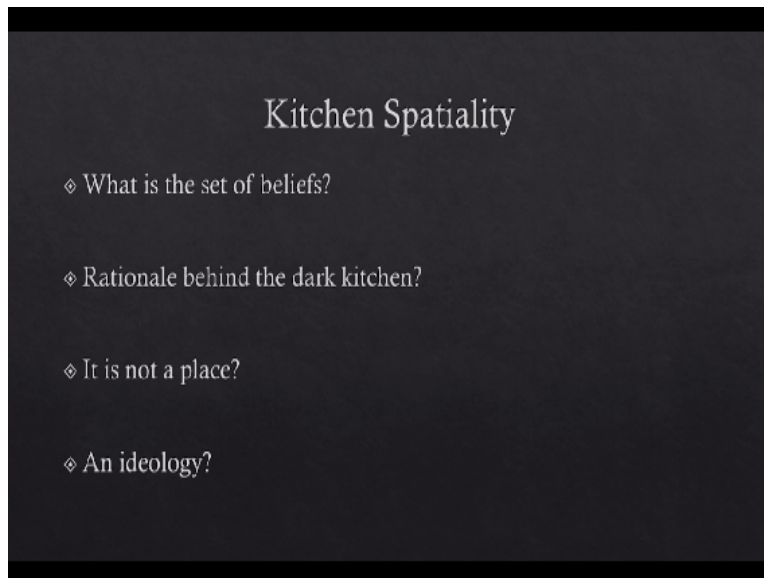


Short Fiction in Indian Literature
Prof. Divya A
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology - Madras

Lecture – 08A
Patriarchal Culture in "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House" - II

Hello and welcome back. So we are talking about the idea of patriarchal culture in Ambai's "A kitchen in the Corner of the House" and in the previous session, I talked about the set of beliefs that seem to structure the kitchen in a particular way. So we need to think deeply about what are the different set of beliefs that makes the kitchen the way it is in this household in Ambai's story.

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So what is the set of beliefs, that is the rationale behind the dark kitchen, why does it have a 0-watt bulb, why is it not brightly lit, why is it not a tangible, physical, concrete place for the men folk? Why does not it strike them in that way and what is the ideology that structures the kitchen in this particular manner? So all these questions need to be asked?

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What is interesting about that particular description that are read out in the previous session is that there is no conversation in that particular description happening between the women folk. The noises that seem to emanate, come out in that space is about slapping and kneading and stirring.

So all these activities are associated with the physical labour, the slapping of the chapatti dough that, kneading of the dough and the stirring of the spicy dal and women, the women folk who work in that space just become hands and, and remember all the colourful dresses become dark and they become faceless and identity-less and just the activity makes us realize that there is a set of human beings doing all these, you know, tasks.

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A crisis in the family

Papaji is building a new room above the garage

Daughter-in-law asks for extension of the veranda

A new basin for washing dishes

A new set of aluminium wires for drying clothes

So there is a crisis in the family in this story. In fact, we need to remember that this story is very episodic. It is not a neatly structured story along the lines of Khushwant Singh with a very structured beginning, middle and end. This is a story with a sort of a conclusion, with an epiphany at the end of the story but it is very episodic and, and in the first episode, there is a minor crisis and this is the crisis.

Papaji, the head of the family, the father-in-law, is building a new room above the garage and the daughter-in-law, Minakshi, who is from the south, she is from Mysore and she is the wife of Kishan. Kishan is an architect and Minakshi asks for an extension of the veranda outside the kitchen and she says that it will be great if they have a new basin for washing the dishes to the left and then perhaps a new set of aluminium wires for drying the clothes, you know, behind that and, and that is the crisis. However, quest becomes the crisis.

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A crisis in the kitchen

- ◊ Daughter-in-law requests restructuring
- ◊ Native of Mysore and an other in Rajasthan
- ◊ “The basin in the kitchen is extremely small. And the drainage is poor. If the servant woman washes the vessels there, the whole kitchen gets flooded. And, Papaji, if you hang the clothes outside the window, the mountain is hidden.”

And she in fact requests a restructuring of the household and that is something we need to make note of. Here we have a woman who is suggesting some kind of changes to the way this home has been laid out and as I said, she is a native of Mysore and this space in which the story unfolds is in Rajasthan. So she is an outsider and other in, in this particular family as well as in that region and the father-in-law asks why do you want this extension, what is wrong with the present, you know, set of, present structure in, in the kitchen.

And she says that the basin in the kitchen is extremely small and the drainage is poor. If the servant women wash the vessels there, the whole kitchen gets flooded and, Papaji, if you hang the clothes outside the window, the mountain is hidden. So she offers 2 good reasons as to why instead of a room above the garage, an extension of the veranda outside the kitchen is ideal for a smooth functioning of the family.

And if you recall the previous session, at the beginning of the story, the narrator mentions that nobody seems to mind the inconvenience of the kitchen and suddenly there is this, a woman, this new, this daughter-in-law called Minakshi, who seems to mind the discomfort, the, the displeasure that, you know, that arises from being in that space and she voices it out and let us see what the reaction is.

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Crisis about the kitchen

- ◊ Physical and spiritual reasons offered
- ◊ Her husband, Kishan, endorses her view
- ◊ “When did you go near the kitchen?”

“skilled architect”

So as I said she offers both physical and spiritual reason for having an extension and her husband, Kishan, who is a skilled architect according to the narrator, endorses her view because the father accounts to him and asks what do you say to her request and, and he agrees, he endorses the request and he asks quite archly when did you go near the kitchen.

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Cooking and Identity

- ◊ “When she cooked us that Mysore-style meal, it was he who sliced the onions and chillies for her,” said Jiji.
- ◊ “It seems we might as well present you with a gold bangle and be done with it”

Symbolic initiation into femaleness

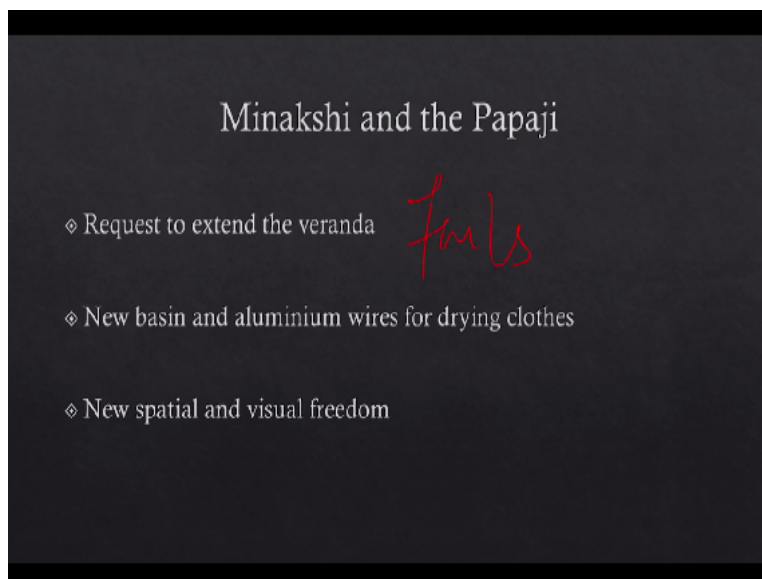
Cooking or assisting in the cooking process is seen as effeminate/unmanly behaviour

And, and, and Jiji says that when she cooked us that Mysore-style meal, it was he who sliced the onions and, and chillies for her. It seems as if it is a grave mistake, a misstep on the part of this man to help his wife in cooking a Mysore-style meal. So he had diced the onions and, and cut the chillies for her and Papaji is almost scandalized and he says it, it seems we might as well present you with a gold bangle and be done with it.

So you need to be inducted, you know, in the proper way by being given a gold bangle and, and, and we can finish, you know, with this whole idea with that and it is very interesting, you know, the way he insults his son, if you think, you know, giving someone a gold bangle as an insult, because gold bangles associated with, with femininity, you know, with femaleness, with female identity and here he, the father says that, you know, we can give you a gold bangle because you seem to be interested in the kitchen.

And, so he, he is somehow symbolically initiated in the femaleness just because he helped out, just because he shared in his wife's labour, wife's labour in the kitchen and therefore, you know, the idea seems to be that cooking or being in a kitchen or assisting in the cooking process is seen as effeminate/unmanly behaviour according to the ideology of this particular man, Papaji, in this story. So that is the comment he offers to his son and what, and how does this battle between Minakshi and the Papaji, the head of the household resolve itself.

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We see from the narrative that the request to extend the veranda is fails, it fails. She does not get her veranda and she does not get a new basin, she does not get aluminium wires for drying clothes and instead a couple of nylon wires are added to the set that are already there outside the window. So her request for spatial and wishful freedom and, and, and, and kind of a freedom from that restrictive labour fails, that, that battle is lost by Minakshi.

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Minakshi and Papaji

- ◊ No change in the state of the kitchen
- ◊ Two more nylon lines were added, for drying clothes.

Mean attitude of Papaji

Assertion of patriarchy

The slide features a dark grey background. At the top, the title 'Minakshi and Papaji' is centered in a white serif font. Below the title are two bullet points, each starting with a diamond symbol and followed by white text. At the bottom of the slide, there are two overlapping red ovals. The left oval contains the text 'Mean attitude of Papaji' and the right oval contains 'Assertion of patriarchy', both in white text.

In fact, there is no change in the state of the kitchen and as I said 2 more nylon lines were added for drying clothes, making sure that the women of this home do not get to see the green mountains or the temple of Lord Ganesha from where they are inside the kitchen and it reveals the meanness of this figure Papaji, you know, the narrow-mindedness, the bitterness that he has for the request of these women who, who dare to voice out their needs and his behaviour is an assertion of a patriarchy.

Patriarchy is fighting its way back. It is making sure that his, its space is not eroded and that the status quo is maintained.

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Thoughts

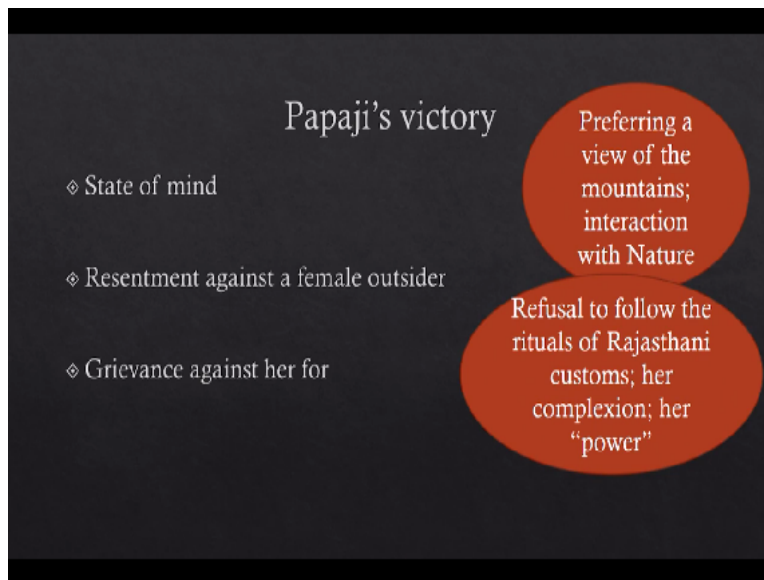
Bitterness

◊ “Papaji’s silent retort: Woman, woman of Mysore, you who have not lived here for many generations, why do you need mountains? Why do you need its greenness? What possible connection is there between Rajasthani food customs, and the window, and the washing up basin? Dark skinned woman, you who refuse to cover head, you who talk too much, you who have enticed my son...”

And this is a beautiful, I am using the word beautiful in an ironic way and this is a beautiful retort, a silent retort by Papaji who thinks all these thoughts. It is his thoughts by the way. He does not spill it out but the narrator captures the male psyche, the repressive male psyche in Papaji's, you know, in Papaji's mind and he says woman, woman of Mysore who, who, you who have not lived here for many generations, why do you need mountains?

Why do you need its greenness? What possible connection is there between Rajasthani food customs and the window and the washing up basin? Dark skinned woman, you who refuse to cover your head, you who talk too much, you who have enticed my son. So you can see a lot of angst, resentment, spilling over in those thoughts of Papaji.

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And we can really see the state of mind of this man, this older authoritative figure who is at the head of this family and he is deeply, deeply resentful of this female outsider, Minakshi from Mysore and he has a grievance against her for all these things, preferring a view of the mountains, her desire to interact with nature which seems to take her out of this female identity, a female is not supposed to enjoy all these things, she is supposed to just be in the kitchen and cook food whenever she is asked to.

So how dare she has a, a desire for all, to look at the mountains, to enjoy the greenery and, and, you know, and Papaji also nurses a grievance against her for refusing to follow the rituals of Rajasthan customs such as covering her head with her dress, with her outfit and then, you know, she is also, he is also resentful against her for her complexion. It is a very interesting thought there on his part.

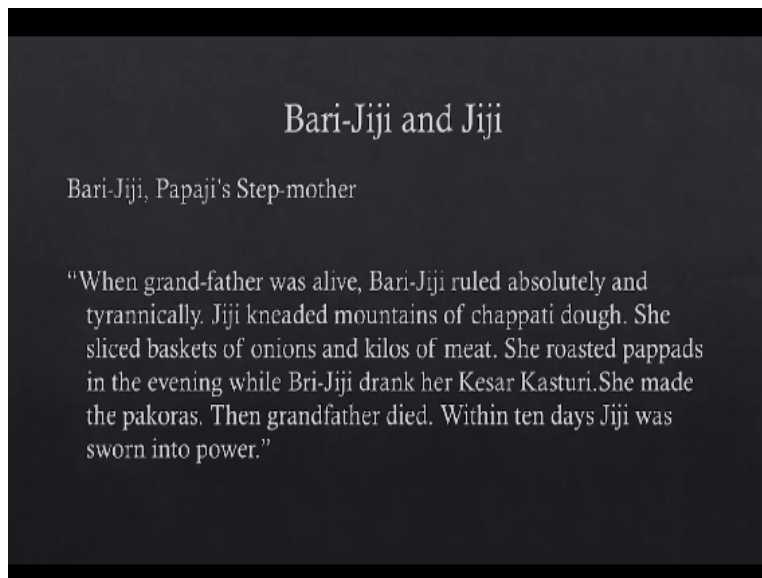
Let us go back to that statement there, dark skinned woman you who refuse to cover your head, you who talk too much, you who have enticed my son. So he hates her, dislikes her for talking too much, for refusing to cover her head and for being dark as well and being dark as well as for enticing, tempting the son and we can guess that, Minakshi and Kishan as marriage is, is not an arranged marriage.

We can speculate because there is a sense that she has tempted Kishan, she has trapped Kishan

and since she is from Mysore, we can speculate that this is a romantic marriage and not an arranged one. So this excerpt is, is a very powerful one that reveals or lays there or highlight the various fractures that are there in the psyche, in the male psyche in terms of an outsider in terms of a female who speaks out, in terms of a female who has a power over her husband.

A power which makes her get his assistance in the kitchen, you know, in terms of, you know, making her, making him, you know, dice onions or, or making him help in preparing a dish. So all these are looked at with a lot of bitterness on the part of Papaji. So that is the episode and that is the crisis. So now let us move on to another episode and this episode is about Bari-Jiji and Jiji.

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Jiji, as I said, is the wife of Papaji and Bari-Jiji is Papaji's stepmother and apparently his father, Papaji's father married Bari-Jiji when she was just a, when she was 17-year-old and now let us look at the relationship these 2 women, the stepmother and, you know, the daughter-in-law, she, I mean the mother-in-law of the other woman. Okay, now when grandfather was alive, Bari-Jiji ruled absolutely and tyrannically, Jiji kneaded mountains of chapatti dough.

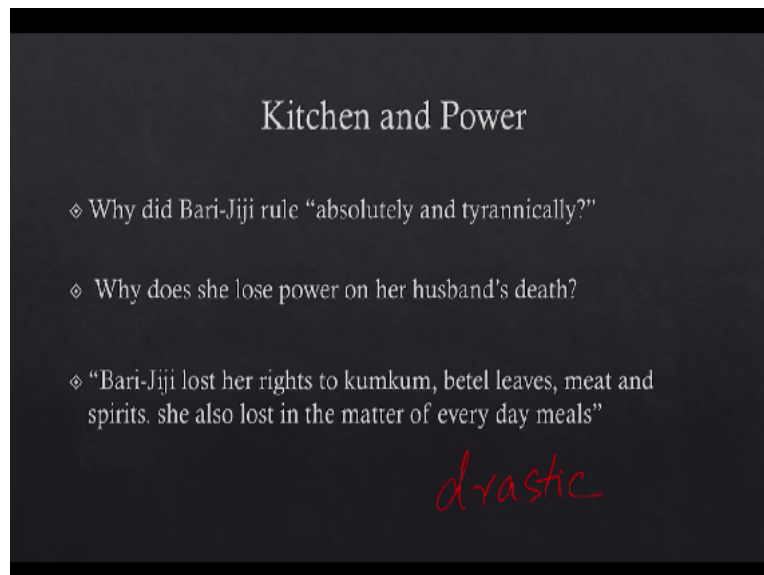
She sliced baskets of onion, and kilos of meat. She roasted pappads in the evening while Bari-Jiji drank her Kesar Kasturi. She made the pakoras. Then grandfather died. Within 10 days, Jiji was sworn into power. So when Bari-Jiji's husband was alive, she was the queen of the kitchen, you know, and this young wife, this young mistress was absolutely powerful within the home in

terms of the kitchen.

And Jiji who was just a daughter-in-law then, had to do much of the hard labour and, and the narrator says that she had to knead mountains of chapatti dough, that is so much was her labour and she did so many other tasks and, and, and Bari-Jiji enjoyed herself by drinking Kesar Kasturi that is a hard spirit and once her husband died, once the grandfather died, within 10 days, Jiji was sworn into power. Look at the, look at the metaphor there.

The metaphor of a new ruler assuming power in the kitchen. So the daughter-in-law has become powerful and the mother-in-law loses her power because her husband is no more.

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So why did Bari-Jiji rule absolutely and tyrannically to begin with? She is the second wife of, of the head of the household then and why was she absolutely and tyrannically powerful? Why does she lose power on her husband's death? So it becomes clear, these 2 questions make us realize that the power that Bari-Jiji has is not her own power. It is the power that she derives from her husband.

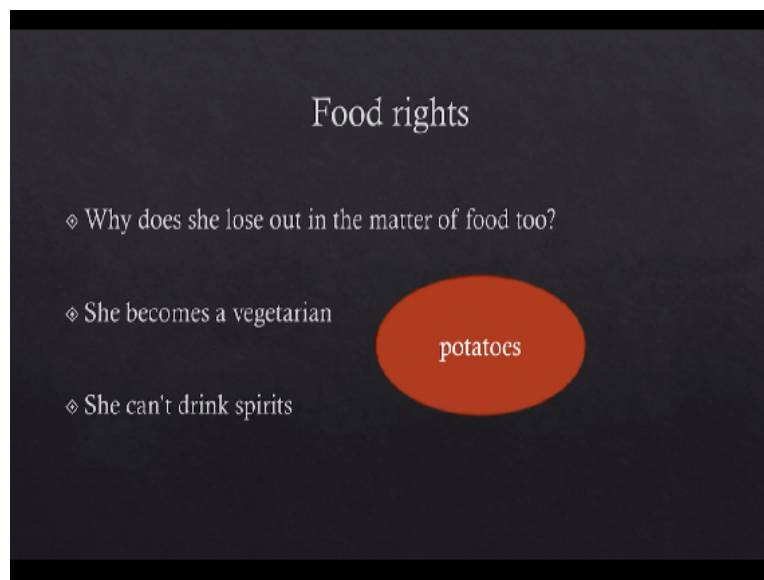
So which is why when he is around, when this older husband is around, much older husband in fact because the narrator says that there was Bari-Jiji and Papaji, they were of the same age. Both of them were 17 years of age when Papaji's father married Bari-Jiji. So, the, the point that I am

making is that, Bari-Jiji is not powerful on her own. Her power derives from her husband and once he is not around, once he is dead, she loses power.

And the women who has the, who has this living husband, becomes the next big power center in the household because her husband is around, her husband is Papaji. So she becomes the new queen of the kitchen and what happens after Bari-Jiji loses power, she lost her rights to kumkum, betel leaves, meat and spirits. She also lost in the matter of every day meals. So look at the fall from power, it is a really drastic, it is a really drastic fall from power in fact.

She enjoyed, she enjoyed all this while her husband was alive and she does not get to enjoy these when he is dead and gone.

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So and my question is, why does she lose out even in matter of food, she was a meat eater but once her husband is dead, she has to become a vegetarian. So the understanding is that that is the unregent rule of the family. So if you become a widow, you are supposed to give up the pleasures of life. So she becomes a vegetarian and she also gives up the drink that the women of the household enjoyed, that hard spirit, that Kesar Kasturi that everybody consumes.

And she is just given potatoes that vegetarian dish and, and, and here we have the humour in, in the narrative when Bari-Jiji has an own way of taking revenge on, you know, the people who

have, you know, thrown her aside in terms of the power dynamics. So how does she take revenge?

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She takes revenge through bodily noises that she releases and it, it becomes an embarrassment and a disturbance to those around her. So she breaks when she belches because she consumes a lot of potatoes and that is one way to take revenge for losing out in the, in the power struggle between herself and Jiji and there is another way as well through which she takes revenge on the others and Jiji and that is through a spiritual means.

So every once in 6 months, apparently she is possessed by Goddess Amba and once she is possessed and she is always possessed when the rest of the family, especially Papaji and Jiji are enjoying their meal and enjoying their drink and which she does as she, you know, commands everyone to give her, you know, lots of burfi, lots of meat and drink, Kesar Kasturi.

And then she shoos them, shoos them away and says leave me alone and then she locks herself up in the room and enjoys all the variety of dishes that she gets as Goddess Amba and she makes a lot of celebratory noises. So this, this is how she takes revenge on Jiji once in a while by, you know, by becoming possessed by Goddess Amba.

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Subversion and Authority

- ◊ It might have been possible to bandy words with Bari-Jiji, but Jiji did not have the courage to question Amba.

Resorts to the
authority of the
Goddess

So and, and the narrator says with a tongue and cheek, the narrator says that it might have been possible to bandy words with Bari-Jiji but Jiji did not have the courage to question Amba. So Jiji, the new mistress of the household, the wife of Papaji might, you know, attack Bari-Jiji, the once queen.

But once she becomes possessed by Goddess Amba, she does not have the courage to question this woman. So it is interesting the way Bari-Jiji, the woman who had lost her power resorts to the higher authority of the Goddess Amba in order to, you know, in order to take a revenge against Jiji and enjoys the pleasures of life that she had lost after the death of her husband.

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Lakshmi Holmstrom

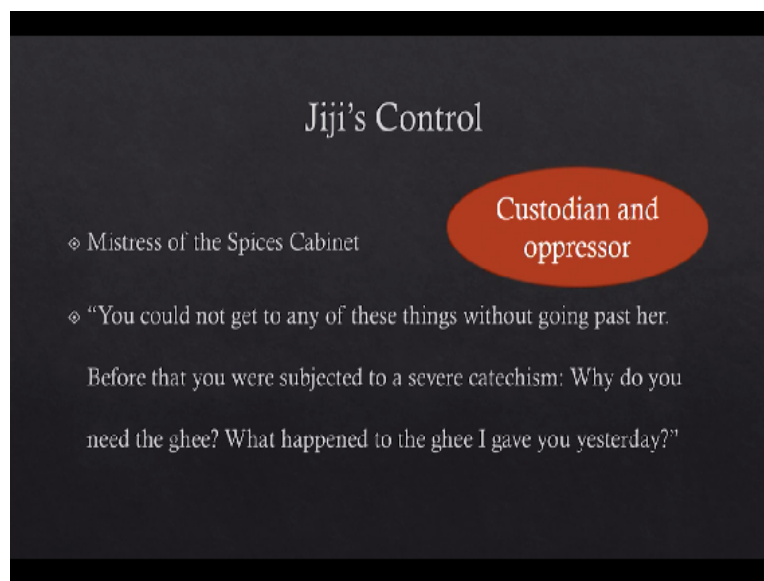
- ◊ “ ‘A kitchen in the corner of the house’ examines the mother-in-law’s illusory authority in the kitchen, the establishment of a hierarchy within it, and how that authority can be subverted through ‘food wars’.”

So how does, how does Lakshmi Holmstrom see the power struggle that takes place through the idea of food in kitchen in the corner of the house and she says that this story examines the mother-in-law's illusory authority in the kitchen, the establishment of a hierarchy within it and how that authority can be subverted through food wars.

So in the case of Bari-Jiji, you know, that hierarchy is subverted through, you know, the physical way in which she takes revenge as well as through the spiritual means and according to Lakshmi Holmstrom, that authority can be subverted through these food wars that happened between the women. But the other interesting thing that we need to make note of is the fact that, you know, there is a lot of enforcement of authority and a consequent pain is prolonged for the women who are not at the top of the hierarchy, who are at several levels below, below the highest authority.

So Bari-Jiji who was once the queen of the household or of the kitchen, does suffer and she does have to, you know, act in a crafty ways, in strategic ways in order to enjoy some of the foods that she enjoyed while she was a, you know, while she was the mistress of the house.

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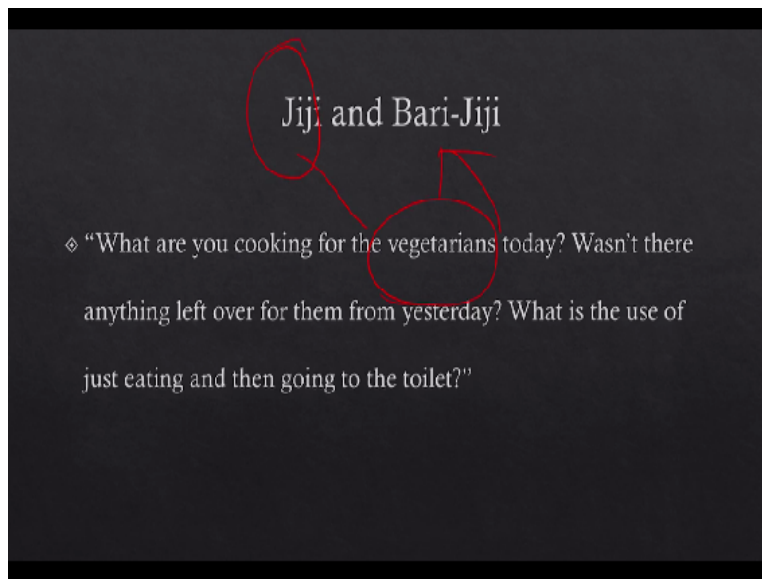


Now Jiji who is the new mistress or who is the reigning mistress of the kitchen, you know, is, is a little bit sick and she is no longer as powerful as she used to be and but she is still controls the kitchen, she is still the custodian as well as the oppressor. She is clearly the oppressor of, of Bari-Jiji, her, you know, her previous boss, in fact. So she takes her revenge in whatever means that

she can and Jiji has absolute control over the spices cabinet which she keeps under lock and key.

And the narrator says that you could not get to any of these things, all these spices, cloves and cardamom and, and cashews without going past her. Before that, before that you were subjected to a severe catechism. Why do you need the ghee? What happened to the ghee I gave you yesterday? So all these questions were asked to the woman who wanted to use the spices.

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And for the questions came at the person who wished to use the spices cabinet. What are you cooking for the vegetarians today? Was not there anything left over for them from yesterday? What is the use of just eating and then going to the toilet? So all these questions were asked by Jiji and the target of all these questions are, is Bari-Jiji in fact because she is the only vegetarian in the family.

And look at the way she asks. I mean, why do not you use the left over from yesterday to feed this old woman who is toothless and what is the use of her just eating and then going to the toilet. So look at the harshness behind these questions. So we just have 2 women here on the battlefield, you know, we do not have a man and a woman in the battlefield. We just have 2 women and one of them has been the previous boss of the kitchen and the other is the new heir to the kitchen.

So it is, it is a kind of, you know, it is an in fight that is going on in, in, in terms of the fact that

these are women fighting between themselves and why are they fighting between themselves, that is the question that we need to ask? What, what is the hierarchy that they have one? From whom do they get these powers? So they do not seem to realize that the power that they have is, is second-hand power, temporary power.

The power that derives from the men folk who are outside of this kitchen space and, and who do not even consider the kitchen as a physical space. It is just a set of beliefs for the women who, you know, work with. So all these undercurrents are there, ideological undercurrents are there behind the way in which Ambai has structured these conversations, these thought processes.

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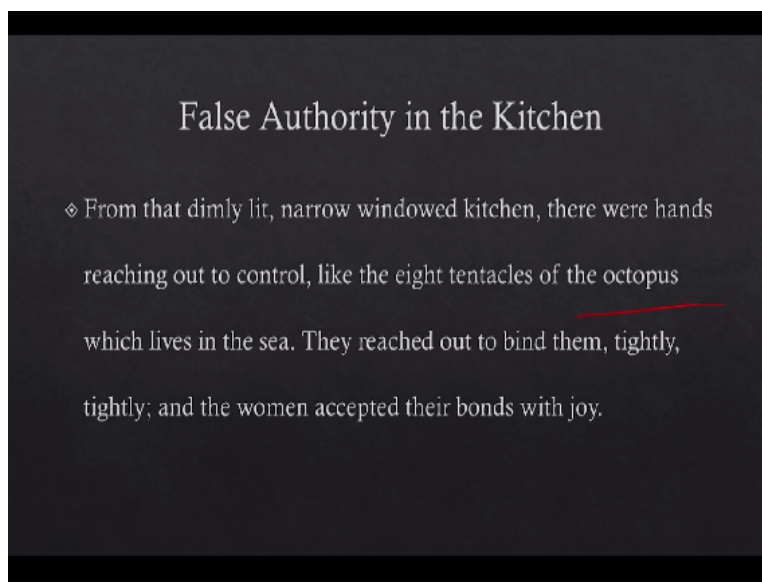
The questions that Jiji asks anybody who wants to use this spices cabinet is, is not a literal question about the amount the spices somebody wants to use. It is a question that signifies the patriarchal authority of the, of the men folk of the society and, and all these details, the nuances of the details about the, about cardamom and cinnamon in this context point to the power that is there in men who seemed to, you know, keep the women busy by giving them pseudo-authority about all these and keeping them engaged through all these infightings and all these power struggles, about who is the boss, who owns the keys and things like that.

So this hierarchy in the kitchen is, is, is, is a kind of a false hierarchy but it is a hierarchy alright but it, it is a hierarchy which, which harms as well and the people who are vulnerable in this

hierarchy but it is a hierarchy enforced by, you know, constructed by the patriarchal figures in this home and in the society and Bari-Jiji is the victim now. She is the victim now but she was the perpetrator of, of horrors previously when her husband was alive.

So there is a kind of a cycle of oppression that keeps going on and on with, with regards to the women in the space of the kitchen in homes. So again we have a fantastic, you know, psychological understanding, sociological understanding of the dynamics of the kitchen on the part of Ambai.

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And she makes her narrator say that from that dimly lit, narrow windowed kitchen, there were hands reaching out to control, like the eight tentacles of the octopus which lives in the sea. They reached out to bind them tightly, tightly, and the women accepted their bonds with joy.

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False Glory

◊ If their waists were bound, they called them jewelled belts; if their feet were held back, they called them anklets; if they touched their foreheads, they called them crowns. The women entered a world that was enclosed by wire on all four sides and reigned there proudly; it was their kingdom. They made earth-shaking decisions: today we'll have mutton pulao; tomorrow let it be puri-masala

Continue. If their waists were bound, they called them jewelled belts; if their feet were held back, they called them anklets; if they touched their foreheads, they called them crowns. The women entered a world that was enclosed by a wire on all four sides and reigned these, and reigned there proudly; it was their kingdom. They made, they made earth-shaking decisions. Today, we will have mutton pulao; tomorrow let it be puri-masala.

So it is fantastic passage again in the sense that the narrator clearly, you know, tells the reader that there is, there is a kind of an octopus like, like monster in the kitchen which reaches out to all its victims and it binds them tightly and tightly and even after being tightly bound, the women accepted their bonds with extreme joy. So that image of the octopus is, is a fantastic image, a very disturbing image.

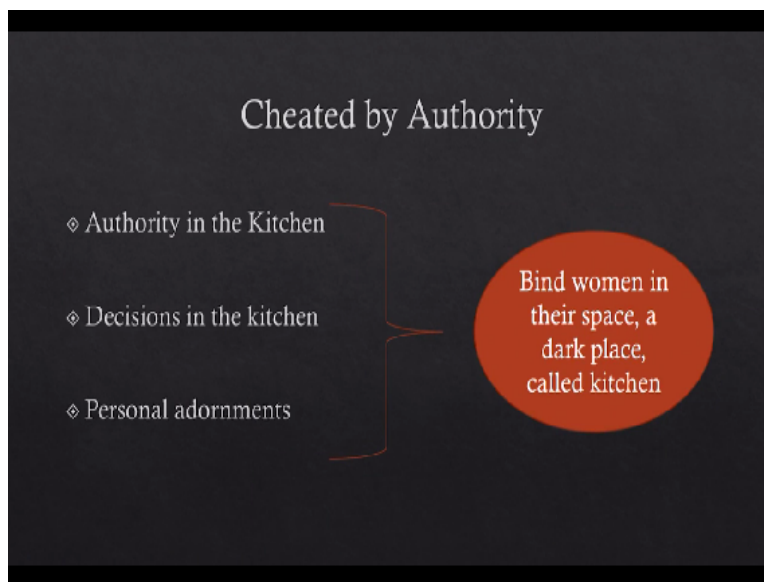
And we need to ask who that octopus is? Is it the women? Is it the men? Or is it both with men conditioning the women in such a way that they kind of harass the inferiors who are beneath them. So that question needs to be asked what is that octopus? Who is that octopus? Who are the various octopuses who kind of suffocate the joy out of the women who are in the kitchen and again, once again, you need to look at the sarcasm with which the narrator describes each and everything.

Look at the way she describes anklets, you know. If the feet were held back, if your feet were

tied, that was called, that is called the anklets that the thing that ties the feet is the anklet and if, if the head is bound, that becomes the crown and if, if the waists were tied up, that becomes the jewelled belts. So all these jewellery becomes these elements of incarceration, imprisonment and the women enjoyed these various aspects of imprisonment.

In fact, you know, the entire women folk seem to be, you know, within a fence, a fence of 4 walls, a wire fence, a really horrible wire fence and they seem to think that a space is their kingdom and they are the queens, the rulers of that kingdom and they make these big decisions as to what they are going to cook today. Is it going to be mutton pulao today and is it going to be puri-masala today and these decisions seemed to be earth-shattering decisions and there is a lot of irony in that remark.

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And as I said the authority in the kitchen, the decisions made by the women in the kitchen and the personal adornments, the jewelleries become, bindings become incarceration devices for women in their space and, and that spaces are dark space, a dark place and that dark place is called the kitchen. Thank you for watching. I will continue in the next session. Have a good day.