

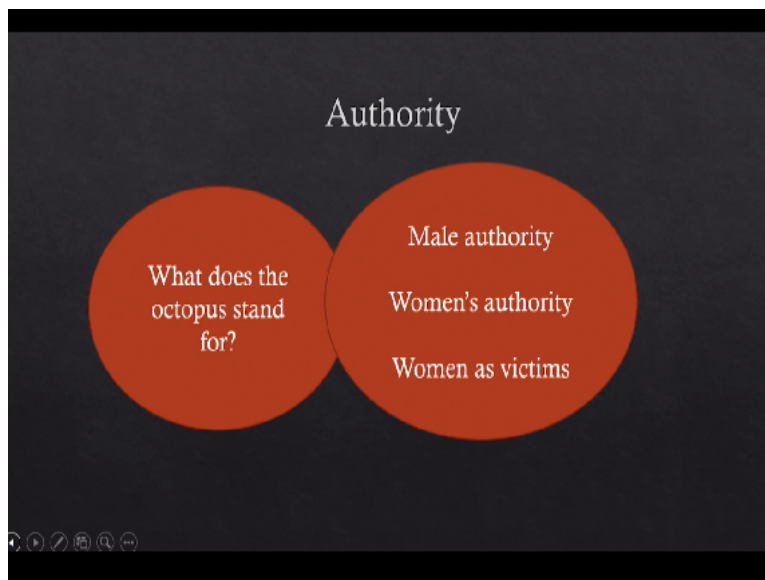
Short Fiction in Indian Literature
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Lecture – 08B

Patriarchal Culture in Ambai's "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House" - I

Hello and welcome to this lecture on Ambai's "A kitchen in the Corner of the House." The thematic foray that I am considering in this story is a patriarchal culture and how it is played out in this short section. So in our previous session we talked about the metaphor of the octopus.

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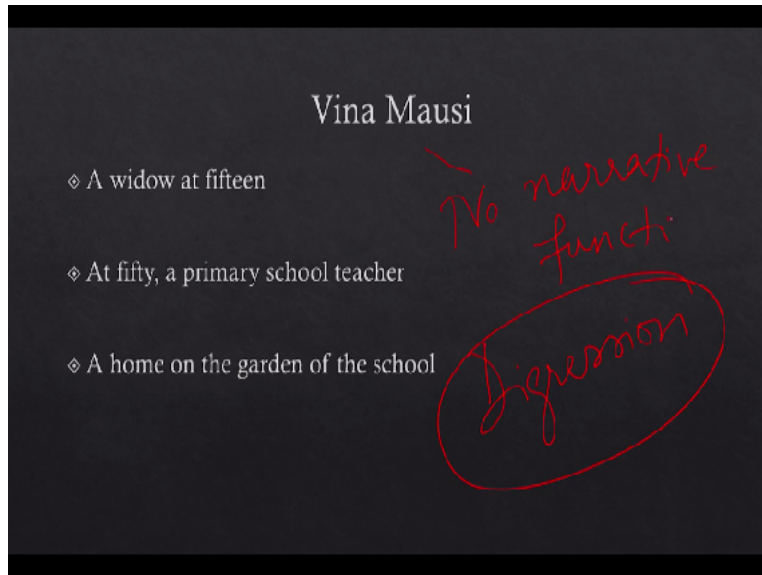


And let me remind you about the signification of this particular sea creature, what does the octopus stands for? The octopus stands for male authority. It also stands for women's authority and it also represents the victims who are also women. So men enact their power, you know, octopus like through their influence over women and women once again internalise patriarchy and once again they become oppressors of vulnerable woman who are beneath them, who are their inferiors, who are their subordinates.

So it is like a hierarchy where power seeps down from the top and the top being the men's authority. So it is a very very interesting metaphor that Ambai utilizes in this particular context because there are so many different ideas can be expressed through this octopus like image and the idea of strangulation is very very interesting. The way, the spirit of the victims is suffocated

is clearly brought out through this particular image. So the next major character portrayed that we get in this short story is Vina Mausi's.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:09)



She is a relative of Kishan. In fact, Vina is Kishan's aunt and it is her life's story that we get in this particular, in this particular short fiction and it is an interesting digression, I would say. In fact, Ambai digresses in order to bring in this particular character in the story because she does not have any narrative function to play in this particular story and, and that is why I call her character portrayal, portrayed as a digression.

So why does she digress, we will talk about the implication of the digression in a minute but let us look at the context of Vina Mausi and she is a widow at 15 and at 50, she is a primary school teacher and she has her home on the garden of the school grounds itself. The owners of the school allowed her to stay on campus and she is this isolated figure who lives on the school. So it is an interesting narrative, you know, a presence that she has in this particular story and even the fact that she shares her professional space and her domestic space again is very very significant.

How the professional life also blends into her domestic side too?

(Refer Slide Time: 03:58)

Nature and the Teacher

◆ An asoka tree stood in front of the house, and behind the kitchen, a champak tree, with its creamy flowers and yellow stems. Flower laden creepers entered through her windows freely. In the evenings, all the neighbouring children would come to visit their teacher. Otherwise there was the koel song from the asoka tree.

So this is a natural description that we have for Vina. In fact, this is the description of her home. An Asoka tree stood in front of the house and behind the kitchen, a champak tree with its creamy flowers and yellow stems. Flower laden creepers entered through her windows freely. In the evenings, all the neighbouring children would come to visit their teacher. Otherwise, there was the koel song from the Asoka tree.

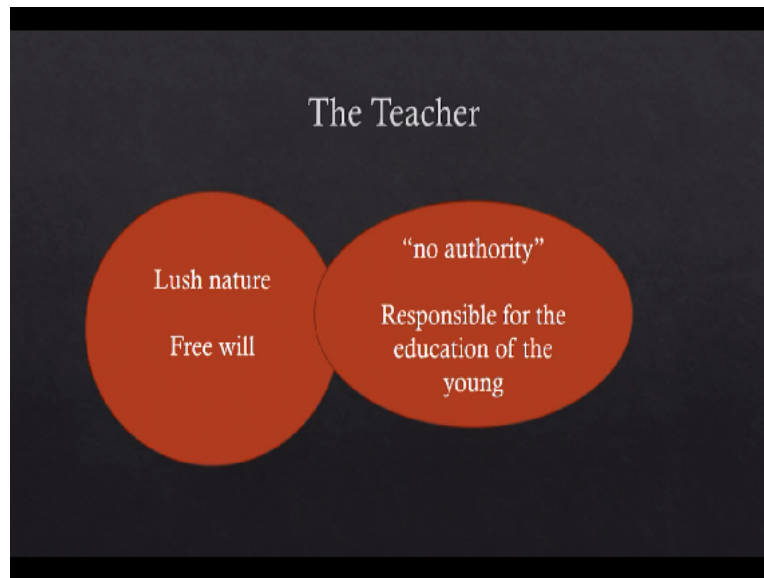
So this is a description of the exterior aspect of her home and interestingly, we do not get a description of the interiors of that small home on the school grounds. So even the exterior has a lot of symbolic signification that I will analyse in a minute. So we have 2 trees. So the home is set amidst nature and look at the way the creepers enter through her windows freely. That adverb is also very very significant in the context of the notion of freedom for women.

So there is liberty in the context of Vina Mausi and this freedom is not available to the women in Papaji's big household and you need to recall the beginning of the story where we are told that the women of this household cannot look at the green mountains from the space of the kitchen and that is a big drawback in terms of this spiritual aspect, in terms of their idea of freedom, spiritual freedom.

And here we this widowed woman enjoying her life amidst nature. So we, we are given a study in contrast in relation to this particular character. And in the evenings, it is mentioned that the

children of the neighbourhood visit her and if the children do not come, there is the song of the koel, the bird which gives her company. So we have this figure who is almost cradled in the lap of nature and that is a, that gives her a sensation of liberty which the other women of Papaji's house do not have the luxury of. Okay, so as I said she is surrounded by lush nature, nature that gives her lots of flowers and again, it is mentioned that she has free will.

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She has the liberty of movement and that is very very important as well and this seems to be restricted in the case of the other women that we looked at in the context of Papaji's home. So it, it is mentioned that whenever she wanted to go to the market, she would just take a walk and that is a, that is liberty in a big way and, and that is given to Vina Mausi and we need to remember that there is no male presence in her domesticity.

In fact, she is the, she is the only one in her family which is why she has that free will and even though Vina claims that she has no authority over anybody, she has this big responsibility of nurturing the young, educating the young children who come to visit her often, whom she teaches at the school also. So this is an important stopover, if I can use that word for Ambai in her narration of this particular tale.

Because she just offers a female character who is at liberty to enjoy the beauty of nature, who enjoys the company of the creatures in nature, who teaches young children who can walk freely

and that is because she is a widow with no male control over her movements or over her lifestyle. Now further description is also very interesting in the context of understanding her, her lifestyle.

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The slide has a dark background. At the top, the title 'Her companions' is written in a light-colored serif font. Below the title is a quote in a smaller, light-colored serif font: '◊ If she put a charpoy under the Asoka tree, she could share the companionship of the Koel and its calling voice until her longing ceased. In the early mornings the white flowers were at touching distance the minute she opened her door'. Two red ovals are positioned at the bottom of the slide. The left oval contains the word 'Companionship' in white text. The right oval contains the text 'Longing for what?' in white text.

And the narrator says that if she put a charpoy under the Asoka tree, she would share the companionship of the Koel and its calling voice until her longing ceased. In the early mornings, the white flowers were at touching distance the minute she opened her door and so as I said, while she does have a lot of nature and its aspects as company, there is a missing element in her lifestyle and that is indicated through this word, longing. What is she longing for?

That is a, that is a question that we can ask. So she does enjoy the tree, she enjoys the flower. It is, it is white flowers and white flowers again is very indicative of the purity of, of heart of Vina Mausi or the, the widowed status, white symbolizing again the widowed status. So all these are very symbolic and she is at a very close commune with nature but she longs for something else and is that companionship, is that human companionship, is that children of her own. So all these are questions that we can speculate on.

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A Disturbing Note

◆ As soon as she reached open spaces, something in her moved towards the earth. Her nipples and her womb became as stone. Heavy. Pulling her down. Descending, descending, descending to the earth in surrender. Forcing her to stand stock still, her feet buried deep.

Sexuality
+ fertility

So as soon as she reaches open spaces, something in her moved towards the earth. Her nipples and her womb became as stone. Heavy, pulling her down, descending, descending, descending to the earth in surrender. Forcing her stand stock still, her feet buried deep. So again this passage is also very significant in the context of the story as I mentioned.

So all these statements and description of nature do not have a, a massive role to function in terms of pushing the plot along or having any kind of impact on the lifestyle of the other characters in the story such as Minakshi or the other daughters-in-law or the mother-in-law. Nobody in, in the story is affected by the lifestyle of this particular widow.

Vina Mausi and the fact that Ambai invest a little bit of energy on her, suggests that she is kind of experimenting with a different sort of character to the once we have seen in Papaji's household, a character who is alone, who has a lot of freedom but she is not very happy and it is very clear that this particular description which talks about her moving out of doors is a symbolic of a different kind of meaning in terms of her presence in the world.

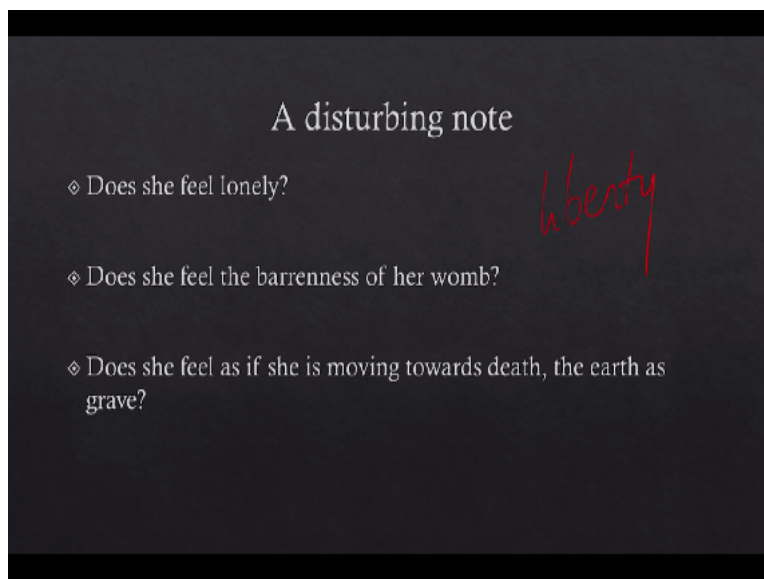
So as soon as she reached open spaces, it is as if she is gravitating towards something else because of a particular lack and that particular lack is indicated through a reference to her body parts and I would interpret this reference as, as associations with sexuality obviously because of the nature of the words used there and a fertility and it is very clear that Vina Mausi does not

have any children and that in itself is a big absence in her life.

And because she does not have any progeny, she almost gravitates back to earth and she is almost giving up her life and returning to mother earth. She is surrendering, she is descending actually. She is getting off life itself. Look at the repetition of the word descending, descending, descending, descending. So she is descending in the sense that she is just going back to ground zero to the earth, mother earth and she is surrendering her body to earth itself.

And again the reference to burial is there in that last phrase in this particular extract on the slide. So forcing to stand stock still, her feet buried deep. She is almost resisting back, return back to nature but then there is a gravitation and that gravitation is created because of the fact that she does not have any, any kind of sexual, fertile life and this particular life is so empty that she is going back. So this character description is a strong contrast to the other women characters that we have in this particular story.

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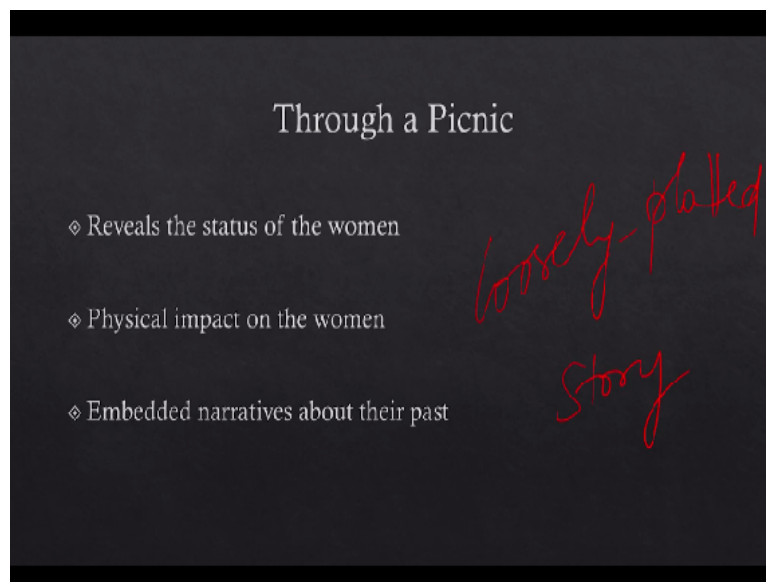


So again my questions there as I mentioned, a disturbing note is presented through the character note of Vina Masi. Does she feel lonely? Yes, she does. Does she feel the barrenness of her womb? Yes, she does feel the barrenness of the womb which is why she wants to give up on life itself because that is the strong associations, strong, you know, notion that we get when we read those statements.

Does she feel as if she is moving towards death and the earth as a grave? Yes, she does feel as if she is migrating towards a, a different sort of land where she would not feel the heaviness of her womb. So all these longings are there and finally enough, there again this character who was completely at liberty in the sense that there is nobody to control her, is not happy. So there seems to be a suggestion that children, you know, sexual life are some of the most important factors in life that will offer a women happiness.

So that suggestion seems to be also there in the story. So there would not be a complete, a complete happiness for a woman unless she has all these other, other aspects to for her to enjoy and nurture and care for. So being single, even if that singleness means widowhood, is not a happy place for a woman. So we have another episode in the story.

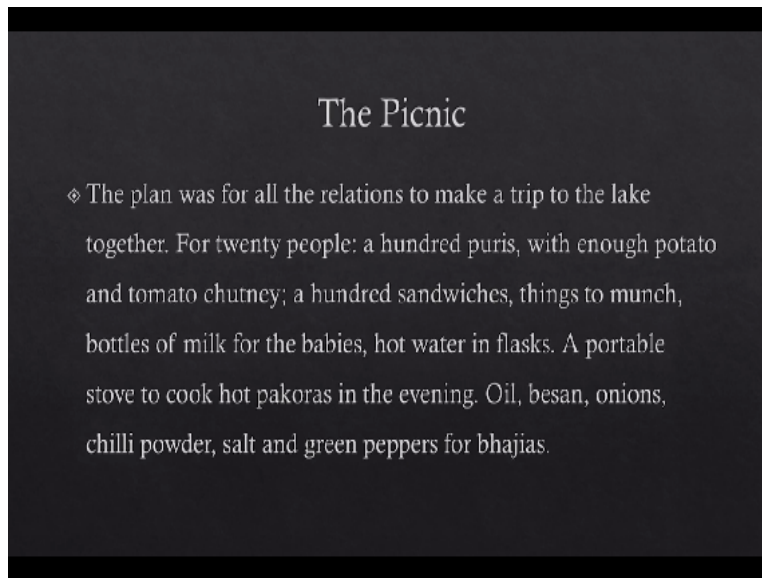
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And remember I mentioned that this is not a very very tightly plotted story. This is a very very loosely bound, loosely plotted story with lots of episodes in it and with minor crisis here and there and all these are stitched together in order to offer a, a connected set of ideas about the role of women in Indian society. So what Ambai does at a midpoint in the story is offer a picnic as a, as an episode and this episode is important in terms of revealing once again the massive difference between men and women in terms of the roles that they play in, in the context of their family.

So it does reveal the status of women. It reveals, the picnic reveals, you know, the physical impact on the women in terms of the immense amount of labour that they contribute in organising and carrying out a picnic. And then we do also get a lot of embedded narratives about the past of some of the women. So this picnic becomes a kind of a, a kind of a touchstone in fact to talk about multitude of, multitudes of lifestyles, especially lifestyles that have been effected by these gender disparities. Now this is how the picnic is talked about.

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The plan was for all the relations to make a trip to the lake together. For twenty people, a hundred puris with enough potato and tomato chutney, a hundred sandwiches, thing to munch, bottles of mild for the babies, hot water in flasks. A portable stove to cook hot pakoras in the evening. Oil, besan, onions, chilli powder, salt and green peppers for bhajias So look at the scale of the amount of food that they need to prepare and pack in order for a big family, a family of extended relations and, and, and all these people to have an enjoyable time on a picnic near the lake.

So hundred sandwiches and hundred, somebody has to knead all these doughs, you know, all these dough, somebody has to prepare the sandwiches. Somebody has to fill the mild bottles. Somebody has to, you know, prepare the hot water and, and it is a big operation and it is a logistical, you know, terror. In fact, when, when I first read this particular passage, I was really

amazed by the amount of, you know, energy and hard work that would go into preparation of this scale.

And we have one particular character who is introduced to us in, in, in greater detail in the context of this particular picnic.

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And she is Radha Bhabiji and she is married to one of the sons of Papaji and Jiji and her husband is Gopal, Gopal Bhaisaheb, that is how he is introduced. So Radha is busy packing. Apparently that task has been given to her and she is muttering and packing and, and she does the packing for the children, her own children. She does the packing for the children of the other women in this household who are, who are all meeting during this vacation.

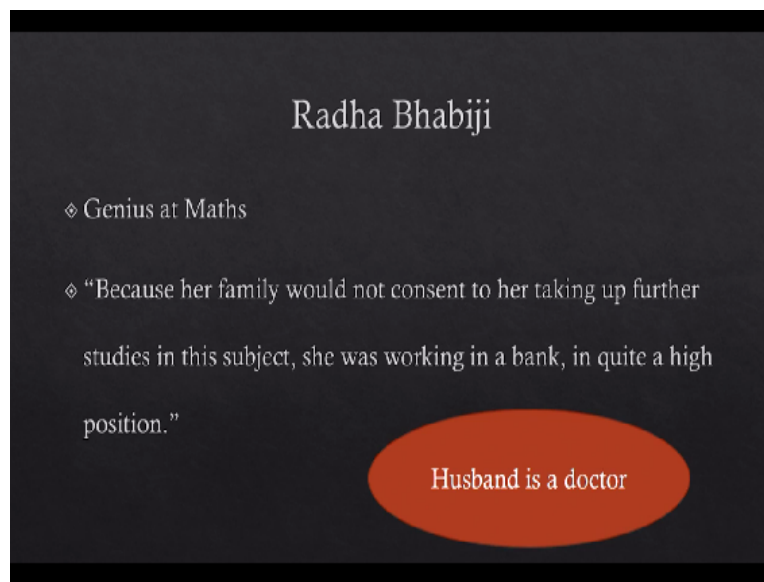
And she is preparing, as I said, the mild bottles for the babies in the family and, and she is also packing for the adults, such as the blankets that they have to use while they, while they are out there and she has to think about spare clothes for the children, the biscuits and, and each and every child has a particular favourite and she has to make sure that everybody has their own favourite.

And if some child, especially her child, if he or she does not get to have that particular biscuit and the child would cry and her husband would not be happy and she has to think about the mild

powder, different kinds of milk powder that she has to pack and the plastic bags to put the clothes in, the spoons and the blankets.

And again, these details are spelled out, you know, painstakingly by Ambai in this particular story and I tell you the, the amount of details that you read in terms of, of all these domestic stuff and in terms of all the food items, it really amazes you, the extensive detailing. So Radha Bhabiji is involved in this process and it becomes very clear that it, it is the women who struggle with this uphill task.

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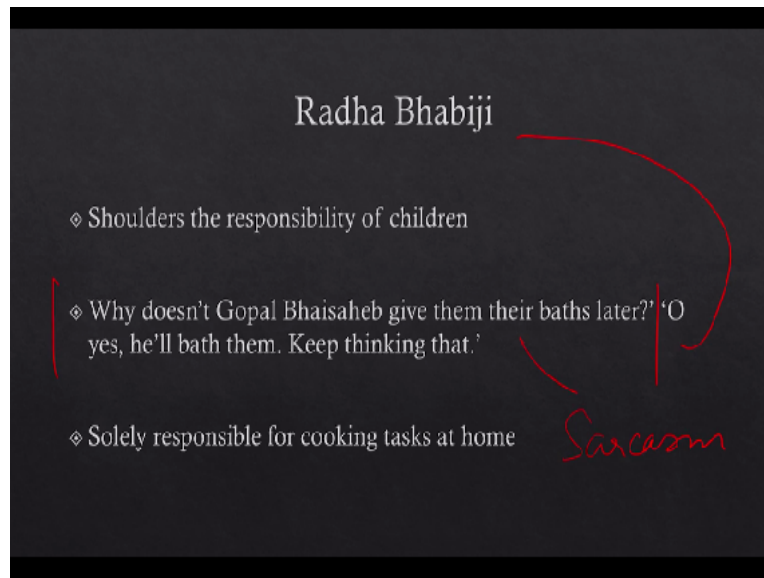


And what is her educational context, she is a genius at Maths, that is what the narrative tells us and she could have gone for higher education but her family did not prefer it that way and the narrator tells us that because her family would not consent to her taking of further studies in the subject, she was working in a bank, in quite a high position. So and, and, and we got to remember that her husband is a doctor.

Gopal is a doctor. So even though she is excellent at mathematics, she does not get the chance to pursue higher education and she does not reach the maximum that she could in terms of her educational trajectory and she compromises and then, you know, her compromises her mental aptitude.

And then she finds a work in a bank and even in that context, she is in quite a high position because of her calibre. So this is the educational, professional context for Radha Bhabiji and we get this tiny titbit of information while, you know, Ambai is detailing all the work that she does. So what, what is her other role in her family.

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It is that she shoulders the responsibility of the children. In fact, the entire responsibility of raising the children seems to be on her shoulders and, and women are preparing in Papaji's household for this particular picnic. Radha asks Minakshi to give the children a bath and, you know, Minakshi says that, you know, let them sleep for a while. If we wake them up this early, they will not be very happy.

The children can be allowed to sleep a little later and perhaps Gopal can give them a bath. So this is the question that Minakshi asks, why does not Gopal Bhaisaheb give them their baths later? And this is the response of Radha Bhabiji and she says, "oh yes, he will bath them. Keep thinking that." So the louder sarcasm in that couple of statements, oh yes, think, you keep thinking that, that will never happen and behind the sarcasm, is also a, a little bit of bitterness there about the fact that the husband will not pitch in.

And not only does she have, you know, the responsibility of the children, she also has the responsibility of cooking the food at, at home, in her home in Jodhpur and she is also entirely

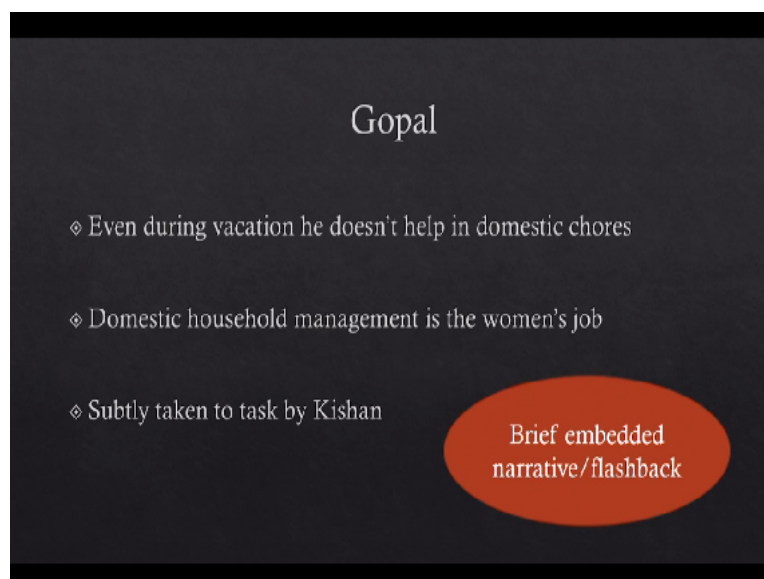
responsible for that. And we do get a, a tiny flashback which explains to the readers, the state of affairs at their particular, at their home in Jodhpur. So all the domestic chores including ironing for everyone is, you know, has fallen on Radha Bhabiji's shoulders.

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So she irons her clothes, her husband's clothes, her children's clothes in order to prepare them for this particular picnic and she does look haggard and in fact, she does not have time for herself. So all these become very very apparent as we read the, the details and, and the run up to the picnic itself.

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Okay, and what is brought out in that particular exchange between Minakshi and Radha, is this

fact that even during the vacation, even when he is at leisure, even when he is enjoying himself, outside of his professional context, he does not help in domestic chores, he does not share the responsibility either of the children or of the duties in the kitchen and why, why does not he do that?

Because it is everybody's understanding that the domestic household management is the women's job. It is the women's prerogative. It is their privilege. It is their traditional responsibility that they have been doing for ages together since time immemorial and this notion, this notion it is the, it is the women who are supposed to take care of the kitchen and the children is subtly questioned by Kishan and how does he do that?

Because he, he does that in the, in sort of an embedded narrative, there is a brief embedded narrative in the story, mini flashback which gives as a window, a glimpse of the life of Gopal and Radha in Jodhpur. So this is the flashback and this is Gopal telling Kishan and Minakshi, what, what are the difficulties that he faced if his wife was in around?

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Gopal

- ◊ "I was completely helpless. I couldn't so much as stand in the kitchen. And you can't even get servants over here. Can you imagine what it was like, Kishan. I couldn't even stand in the kitchen long enough to make a cup of tea."
- ◊ Kishan said quietly, 'Isn't Radha Bhabhiji who also has a job at the bank, cooking in the same kitchen at this very moment?'
- ◊ 'Certainly. So what? After all, women are used to it.'

Radha ←

← *intolerable space*

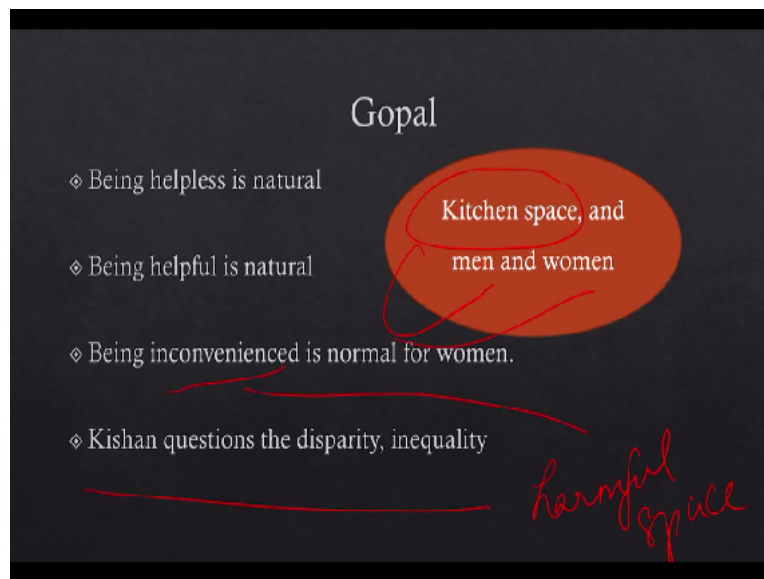
He says that I was completely helpless. I could not so much as stand in the kitchen. And you cannot even get servants over here. Can you imagine what it was like, Kishan? I could not even stand in the kitchen long enough to make a cup of tea. Kishan said quietly, is not Radha Bhabhiji who also has a job at the bank, cooking in the same kitchen at this very movement? Certainly. So

what?

After all, women are used to it. So Gopal tells Kishan the difficulty that he had faced when he has to do certain tasks in the kitchen when Radha was away on, on certain bank work and he had to take care of the kitchen and he says that I could not even stand for a brief time even, even to make a cup of tea. That does not take a lot of time in the kitchen. So it was that, that difficult. The kitchen was almost a place that one could not be there for a long time because he is talking about Jodhpur and Jodhpur is very very hot, extremely hot most of the year.

So and Kishan asks very quietly, is not Radha doing some sort of kitchen work at this very moment when we are enjoying a drink, we are enjoying this chat and he, he does not bat an eyelid, Gopal does not bat an eyelid. So what, after all women are used to this terrible inconvenience, the pain, the struggle that comes with, you know, working in a, physically uncomfortable kitchen. So what are the interpretations that we can draw in, from this particular conversation and these are some of the interpretations that I have charted down.

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Being helpless is natural, being helpless is natural. It is almost as if Gopal is proud of the fact that he is helpless. In fact, there is a repetition there because he says I could not so much as stand in, I could not even stand in. So that is repeated and the repetition highlights or reinforces the fact that men cannot be in the kitchen even for the briefest of the moments and it becomes

intolerable as the space.

It is a very interesting idea; it is intolerable space for the men. Why does it become intolerable for Gopal and not for Radha and that is a, that is a question that we, we need to ask? We should ask because men are not used to. Men such as Gopal are not used to being in difficult spaces and kitchen is a difficult space as we have seen in this particular story and the first kitchen that we introduced to in Papaji's home is also a very very inconvenient and physically harmful for the women, especially for the feet because they have to stand in flooded waters and here it is the opposite.

Here we have the heat, the extreme heat which, in which Radha cooks on a daily basis and, and Gopal thinks that is okay, that is perfectly natural, perfectly natural for her. So being helpless is natural for men like Gopal and being helpful is natural for men, for women like Radha. So the kitchen space means 2 different things for the 2 sexes. For one, it is intolerable. For the other, it is a space in which they work and feed the people who depend on them.

So being inconvenience, being in terribly a harmful situation, not only inconvenience, being in physically harmful spaces. So it is a harmful space. Extreme heat is harmful just as a flooded kitchen is harmful for women. So extreme, you know, temperatures and, and, and climatic conditions and weather situations is harmful for everybody, not only for the women, it is harmful for everybody.

And, and women are exposed to these conditions on a daily basis in order to help the other, the other half, the men to survive and it is very very interesting, it is almost touching to see that it is Kishan who questions the disparity, not Minakshi, you know. The first time in the first episode we had Minakshi question the disparity that the inconvenience in the kitchen and here Kishan questions the, the discrimination that Radha Bhabiji suffers, the inequality that is practiced in Gopal's home, in Radha's home.

And it is very very appropriate that we have a man question the disparity because it is high time that the men also woke up to this discrimination and Ambai makes a, a, an architect question all

these, you know, double standards in Indian society in the context of a kitchen in the corner of the house. Thank you for watching. I will continue in the next session.