

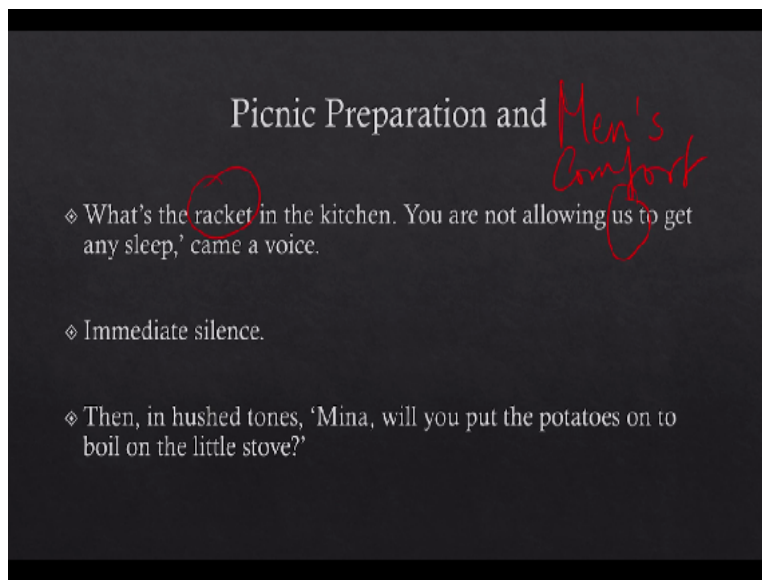
Short Fiction in Indian Literature
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Lecture – 08C

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

Hello and welcome back to Ambai's "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House" and you have been exposed to a quite detailed analysis of patriarchal culture in the context of this story and this lecture is a continuation of the previous one.

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So we have a, picnic in progress, in fact a preparation for a picnic in progress and the women are in the kitchen preparing in a hurried fashion in order to pack everything on time, in order to make sure that everybody has sufficient number of puris or, you know, potato curries or whatever and they are in the midst of doing this really laborious business and suddenly there is a voice from outside the kitchen which takes them to task and what is the racket in the kitchen, you are not allowing us to get any sleep, came a voice.

So there is a lot of chatter in the kitchen while they are preparing, the chatter is on the part of the women who are preparing the various things. So there is almost a very very congenial atmosphere in the, in the kitchen. There is comradeship among the women. They exchange a lot of information, bonds are being forged, lifestyles are being, you know, discussed and questions are

being asked and sarcastic replies are being made by the women about the fact that they do get a lot of hardships on a, on a daily basis.

And we have a voice from outside of the kitchen shushing them, taking them to task and, and the word is very interesting, racket. Racket means a lot of noise, confused noise and it is not racket, by the way. If you read the story pretty closely, the discussion that are undertaken by the women are not racket at all. In fact, they are a, a kind of discussion which reveals the gender imbalance in the Indian society.

And here we have a voice most probably a male voice and most probably the voice of Papaji who says that you are not allowing us, us being the men folk to get any sleep and there was immediate silence on the part of the women. They are shushed. In fact, there is also a sensation that, you know, on the part of the women that they have done something wrong and therefore, they become quiet and so that is a very interesting, you know, notion, to, to realize and they, they start talking in hushed tones.

Mina, will you put the potatoes on to boil on the little stove. So they are reprimanded and, and, and they behave accordingly because they do not want to disturb the men folk. So I, I want to make this title as picnic preparation and men's comfort. So while the picnic preparation involves a lot of labour and that labour has to be carried out in such a way that men's comfort are not affected. So it, it is a very very significant and interesting play out of gender rules.

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And as I say, the racket, if there is a racket, it is not the racket of the women's conversation, it could be the noise that is part of the labour of making, preparing, bringing all the vessels, putting all the stuff in, in the vessels and cooking them and packing the food and another very significant detail in this particular moment is the fact that the women do not express any kind of objection to this reprimand.

And, and, and, and this reprimand immediately brings order to, to this kitchen in some way, in the sense that it, it kind of suppresses the, the tone of the women's voices. So immediate order is enforced by the patriarchal authority and here it is Papaji we can safely say and it is also very important to recall that even when Radha Bhabiji, you know, makes a sarcastic comment about the fact that her husband will not help with the children, she, she stops with the sarcasm.

And, and she does not spell out, she does not spell out the fact that, you know, her husband does not share in the responsibility, in the domestic responsibility, in the family responsibility. No such objections and, and complaints are made and that is very very, you know, disturbing. I would not say the word, the word interesting or significant. I would say it is very disturbing to note that there are no objections against such kind of double standards in their lives.

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The Head's perspective

◇ By the time eight o'clock struck, all necks and underarms were raining sweat. Cholis were stuck to bodies. Oil smoke irritated their eyes. Their eyelids were heavy from lack of sleep. Papaji peeped into the kitchen.

◇ 'As soon as the trip to the lake was mentioned, the lot of you began to leap with enthusiasm.' He laughed out aloud.

So they have prepared for the picnic and it is 8 o'clock and the narrator says that by the time 8 o'clock struck, all necks and underarms were raining sweat. Cholis were stuck to bodies. Oil smoke irritated their eyes. Their eyelids were heavy from lack of sleep. Papaji peeped into the kitchen. And I would like to take this set of statements very slowly because the, if you look at the words necks, underarms, cholis, there is not a single reference to any particular female character.

There is no mention of the fact that Radha Bhabiji was sweating. There is no mention of the fact that Minakshi was, you know, Minakshi's choli was stuck to her body. It is all, you know, they have been almost be constructed into necks and underarms and cholis into parts of their outfits. It is almost their identities have been taken apart and they just become all these body parts which have been labouring and which have been affected by the labour that they have performed in the kitchen for the benefit of their entire family.

And, and here we have the response of Papaji, he says that as soon as the trip to the lake was mentioned, the lot of you, the lot of you began to leap with enthusiasm. He laughed out aloud. Again, women as a category, as one big identity which brings in everybody, every single woman is employed here and look at his take on their appearance. They are, the eyelids are very heavy with lack of sleep and they are really haggard and exhausted.

And he says that you are all leaping with enthusiasm. That is a very interesting comment and he

laughed out aloud. So that particular extract tells us the physical state of women who have been working very hard from dawn.

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A study in contrasts

- ◊ Physical state of women
- ◊ Exhausted and drooping
- ◊ Blindness of the observer

Covered in sweat and hurt by oil smoke

And as I said they are drooping with exhaustion and fatigue and instead of observing their fatigue, instead of observing their physical distress, what the observer does is offer a contrary spin on their state of affairs. So it is, it is, it is a spin that makes us wonder about the quality of mind of the observer. So, cannot he see that these women are covered in sweat and their eyes have been hurt by oil smoke, is he literally blind or is he ideologically blind. So these are some of the questions that we need to ask.

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The Head's Reading

- ◊ Wilful blindness?
- ◊ Unobservant?
- ◊ Trained not to notice?

Serious misreading?
Deliberate misreading?
Enthusiasm?
Laughter!

No straight answer

Again the question that I am repeating here is, is the head's, head, by head I refer to the head of the family, Papaji, is Papaji's reading, is Papaji's reading representative of wilful blindness or is he unobservant or is he trained not to notice, is he trained not to notice or is it a serious misreading or is it a deliberate misreading, is he deliberately misreading the state of affairs of the women.

So if so, why? If so, why, that is a question that we need to ask and that question is not answered straightforwardly in this particular story by Ambai. No straight answer. In fact, Ambai through this piece of literature want us to elicit the meanings, the interpretations through the lifestyle that is presented to us. She wants us to think about it and find out our own answers. In fact, if you look at the story, it is a story that is dominated by women in one sense and that sense comes from the fact that, that reading comes from the fact that Ambai throws her light on the lives of the women and, and, and their sufferings and their, you know, attitudes to various things.

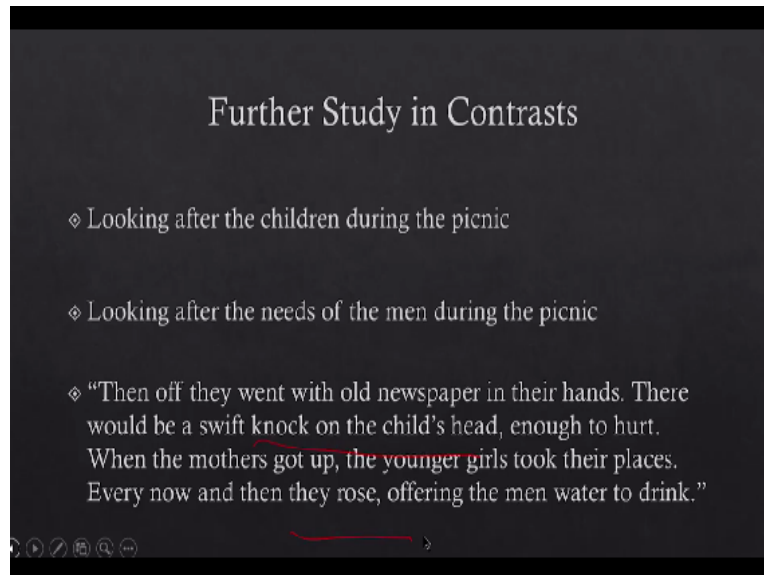
In fact, the women's commentary on, on, in fact, men's comment to on the women's roles are minimal, minimal comments such as the ones that we have here by Papaji is not the norm. This is an exception in fact and that, that is something that we need to consider and ask ourselves why is not Ambai turning the spotlight on the men? Why does she turn the spotlight on these array of women characters from Jiji? Bari-jiji to Radha Bhabiji to other women characters that I will talk about in a short while.

So why is this interest? Why is this exposition on the women and not on the men? Why, why? So all these questions can be asked and we can speculate about the answers too. So it is a deliberate misreading because Papaji is not a, a stupid man to put it bluntly because in one of my first, you know, analysis of the story, I talked about how read Minakshi? What was his perspective on Minakshi? and his perspective tells us something about a deep understanding of what is right and what is wrong in terms of Rajasthani culture, in terms of a perfect daughter-in-law and other things.

So he is a man who, who is not crass, who is not an idiot but he has a specific agenda, a specific perspective on what is right for him and his family. So how do we then see his enthusiasm? How

do we then read his laughter? What does that suggest? What does his enthusiasm suggest? And he, he seems to kind of push his enthusiasm on to these really tired set of women and why does he do that and that is a question that we need to ask too?

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Okay, so we, we get further study in contrast in this story in relation to the picnic. So they are there near the lake and they enjoy themselves by playing cards, at least the men do continuously because the task, the task of looking after the children during the picnic obviously falls on the shoulders of the women. So they have to look after children. They also have to look after the needs of the men during the picnic and this particular extract tells us how they go about it.

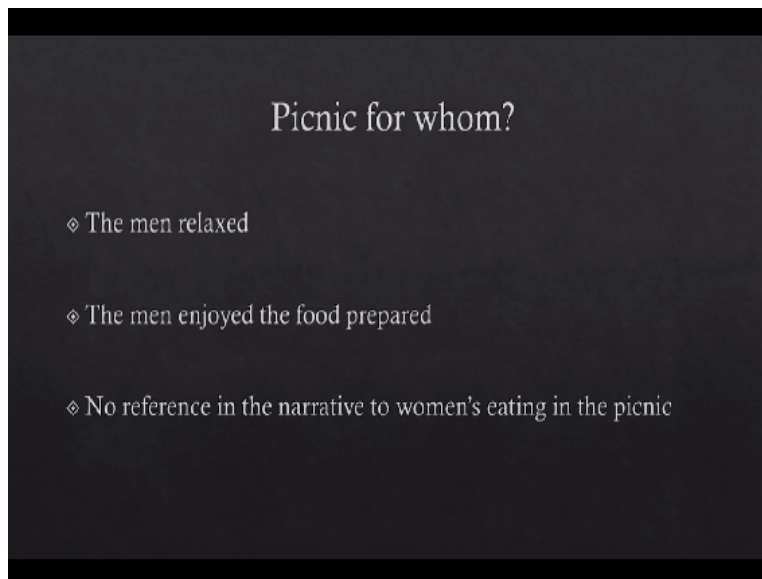
Then off they went with old newspaper in their hands and this is a reference to children who come and, you know, disturb their mothers saying that, you know, they have dirty diapers and, and, and the mother's have to leave with old newspaper in their hands to help clean up the children and change them into fresh clothes and there would be a swift knock on the child's head, you know, enough to hurt.

When the mothers got up, the younger girls took their places. Every now and then they rose, offering the men water to drink. So the mother's leave and, and then they show their displeasure by, you know, giving the child a knock on its head and then the young, young girls who take the place of their mothers, even they do not get to enjoy themselves continuously. They have to get

up and, and they have to serve the men water to drink.

Even water, you know, a simple thing as getting a glass of water is apparently difficult for the men and they have to be served by these girls and, and women and so all these contrasts are in terms of the labour that one particular gender engages in and the labour that the other gender does not engage in is brought out really vividly in this particular story.

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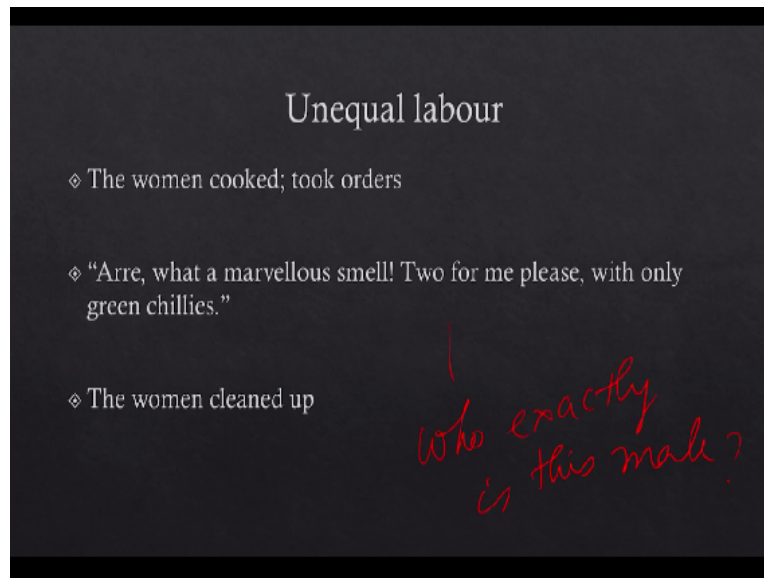


And so the bottom line in terms of the picnic is this. The man relaxed. So it is a real picnic for the men, they enjoyed as I said playing cards and they enjoyed a chit-chat with, with the children and they enjoyed the food prepared by the women at home as well as the snacks that are prepared near the lake because they bring all these pots and pans and stoves and make bujias and pakoras while they are there.

So all these are there and, and, and what is not there is this reference to the activity of women eating, especially particularly in the context of this particular, of this picnic. There is not one single reference which, which this narrator offers us about women eating food. It, it is the men who seem to enjoy that, which is why perhaps the narrator deliberately suppresses the activity of women's eating in order to highlight the scale of enjoyment of the men of the various dishes that the women prepared and offers them.

So this suppression of reference to eating is, is very very interesting because obviously the women would have eaten but then in the narrative, it is not mentioned by Ambai as I said in order to highlight the, perhaps the disrupted eating that the women enjoy or the smaller quantities that they had and other aspects which diminished the enjoyment of eating food. So again the black and white difference in terms of labour is very clear.

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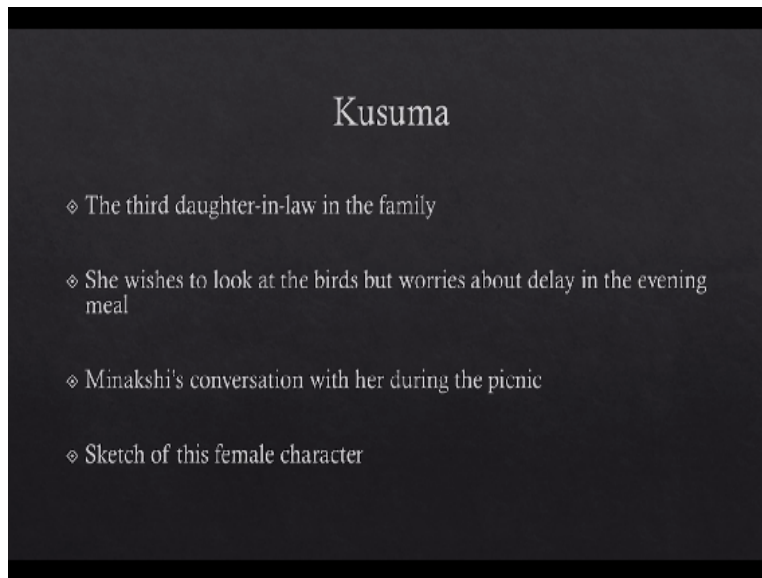
The women cooked, the men ate. The women took orders and the men enjoyed the labour, the privilege of eating and there is one particular statement here which I have put there to, to tell the readers how, how this, you know, the labour of the women is somehow glossed over in the narrative by these men and we have somebody saying we do know who exactly is it. Who exactly is this male is not very clear because it could represent any male and, and he says "Arre, what a marvellous smell! Two for me please, with only green chillies."

So he has a particular favourite and he demands that particular chilly flavoured dish to be served up. And again, once again, the women cooked and the men do not clean up. It is the women again who clean up in terms of washing the dishes and clearing up the picnic. So quite a lot of labour once again is undertaken by these women. They are workers to the core and Ambai makes that clear and once again we need to remember that this is not a poor family at all.

This is a family of doctors and bankers and, and people who do have a good profession. In fact,

Minakshi, she wonders about the book, she climbs mountains and, and these women do have a lot economic wealth as the subjects to their presence in this family but how far does that economic subtext translate as physical and emotional liberty and freedom from the kitchen is a big question that we can ask.

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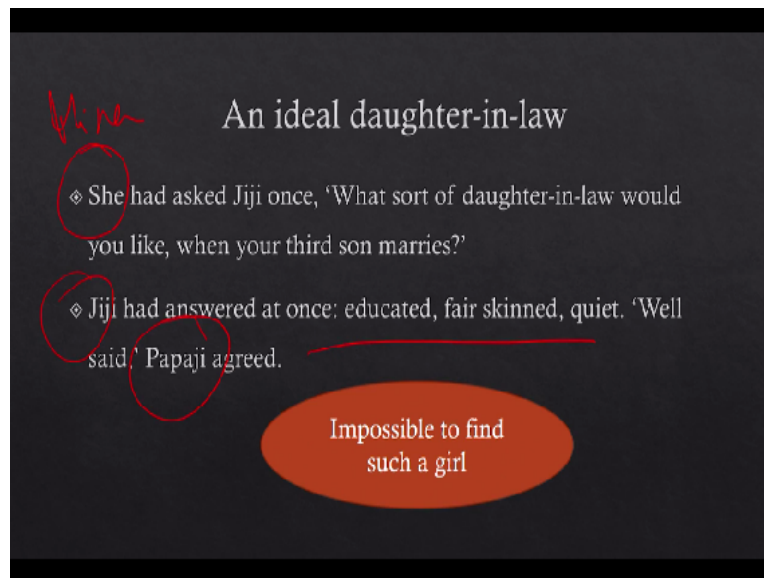
So, now what Ambai does is, she introduces another character, another daughter-in-law during this picnic and she is Kusuma and she is the third daughter-in-law in the family and as the family is leaving the picnic spot, she tells Minakshi not to hurry but, you know, go slowly so that she can look at the birds and it is very touching and tragic in the sense that she has not had the time to look at the birds, the Russian birds that, that come by to this particular spot in north India during a particular season.

And she says that I did not get the time to look at the birds. Could we, could we take out time and at the same time, she also remembers that she has to hurry because there is this evening meal to worry about and she has to peel the garlic. So and this is a very very emotional moment in the story and Minakshi makes her stay back by the side of the lake and they get to watch the birds and Minakshi's conversation with this Kusuma.

And her, you know, revelation about the context of Kusuma tells us a lot about the ideology of this upper middle class or even elite family which really kind of, you know, extracts the

maximum from its, from its women folk and it somehow flourishes or thrives on the labour of these women. And so we do get a, a brief sketch of this female character called Kusuma.

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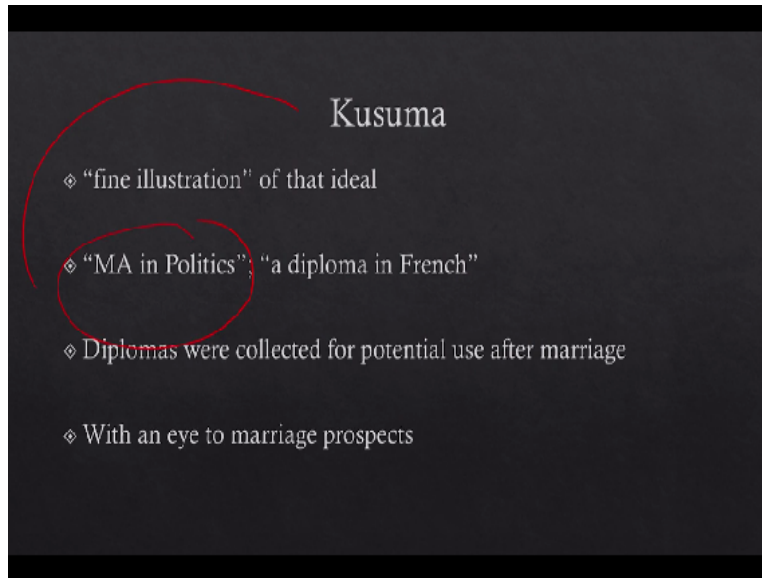


And she is the ideal daughter-in-law in the family and Minakshi had once asked Jiji what sort of daughter-in-law which you like when your third son marries and Jiji had answered at once; educated, fair skinned, and quiet. Well said, Papaji agreed. So the husband soundly agrees to the observations of his wife and this set of references; educated, fair skinned, and quiet is a hit against Minakshi in fact.

That is because Minakshi is educated but she is not fair skinned, I am sorry, but she is not fair skinned and Minakshi is not quiet. She is quiet voluble. In fact, as I said in my first lecture on this particular story that she is the only one who objects to the inconvenience of this kitchen which floods every times somebody washes the dishes.

So this husband and wife, Papaji and Jiji, they want a woman who is a contrast to Minakshi except for the fact of the education. So they want a woman who is fair skinned and who is quiet and at the same time educated and Minakshi, funnily thinks that that woman is impossible to find. There is no such thing as a, as a fair skinned educated and quiet girl and, but this family does find such a girl and she is Kusuma.

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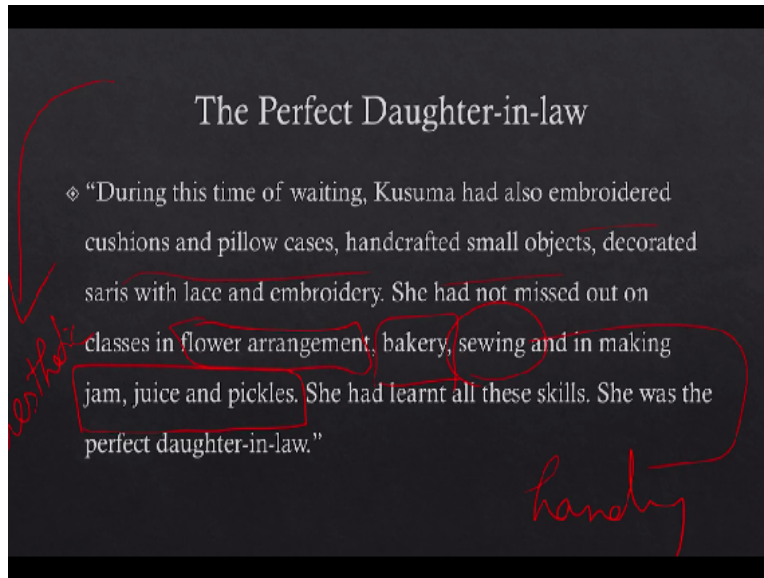


And Minakshi says that she is a fine illustration, fine exemplification of that particular ideal, desired by Papaji and Jiji and in fact, this is, this was such a, you know, surprise to me too when I first read the story because she has an MA in politics, not a BA, MA, a postgraduation in politics and she has a diploma in French and, and, and the narrator says that these diplomas were collected by these girls for potential use after marriage.

So what if the husband is placed outside of the country? What if he is a diplomat or works with the embassy and the French might come in handy during such occasions but again to go back, this is, you know, context of the MA in politics. Here we have a girl who has done MA in politics and she does not raise a word against, you know, the inconvenience of the kitchen. This really rudimentary kitchen that they have, she is very very quiet when Minakshi raises her objections to the state of the kitchen.

So it is an ironical degree I would suggest in the context of Kusuma's education. And again as the narrator points out, diplomas were collected by girls with an eye to marriage prospects, you know, whether this degree or this diploma would come in handy. What is the logic behind their choice? Even though I still wonder about the political science degree.

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Okay, so during this time of waiting and this time of waiting refers to the, the time she waited for her marriage to, to happen. So during this period, Kusuma had also embroidered cushions, pillow cases, handcrafted small objects, decorated saris with lace and embroidery. She had not missed out on classes in flower arrangement, bakery, sewing and in making jam, juice, pickles. She had learnt all these skills.

She as the perfect daughter-in-law. Again we see a lot of details in this, in this excerpt and the, and the details can be classified into 2 categories. I would, I would differentiate them between the kitchen related, you know, skills such as bakery, preparation of jam, juices and pickles. All these related to the kitchen and the food and the rest and the flower arrangement would relate to the aesthetic aspect, that would come in handy in the decoration of a home.

So this decorative object of a woman, the woman itself is a decorative object. This decorative object of a woman would help in decorating the home too by, you know, activities such as flower arrangement and she will also be very very useful because if she knows sewing, she can, you know, fix all, some of the damages that happen, some of that, you know, tears that are, that might happen, in an, in an outfit.

So she becomes very very handy. And again, you know, embroidered cushions and pillow cases and handcrafted small objects again will fall within the aesthetic. So the aesthetic and the useful

and the kitchen side will come into the useful side. I am sorry. So Kusuma is a perfect daughter-in-law.

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She has covered all the different sections that are necessary for a highly capable daughter-in-law and she is very well, very well educated. She has a diploma in French. She knows embroidery. She knows sewing. She knows how to make pickles and she knows how to arrange flowers. She is a perfect daughter-in-law but as I said, she does not raise an objection to an imperfect kitchen. In fact, she slogs just as the other women do inside this kitchen in her mother-in-law's home.

And in the context of the picnic, she does not get to enjoy the birds such a simple thing. She does not get to enjoy the beauty of nature, aspects of nature which is available to Vina Mausi, the widow, the widowed professional who lives on school ground. So we can see a star contrast here between a very very well educated woman and, and, and a woman who is on her own. And again, Kusuma is not very happy and immediate context for her unhappiness is her inability to conceive and, and, and that makes her very very unhappy and she sobs quietly.

It is not a big fussy crying that she, that she, you know, that she undergoes or suffers. She sobs quietly and, and again that indicates her, you know, mild mannered attitude. She does not create any fuss. She does not want to be noticed. She does not want to stand out and again the lack of fertility is again perhaps indicative of the, perhaps the dysfunctionality in, in the home.

And, and the fact that she is not able to talk about all her unhappiness with her husband, could be a reason for further unhappiness. So we can speculate, we can speculate quite a bit on the background of Kusuma too with, with the factors that we have available in the narrative. Thank you for watching. I will continue in the next session.