

Short Fiction in Indian Literature
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Lecture – 08D

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

Hello and welcome to the last section on my lecture about Patriarchal Culture in Ambai's "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House". So we have been talking about several episodes in the life of the women surrounding this figure of Papaji and now, today, we are going to look at a, a crisis in the life of his wife, Jiji.

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Final Crisis

- ◊ Physical collapse of Jiji
- ◊ When she is checking the ingredients for cooking
- ◊ "I am going...I am going...My daughters-in-law are elsewhere. That wretched Bari-Jiji will rule in the kitchen...Hé Bhagawan"

Comical

So this is the final crisis in this short story. So Jiji, who has been unwell for quite a while with high blood pressure and asthma, suffers a, a, a kind of a serious point of illness towards close of the story and everybody attends to her, that is all the women. So there is a physical collapse for this elderly lady and this happens, the collapse happens when she is checking the ingredients for cooking.

She is walking to the fridge to check what is there to cook for the evening meal and then she falls down with a stroke and this is the rambling that this woman, you know, utters when, even when she is down and she says, "I am going, I am going. My daughters-in-law are elsewhere. That wretched Bari-Jiji will rule in the kitchen. He Bhagawan." So it is, it is almost comical in one

sense because even when she is under immense physical pain and duress, look at her primary concerns which are evident in this, you know, mutterings.

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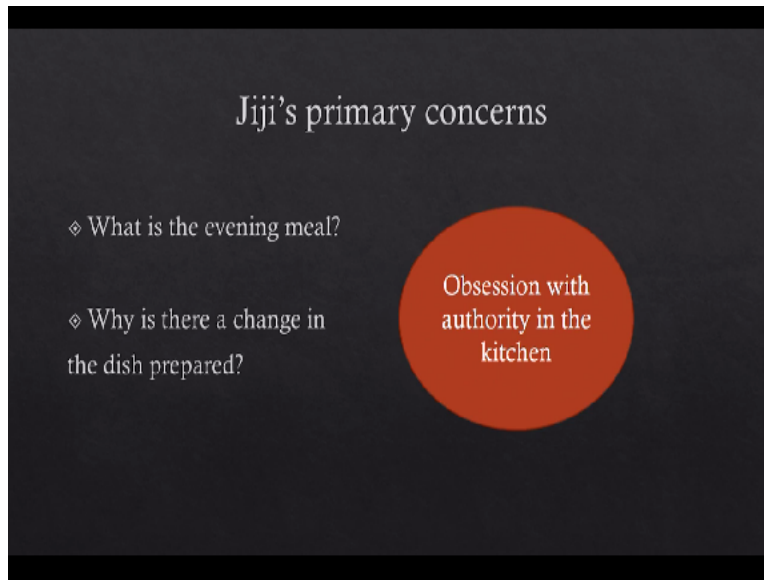


So her primary concern, her biggest concern is that Bari-Jiji will take over the kitchen because her daughters-in-law are elsewhere. They have settled in various parts of the country with their husbands and therefore, Bari-Jiji, the stepmother of Papaji might rule in the kitchen and that will be a disaster and that will be tragic for this woman Jiji. So her concern is who will take over the kitchen?

Who will, you know, be the next queen and look at her concern again when she wakes up after her becoming unconscious. So when she wakes up, she opened her eyes again, she first made sure her keys were as usual at her waist. So this woman suffers a stroke, she becomes unconscious and once she regains her senses, she checks if the keys to the kitchen cabinet are at her waist.

So that is, that is very interesting. So the keys are not to the treasure chest in the house. The keys are not to this chest which holds all the property documents or, or the wealth of the family, the cash and the jewels but to the kitchen cabinet which contains all the spices. So that is, that is again a very very significant and pathetic as well in some sense.

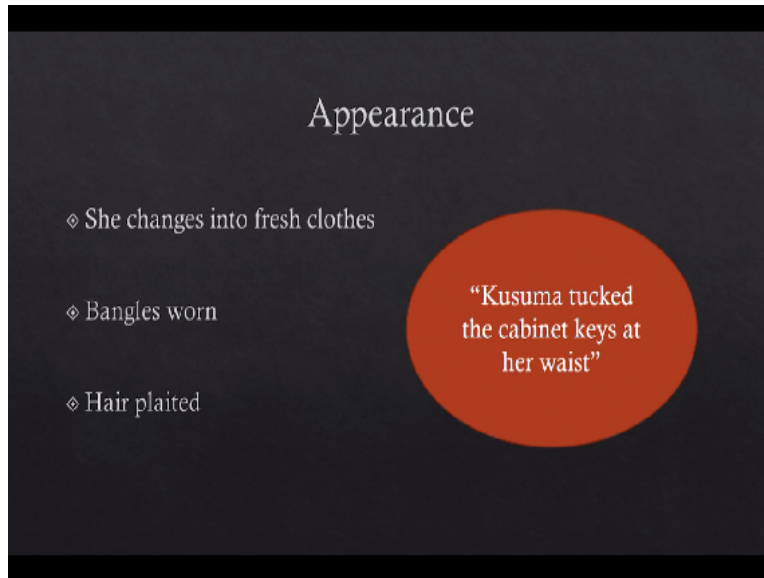
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So again, other primary concerns are what is the evening meal for the family because she has been unwell and who has prepared the evening meal and what was the meal that has been prepared and she finds that there has been a change in the dish that was prepared and she gets angry. Why was this changed? Who made this change and she asks the women around her, did Bari-Jiji make this change?

Did she already think that I was dead and she has taken over? So all these questions reveal the obsession with who is highest authority in the kitchen. Is it herself or her predecessor, Bari-Jiji. So there is a battle of sorts between these 2 women. The one woman who has had a supreme authority over the kitchen previously when her husband was alive and this woman, Jiji, whose husband is now the head of the family.

So we can see this battle played out even during crisis in the family such as a big physical illness.
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And then, other concerns also become apparent, the concerns of Jiji, excuse me. She changes into fresh clothes because she soils the clothes when she becomes, you know, when she loses the control over herself and therefore, she, when she regains consciousness, she changes into fresh clothes and she wears bangles, she wears, she has her hair plaited by her daughter-in-law and it, all these are quite normal set of events for someone who has been unwell, nothing extraordinary about this.

But what is interesting or sticking about it is this anxiety to make a good impression on those around her. So she wants to be spick and span. She wants to make a, an impression on those who are around her. So she does dress up well even during moments of illness and once she has, you know, clothes herself neatly and she has dressed herself neatly, Kusuma tucked the cabinet keys at her waist and that is the last adornment so to speak that goes into her outfit and, and that is also again very interesting.

So that is also very important in fact. And when, when they do dress her, when they change clothes, when they change the clothes of Jiji, the narrator, third person, narrator, kind of, you know, describes the state of Jiji's body, this elderly woman's body and she points out, assumes the narrator is a woman somehow and she points out the ravages of life as a wife and a mother.

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Jiji's Body

- ◆ Ravages of life as a wife and mother evident
- ◆ "There were scars of childbirth on her lower abdomen, as if she had been deeply ploughed there."
- ◆ A scar... "as if she were going bald, shone at the lower edge of her centre parting, where the gold band with its heavy pendant had constantly pressed."

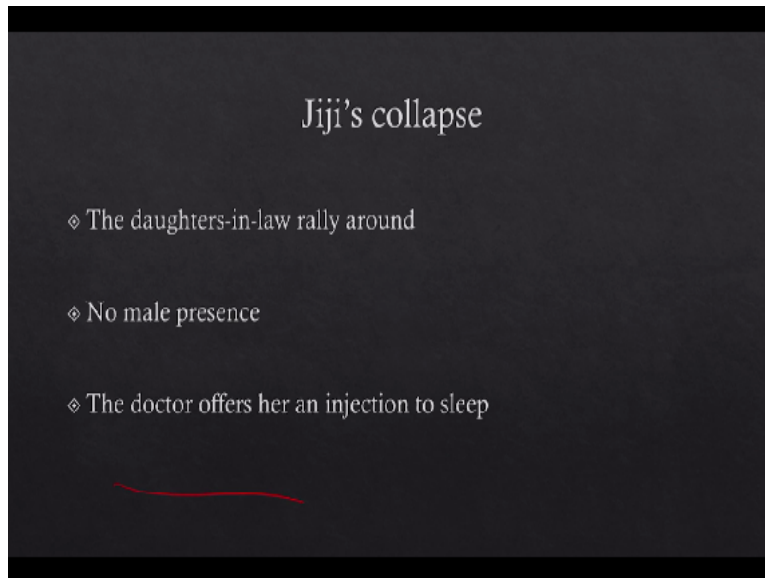
farming = land
good produce

And this, these are some of the very interesting details that, that are explained to the readers and the narrators says there were scars of childbirth on her lower abdomen as if she had been deeply ploughed there. I have highlighted the phrase, deeply ploughed, that metaphor is very very interesting. The metaphor of farming is employed as if she becomes a, a land that has been ploughed deeply in order to yield the very good produce.

So what is highlighted here is her reality as a productive machinery or a productive space that will bring forth a good benefit for the farmer and then once again, a scar is highlighted, a scar in her chest and that scar is described as a, as something that is to do with going bald and, and this scar shown at the lower edge of her centre parting, the area near her chest where the gold band with its heavy pendant had constantly pressed.

So that is that marital pendant that presses against her chest and it leaves a scar on her body. So as if she has been deeply injured, as if there can be no growth of any kind in that particular space. So that is also a very interesting a metaphor there. The lack of any kind of growth and, and, and suggestions of injury are associated with this heavy pendant associated with the wedding ritual of varying a, a marital chain.

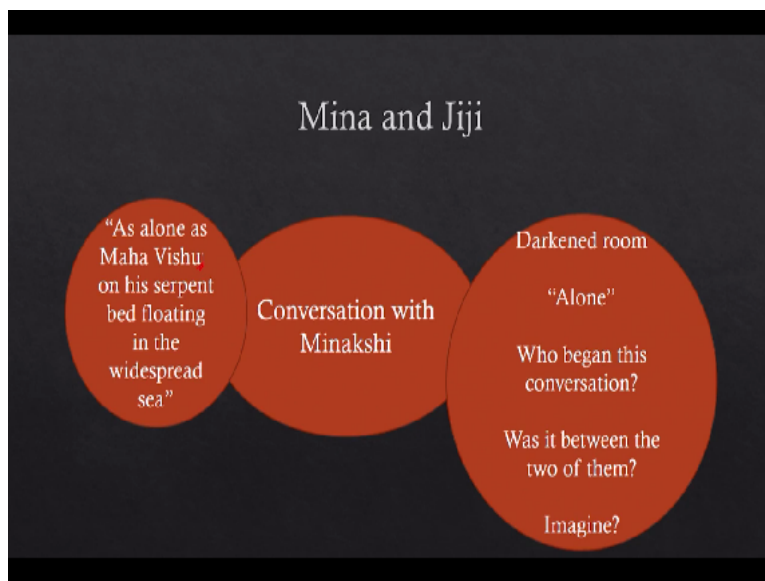
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Now, so when Jiji collapses, the daughters-in-law rally around and it is also a pretty significant to notice the absence of men. In fact, we see a doctor coming up hastily and offering her an injection that will put her to sleep and not be disturbed with anxieties about who is going to take over the kitchen. Apart from that, we do not see lot of male presents around this sick woman and that is, that is very interesting too to notice.

So once the daughters-in-law help her change the clothes and, and, you know, help her settle on the bed, we have a conversation between Minakshi and Jiji.

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It is a very very interesting moment in this story. There is nobody else around them. They are

almost as if in a cocoon, these 2 women and in fact, the metaphor of how Vishnu is very apt to describe the isolation of these 2 women in a darkened room with curtains drawn and having a chat. So the narrator says that they were as alone as Maha Vishnu on his serpent bed floating in the widespread sea.

So it is almost as if they were cut-off from the rest of humanity. They were in these vast waters and in fact, the bed is comparable to the serpent bed of Maha Vishnu himself and we have this very significant conversation in the entire story when Minakshi lays bare, all the fault lines that, that kind of deconstruct the lives of women, not only in this family but also in the rest of the society.

So they are alone and, and, and the narrator says that it is difficult to point out as to who began this conversation. In fact, it is also difficult to ascertain whether the conversation in fact happened itself or was it between the 2 of them or was it symbolically between, you know, any, any 2 women in, in, in this society or in this world. So it is a very very surreal dialogue that happens between Mina and Jiji.

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So, so this conversation also involves a set of flashbacks narrated by Jiji about her early days of marriage in this household and in fact, it is very interesting that Minakshi seems to provoke all these women into talking about their, you know, their lifestyles, their past and so on. So she

almost becomes a, a kind of touchstone for a great revelations and she seems to be the unifying factor that connects all these episodes with various women in the story.

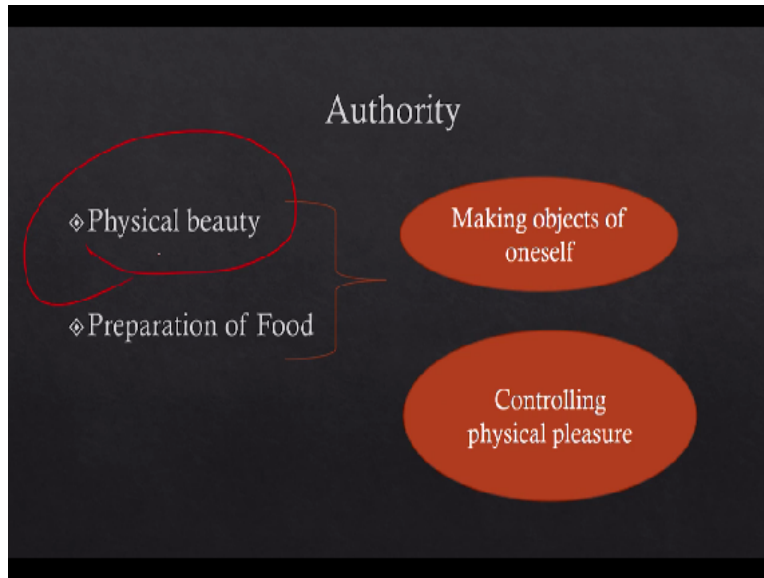
So Jiji too reveals her really brutal past to Minakshi and she begins her past from her wedding day and she tells Minakshi about the colour of her dress that she wore on that day, the red dress. And in fact, she also details the exact kind of jewellery that she wore and the type of jewellery that she wore and most importantly, she tells Minakshi about the advice of her mother. It is a very important moment in the story and, and, and that advice is this.

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The mother of Jiji with her head covered, she leaned over me and held me to her. Her big nose ring was sharp against my face. Take control over the kitchen. Never forget to make yourself attractive. Those two rules will give you all the strength and authority you will need and these words of the mother of Jiji becomes the guidelines for Jiji to lead her marital life. In fact, she offers to precepts, 2 golden rules.

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And these golden rules are, you should be concerned about your physical beauty. Make yourself attractive and this is important advice that she carries through her entire life even when she suffers a stroke and, and, and the first thing she worries about, one of the first thing that she worries about is to change into attractive clothes, neat clothes, wear her jewellery, wear tassels in her, in, in her plaited hair and all those things.

So she does carry out the advice of her mother to the last detail and the other golden rule is take over the kitchen. You should be the mistress of the kitchen, the mistress of the cuisine that you prepare and serve to the family. So that is, and that is the other golden rule that Jiji really takes to her heart and, and take control over the kitchen. And this advice is also the reason behind all the fights that she has, all the food wars that she has with her predecessor, Bari-Jiji.

So it is, it is, these words are very very important and, and they need to be, kind of, understood in greater detail and physical beauty of course has notions of making objects of oneself, especially on the part of the women in the context of this particular story. So women make themselves attractive for the benefit of their men. So they, they almost become objects in some sense.

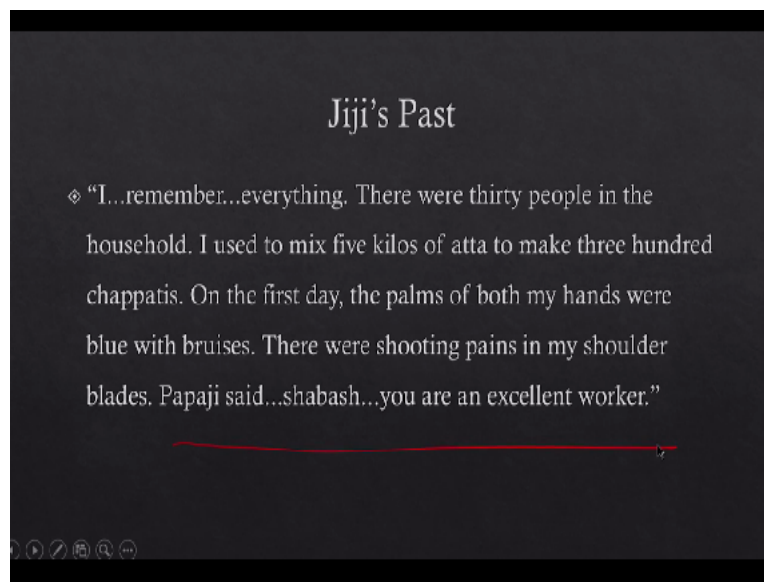
And, and again the control over kitchen, the control over the food prepared is also associated with controlling the physical pleasure, managing the physical pleasure of the men, managing the physical pleasure, you know, undergone by men like Papaji. So it is all about pleasure and, and

being mistresses of these pleasure.

So if you have authority over that, then you will be powerful, that is, that seems to be the advice of Jiji's mother and, you know, similar mothers around this society. And Jiji also has a very important crisis to narrate in her past. So there are lots of crisis in the story and this seems to be a crisis within the crisis. Jiji's collapse itself is a crisis in that, you know.

Narrative of that crisis, we have another crisis and it, this talks about the death of a young child, a death of an infant and, and, and, and, and that will come very shortly after this excerpt that talks about her, you know, her first experiences of cooking for a big family and she says I remember everything.

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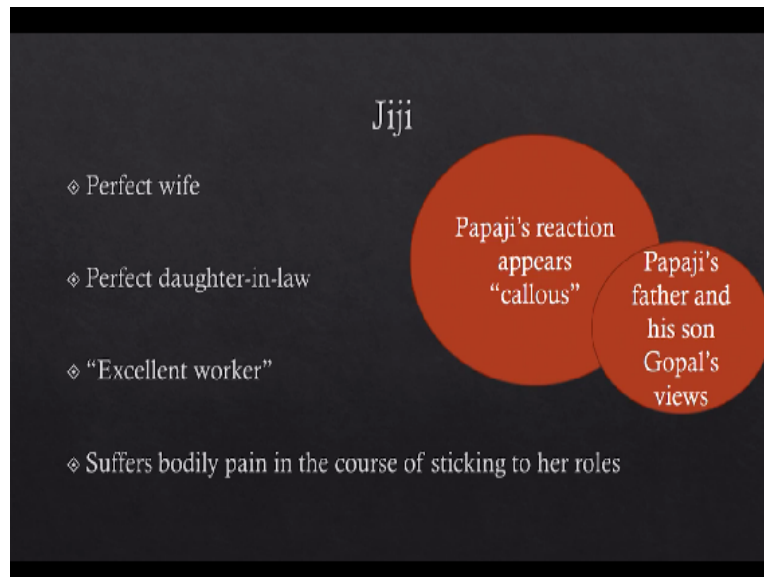


And this woman, Jiji, is on this bed. She is recovering from her stroke and she talks about this. She says that I remember everything. There were thirty people in the household. I used to mix five kilos of atta to make three hundred chapattis. On the first day, the palms of both my hands were blue with bruises. There were shooting pains in my shoulder blades.

Papaji said, shabash, you are an excellent worker, you know, well done. So this is a young bride, you know, and she spends her early days or everyday of her married life making about three hundred chapattis and she does undergo a lot of physical pain and this is the comment of her

husband that you are an excellent worker and there is a lot of irony there.

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So Jiji is a perfect wife and she is a perfect daughter-in-law. She is a perfect wife. She gets praises from her husband, you know, who says she is, she is a brilliant worker and, but being perfect, being excellent in the eyes of the men means immense bodily pain on the part of the women in the course of doing their, in the course of doing their jobs or their roles as daughter-in-laws or as wives.

And it is, it is, in this context, in the context of the immense physical pain undergone by Jiji on her shoulder blades and on her palms, in this context, Papaji's reaction to her work appears almost callous, cruel but, you know, these men, men like Papaji and even his son, Gopal Bhaisaheb, who has a, who is a doctor.

In fact, they seem to not notice the pains of their women in the kitchen because they are trained not to notice, they are trained not to notice and therein lies the tragedy. In fact, they do not seem to see anything amiss in, in a woman who perspires, in a woman who suffers a lot of pain in the kitchen space doing a lot of labour. So on the one hand, it is tragic. On the other hand, it is, you know, it becomes the norm for these men.

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The crisis in the past

◆ Jiji's one-year old son dies

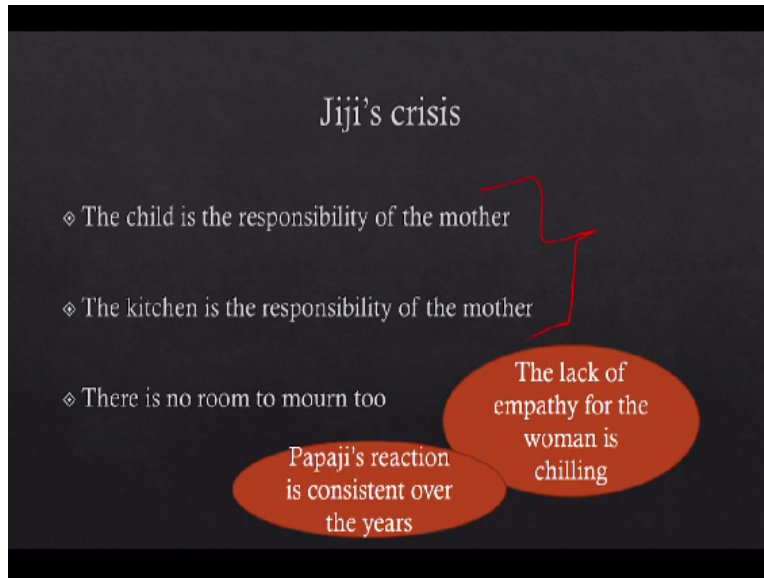
◆ "There was puja that day. Everyone was in the kitchen. The baby had climbed the stairs and fallen off the parapet wall. He had crawled up thirty steps. ...I heard that huge scream just as I was putting the puris into the hot oil...It seemed to knock me in the pit of my stomach...The base of his skull was split...After all the men returned ...I fried...Mina are you listening ...I fried the rest of the puris."

So the crisis in Jiji's past is about the death of a young one. In fact, a one-year-old son of Jiji and Papaji dies tragically in an accident and this is the, the excerpt that, in which we get to see Jiji's narration of that particular incident and she says that it was a, a day of celebration. In fact, it was a puja day. There was a puja that everyone was in the kitchen. The baby had climbed the stairs and fallen off the parapet wall.

He had crawled up 30 steps. I heard that huge scream just as I was putting the puris into the hot oil. It seemed to knock me in the pit of my stomach. The base of his skull was split. After all the men returned, I fried, sorry. Mina are you listening. I fried the rest of the puris. So it is a moment of horror, real horror in, in, in this section of the story. So Jiji talks about the death of her son, a very young son who climbs the stairs and falls off a, a wall, a parapet wall.

And nobody notices because everybody is in the kitchen and she is just, just she is about to put a puri into the hot oil, she hears the scream of the child and the, the child falls off the wall, you know. The skull was split and the baby dies and after the men return after doing all the rights and, and, and the needful deed, she fried, she carries on with, with the frying of the rest of puris and that is the tragic, that is the tragedy of her life.

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And what is, what becomes clear in, in this narration is that the child is the responsibility of the mother. The mothers should see to the, you know, should see to it that the child is, is protected and the kitchen is also the responsibility of the mother, the women. She should see to it that the food is cooked, you know, the necessary dishes are cooked and served without any trouble. So how could this one woman manage everything at the same time and, and that is, that is, that is a question that nobody asks and nobody talks about it.

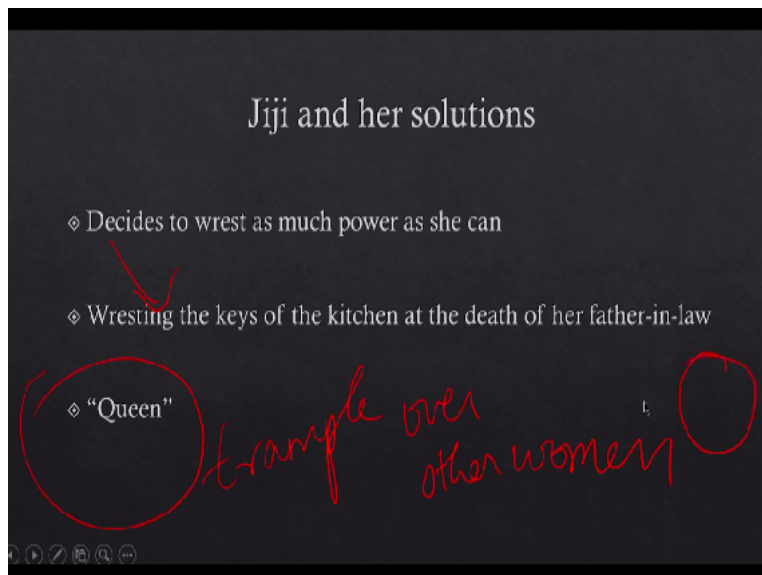
So in, in that earlier excerpt, it becomes very clear that the men or nobody else is deputed to look after the child, this young child who somehow slips up the stairs and falls tragically. And the other, other interesting thing is that she is not allowed to mourn the death of her son. In fact, she has to carry on with that kitchen chore of, of, of you know, frying the puris. Why is she not let, you know, allowed to spend some time on her own to mourn the death of her beloved child and, and why does not some other women take over this job of frying the puris?

Bari-Jiji would have been around. She should have been around too. And other women too and, and why, why this fate on this daughter-in-law, this Jiji, to carry on with this task and what about Papaji's reaction? Where is he? Why does not he offer any comfort? All these questions, you know, come up to our minds because we are living in a different age and, and, and day and the lack of empathy for this particular woman is chilling, it is disturbing.

And in fact, this lack of empathy, the lack of commentary, appropriate commentary in relation to particularly difficult time for women on the part of Papaji is consisted over the years. This is a man who does not seem to mourn for the death of his child or this is a man who does not seem to offer any overt support or, you know, consolation to his wife and he does not seem to notice any of the troubles in his kitchen.

He does not seem to notice the leaking, you know, sink. He does not seem to notice, you know, the, the restrictive view in the kitchen. He does not seem to notice the, the immense labour that the women carry out on the day of the picnic. So it is all part of a piece. Everything falls into, you know, its place in terms of Papaji's reaction to his women folk.

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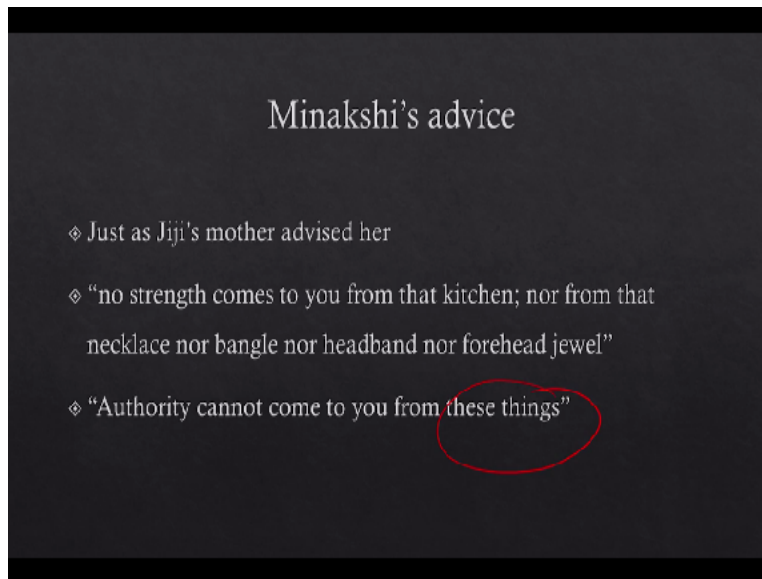


So, so Jiji realizes that, you know, the best thing to do in her life would be to wrest as much power as she can from the other women around her and wresting power means wresting the keys of the kitchen at the death of her father-in-law. So she gets the keys of the kitchen cabinet when her father-in-law dies and Bari-Jiji becomes a widow and she becomes the new queen of the kitchen.

And she gets the power to trample over other women around her just as she was trampled over by other women when she was vulnerable, when she was lower down in the hierarchy. So it does seem to be a vicious cycle going on there in terms of the relationships between women in, in

their kitchen speciality.

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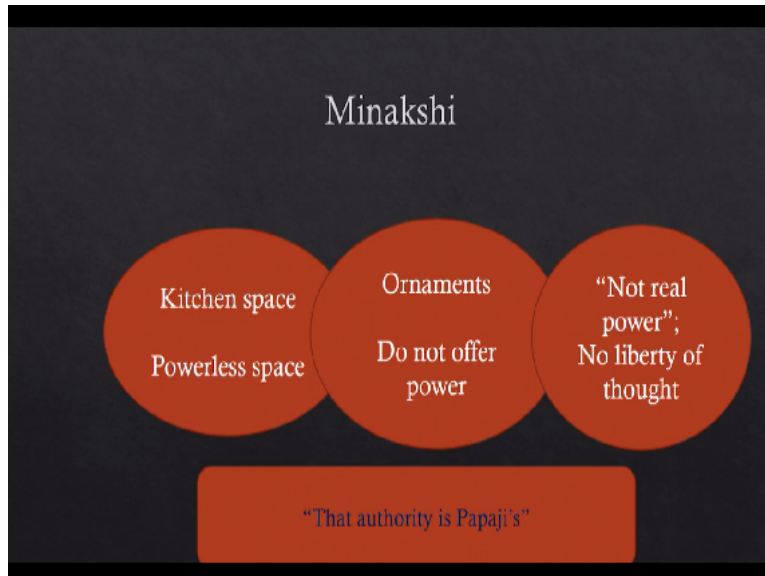


So now Jiji has related her past to Minakshi, her sufferings as a new bride, her, you know, tragedy in terms of the death of her young child and, you know, her rise to glory as the new queen of the kitchen. So she has narrated the past and now we have Minakshi offering advice to her elderly, sick mother-in-law, Jiji and just as Jiji's mother-in-law advised her, you know, while bending down and speaking to her ear, Minakshi does the same.

She speaks to her in her ear and she says very very powerful words in this story and she says no strength comes to you from the kitchen nor from that necklace nor bangle nor headband nor forehead jewel. Authority cannot come to you from these things, these material things. So some of the most powerful lines in, in, in, in, in the literature I would say and she says that please do not worry about all these various kinds of jewellery.

You do not get any kind of power from these things, these material stuff.

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And she seems, Minakshi says that kitchen space is a powerless space in some sense and the ornaments do not offer power and of course, they do not offer any kind of real power. In fact, there is no liberty of thought that is embedded in all these duties that are there in the kitchen. So kitchen space and, and, and the glory of the ornaments should be kind of given up by these women.

And she says that the authority that you derive through the kitchen, the authority that you derive through the ornaments are part of the authority of Papaji. That authority is Papaji's, not your authority. He is the one who kind of endorse these powers on you and you seem to use that power to, you know, further imprison yourself and trample down or imprison other women who are beneath you in that particular space.

So these spaces, though they are useful in the sense that they provide food for the rest of the family, though they are useful spaces in the literal manner, in terms of the symbolic value, they do not have any kind of real power for the women who are employed there without pay.

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So, and Minakshi says that from all that, from all the, all the kitchen space and from all the ornaments, be free, be free, be free and it is, it is a, it is almost a refrain, it is almost a refrain on the part of Minakshi and, and this repetition is very very important because it highlights, it highlights the fact that women have to free themselves and, and, and, and the advice seems to be liberate yourself from false authority.

Women like Jiji and Bari-Jiji think that they have real power but it is not real power but it is false authority that they have derived from the men folk.

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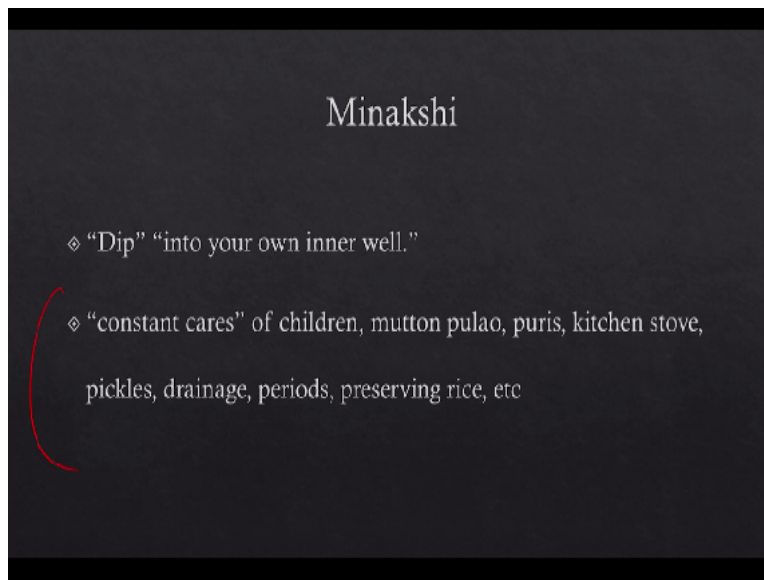


And Jiji's response to Minakshi is very interesting too. And she says that if I renounce my

jewellery, my kitchen, my husband and children, what is left for me? Who am I? And Minakshi says that you are just a Dularibai and it is very interesting that this name of Jiji is mentioned for the first time at the end of the story. We see her as an individual, as a, as a real personality, hiding within that stereotype of a mother-in-law.

And Minakshi says that you need to find out the relationship between Dularibai and rest of the world, you know, connect yourself to the rest of the world and see what is your place in this particular world rather than attaching yourself to all these things, kitchen, husband, children and jewellery.

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And Minakshi says that dip, dip into your own inner well, in your own inner waters, in your own spiritual self and, you know, all these constant cares about children, mutton pulao, puris, kitchen stove, pickles, drainage, periods, and preserving the rice from the insects, all these things are, are constant cares which, which kind of suffocate and burry the real identity of Dularibai. If you are worried about these, how can you think about other things.

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And, and, and this, at this moment, Jiji becomes a kind of a representative figure of much of the women in, in society who are, you know, obsessed or who are lost in all these details, in all these constant cares of the domestic set up. And, you know, if, if women become obsessed or lost in this world, where will be the time for them to become an adventurer? Where will be the time to become a poet, a painter, an observer of nature, a pilot, you know.

They would not have the time to engage in all these pursuits outside of the home and she says that if women did have the time, if women were given the time, they would have a made a world without wards, prisons, gallows and chemical warfare. Perhaps the contribution of women would have made a big change in this unequal world. Perhaps the women would have helped contribute to make the society fairer and more beautiful.

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Strength of women

- ◊ Not in the "food that was given in the appropriate measure and jewellery that weighs down ears and neck and forehead?"
- ◊ "Connect yourself with the world that surrounds you"
- ◊ "Not trapped nor diminished by gender, but freed"

Now and she says that, Minakshi says that the real strength of women is not in the food that was given in the appropriate measure and jewellery that weighs down ears and neck and forehead. So your strength does not lie in the kind of food that you offer to your family, the right amount of food, the correct amount, the right proportion that you offer to your home and to your family and, and it also does not lie in the jewellery that really weighs you down.

It, it, you know, suffocates your body and, and your ears and neck and forehead, it, your strength is not there. Your strength will become visible when you connect yourself with the world that surrounds you and she says that you should not be trapped or diminished by gender, the identity, the female identity should not trap you or limit you or diminish you or tarnish you in any sense but it should free you from your body and make you think about the other things.

Other beautiful things, other curious things about this world and what is ultimately the message of Ambai in this particular story.

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Ambai's message

- ◇ Biological identity is not the only essential identity
(womb and breasts)
- ◇ Not a mere reproductive device
- ◇ Not the definitive slave in the kitchen
- ◇ Is not born to cook and feed

Other roles to perform:

- Creator
- Discoverer
- Adventurer
- Innovator

It is a very powerful message and it is a very very clear message. There are no complications there. There are no complexities here, you know. This story is, is very very easy to understand and very very easy to relate to. There are no profound messages. She just sets a lot of contrast between the world of women and the world men and she leaves the reader to see the differences and make their own assumptions and, and, and take their own meanings from the story.

And in fact towards the end of the story, she spells out, you know, what, what should be the ideal destination for women and, and, and she says that biological identities not the only essential identity for a woman. A womb and a set of breasts do not define a woman. There are other identities for women that they can, you know, aspire to and fulfil in their life, in their lives on this world and a, a woman is not merely a reproductive device, a biological device that reproduces, nor is she the definitive slave in the kitchen.

She is not there to slave away for the benefit of the family and she is not born just to cook and feed the husband and children. In fact, she has other roles to perform. She can be a creator. She can be a discoverer. She can be an adventurer. She can be an innovator and the women of, of the Indian society and other societies can aspire to these, the greater, more satisfying identities. Thank you for watching. I will continue in the next session.