

## Women's Isolation in Ambai's *a Kitchen in the Corner of the House*

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**Abstract:** *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House* is an outstanding story that concentrates on the experiences of women. It highlights diverse abstract themes such as liberation of women, position of women in the past and the present, symbols of freedom and renaissance of women. The story describes the life of a group of women in Ajmir. Their life revolves around the kitchen. These women are the representatives of entire women population especially in India, who spend large part of their day within the confinement of kitchen. This confinement is often undertaken willingly since nurturing of the family is considered to be the chief duty of a woman in our society. Ambai narrates the story from the perspective of Minakshi, the youngest daughter-in-law of the house – a person from outside the cultural background of Ajmir.

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### I. Introduction

*A Kitchen in the Corner of the House* is an outstanding story that concentrates on the experiences of women. It highlights diverse abstract themes such as liberation of women, position of women in the past and the present, symbols of freedom and renaissance of women. The story describes the life of a group of women in Ajmir. Their life revolves around the kitchen. These women are the representatives of entire women population especially in India, who spend large part of their day within the confinement of kitchen. This confinement is often undertaken willingly since nurturing of the family is considered to be the chief duty of a woman in our society. Ambai narrates the story from the perspective of Minakshi, the youngest daughter-in-law of the house – a person from outside the cultural background of Ajmir. As an outsider she is able to observe the traditional joint family system of her husband Kishen critically. The story opens with a vivid description of kitchen in the house. Minakshi finds kitchen:

Right at the end, stuck at the careless manner. Two windows. Underneath one, the tap and basin. The latter was too small to place even a single plate in it. Underneath that, the drainage area, without any ledge. As soon as the taps above are opened... within ten minutes there will be a small flood.

(63)

Kitchen is an important segment of house, which is the source of health and wellbeing of the people of the house. In this story the position of the kitchen is in the back of the house. While keen attention was given to the construction of other segments of the house, the kitchen remains neglected. This negligence signifies the status of women in that house. "the women appeared there [kitchen] like shadows, their heads covered, their deep coloured skirts melting in to the darkness of the room, slapping and kneading the chappati dough or stirring the fragrant , spicy dal." (66)

Ambai observes that "their style of life indeed encompasses the kitchen and was woven around the concept of kitchen" (27). Their anxieties and desires are connected with the "fire place" of the house. It is the place where they used to spend biggest part of the day. The little space called kitchen has seen their dreams, hopes, miseries and compromises for survival. In this story Kishen's mother suffers a heart failure. Even at the verge of collapse the first thought a strike through her mind is the perilous state of kitchen after her death. She asks others to take control over the kitchen. She even remembers the time when she single handedly made food for entire house. It shows how deeply they are connected with the space and idea of kitchen and cooking. Throughout the story men enjoys a position of importance. On the other hand women are treated as second class citizens with limited rights.

When men are relaxing after a day's labour, women are forced to retreat into the kitchen. They had to work inside the kitchen even after the job outside of the house. Men do not offer any help. Who creates this distinction? Simone de Beauvoir, a French author and philosopher provides a better explanation of "self" and "other" from feminist perspective. Her famous treatise *The Second Sex*, describes how "men are regarded as norm and women as other" (16). She furthermore argues that the otherness of women develop because "women exist and are only conscious of themselves – in ways that men have shaped" (49). She again says "few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day" (47). This repetition is their life.

Ambai sees food and cooking as a way of imposing control or power within the family. Sarika Goyal through her article "Marriage and Family: An Indian feministic Critique" argues that "It is noteworthy that Indian kitchen turns out to be the hub of family politics where mother and wife competes as chefs and present choicest delicacies to win the male". The story examines the mother-in-law's illusory authority in the kitchen and the establishment of hierarchy within it. Minakshi terms this power conflict as "food war". Like this Ambai's work portrays the kitchen politics which can be seen in most of Indian families. But the poor condition of the kitchen makes life hard for the women who spend the biggest part of the day by making meals for the entire family. No one thinks about improving the facilities the kitchen until Minakshi's entry to the family. Here the dark, small kitchen becomes the icon of rigid tradition.

The image of kitchen thus assumes the form of long practiced customs that suffocates women from inside and outside. It also represents a set of predefined customs that considers any change in the existing tradition is unnecessary. Ambai questions and rejects the tradition in two ways. According to her, "sometimes the predominant aim is to portray realistically and sensitively the entrapment of middle class women in the codes of this tradition. Sometimes it is based on revolutionary romanticism" (Raman, 119).

The tradition that a woman should never advise a man is broken by Minakshi. Thus she becomes the symbol of liberation. Right after her marriage Minakshi daringly suggests some alterations to the kitchen to the patriarch of the family.

Papaji why don't you expand the veranda outside the kitchen? If you widen it we could have some chairs out there. If you then build a wash place to the left you could have a really wide basin for cleaning the vessels. And then beyond that you could put up some aluminium wire for drying the clothes (66)

All others in the family are amazed and they stood like statues. Radha babiji stares fixedly at her. Kusuma straightens her veil to hide her allegations. Nobody dares to support her view. "papaji looked as if he had been assaulted by words for expressing this opinion. Jiji in her turn looked at him shocked. Daughter-in-law had not thus far offered their own opinion in that house" (67).

In the story Ambai uses symbols that echo liberty and emancipation of women. In the first part of the story, we find images of beautiful green mountains and temple. Unfortunately such a beautiful sight is hidden by the cloth line. Here the mountain is the symbol of liberation and power. The enchanting view of the mountain range is visible from the window of the kitchen. But the cloth line hinders the sight. It points towards how the symbols of liberation are overshadowed by the grim image of the kitchen. Women are blinded themselves with different norms of the society from the idea of power and equality.

Mridula Garg rightly points out that "women have always had to wrest this space to work from the invisible margins within the margins" (10). It is a depressing that most of the time these margins are strengthened by the women population itself. In story, even on the day of picnic the women folk involves themselves in the cooking and cleaning, they forgot to enjoy the In this sense we can say that, all human society has traditionally been held together by the invisible labour of countless women. Even though writer presents women of present and past, their ultimate space of action remains to be the kitchen, isolated from the greenery waiting for her outside.

Ambai's short story reveals how gender is created within the society with special reference to kitchen as a segment of house. The walls of kitchen define the boundaries and politics of patriarchal system. This work is a call to rethink and rebuild the role of women according to current socio political atmosphere especially, in today's world, where both men and women earn for their family.

### **Works Cited**

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