

Srilata Raman

In 1972 the Tamil writer C.S. Lakshmi, who also calls herself Ambai, published the short story "Wings can break" in the Delhi-based journal *Kanaiyāli* ("Signet ring"). This story, her first mature work, later became part of her first collection of short stories. In 1984 she wrote a critical work in English called *The Face Behind the Mask: Women in Tamil Literature*<sup>1</sup> on the images of Tamil women in the fiction of Tamil writers. This study was followed in 1988 by her second collection of short stories in Tamil called "A kitchen at the corner of the house".<sup>2</sup> The critical work, *The Face*, reflected the writer's preoccupation with the images of "woman" in Tamil culture and their impact on the Tamil fiction of women writers. In that study Ambai subsumes all the dominant definitions of what constitutes "woman" in Tamil culture under the rubric of "tradition". *The Face* tries to show that this "tradition" continues to fetter women, making them conform to certain stereotypes, and also impoverishes any fiction they write because the fiction reflects this conformity. It makes a plea for new voices and a new kind of fiction, which Ambai's own fiction would presumably be a part of. What is considered necessary for the emergence of the new fiction is the rejection of "tradition" itself.

The present article proposes that one useful way of approaching Ambai's own fiction is to study it in the light of this hostile stance towards "tradition". It shows that Ambai's definitions of "tradition" can, by and large, be best understood in the context of recent Indian feminist historiography which has explored the creation of a new "tradition", incorporating specific images of the ideal woman, by and among the urban middle class in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in India: that is, a "tradition" which is an eminently colonial construct. It further explores how Ambai's questioning and rejection of this "tradition" in her critical work is reflected in her own fiction in at least two ways. Sometimes, the predominant aim is to portray realistically and sensitively the entrapment of middle-class women in the codes of this "tradition". Other stories are based more upon an impulse of "revolutionary romanticism".

The typology of romanticism which this article employs has been developed in the context of Marxist political philosophy, in the writings of Michael Löwy (1979, 1993). Löwy (1993: 1) defines the term as the nostalgia for pre-capitalistic societies which includes a cultural critique of capitalism and of bourgeois society. The phrase

<sup>1</sup> Henceforth, *The Face*.

<sup>2</sup> Henceforth, "A kitchen".

"pre-capitalistic society", he makes it clear, covers a broad range of meanings including even, as it does in Rousseau, the idea of a return to a mystical "state of nature" (1993:3). The concept of "revolutionary romanticism" is used in this article in contrast to "retrograde or reactionary romanticism" whose nostalgic impulse is essentially conservative, seeking a return to a past form of society which is non-egalitarian. In contrast, "revolutionary romanticism refuses the illusion of returning to the communities of the past (...) seeking a solution in the future" (1993:3). While Löwy is essentially dealing with the political patterns of romanticism, he would be the first to admit that these patterns are "inseparable from (...) [their] (...) cultural and literary manifestations" (1993:1). It is in the light of these definitions of "revolutionary romanticism" that I suggest that some of Ambai's stories establish a break with "tradition" and, instead, present an alternative vision of how women might think, feel and interact with each other and men. This vision, therefore, might be called utopian in a specific sense: the stories do not so much depict transformed circumstances, an alternative society, as a transformed consciousness. That which is being constructed anew in them is the category of "experience" itself as a category liberated from "tradition".

The short stories of Ambai which are analysed in this article from the perspective of her reaction towards "tradition" are "Wings can break", "Gifts", and "A kitchen at the corner of the house", the last two of which are from the collection "A kitchen".<sup>3</sup> These particular stories have been chosen for analysis because they typify the tendencies prominent in much of Ambai's fiction, which were mentioned earlier. That is, "Wings can break" portrays a woman still trapped in "tradition" and unable to break away from it, while "A kitchen at the corner of the house" is grounded on the impulse of revolutionary romanticism. "Gifts" is a work which straddles these two stories and explores, in a far more differentiated way, the nature of women's entrapment. It shows that to be ideologically liberated alone does not suffice to constitute a real liberation from "tradition" and that the latter can only come about through an integration of both body and mind.

#### *The critique of "tradition" in Ambai*

In *The Face* Ambai begins by listing certain dominant images of women prevalent in Tamil culture. She says that the qualities of a woman which are stressed are those of fear, ignorance, shyness, sobriety and, above all, chastity (1-4). Later in the book she comments on this code of chastity and its effect on notions of female sexuality. She points out that while Tamil culture is replete with images of women like Kannagi and Sita going through various ordeals to preserve their purity and chastity,

<sup>3</sup> All quotes from the short stories are from Holmström (1992).

female sexuality itself has always been scorned and ridiculed in Tamil culture, described in an exaggerated manner as a weapon with which women tempt men (235). She adds, "Paradoxically, to the woman herself the body is not supposed to matter. While most of (...) [the above-mentioned] (...) female qualities are directed towards her body, as a person, the body is not supposed to matter to her", and what is expected is "(...) a non-consciousness of the body for the woman herself" (236).

In the first chapter of *The Face*, Ambai shows how these dominant images come to be constructed in the colonial period. She does so by tracing the origins and development of the reformist agenda relating to women's issues in urban Tamil Nadu (i.e. Madras), starting from the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century. Under the dynamic leadership of Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins several Brahmin women sought to rectify specific social injustices such as the pre-puberty marriage of girls and the tonsure of Brahmin widows, and to introduce widow re-marriage (4-6). But the images of the ideal woman which the reformists propagated were essentially elitist and upper-class, coupled with "ardent cries of reviving the Vedic past" (8). That which was projected as the Vedic past was a supposed ideal period or golden age of Hinduism in which women served as the spiritual exemplars for all of society. Ambai says of the reformist agenda:

The urban-based middle-class awareness was circumscribed by its very origin. They were only aiming at concessions within a particular set-up which they totally approved of. They had no doubt that the basic role of a woman was that of a home-maker and, if not, one of rendering service to others. Education and eradication of certain evils were essential to function better. What they were demanding were functional concessions. (14)

Thus, according to Ambai, views of women as chaste, confined to the domestic sphere, self-sacrificing and saintly were further reinforced and legitimized by the reformists, or as I would suggest, they became part of the construction of "tradition" in the colonial period.

The rise of the non-Brahmin political movement in the 1930s had two further effects on the rights of women. Firstly, it strengthened an already existent "orthodox" reaction to the reformists, by solidifying the insecurity of urban Brahmins. The reforms were attacked with renewed vigour as an attempt to westernize and christianize Tamil society.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, the non-Brahmin movement itself did little or nothing for the emancipation of women, concerned as it was with combating

<sup>4</sup> Writers like Kancipuram Vasudeva Iyer and Thiru V. Kalyanasundaram were the literary voices of the "orthodox" position in this period (cf. Lakshmi, 1984: 9f).

Brahmin hegemony in the political sphere rather than combating gender injustices which cut across caste structures. Ambai writes:

What they were proposing was the deification of women as in ancient Tamil culture. (...) hence their concern for women could only be within this familial atmosphere of "freedom" and "glory" within imposed limitations of *karpu* (chastity) and *thaymai* (motherhood). (13)

Ambai shows that the women's movement in Tamil Nadu gradually lost direction by the end of the 1940s and has, according to her, essentially remained stagnant since then. She concludes:

(...) by the end of the forties, the notion of helping women through charity - through Homes, orphanages and destitute homes - seemed to be the only alternative to even partially examining the social status of women. (25)

*The Face* proceeds to draw a direct corollary between this state of affairs and the fiction of Tamil women writers which emerges from the mid-1950s onward. The women writers whose work is analysed are overwhelmingly from the urban middle class, and tend to be Brahmin. Ambai shows that their fiction reflects the images of women discussed above, the images which are normative in Tamil culture. She feels that they can only break out of these stereotypical views and produce authentic fiction if they were to undertake an exploration of their own social and cultural conditioning. "Such a search would involve a journey into the historical past and present that has created the present historical self" (237f). If this search were seriously undertaken it would result in the rise of a new language, "(...) a language going down to the deep social foundations of life" (239). Further, "A language such as this does not come out of the experiences of oneself and others alone but by an ability to "see" the experiences; by experiencing the experience" (239). *The Face* concludes with Ambai's appeal to Tamil women writers to "step out of their traditional roles" and "write the truth" (244).

In their introduction to a collection of essays about the "reconstruction of patriarchy in colonial India", Sangari and Vaid (1989) discuss the construction of "tradition" among the middle-class Hindus in the North of India in this period. While their analysis of this process is far more differentiated than Ambai's in *The Face*, there is common ground regarding the type of images of women which emerge in this new middle-class ideology. Thus, Sangari and Vaid (1989: 9f) write:

Through the nineteenth century different versions of female emancipation came to be slowly tied to the idea of national liberation and regeneration. The early colonial constellation of the Arya woman is a sternly elitist concept in class and

caste terms, and finds its nationalist shape in social and political thought, in literature (...) The Vedic (and later, the Puranic) model becomes both a part of popular consciousness as well as of organised reform such as that of the Arya Samaj and is fed into the companionate models of the middle class family. The recovery of tradition throughout the proto-nationalist and nationalist discourse was always the recovery of the 'traditional' woman (...).

Undoubtedly, it is this reformist construction of the "ideal" or "traditional" woman which Ambai attacks in *The Face*. The dominant images of women in modern Tamil fiction by women writers are seen to be those of the woman as the ideal homemaker, the obedient wife, the upholder of "Hindu" values. Two of Ambai's short stories which most effectively address the effect of this middle-class ideology on women are "Wings can break" and "Gifts".

*"Wings can break" and "Gifts"*

"Wings can break"<sup>5</sup> is a powerful and moving story about Chaya's ten-year old marriage to Bhaskaran. The story is told entirely from Chaya's perspective. It begins with Chaya reflecting upon her dislike of her husband even while she goes about her domestic tasks and he is about to leave for work. Bhaskaran is unkind to both his wife and his small son Shekhar; he is unromantic, extremely miserly and even physically unattractive (stout, unwashed, greasy-haired). The marriage came about in the usual way, it was arranged by Chaya's uncle. The only person to raise some objections to the marriage, pointing to the couple's physical incongruity (Chaya so slender, Bhaskaran already then large) had been Chaya's mother, but she had been overruled by the men of the house. The mother, in the story, is the loving and empathetic figure but her support of Chaya is inadequate, the support of the weak.

At the time of her marriage Chaya was a naive and romantic girl whose ideas of partnership had been formed entirely by Tamil films. "In her mind she had seen Bhaskaran strutting about stylishly with his fine stomach, singing love-duets. Chaya-Bhaskaran; how well the names went together" (23). She had had many dreams about the marriage, then, but now she reflects bitterly, "Of course, her dreams were strictly within what was permitted to a Hindu woman (...) She, after all, was a Hindu woman, and women of her sort were supposed to dedicate themselves to their husbands, even if they turned out to be lepers" (27).

As Bhaskaran's true colours are revealed Chaya becomes increasingly unhappy and desperate for money. She starts a small tailoring business, sewing blouses for

<sup>5</sup> In Holmström's translation the story is titled "Wings". I prefer to use the title "Wings can break", which in my view conveys the Tamil title more accurately. Apart from this, all quotations from the story itself are exactly reproduced from Holmström's translation.

the neighbourhood ladies for a pittance. The marriage has dried her up, "It was ten years since she lost all pleasure in clothes and jewels" (30), and she feels any physical contact with Bhaskaran to be an affliction (35).

Meanwhile, the marriage of Chaya's younger sister Bhuma has been arranged. Chaya is invited to go over to her parents' house on the day when the prospective bridegroom is to visit. On this very day, when she receives a note from her mother, her will to stay in the marriage, her endurance, snaps. After Bhaskaran has left for work as usual, "At that instant she was struck by the one thought forbidden to Hindu women through all time. She thought: I must leave him now, immediately. Her mind which had been pulled and stretched for ten years, which had always given in to him, suddenly snapped" (37). And, "She needed to spread her wings. She had to beat her wings in the wide steadfast silence of the skies. That alone was life" (38).

Thoughts which are shocking and illegitimate, about her situation and the sort of partnership she really desires, rise in her mind. "[A marriage like hers] was actually a self-deceit, a hostility to one's soul, which stopped women from enjoyment and pleasure, preferring to wilt away within, priding themselves on their renunciation" (43). And later, "But I want to be with a man who can make me feel that there is a silent beauty in sleeping together, in enjoying one's body as one enjoys a painting" (43).

With these feelings of defiance Chaya goes to her parents' house to witness a very different kind of future opening up for her sister. Bhuma has arranged for her lover to solicit her hand, and can be confident of the happiness which has been denied Chaya. It is at this point in the story that the reader is made aware that Chaya is again pregnant. Her defiant thoughts are shown to be just that, mere thoughts because she does not see how she can now leave Bhaskaran. More importantly, she realises that the marriage has fundamentally altered her disposition, she too has become tight-fisted about money (she has saved a fair bit through the sewing business but does not want to use it and hoards it anxiously) and takes little pleasure in the happiness of others, like Bhuma. The story ends with Chaya returning home to Bhaskaran after the visit to her parents and sister. Her mind is full of bitter thoughts about the coming child. "Her imagination could only think of the doctors bills that were bound to come. It could only think of the money she would lose during the months when she would be unable to sew" (54).

Broken by the thought of her future, Chaya is finally shown to accept it completely. "She had become familiar with all of it. She had even lost the anxiety to be free of it. Like a bird whose wings are gone, she folded herself into her bed. What she needed was sleep" (55f).

Through the figure of Chaya Ambai describes in this story a woman who sees very clearly what is wrong with her marriage and longs for other possibilities but for whom these possibilities are eventually closed. This is partly due to the circum-

stances of her existence - the pregnancy is a crucial factor, because it reinforces her economic dependence on Bhaskaran - but on the other hand, Chaya herself feels that she is capable of earning her own living if forced to. An equally crucial factor in her decision to stay on in the marriage is her own mental make-up. At various points in the story, when Chaya's mental defiance is described, we are also shown how illegitimate she herself finds it. "She began to doubt that she had actually thought these things. She felt rather like one who commits a murder in a moment of frenzy and then stands there, knife in hand, unable to believe she had actually done the deed" (39). And later, "She was shocked by her own thoughts" (43). Ambai shows us that Chaya's inner development has not yet reached the point where she is truly free of the middle-class ideology which is her cultural conditioning, where she can recognize the legitimacy and seriousness of her own defiance. Thus, "She had never consciously forbidden herself these thoughts; she had perhaps concluded that they were profitless (...) Now it almost amused her that even she (...) should have had such an urge to cut her fetters and run" (39).

Without a transformation occurring in her own consciousness, Chaya is portrayed as someone who undermines and eventually puts an end to her own potential liberation. As its title indicates, the final picture the story leaves us with is one of suffering accepted: the triumph, in Ambai's sense, of "tradition".

"Gifts" is about the encounter between an urban woman researcher and two women she successively encounters in a semi-urban area in the course of her research. The woman researcher is visiting an anonymous small town in the South of Tamil Nadu. She is scheduled to stay for a day in the house of a man called Ganapathi but he will not be available before the evening. In the meantime it has been arranged for her to spend the morning at the house of a man called Chidambaram. That evening the woman researcher catches the bus to Ganapathi's house, and next morning she leaves this place. The main body of the story consists of two incidents: the first is the researcher's conversation with Chidambaram's sister-in-law while the second, which takes place thereafter, is a conversation with Ganapathi's younger sister Chandra. In neither situation men are present.

The conversations take place in that most female and domestic of settings - the kitchen - during eating. The talk is about food, and the preparation of food and other fundamentals are touched upon, including the biographies of the two women the researcher speaks with. These women are at different stages in life, the one married, the other a young girl who dreams of marriage. The woman researcher is clearly contrasted with the other women. There is, to begin with, an urban versus semi-urban or rural divide. This divide, further, appears to be symptomatic of other, fundamental differences which are brought out particularly in the first encounter.

As the story begins, on the way to Chidambaram's house from the bus stop, the researcher and he pass the river Tamaraparani. Since it is early morning Chidam-

baram suggests that they should both have their morning bath in the river before going to his house as, in fact, several women are already doing. The researcher refuses stiffly, unwilling to bathe in the full view of others. "Not she. (...) Nor were these simple enough garments to manage with such ease: to remove, to put on in full view of all. (...) "No, no, no. I can't manage it." He was a bit taken aback by her obstinate refusal" (2).

When they reach the house and the researcher is left alone with Chidambaram's sister-in-law, the first thing she does is to take a bath. The washing area is inside the kitchen and while she is bathing the sister-in-law walks in and starts to cook. The researcher's discomfort at this is brought out.

And before her visitor could quite take in the casualness, the utter lack of self-consciousness of that entry, she [Chidambaram's sister-in-law] had started pouring out the dosai batter. (...) "Do you want me to scrub your back for you?" "No, no. Thank you." "Are you shy? No need to be shy; we're both women." (3)

While eating, the older woman comments on how dried up the researcher's hair is and advises her, kindly, on how to care for it. She notices the researcher looking at her own glossy and black hair and comments proudly, "Are you looking at my hair? I'm fifty years old. You won't find a single grey hair on my head. I still get my periods" (4). This remark triggers within the researcher a variety of emotions which encapsulate the bond as well as the fundamental difference between the two women she encounters and her. She thinks:

"Is there nothing you want to hide? You too must have been reared as I was - Why is your sari hanging off your shoulder? Tuck it in properly at the waist. What are you doing in the front verandah. Shut up. I don't want to hear your voice. Put those books away. (...) Regulated. Repressed. Then from what source of strength does such innocence spring? Such a smile?" (4)

In this story Ambai shows two different types of women. The researcher is, in one sense, a liberated woman. She has a career, she researches on women, she is aware of the daily injustices they have to accept owing to their gender, one might call her a feminist. The two other women, in contrast, do not reflect on their fate: the older woman lives a confined life tied to the kitchen all day, while Chandra is a Chaya-like figure, what Chaya was like prior to her marriage, absorbed in Tamil films and longing for marriage as a sure source of romance. Yet, the story subtly reveals to us the nature of the researcher's prison, for even while being ideologically liberated she is confined: she is immensely self-conscious about her body and ill at ease with nudity and talk of bodily functions - typical results of a middle-class Brahmin

upbringing. The title of the story "Gifts" seems to imply that it is these other women who have something of value to offer her: that, even while being unliberated in their thinking, they have a natural and unself-conscious relation to their own bodies and to sexuality, which the researcher lacks. The story ends with the researcher unchanged, leaving town. But perhaps she does leave bearing away the gift which these women give her: the possibility of relating differently to her own body.

These two stories demonstrate on the one hand the criticism of "tradition" present in Ambai's fiction: a critique of domesticity as tyranny, the cruelty of the system of arranged marriages which does not take into account the individuality of human beings, the impossible ideals which a woman is expected to live up to as a "Hindu wife" and, above all, the suppression of women's sexuality, both by others and herself, as part of the middle-class code of morality. In "Wings can break" we see a woman who cannot free herself ideologically from this world. "Gifts", on the other hand, makes a far more subtle point through its depiction of the two different sorts of women. It shows, through the figure of the researcher, that ideological liberation alone is insufficient, when it is not followed by liberation at other levels. It also shows, through the figures of the other women, who are clearly from a different social class than the researcher, that it is possible to be liberated, in a certain sense, without being a feminist, without being educated. Thus, the two stories which critique "tradition" have shown us two types of women: either they are women who think or have begun to think in a feminist way (Chaya, the researcher) but have not achieved a real integration of body and mind, or they are unintellectual women (the two in "Gifts") who cannot remotely be called feminist but are at ease with their bodies.

Ambai's fiction which seeks to present an alternative to this "tradition" does so by depicting women who transcend these types and who, therefore, are able to encounter society differently.

*"A kitchen at the corner of the house"*

Thus far, we have seen the contours of the "tradition" Ambai rejects. For Ambai, as *The Face* makes clear, there is an unbroken continuum between the images of women from the classical past (1-4), those which emerge or rather re-emerge in the colonial period (8-14), and those which become predominant after the 1930s in the non-Brahmin political discourse (13-15). These images constitute "tradition". "Tradition" is seen not just as dominant but as all-encompassing. The implication is that the middle-class ideology formulated in the last two centuries merely reinforced images already in existence and that there were no alternative or dissenting voices even while it was being constructed. This undifferentiated historical analysis, which can be factually disputed, is the weakness of her study. Rajadurai and Geetha (1996) have shown that Ramaswamy Nayakar (Periyar), the founder of the non-Brahmin

political movement, fundamentally challenged the dominant images of women and sought to introduce alternative models.<sup>6</sup>

The assumptions in Ambai's critical work about "tradition" have a clearly discernible effect on her fiction. The stories which have utopian elements, in that they deal with an alternative vision of how women can think and feel, are "revolutionary" because they do not look to any past or present model of society or ways of thinking which might be a source of inspiration for contemporary Tamil women. This is in keeping with Ambai's views that no real reflection has taken place in the past on the social status of women. Neither is the present any better. Instead, in "A kitchen at the corner of the house", society is depicted as still restricting and unjust, but it is the liberated woman who has changed in her response to it. And the "romantic" component consists of nostalgia and the search for a return to a specific state: to paraphrase Löwy, it might be called the return to a state of nature but with regard to the female body, to notions of what is "natural" in connection with female sexuality. This romantic nostalgia regarding the "body" is explicitly tied up, in Ambai's fiction, with images of nature: the sea, mountains, birds, a lotus pond. "A kitchen at the corner of the house" is a story which exemplifies all these elements.

In this story Minakshi lives in the traditional joint family of her husband, Kishan. She has married outside her community, she is from Mysore, her husband's family is from Ajmer. The story describes with vividness and lyricism the life of the women in this family, a life which revolves around the kitchen. "Their style of life did indeed encompass the kitchen; was woven around the concept of the kitchen" (Holmström, 1992: 204). But the kitchen is a dank, badly drained, small and dark place which makes life hard for all the women, who cook prodigious amounts of food there all day. Nobody thinks of doing anything about this until Minakshi, soon after her marriage and entry into the family, suggests that it be re-modeled, enlarged and a clothes line put up somewhere else so that the view of the mountains is not forever obscured by damp clothes hung outside the only window of the kitchen. The entire family is shocked by her temerity. "Papaji looked for a moment as if he had been assaulted by the words expressing this opinion. Jiji in her turn looked at him, shocked. Daughters-in-law had not thus far offered their own opinion in that house" (206). Eventually, Minakshi's suggestions are only partially accepted and carried out

<sup>6</sup> "Periyar's rationalistic ideology was particularly radical in that it sought to address the question of gender oppression (...) Periyar ridiculed the notion that women had to be "chaste". He condemned all attempts to stereotype women as "fragile" and "gentle" in the literary texts of the past and the present. (...) The self-respect movement, founded by him, organised self-respect marriages during the '30's and '40's in which all the rituals and symbols of women's enslavement to men, including the *mangalasutra*, were consciously rejected. The movement strongly advocated divorce, widow remarriage, abortion, and equal rights for women, and argued for their control over the reproduction process" (Rajadurai and Geetha, 1996: 558f).

by Papaji, the *pater familias*. The kitchen is enlarged, an extra room added but the view is still obscured, the women cut off from nature throughout the day: "The state of the kitchen remained unchanged. Two more nylon lines were added, for drying clothes. Outside the window" (207). It is a negligible victory for Minakshi and the other women.

The story depicts Minakshi participating cheerfully in and accepting this existing structure - unequal and unjust though it is - for several reasons. Firstly, her marriage is depicted, in its private sphere when she and her husband Kishan are alone (which is not often), as a happy and passionate one (208). Kishan also tries, in an unobtrusive way, to show his support for his wife, though this support is immediately questioned and challenged by his father. This is made clear when the discussion about enlarging the kitchen comes up:

[Papaji] looked at Kishan. And that skilled architect agreed with his wife. "What she says is right, Papaji. Why don't we do it?" "And when did you go near the kitchen?" "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." (207)

Secondly, the family into which Minakshi has married has, in one respect, values completely different from those of Minakshi's own South Indian, middle-class set-up. "The lineage [of Kishan's] had a reputation for its love of food and drink. They were people who enjoyed the pleasures and experiences of life" (204). Thirdly, Minakshi is depicted as free of the cultural conditioning which imprisons all the other women in the story. Even while participating in it, she is shown to stand apart from it, a detached observer. Reflecting upon Jiji's life, towards the end of the story, Minakshi thinks:

"If you had not had these constant cares: once every four weeks the wick of the stove has to be pulled up; whenever kerosene is available it has to be bought and stored; in the rainy season the rice has to be watched and the dal might be full of insects (...) If all this clutter had not filled up the drawers of your mind (...) Perhaps you too might have seen the apple fall; the steam gathering at the kettle's spout; might have discovered new continents (...) Might have made a world without wars, prisons, gallows, chemical warfare. (...) And there will be you. Not trapped or diminished by gender, but freed." (222f)

This vision is not available to Jiji but it is to Minakshi, and permits her to live and accept confining circumstances. Unlike Chaya or the women in "Gifts", Minakshi has because of her transformed consciousness a different form of "experiencing", making possible a different experience of the same circumstances and a liberation

from "tradition". She has been able to achieve a good marriage, and perhaps she was able to choose rightly in the first place, because she had never been "diminished by gender". The liberation from "tradition" is directly linked to the return to a natural attitude towards the "body" and the fulfilment of a woman's physical desires. In case one were to doubt that this is the main romantic impulse behind Ambai's utopianism, let her words (which would be true of all her stories which have utopian elements) speak for themselves:

"In "Black Horse Square" I'm talking about rediscovering the body and language. (...) The entire story is about how we have to first deal with our bodies if we are going to evolve a language. New language will emerge only if you understand your body differently, if you look at your body differently, and only then communication is possible." (Dickman, 1995: 34).

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