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## THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN IN AMBAI'S *MY MOTHER,* *HER CRIME*

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### Abstract

Ambai is a daring experimenter of short story genre. As a writer, Ambai starts from a firm feminist base. But her works have moved outward into a larger concern. In her work there has been a thrust towards freedom from bondage letting go of identities that we are forced into, one way or another. Thought provoking, witty, inventive and stylish, but also deeply touching, Ambai's stories are among the finest of contemporary short fiction in Tamil. Her stories constantly reinvent the short story form and delight the readers. They interweave lives, juxtapose the past and the present, the mythical and the contemporary, articulating the real experience of women and communicating their silence in words and images.

*My Mother, Her Crime* shows how a natural growth in a child represses her freedom. A female child with dark complexion is hated by the members in the family. On all such occasions the only resort to that child is her mother, who is magnanimous enough to accept everything. In the absence of her mother, when the child attains puberty it is considered by the family as an additional burden. The child in a desperate mood waits for her mother's return. She feels very insecure thinking that something strange has happened to her. She thinks if her mother is with her then everything will be fine. The expectation of the young daughter is as follows:

I want my mother. I want to burry my head deep into the Chinnalampatti silk of her shoulder. I want, unashamed, to tell her, 'I am frightened. 'I want her to comfort me and stroke my head. Because, surely, something very terrible has happened (APS 15-16).

Her mother returns with bitter thoughts about the fate of a dark-complexioned bride. She is much irritated by the news about her child's attaining puberty,

as she now has to search for a groom for her. So she is angry with her daughter, and that brings down her image in the mind of the child. The protagonist's view in this story provides evidence that the passage from childhood to womanhood is tremendously difficult for a large segment of the female population. The author vividly portrays the girl's longing for her mother. This story further shows the patriarchal domination and influence which make a woman betray her own gender. The dowry problem is highlighted as one of the important causes for women's repression.

The girl child thinks of her mother as a goddess who purifies all the sins and a creator who with a smile can change everything around her. Her mother is Agni who makes ashes out of impurities. She eagerly waits for her mother thinking that she will explain her about the changes in her body and purify her from that ugly experience and recover her from the terrible fear. She believes that only her mother's love can overcome all her sufferings and difficulties and she longs for her mother.

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She is very innocent and ignorant about herself. Though she knows that something has happened to her nothing reaches her understanding. She cannot even understand or express herself and bursts into asking herself "what on earth has happened to me?" (APS 19). She thinks as if she is lost. Her feelings reveal her innocence and immaturity.

I feel as if something has ended forever..... I weep as if I carry all the world's sorrows on my own narrow velvet clad shoulders (APS16).

She doesn't understand that all her freedom which she had enjoyed in the past is denied to her. She expects her mother to free her from all the obstacles. But the close and harmonious relationship between the young girl and her mother ends abruptly when the mother fails to negotiate a dowry-marriage for a relative to her daughter returns home to curse her for being dark: "And what a time for this wretched business for yours! It's just one more burden for us now" (APS 21).

In the daughter's eyes, her mother commits a murder by identifying herself with the dominant patriarchal cultural logic. She destroys her daughter's female subjectivity which she herself has shaped. In this story woman's history is represented in terms of female subjectivity, which is brought to a traumatic end by the patriarchal symbolic code when the child enters upon womanhood. The pre-pubertal child, who has lived a childhood in imaginary place with her mother finds that on attaining age, she has to identify with the codes of her father.

These patriarchal restrictions of female subjectivity and desire are further transmitted to the daughter by other women: her elder sister, an old widow and also her father. Her elder sister advises her not to climb the trees and to do all her works on her own. The old widow and other women around her insist her to wear 'dhavani' and to be

modern. Representing this female identification with male codes as woman's betrayal of herself and her gender, Ambai's story dramatically inscribes female responsibility and guilt as the source of gender oppression. The young girl's indictment of her mother for 'crime' is a loaded rhetorical strategy. If a crime charge is read as performing a demand for injustice, then this story, as speech act, calls to women to take action and to resist traditional gender ideologies, and to restore an original female identity.

The intimate relationship between the mother and the daughter forms the basis of this story. Though the love of her mother towards the daughter is deep in her heart, the angry words which her mother speaks in the situation, when the girl really needs her love, pierces her heart like a sharp knife and kills her spirit. This story proves how the patriarchal influence affects the immature mind of a girl child.

Ambai analyzes this story from a feministic point of view; it gives different interpretations. The mother scolds her daughter, because society sees the girl child as a burden. Society itself assumes that there is no value and importance to the girl child. When she reaches puberty the society thinks of other problems. In that way the mother fails to show her affection towards her daughter. She forgets her motherhood and behaves very cruelly towards her daughter.

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