

The Femininity of Food in “A Kitchen in the Corner of the House”

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Abstract

Ambai's "A Kitchen in the Corner of The House" signifies the place and position of a woman in a household which is confined in one corner of the house as 'Kitchen'. There are some stereotypes who still believe that the terms kitchen, cooking, washing, nurturing, raising the kids and cleaning belong to the women. Hence, it is evident that house-keeping and child-rearing well describes a woman's identity and fertility. A woman is believed to be physically delicate and exhibit kindness. But often her kindness is mistaken as weakness and subjugates her as a life-time slave in the name of marriage. Though a man has been assigned to play the role for upholding moral values and work as engineers, a woman is imprisoned in the corner of the house as portrayed in the short story "A Kitchen in the corner of the House". This paper analyses the relativity of food and femininity; and how it remains closely connected even in the 21st century.

Keywords: Femininity, Food, Patriarchy, Dominance, Weaker Sex

Introduction

The term ‘Femininity’ is considered to be a set of cultural attributes assigned to female sex as defined by Moi (1989). Femininity is not biological nor does it have anything to do with female physical body. It is something that is imposed on a woman’s body from the outside either through direct or indirect means (Andermahr et al. 2000). In order to become a complete ‘woman’ with all social and cultural tags, a woman has to attribute herself with the quality of femininity. It is rather an identity that she has been expected to play traditional roles such as a wife/widow, a daughter/daughter-in-law, a mother/mother-in-law or a sister. Femininity is not born right at the time of her birth; it is rather created to make herself fit in the male-dominated society. As Simone De Beauvoir says “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”.

Ambai in her story “*A Kitchen in the corner of the house*” depicts the plight and pathos of married women who have confined their world in Kitchen. Minakshi who is the third daughter-in-law of Ajmer family is quite enlightened and empowered. She initiates to emancipate freedom and rights of other woman who are subjugated under the patriarchy of Papaji. She often voices her opinions yet it seemed to be unheard by other members. Finally, she establishes her emancipation mission by breaking the ideologies of Jiji who have lost her identity in the household of Ajmer.

A Women’s Place is in the Home

It is an age-old notion that a woman is expected to be inside the four walls. This phrase has been made a ‘make-believe’ one in order to insist on the fact that a woman has to rely on her family and she is supposed to spend her time in the Kitchen. In this short story, ‘A Kitchen in the corner of the house’, the prominent roles of women such as Jiji and Bari-jiji dominate the Kitchen to get strength and authority required to rule the household.

Ambai has made this phrase ‘A Woman’s Place is in the Home’ evident when Minakshi has been introduced to the skin specialist by Papaji to examine her hands. The expert’s advice:

“Just stay at home. Be like the other women. Everything will come all right. If people live as they ought why should anyone fall prey to disease?”

The satirical words uttered by the doctor indirectly attack her refusal to accept this male ordained society.

The Kingdom of Kitchen

Kitchen is assumed to be the Kingdom of Womanhood. It is mentioned in a German slogan that 3K’s are necessary for a woman, ‘Kinder, Küche, Kirche’ which is translated as ‘children, kitchen, church’. A woman is destined to spend most of her lifetime in the kitchen for the welfare of others. She loses herself in the process of making delicious and healthy foods for her family members. Though she reigns the kingdom of kitchen, she is bothered less and cared less by her family members. It is more like she is intentionally ignored. This has been made evident through the description of kitchen that how the maintenance of Kitchen was bothered less where women spend most of her life time.

“Right at the end, the kitchen, stuck on in a 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 were opened, the feet standing beneath would begin to tingle. Within ten minutes there would be a small flood underfoot. Soles and heels would start cracking from that constant wetness”

Ambai’s careful use of words in “Right at the end, the kitchen, stuck on in a careless manner” stands as an imagery of a woman who has been left behind carelessly in the corner of the house. “The drainage area, without any ledge” again brings out a trivial feminine concept that how a woman’s health has been ignored who has been striving hard to prepare healthy foods for years.

Although she strives hard for the well-being of other, her thinking has been mould and limited by the stereotypes. The windows in the kitchen reveals how her vision has been narrowed down to restrict her thinking. The ‘clothes line beyond the window’ is an imagery of the male drawn territory of women

beyond which she cannot look or prospect anything.

“.....The cooking area was beneath this very window. The green mountains might have made one forget one’s chapped heels. But since the clothes line was directly beyond this window, trousers, shirts, pyjamas, saris and petticoats spread out to obscure the view”

The Kitchen Queen and the princesses are supposed to remain quiet and calm. Patience and Tenderness are the two sides of the Kitchen queen. Though they are deprived of expressing their thoughts, they can enjoy and make fun inside the four walls. They can command and order, even judge the quality of the dishes that they prepared but they hardly have the right to express their inconvenience. When Minakshi is about to protest for the pathetic condition of kitchen, no women from her household joined hands to voice out her opinion rather they were spell bound for crossing her boundaries.

“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 opinions in that house. Radha Bhabhiji stared fixedly at her plate. Kusuma straightened her veil to hide her agitation.”

Food and Femininity

A girl right from her puberty is supposed to learn cooking by looking at her mother in kitchen. She should know how to mince, chop, slice and cut. Cooking has been inherited to the daughters from their obliged mother to run the family. She will be recognized and rewarded only if she is an expertise in cooking. Ambai has brought this out in the following lines.

“.....on the very first day one entered the kitchen, cooked a meal and was given the traditional gold bangle”

The quality of femininity is attributed to food. A man helping his wife in cookery seemed disagreeable. It is found when Kishan tries to defend Minakshi when she shared her opinion on extending the veranda outside the kitchen.

“What she says is right, Papaji. Why don’t we do it?”

“And when did you go near the kitchen?”

“When she cooked us the 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”

A man who wishes to help his wife in doing household chores is often being discouraged and humiliated for sharing their works. Femininity and Masculinity are interdependent. It is not that money-making and monitoring are considered to be masculinity. One cannot exist and function without the other. These qualities are often made as identities to subjugate and exercise power on the other.

To be Pleasant and Please

In general, a woman is expected to be a beauty with brains yet she should remain quiet. She should be the embodiment of patience and perseverance. This nature will make her fit in the family to be a perfect mother or daughter. In this short story, Ambai made her protagonist to break all the stereotypes that is ought to be possessed by a traditional woman with all social constructs. Minakshi is appeared to be dusky and brought up in different culture contrasting Ajmer. She refuses to stand parallel to other daughters-in-law such as Radha and Kusuma. She often voices her opinions and stands against patriarchy.

Jiji wants her daughter-in-law to be a pleasant looking with pleasing nature when she sought prospectus bride for her son Sathish.

Jiji said, "educated, fair skinned and quiet"

Minakshi thought this breed of woman would hardly exist. But to her astonishment, she found Kusuma as the fine illustration to Jiji's exposition. She had M.A in Politics, Diploma in French. She had also embroidered cushions and pillow cases; handcrafted small objects and decorated saris. She had also attended classes in flower arrangement, bakery, sewing and in making jam, juice and pickles. She was the 'all in one'.

Kusuma appeared to be the perfect daughter-in-law as she knows the strategies to be a perfect woman. The one who is versatile in all fields hardly have the guts to disclose her inconvenience at the time of emergency. She once had menses when they had a trip to the lake. Disclosing her menses considered to be a taboo in this modernized society. A woman who is well-educated and expertise in too

many art works doesn't have the right and courage to reveal her menses. This shows how enlightened minds are enslaved inside the four walls.

"I was ten days late. Just as I was thinking of going to the doctor, it's come on"

"Did you come prepared? If you had said, we could have stopped by the shops"

"O yes, I came prepared. Even so, it's a white sari. Can you just have a look?"

"It's all right. Nothing's happened"

Summation

As Bacon said in his essay "Of Marriage and Single Life",

"Wives are young men's mistresses; companions for middle aged and old men's nurses"

The mandatory mantra to be followed for womanhood is to "Adjust and Accept" which is made evident through such characters such as Bari Jiji, Jiji, Radha, Kusuma and Vina Mausai. They assume that they are safe and secure inside the shell but they never realized that they are trapped in the cell.

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