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A Journey: Women in Search of Self-Fulfillment in Ambai's *Fish in a Dwindling Lake*

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Abstract

This paper explores Ambai's engagement with the wave of emancipation of women in the Twentieth Century. I have chosen the following three stories – “Fish in a Dwindling Lake”, “Journey 4” and “Journey 5” – from Ambai's short story collection *Fish In A Dwindling Lake*. It is an attempt to show the suffering of women not only in their personal life but also in the impersonal life. The characters move freely in the patriarchal society and voice against the injustice. They involve in solving the social problems and try to help others with utmost sufferings. Consequently they are forced by fate to separate from their family and go around the world to serve the society. In spite of all the ill-speeches of the society, they move forward with their decision of serving at the cost of pains.

The stories have a common metaphor which is identified as journey. The leading characters in these stories travel from one place to another. Beyond the apparent meaning of journey, the concept of life journey is focused on. Ambai's *Fish in a Dwindling Lake* is a collection of short stories that consists of short stories and four long stories. Interestingly, the short stories are merely titled as “Journey”, but the longer stories stick to the motif of the journey. The narrator is usually a universal “she”, who is never given a name, to discuss various positions and responsibilities of women, to bracket them merely as a wife, mistress or a reliable widowed aunt would be doing injustice to the women characters created. They do occupy these socially defined and recognized spaces, but Ambai's strength as a storyteller shines not merely that she is able to describe their lives or an incident or a conversation or a journey that they undertake, but in a manner that shows these strong women have the quiet ability to question and make their choices and be at peace with them.

Ambai's stories are known for their emphasis on issues concerning women. Her voice is one to be reckoned with as far as feminist self-affirmation is concerned. Her issues are close to a woman's heart because they form an integral part of her struggle to survive in a hostile world. Her women point towards the overriding theme of self-liberation. It is a search for women's freedom; freedom from grief: a liberating move that takes her towards self-realization. Ultimately this emerges to be the theme of “A Journey: Women in Search of Self-fulfillment.”

Keywords: journey, women's emancipation, patriarchal society, voice, injustice, universal, feminist, self-affirmation, self-liberation, self-realization, self-fulfillment.

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Ambai, a historian and a creative writer in Tamil writes about love, relationships, quests and journeys in the Tamil region and elsewhere. She was awarded the Lifetime Literary Achievement Award of Tamil Literary Garden, University of Toronto, Canada, for the year 2008. She is a renowned feminist, who established SPARROW (Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women).

This paper explores Ambai's engagement with the wave of emancipation of women in the Twentieth Century. I have chosen the following three stories: "Fish in a Dwindling Lake", "Journey 4" and Journey 5" from Ambai's short story collection *Fish In A Dwindling Lake*. It is an attempt to show the suffering of women not only in their personal life but also in their impersonal life. The characters move freely in the patriarchal society and voice against the injustice. They involve in solving the social problems and try to help others with utmost sufferings. Consequently they are forced by fate to separate from their family and go around the world to serve the society. In spite of all the ill-speeches of the society, they move forward with their decisions of serving at any cost of pains.

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The world symbolizes a drying lake in which all the suffering human beings, especially women, are considered Fish. When there is plenty of water in the lake, all the creatures like birds, frogs, snakes and animals come to it and quench their thirst. Women in

the world suffer like fish in the lake. They struggle hard in the society expecting changes in their life as well as in the society.

For Bimla in the title story, "Fish in a Dwindling Lake", 'Journey' had become the symbol of her life. "Journeys with objectives, journeys without; meaningful journeys, journeys made of necessity; journeys which were planned, but never happened; journeys which broke all decisions; journeys which had become rituals." The stories raise questions about human relationships, sexuality of a woman and the fact that there is nothing wrong in discussing it or being aware of it.

This title story "Fish in a Dwindling Lake" pictures the life of two women characters along with some other characters who live like fish in the society. Having fulfilled their part of sacrifice at home, the two women Kumuth and Bimla Devi, go out to reach out the needy for general social uplift and peace at the global level. Their journey appears to have no end and thereby is bound to inspire several such persons to continue their journey.

Kumuth's life is full of journeys. Her birth itself witnesses her mother's last journey. She grows under the care of her sister and starts her life journey as a part of dowry when her sister gets married. She continues her studies and joins as a lecturer and becomes a professor. After the death of her sister, she is the caretaker of her children and family. Kumuth sacrifices herself fully to the welfare of her sister's family.

Kumuth is very conscious of other problems in the society. It is expounded in one of her journeys when she unknowingly urinates under the statue of Mahatma Gandhi in the dark night. She is stunned for a moment and remembers Gandhiji's meaning of true freedom. She realizes that women need not wear jewels but a bathroom to pass their natural tension without any fear. The monologue in her mind evidently shows the inevitable pathetic situation in a country like India. She considers the spiritual life as a mere dream wherein she does not want to confine herself within this empty life. She longs for the family life having children and husband.

Kumuth and Bimla Devi are friends from their college days. Bimla Devi has passion for spiritualism from her childhood and follows the spiritual path throughout her life. To her, body is nothing but a medium to serve the society. Once, Bimla travels in

a train with some nuns to participate in the spiritual meetings for women in a village. In the train, a nun is molested and murdered by some religious fanatics. Her body is full of blood and cut by blade with the sign "Om" indicating their religion. Bimla identifies the causes for these kinds of cruelties and realizes that the people need good education and good health. So she calls Kumuth to join her in her service. Kumuth goes to meet Bimla in response to her letter.

The plight of the woman and her search of life is revealed here. Then the rain begins and Kumuth gets drenched fully. The long expected rain comes. Ambai, like a spectator observes the society with much more care on the problems and struggles which women like fish face in the society where human feelings, love, compassion, etc. are all drying. They have to survive in the human lake accepting all their struggles.

The story "Journey 4" is a journey by bus in which the unnamed character or the omniscient narrator observes the love and affection of a husband and wife. As Thomas Fuller has rightly said "absence sharpens love, presence strengthens it", the love of the characters in this short story is so intense both in their presence and in their absence. The love between the husband and wife is realized in their very conversation in the bus stand. Kamalam's husband weeps uncontrollably and unable to tolerate her separation even for a few days. Though he is strong, he has the heart of a child. Kamalam says "he is like a child, does not know even the hunger" (FDL 45).

Kamalam's love for him is so deep that she cannot tolerate if anybody speaks ill of him, even if it is her own mother. Kamalam, though innocent, knows the world better and has the guts to encounter its brutalities. It is evident even before her marriage. She obstinately refused a man who, though a government servant, demanded more dowry. His inhuman act of asking a motor bike and the remaining half sovereign due within a month of marriage infuriated Kamalam and she said "I don't want this bridegroom. I won't marry. If any man is here, come forward to marry me as I am" (FDL 47). Thus she married the man who voluntarily came forward to give her a life.

Between a man and his wife nothing ought to rule but love. Love rules Kamalam's memory throughout her journey. She is pregnant; so she views the image of her child in the waves. The movements of the

waves appear like her child swinging in the cradle. She identifies herself with the waves. They are very innocent and so they are in the care of God. Kamalam has not seen the sea before. So the wave and its beauty is a new experience to her. The sea stands for her desires unfulfilled so far. She wants to collect the sea water with its waves for her husband to see. So she asked "will the wave remain, if it is caught in this utensil?" (FDL 49). But the narrator who has been observing her in all her activities replied, "There will be no wave, if the sea water is caught" (FDL 49). It signifies that the sea appears like desires which cannot be fulfilled at any cost.

Through this action the innocent mind of Kamalam is revealed. Moreover there is a deep understanding between Kamalam and her husband. So in their life journey, though they have many hurdles, they go on loving each other without bothering about anything else. The story is written in a way that the past and present incidents are brought to make the reader understand that man is very fond of nostalgias and Kamalam is in search of self-fulfillment in her life.

In "Journey 5", Gomati Ammal invites her childhood friend, now a renowned professor, to move in with her after she is widowed. They belonged to the same village near Tirunelveli, but belonged to different castes. Besides this factor, her family was paying for his education. She pleaded with him when they were young to elope and get married, but he refused and married a classmate of hers. But once she was widowed and her children were settled abroad, she wrote to the professor, "I have lived all these years in accordance with your wish. Now at least let me be with you? So they worked out a convenient arrangement where he visits her twice a month. "He is never asked at home, why and where he is going. Neither does she say anything when she sees me. After all she is a woman who studied with me, isn't she? Isn't she my friend? Using the personal pronoun or naming the protagonist instantly distances the reader from the experiences of the character, although there is an instant recognition and empathy for her.

Ambai's stories are known for their emphasis on issues concerning women. Her voice is one to be reckoned with as far as feminist self-affirmation is concerned. Her issues are close to a woman's heart because they form an integral part of her struggle to

survive in a hostile world. Her women point towards the overriding theme of self-liberation. It is a search for women's freedom, freedom from grief; a liberating move that takes her towards self-realization. Ultimately this emerges to be the theme of "A Journey: Women in search of Self-fulfillment".

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