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Capturing the Unconscious Journey: Exploring Stream of Consciousness in Ambai's *Yellow Fish and Squirrel*

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Abstract: Many times it is noticed that the mind makes a voyage from conscious to unconscious. At that time a man being present somewhere physically may not be there mentally. In literature, writers have created characters who lively have presented this process or in other words this quick transition of thoughts. To present their character's psychic journey writers practice the technique of stream of consciousness. C. S. Lakshmi is a Tamil writer who has used the stream of consciousness while creating her characters. In two of her stories *Yellow Fish* and *Squirrel*, we can observe this technique effortlessly. The present paper will present a study of these two stories and the application of the stream of consciousness in these two.

Keywords: Stream of consciousness, yellow fish, sea, squirrel, books.

C. S. Lakshmi, a Tamil writer who has chosen pen name Ambai to flourish her writing career is a personality of importance in feminist writings. "Ambai struggled to break free. A rebel at heart she knew that there was a different and wider world beyond the confines of her walled existence"(Gupta, *Yellow Fish*). Her literary talent can be imagined by the fact that she wrote her first work when she was a teenager. In a truly literary sense, her first work was the Tamil novel *Andhi Maalai* (lit. Twilight). Further her works include *Siragugal Muriyum* or *Wings Get Broken*, *The Face Behind the Mask* and *The Singer and the Song: Conversations with Women Musicians*. Initially "Ambai's writing is considered a significant voice of feminist self-affirmation in Tamil fiction, exploring various aspects of women's experience in innovative literary styles."(Ambai, *Yellow Fish*,100)

The story *Yellow Fish* begins with the time of summer. As the title suggests story discusses a part



of the life of fishermen. In spite of this, there is a yellow fish which is compared with a dying child. It's the time of sunset all the boats are coming towards the shore. First, the white boat comes as "this is the forerunner. Its appearance is the signal that the fishing boats are returning. It floats ashore like a swan, swaying from side to side." (Ambai, *Yellow Fish*, 101). After this numberless boats of different colours come. "blinding indigo, demonic red, profound green, assaulting blue"(Ambai, *Yellow Fish*, 101) are the description of the colours that shows the atmosphere of the story which is full of pessimism and negativity.

Fishermen come to the shore and their wives helped them in collecting the fishes. In this process, they keep the fresh ones and throw away the rest to die on the shore. Meanwhile, the narrator's eyes catch a fish which is yellow. "Of that palest yellow that comes before the withering and falling of leaves"(Ambai, *Yellow Fish*, 101). May yellow colour be the symbol of paleness and uselessness of the fish for the fishermen. On the other hand, it could be of bright colour so that the narrator may notice it. After noticing the yellow fish suddenly the narrator becomes lost in the thoughts of her daughter Jalaja who is at present no more.

Here Ambai has perfectly used the technique of stream of consciousness. She has the talent to create characters through reflections and other various techniques. "Throughout the story, the writer uses very choppy sentences, as well as fragments, to represent Anu's stream of consciousness"(Sample Essays). Anu is the narrator who is in grief because of the untimely death of her daughter Jalaja. Jalaja means one who comes from the sea. In the present story, there is great importance to the sea. He is a giver as well as a taker of life. When Anu sees the yellow fish a storm of thoughts overcomes her consciousness. Ambai has skilfully portrayed that inner storm of Anu's thoughts which is called stream of consciousness in literature.

Stream of consciousness or the interior monologue is a technique of narrating which characterises the free flow of thoughts in the conscious mind. "Stream of consciousness as a narrative technique successfully captures without the author's intervention, the complete mental process of the character in



which sense-perception mingles with consciousness and half-conscious thoughts, memories, feelings, and random associations” (Stream of Consciousness). This literary device is based on the thought process of the characters in a particular literary text. Shifting of thoughts is minutely read in stream of consciousness. Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Henry James, and James Joyce are the writers who have developed this technique to its present form. May Sinclair has the credit to apply this term for the very first time for the novel of Dorothy Richardson.

Arwind Nawale says, “stream of consciousness writing aims to provide a textual equivalent to the stream of a fictional character’s consciousness. It creates the impression that the reader is eavesdropping on the flow of conscious experience in the character’s mind, gaining intimate access to their private thoughts” (Nawale, 39). The sudden outburst of thoughts which comes with an irregular sequence when attacks on the psyche of the human beings, when they automatically hyperlink their present and past, all these conditions when noticed and judged by the writer then it is called stream of consciousness.

There’s a very little practice of stream of consciousness technique in India. Many writers have taken it in their hands but do not get much success. C. S. Lakshmi is the writer who has achieved this success by using this technique perfectly in her works. In the present story, the fish reminds the narrator of her daughter. When she observes the closing and opening of the mouth of the fish she at once leaps on the past incident, death of her daughter. Her dying daughter was also “desperate for water”. (Ambai, *Yellow Fish*, 101). One by one the series of incidents is displayed by her unconscious which occurs on her conscious. Series begins with the birth of Jalaja and how she was named. “Too hasty infant Jalaja’s mouth. She pushed and bumped her way out into the world. Her name had already been decided. She who rises from the waters. Lotus. Jalaja.” (Ambai, *Yellow Fish*, 102). Soon the narrative makes a shift towards a hospital room:

The narrative is in the form of images showing rather than telling what happened. The first image is that of the narrator standing outside Jalaja’s room constantly watching her struggle to survive. The next image is that of ashes being brought home in a small urn and the narrator’s insistence that the



mouth of the urn be opened and then the somber line that the ashes were immersed in this very sea.
(Gupta, *Yellow Fish*.)

Then again the narrator comes to her consciousness when she remembers her daughter when “she would open and close her mouth as if sucking” (102). Before a few moments she saw the fish in the same condition when its “mouth closes; closes and opens, desperate for water” (101).

By the use of stream of consciousness, Ambai has powerfully displayed the pathetic condition of the lady who is missing her daughter. Her unconscious mind is not ready to accept the tragedy while the conscious mind knows that her daughter is no more. “A detailed and analytical look at the story reveals the thematic connections between the two events and helps us understand that Ambai is here dealing with larger issues at a micro-level. Issues that are close to a woman’s heart because they form an integral part of her struggle to survive in a hostile world.” (Gupta, *Yellow Fish*)

Again narrator’s thoughts flip to her unconscious. Her husband brings the ashes of their daughter. Those were “in small urn” and the mouth of the urn “was tied with a piece of cloth”. (102). The narrator argues her husband to open the mouth of urn. Then “the cloth was removed to reveal the urn’s tiny mouth” (102). She sets afloat the ashes into the sea as she acclaimed, “The ashes were in this very sea.” (Ambai, *Yellow Fish*, 102). Then again “the image of the sea brings us back to the present moment and this time the narrator observes the yellow fish struggling to survive” (Gupta, *Yellow Fish*).

The yellow fish is struggling hard to survive. The narrator wants to save her life and her wish is to give it to the vast sea where her yellow colour would “merge into the blue-grey-white of the sea” (Ambai, *Yellow Fish*, 102). A boy emerges there as her husband she asks the boy to hand over the fish to the sea. First, the boy laughs but later “he places it on the crest of an incoming wave”. Soon the fish loses its own existence and merges in the sea. Here the story ends but leaves a picture of agony and pain of the mother. We see here the difference between father and mother. Father has accepted the truth of his daughter’s death and is looking forward but the mother still feels her daughter everywhere. Ambai is the writer who is



frankly opening the world for the women. She is the supporter and guide in their grief. “Ambai’s experiences had widened her horizons until now. She had begun questioning the constant suppression that women were being made to submit to in all spheres of life” (The Short Stories).

Squirrel is the other story where Ambai has applied very skilfully the technique of stream of consciousness. The story has been narrated in the first person. Here the narrator enters a library in quest of some good books. She asked the librarian by pointing at a particular place, “what is there at the top, sir? (Ambai, *Squirrel*). The librarian replied that there is only dust. He called those books “rubbish” because all those have been written by women writers. Nobody has any interest in them and these are considered useless. Here Ambai seems to question the notion of the society which consider the works of female writers not up to the mark or useless. When the narrator asked the librarian to “throw them down”, “they fell with a thud” (Ambai, *Squirrel*).

All those books are of feminist writings. These were the books of Penmadhi Bodhini, Jaganmohini, and others. Writers of these books and the content in those have been presented as alive:

A study of the women characters in this story establishes the point that the writer has shown admirable psychological insight while creating her women character. The novelistic concern is to probe, analyze and develop deeper into the secret recesses of her as women and present her in flesh and blood. She has been successfully able to strike a sympathetic cord with their women characters and with their psychological reactions and responses, broodings and frustrations. (*Ambai’s Squirrel Summary*)

Here the narrator begins to lose herself and is entering into a new world where the characters of these books become alive. As Ambai reflects, “The sight of them crashing through the roof, splitting open even this grew familiar. For someone who doesn’t believe in miracles, here was an overdose.” She further adds as her “finger touched the spine of a mended, nineteenth-century book, a tremor rose... like an orgasm.” (Ambai, *Squirrel*). The first character emerges before the narrator is Anna Sattianandhan who is on her



death bed. Here we meet one more very important character Squirrel “which serves as a bridge between the “transcendental and the real”, or rather the “dream and real” for the protagonist. The character of the squirrel is highly suggestive. The squirrel stands for the inner world of the narrator. The transition between dream and reality and vice versa is made through the symbolism of the squirrel” (*Ambai’s Squirrel Summary*).

The narrative technique that has been applied here is a stream of consciousness. The narrator is physically present on the third floor of the library but her inner soul flows somewhere in the unconscious where she assumes all those lively. “Ambai’s “Squirrel” is the style of narration which makes the books and authors in the “Squirrel” are the lively, fleshy characters themselves. “Squirrel” is hardly over until one analyzes the narrative style.” (*Ambai’s Squirrel Summary*). Further, she feels an extreme sensation when she meets with the woman who “ first set out on horseback to spread Christianity”. (*Ambai, Squirrel*). In this story, Ambai tries to create a horizon where the conscious and the unconscious are mingling in the narrator's psyche. She is there in a room in the library but she is living those moments with those characters.

Then she meets with a Bengali girl who is requesting her father not to sell “his only house to meet her marriage expenses” (*Ambai, Squirrel*). That girl commits suicide. The narrator describes that “ the killing flame chased through this room, like a snake. The flame spread through the third floor, its shape visible to the squirrel and me.” (*Ambai, Squirrel*) The narrator is almost rendering in the thoughts which are the combination of imagination and reality. “Often the boundary collapses between the factual real world surrounding the narrator and the dream world that she enters through the books she sits reading. Characters seem to step out of the pages to become real life figures, living their experiences in front of the narrator’s eyes making her a participant too” (*The Short Stories*). At last squirrel’s produced sounds bring her back to the reality where she finds herself on the third floor of the library. Squirrel has an important role in the story. It is the connector between dream and reality and is the sole companion of the narrator in her joy, pain, and curiosity. Finally, readers realize the importance of a perfect narration style of the author.



Narrative style has the main credit in both the stories which is conveying theme and meaning. This technique is the stream of consciousness as the voyage from conscious to unconscious can be seen here. In this story, we can see the importance and significance of the narrative style. “It’s the narration “Squirrel” that transcendental place between dream and reality enlivens up each book and author into a character of its own, and also heightens the sensation. (*Ambai’s Squirrel, Summary*). On the other hand in Yellow Fish, the trauma of the mother can be felt.

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