

The Space of Silence: Feminist Resistance in Ambai's "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House" and "The Squirrel"

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Abstract

Ambai's short stories articulate a distinct feminist perspective by exploring the complex relationship among silence, the body, and resistance. This paper analyzes how silence in "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House" and "The Squirrel" functions not as passive absence but as an active and transformative site for feminist negotiation. Within domestic and psychological contexts, Ambai's women characters confront patriarchal constraints through quiet endurance and heightened self-awareness. The kitchen and the squirrel emerge as potent symbols, illustrating how silence can simultaneously serve as a mechanism of oppression and a strategy for survival. Drawing on feminist theories, particularly those of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Hélène Cixous, this study demonstrates how Ambai's use of fragmented narrative structure, interiority, and sensory detail reconfigures silence as a mode of resistance. Through close textual analysis, this paper contends that Ambai's fiction challenges conventional associations between speech and power, and between silence and weakness. Instead, silence is reimagined as a marker of resilience and subtle rebellion, enabling women to reclaim agency within domestic and emotional spheres. By redefining the significance of voice and silence, Ambai develops a feminist aesthetic that privileges introspection and quiet defiance over overt confrontation.

Keywords : Resistance, Alienation, Gendered Politics, Patriarchal Language

In Indian feminist writing, silence often occupies a paradoxical space—it is both a symptom of patriarchal control and a subtle form of rebellion. Among contemporary Tamil women writers, Ambai (C.S. Lakshmi) distinguishes herself by transforming silence from a sign of suppression into a space of negotiation and resilience. Her stories do not present speech as the only means of liberation; instead, they explore how women articulate identity and resistance through gestures, memories, and inner monologues. In "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House" and "The Squirrel," Ambai reimagines everyday experiences of domesticity, confinement, and observation to show how silence itself becomes a feminist language.

Ambai's fiction, written originally in Tamil and translated into English by Lakshmi Holmström, is situated within a larger context of postcolonial feminist discourse. She writes of women's lives not as abstractions but as lived, embodied experiences where the boundaries

between oppression and resistance blur. The spaces her women inhabit—the kitchen, the courtyard, or even the silence between words—are charged with symbolic meaning. Ambai's sensitivity to language, gesture, and thought creates a narrative texture that allows silence to speak louder than dialogue.

The term “feminist diplomacy” aptly describes Ambai's strategy of resistance. Her protagonists rarely rebel openly; instead, they negotiate patriarchal expectations with quiet intelligence, finding room for freedom within confinement. As Hélène Cixous argues in her seminal essay “*The Laugh of the Medusa*” (1975), women's writing must recover the “white ink” of the body, expressing what has been silenced or excluded by patriarchal discourse. Ambai's stories exemplify this *écriture féminine*—a writing of the body and the unsaid—where silence is not emptiness but *a site of subversive creation*.

Similarly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question, “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*” (1988), provides a useful theoretical lens. Spivak cautions that the subaltern woman's voice is often mediated or erased by dominant structures of representation. Ambai's women neither speak in the loud, political sense nor remain mute victims; rather, they create their own “space of silence” that resists being interpreted by patriarchy. Through silence, they speak differently—through emotion, memory, and bodily awareness.

Both “A Kitchen in the Corner of the House” and “The Squirrel” exemplify Ambai's redefinition of resistance. The former centers on a woman's alienation within domestic life, where her kitchen—tucked away in a literal corner—becomes a symbol of both isolation and self-reflection. The latter portrays a woman observing a squirrel, her gaze transforming into an act of identification and quiet empathy. In both stories, silence becomes a communicative act—a feminist diplomacy that transforms endurance into insight.

This paper thus explores how Ambai transforms the domestic and the ordinary into a philosophical site of rebellion. By analyzing the narrative structure, imagery, and symbolic spaces in these two stories, it argues that silence in Ambai's fiction is an act of resistance, a means through which women reclaim agency and redefine the boundaries of speech and power.

Ambai's “*A Kitchen in the Corner of the House*” (from *In a Forest, a Deer*, OUP 2006) is an intimate portrayal of a woman confined to the domestic sphere yet inwardly aware of her own marginalization. The kitchen—tucked away in an architectural corner—functions both as a physical and psychological metaphor. The narrator notes how the woman's “world began and ended in that smoky corner” (Ambai 43), emphasizing the isolation imposed by household labour. This “corner” becomes a space of surveillance and invisibility: she can hear the world beyond her walls but remains unheard within them.

Ambai uses silence as both texture and theme. The woman's silence is not emptiness; it vibrates with emotion and suppressed consciousness. When she stirs the pot or listens to

distant laughter, the narrative lingers in sensory detail, suggesting that the body becomes the medium through which silence speaks. As Cixous writes, women must “write through their bodies” (Cixous 885); Ambai’s protagonist cooks through her body, translating frustration and longing into physical rhythm. The repetitive sounds of grinding, chopping, and boiling function like a muted language, a code of endurance.

The story also reveals the gendered politics of space. The kitchen corner represents how patriarchal architecture literalizes women’s marginalization, assigning them corners, backrooms, and thresholds. Yet Ambai inverts this symbolism: within this confined space, the woman cultivates her interior freedom. Her silence, though unnoticed by others, becomes her resistance. In a rare moment of self-recognition, she senses that “there was another self-watching her from the wall’s shadow” (Ambai 46). This doubling expresses the feminist idea that consciousness begins in self-observation.

Ambai’s narrative structure itself embodies fragmentation. Shifts in voice and perspective blur boundaries between the external narrator and the woman’s thoughts. Such fragmentation mirrors what Spivak calls the “fractured articulation” of the subaltern (Spivak 295): the impossibility of direct speech under patriarchal dominance. Instead of giving her heroine an explicit monologue, Ambai writes silence performatively—through gaps, ellipses, and sensory imagery. The absence of direct dialogue emphasizes the woman’s interiority and her silent refusal to conform to the expected cheerful servitude of domestic life.

The kitchen, therefore, is transformed from a site of oppression into a site of feminist diplomacy. The protagonist neither escapes nor rebels violently; rather, she negotiates her existence through mindfulness, through owning the rhythms of her labour. Ambai’s art lies in showing that resistance can emerge from within obedience. The woman’s endurance is not passive acceptance but strategic silence—a language patriarchy cannot easily decode.

Ambai’s “A Kitchen in the Corner of the House” and “The Squirrel” together construct a theory of feminist diplomacy—a negotiation that happens not through confrontation but through an intimate re-imagining of silence. Both stories dismantle the binary between speech as empowerment and silence as submission. For Ambai, silence is not an end but a threshold, a generative pause that allows thought and feeling to merge before articulation.

In both narratives, spatial imagery embodies psychic condition. The kitchen corner and the window ledge are marginal spaces that reflect women’s social positions yet also shelter interior freedom. Ambai’s use of the corner and the window suggests that even within limitation, there exists a small aperture of self-awareness—a quiet room for rebellion. In “A Kitchen in the Corner of the House,” the protagonist’s confinement produces introspection; in “The Squirrel,” the protagonist’s gaze outward becomes a meditative act of solidarity with

another fragile being. Thus, silence moves from internal endurance to external empathy, from enclosed body to expanded consciousness.

The stories also share an interest in embodied language. In each, the female body performs what words cannot. When the woman in “A Kitchen in the Corner of the House” stirs, chops, and breathes in rhythm with her thoughts, Ambai turns routine labour into choreography—a lexicon of resistance. Likewise, the woman in “The Squirrel” translates feeling into gesture: a single tear replaces a scream. Cixous’s notion of *écriture féminine* helps articulate this shift. Writing—or in Ambai’s case, storytelling—through the body allows women to reclaim silenced narratives. The body’s movements, pauses, and sensations become forms of inscription, translating experience into meaning outside patriarchal language.

Ambai’s silence is not apolitical. It functions as an ethical stance that critiques the violence of speech itself—speech that too often re-centres male authority. By withdrawing from speech, Ambai’s women resist assimilation. Spivak’s concept of the subaltern’s unspeakability illuminates this paradox: the impossibility of transparent communication under hegemonic structures. Ambai turns that impossibility into method. Her women “speak” through non-verbal consciousness; they negotiate rather than protest, illustrating diplomacy as a feminist survival strategy.

Stylistically, Ambai’s fragmented narration mirrors the fractured identity of her characters. Ellipses, abrupt transitions, and sensory fragments reproduce the rhythm of thought rather than dialogue. The narrative form itself becomes a silent grammar. As readers, we inhabit those pauses and feel the weight of what remains unsaid. The stories thus perform their thesis formally: silence is not described—it is enacted.

Cultural context intensifies this reading. In Tamil society, where domesticity and obedience are idealized, Ambai’s protagonists inhabit familiar terrains but subvert them from within. Their resistance is culturally resonant: they do not reject tradition outright but reinterpret it through consciousness. This inward diplomacy echoes the lived experience of many women negotiating between familial expectations and personal autonomy.

Ambai’s “A Kitchen in the Corner of the House” and “The Squirrel” transform silence from a condition of erasure into a space of agency. Through her women characters, Ambai redefines resistance as the ability to think, feel, and create meaning within constraint. Drawing on feminist theories of Cixous and Spivak, this study demonstrates that silence in Ambai’s fiction is not a void but a dialogic field where subjectivity is re-forged.

The two stories form a continuum of feminist experience: from the domestic silence of the kitchen to the contemplative silence of observation. In both, Ambai’s protagonists practice diplomacy rather than defiance, crafting subtle negotiations that expose the everyday

politics of power. Their silences are active, embodied, and creative—acts of self-definition that convert subjugation into strength.

Ambai's contribution to Indian feminist literature lies in her ability to intertwine aesthetics and ethics. She does not merely write about women's oppression; she writes *as* the silence that has long surrounded them. Her prose invites readers to listen differently—to hear the heartbeat within stillness, the rebellion within quietude. By transforming silence into a narrative strategy, Ambai expands the vocabulary of feminist resistance and articulates a uniquely South-Asian sensibility where endurance itself becomes eloquent.

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