

Re-reading Women's Writing: 'Sarika Caged' and 'Unpublished Manuscript'Susmita Ghosh¹**Abstract:**

This paper concentrates on women's writing and explore two feminist literary text 'Sarika Caged' by Saroj Pathak and 'Unpublished Manuscript' by Ambai. Both the texts deal with the question of women's space in distinct way. They deal with contradictions within the respective spaces of Sarika in 'Sarika Caged' and Thirumagal in 'Unpublished Manuscript.' While 'Sarika Caged' focuses on self expression and resistance in women's lives which are muted within the patriarchal status quo, 'Unpublished Manuscript' reveals the contradictions of space gained within patriarchy. It reveals the fact that improving the quality of women's lives does not always remove certain silences in their lives. This paper also address the question of the specificity of women's writing. The critical question is why do we at all need to talk about women's writing? The paper tries to explore possible answer to this question.

Keywords: women's writing, patriarchy, silence, women's space

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In this paper I would like to reread women's writing from a feminist position. The central question is if there is any specificity of women's writing. Whether women's writing itself need any separate discursive engagement. This I want to look through close reading of two stories. The stories I have selected are 'Sarika Caged' by Saroj Pathak and 'Unpublished Manuscript' by Ambai. It is therefore my political choice to talk about women's writers, but it does not ensure that talking about women writers is in itself a feminist position. To be a feminist critic, it is more important to consider gender perspectives of a text and not simply to focus on female writers. Though focussing on women writers within a male dominated literary tradition is in a sense locating female agency. When my project is to understand the specificity of women's writing, things become problematic. It is assumed there is an essential quality in women's writing. If femininity as opposed to masculinity is essential to every woman in patriarchy, then we place ourselves in the same patriarchal notion of biologism. Even if we point out that this femininity is a socio-cultural construct, we are none the less emphasising the difference between the male and female, which ultimately serves the patriarchal status quo. So it becomes an important task for feminists to redefine the notion of femininity. If femininity can be seen as a position which is marginal in the patriarchal order, the problem can be solved in certain sense. Now when femininity is not an essence but a position, it is no longer explicitly concerned with women. Here comes the second problem which is how do we then define women's writing as a category. Why do we at all need to talk about women's writing, when we are not arguing that the female experience is ultimately culminate in feminist utterance. If a feminist position is not essentially a women's point of view, when theoretically even men can be feminists, then what compels us to focus on women's writing? Is it to make room for women writers in the literary canon? My point of view regarding this is that a re-reading of women's writing is important in order to locate a feminist intervention.

It is also important to mention here that the total rejection of the male symbolic order cannot be a feminist agenda. Then we will again be producing an exclusively female space. The strategy of women's writing is to subvert the dominance of male cultural/linguistic discourse from within. This strategy is of course not that of women's writers alone, but I want to confine the framework of my paper to women's writing to locate a female subjective

agency. My re-reading of female writers does not mean a return to a specifically 'female' domain. The women's writings I have chosen are feminine in position and I have deliberately excluded women's writing which maintain the patriarchal status quo. The texts I have chosen deal with the gendered experience and provide the scope for a feminist reading. When margin speaks in terms of centre, its own inheritance is muted. It is being silenced but it does exist. Through this silence, patriarchy is subverted from within. This is the politics of feminine position. Feminist scholarship must reread this silence within phallogocentric discourse. But women's writing is not a practice about form. If we focus our attention on the themes of women's writings, we will find that they are about the space that women occupy within patriarchy. This is the very physical space women occupy in life and thus it is the recurring theme of women's writing. The possibility of transforming the quality of this space is the feminist politics of subverting power, though not every feminine writing projects the possibility of transforming the quality of this space. But feminine writing does deal with the binary of inner space and outer space of everyday life.

The two stories I select is not only written in different language but also written in different time. Saroj Pathak and Ambai lived in different times and spaces altogether. Both of them are eminent writers of Gujrati and Tamil literature respectively. Their writings represent ambiguity of women's life within the complexity of Indian modernity. Saroj Pathak generally focuses her attention on the analysis of human mind, "mind warped or diseased through inner or outer pressures" (Kudchedkar X). Her selection of characters is irrespective of their class, caste and gender. Her writings took shape in the mid-fifties and sixties. Ambai, on the contrary is one of those writers are "are influenced by, or engage directly with, issues that emerged in Indian society since mid-seventies" (Tharu and Lalitha 113). And Ambai as a writer is interested in retrieving and rewriting women's lives and history. This spacial and temporal distance between the contexts is very much represented in the selected texts.

I would now give the summary of these two stories. Sarika is the central character of the story 'Sarika Caged'. She is women from upper caste upper class family. She was not economically or socially deprived but she was unable to exercise personal choice throughout her life. She was forced to study maths then science. Her marriage was settled at the cost of her preference for becoming a doctor. After marriage she had to follow what her husband wanted. She was taught dancing though she disliked dancing in the public. She had to attain

the clubs and party with her husband. She was denied motherhood and had to take a puppy instead. After the sudden death of her husband she realized that there is no one in her life whom she had to follow. Knowing this as a greatest misfortune of her life she cannot cry. She was unable to perform the role of widow. This led her to insanity. She was admitted to a hospital and whatever she says seems to be raving. She was unable to communicate. Finally she became caged for her insanity. The 'Unpublished Manuscript' is the story of Thirumagal and her daughter Chentamarai who are much privileged than Sarika. They were given much more personal space. Thirumagal was grown up by a radical father who does not believe in any gender specific role. She was exposed to intellectual life by his father and his progressive friends. She fell in love with a Tamil poet Muthukumaran and this brought her misfortune. The married life was not a happy one as Muthukumaran believed in gender specific role. He expected Thirumagal would entertain him and his friends as a traditional Tamil wife. But Thirumagal has other things to do. She was busy with her studies and her father's printing press. The details of their conjugal life were written in her autobiography which would be eventually read by Chentamarai. When the situation became extreme Thirumagal had to take a decision. By the time her father died. She left Muthukumaran and took a job in Benares University. She realized it is easier to stay with Muthukumaran's poetry than with the person himself. In the autobiography she mentions her hardship as a single woman settling in an unknown city. We find both the mother and her daughter well settled in Benares. Chentamarai is even more assertive and empowered than her mother as she was more exposed to radical thinking. We come to realize this is a story of women's empowerment which Sarika was unable to achieve. But there are blind spots within this story. Muthukumaran's death and the invitation for Kavignar Memorial Festival expose the complexity of the mother's and daughter's relationship with the poet. Chentamarai's eagerness for a father figure and Thirumagal's unexpressed grief would lead us to such a reading.

My entry point to these two texts is through the physical space that encloses or expands around both the female central characters. There is a thematic similarity in the narration. Both the central characters resist the physical space given to them by patriarchy. In the case of 'Sarika Caged' Sarika tries to subvert patriarchal norms and is finally encaged because of her insanity. Her resistance encloses her in a limited physical space. While in 'Unpublished Manuscript' Thirumagal successfully breaks off with her husband and establishes her own individual space. She triumphantly manipulates the outer space and thus

widen her physical space. The contrasting feature of these two stories attracted my attention. We might come to conclusion that 'Sarika Caged' is the story of a woman's oppression within patriarchal society while 'Unpublished Manuscript' is a story of women's empowerment. But this kind of closure limits our vision from more complex positions of women's space. The representation of gender relations in these texts is more heterogeneous. These closures must be challenged because of their superficiality. My reading of these texts explores the blind spots which transgress this binary of triumph and defeat. It is important to note that challenging the binds of women's space/life is more important than gaining more space within patriarchy.

In 'Sarika Caged' the incidents that unfold in Sarika's life are specific occurrences of gender oppression within her upper class/caste background. The incidents can be coined as 'oppression' in relation with Sarika's inability to negotiate with them. She was not deprived of any material access but confined by limited personal choice. She has to learn mathematics, the subject which gets privilege over her imaginative self. She has to take up science though she cannot stand dissection. But when she prefer to be a doctor her marriage is given more importance. A good connection must not slip out of one's hand. The marriage ceremony was not the kind of celebration Sarika had imagined. This was again a choice of the bridegroom with secular ideas. After her marriage she has to suppress all her own feelings for her husband's pleasure and wishes. She could not choose a life without clubs and parties because 'Mr. And Mrs. Always have to go together' (Pathak 50). She is denied motherhood, instead she has to place a puppy in her empty lap. She plays the role of the better half of her husband, though her husband's affections are not exclusively reserved for her. She protest in vain and plays the roles she is expected to play. The death of her husband places her in new role of widow. But she is no longer able to keep up the performance by crying for others on the day of her 'greatest misfortune' (Pathak 53) and thus exposes the incoherence of her life. Ultimately she becomes mentally insane and is engaged for insanity. Sarika's self expression never turns into her self-assertion and that is where her failure lies. It is her failure that she, as an individual is unable to manipulate her own space. Herself expression is muted by the dominant cultural codes. But this failure cannot be simplified as her inability to resist those cultural codes. Rather it should be seen in the context of her pre-existing social relation in contrast to Thirumagal and her daughter in 'Unpublished Manuscript.'

Sarika is situated in a position where epistemological access is limited compared to the position of Thirumagal and her daughter. Their liberal education and exposure to a wider epistemology had helped to build up their assertive selves which was not the case for Sarika. Sarika's imaginative self is never appreciated. This is in stark contrast with Thirumagal's daughter who comeback from school spreading her arms like wings. Sarika's education was not for her own inner quest, nor for earning her livelihood, but to fulfil her parent's dream. Her marriage to a bridegroom 'just like real European' (Pathak 48) make her parents proud which is the opposite of Thirumagal's marriage to Muthukumaran. And Thirumagal's self assertion in the case of her marriage is shaped by her parents relatively compassionate conjugal relationship. Silence in Sarika's marriage can be read as the silencing process of her existence. She protest all her married life in her own terms. She expresses every little wish of her own, even those that conflict with her husband's wishes. She expresses her desire not to dance in public, not to ride a horse, not to murder the child she conceived. But she is interpellated as a subject by the ideology that insists that a wife must follow her husband's command. This is different in the case of Thirumagal. She is exposed to the counter ideology that opposes this kind of patriarchal value. So it was easier for her to counter her husband's abuses. After Sarika's husband's death she comes to this self realization, at whose bidding she danced 'that stage director is no more' (Pathak 54) and this self realization makes her unable to cry, though she knows it is her life's greatest misfortune. Her self assertion can be traced within this contradiction. At this point she collapses into a mental breakdown and loses her coherent self. She loses her relationship with the outside world and can neither make sense of nor shape her own existence. She feels an emptiness, a total void.

In the hospital bed she discovers that the teacher, mother, doctor, nurse all of them in her life are representative of the male symbolic order where her own voice is muted. Even on her sick bed she poses a question to the patriarchal social order by asking whether the girl in front of her bed, is reciting a poem against her wish. But she cannot convey her utterance to the listener. She is in a position where her voice is choked by patriarchy. When she pronounces something it seems she is raving. When she privileges her muted self she becomes insane. This position of insanity is one where her utterances cannot be understood by male stream, main stream linguistic practice. Her ultimate insanity may not be looked upon as an emancipation from the male symbolic order but still her resistance to this symbolic order cannot be underestimated. It is obvious that what happened to Sarika is not

empowerment but a close reading of the text will established her ability to subvert patriarchy. The focus of feminist criticism should not only be the successful manipulation of patriarchy. Thus Sarika's story is not only the narrative of her oppression but also of her resistance from within her socio-cultural context.

In 'Unpublished Manuscript' Thirumagal is situated in the same socio-cultural position but with more epistemological access. She was brought up by a liberal father whose idea about women's liberation was radical for his time. He does not believe that a woman's goal in life is to get married and confine herself to household chores. Thus he insists on women' education, women's access to job over widow remarriage. Though he himself married a widow, it was not out of a sense of social responsibility. He was in love with Thirumagal's mother. He insisted on her education and her obtaining a teacher's training degree. Then she joined him in Malaysia. After the death of his wife, he returned with his three year old daughter and set up a press that refused to publish books that made obscene allegations against particular castes or against those who spoke particular languages nor did it print invitations of coming of age celebrations or for marriages performed with elaborate rituals. He never insisted on Thirumagal's learning any gender specific skills. His encouragement towards Thirumagal's education, exposes her to a wider world and expands her mental space. Thirumagal's self assertion develops under the influence of a father with such high principles and the association of his intellectual friends. Her M.A in English literature and her exposure to publishing world situates her in a privileged position in juxtaposition to Sarika. Her daughter Chentamarai's childhood is even more intellectually vibrant. As a daughter of an intellectual and critic she is exposed to biographies of countless writers, poets and artists. To her the stories of Sylvia Plath, Lorca, Anna Akmatova or Akka Mahadevi are stories of people close to her. Thus it seemed natural that Chentamarai grows up enacting a different persona every day from this constellation of radical intellectuals in front of a mirror. Her imagination is encouraged by her mother and Chentamarai's exposure gives her a voice which is not muted by dominant patriarchal cultural codes. Thirumagal and her daughter's challenge to patriarchal ideology is possible because of their solidarity with the intellectual traditions that subvert patriarchy. Chentamarai's vivid description of the river Ganges and its banks expresses her unrestrained relationship with the outer world. This relationship makes way for self exploration which culminates in her creativity. This coherence between outside world and her inner self was impossible for Sarika to achieve

within her context. Chentamarai's self assertion of her sexuality is expressed through her naming her breasts. And her self confidence is expressed when she thinks of herself as someone who 'was going to attract the world' (Ambai 105).

In Thirumagal's life self assertion was muted once and for all with her marriage to Muthukumaran. Muthukumaran, who believes in gender specific role and fails to be a supportive husband. His intervention breaks Thirumagal's individuality temporarily. But she overcomes it by leaving her husband and establishing herself as a scholar and critic. By teaching at Benares University, she not only regains her own space but is able to transform the quality of that space. She becomes more sensitive to gender constructions which are assumed to be very natural in patriarchal value system. Thus when her daughter talks of her longing for a man who can feel deep sorrow, so that she can then play her *yaazh* and make him happy, Thirumagal asks her daughter if she ever imagines a man playing his *yaazh* to drive away her sorrow. After this conversation Chentamarai comes to the self realization 'A thing that seemed normal when a man did it, why did it seem crazy when a woman did it?' (Ambai 108-109) Finally she makes up her mind about the kind of man she would respect. He would have to know 'how to melt' (Ambai 109). Thirumagal drives Tamil grammar into Chentamarai's head. When Chentamarai asks why she cannot write poetry beyond grammar, her *amma* makes her understand that 'she had to first grasp that which she wished to transcend' (Ambai 107). This phrase can be applied to Thirumagal's journey through life. Thirumagal carves out her own space by understanding the gender perspective of the patriarchal space, a perspective that Sarika fails to comprehend. But within this autonomous space of the mother and the daughter there are silences which patriarchy has inscribed. The autobiography from which Chentamaria learns about her mother is 'unpublished'. She has to discover it from a cupboard in her *amma*'s room. Thirumagal's life might be a story of personal success but blind spots of deep grief can still be located within it. Her single utterance to Mohan that life without Muthukumaran was not an easy one and the cost she has to pay for it, reveals Thirumagal's self contradictions. It was difficult to live with a person like Muthukumaran but it was even harder to leave him. When she finally leaves him and Chennai a poem of Muthukumaran's about a train journey surfaced in her mind. It is not only a hard journey for a single woman to settle down in an unknown city but struggle within her inner self makes it harder. She ultimately comes to the conclusion that it is easier to stay with

Muthukumaran's poem than with Muthukumaran the person. This silent grief remains with her all through her life, her unpublished autobiography is proof of this silence.

The world of Thirumagal and her daughter may look like a world beyond the patriarchal value system, interpellated by a different sets of ideologies but a close reading reveals the other side of this 'emancipated space'. The contradiction within this space are very prominent. Though Chentamaria's relationship with her mother is very fulfilling, there is a undertone of desire for a father figure in her life. She tries to imagine how her father must have looked. But the picture remains incomplete in her imagination as the only picture of Muthukumaran in his anthology of poem is faded and creased. Thirumagal informs Chentamaria of her father's death as if it is a news item. Thirumagal's inability to express her emotion is our entry point to the silencing process at work in her life. The day Chentamaria hears about her father's death, she comes across a girl child in its father's lap. She cries a lot in her room that day. Then her mother takes out a photograph from her childhood that shows her with both her father and mother, and it is kept 'where her eyes could fall upon it every now and then' (Ambai 126). And when the invitation from the Kavignar Muthukumaran Memorial Festival arrives she decides to attend the programme. In a way the father figure for Chentamarai is established by the fact of his absence after his death and the patriarchal order thus re-establishes itself. Thus the reading reveals the spots where the binds of heterosexual social matrix are not undone. Thirumagal's individual space, unfortunately, can neither transgress her grief and solitude, nor transcend her daughter's expectation of a father figure.

The stories I have chosen, deal with contradictions within the respective space of these two women. The space of these women can be historically linked. The historical context of a character like Sarika is transformed within two decades. Thus Thirumagal has to deal with different sets of complexity within patriarchy. Within these two decades women of upper class/caste have achieved considerable power but the silence of their lives has not been erased by gaining power. While 'Sarika Caged' focuses on self expression and resistance in women's lives which are muted within the patriarchal status quo, 'Unpublished Manuscript' reveals the contradictions of a space gained within patriarchy. It reveals the fact that improving the quality of women's lives does not always remove certain silences in their lives. These contradictions within self assertive individuals make room for a more complex and heterogeneous existence for women's lives. These silences must be located by feminist

scholarship. And as long as these silences remain in the physical space inhabited by women, women's writings which deal with these silences will demand a separate discursive engagement.

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