

GENDER WITHOUT BORDERS: AN INTERVIEW WITH C.S. LAKSHMI (AMBAI)

Antonia Navarro Tejero
Universidad de Córdoba

C.S. Lakshmi (Ambai) was born in 1944 in Tamil Nadu. She is a distinguished fiction writer in Tamil, and her works are characterized by her passionate espousal of the cause of women, humor, a lucid and profound style, and a touch of realism. Most of her stories are about relationships and they contain brilliant observations about contemporary life. Exploration of space, silence, coming to terms with one's body or sexuality, and the importance of communication are some of the recurring themes in her works. She holds a Ph.D. from Jawaharlal Nehru University, and she is presently the Director of Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women (SPARROW), a trust set up in Mumbai to build a national archives for women with print, oral history and pictorial material. She is the author of *Sirakukal muriyum*, *Vittin mulaiyil oru camaiyalarai* and *Kaattil oru maan* and two translated collections entitled *A Purple Sea*, *In a Forest*, *A Deer*. She has also published some research works entitled *The Face behind the Mask: Women in Tamil Literature*, *Singer and the Song: Conversations with Musicians*, *Mirrors and Gestures: Conversations with Dancers*. She also writes non-fiction and has edited a book on the city of Chennai: *The Unhurried City: Writings on Chennai*. As a young girl she won some popular literary awards instituted by the magazines *Kannan* and *Kalaimagal*. Later in her career she won the Ilakkiya Chinthanai award for a short story entitled *Amma oru kolai seithaal* and the Katha Award for a short story entitled *Kaattil oru maan*. Recently her book *In a Forest, A Deer* won the Hutch-Crossword Award and she has also won the Vilakku Award for the year 2006 instituted by a group of Tamil literary enthusiasts in the U.S. for her contribution to Tamil literature.

ANT: Why Ambai when writing in Tamil and Lakshmi when writing in English?

CSL: I write fiction in Tamil and non-fiction in English. As a creative writer I like to use the pen name Ambai. Non-creative writing I prefer to do it in my real name.

ANT: What does Ambai mean?

CSL: Ambai actually means Devi which is goddess Parvathi. When I was in my early teens there was a popular writer called Devan who wrote a novelette



Parvathiyin Sangalpam (Parvathi's Vow) where a woman spurned and insulted by her husband takes a vow to become somebody and starts writing with the pen name Ambai. She becomes very famous and not realising that she is the wife he spurned, her husband comes to meet her and she rejects him. As a young girl I liked her guts and began writing with the pen name Ambai. But later I retained the pen name because of its *Mahabharatha* connections. Ambai is the woman who becomes a man called Sikandi in *Mahabharatha* and takes revenge on Bhishma who she feels ruined her life. I liked the androgynous quality of Ambai and liked the idea of a borderless gender.

ANT: Much literature has been discussed around the topic of English Indian fiction. What is your position towards English language, do you also have an ambivalent feeling of love and hate?

CSL: It is not a question of love and hate. It is just that I don't think in English. I do love the language but I love so many other Indian languages and where languages abroad are concerned, I really love the sound of Spanish. I have a diploma in Spanish and Portuguese. And I like these languages too.

ANT: Does your Tamil reader differ from your English one in any way?

CSL: I certainly think so. The Tamil readers pay attention to my language nuances also. The English readers miss that entire part.

ANT: Sexuality seems to be a taboo topic in India. However, you, along with some other Indian women writers, explore this topic. Did censorship affect you at all?

CSL: Sexuality is strangely a taboo topic only in the modern period. Our ancient Tamil literature has a special place for love and desire. It is also a part of our oral history. Colonial education brought in some Victorian values with regard to sexuality. But this taboo is there only in terms of literary expression. In conversations and discussions among women sexuality is easily talked about. When I began to explore this topic I did not realise I was defying anything for I was doing it for my own sake as much as for the sake of writing about it. The censorship happened not in terms of open discussion of what I wrote but more in terms of a total rejection of what I wrote. My first short story collection did not get reviewed for about ten years! Also no recognition in terms of awards came my way. There was also harassment at a personal level by some male writers and for several years what they imagined to be my lifestyle and my personality got lampooned. I was left quite alone to face it. I responded by stonewalling all their comments.

ANT: How did literary recognition finally happen?

CSL: It came many years later for a story. And that is about the only award I have received in Tamil Nadu itself. The other awards have been for my translations. The recent Vilakku award is from a Tamil group in the U.S. Since I write in Tamil literary journals there are many who have not even heard of me in Tamil Nadu. And many of the senior male writers publicly say that they have not read me. So literary recognition in that sense has not really happened.



ANT: How did the idea of founding SPARROW come to you? Is it a deserved tribute to other women artists who suffered the same censorship as you did?

CSL: The idea of founding SPARROW rose from my work as a researcher on women and culture. Women artists form only one part of it. SPARROW is much more than an archive of women artists. It is an archive to document women's lives and history and this includes women from various walks of life, not just artists. SPARROW was founded to document the lives and works of women who have not found their way into history textbooks and who are not part of the public memory of past history as well as contemporary history.

ANT: The rewriting of History from a feminist perspective made an enormous impact on Women's Studies. How did SPARROW contribute to that project in the 90s?

CSL: From 1997 onwards SPARROW has been doing various projects and programmes to raise awareness regarding the history of women by holding workshops for students, through publications, through Summer workshops for students from abroad, through film workshops, film festivals and producing its own documentaries. Whether these have immediately impacted Women's Studies one can't say. But those in Women's Studies do know about SPARROW's work. And SPARROW is a member of the Indian Association of Women's Studies.

ANT: How is SPARROW working now?

CSL: It is working fine except that we need a permanent space and an endowment grant that will allow us to be less anxious about the future.

ANT: Where does the organization get the funds from?

CSL: From 1997 to 2007 we were funded by HIVOS, a humanistic group from Holland. Currently our infrastructural expenses are funded by Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, a trust in Mumbai. This will get over in 2008. So we are still struggling to be rooted as an institution and funding is a major challenge for organizations like ours. It is like a sword hanging above our heads, for girls we train become insecure every time a funding period ends and very often we lose senior staff in the process. It is an uphill task to say the least.

ANT: Do you consider your organization and writings feminist?

CSL: My writings can be considered feminist but my organization is trying to archive material on women, one can say, with a feminist perspective. But we collect all kinds of material and some of them need not necessarily be feminist but can be material which can be used for research on women with a feminist perspective.

ANT: Can you name a few foundings that helped to challenge the canonical history of India?

CSL: In our oral history project when we interview women who have participated in the freedom movement or even ordinary women we have found that many women are making history all the time. This completely changes the way we



see women in the family and in the history of the nation. Some rosy images of the Indian family also crumble at times and at times we find that rules and norms get broken in a family by women in a determined manner. Our approach to women's expression, scholarship and action can undergo a radical change when we look at them in the context from which they have arisen.

ANT: As a Tamil author, does feminism make any sense in your community?

CSL: Do you think feminism is a western prerogative? We have women's journals in Tamil which are feminist and feminism is a topic we have been discussing for a long time now. I think you have no idea what the Tamils are. We have women's organizations which have been having theoretical discussions about feminism for many years.

ANT: Could you then tell us more about the history of Tamil feminism?

CSL: I will not call it Tamil feminism exactly for many women would not use that term. I don't think we would like to restrict feminism into certain cultural or community specificities. I think feminists have existed in the Tamil land even before the term feminism was in use. For example, one of our ancient poets Avvaiyar, was a single woman and a bard who wandered around singing poems. A very modern image that is. But such a person was not unusual even in earlier times although she may not have specified that she would like to opt out of marriage and motherhood and so on for certain theoretical reasons. But such choices seem to have existed. Coming to modern times, in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century there have been women educationists and professionals who have struck a different path. Many women who spoke about women's rights and women's equality participated in the Self-Respect Movement whose leader was E.V. Ramasamy Naiker or Thanthai Periyar, as he was known. In the thirties and forties when women came into national politics women's right to education and equal rights for women were commonly voiced concerns. Poet Bharathi, called the revolutionary poet, wrote about women and men being equal. It is true that the term feminist was suspect during the national movement for it had connotations which threatened even some well-known women leaders. But even when in the late seventies Penn Urimai Iyakkam, an organization, was started in Chennai and they began by blackening obscene posters, demanding rights and running a tabloid, the term "penniyavathi" (feminist) was respected but also sneered at sometimes. "Penniyavatham" (feminism) is a commonly used term in many NGOs run for women and is also part of the popular vocabulary. It is viewed in many different ways but it has become a part of the every day language of the people.