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Figures of Speech Are Not For Women: Metonymy, Rhetorical Questions, and Simile in *The Calf That Frolicked in the Hall*

Language reflects the broader systems of oppression that cultivate it. These structures extend beyond institutions and into the interpersonal realm, shaping discourse itself. Ambai complicates this distinction by illustrating how her female protagonist remains an outsider despite mirroring the figurative speech of her male peers. Her innate inability to conform to masculine literary devices excludes her yet allows her to succeed in the long-term. In *The Calf That Frolicked in the Hall*, Ambai utilizes metonymy, rhetorical questions, and similes as a language of agency for women, while the male characters—particularly Udayan and Kadir—use the same figures of speech in ways that reflect not only patriarchal exclusion, but also the melancholia of a generation confronting the failure of its revolutionary ideals.

Metonymy, the substitution of a word or phrase for something closely associated with it, highlights the philosophical divide between genders, while also revealing deeper generational disillusionment. Udayan and Kadir, two young men shaped by the waning momentum of leftist and anti-caste political movements such as the Naxalite struggle and Self-Respect Movement, use metonymy to question one another's ideological beliefs. Their discourse over the names of literary journals is not simply a machismo sparring match—it expresses their struggle to find meaning and direction in a world where humanity seems to be slipping.

Udayan idealizes journals with, “forceful names, *Ezhuthu*, Writing; *Manikkodi*, Banner” and criticizes the names of journals that “show a lack of goals: *Vanampadi* [my trans. “skylark”], *Vaigai* [my trans. “a river”], *Yatra* [my trans. “pilgrimage”], *Kaatru* [my trans. “wind”], *Padigal* [my trans. “staircase”], *Chuvadu* [my trans. “footprints”], and so on...” (Ambai 22). The journal names Udayan that mocks, symbolize movement and fluidity while the journals he respects convey rigidity and permanence. Kadir then rebuttals highlighting Hindu beliefs and Udhayan retorts, “But are any of those names forceful, though? *Visvarupam*, Cosmic form; *Darsanam*, Vision; *Gnanaratham*, Chariot of wisdom... And what about us? *Thedal!* Quest! What quest?” (Ambai 22). This contrast implies that they perceive adaptability and progression differently as Udayan views socialism as intellectual weakness while reinforcing a preference for grand, unyielding ideologies.

Meanwhile, the unnamed, female protagonist is excluded from this intellectual sphere entirely. Her engagement with existentialism and religion is dismissed before she can fully express it. She asserts, “Of course a woman reads Camus too. She reads Sartre. She also reads the Tirumandiram, Akka Mahadevi, and the Sufi poets” (Ambai 18), constructing a metonymic bridge. The protagonist equates the prestige of Western existentialism as seen with Camus and Sartre symbolizing “Non-being” to be equal to South Asian spiritual traditions with the Tirumandiram, Akka Mahadevi, and the Sufi poets, symbolizing “Being”. In doing so, she asserts intellectual authority by positioning herself within these discourses, demonstrating fluency in both traditions. As the protagonist reflects, “You look at me as if I belong to some strange species. It really troubles me. I could speak, read, debate with you. But it can happen only if I’m one of you. Otherwise, I will always be an outsider. Just a spectator” (Ambai 14). The use of metonymy elevates her intellectual standing. By referencing specific philosophers rather

than making a general claim about women's reading habits, she forces recognition of her erudition. This challenges the male-dominated discourse, yet ultimately, her words expose the systemic exclusion that renders her an outsider.

Rhetorical questions—questions asked without expecting an answer to assert something indirectly—function as a space where female agency is expressed and male dismissal is reasserted. For the protagonist, the question “Why are you at the window?” (Ambai 18) encapsulates her life. The window becomes a metaphor for longing and the constraints of gendered existence—a threshold to freedom that she is never allowed to cross. These rhetorical questions grant the protagonist a voice, yet also reveal her powerlessness. Unlike the men—who use rhetorical devices to dominate—the protagonist uses them to expose contradictions in her reality. Her question, “Why are you at the window?” does not seek an answer but forces recognition of an unspoken reality—the persistent exclusion of women from spaces of intellectual discourse. The window represents both opportunity and entrapment, reinforcing that women's agency is often acknowledged only in theory, not in practice.

In contrast, male characters use rhetorical questions to belittle and silence women. Unlike the protagonist, who uses rhetorical questions to assert agency, men in *The Calf That Frolicked in the Hall* wield them as tools of dismissal. Udhayan sneers, “Fine. All this is mere breast-beating. Are you saying that women are sacrificial lambs, then? I can hear songs like ‘If you are born a woman, this world must always be sorrowful’ playing away in the background” (Ambai 18). Instead of engaging with the protagonist's insights, he reduces her argument to an exaggerated stereotype of female victimhood, effectively silencing her perspective.

As Ann Brooks, citing Foucault, writes, “Power is something that is exercised rather than possessed” (qtd. in Swamy 271). Udayan exercises this power through rhetorical dismissal. His

words do not merely express disbelief; they maintain control. By mocking the protagonist's expressions of oppression, he reinforces the very systems she seeks to challenge. Thus, rhetorical questions in Ambai's story serve as both tools of resistance and instruments of patriarchal repression.

The similes in Ambai's text are another vessel for men to uphold the patriarchy and for women to gain agency. Ambai repeatedly states, "It felt cold to the touch. Like a wet kiss" throughout the text to highlight the protagonist's shifting emotional and psychological states. At first, the phrase describes an intimate moment between the protagonist and Kadir, where coldness contrasts with the warmth of passion. Later, it recurs in different contexts—when the calf licks the protagonist, in her letter to Kadir, when Kadir touches her with cold hands, and finally, when she touches Udayan's corpse. This repetition grants the protagonist the freedom to make some observations and claims that she otherwise would be ridiculed for based on her gender.

Swamy argues that "Ambai uses repetition in her narratives to enforce how repetition aids to naturalize the performances" (Swamy 275). In this context, the phrase "Like a wet kiss" initially symbolizes desire with Kadir, but by using the phrase with the calf, the protagonist subtly aligns Kadir with the immaturity of the calf, even stating in her letter to him, "That kiss on that terrace is still wet on my lips... But it seems to me that as far as I'm concerned, our meeting has happened too late, whereas on your part, it is too soon. I have travelled many miles. You, though, are still within the womb of your family" (Ambai 30–31). The protagonist uses this repeated simile to assert control over her narrative, expressing connections and conclusions about her world that she cannot openly voice. The repetition of the phrase allows her to impose meaning onto her experiences, reframing her relationships within her own terms. Additionally,

by using the phrase with Udayan's corpse, she also aligns Kadir with death, signaling the inevitable conclusion of a relationship that was never meant to progress.

However, when men use similes in *The Calf That Frolicked in the Hall*, they often do so to demean and diminish women. For example, Swaminathan states, "What is this, Amma, have you no idea about bringing up a girl properly? The boy is an utter innocent. It seems she hangs on to him like a pisaasu, and wanders about everywhere with him. It seems the whole town is laughing at them" (Ambai 30). The simile "like a pisaasu" is a particular insult in Tamil. Pissasus are cannibal imp creatures in the Mahabharata that are the very manifestation of evil. By equating her to a demonic creature, Swaminathan erases her autonomy and portrays her as something unnatural, reinforcing the societal expectation that women should remain passive rather than assertive in their desires and relationships. This aligns with Swamy's argument that "Ambai's powerful and thought-provoking writings of protest and social activism aim at shackling the existing hegemonic canons which undermine human dignity" (Swamy 271). Ambai's use of simile, then, is not merely a stylistic choice, but a deliberate act of resistance. Ambai challenges the structures that seek to confine women within limiting definitions of propriety and submission.

Ambai's *The Calf That Frolicked in the Hall* reveals how language—especially through figures like metonymy, rhetorical questions, and similes—is shaped by and entangled in social power structures. Men in the story use these figures to reinforce intellectual hierarchy and to exclude others from their philosophical domains. Yet, as the story makes clear, these men—Udayan and Kadir—are not simply generic embodiments of patriarchy. They are young, idealistic individuals navigating the twilight of revolutionary hope in postcolonial Tamil Nadu, where movements like the Naxalite struggle and the Self-Respect Movement no longer carry the

radical force they once promised. Their rhetorical bravado masks a deep-rooted uncertainty, even despair. Udayan dies—likely by suicide—and Kadir ends up detached from Tamil intellectual life, speaking his mother tongue only in dreams.

The female protagonist, by contrast, begins as an outsider to their discourse but ultimately forges a voice of her own. Her deployment of metonymy, rhetorical questioning, and simile reflects not only erudition but also a willful remaking of literary and philosophical space. She bridges European existentialism with South Asian mysticism, and, in doing so, constructs a new, hybrid mode of thought.

Still, her journey is not without difficulty. Her attempts to enter male-dominated intellectual conversations are met with resistance and dismissal. Her language is powerful, but the structures that seek to marginalize her persist. The story's cyclical structure and layered temporality—the return of metaphors, the repetition of images like the window and the wet kiss—imbue it with a deep sense of melancholia. We are asked not just to feel her frustration, but to mourn what was lost: youthful idealism, political solidarity, and unfulfilled intimacy.

In the end, however, it is the protagonist—not the men—who becomes part of the literary world. The failure of the men is not only an indictment of gendered exclusion, but also of a generation's inability to imagine a future that includes nuance. Ambai's narrative ultimately complicates simplistic binaries, showing that even within systems of power, voices can emerge that bend language toward liberation.

Works Cited

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