

Ambai's Short Story Atavi -- A Case Study Of Urban Fantasy

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Abstract

Fantasy fiction is ever a fun as it possesses mythical elements nourishing the food of imagination. Today's animations and cartoon characters hold a sway over the young minds. Comic Fantasy, Contemporary Fantasy, Dark Fantasy, Juvenile Fantasy, Magic realism are its sub genres. Urban Fantasy deals with earth in its varied representation. All fantasies focus on a hero's journey in varied forms and dimensions. This article on Ambai's Atavi deals with a shero's journey. The journey is symbolic. Forest in its darkness symbolizes the inner world which is mysterious until one realizes the true identity. The shero of Atavi Chenthiru is on a similar journey. She reminds Sita of Ramayana and how Chenthiru and Sita meet makes it a story of Urban Fantasy.

Key words: Fantasy, Fiction, Urban, shero, identity, journey, forest, epic.

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Fantasy fiction is a genre of writing that involves magical elements, set in a fictional world and is generally believed to be provoked by mythology or folklore or oral traditions, resulting in "Fantasy Literature" and Drama. A typical example is Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. At present, Fantasy Literature has been enlarged further in the film, television, media, in the graphic novels and animations. The Fantasy genre is distinguished from the Science and Horror fictions due to the absence of scientific and grisly themes. Instead, the settings are of the earth represented in a different manner. From the beginning, the supernatural and fantastic elements have been a part of literature. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* (2150-1400 BCE), the great Babylonian poem is considered to be the oldest epic text. In India, the Vedic Mythology has been a source for the creation of fantastical stories and characters. The popular instances are the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, the *Panchatantra* and the *Vikram and Vetala (Baital Pachisi)* stories. Isabel Burton in the "Preface" to the book *Vikram and the Vampire* (1893) written by Sir Richard F. Burton says that the *Baital Pachisi* "is the germ which culminated in the *Arabian Nights*, and which inspired the *Golden Ass* of Apuleius, Boccaccio's *Decamerone*, the *Pentamerone*, and all that class of facetious fictitious literature." The Fantastic fiction has a long history covering several early civilizations. Fantasy Literature has been classified into many subgenres characterized by particular themes or settings and overlapping with other literary genres or forms. For instance, Comic fantasy which is humorous in tone, Contemporary fantasy, set in the modern world or a world based on a contemporary era but involving magic or other supernatural elements, Dark fantasy that includes elements of horror fiction, Juvenile fantasy is children's literature with fantasy elements. Magic realism is a genre of literary fiction incorporating minor supernatural elements. While Urban fantasy is set in a city, Weird fiction involves macabre and unsettling stories. There are many other varieties too that draw from the Chinese and Japanese mythology. More than any other genre, fantasy narratives focus on the journey of the hero.

Urban Fantasy narrative is set within an intensely urban environment. The city landscape is contemporary, with all the relevant technology and complications of modern lives, but also a home to a myriad of supernatural, fantasy and mythical elements that peep out from the background. A further emerging characteristic is the projection on the use of Female heroes, depicted in a unique manner within fantasy literature. The primary feature that differentiates Urban Fantasy from other Fantasy subgenres is the protagonist. Urban Fantasy is a sub - genre rich in heritage. Like any type of fantasy fiction, it draws on ancient mythologies and follows a familiar pattern of the heroic quest. The key character, then, has been fashioned as a unique combination of urban realism and fantasy. He/ She exists in a real-world urban setting, with its pressures and freedom of modern city life, while facing an invasion of the non-rational and supernatural. With their action, they take the reader through the network landscape of real and unreal. As a hero, they must obviously face the horrors and find resolution. Urban Fantasy is female-centric and hence, the gender complications get added to

the burden. The female protagonists are not Amazonian warrior women, but contemporary women thrust into an extraordinary situation. This subgenre is primarily written by women, for women, about women and the popular example given is Emma Bull's *War of the Oaks* (1987). The traditional hero acted as an Everyman; but the contemporary Fantasy hero either stands away from this depiction or is set at the lower level of the social hierarchy. For the female protagonists, this is a complex issue. In the early tales by authors like Emma Bull, Mercedes Lackey and Charles de Lint, these complex Female heroes appeared. This 'New' woman continues to dominate in later Urban Fantasy series. The criticism about the role of the female protagonist is quite negative because of the debate over gender, emphasizing the cultural order she belongs to. But it fails to show how she meets the challenges and inspires the society. Fantasy is an amalgamation of past, present and future images that help the readers evaluate the current era. The fantasy society derived from contemporary society is still, like other historical societies, a patriarchy and debates are carried on from a male point of view. In the process of her action, a Female hero runs the risk of sacrificing either masculine or feminine qualities, that is, she may have to reject either traditional gender roles or new-age gender roles. She must either accept a partner or remain alone. Unfortunately, there does not exist a single representational view of women, even in the form of an accepted archetype. The fact is that contemporary gender roles are still evolving and no single character has so far captured this.

It is a well-known fact that the hero lies at the core of any fantasy fiction, including Urban fantasy, and the story focuses on the journey of the hero, the heroic quest. The hero is often an Everyman—a culturally familiar character who represents 'us' on the journey. Importantly he should face conflicts, flaws and virtues that are shared by the reader. The hero often becomes an archetype because the universal aspects of shared experience "take precedence over their individual personality traits" according to Barr Merleen, in his *Alien to Femininity* (83). The contemporary fantasy novel has developed from these roots and continues to serve the same purpose. Yet, regardless of the thematic or even generic changes, the hero's journey remains a vital element of any fantasy narrative. In Urban Fantasy, the heroes tend to be driven by three motivations: (i) a sense of moral responsibility, (ii) the desire to act, and (iii) a willingness for self-sacrifice. Though these characteristics are already present in society, the combination of which makes a hero. However, the last two are too often absent in contemporary society, especially in the cities. The Urban Fantasy protagonists become heroes since they are motivated beyond their own personal safety and well-being. The traditional hero in epic fantasy has been predominantly male, a fact which is not at all surprising. Grixti in his article "Consumed identities: Heroic fantasies and the trivialisation of selfhood" in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, explains that it will be so because, given the patently patriarchal and phallogocentric orientations traditionally endorsed by such tales, for, a long-time heroic fantasies of this broad type were very much an exclusively male-dominated area". (208)

This is understandable since much of literature and history endorse this view, as women are denied the right to participate in real heroic roles. Although the masculine hero remains a staple of fantasy, there have been significant developments in the role of the female hero in today's Urban fantasy.

Consequently, the Urban Fantasy female must fulfill the role of hero, by following the version of Campbell's description of the hero's journey and must satisfy the criteria expected of a hero engaged in heroic exploits. An archetypal hero is responsible for saving his world from a villain and must display an ability to transcend temptation as per the perception of Ramaswamy, S. in her article, "Archetypes in fantasy fiction: A study of J. R. R. Tolkien and J. K. Rowling" in the journal *Language In India* (621). The Urban Fantasy hero performs these functions by facing the antagonist, securing the safety of his city and overcoming an internal flaw in the process. The Urban Fantasy Female responds to similar opportunities and in the words of Grixti: "the depiction of women in roles demonstrating strength, initiative, independence and wisdom (the ingredients of the heroic life) constitutes a critical reclaiming of the concept of heroism out of the patriarchal rut into which it had been lodged" (209). She adopts the opportunities of her urban world to conduct her heroic journey. A complex blending of heroic archetype and urban woman forms the Urban Fantasy Female hero. Fantasy fiction's flexible boundaries offer female authors a space to experiment with the female hero. The first notable change was the 'shero'—a female hero with all the characteristics, concerns and motivations of a male hero. The term is a combination of the words 'she' and 'hero' and is used to underscore the achievements and contributions of women in society. Sheroes are women who have demonstrated exceptional courage, strength, and determination in the face of adversity. They are often pioneers who have removed the patriarchal barriers and paved the way for future generations. The 'shero' in the western literature, in general, is a new breed of Female hero with a female body with predominantly masculine traits. However, their personal behaviour and motivations often reflected what was considered more feminine resolutions. Charlotte Spivack in her *Merlin's daughters: Contemporary women writers of fantasy* comments:

Their [male heroes] emphasis is on physical strength, courage and aggressive behaviour. In the fantasy novels the female protagonists also demonstrate physical courage and resourcefulness, but they are not committed to

male goals. Whether warriors or wizards, and there are both, their aim is not power or domination, but rather self-fulfillment and protection of the community. (8)

The Urban Fantasy hero came into being at the same time when many other fantasy authors were developing female protagonists. The Urban Fantasy female can be assumed to have been created as a response to the male heroes. A plethora of authors who developed Female heroes with a number of distinct characteristics unique to Urban Fantasy; an evolution that continues as each new voice adds to the complexity of this modern-day hero, resonating with female readers world-wide.

Ambai in her long short story *Atavi* has created one such distinct Urban Fantasy character and has offered a very different story. Ambai (b.1944), pseudonym of C,S, Lakshmi, is a Tamil writer, historian and an independent researcher of Women's Studies. *Atavi* is translated from Tamil by Lakshmi Holmstrom and is included in the collection *In a Forest, A Deer* (Oxford University Press, 2006). The Tamil version appeared in the collection *Kaatil Oru Maan* published by the *Kaalaccuvatu Patippakam* in the year 2001. The *Kaalaccuvatu* exclaims that Ambai writes fiction that "reverberates with the ideals of feminism and a sensitive grasp of socio-cultural realities" and continues:

Ambai's intricate stories constantly reinvent the form of the short story, tantalizing and delighting the reader. They interweave lives, articulating the real experiences of women and communicating their silences in words and images. A mix of narrative forms – letters, dispatches, journals, emails, memos and articles – adds variety. (www.kalachuvadu.in/contemporary-fiction-ambai/)

In the editorial reviews by different dailies and magazines, the review by *The Hindu*, a leading English daily, comments thus:

Ambai is widely regarded as one of the most original modern Indian writers. Her stories are about contemporary lives and relationships, and have women who are conscious of their identity, challenge patriarchal authority, and break social conventions as their main protagonists. Ambai brings to bear upon her tales the weight of her knowledge of the mythic, literary and Puranic . . . A felicity of language and easy flow of words make the translation a pleasure to read. (indiaclub.com)

Ambai has also authored a pioneering research monograph, *The Face Behind the Mask: Women in Tamil Literature (1984)*. Three collections of her short stories in English have acquired international esteem. She has won the Crossword award for the collection *In a Forest, A Deer*.

Atavi, divided into twelve unequal sections, presents an exceptional story through its very unique protagonist, Chenthiru, who entertains a different goal and different desires -- a singular character, totally diverse from the conventional patriarchal heroine. 'Atavi' meaning 'Dense Forest, is the sanctuary chosen by her to fulfill her goal by conducting her heroic quest. Ambai has created her as an especial 'shero', a middle-aged woman, married to Thirumalai and has two grown-up children, studying abroad. They have a flourishing business for the growth of which she had tirelessly laboured along with her husband. When she desires to have an equal partnership in the business, her husband could not fulfill it, since his other business-partners objected to it. Chenthiru feels that her self-esteem has been wounded -- the pretext to her to take a break from the business, seek the 'atavi-refuge' and go far away from the maddening crowd, including her doting husband. But, her real goal is to rewrite the *Ramayana* – the *Sitayana*, Sita's Journey / Quest – in her perspective, rather, Sita's perspective amidst the sylvan surroundings of the Forest, a motivating spirit not only to her own self but also to her epic protagonist, Sita.

Atavi is an Urban Fantasy creation, an admixture of fiction, myth and legend. The story is interspersed with parallel events of Valmiki's *Ramayana* – this *Sitayana* projecting a wise, independent Sita who takes a decision by herself, where to go and stay, and spend her time, for which she has prepared herself. "She thought of the notebook with its camel-yellow covers and its blank white pages, lying there in her suitcase among her clothes. She had bought a dozen dark-leaded pencils. A pencil sharpener. An eraser. The wind traced the first sentences as it went along its way" (*In a Forest, A Deer* 147). The first section of the story closes with Chenthiru leaving the city to the forest. Annamalai, her driver takes her by car to the bus-stand. Ambai's language and creative skill suggest many similarities between the earlier Epic and the short story making Chenthiru the modern Sita. For instance, her 'forest-passion' is associated with her being born under a tree in the forest as her mother could not be rushed to the hospital in time. Her father was working in a coffee-estate, "among the pepper and cardamom plantations which lay along the densely-forested mountain slopes" (144). Her father used to tease her playfully about her birth that he had "picked" her up and brought home. One cannot miss the obvious parallel. King Janaka had picked up infant Sita as he was ploughing the field to perform a *yaga*. Like Sita, Chenthiru's favourite rendezvous is the Forest.

The second section of the story presents an unknown version of the *Ramayana*, when Lakshmana leaves the pregnant Sita informs her that hereafter forest would be her dwelling-place, Sita sternly replies to him that this is not something new to him. "It had become his brother's main duty to doubt other people's purity; to put them constantly to the test. He was suspicious of everything" (148). He cross-questioned the Sun, the Moon and even his brother. Ambai presents an unheard event through the voice of Sita. Sita tells Lakshmana that she

is weary of the purity tests and the forest is not a new place to her, but "before he left her, Lakshmana must look carefully at her lightly-swelling stomach. He must make sure to tell his brother she is with child. Otherwise, there will be preparations for yet another ordeal by fire" (149). Another unseen, different scene is Sita writing her life-story, "Sita's *ayanam*" (149). When he asks her whether his *Ramayana* is sufficient. She categorically replies that "in the ages to come, there will be many Ramayanas. Many Ramas. Many Sitas" and that she is not same Sita he portrayed. She tells him straight: "You were a poet of the king's court. You created history. But I experienced it. I absorbed into myself all manner of experiences. My language is different" (149), and that her story will be launched "in the forest in the minds of Forest-dwellers" (149).

The third section reverts to the modern-Sita, Chenthiru, who reaches her forest "ashram" at dusk, to the well-arranged, neat room where she can work comfortably. The big window opens up to show the forest, now bathing in the moonlight. Section four again switches over to the *Ramayana*, again to an unknown mystery of King Ravana and his wife Mandodari who finds a girl-baby in the lotus flowers picked by her husband. The baby smiling at her widely says, "I will kill Ravana", but the next moment lapses into meaningless baby-noises. The disturbed Mandodari puts the child into a bamboo-box and puts the box out to the sea. The box floats, reaches the shores and is picked by a man and he hands over to the headman, Janaka. He names her Sita. "Sita came into being, in touch with flower and earth and water" (151). The story now moves over to Ayodya, a twist is given to Rama's birth. "Rama, as soon as he was born, caused grief to a living creature" (151). His mother Kosalai gives a venison dinner using the flesh of a buck, the doe requests her to have her partner's skin. But, Kosalai refuses and says, "I intend to make a beautiful *kanjira* with that skin and to give it to my baby boy to play with" (152), When the child taps it every time, it wails with grief, moaning that Kosalai too will suffer this pain. Sita thus writes about her and of Rama.

The long section five of the story once again takes the readers to Chenthiru in the forest who takes a long walk enjoying the natural scenery, the sudden dance of a peacock before her and her meeting with the three village women who without any inhibition invite her to join the meals they have brought. "With the ease of long-familiar friends, they asked after her and told her about themselves" (153). They are Minabai, Rukminibai and Savitabai. Chenthiru joyfully tastes the *roti* that rolls down "her throat to the savoury accompaniment of the *thruvaial*, between bites of onion and chilli" (153-4). Their casual, rustic talk reminds Chenthiru of her mother and as she walks back she remembers her student days, her meeting with Tirumalai, her falling in love with him and her marriage. Section Six switches over to Sita at the *Ashrama*, her thinking of her girlhood when very easily she could lift the great bow, her meeting of young Rama in the orchard. "They looked at each other, the two of them. When he opened his arms, she walked into his embrace, without even knowing what she was doing" (157-8). She tells her mother about the incident and is ready to accept whatever punishment is given to her. But her mother consoles her that surely the very same Rama would break the bow and marry her. Ambai goes one step further than Kambar who in his *Ramaavatharam (Ramayanam)* only makes Rama and Sita "see" each other and fall in love. The long seventh section is again the present, Chenthiru in her forest-walk in a nostalgic mood, desires to call her husband. But, she stubbornly refuses his request to come back, saying that she has to feel light, do it on her own, "Even if it is a forest path, even though it is beset by robbers" (159). She walks back to the guesthouse with her village friends, enjoying the moon and its dance in many forms.

Section Eight takes the readers to the epic-world, Sita writing her *Sitayana*, the inseparability of Sita and the forest -- the forest of her childhood, later an asylum with her husband that imparted many experiences, moulded innocent child-like Sita into a woman. "It was in a forest, too, that she was imprisoned, And now, it was a forest that was her sanctuary" (163). She remembers about her "childlike obstinacy she had thought of Rama alone, in her forest prison! And what was it that Rama had declared publicly, the very day the war ended?" (163) The humiliating incidents roll in Sita's mind. *Sitayana* gives account of other strange events also that are not in the original. Rama's pungent words cross her mind. Remorse raising in her mind, Sita now writes: "He who was so aware of the pride of his lineage, did he forget that she too belonged to a proud clan? Had she not herself made it necessary for him to wage a battle, because she was so aware of his pride? . . . Hanuman set fire to Lanka. All Rama could do was to light a fire to his wife's heart. Her very first words to Lakshmana, who greeted her after those long days of parting, were, 'Lakshmana, light the fire!' Even after she finished writing about it, that moment was like a weight upon her heart" (164).

The ninth section is about the modern Sita, Chenthiru, her forest stay and experience, her dream about her father, her blind music-master Ramachandra Bhagavatar when her mother asked him to sing a song, "he tuned his *vinai* and began to sing, accompanying himself, '*Naaneke badavanu, naaneke paradesi*'... Am I really destitute? Am I truly a wandering beggar? I who have been gifted with that treasure, Purandaravittala himself, how can I be destitute? How can I be a wandering beggar? It was a song composed in *Sindhubhairavi raagam*" (166). In the dream, she hears her father singing the song. The *vinai* and the song later get associated with the *Rudra-vinai* in her *Sitayana*. Once again, she enjoys the pleasant company of her three village friends, their rustic hospitality with simple meals and Palm-toddy. She reminisces the past joyful event with her friends, when she once had tasted palm-toddy along with S.D. Burman's song and also the boatman's folk-music. Chenthiru's

night closes with hearing the distant *vinai* music. Savitabai tells her that the music is from/ the saint-like Sufi Baba living in the *ashramam* on the other side of the waterfall.

The readers are taken to the unsaid events of *Ramayana* in the tenth section, as they are introduced to Rama's sister, Shanti, who anxious to know how Ravana looks like, keeps pestering Sita to draw the picture of Ravana. To satisfy her, Sita starts drawing the picture and as she is about finish his face, Rama enters the room, Sita hurriedly hides the picture. But later in the day, Shanti acts like Surpanaka, Ravana's sister, with her words to her brother by indirectly mentioning about the picture. Sita remembers this painful incident. Sita's sons Lava and Kusa rush in to have their midday meals. She imagines, if they had been girls, "she would have brought them up, too, as women warriors. Nobody would have been able to kidnap them and carry them away" (172). Now, Rama comes there with them and when they come to understand that he is their father, they just leap towards him. Sita thinks: "Had they been girls. they might have stood close to their mother. They might have looked upon a father who abandoned their mother in the forest with suspicious eyes" (172). As Rama pleads with her, she feels a terrible pain, "why the earth could not split open and draw her inside. She refused his plea with firmness. She said her journey lay in a different direction. After that she felt as if the earth had indeed split apart and she had gone within, somewhere far, far beneath: (172-3).

Chenthiru's journey comes to an end in the Section Eleven as she takes her morning walk "in a southerly direction from the waterfall" (173) that takes her to a dwelling of small huts. She enters the principal hut, and there she sees three *rudravinais* arranged one after the other, and a sixty-year white-bearded man sitting with a *vinai* on his lap tuning the instrument. He speaks to her quite familiarly asking her to find out whether it is in tune or not. He then continues to give an explanation what *sruti* is and who is an *asur* -- "not someone with crooked teeth and ten heads, but one who is ignorant of sur. A-sur. . . . They are not reined in by their sur" (173). The Master asks her to sing the raga Sankarabaranam, and from a single note of the raga he plays in his *vinai* the *Bhilaval* ragam. The tune runs through her like electricity and makes her confess to him that she does not know what she really wants. The Master's words are like mantra: "Each of us has just two choices. One is to renounce; the other is not to renounce. Why do I play this instrument. Why do I play this instrument? Why do you listen to it? Because we haven't yet understood what is renunciation and what is not. . . . Mumbai can follow you here. And the forest too can go with you to Mumbai" (174). Ustadji's notes rise and fall like a cascading waterfall which seem to impart the message to her: "Play the music on the flute of life. . . . The koel sings everywhere. the koel's song is transformed into the tune the listener wishes to hear" (175). Chenthiru begins to walk towards the guest-house.

Section twelve is the end of *Sitayana*, as Sita sticks on to her decision not to go back with the King of Ayodhya. "This time it would be a total renunciation. A lone journey which left behind all those who were known to her, those who spoke lovingly, who dispensed advice. A journey that would be long, that would go very deep" (176). Sita walks into the forest and early one morning, the sound of *vinai* music takes her to a hut where she sees a *tapasvi* introducing himself as Ravana, much to her surprise. He says that he was saved by Rama at the request of his attendant, turned them a kite and a parrot. Sita now for the first time addresses him: "Ravana, words make me tired. Language leaves me crippled. I am fettered by my body" (177). His saintly reply is again a surprise: "The body is a prison. The body is a means of freedom" (177) and offers her his *vinai*, saying that the instrument is not an ordinary one, but "an extension of Devi's body" (177). He readily accepts to be her Guru to teach her. The story ends thus:

He lifted the *rudravinais* from his lap and stretched it out towards her.

'Leave it there on the ground,' said Sita.

'Why?'

'It is my life, isn't it? A life that many hands have tossed about, like a ball. Now, let me take hold of it; take it into my hands.' So saying Sita lifted the *rudravinais* and laid it on her lap. (177-8)

The message is obvious. It is not only for the Sita of *Sitayana* or the modern Sita, Chentiru but to all.

Atavi's Chentiru is a typical Urban Fantasy Female-hero who goes on an unknown quest of writing a different *Sitayana*, the protagonist of which, Sita, herself acts like a Fantasy Hero. Chentiru like her learns from her own life, for which she has to select the Forest as her rendezvous. The parallels and reversals of her life and that of her Female-hero offer an interesting study, making Chentiru's life an epic. As Dr.Padma Srinivasan in her article, "Surfacing and Atavi -- A Study of Eco-Feminism" in the book *Critical Responses to Canadian Literature* ruminates, "However, she also understands through the music in the forest that humanity can be better understood by appreciating nature within one self and one can continue to be a music of solace to the next man" (129). Chentiru's Sita acts so to Ravana.

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