Chapter Six

Thematic Demands and Textual Devices

I like looking at people's lives over a number of years, without continuity. Like catching them in snapshots. And I like the way people relate, or don't relate, to the people they were earlier. . . . I think this is why I'm not drawn to writing novels. Because I don't see that people develop and arrive somewhere. I just see people living in flashes. From time to time.

(Munro, Hancock interview 89).

When the form is to be woven with already existing thought patterns, the story itself will be something that will not break out of the confines of this form. The purpose, therefore, decides the form and the content.

(Ambai, Face, 226)

Women's writing, which is distinctively recognized as a genre, is identified by its unconventional themes and non-traditional expressions. The female experience and yearning for a different kind of reality account for an alternate aesthetics aspired by women writers. In the contemporary intellectual scenario of feminist politics, women are exhorted to resist submission and suppression and reject the male-imposed image. Women writers respond by projecting
their lived experiences and imagined realities into their fictional creations. As they are silenced and marginalized in the male-dominated world, they turn down the phallocentric system and recreate a parallel way of living and writing which are gynocentric. Although Ambai and Alice Munro refuse to be labelled as advocates of any of the contemporary feminist schools, their themes and techniques reveal their feminist dispositions. Their language and narrative strategy are throughout so designed as to project their female points of view. A study of their short fiction indicates the progress of their literary craft from the simple and the traditional to the complex and the non-traditional. They have both used diverse literary devices to delineate different lives of girls and women and to project their feminist stances overtly and covertly. What one finds in most of their short stories is a bold attempt to break the mould of short fiction. The fierce feminist in Ambai could be discerned by one as she launches into her loudest polemics against the practices of the patriarch. The protests of her Canadian counterpart are understandably subdued as the culture of Canada is less regimented. While Ambai's thematic strains are strident, Alice Munro's textual devices are strikingly sophisticated.

Ambai and Alice Munro strive hard to structure in their stories their feminist consciousness of external
reality which is marked by male exploitation. They have both what E.M. Forster calls "the power of the writer to bounce the reader into accepting what" they say (143). Their heroines live alternately in the past and the present; they recreate their lived experiences interspersing them with fantasies. They look at their female selves and compare their plights in the past and the present. They contrast their feelings and desires with what men expect or mean to them. In the process men are treated with derision or dismissed as fools or fiends. One finds that oppositional strategies--fact and fantasy, past experiences and present yearnings, hopes and dejections, acquisitions and losses--determine the nature of the two writers' narratives. In some of their stories one can easily identify a broader framework of parallelism that subsumes within it all kinds of oppositions.

The Tamil and the English-Canadian writers discussed here have both written short and long stories. Their marked preference for long stories reminds one of Mavis Gallant in anglophone Canada and Jayakanthan in Tamilnadu. Their stories are conspicuously modern in tone and texture although their content continues to contain traditional elements. The traditional and the modern come together in their fiction and form a kind of amalgam. Most of their stories are open-ended with neither a traditional
beginning nor a conventional conclusion. They tend to leave the story line open to question. It is so structured as to make the reader wonder what happens in the wake of the developments detected or the events recounted in the course of the story, as in Ambai's "Cañcāri" or Munro's "Prue." However, one finds the story to be so skilfully crafted as to make the readers take in what they need to know as the plot progresses from the plane of reality to the realm of fantasy, or from the land of dreams to the level of factuality. Their narrative strategy reflects contemporary life with its problems and pathos.

Ambai favours a distinctly unconventional form which her themes demand. She maintains in her private conversations as well as critical writings like Face that women writers have at no point been innovative or iconoclastic in expression. Their tendency to be imitative has led to a situation of literary inferiority for the female writer. Analysing the themes and techniques of her predecessors and contemporaries, Ambai finds them all part of the past and plainly passe. Commenting on her own early stories, she says that they were "very ordinarily structured" but their themes "were maybe slightly different," as she has had a "slightly different imagination" (Ambai, Dickman interview 1). She started out as a writer of conventionally structured stories
while she was at school. But even among her stories written in the early sixties one finds proof of her experiments with the traditional form of short fiction. The one titled "Nāñam" anticipates the innovation introduced later. In this story she portrays in three distinct parts the unalloyed delights of adolescence, the mixed joys of youth and the mature ripeness of age that enable one to look back on the different stages in the course of the stream of life and see them in their proper perspective. The point of view here is omniscient with an intrusive narrator. The narrator in "Eppōtu" is more intrusive with interrogations as the feminist element in the author begins to assert itself.

This story shows the female indignation at the gulf between the hero's precept and practice. The story is so constructed as to focus societal attention on the hollowness of the young hero's ideals and the hypocrisy of the prospective husband. Its four divisions have no subtitles unlike those of the former story. The structural segments and the use of the epistolary form to underscore the main theme of hollow male values remind the comparatist of the Munrovian story, "Carried" of the eighth collection. The Munrovian story has, of course, a much more intricate structural design with its major and minor divisions and the story line meandering beyond the barriers of its realistic framework. What brings the two stories together are
their thematic unity and the weaving into their plots the letters written by the central characters. Ambai's story is much more realistic and is concerned with the pathetic plight of the heroine, Vasanthi, whose youth and beauty are corroded by consumption. The first part introduces Vasanthi by an omniscient narrator. The writer here lays bare the mind of the woman who has been constrained to keep back from her fiance the decaying disease of her body. Unable to sleep, she gets up and reads again the letter received from her prospective husband, Sundararajan, a writer. The letter reveals his admiration for her lovely figure and his sense of satisfaction at having found the beautiful woman of his dreams. In the letter she is asked to read his story being published the next day in Katampam and give him her comments in person. The second part begins with the heroine wondering whether her physical beauty drawing him to her will last or his joy in marrying her will endure. The deceptive beauty of her body makes her all the more miserable. She wears only a diseased flower as she is herself decaying inside. What makes her keep back from the groom the truth about her body is the sight of her mother's tearful face. As Vasanthi reads Sundararajan's story the image of the man in the letter delighting in her mere physical beauty vanishes. What she finds in the story is a different facet of the man that values in life high
ideals of love. The hero says in the story, "It is not because of physical beauty or wealth that love lasts. Love lasts because there is beyond the body and wealth the heart which does not wither, rot or change" ("Eppōtu" 90). Vasanthi sheds tears of joy at the nobility of the man's mind. The third part shows her anxiety to disclose the truth to the man upholding high ideals. The letter written to him by her the previous night disturbs her. While she is beautifully dressed and decorated, she wonders if it is her beautiful body that makes her what she is. She asks herself whether it is not the mind that makes up her real self. Will he realize this reality? She feels that he will see it. She remembers his words on true love. She asks herself whether the story is not a reflection of his inner self. The hero revealed in the story is more appealing to her than the man that the letter pictures. She thinks that it is not proper to hide the truth if he really values the inner self. Anxious to make the truth known to him, she reads again the letter written to him. An extract of the letter is given here. In it she compares herself to a flower in the lake of life which neither blooms nor withers when the sun or the moon shines. She expects him to be impressed by her frankness and sends her letter to the groom just before his arrival. The fourth part starts with the hero receiving and reading the letter. The reaction of the
man behind the mask is seen now as he follows with his father and folks fuming with rage at the shocking revelation; but only the bride's body lying in the lap of her mother is sighted.

Ambai's bitter irony is seen in her exposition of the humbug in the writer-hero whose words and deeds are totally inconsistent. The woman has left the world without perceiving the gulf between his precept and practice. The contrastive pictures of Vasanthi and Sundararajan reveal the sincerity in the disposition of the woman and the dissimulation and dishonesty of the man. The metaphors and similes employed by him and her reveal the way women tend to be carried away by such figures of speech that fiction-making males have throughout used to captivate the fair sex. The story reveals Ambai's criticism of male writing which lacks substance and sincerity. The title signifies the woman's question as to when heartless men like Sundararajan will shed their humbug. The man's letter here hides his real self while the woman's frankness finds full expression in her epistle and interrogation.

The narrative strategy one finds in Munro's "Carried" of Open is amazingly complex. It has multiple layers of fact and fantasy where the reader unused to the author's techniques gets lost. The past, present and future are used to convey different aspects of the protagonist's life and the different levels of
awareness. The story is divided into four major sections with a subtitle for each one: Letters, Spanish Flu, Accidents and Tolpuddle Martyrs. The first part gives the reader a peep into a world of secrets and revelations where the soldier named Jack Agnew trifles with the affections of the deeply sensitive woman, Louisa, the librarian of Carstairs Public Library. The soldier, who comes from Carstairs, does not expect to return home alive. Lying now in the midst of the wounded and the disabled, Jack Agnew just hits upon the idea of taking his mind off by picturing things in Carstairs and visualizing the librarian doing her job beautifully unlike Miss Tamblyn whom he dubs "a dragon" (4). "Perhaps you will be surprised to hear from a person you don't know and that doesn't remember your name"—thus begins the first letter of the soldier addressed to Louisa dated 1917 when the first World War is on. He remembers seeing Louisa in the library but she could hardly figure him out. He tells her where his house is and she walks past it and tells him how things there look. He writes of what books he has read. They disclose something of their tastes and thoughts. Surprisingly, "feelings warmed up on either side" (15). She says later that she was only being kind to him and did not like to turn him down or embarrass him. But how she takes him at his word is seen in her readiness to send him her photograph when
he asks for it. He next asks her if she is fancy-free. She truthfully tells him that she has no sweetheart. She is curious to know what he looks like, but this curiosity, it may be noted, is never gratified.

Letters, one is told, played a part during her puppy love as well at a sanatorium where she was treated for consumption. A doctor there took a fancy to her and got consequently sacked, but their correspondence continued till the discovery of his being already married with children. She has all along been haunted by the feeling that she is "a heroine of love's tragedy" (9). The epistolary form is interpolated only into the first section but the informality of the narrative is maintained in the second division as well. Most of it, subtitled Spanish Flu, is taken up with the heroine's recapitulation of her story which is recounted in a confessional tone to Jim Frarey. Louisa tells him that this "peculiar story" is "a lesson in what fools women can make of themselves" (15). Louisa asks Jim Frarey if a man could be so "diabolical." His reply shows the male view of women as deceivers. He is dismissive of the gravity of the betrayal and calls it a case of just being "carried away." She tearfully concedes that "He bit off more than he could chew" (18). In this mood of disillusionment and despair Louisa surrenders to Jim Frarey's suggestion to go to bed together as they
happen to be all by themselves. Later in the night he rouses himself and reproaches her for not telling him that she was a virgin. He thinks the affair has made her a different woman. She replies that it has not made any difference. Her indifference indicates the intensity of her dejection. Accidents is the third section which portrays the terribly fatal accident that Jack Agnew meets with at Doud's Factory where he has been employed since his return and marriage to Grace Horne. The figure made memorable in this part is the victim's boss, Arthur Doud. He is a widower living with his thirteen-year old daughter, Bea, and their housekeeper. It is to return the deadman's books that Arthur visits the library. The ambience of the place and the subtle charm exercised by Louisa induce him to repeat his visits. She is not young any more but she maintains "an eye-catching" image of a houri (35). But her apparent lack of humour leads him to suspect if she is "one of those people full of mended cracks that you could only see close up" (37). He wonders if her misery is the result of having lost a sweetheart in the war. Louisa outwardly resembles his mistress, Jane MacFarlane. But Louisa, unlike her, mystifies him, "He could not imagine Jane ever presenting a man with a mystery, and following that up with the information that it would never be solved" (39). Arthur realizes that he hardly knows anything about her. The feeling
that he gets from her is as indescribable as a smell. As he compulsively proposes to her, she laughs and, checking herself, she apologetically says, "It's just what went through my mind. . . . I thought— that's the last I'll see of him." Arthur replies, "You're mistaken," probably mistaking it for a reference to himself (41).

In the third and fourth sections one finds many years rolling by and sinking into the distant past. The first and the second sections have their time of action during the first World War. In the third section, the story takes place in the 1920s. The final part, 'Tolpuddle Martyrs,' is said to be taking place in the 1950s. Louisa here is represented as Arthur's wife with a son. The final section seems to be a mix-up of fact and fantasy which leaves the reader puzzled. One is constrained to comb the text for clues as to what really happens and what is fantasized. Louisa could have married Arthur or she just has a reverie. The close of the story brings the reader back to the day that saw the start of her career as the librarian in Carstairs. What most of this section is taken up with is nothing more than a sweetly bitter fantasy like Charles Lamb's dream of what his life might have been like if he had married the woman he was in love with. There is in this section a lot of muddle with the mixing up of memories of Jack Agnew, the man Louisa
really loved; of the man she wished to marry to lead a normal life, for Arthur seemed to promise her that; of the man who listened to her tale of unrequited love, drank with her and finally seduced her with her consent and of its echo in her fantasy of the intimacy her supposed son has with Arthur's daughter, Bea. The story has in its three sections a fairly firm grip on reality. It moves to the plane of illusion in the final section and returns to the level of reality in the end. The fictional world here ranges back and forth not only in terms of time and space but in terms of dream and reality as well. Commenting on the parallel existence, Munro observes, "the last part, which may give some people difficulty, is not a hallucination in the simple sense" (Smith interview 24).

There is a striking similarity between Ambai's and Munro's perceptions of reality and the dream world. They exist for them side by side or run parallel to each other, as Munro says in her interview with Quill & Quire where she terms them "two strains of reality" (Smith 24). Ambai uses in "Aiil" this kind of parallelism. She employs here the sort of fictional framework that encompasses the mind on the plane of reality as well as its parallel counterpart. It is when "Some relationships possibly extend from dreams to reality, and others" are "the spillover from
reality to dream" that the unwary reader loses his track of the story line (Vittin 129). Here the squirrel is seen not only as a real creature eating up the paste used on books but also as the alter ego of the narrator. She calls it "my only connection with reality. But at the same time my companion in the realm of fantasizes" (134). Viewed in this light, the dominant textual device used by Ambai as well as Munro is the construction of a text by means of juxtaposition of the real and the unreal, both rather conceptually stable and unstable. They both alternate between reality and dream or hallucination. While the realistic part of the text pins the protagonist to the here and now or the material and earthly experience, the magic-realistic facet ranges from dream to fantasy or delusions to hallucinations.

The dominant textual strategies employed by Ambai and Alice Munro are parallelism and irony. Keith Green and Jill LeBihan, in their book, Critical Theory and Practice: A Coursebook point out that women are obliged to reject privileged modes of patriarchal writing in favour of "Informal, 'private' and personal forms, such as diaries, journals, letters, travelogues and autobiography" (240-241). Ambai and Munro are found to resort naturally to such informal modes of expression in their short stories. Their narratives are mostly memoirs, meditations or confessions made out of their
lived or imagined experiences. As their stories are a mix-up of dream-texts and realistic expressions, they could not be contained in traditional short-fictional frameworks. The blurring of the borderlines of fact and fantasy renders their narratives non-linear. The informality of their narratives is sometimes enhanced by use of the epistolary form. Ambai and Munro very often employ irony to question the myth of male supremacy.

The formulaic pattern of short fiction is believed to represent the male-ordained reality like the other conventional genres such as poetry and drama. Women writers, in their attempts to avoid the conventionality of the formula, tend to disrupt the linearity through interspersal of self-expressive forms like epistles. The epistles incorporated into the texts of the two writers are revelatory of the female self rather than communications for consumption by their male addressees. The Munrovian heroines write letters as a strategy to express their anguish or anger at male behaviour. In the narratology of many of Munro's stories, the epistles are structured as motifs designed to disclose the fickle and fiendish nature of man. For instance, Munro's "Tell Me Yes or No" is structured as a "spoken letter" addressed to an ex-lover. The centre of the narrative rests on the lack of response to the narrator's letter from the man and the discovery of his
liaison with Patricia, author of another series of letters addressed to the same man. Interestingly, both the narrator and Patricia are the man's mistresses waiting in vain for a positive or negative response from him. The real irony of the narrative is the discovery of the man's deceit of the two women. The narrator learns of it from the letters of Patricia handed to her by his wife. The entire narrative reads like a monologue as well as a letter. The first part of the story is structured like a letter without any salutation or signature. This is followed by four letters signed by Patricia. They are followed by "the last letter, really no letter at all, a large scribble on the page, without salutation or signature" (Something 99).

The final letter of Patricia parallels the long monologic letter of the narrator. The former seems to be the gist of the latter. Here Patricia and the narrator merge into one, the victim of male treachery and female delusions. The story line moves from fact to fantasy. It may be noted that as the letter bag is dropped into the waste-basket by the man's wife, the two women's crazy waiting ends with an ironic answer: a big "No." The narrator imagines the actions and appearance of Patricia. In a mood of disillusionment and anguish she poses the question, "How are we to understand you?" It is perhaps out of anger at the
silence of the man that the narrator-mistress puts him out of existence by declaring, "I invented loving you and I invented your death" (101).

Ambai's "Tāṇimaiyenum Iruttu" ("The darkness of loneliness") also is one of the stories where letters authored by the woman are revelatory of the female experience. The protagonist, Aruna, is pictured as the opposite of her husband, Ranga, who, we are told, "does not write much" (Cirakukal 54). But for Aruna writing is an obsession. She writes notes to her husband even when she sends lunch to his office. She wants to share with him even her trivial experiences such as the story she likes in Ānantavikatan. She is eager to know his response to the relish of the dishes she makes for him. But Ranga's response is either silent or scanty. Interestingly, he expects her to write him letters whenever he is away. But he does not gratify the same desire in her. The turning point in her life comes with the arrival of a letter from her taciturn husband announcing his return the next Sunday. The letter, instead of giving her any joy, leaves her dejected. In his absence she has evolved a fantasized life with her ideal version of Ranganadhan which is in harmony with her desire and disposition. The return of her husband threatens to take away the ideal Ranga from her world of dreams. Therefore, she decides to go to bed drugged
never to wake up again so as to preserve intact her sweet realm of fantasy.

In Ambai's story, as in Munro's fiction, the epistle is structured as a motif around which the emotional world of the heroine is built. Ambai's "Pilāciṭik" is structured basically in the epistolary form. Most of the narrative here is composed of two long letters exchanged between two daughters about their mother. The choice of this form of writing suits the author's design to reveal the daughters' response to the mother's sense of homelessness. The two letters present the mother's presence in two different regions: her visit to Bharati in the U.S.A and Dhanam in India. They form a vivid vignette of the mother, the one complementing the other and both highlighting the agony and isolation of the mother. The letters also reveal the mother's present suffering caused by the father's callousness and lack of care for the comfort of his wife. They also show what the daughters decide to do in order to help her regain her independence. Dhanam writes suggesting how they could buy her back their house which their father had sold.

In some more stories of the two writers, one finds letters being used to personalize human interactions. The personal element in this form helps the two authors to inform their writings with their chosen positions that counter male reality. Another Ambaian story
making use of letters for better personal articulation is "Fifteen." The story centres round the parallel existence imagined by Champakam. This fantasized realm gets pictured in the notes of love that she writes for Chellam to be sent to her lover, Kalivaradhan. The irony of the situation lies in Chellam's blissful ignorance of the romantic things that she is supposed to speak about in her replies to the letters received from her tutor's son. The girls get totally disillusioned by the false figure that the hero cuts before them. They discover reality to be different from the daydreams that they have had. This story with its epistles and romantic ambience reminds the reader of Munro's "Carried," but this story of Ambai would be characterized by Munro as one of the stories that are "single paths" since in the latter half of her career Munro has come to see "the content of life as being many-layered" (Smith interview 24).

Ambai and Alice Munro also make skilful use of dreams to create in their heroines awareness of the realities of the male oriented culture. Some of the stories like Ambai's "Rat" and Munro's "Eskimo" are made up of dream-text and realistic material. Ambai's mode of telling has the effect of the first-person narration as the unnamed heroine seems to be behind the narrative voice. It is a story where fact and fiction, dreams and myths, are all mixed up. Most of it reads
like an interior monologue as well. The apparently detached narrator lives with her man, Amulyo, in a crowded city which, she thinks, could well be named "The city of rats" (Ramanujan 155). People had warned her that the city was infested with rats and bandicoots. But she thought that it would be a reference to the inhabitants of the city as the name was given by intellectuals and artists. This analogy seemed very appropriate when she spent the first night here with Amulyo in a small house with one room and a kitchen. Here she has a dream in which the room looks like a rat hole. The dream is about the buildings that rise like mountains but which have small low-roofed rooms for humans to live in. The presence of rats makes movement in them dreadful. The streets are narrow. When she wakes up and tells Amulyo of her dream, he wonders how she could see beautifully allegorical dreams, as a rule. After her dreams of rats, she has visions of them and learns legends of rats and hears people narrate their anecdotes. The stories within the story not only provide it with multiplicity of viewpoint but also leave the content multi-layered. The woman here, for example, knows the story of a rat prince. There were three princes once upon a time. One of them was a rat. The other two princes drove this rat prince away. After a series of hardships he met a princess. When she kissed him, he
got transformed into a handsome human prince. When the protagonist grew up, she made a postscript to the conventional version. In her feminist text of it the princess kissing the rat prince turns into a rat. Now no prince offers to kiss the rat princess. Even the former rat prince does not come forward to do it either. The protagonist here wonders if the rat that devours the books deforming them and frightening her might have got fed up with its drab existence and wants to get transformed through an act of osculation. She regards it as a literary rat. The story is throughout tinged with irony and satire. The butt of ridicule is seen to be invariably a man and never a woman in the Ambaian world. The story is replete with symbols and images. Ambai's language is more poetic than Munro's. The rat symbolizes the culture of Amulyo that modifies the traditional way of life in the narrator. Its death followed by the appearance of the sparrow signifies the woman's liberation from tradition and acceptance of new ideas and a wider outlook. Old and traditional Tamil writers are no more revered. Their rejection is indicated through their desecration by the sparrow. The young sparrow is the emergent feminist. It is Women's Libbers who are introduced in the guise of the two sparrows that come to tutor the nestling. It finds its place ultimately among other free sparrows on a tree. It shows the woman's identification with her
fellow feminists. The reaction of the young sparrow on the shelf when the woman sings to it of the delay in the return of her husband is significant as it signifies the total repudiation of the idea of the pining housewife.

The structural patterns in the stories of the two writers are expressive of the feminist themes. They are so designed as to reveal the realistic subjugation and the imagined release of women. The realistic sequences of events are juxtaposed with dream-texts.

In the "real part" of the story the women's lives, from the feminist angle, are made available to the reader for analysis in terms of spatial, linguistic, social and political marginalization. In the dream-text, the woman's answer emerges as surrealist subversions of the real world. Therefore, the males are disfigured or stripped naked and exposed in their true colour as in Ambai's "Cila Maraṇaṅkaḷ".

The collage technique of employing blurred and bizarre dream-texts with rational logical real texts serves well to subvert or interrogate the male order of discourse. Munro's "Eskimo" of Progress is a text constructed out of the experience of an unwed wife. It has an ironic theme. Mary Jo, Dr. Streeter's nurse and mistress, carries on an imaginary dialogue with her lover about the strange demeanour of her fellow-passengers and their children, on her air trip to
Tahiti. The behaviour of the couple, the Metis and his sixteen-year old Eskimo wife sickens Mary Jo. They seem to mirror Dr. Streeter and herself and their liaison. The underlying realities of her life begin to come to the surface of her consciousness releasing the silenced woman in her. The tension between her realization and the reality of the situation could be discerned in her desperate attempt to rescue the apparently victimized adolescent mistress of the typical patriarch whose true image she has closely seen in her boss. The life of the protagonist and the life of the Eskimo run parallel. As she speculates on the similarity, her fantasy turns into a dream in which she invites the obviously victimized girl to come into the ladies' washroom in order to save her. But Mary Jo finds the toilet poorly maintained and the Eskimo girl "lying on the floor. She has shrunk, and has a rubbery look, a crude face like a doll's" (Munro, Progress 206). The girl has her head cut off. A white-haired woman wearing a red sari seems to accuse her. The bizarre dream baffles one. Rasporich says:

On this trip towards independence, she is "wearing new clothes from the skin out" . . . but the best she can finally muster for herself is the dream of the maternal garden with blue flowers, "like snowdrops" . . . only partly understood: "in the garden' means
something else, too, which Mary Jo will have to concentrate hard on to figure out...."

(157)
The helplessness of the silenced nurse and her unconscious determination now to sever her relations with Dr. Streeter could be discerned in the image of the doll with its head decapitated. The mysterious woman in red might stand for his untidy wife. Her regeneration is suggested by the final sentence of the story, "This is the beginning of her holiday" (Progress 207).

The heroines of Ambai's three playlets are also women who recognize and resist female inferiorization. "Payañkal" is a brilliantly written satire that took its readers by surprise with its frank discussion of the intimate life of its heroine, Anjali. It has been anthologized along with her early stories. It reads almost like a story with its rich dialogues and poor dramatic features. What makes it a compelling read is the marvellous use of retrospection through conversation. There is criticism of male selfishness here as well. The heroine gets molested at the age of five by her brother's friend, an eccentric. She develops an aversion to sex and turns to the study of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. When she leaves her family in protest against her father's tyranny, she writes in a letter to her father that she hates all men
as they remind her of him and the man who frightened her sexually. However, her hatred of men and sex is removed when she meets Sekhar, a married man, whose erotic urges lead her to be his mistress for two years. His cowardice prompts him to break with her when he is to get a promotion which necessitates a clean image. Manohar, the man she marries, turns out to be a mother's boy like Munro's Jerry with little sexual potency. As the curtain rises, one sees how his sense of failure infuriates him and her frustration surfaces through her humorous talk. How she copes with the situation suppressing her sexuality could be seen through her reading of Germaine Greer's book entitled The Female Eunuch. It is through her conversation with her former lover, Sekhar, and her chats with her husband before and after the visit of the cowardly but curious lover that her life in the present and in the past unfolds before one. The second play, "Arṭai Kaṭattal" ("Crossing the river"), is a more experimental interior drama with only one character named Sita. The mythicized heroine of the Rāmāyaṇa is presented here as an archetypal victim of male hegemony who searches for her true identity in order to seek a new world and don a new image. S. Ravindranathan of M.S. University has compared this work to George Ryga's play, The Ecstasy of Rita Joe, and said:
If *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* is an attempt to universalize a particular event, creating a myth out of the event—or rather redoing the odyssey myth—thereby underscoring the predicament of woman as victim and underdog, Ambai's *Crossing the River* is an attempt to present Sita, the legendary heroine of the epic *Ramayana* at once as a helpless individual, a metaphor for exploitation and also with mythic dimensions. (193-194)

The play portrays Sita imaginatively reliving her painful past and in the process she is seen to identify herself with all those women who have suffered at the hands of men including even the demon, Thadaka, annihilated by Rama to help male hermits. Sita forcefully argues that the forest belongs to Thadaka. She has been "belittled and disrupted by Rama the power, Rama the pride, Rama the arrogance and Rama the politics" (5). The third dramatic piece brought out lately is titled "Mutivilla." Here also one finds little action but much dialogue which sparkles with sarcasm. The three women characters on the stage form a kind of symbolic triangle. The voice of the unseen woman behind them represents tradition which has constructed its own concepts of sex. Woman I stands for the traditional woman, an object of sex for the male partner. Woman II is her reflection in Tamil
literature. Woman III symbolizes the modern woman liberated from tradition and false values enshrined in literature. Patriarchal precepts and practices are ridiculed in the play.

Ambai's thematic and technical innovations have "broken new ground in Tamil writing" (Holmstrom xii). Her advanced ideas of art and life have made her the enfant terrible on the literary scene of Tamil Nadu. Her complex style and structure make great demands on the readers at times. It requires attention and alertness on the reader's part that match the author's standards and dedication. Her strenuously phrased dialogues, striking use of analogies, historical and mythological references in the course of the portrayal of persons and places, forceful analyses and flaying of men--all combine to baffle casual or cavalier readers.

Munro's early works, according to Martin, seem to have the kind of ironic endings that Maupassant and Maugham stories have which are laughed at by Munro herself through Julie in her "Hard-Luck" when she refers to them thus," those ironical twist-at-the-end sort of stories that used to be so popular" (Moons 210). Alice Munro had told Struthers that her early stories were rather "exercises" (Struthers interview 20). Munro's structural strategy in her first two collections is neither very unconventional nor complex. She set out to produce her short fiction in the
traditional way like Hugh Garner who introduced her first collection, Dance saying, "The writer who has mastered the classic short story is an artist, and his work carries with it the mark of literary craftsmanship, Alice Munro is a literary artist" (viii). Munro, in her interview with Graeme Gibson, says, "I see my technique as being very traditional, very conventional. Yes, sometimes this worries me . . ." (256). Different critics have reviewed her art differently. One would rather describe Munro as "traditionally modern" and not "postmodern." Most of her short fiction in the first two collections is housed within the realistic framework. The stories in Dance have traditional elements of plot, characterization, chronological sequence and settings that are realistically based. The general pattern that emerges is one of pathos caused by isolation or rejection. Some of them are acknowledged to be autobiographical fragments. The observations and experiences of girls and adolescents make up the material for the fictional world created here. Consequently, the tone is feminine. The only male narrator here is George's cousin, Dick, in "Thanks." Eleven of the fifteen stories are first-person narrations. "Shining," "Time," "Sunday" and "Trip" are told in the third-person mode, but the focus falls on the female figures in them. Retrospective
techniques that Munro frequently favours are conspicuous by their absence in all but two of the stories: "Peace" and "Time." The use of parenthetical asides in the latter story reminds one of Ambai's adroit use of them in "Cañcāri" of Cirakukal. The very use of texts in parentheses signifies at once the power that silences and the protest that transcends. The technique provides an opportunity to supply parallel texts, the text within parentheses being the alternate texts of correction, illumination, subversion, interrogation etc. This literary device signifies the female need for articulation when audible speech is sought to be silenced in the face of falsehood. The reader is given a peep into the accuracy of what Leona Parry says through the reflection of her neighbour, Allie McGree, which are bracketed like the unspoken words of Ambai's Rukma during her dialogue with her jealous spouse.

The employment of analepsis in the two stories enables the author to fill in details of the events and persons that make up the past in the life of the protagonists. Robert Thacker comments, "her stories either employ remembering first-person narrators or, alternately, use third-person narrators, usually limited to the protagonist's perspective" ("Connection: Alice Munro and Ontario" 216). Munro acknowledges the shift in the point of view in her writings when she tells Struthers, "a lot of my stuff I write in both
first and third person. Or I start off one way, and then I do it the other way. And sometimes I have to do it in both to get the final" (Struthers interview 24). In her later stories Munro creates a wider variety of viewpoints than Ambai. This is one way of relieving monotony. The reader is able to get access to the thoughts of several characters. This is not generally accomplished by short-story writers as the narrow limits of this literary form hardly allow for multiplicity of viewpoints.

Ambai's narrative devices and parallel structural strategies in some of her first collection, *Cirakukal*, show how distinctive her thematic strains and textual devices are. Both the content and construction of the title are said to have so outraged conservative editors that it was turned down by them all and got finally published in *Kanaiyāli*, a little magazine edited by Kasthuri Rangan. This story and Munro's "Providence," one of the linked stories of the fourth collection, are similar in several respects. Both have significantly suggestive titles. The heroine of the Ambaiian story looks like a bird with broken wings inside the cage of marriage. Munro's Rose gets out of the cage but Providence frustrates her flight to happiness in love and so she also is miserable like Ambai's Chaya. Chaya's passive protest is registered in a merciless manner on the psychic plane while Rose's resistance
results in physical separation. The stories have two divisions each. Both the writers take the readers to the past and bring them back to the present when the stories are rounded off. While Ambai internalizes the feminist recognition and reaction to male apathy, Munro externalizes them with the heroine parting from Patrick to seek autonomy like Ibsen's Nora in A Doll's House. Both the stories are told in the third-person narration. Another Ambaian story whose thematic novelty and technical virtuosity have drawn critical adulation in academic circles and adverse comments from conservative quarters is "Cañcäri." Here is a heroine who has had premarital sex and seeks to sever all ties with Ranga, the man she lives with when her dreams of a healthy and happy man-woman intimacy are shattered. The structure of the story is as unconventional as the feminist stance of the heroine, Rukma. Few events occur in the present of the story which is packed with the dialogues of the protagonists and the asides of the woman. Ranga, for instance, asks Rukma, "What are you thinking about?" She replies, "Nothing." But the reader finds that the thoughts, feelings and memories of the woman are all put outside inverted commas in separate paragraphs. Her asides or unspoken words most often follow their spoken counterparts thus:

You are a Brahmin. Even when divested of your traditional trappings you continue to be
a Brahmin. Can you look at me in the nude? Can you enjoyably stroke my belly? Won't you wash your hands impulsively if you do it?

(Cirakukal 67)

Rukma here could be regarded as the analogue of the Munrovian heroine in "Prue" of Moons. Their attitude towards sex is similar and so are their frustrations in the wake of their attempts to have healthy sex with their jealous partners. The external structures of the two stories correspond to the thematic design of disillusionment which is interwoven with its motifs of sexual jealousy and male fickleness and fiendishness. Both the stories are relatively short and compact.

Alice Munro has characterized "Prue" as "a neater story than I usually write" (qtd. in Martin 144). Both the heroines are skilfully articulate and they use sarcasm to ridicule men. Munro writes of Prue, "She has what eastern Canadians call an English accent. . . . This accent helps her to say the most cynical things in a winning and lighthearted way" (Moons 150). Unlike Rukma, Prue keeps her cool in the face of Gordon's childishly deceptive demeanour but she subtly mocks him behind his back saying, "He doesn't know why people laugh or throw their overnight bags at him . . ." (154). The bitterness and irony in the words of Rukma could be discerned as she detects the orthodox Brahmin lurking in Ranga. There is sardonic exposition of the
inner man as Ranga claims to be heterodox. There is scornful humour in her comparison of the sexy man to her dog. The bitterness of her assessment is seen in her silent interrogation, "What revolutionary things can you do in bed--you who doubt your potency and wonder if a woman could be satisfied for life?" (Cirakukal 68). The two stories show how good their authors are at omniscient third-person narration as well. The two divisions of "Prue" also present the past and the present events in the life of the central figure.

Reviewing Munro's second collection of linked stories, Lives, Phyllis Grosskurth writes, "This novel is such a natural, organic depiction of the development of a girl-child into woman that words about it seem superfluous. It is an experience to be lived through" (17). This book of stories with the same female heroine is narrated in the first person like Ambai's "Ammā," which is also a confessional story of the flowering of a girl into womanhood. What the two works have in common are not only their confessional tones but their heroines' alienation from their mothers. Grosskurth feels that "Most penetrating of all is Alice Munro's perception of a girl's ambivalent attitudes toward her mother . . ." ("Delight" 17). Both the works are admittedly autobiographical. The female narrators in both recollect the events of their past
lives. The Ambaian heroine remembers, "As I think of mother, certain events come flooding to mind and stab my heart" (Cirakukal 137). The Munrovian narrator in Lives says, "We spent days along the Wawanash River, helping Uncle Benny fish" (1). Ambai's story presents in microcosm the essential female experience which Munro does on an almost novelistic scale. She, like Munro, makes the reader vividly visualize the process of a girl's growth into womanhood.

Margaret Gail Osachoff, discussing Alice Munro's narrative techniques, comments:

The most straightforward way to deal with a retrospective view of a past event is simply to set it down as a fictional autobiography or memoir. But if the emotion that charges the memories of a particular event is stronger, the story becomes a confession.

(63)

There is emotional intensity in both the writers' accounts. Munro's book could be termed a series of confessions. If the Tamil writer had continued to record the subsequent stories of the girl's life, one could have seen her blossoming out as a bold and rebellious adolescent like Del. One finds in Del greater defiance of customs and conventions that curtail female freedom. She questions in thought, word and deed the moral mores of her parochial community.
She boldly forms forbidden friendships and gleans from her friends and books knowledge of sex and finally gets initiated into it. Kalyani's audacious younger sister in the Ambaian story has the potential to do all these in such a permissive social setting. Neither narrator would take the suggestion traditionally handed down to women "being female made you damageable." They are both potentially fierce feminists in their determination to be "able to go out and take on all kinds of experiences and shuck off what they didn't want and come back proud" (Lives 147). As the Ambaian heroine comes home late from school and is scolded for sitting alone under a tree, she angrily answers back, "I will sit like that. Nothing happened to me" (Cirakukal 149).

Ambai experiments with different methods of narration in the first collection itself. One can even say that she fractures the structure of the short story so radically in "Payaṅkal" as to make it read like a playlet. It is placed at the end of the collection that carries eleven short stories. Seven of the stories are told by third-person narrators. "Vallūṟukal" and "Ammā" have first-person female narrators. The other two stories "Miritiyu" and "Aṟaikkul," have first-person narration with a difference which the writer prefers to use in most of her later stories. This use of the first-person
narrative method is novel in Tamil literary circles. By this mode she records events and allows the process of narration to filter through the female consciousness of an apparently external narrator or voice. This detached kind of narration gives the writer the advantage of a subjective author who views things with the objectivity of a third-person narrator. It could be noted in stories like "Vākaṇam".

The fiction of Ambai and Alice Munro prominently profiles the maternal figure although the daughters reject their mothers as models. Ambai's "Vallūrukāḷ" and Munro's "Images" bear out Gardiner's words, "We think back through our mothers" (qtd. in Gallop 217). The traumatic events in the life of the mother recollected by the daughter as an adult quite qualify as a memoir, for Osachoff defines a memoir thus:

A memoir is usually a story about childhood told by an adult who looks back on some memorable or traumatic event in the past. The point of view of a child or an adolescent is changed by the passage of time, and that changed person, the narrator, is sometimes evident in the present. Childhood and adolescence are seen from the perspective of experience and maturity. (63)

This story of Ambai with its rich imagery invites comparison with Munro's "Images" of the first
collection, which Redekop says, "is what we used to call a seminal story, rich in reflected and refracted images" (Mothers 43). Both the stories begin with memorably macabre images and end with the narrators' realization of the reality of what the imagination pictures. The Ambaian story begins with the narrator's mother pointing out how the stars look like the noses of flesh-eating vultures. The mother lying murdered in the end brings together in the mind of the narrator the different images of death, destruction and desolation. The woman's assailants are likened to vultures around the body with folded wings and sharp beaks ready to peck at the flesh. The story ends with the stars looking really like flesh-eating vultures causing the narrator to scream and run into the house. The images linger longer than the events in the mind of the reader. Holmstrom calls this striking feature of her work "concentrated imagery which is the genius of Tamil poetry" (xii).

Munro's story begins with the "dangerous" image of Mary McQuade who seems to have come to displace the narrator's mother and "let her power loose in the house" (Dance 32-33). It ends with the image of the woman taking over her mother's place and the bedridden mother pushed into the background. The girl-narrator drops off "powerful with secrets" which confirm that "our fears are based on nothing but the truth" (43).
Both the stories have what one can term the quest motif symbolized by the narrator's being taken out to see the country of the poor and the miserable. Munro's "Thanks" and Ambai's "Uṭampu" are two of the stories in their first collections which are narrated from the male viewpoint. Munro here seems to meditate on what teenagers do when they date. She fantasizes sudden sexual friendships between boys and girls being consummated casually. Helen in "Peace" regrets how "unconsummated relationships" depress particularly "outsiders" (Dance 194). Woodcock comments:

And in "Thanks for the Ride" Munro makes a rare foray across the sex line and tells in the voice of an adolescent boy the story of his first lay; in fact, the point of view is deceptive, since the real interest of the story lies in the portrait of his partner Lois, a fragile yet tough working-class girl, much used by men and yet--in her coarse independence--strangely inviolate.

("The Plots of Life" 240-241)

The voice here, Woodcock feels, is female. The essence of a memoir is something preserved in the narrator's or experiencer's memory. There is little here to be stored in such a fashion. There is nothing to be confessed either and so it does not qualify as a confessional story. It can at best be treated as a
meditation. Similar is the case with Ambai's "Uṭampu" where the apparent viewpoint is male but the mind meditating on the sad and pitiable figure of the male dancer, Bala Reddy, is female. The reader of this story would be reminded of Bhaskaran with his fat figure and his hairless chest in the title story. The dancer's wife, Lalitha, like Chaya, has only contempt for her womanish-looking man. The poignant wish of Bala Reddy for visible symptoms of masculinity and the tragic reality of his feminine features are reflected in the androgynous figure that assumes its form as he drowns his misery in a glass of whisky. There seems to be no notable shift in the thematic pattern of Ambai's stories in the second collection named Vittiri, but here there is greater variety of style and structure. The major concerns continue to be the relegation of the woman to the back of the house, as the title suggests. Holmstrom says:

What has perhaps remained constant in Ambai's writing are two things: her eye for detail and her sense of irony which can range all the way from the wry, almost playful sense of humour, apparent, for example, in 'Squirrel,' to something much more sharp, and with a tragic undertow [sic], as in 'Vamanan'. (x)
Alice Munro's technical complexity and narrative innovations could be seen in *Something* and the subsequent collections. Struthers writes:

The major developments that have occurred in Munro's writing were announced in several stories collected in *Something I've been Meaning to Tell You*, in stories such as "Tell me Yes or No," "Winter Wind," and "The Ottawa Valley," which not only open to us the theatre of a heroine's imagination but also make us think frequently about the fictiveness of the fictions themselves.

("Alice Munro's Fictive Imaginations" 103)

The two writers have emancipatory ideals and the desire for the fullest possible enjoyment of human capacities. These naturally make them smash existing social barriers that bound them. The very desire to be free of trammels is itself said to be postmodern. Their frank discussion of intimate things is also a postmodernist trait. Their tendency to move away from realism and fictionalize their fantasies is also unconventional. But most of Ambai's protagonists have certain ideals which distinguish them from postmodern 'anti-heroines.' Alice Munro's heroines could hardly be categorized. Their self-conscious narrators and metafictional elements also draw them closer to postmodernist writers. The texts are spiced with pop songs and new
versions of mythological events, which again make these writers out to be heterodox. They seem to feel that the conventionally employed linear order fails to image the disorder underlying human existence. Ambai, in her preface to *Face*, asserts, "while it is obvious that no writer can find expression by the total denial of the past, the crippling effects of tradition have to be overcome to arrive at freer expression" (VII). Alice Munro looks upon the framework of fiction as a "road" rather than a "house" for the reader to move around or "stay in" for a little while (qtd. in Gadpaille 57).

The digressions and disarrangement of the events and the fracture of chronology make the structure complex. Ambai and Munro seem to concentrate on a notable event but before and after this there are digressions in various directions. Their lines of thought get broken. In stories like Ambai's "Punar" and Munro's "Material" the consequence is a mix-up of separate memories. They can be called anecdotal stories rather than episodic ones. Ambai makes the reader conscious of the fact that if a woman is to write the history of woman, she must deconstruct her conventional self which is imposed on her by the male world. She must have in the place of imitation originality. It is the kind of originality which one could discern in the "Progress of Love" as Beryl tells Fame, "I'm not used to being anybody's aunt, honey. I'm not even anybody's momma. I'm just
me. Call me Beryl" (14). Beryl's counterpart in the Ambaian world is seen in Meenakshi, the heroine of "Vîṭṭiṇ," who like Beryl, makes her man malleable and wants women to be conscious of their true identity. The two writers record in these two title stories the ironic progress and retrogression of love on three generational levels.

The similarity between the two writers in terms of themes and techniques is seen at its best in their two long stories, Ambai's "Piracurikkappatăta," and Munro's "Friend." These stories are structured by the unpublished versions of what their protagonists' mothers have narrated. The text of Thirumagal's memoir in the Ambaian story is brought out with notes by her daughter. The unfinished letter and unwritten story of the unnamed heroine's unnamed mother in the Munrovian story find implicit and explicit expression from the perspective of the heterodox daughter on the plane of reality as well as on that of fantasy.

The two stories deal with marital relationships, in particular, and man-woman intimacy, in general. The suggestion of rancour or want of a wholesome male-female relationship is recorded and reiterated not only at the subtextual level but at the obvious level of the text as well. Munro deals with the sisters' sense of loss, loneliness and lovelessness. The wreck of their
unhappy lives is completed by Robert Deal through the medium of his new mistress, Audrey Atkinson, the nurse, who gets employed to look after the bedridden Ellie. The trauma of a series of miscarriages and stillborn arrivals that Ellie undergoes suggests the loss, the lack of creativity and rejection of the ties with her man. The nurse's sexual intimacy with Robert is subtextually shown to be sterile:

To the ladies in the cloakroom she even hinted that she was feeling unwell, for the usual newlywed reason. Nobody believed her, and indeed nothing ever came of this hope, if she really had it. Some of the women thought that she was lying to them out of malice, insulting them, making them out to be so credulous. (Friend 18)

Sickness of the sisters, Ellie and Flora, their mental imbalances and their home being turned into their hospital—all these prove how unhealthy the relationships sought to be established are. The division or partition of the Grieveses' house is both spatial and symbolic. The neglected part of the house that Flora occupies excites people's pity and pathos initially. The partitioned house has two parts, the destroyed and the decaying. The warmth and buoyancy of spirit are seen in the sisters only during their days before marriage.
While the man in the Munrovian story is depicted as dishonest and deceitful, Ambai shows Muthukumaran as a strange blend of creative art and cruel acts. The two phases in his life reveal his two faces—the ideal and the real. In Muthukumaran one finds the Tamil poet Bharathidasan. The descriptions of his features and behaviour tally with those of the Tamil poet referred to. Ramaswamy here seems to be a subversion of E.V. Ramasamy Periyar, the founder leader of a rationalist group.

Ambai's story is structured with a political strain as well with its broadsides from the rationalist perspectives on widow marriages, Tamil music, and Tamils' hospitality. Munro's handling of the subject, on the other hand, is psychological and universal. Ambai's story ends with the narrator caught up between attachment to the mother and father fixation. She wants to attend the function in honour of her father as "She could receive the anthology of poems in the proper spirit" ("Piracurikkappāṭāta" 136). She would rather have some kind of distance from her mother, whose disappearance to the other side of the house signifies it. Yet Thirumagal retains for her daughter, Chenthamarai, still some radiance and charm as "a glowing yellow feather floating" (136). Both the stories take the readers into the past to see the youthful images of their narrators' mothers.
Both the stories have the texts of their mother's memoirs. Ambai's story involves two texts: mother's story of her life in the form of a memoir, and father's text in the form of the poems. The story begins with the notes left by the mother for the daughter. It slowly then picks up the text of the mother's unpublished story, which also refers to the father's rejected text—poems that were turned down on account of their violent literary priapism. The Ambaian text is structured by imagined or dream versions of Chenthamarai, "Who do you make believe you are today?" (122). Mirror-reading by the heroine helps her to have the vision to see the text of reality moving on the screen of fantasy.

Physical features are described in a strange fashion. The foot and face of Muthukumaran come in for vertical description. The residence of the Munrovian sisters comes in for horizontal depiction. There is warmth in the face but violence in the feet. Ambai's story begins with a letter of invitation. As Chenthamarai reads it, she recollects her experience of reading the mother's memoir. In Munro's story, the sixth section, which completes the narrator's imagined text of the mother's memoir, has a letter with the salutation, "Friend of my youth". It is an abruptly phrased and unfinished note with an unidentified addressee. The victim in this story is identified, but
the victimizer is not. But in Ambai, the oppressor is brought into the focus. Muthukumran inflicts violence on Thirumagal physically as he hits her on the back of her head. His poems project the violence with which a woman is treated in a male-oriented milieu.

The use of parallelism and irony could be seen at their best. The real story and the fantasized one run parallel to each other. In the Munrovian story one finds the mother's version of the story of the two unhappy sisters. The narrator's imagined version of their story makes up the parallel text. There is an ironic contrast between the conventional mother's version of Flora, Ellie and the nurse, Audrey Atkinson, on the one side, and the fantasized one of the unorthodox daughter, on the other. There is in the mother's story admiration for Flora's sacrifice and contempt for the nurse who destroys Flora's second chance to marry Robert. The permissive daughter sympathizes with the nurse's zest for life and zeal for sex. The version of events in the Ambaian story has a written form, but the story within it has only a fantasized form. The inside story acquaints Chenthamarai with her grandfather's dedication to his ideals, his calm but critical turn of mind and his beloved wife who had passed away when Thirumagal, was only three years old. It vividly paints her mother's artistic and academic achievements, her admiration for
the poems of Muthukumaran who fell in love with her, married her and marred her life.

The biographical account of the two unlucky sisters and the autobiography of the narrator's mother are so structured as to enable their authors to recapture and recapitulate the essential elements of their own lives. Munro's story does this through its seven artistically arranged sections. Ambai brings back the past and blends it beautifully within the eight aesthetically selected segments of the story. There is skilful employment of the device of flashback in both the stories. One finds in the Ambaian as well as the Munrovian world multiplicity of viewpoints. The disenchantment experienced in the wake of intimate man-woman relationship is brought to the surface from time to time implicitly and explicitly. One tends to conclude that the two stories arise out of fragments of the two author's bitter experiences inside the orbit of marriage. Perhaps they get emotional release through what psychologists call "displacement."