Chapter Two
Fact and Fantasy

I am not able to separate my writing from my life. I feel that if I reflect certain values in my writing, those values exist already in my life. I can't write about them without experiencing them in my life or believing in it myself. It's very tough. But not many have those qualms. (Ambai, Dickman interview 19)

When you start out to write a story many things come from distant parts of your mind and attach themselves to it. Some things you thought would be part of it fall away; others expand. So with hope and trepidation and frequent surprise you put the whole thing together. (Munro, Moons xiii)

Ambai and Alice Munro belong to the class of writers who could be characterized as intimate and self-revealing story-tellers. In their fiction-making processes their lived and fantasized experiences merge and make their fiction a fictive fusion of fact and fantasy.

George Woodcock confirms this fusion in the case of Alice Munro as he comments:

There is a challenging ambivalence in Alice Munro's stories and her open-ended episodic
novels, a glimmering fluctuation between actuality and fictional reality, or, if one prefers it, a tension between autobiography and invention which she manipulates so superbly that both elements are used to the full and in the process enrich each other.

("The Plots of Life" 235)

It holds good in the case of Ambai as well. He goes on to say that Munro has throughout written best when she portrays events which are similar to her own experiences (237). The channelization of life into art has been a complex process for the two writers. Several modes of fictionalization could be seen in their short fiction. Some of their stories are earnest attempts to reevaluate their girlhood experiences from adult perspectives. There are in a few other stories characters and situations which give expression to the authors' repressed thoughts and feelings. Passions and impulses which are denied fulfilment in reality find fruition in fantasy or get displaced and distributed. The Tamil poet-critic, Sirpi, told this researcher on 10 March 1996:

Women writers, in particular, are by disposition less inhibitive, open-minded and are not reticent in the realm of literature where they share their experiences with others. Consequently, they tend to be
autobiographical. Ambai is exposed to the lives of Indian women not only as a perceptive writer but also as a sensitive scholar and researcher on women's problems in India. The writer, the scholar and the woman in Ambai are seen in her stories. There seems to be little distance between her life and her art. The borderlines between art and life frequently get blurred leaving the reader puzzled as to what is fact and what constitutes fiction or fantasy. (Personal interview)

The making of stories out of experiences is said to be essential for the emotional survival of writers. The lack of space or suppression that women experience in familial or societal circles oblige them to repress their natural urges. They naturally seek in fantasy fulfilment of the desires frustrated on the factual level, as Ambai and Alice Munro do. Munro once confided to Eleanor Wachtel in 1990:

I very early on got the notion that my real life had to be hidden, had to be protected. I didn't think you could go to your teacher or your parents, and tell them what you really thought about anything. . . . I just, I suppose, lived a very deceptive life.

(qtd. in Ross, Double Life 19)
Ross goes on to substantiate how Munro has lived a "double life" and how "the idea of a hidden identity appears as a fascination" in many of the fantasies that she has fictionalized (21). Ambai also suggests how she has throughout lived a double life in suppressive surroundings. In her conversations with her friends like Kannan in Nagercoil, she has recounted how she used to conform only nominally to the customs of her family like the Alsatian dog reared by her mother, which was forbidden to enter the kitchen. It would feign to slouch outside with only its hind legs and tail while thrusting into the kitchen most of its body. (Kannan interview 28 February 1997)

It is to be noted that India and Canada have seen since the sixties the emergence of a large body of women's writings which are mostly autobiographical. In her review of Munro's second collection of stories, Clara Thomas writes:

Canadian literature is rich in autobiographical and fictional accounts of female adolescence, from *Anne of Green Gables* through *Street of Riches, A Bird in the House, The Swallowe... Swallowed, In an Iron Glove, to Lives of Girls and Women, Raisins and Almonds, and The Girl in the Red-River Coat*. These books, and there are many others, can be classified tidily together as
Srinivasa Iyengar feels that "Women are natural story-tellers even when they don't write or publish" (435). Women's fiction in Indian English is rich in memoirs and confessions. A casual survey of the writings of Toru Dutt down to those of Kamala Das bears out the disposition of female writers to tell the stories of their own lives. Referring to Nayantara Sahgal's writings, Iyengar observes, "To essay autobiography—whether veiled or unveiled—is in her blood" (472). One could see how contemporary women writers probe into human relationships and profile women's problems. Writers like Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande in their fiction do it in their own individual ways. Current female fiction in Tamil also tends to be more and more subjective and self-revealing and focus on the most personal elements of their authors' private experiences. Prema Nandakumar, in her write-up, "Penkal Kaiyil Pena" ("Pen in the hands of women"), points out how women in the Sangam period used to be articulate and how they lost their freedom and how their fear of expression silenced them and how slowly they retrieved their power of expression after India's Independence. She goes on to add that the women writers now feel free to portray minutely the miseries in their lives (78-79). Most female literary
texts centre around women protagonists. Their experiences in the ultimate analysis turn out to be fictional transmissions of their authors' own experiences without their non-essential trappings.

Lorna Irvine, in a fictional dialogue on the excellence of Anglophone Canada's women writers, remarks, "Certainly, whenever autobiography figures in the writing, the sex of the writer matters" (76). Women writers, who choose female characters to be their protagonists, cannot afford to lose their identity or their control over what they write. It is precisely because of their subjectivity and female perspectives that the narratives of Ambai and Alice Munro claim the attention of the female part of the reading public. Their writing is more effective when the reader feels the presence of the author behind every word written by them. If they are made into mobile writing subjects with no fixed identity, their texts will lose much of their relevance and reverberation. The female subject in each of their stories is felt to be historically and culturally situated.

Ambai and Alice Munro have produced their best in stories which draw on the memories of their childhood and early youth. As they sit to write, memories of their lives, relations, friends and neighbours seem to crowd in on them as in the case of the English essayist, Charles Lamb. Their analeptic accounts of
events in the stories enable Ambai and Munro to unravel intricate human relationships. Sometimes their narrators' autobiographical excursions into the past are triggered by a situation in the present as the agonizing sight of the writhing fish in "Mancal Min" ("Yellow fish") of Ambai's second collection or Fame's father's breaking the news that her "mother's gone" in "The Progress of Love" of Munro's sixth collection. Using retrospection, they pack the past with suppressed emotions and out of them issue memories that highlight the hidden recesses of the narrator's personality. They both voice the forbidden or frustrated longings of women. These female yearnings quite often lie outside the province of patriarchal consciousness. As one reads their memorial and confessional fiction, one recognizes the distinctive features of a feminist oppositional culture.

The parallels between the fictional events and the experiences of Ambai and Alice Munro can be discerned if one looks through the different phases of their lives and the sequences of notable events. Born on 17 November 1944 in Mumbai, Lakshmi spent her early childhood with her parents attending a Tamil-medium school just behind their house. But she did most of her schooling in Bangalore where she moved with her folks at the age of eight when her father got transferred. She was again put to a nearby Tamil
school. Here she avidly read all the Tamil books and periodicals bought, bound and preserved by her mother. She was, unlike her elder sister, rather timid and less talkative. As she was something of a loner then, she could retreat into the world of books and cultivate her flair for her native tongue and its rich literature, which the rest of the family except her mother undervalued as they loved English better. In her interview with Dickman, she recalls, "Actually, I started writing when I was very young, when I was still in school. I used to write long essays and little stories . . ." (1). Both the writers began their literary endeavours early in life. Tausky says:

Munro began writing down her stories at the age of twelve, beginning with imitative adventure stories. She also indulged in daydreams picturing herself in heroic roles (as the protagonist does in the story "Boys and Girls"), but she now feels that it was the impulse to imitate that defined the potential writer. . . . (x)

Lakshmi also imagined thrilling adventures and had the impulse to imitate writers like Enid Blyton.

The Canadian writer's profile could next be skimmed through. Born on 10 July 1931, Alice Laidlaw grew up in Wingham, Ontario. Unlike Lakshmi, the third of four children, Alice, the first child, was
overprotected at home till the birth of her brother and sister. Like Lakshmi, Alice first attended an ordinary centre of learning called Lower Town School. Alice recalls, "it was a kind of rural slum where I first went to school" (Munro, Ross interview 23). In "Privilege" of her fourth collection, she gives the reader a vivid picture of Lower Town School which she attended for two years. Here "Her schooling seemed deplorable. It seemed she must have been miserable . . ." but Alice, like her protagonist, Rose, really enjoyed this phase of life and learned "to survive, no matter with what cravenness and caution, what shocks and forebodings. . . ." One goes on to read that her life as a pupil here was not "miserable. It is too interesting" (Who 27). The reader sees in the story what kind of friends she had at school and how the goings-on there amused her. The teacher was indifferent to the misdemeanours of the mischievous boys bullying younger boys and teasing girls. Rose admired Cora, who would taunt boys and dominate like a queen with her two companions. The boorish boy, Howard Troy, who propositioned Helena in "Executioners" of Something may have been one of the louts attending this school. Rasporich writes, "A sensitive and protected child, she was shocked by her first exposure to school, by the terrific violence and vulgarity of its elementary life . . ." (4). Like Del Jordan in Lives,
Alice chose friends resembling Naomi and mixed with the brats of her impoverished neighbourhood, and gained the experience of life that she later turned to good account in her stories. Her ambitious mother managed to have her put to Wingham Public School, where life was not so enjoyable for Alice as she did not feel at home in the midst of the children of snobbish people. All the same, she measured up to her mother's expectation by making it to the top of her class and winning prizes for her academic attainments. In her eighth grade she was, like her protagonist, Del Jordan of Lives, a folk dancer in the three-act operetta called The Pied Piper. There is said to be "a similarity between the cycle of operettas listed in Lives . . . and the cycle actually performed by Wingham Public School students . . ." (Ross, Double Life 35).

Like Lakshmi, Alice grew up in a conservative community, for she has told Graeme Gibson, "Well, I grew up in a rural community, a very traditional community" (246). Like the Tamil writer again, Alice found herself to be left out socially and familially. Alice says, "As a child, I always felt separate, but pretty happy to be so" (Tausky x). Alice was something of a rebel in her attitude towards her mother. She refused to recite lessons at Sunday School and conform to her mother's concept of sex. Like Del Jordan, a typical Munrovian heroine, Alice combined in her teens
both sexuality and intellectuality. In an unpublished interview quoted in A Double Life, the author divulged her deep desire for sex and her disappointment when nobody showed any interest in her. She says:

I was sexually interested, to the point where I would easily have married any of half a dozen people, if they had shown interest in me. I really liked men. I really liked boys and they were so callow. (Ross 42)

One could see in the narrator of "Red Dress--1946" the image of the author and how "boy-crazy" she was (Dance 157). The Tamil writer, it may be noted, was strangely naive in her teens like her protagonist, Champakam, in "Vayatu Patiṅaintu" ("Aged fifteen"), a story published in 1990 which Holmstrom has translated into English entitled "Fifteen." She also shows in this story how flirtatious and flighty girls in their teens tend to be. The subdued tone of Chellam's love for Kalivaradan signifies the restrictive cultural ambience of the Tamil girl. The cultural contrast between Chellam and Champakam in the Ambaian story, and Del and Naomi in the Munrovian tale, is very striking indeed. The early progress in the Canadian girls from innocence to experience seems to serve here as a counterblast to the sexual naivety of the traditionally reared girls in India. In "Thanks for the Ride," the author obviously fantasizes what Alice would like to have done when she
was a teenager like Adelaide and Lois. When Alice and
her man were running their bookstore in Victoria, she
one day sat down and wrote "Red Dress--1946"
remembering the details of the dress her mother had
made for her and the time when she was carefree (Ross,
Double Life 61). What the reader gets here is the
picture of a girl setting out to be admired and adored
by men. She remembers:

The dress was princess style, very tight in
the midriff. I saw how my breasts, in their
new stiff brassiere, jutted out surprisingly,
with mature authority, under the childish
frills of the collar. (Dance 152)

When Alice's parents were in straitened
circumstances in the wake of the War, she got the
situation of a maid during her final years in school.
This experience provided her with the stuff for stories
like "Sunday Afternoon" of the first collection and
"How I Met My Husband" of the third collection. In the
former story, the protagonist is a maid named Alva who
thinks like the Shavian feminist, Raina, but feels like
a malleable maiden. Mrs. Gannett's cousin goes up to
her at the sink and spends "some time kissing her
mouth" (Dance 170). Her pliability surprises the
reader as she has just written to her folks saying,
"Don't worry about me being lonesome and downtrodden
and all that maid sort of thing. I wouldn't let
anybody get away with anything like that" (167). Her response to the stranger's sexual overtures is "simply grateful and expectant" (170). She excitedly looks forward to the outing on the island in Georgian Bay where she is shortly to meet him again. The story ends with her reluctance to explore "a tender spot, a new and still mysterious humiliation" (171).

Unlike the Tamil writer, the Canadian author has demonstrated how an ordinary woman's desire for sex is liable to supersede her demand for independence and self-respect. The heroine's mother in "Araiikkul Iruntava" ("Man inside the room") angrily spurns her neighbour's little gifts sent to her in anticipation of sexual services from her. The heroine recollects:

Once he handed her a red silk blouse piece and said, "Give it to your mother and say my wife is away."

As soon as she told this to her mother, her mother went to Rayar's house dragging her. . . . Mother threw into the oven the blouse piece and blurted out something fuming. The words have gone out of the memory as they could not have been taken in at that tender age. The image of mother standing with one hand pointing to the burning blouse piece in the oven and the other hand placed on her chest with eyes
burning brighter than the blouse and the image of the surprised Rayar with his oiled body could never be forgotten.

*(Cirakukal 169-170)*

Self-respect here supersedes sex. However, the pangs of poverty prompts the mother to sacrifice at the altar of wealth the youth and happiness of her daughter. This situation in the Canadian context might have been depicted differently by Munro.

Edie, the narrator of "How," is in the present a married woman with children and all the good things of life which she used to admire as a maid of fifteen in the house of the Peebles. Strikingly vivid in her memory is the scene where she puts on Mrs. Peebles' clothes and beautifies herself while a man comes to get some water. He is the airman giving the people rides on his plane. The young maid's consciousness of her femininity is awakened as the man, Chris Watters, says, "Well, I just wanted to tell you you look very nice. I was so surprised when I looked in the door and saw you. Just because you looked so nice and beautiful" *(Something 41).* Her curiosity and her manner remind one of Del Jordan. Another event etched on her memory is the visit of the airman's fiancee, Alice Kelling, a persistent pursuer of her fugitive lover. While the Peebles and the visitor drive out to the lake, Edie makes a cake and takes it to Chris Watters along with
his fiancee's message that they will not be back before five. In the tent, the girl is asked to sit with him and they have a nice time with hugs and kisses. He, like a typical Tamil character, restrains himself resolving not to harm her for the world. He splashes water on his face and hers to cool their ardour. This act of his reminds one of what Champakam in "Fifteen" dreams of doing when she is married to the impotent man of her reverie. The airman's promise to write to her, her confession of being very close to the man, his fiancee's fury, and how her long vain wait for a letter from him ended up with her marriage to the mailman are all narrated from the perspective of a mature matron.

Both the writers were hungry for experience of life away from their folks and familial circles. Alice went to the University of Western Ontario after winning a two-year tuition scholarship like Helen, the narrator in "The Peace of Utrecht." This phase of her life gets painted in Who. As a student here, she had part-time jobs as a librarian at the London Public Library and at Western's Lawson Library. Ross says in A Double Life:

In an early draft of Lives of Girls and Women (in the Alice Munro Papers), Del similarly got a clerical job in the London Public Library, where she "stamped books in and out and rang up people about their overdues and
joked with the public and supervised the lazy high-school students." (47)

Books have throughout delighted Alice and Lakshmi and have helped them to relieve and lessen the monotony and loneliness of their solitary existence. The Canadian author has told Struthers:

I learned nothing at university about new books, though I did stumble on some books. I worked in the library, and I stumbled on books, but they weren't new. . . . So the most important work I did here was reading in the library. (Munro, Struthers interview 7-8)

As a girl, Alice used to browse through the Book of Knowledge. Recollecting her childhood reading, she tells Ross, "Then Mary, John and Peter was my first reader" (Munro, Ross interview 14). When she turned eight, she read Charles Dickens's Child's History of England. She avidly read Tennyson and Emily Bronte. She read and reread Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind admiring the fire of passion portrayed in it.

It may be noted that the kind of books read by Lakshmi in her teens dealt only with platonic love or the myths and legends of ideal humans or deities. She was used to reading only Tamil fiction till her entry into college. She continued to read all the Tamil books that she got access to through her mother and a
teacher named Nagammal, who encouraged her to read the books of Annadurai, Mu.Va and others. She was profoundly influenced by Bengali literature being then translated into Tamil. Tagore, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda had a special charm for her. Na. Parthasarathy's novel, Kurincimalar ("Kurinchi flower"), left a deep impression on her young and idealistic mind.

The two women had the appropriate apprenticeship for their literary careers. They both started out as writers of adventure stories. The kind of thriller attempted in "Charlotte Muir" could not be brought to a finish by Alice whereas Lakshmi's plan in this direction found fulfilment in her two early novellas, Nantimalai Cărălițe and Antimălai. These two books thrill young readers but have only allegorical appeal for mature scholars. The writer, in her interview with this researcher on 24 July 1995, says that there was a magazine for young readers, called Kannan, which her mother used to buy for her. It held a competition in long fiction and she participated in it with her first novella. While writing it, she felt that she should not use her name because of its religious connotations (she was given the name of the Hindu Goddess of wealth as she was born on a Friday). She decided to have a pen-name. She picked out the pseudonym, "Ambai," used by the liberated writer-heroine, Parvathi, in Devan's
novella entitled *Parvatiyin Caṅkalpam* ("Parvathy's determination"). Only later the writer, Lakshmi, came to know of the name's signification in the Indian epic, *Mahabharata* (Ambai is a female character in this poem who burns with fury and obtains from Lord Siva through austerities the boon to be reborn to wreak vengeance on Bhishma, the man who mars her life and humiliates the woman in her).

Ambai next wanted to write an adult story philosophizing on youth and age and got it published in *Ānanta Viṅkatā* with the title, "Nāṇam" ("Wisdom"). Her notions about man-woman relationship at the time were very romantic, as she said in her talk at Scott Christian College, Nagercoil on 25 July 1995. One who reads her early stories could make out how innocent she was about the physicality of the body. She was brought up in orthodox surroundings that allowed her no access to male society other than her father or brother. She said in the course of the talk:

> the culmination of all this was the writing of a novel for *Kalaimakal* which held a competition. At this time . . . there was a writer called Na. Parthasarathy. And he had written one novel called *Kurinçimalar* which was all about sexless love. It was about a sublimated relationship. And girls of my age at that time were greatly influenced by this
Poorani character that he had created in this Kurinçimalar. And all of us, I think, at that time told each other that this was the kind of love without the body which we would like to have. (unrecorded speech)

In her preface to the book, Ambai writes:

Antimanai has evolved as an outlet for the thoughts and feelings of protest evoked by the events around us which could not be shared with others for fear of being snubbed. Antimanai has been created to be the means for the expression of the spontaneous feelings and thoughts that caused me to stagger. It is amusing to recollect how, sitting in the last row, this book was written with wool being pulled over the eyes of the teachers. (N.Pag.)

One could visualize the young Ambai daydreaming like the heroine here and conceiving of love as a kind of sexless sacrifice. The woman as a good Samaritan was a popular image when Ambai was a student. In the Gandhian era, the woman dedicating herself to social service was hero-worshipped. Under Gandhian influence, Ambai portrays here a woman named Bhavani, who turns her back on the pleasures of the perishable body and dedicates her life to the welfare of the orphans in an obscure hamlet named Kundrimani Gramam. She has a
platonic relationship with the hero, Sankaran. At her instance, he marries his cousin, Gayathri, who could give him the pleasures of the body. Later, in *Face*, Ambai comments, "One can only pity the hero for having got the mind of one and the body of another" (177). In the first part of the book, the reader is given a peep into the college days of the Ambai-like heroine, Bhavani, and her friends. Bhavani was even then known among them as a "renouncer" and nicknamed "Avvaiyar." Referring to the heroine in the novella she says, "The novel reflected very much the girl I was then." She confides to the American interviewer:

Even when I was still in my M.A., I didn't know exactly how a child came out of a woman's body. I didn't know it came out of the vagina. I had seen some animals birthing, so I thought it came out of your anus. . . . So I was very innocent of the body and desires of the body. (Ambai, Dickman interview 2-3)

One can again discern the author in her teens if one has a close look at Champakam in "Fifteen," where she obviously saunters down the memory lane to recreate in Champakam her adolescent image from the adult perspective. The story centres round the world of romantic tragedies visualized by Champakam, the prototype of the naive author in her school-days.
Champakam is consulted by her younger cousin, Chellam, for progress in love. How girls in their teens consider pathos to be inseparable from true love could be seen in the answers she writes to Kalivaradan on Chellam's behalf. She makes Chellam compare herself to a solitary "flower that shuns the bee" and to a "nun-like" flower to be "dedicated to Jesus" (Ambai, Purple 145). The lover is made to pass through the proverbial pangs of unrequited love with her threats to sacrifice her life for one who "is good," but he is one who has "lost his manhood" (146). She imagines him losing it in an accident and her deciding to marry him repressing her sexuality or taking the veil if her family should oppose their union. Chellam is too innocent to know what image she is made to create through the romantic notions of her cousin. It is interesting to see how ignorant of sex they and their friend, Katyayani are. Their attempts to discover the meaning of "manhood" through a book stolen from Katyayani's newly married uncle's bookcase and the books in the circulating library uncover their utter inexperience.

It is curious to note here that their Canadian counterparts, Del and her friend Naomi, in Lives, turn to books on sex only to deepen their knowledge of it. As Ambai looks back, she could see how removed from reality the realm of Champakam is. In retrospect the
writer could even see how ludicrous the whole situation could have been. The romantic heroine of the story sees no meaning in existence, but there is no link between her outlook and her style of living or studying:

her sorrows did not seem to be connected to her day to day [sic] life. In the algebra examination, she competed against her classmate, Kalyani, and never failed to get her hundred marks. If others wrote essays entitled, 'If I should become a teacher', 'If I should become a nurse', 'If I should become a doctor', she wrote essays beginning, 'When I drive an aeroplane', or 'When I am a sculptor'--topics insistently untouched by tragedy. What is more, she quarrelled with her parents and insisted upon buying herself a silk davani (half a saree worn as an upper garment by a pubescent girl). If dosais were on offer, she ate properly and in series. . . . So people had not understood nor realized that Champakam had actually renounced the world. (Ambai, Purple 143)

Munro shows the reader through the physical and psychological development of Del Jordan in Lives how she moves away from the Oedipal phase for integration into the social order. Both the writers have had
uneasy relations with their mothers that bordered on hostility in the case of Munro and on disillusionment in the case of Ambai. The latter was emotionally much dependent on her mother for comfort and fortitude until the attainment of puberty. Her mother seemed to let her down when she most needed to be consoled in the wake of her menarche. This terrible experience led her to write in 1971 a stridently autobiographical story with the title, "Ammā Oru Kolai Ceitāl" ("Mother has committed a murder"). Here the narrator delineates her dizzying experience of her first menstrual period. Ambai, like Munro, reminisces making the reader vividly visualize her loss of innocence and her entry into a world of harsh reality, where even the lovely image of her mother undergoes a traumatic change. How happy and secure she used to feel until then is effectively brought out with her instinctive yearning to fly to her mother's bosom for relief and reassurance. How innocently she would frisk about in her skirt, climbing the Champak tree to pick flowers every morning and being pampered by her mother, teased by her father or helped to get dressed by her sister—all these are feelingly called back. The fateful day that she notices blood stains on her skirt and her crass ignorance of pubescence are dramatically brought before the eyes of the reader. How the absence of her mother adds to her painful feeling of getting lost could be
discerned. One gets a kaleidoscopic view of the different scenes of the event with the widowed shaven-headed woman coming to perform her traditional part, the women gossiping with her sitting like a doll, their voices being lowered as her father enters, the change anticipated by the event, her behaviour at school, her furious reaction to the traditional stances of her father and sister, and her yearning for the return of her mother after the bride-seeing function of her cousin. All these find powerfully frank expression in words that only a woman could pick out. The groom's rejection of her cousin as a "dark-skinned" girl causes the narrator also to be looked upon all of a sudden as "a burden" even in the sight of her mother (Cirakukal 151).

Alice majored in English at Western whose literary magazine, Folio, brought out her first short story entitled "The Dimensions of a Shadow." Ambai graduated in 1964 at Mysore University with history and economics. Then she took a break for two years. Like Alice, she felt she should have a change of air and have experience of life in all its variety. Against heavy odds and objections from the paternal side, she pursued her post-graduate studies in Madras University with support from her mother and got her degree in 1968. She has told Dickman:
After my M.A., I had not given up my ideal of working in a village. There was a small town near Madras, like an overgrown village. . . . There was one girl’s [sic] school there, so I became a teacher in that school. (4)

In a letter sent to this researcher, Ambai claims to have written in the early sixties her first few stories like "Ṇāṇam," "Eppōtu?" ("When?") , "Viṭṭivu" ("Dawn"), and "Maṇal Viṭṭu" ("House of sand"). The last named story has a pungent poem as its epigraph. The story is a slice from the life of a lonely and embittered schoolteacher named Bhooma. The emotions expressed here seem to be those of the author repressed during her Panruty days. One reads here, "The fierce fury of the sea of society has not abated yet. . . . Bhooma’s fort of rock was once demolished by fate. She built a house of sand to soothe her desolate heart. Society has destroyed it" (48). Ambai has told this researcher about a writer-friend who used to meet her during this phase of her life and read with her his stories. His affection for her, their walks and talks together used to scandalize the strait-laced segment of society there. The relations between the headmistress and the teachers of the school were rather strained. The heroine in this story is a highly talented woman who gets orphaned by the death of her brother, Sundaram. One has a glimpse of her brief teaching
stint at Kasturi Devi High School and the grim figure of its headteacher, Miss Asirvatham.

Bhooma is presented as a woman with certain ideals in life. Her conception of education could be seen in the speech that she writes for the principal. She wants boys and girls to be educated together so that they could complement each other's personality. She has no inhibitions about striking up an acquaintance with Raghavan who comes to see his sister there. She takes a fancy to him as he resembles her brother, but it is sisterly love that she has for him. Later, it gets her into trouble with the arrival of a lot of anonymous letters asking the school not to allow its image to be tarnished through their intimacy. Raghavan, in the meantime, gets married to a woman named Gita. When Bhooma loses her job, she goes to Raghavan's house where he has been honeymooning. She overhears Gita's stinging questions about his friendship with Bhooma and his assertion that she is his sister born outside his family. Bhooma leaves the place and walks towards the railway station. The title of the story signifies Raghavan's flimsy friendship with her which society snaps.

Ambai moved next to Madras (now Chennai) where she got into Thiyagaraya College at Vannarapet as an English tutor. Here she "took a small room in a distant relative's house" where she could board and
lodge for a relatively small sum of money (Ambai, Dickman interview 6). Here, in 1967, she wrote a long story which now forms the title of her first collection. The story, "Čičakukač," is based on the author's observation of the life of a neighbouring couple. Ambai's stories, like those of Munro, could be divided into two categories: those dealing with personal experiences of the author and those which depict the lives of the author's friends, relatives, neighbours and acquaintances. Critics have grouped Munrovian stories into "inside" and "outside" ones. The title story of Munro's first collection is also an "outside" story, where one does not find autobiographical overtones.

Ambai's insatiable thirst for knowledge led her to pursue doctoral studies. Her unpleasant experience and keen observation of life in academic circles inspired her to write stories like "Tiricahku" ("State of being neither here nor there" which Holmstrom has translated with only transliteration of the title), "Milēccan" (" Outsider") and "Ālkāṭṭi Viral" ("Index finger"). She told this researcher that she was first planning to do research on Hoysala art. One wonders if her disenchantment with a repulsively licentious guide led her to write "Trisanku" and portray the plight of Anjana. However, she denied having had a similar experience in her own life. She does not seem to have
got along well with her research supervisor, for in two of her stories, "Trisanku" and "Milēccan," she has cast doctoral guides in a rather bad light. Anjana's first guide, Basavayya, is portrayed as a man with a tendency to lick his superiors' boots and his ignominious lack of success in argument and his intellectual shallowness. It is his partiality for women and his attempt to molest Anjana in the privacy of his room on a Sunday that completes his picture as a contemptible reprobate. His students know under what circumstances he had to marry the daughter of the hostel warden who is seven years older than him.

It is during her flight from the pursuit of this man that she begins to hate Hoysala art. She next works for a few months as a research assistant before getting selected to do her research on foreign policy at a research institute in the north. She is caustic in her comments on the rat race among the scholars and their occasional sacrifice of integrity. Humiliations continue to plague her here as well. Her second guide turns out to be an insolent male chauvinist. Her determination to overcome her timidity and pluck up courage to disagree with the professor during a seminar in the presence of the overseas visitor could be seen when "Her mouth burst open like a cave, and like animals coming out in a rage, the words sprang forth furiously to assault the ears with the speed and swish
of whiplashes" (Ambai, Purple 67). The professor's
disgust at her boldness can be seen in his act of
"twisting his lips in a grimace." "She thought
that . . . it was impossible to reveal anything freely,
without fear or shame. Not even tears" (67). Alice
Munro recalls how seeking fame in Huron County amounted
to asking for trouble (Ross, Double Life 17). The
Munrovian narrator, Del Jordan in Lives, felt that "to
be ambitious was to court failure and to risk making a
fool of oneself. The worst thing, I gathered, the
worst thing that could happen in this life was to have
people laughing at you" (32). The Munrovian and the
Ambaian protagonists, however, emerge ultimately
victorious like Vanaja in the Ambaian story, "Vāmaṇaṁ"
(a proper name signifying the dwarfish incarnation of
Lord Vishnu), exploding the ego of the male sexists.

The Tamil writer has confessed in the course of
her talk with this researcher that the dreadful
conditions of researchers in Delhi with disdainful and
dilatory supervisors would drive a scholar crazy. Her
comment would remind one not only of the tragic hero,
Rajan, in "Āḷkāṭṭi," but also of the pathetic plight of
Sambu and Arathi Banerjee in "Milēccaṇ." Rajan's
protracted research, spilling over a decade, leaves him
a loony scholar with a ludicrously luminous mind. In
"Milēccaṇ," one sees the fate of the lower middle-class
women students, who dream of finishing their doctoral
work in three years and finding rich grooms and plum jobs and then end up being frustrated, is forcefully focused. Here again, Ambai has a dig at research guides who trifle with their scholars and talk of things totally irrelevant to the topic:

If one goes for a discussion on the thesis, he talks about the railway strike in a very interesting way. He talks of Joan Baez's sexy voice, or of the vicissitudes of Nixon's life. He would say what a spent force Jerald Ford is. He would recollect events in history that others forget and comment humorously on them. It all would take up one and a half hours.

"Sir, my chapter . . ." the scholar would ask.

"Which chapter?"

"The first one, Sir."

"Was it handed to me in the house or in the office?"

"In the house."

"Have you got another copy?"

"Mm, Sir."

"Bring it tomorrow. Let me see."

"Yes, Sir."

"This has been happening for two years."

(Cirakukal 14-15)
Ambai's phase of life in Delhi helped her overcome her
timidity and fight back. Something of her personality
could be glimpsed in Arathi Banerjee here. One seems
to hear the authorial sound in the voice of this woman
as she says, "Yes. But my dreams have brought me
here." Arathi Banarjee goes on to say:

That I could finish Ph.D. in three years.
Then a big job. Could even get a rich hubby
to resolve the problems of my life. What has
come about is different. What look likely at
the end of Ph.D. are overage and an
unsatisfying job and the stigma of
spinsterhood. (12)

Arathi Banerjee does not have a sense of belonging like
Sambu. Unlike him, she cannot return home as her
people are accustomed to living without her and as she
has become almost an outsider there. They look upon
her as one with no problems in life. She does not want
to have this attitude of her people altered. She is
determined to stand on her own feet. How one of her
fellow scholars, Govind, twits her about her hunt for a
hubby and how she retorts silencing the womanizer show
the emergent feminist in her.

When Alice was a student of Western, she was
something of a left-winger, and one could see in Rose
of Who the proletarian image of the author. The man
that Alice married, James Armstrong, came from a rich
family like Ambai's man, Vishnu Mathur. James Armstrong gets projected into Patrick, Rose's husband, who comes from a rich family and is conventional and right wing. Unlike Mathur, James is said to have been traditional in outlook. In Kishan of Ambai's title story in her second collection, one sees an idealized semblance of the author's spouse, who also comes from Rajasthan. Another facet of the author's disposition could be found in Hitha's fierce fight for justice and humanity in "Cakkaranārkāli" ("Wheelchair"). The heroine here reflects the author's leftist leanings, which are more evident in "Kaguppu Kutirai Catukkam" ("Black horse square").

In "Wheelchair," Hitha, like Ambai, loses her job as she tries to uphold her sense of justice. Then she accepts the generosity of Gauthaman's friends and gets a room to live in and food to eat. She gets involved in Gauthaman's politics and attends intellectual discussions and seminars. Before long, she gets disillusioned with the armchair critics and insincere friends of the revolutionaries. They could only talk over their whisky and form "a frightful cultural island" (Ambai, Purple 163). Through Hitha, the author seems to be lashing out at the communist party with its so-called strategies that condone its members who commit atrocities on women. The partymen fail to realize that "There is no difference whatsoever between
a revolutionary and any other man when it comes to treading upon women." When women's freedom gets treated as a separate issue, Hitha hits out, "We used to be conned in the name of motherhood, compassion, womanhood, chastity. And now too we are cheated in the name of modernity, freedom and the revolution" (165).

The reader is made to see that the party functions like the computers in "Vāmaṇan" before Vanaja's arrival giving no room for human emotions. The revolutionaries believe that "Desire, love, compassion" are bourgeois diseases (Purple 166). Hitha fails in her attempts to feed the human computer in Gauthaman with the kind of emotion that Vanaja feeds into "Manaja." Sundara Ramaswamy feels that Ambai's later writings show how she has been influenced by the feminists leaving her less dependent on the leftist ideology. She began to be critical of institutions that curtailed individual freedom. She is basically for freedom--the kind of freedom that allows the flowering of the human mind according to one's taste. (Personal interview 28 August 1996)

Hitha scrutinizes their relationship and discovers Gouthaman to be nothing more than her loveless "lover," "A research student," and "A clever son" who holds different principles without displeasing his bourgeois
father (Purple 168). One finds the highbrow in Gauthaman coming to the surface when his sense of shame at her habit of gorging and huge hunger are referred to.

The socio-cultural differences between Hitha and Gauthaman and their subsequent rows remind one of the gulf between the Manrovian heroine, Rose, and her patronizing Patrick. It is in Del and Rose that one discerns the different phases of the author's flowering into adolescence and adulthood. Del in Lives fulfils in her fantasy, like her creator, all that the patriarchal social system denies a girl in actuality. She even fantasizes Mr. Art Chamberlain slipping into sex with her:

After this I constructed in several halting imperfect installments a daydream. I imagined that Mr. Chamberlain saw me in my mother's black flowered dressing gown, pulled down off the shoulders, as I had seen myself in the mirror. Then I proposed to have the dressing gown come off, let him see me with nothing on at all. (128)

As she lives in a less repressive social setting, she is able to make some of her dreams come true. Unlike the Ambaian girls, she is able to have intimate ties with Mr. Chamberlain, Jerry storey and Garnet French. The last named lumberman initiates her into sexual
"baptism." Del finally drifts into a literary career like her creator in the last section of the book named "Epilogue: The Photographer." She decided that "the only thing to do with" her "life was to write a novel" (203). She inherits Uncle Craig's unfinished "history of Wawanash County" as the young Ambai inherits her grandmother's Naitatam (a popular romantic history). Del's legacy perishes symbolizing her repudiation of Uncle Craig's literary tradition with its complete reliance on factual details of "daily life" and follows the kind of art that enables her to see how "dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable" life in Jubilee really is (210). The idealistically romantic tradition that Ambai inherited through Naitatam lasted only during her years of inexperience. The realities of what Munro terms "daily life" could have prompted the adult Ambai to pursue a literary path different from the ideals preserved in the romance passed down to her through her grandmother.

In 1951, Alice's courtship of Munro materialized in their marriage and they moved first to Vancouver and then to Victoria in British Columbia. Joyce Wayne comments:

Those who knew the Munros in the West say they never met two people as opposite as Jim and Alice: he all prim and proper, the son of an established Oakville family; Alice exactly
the opposite, from a dirt-poor fox farm in Huron County. (qtd. in Blodgett 3-4)

In her third book, *Something* published in 1974, Munro's stories reflect the realities of what Ambai calls the "stay with a person under the same roof" (Ambai, Dickman interview 10). Disillusionment in wedlock leads her to show the impermanence of male-female relationships. It is, however, in her fourth book that the stories focus factually on the author's studenthood, wifehood, motherhood, extramarital affairs, divorce and determination to be an independent individual. Carole Gerson concludes, "After nearly losing herself among the masks and poses of the arties [sic] and intellectuals who specialize in camouflage, Rose has to return home to discover who she really is" (7). In Vancouver, James (Jim) worked for Eaton Department Store. Munro became the mother of three daughters. They lived here emotionally disengaged like the narrator and her snobbish husband, Richard, in "Connection" of Munro's two-piece story, "Chaddeleys and Flemings" of her fifth collection. However, they successfully ran a bookstore in Victoria. Their disenchantment before long resulted in their divorce. Like Rose, Munro got back to her home town and married another fellow student, Gerald Fremlin, after a brief affair with a man in the States. The American reminds one of Rose's tantalizing lover, Tom. Munro, like the
narrator in "Material" of her third book, settles with her second man at Clinton. Ambai met Mathur, a movie-maker, in 1975 and they cohabited "for a while but in India, it's very difficult to live together," without getting married. So Mathur told her, "Look, let's sign a piece of paper, it doesn't make a difference" (Ambai, Dickman interview 9). She confided to this researcher that they decided to be together but they chose to opt out of parenthood as neither had the urge to own children nor the time to rear them. Her stay with her husband's folks at Ajmer stood her in good stead later in Mumbai, when she wrote the title story of her second collection. Mathur's household is, in the language of Munro, "lifted out of life and held in light, suspended in the marvelous clear jelly that" Ambai "has spent all" her "life learning how to make. It is an act of magic. . .." (Something 35).

One really finds that dreams, memories, fantasies and histories come together in the Munrovian fiction. This is exactly what one finds fused in the Ambaian fiction as well. One gets a peep into Ambai's new phase of life in Mumbai in an uncollected story named "Oru Eli, Oru Kuruvi," which the poet, A.K. Ramanujan, translated as "A Rat and a Sparrow." It is a story where facts and fiction, dreams and personal history and legend are all mixed up. The protagonist here lives with Amulyo in a suffocatingly small house where
their friends used to live. The heroine furiously reacts to the denigration of the Tamils and their language by the north Indian friends of Amulyo. It is their scorn that initially leads her to the point of developing into a Tamil fanatic wishing even to hug the Tamil man who sells plantain leaves. It is at this point that she begins to feel that the eatables of Tamil Nadu make up

The very staple of life. Forgotten Tamil songs began to appear in her memory suddenly at night, in the afternoon sun, or when wiping off sweat in the heat of buses and trains--it went through her like a lightening of pain. (Ramanujan 157)

But her total disillusionment occurs as she visits the Tamil bookstore there and sees there the denigration of women through obscene pictures. Even the quotes from the Kural (a celebrated poem in Tamil) seemed to deny the woman her individuality. The autobiographical elements could also be noted in the couple's feeling that "It's utterly wrong to shut up animals" and "children" "in these cage-like flats" (154). The death of the rat here seems to symbolize the demise of the woman's old self. The sparrow nursed by her is the emergent feminist nurtured during this phase of her life. It is borne out by the furious reaction of the bird as she
kneeled one day in front of it and sang the old rhyme, "Little sparrow, little sparrow, do you know, do you know, my man who has left me hasn't come home yet?" The sparrow made sharp KRK noises and showed its displeasure. It also liked red things. (160)

The transition of the heroine from the feminine to the feminist phase, as Showalter puts it in a different context, is symbolically summed up in this story.

There is always in women writers a desire to return to the days of their childhood and they cherish maternal memories since the social order dominated by men tends to frustrate or mutilate their deeply felt urges and expectations. The mother or grandmother haunts the memory of every woman. Both Ambai and Alice Munro have had experiences that alienated them from their mothers, but both have rediscovered their inalienable bond of maternal kinship. The mother is the figure that they see more vividly when they look into memory's mirror. Godard writes:

In order to establish an alternate literary tradition, however, the woman writer must write her own "family romance" from herself as centre, return to her primal scene: she must give birth to herself as authentic being and as text. To do this, she needs to make contact with her lost foremothers. (51)
Ambai's maternal grandmother, a memorably resourceful figure like Charles Lamb's grandmother of his "Dream Children," is longingly remembered and portrayed in "Rat." Ambai was born on a Friday and so was named after her grandmother, Lakshmi. Like Lamb, she would spend her holidays with her grandmother in Coimbatore. One reads in this story:

She remembered her Coimbatore house. . . . That house brought with it the image of Patti [grandmother]. Patti, who had borne children since she was thirteen. Patti who had cooked vegetables and sweet halvas in large frypans. Patti who had vigorously massaged her thin-fleshed grandchildren (she was also one among them) with castor oil and told them the Ramayana while she did so. Patti with a tongue like a whip. One word from her would sting like a lash.

Animals surrounded her, like cows around Krishna's flutesong.

Patti woke up suddenly from an afternoon nap one hot day. She went to the backyard. On the wall behind the well, a monkey was shrieking in a most horrible voice.

(Ramanujan 153-54)
The granddaughter recalls how the lady spoke to the animal and, sensing its thirst, gave it water to drink from a coconut shell. She could understand its language and had no fear to go near it. The house had around a dozen cats of different hues as well. She would feed the cats big with their young ones on special food. Memories flood the writer's mind of how her Patti would feed "A line of granddaughters and grandsons. After feeding a line of the males first according to custom, she would sit down, stretching out a leg, to eat with a line of the girls and women . . . " (154). In her brief autobiographical account written to introduce her second collection of short stories published in 1988, Ambai acknowledges that she inherited her love of the Tamil tongue from her self-taught grandmother.

The author affectionately recounts the culinary skill of her mother and grandmother in her memoir entitled "The Fragrance of the Hand and Other Stories," which was published in Times of India. She says that she has associated different seasons with the different dishes made by her mother and grandmother. The details of the mother of Dhanam and Bharathi admirably match with those of the author's mother given in the memoir here. The parallel between the factual and the fantasized could be seen and felt in the following quotes:
Or maybe there is a pregnant woman in the family or neighbourhood who feels like eating something spicy and sour and the tender-mango pickle can be just the right thing for her. ("The Fragrance" 3)

She made a milk-sweet with two-kilo milk. She had finished it on the fourth day, when I got back from work. When asked who it was for, she said she had seen two or three expectant mothers in the neighbourhood. She dragged me to them to tell them what it was and that it had saffron in it. . . . She made me explain what the saffron in it would do to the mother and child. . . . ("Pilāciṭīk" 22)

She was profoundly influenced by her mother during her formative years in Bangalore. Her mother was a brilliantly talented musician like Bernard Shaw's mother. Her charismatic personality is portrayed in the uncollected story,"Pilāciṭīk Ṭappāvil Paracakiti Mutaliyōr" ("In a plastic container Goddess Parasakthi and others"). The story reads more like a memoir which points out how much space she deserves to be given in her latter life to accommodate her different dimensions--spiritual, artistic and psychic. The story begins with a daughter focussing on the spiritual mystique of the mother:
Putting some ghee-soaked rice on the windowsill and tapping it with a spoon, mother invited the crows saying in Telugu "Krishna Ra." What special significance this invocation in Telugu has is still shrouded in mystery. Even in Assam the crows came flying when she said, "Krishna Ra." There seems to be linguistic unity among crows. . . .

Mother found a place for herself in a world of crows based on this windowsill where there is no state discrimination and boundary dispute.

It occurs to Dhanam sometimes that the window is not a mere place for a drop of ghee and a spoonful of rice. The tapping of the spoon on it absorbs into itself all that happens outside the window, she thinks. It looks like a vast expanse without a specific or clear form. (22)

The maternal image of love and concern is captured and cartographed in her art. The mother in "Cūryian" ("Sun"), going out boldly with her little boy in search of her daughter and her silent sorrow on finding the corpse of the girl carried away by the soldiers, is a memorable figure. The bond binding the mother and the daughter is strikingly drawn in "Vallūrūkaḷ" ("Vultures") as well. Alice's mother, Anne Clarke
Chamney, grew up on a farm near Carleton Place in the Ottawa Valley. In her youth she went to Alberta to work as a public schoolteacher. Like Ambai's mother, Alamelu, she had a powerfully charming personality. However, she was stricken with Parkinson's disease when Alice was only twelve; but her sick mother continued to mould and manage Alice's life and education. She gets pictured again and again in the Munrovian world. It is in the mother of Helen in the first book and in the mother of Del that she is initially fictionalized. Blodgett says, "her interest in education may be seen reflected in Ada Jordan in Lives of Girls and Women" (3). Munro here makes her something of a feminist with her comment:

There is a change coming I think in the lives of girls and women. Yes. But it is up to us to make it come. All women have had up till now has been their connection with men. All we have had. No more lives of our own, really, than domestic animals. (Lives 146-147)

Like Del, Munro felt that she was rather strait-laced in her attitude towards sex. Alice knew that she would disapprove of her attempts to seek "the joys of sex" (Ross, Double Life 36). Diane Turbide confirms that Munro's mother was "wary of how sex could wreak havoc with women's lives . . ." (47). Ross also corroborates
the young Alice's alienation from the maternal side and quotes Munro:

There was also the complication of knowing that her mother would have disliked her writing very much. "Her dislike of sex was, even for her time, quite violent. So the kind of fiction that I got into would have appeared to her an insult and a horrifying waste of talent." (Double Life 40)

Ambai also resented her mother's attitude towards sex and once refused to answer her question whether she was "a virgin" (Personal interview 27 February 1997).

The sexual mores that suppressed girls and women in their younger days and the privileges that boys and men enjoyed have throughout annoyed Ambai and Alice. In their girlhood days they used to blame it on the mother or grandmother. One sees in "A Trip to the Coast" how restricted May's life really is. Her grandmother is a narrow orthodox and obdurate woman. When she asks her for permission to go swimming with her friend and cousin, the woman says that it is a place where boys go and that the girls will be chased by them. When May persists to know why she "can't," she is told, "Because that's where all the boys go. I told you before. You're getting too big for that" (Dance 182). The narrator's grandmother in "Boys" of the Munrovian world tells her, "Girls don't slam doors
like that." "Girls keep their knees together when they sit down." Her answer to a question is, "That's none of girls' business" (119). Helen, the narrator in "Day of the Butterfly," observes the division of the school campus, one for girls and another for boys.

The preceding patches could be compared with Ambai's "Punar" ("Once again"). The two writers demonstrate Freud's theory that masculinity and femininity are constructed socially and not inborn. Both the authors focus on role expectations and offer the generalizations that are currently held in domestic circles. They subject societal attitudes towards girls to intense scrutiny and try to show their validity and effect on young female children. One finds rigid definitions of what one could or could not do. Ambai here tries to show the world how differently parents bring up boys and girls with conventionally masculine and feminine values infused into them. The way the boy, Lokidas, is encouraged to grow up to be an engineer, to earn and enjoy his privileges in life shows the discrimination practised against girls like Sabari. When he is asked, "What job will you have? tell us," he is conditioned to answer, "I will become an engineer" (Vittin 107). Sabari, on the other hand, is programmed to play second fiddle to the man when she grows up. She is asked:

(111)

She is forbidden to talk about sex and is asked to pray instead. She is encouraged to listen to and not to make decisions and accept the protection provided by the male. She is to make herself the attractive object of sex that the male world needs.

Ambai, in her story "Ammā," demythicizes the idealization of the mother. The contrast between the real mother and the fantasy mother is keenly felt during her adolescence. The two authors fictionally show one how they moved away from the Oedipal phase for integration into the male social order like Del in Lives. In 1959 when Alice was in her late twenties, her mother died after a prolonged ailment. Alice was so moved by her tragic end that she wrote "Peace." The experience of returning home and seeing her mother's clothes shown by her grandmother provided her with the basis for it. Alice Munro told Metcalf that this was her "first really painful autobiographical story . . . the first time I wrote a story that tore me up" (Metcalf interview 58).
The two women characters, Helen and Maddy, in this Munrovian memoir serve as a foil to the two daughters, Bharathi and Dhanam, introduced in the Ambaian story, "Pilāciṭik." The Munrovian daughters are guilty of being callous to their mother as Helen admits (Dance 199). Helen did not even attend her mother's funeral. Maddy was really waiting for her mother to die. The mother's hospitalization was a veritable captivity. Like Helen, Munro neglected her sick mother and pursued her academic life, but her guilty conscience has plagued her ever since. It was to cleanse her guilt and gain release from the haunting image of her mother that she wrote "Peace" and the other stories reviving the image of her mother. Ross writes:

"successive stories from "The Peace of Utrecht" through "The Ottawa Valley," "Winter Wind," "Home," to "Friend of My Youth," recover an image of the mother that gets progressively younger. . . . As Alice the writer gets older, the mother in the stories goes from old age and paralysis to youth, until, in "Friend of My Youth," a time is recovered from before her marriage when she is a hopeful young schoolteacher. (Double Life 41)

Unlike the Munrovian mother, the Ambaian mother portrayed in "Pilāciṭik" has given her daughters the
space they needed for their independent individual development. Consequently, she is not denied in return her share of the domestic and filial space that she needs after the death of her husband. Dhanam writes to her sister in the States:

What she needs is not a mere place to house her plastic container. The poor woman roams looking for a realm of her own. You and I can get her what she needs if we will. The jewels you and I have are gifts from her. If we turn them into cash, we can get her back her house. Its owner is trying to sell it. Let Dinakaran send a certain amount every month. Sandhya is coming back in two or three months on completion of her schooling. She is eager to be with her grandma. She will live there with multi-year plans--learning English to talk to your children, making Salwar and Kameez with flower designs for Sandhya to wear to college, music classes, medical experiments, plans to write the history of her life, grafting rose plants, plots for keerai seedlings. (27)

Munro makes the narrator in "Ottawa" of her third collection tell of her mother, "The problem, the only problem, is my mother. And she is the one of course that I am trying to get; it is to reach her that this
whole journey has been undertaken" (Something 197). In one of her most recent uncollected stories, "Vākaṇam" ("Vehicle"), the heroine, Packiam, tries to sort out her memories of her folks on the maternal as well as the paternal side through descriptions in the form of a series of their photographs as Munro does in stories like "Ottawa." Part of it is a family album like Munro's "Chaddeleys."

In "Āru" ("River"), a short but highly symbolic story of Ambai's second collection, the narrator seems to go back to the pre-Oedipal stage that the French feminists, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva underscore. Here Taru's bath in the river gives her a new vision of life. She reflects on the calm and steadfast river flowing untroubled "as a sage, without being disturbed or fragmented" (Vittin 141). It draws everything to itself but remains unaffected. Thoughts of how women of the epics trusted it with their babies and look to it for protection flash through her mind. She identifies the river with the waters of the womb. As she goes into it, she seems to return to her prenatal state of joy. All inhibitions are shed and she subconsciously turns into the foetus of innocence and joy as she lies back and laughs. This return from the "symbolic" to the "semiotic" could be interpreted in Kristevaian terms. The release results in ineffable joy. Kristeva points out that the desire
to go back to an imagined "semiotic order is a
dangerous position for an individual woman, as well as
for feminism as a movement" (qtd. in Morris 148).
Ambai and Alice Munro go back to their past but do not
give up what Kristeva calls "the symbolic order" which
sustains their individual and social identity.

The creative impulse in the latter phase of
Ambai's life signifies what Godard terms "filliation"
(51). There is renewal of contact with the male
ancestors as well because there seems to have dawned on
her the Munrovian realization that "We would all be
heirs of one another's bodies" (Lives 41). In "Rat,"
Ambai's heroine "heard her grandfather sing a folksong
at night as he walked up and down the open terrace,
looking up at the stars . . ." (Ramanujan 157). The
grandfather appears again in "Punar" pictured thus:

His voice was deep and metallic. He was
related in someway as a grandfather. He was
very musical. . . . He would make one
actually hear the mridangam being played
before one's eyes. With shrunken hands, the
veins standing out, he would tap out the
rhythm and make up the sounds. His part in
evenings at Satyamangalam was conspicuous.

Grandfather came to Delhi. (Vittin 116)

In most of the stories in the two collections, the male
characters are either less memorable or get flayed for
their flaws. Callous or cowardly fathers, unfaithful lovers or cruel husbands are drawn. She apparently wrote the stories like "Vallurukal" when she was passing through a kind of Oedipal stage with a marked antipathy towards the male parent and patriarchal authority. The story of Ram Sharma could well have been entitled "Father has committed a murder." The figure of the father in "Miritiyu" ("Death") is made out to be rather ridiculous with his cowardice. He funks many of the things that give one the pleasures of life. The description of this clerk of the British Government with his dread of going wrong in his performance of duty corresponds to the picture of the author's own father. The heroine's aesthetic sense could not be destroyed by her father's violent tempers. What she sees in the figure of the father during the ceremony to postpone his death is only the skeleton of an already dead man. His wish to put off death is a kind of dramatic irony here as he has never lived. His daughter's conception of life is finding fulfilment in free expression of thoughts and feelings and unrestricted movement in the midst of the beauties of nature. Her bitterness towards her father climaxes in the insolent and infuriating question put to the father, "Have you got gentle emotions?" She got thrashed which resulted in her parting from him (Cirakukal 62). The scene of her row with her father
is remembered in "Cañcāri" ("Traveller") as Rukma bursts into tears. She asks herself:

Why am I crying? Is it for the words uttered by my father who threw out my anklets when I got back from my dance recital and asked, "Are you my daughter or a harlot?" Do those words hurt me or do I cry for being ignored by my classmate who got married and did not care to introduce his wife to me? (77).

Ambai, it may be noted, took dancing lessons from the age of thirteen and gave up her dance recitals only at thirty. In "Trisanku," the cowardly father's influence on the family is recollected. The protagonist here has grown up in a tiny house at Mavalli Circle in Bangalore breathing in "the dog-like treatment he had received from his officer" which permeated "each rat-hole" of the place through "his very looks, his breath, his sighs, his words" (Purple 58). The picture of her father touching his officer's feet in tears to apologize for the theft of the money has left on her mind a deeply traumatic impression.

W.J. Keith confirms the conclusion that "Munro's stories based on her own experience (however transformed) are central to her work" (161). The very first story, "Walker Brothers Cowboy," of the first collection, Dance, stems from the author's experience of going with her father to see her dance teacher. The
story gives the reader a peep into the personality of the author's father, his way of life and habit of mind. Martin, who made a thorough study of the writer's life and art, comments:

"Walker Brothers Cowboy" is a great story and one can understand why Alice Munro . . . should have placed it at the beginning of the volume. There are signs again that, as in "Boys and girls," she is drawing in a new way on her childhood: there is the contrast between the father's and mother's worlds and attitudes: the silver foxes are there again in the background, and also the younger and contrasted brother.

Martin goes on to add:

At the centre of the story is the father's character and his young daughter's reactions to him. . . . Above all there is his lively cheerfulness in entertaining the children--the mother "has headaches" and "often has to lie down"--with songs that remind one of Shakespeare's Autolycus, who was like him a "pedlar"; he takes them for a drive and calls on his old flame Nora. (51)

One wonders if Ben Jordan's sexy sweetheart, Nora, here and the nurse, Mary McQuade, of the narrator's sickly mother in "Images" are also modelled on Robert
Laidlaw's female friends and the nurse hired to look after the author's invalid mother. The personality and pursuit of Alice's fox-farming father are photographically portrayed in "Boys." Munro's father could have shared his daughter's literary taste and sympathized with her artistic aspirations. Rasporich says, "Munro's own father, Robert Laidlow, began to write when he was seventy. . . . His first and only full-length work, The McGregor, was written when he was seventy-four, in the last year of his life, and has been published posthumously" (6). Munro reminisces, "I remember visiting him in the hospital in March. . . . All this time his heart condition was worsening" (qtd. in Rasporich 6). Her words remind the reader of the title story of Munro's fifth collection where the narrator visits her sick father in the "heart wing, on the eighth floor of Toronto General Hospital" (Moons 251). Urjo Kareda, reviewing the book, comments, "Read in the context of earlier stories, particularly those in Who Do You Think You Are? (1978), these form an emotional autobiography extended over several volumes" (63).

A careful reading of Alice Munro's life and fiction shows that there is little distance between them. She says that she does not create characters as Charles Dickens does. Her unforgettable portraits are projections of herself or are modelled on specific
people (Rasporich 23). Munro has confessed that the aunts coming up frequently in her stories are her own relations. It was her stepmother, Mary Etta Laidlaw, who inspired her to portray Rose's stepmother, Flo. Her father's hired man, Lloyd Cook, with his mannerisms and tales, provided her with the material for creation of Uncle Benny. (Ross, Double Life 69)

The way the settings are delineated in the fiction of the two authors shows the significance they attach to places. Certain places are not mere backdrops for the unfolding of plots, but are seen to be sources of emotional power which influence the protagonists and their action. Jubilee has left its impact on Del as Hanrotty has influenced Rose. The landscape covering Huron County around Wingham is known to Munrovan readers as "Alice Munro country" (Ross, Double Life 21). The town of Wingham has passed into fiction as Jubilee, Hanratty and Dalgleish. "As The Observer in London said not long ago, Munro's stories have made ordinary Canada seem like 'exotic terrain'" (Batten 25). Verna Reid remarks, "In Lives of Girls and Women, Del Jordan and her mother and father live outside of Jubilee in a kind of marginal no-man's land called 'The Flats Road' . . ." (177). One reads:

Our house was at the end of the Flats Road, which ran west from Buckles' Store, at the edge of town. This rickety wooden store, so
narrow from front to back it looked like a cardboard box stood on end. . . . Houses here were set further apart and looked in general more neglected, poor, and eccentric than town houses would ever be. . . . (Lives 5)

One can vividly see the neglected houses here with all their unattractive features like uncovered marks "of a porch torn away" and "a front door without steps" and windows with "yellowed newspapers in place of blinds."

This kind of detailed description of a place does not seem to interest Ambai. Munro has an incredible eye for detail. The protagonist in "Rat" remembers the house of her grandmother, but the personality of the lady takes precedence over the place. She remembers how spacious the backyard of her grandmother's house in Coimbatore was. "Some places come twined with certain images" (Ramanujan 153). She goes on to describe in detail the person and not the place. The house in Coimbatore figures again in Bharati's letter to Dhanam in Ambai's "Pilāciṭik," but it is bare of the Munrovian details:

yet the backyard of grandma's house in Coimbatore blooms in my mind. How many plantain trees there were in it! At the front of the house there was a traveller's palm. . . . I sometimes wonder if the Eucalyptus sapling is still there which we
together had planted before grandpa sold that house. (23)
The house of Anjana in "Trisanku" is referred to but the reader could hardly visualize their "tiny house off the Mavalli Circle in Bangalore" (Purple 58). Munro factualizes places with their distinctive features. Ambai, on the otherhand, fantasizes the locales of most of her stories.

Both the writers have made themselves out to be positivists where religion is concerned. Scornful references to rites and rituals could be cited from several stories. Ambai looks at Goddess Lakshmi sitting at the feet of Vishnu from the feminist viewpoint in "Rat" and makes Susan say that it is not a sign of female inferiorization; it is only to energize Vishnu for creation and protection of the world. To excite laughter, Ambai makes another character ask Susan, "If this Lakshmi has the power, to rouse such fervor in the god, why doesn't she rub her own feet and do Vishnu's job herself?" (Ramanujan 152). In another story named "Tikku" ("Direction"), which has a reference to the demolition of Babri Mosque, Ambai says in an autobiographical vein:

She was not much acquainted with Rama. As a child her mother would ask her to pronounce the name of Rama if she woke from a nightmare. There was in the worship room the
picture of Rama and his coronation done by Ravi Varma. As she grew up, she didn't have much liking for Rama. His lying on the snake God in the form of Vishnu with Lakshmi by his feet aroused her aversion. (17)

In the title story of *Friend*, the narrator tells the story of the Grieveses with whom her mother once lived before marriage. The religiosity of the sisters and the austere way of their life are scoffed at. The Munro-like narrator's mother was a teacher like the mother of the author. She says, "my mother was a little daunted at the thought of going to live in that black board house with its paralytic Sundays and coal-oil lamps and primitive notions" (5). At the end of the story a vivid picture of the Cameronians and their ruthless iniquities is given. The narrator here reflects her creator's attitude towards conventional morality. Her sympathies, unlike those of her mother, are not with the unmarried and sexless Flora, but with the sexy nurse, Atkinson, who displaces Flora on Ellie's death by marrying Robert. She has all the books of the Grieveses burnt and thus symbolically rids the house of any trace of religion and its suppression of sexuality. It may be recalled that Del attends a revival meeting and the outcome is her "baptizing" into sex and not religion.
Munro's experience as a library assistant could possibly have inspired her to write "Carried Away," a story in the eighth collection. The story centres around a sensitive Munro-like heroine, who falls in love and tragically traverses between the realms of realities and romance.

In "Vākaṇam," Ambai says how she makes fantasy fulfil her deepest longings left unfulfilled in the real world. She starts the story on the mundane level saying, "everyone has a vehicle according to their need. A vehicle suited to their ability" and goes on to describe what kind of vehicles the Gods and Goddesses possess. She writes, "Packiaxn had all these legendary, historical and epic bases to back her desire for a vehicle. Yet she was not lucky enough to have a vehicle" (66). The end of the story baffles the reader with the enigmatic fulfilment of her desire, but what the heroine travels on is ultimately seen to be her own psychic carriage.

In their memoirs, one finds that memories and dreams, facts and fantasies come together. Susan Jackel feels that "If literary criticism is to do justice to all branches of the writing of woman in Canada, it can no longer leave autobiographical texts out of account" as "Self-portraits by Canadian women, already numerous, are being added to every year . . ." (qtd. in Buss 2). Munro's classmate, Mary Ross, wrote
her "Prophet's Address," speculating on Alice's prospective career which the local *Wingham Advance-
Times* published in 1949:

Mary imagines returning to Wingham in 1969, encountering former classmates, and seeing, in a bookstore on Josephine Street, "the smiling countenance of Alice Laidlaw . . . beam[ing] at me from one of the magazine covers. Below her there read 'Candid Confessions honors its most illustrious author. See Page 60'." (qtd. in Ross, *Double Life* 47)

If Ambai had gone to school with Mary's counterpart in the East, she might have made such a prediction of the young Lakshmi's propensity to paint her own life without prudery. Female literary creations tend to be self-revelatory in that they quite often give expression to their factual and fantasized experiences. The experiences of the authors in question here correspond to those of their female subjects. Their lived and imagined experiences form a beautiful fusion when they blend with their art. The comparison of their experiences and expressions confirms the universality of female feelings and responses in spite of cultural divides. There is rejection of the image
invented by the man and imposed on the woman. This results in disillusionment and disintegration of male-female relationships.