

Reclaiming Silenced Knowledge: An Agnotological Reading of Ambai's *A Forest*

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ABSTRACT

Agnotology, the study of culturally produced ignorance, offers a powerful way of understanding how patriarchal traditions erase women's knowledge and experiences. While feminist scholarship has widely examined Ambai's *A Forest* as a revision of myth, little attention has been given to how the text reveals the deliberate production of ignorance within patriarchal knowledge systems. This article argues that Ambai recovers histories, emotions, relationships, and ways of knowing that dominant versions of the Ramayana have been silenced. Through the parallel journeys of Chenthiru, a contemporary woman seeking freedom in the forest, and a reimagined Sita writing her own Ayanam, Ambai shows that women have been excluded not only from storytelling but also from the making of cultural memory. The forest becomes an alternative archive where forgotten voices and knowledge continue to survive. By examining Chenthiru's departure from domestic life, her husband's refusal to value her labour, Sita's voluntary choice of the forest, her conversations with Ravana, and the solidarities she builds there, this study demonstrates that *A Forest* exposes the patriarchal mechanisms that produce ignorance. It argues that Ambai's narrative is ultimately a literary act of recovering suppressed knowledge and restoring women's place in cultural memory.

Keywords: Agnotology; Ambai; Ramayana; Feminist Myth Revision; Epistemic Exclusion; Manufactured Ignorance.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Indian literature, Ambai, the pen name of C.S. Lakshmi, stands out as one of the most influential feminist writers in Tamil. Throughout her career, she has challenged patriarchal ideas deeply rooted in family, religion, tradition, and literature. Born in 1944 in Tamil Nadu and brought up in Bangalore and Mumbai, she completed her PhD at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Beyond writing fiction, Ambai has devoted herself to preserving women's voices in history by founding SPARROW (Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women), an archive dedicated to documenting the lives and works of women writers and artists. Her contributions to literature and women's studies have earned her widespread recognition through several prestigious awards and fellowships.

What makes Ambai's writing remarkable is that she does not portray women simply as victims of oppression. Instead, she imagines women discovering new ways of living, thinking, and defining themselves. Her stories weave together everyday life and mythology, suggesting that the struggles faced by women today cannot be separated from the stories that have shaped society for centuries. In *A Forest*, this approach becomes especially powerful. As Chenthiru searches for freedom and selfhood in the present, the novel simultaneously reimagines Sita's life after the Ramayana. Rather than presenting Sita as a figure whose story ends with sacrifice and suffering, Ambai gives her a future filled with purpose, creativity, and independence. Sita continues to grow even after her sons leave for Ayodhya, reclaiming her voice, dignity, and identity beyond the roles assigned to her by tradition.

This act of recovering forgotten possibilities can be fruitfully understood through the concept of agnotology. Coined by historians of science, agnotology is the study of how ignorance is deliberately created and sustained. It argues that ignorance is not simply the absence of knowledge; it is often produced through

silence, selective storytelling, omission, and the authority of dominant institutions. As Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger explain, societies do not only decide what should be remembered, they also determine what should be forgotten, ignored, or left untold. Seen from this perspective, Ambai's *A Forest* becomes more than a retelling of an ancient epic. It is an attempt to uncover the voices, experiences, and possibilities that patriarchal traditions have long concealed, allowing Sita, and through her, countless women, to reclaim histories that were never meant to be forgotten but were made invisible.

Agnotology and the Production of Patriarchal Ignorance

Agnotology challenges the common belief that ignorance exists simply because people do not know enough. Instead, it asks a more important question: **who benefits when certain stories, voices, or truths are forgotten?** Ignorance is often deliberately created through omission, distortion, censorship, selective storytelling, and the authority of institutions. Over time, some voices come to be accepted as the 'official' version of history, while others are pushed aside or erased altogether. This process is especially visible in literature, where canonical texts frequently celebrate the experiences of kings, heroes, and dominant social groups, while women's lives are simplified, silenced, or confined to symbolic roles.

The *Ramayana* offers a striking example of this process. For centuries, Sita has been remembered primarily as the devoted wife who follows Rama into exile, proves her purity through the trial by fire, and finally returns to the earth. Yet her inner world, her thoughts, emotions, desires, and independent decisions, has rarely been explored in the dominant versions of the epic. In the same way, Ravana is almost always remembered as the villain, while his identity as a learned scholar, gifted musician, and philosopher receives far less attention. The everyday relationships between women, their friendships, their shared wisdom, and their alternative ways of understanding the world are also largely absent from the traditional narrative. From the perspective of agnotology, these silences are not merely accidental gaps; they are examples of knowledge that has been intentionally or culturally pushed out of collective memory.

It is precisely these forgotten spaces that Ambai's *A Forest* seeks to recover. Rather than accepting inherited versions of the epic as complete, the novel asks what happens when those who have been silenced begin to tell their own stories. The forest becomes much more than a physical setting, it becomes a space where forgotten memories, suppressed voices, and alternative histories can finally emerge. This idea is captured powerfully when Sita tells Valmiki:

You were a poet of the king's court. You created history.

But I experienced it. I absorbed into myself all manner of experiences.

My language is different (Ambai 118).

At this moment, Ambai questions the authority of official history itself. Valmiki speaks from the position of the court historian, while Sita speaks from the authority of lived experience. The novel reminds us that history is never neutral; it is shaped by those who have the power to tell it, while the experiences of others often remain unheard. By allowing Sita to speak in her own voice, Ambai recovers a form of knowledge that patriarchal traditions have long kept invisible.

The Forest as an Alternative Archive of Knowledge

From the perspective of agnotology, one of the most powerful aspects of *A Forest* is not simply that Chenthiru leaves her home, but the place she chooses as her destination. In the traditional *Ramayana*, the forest is usually portrayed as a place of exile, danger, suffering, and separation from the civilized world. Women enter the forest only in the company of men, never as independent individuals making their own choices. Tirumalai reflects this deeply rooted patriarchal belief when he remarks that "even in epic times, a woman only went to the forest meekly accompanying her husband" (Ambai 116). He goes on to say, "For a woman, the forest is a means of punishment. To send her there is to cast her aside and make her destitute" (Ambai 116). From an agnotological perspective, this belief is not a natural truth but a form of culturally produced

ignorance that has shaped how generations understand women's relationship with freedom and space.

Ambai challenges this inherited understanding by completely reimagining the meaning of the forest. For Chenthiru, the forest is not a place of punishment or abandonment but a space where she can think freely, heal emotionally, and rediscover herself. She does not enter it because she has been rejected by society; she goes there because she chooses to. This simple yet radical act exposes how dominant narratives have long hidden the possibility that women can seek solitude, knowledge, and self-discovery on their own terms. In Ambai's hands, the forest becomes an alternative archive, a living space that safeguards memories, stories, friendships, and voices that patriarchal society has ignored or erased.

The novel further strengthens this idea through its symbolic portrayal of the forest. As one critic observes, "the titular 'Forest' is not a place of dread and discomfort; the place of punishment it is supposed to be. Rather, it is a refuge." This reversal transforms the forest from a symbol of exile into a place of belonging and renewal. Sita herself reinforces this transformation when she declares that her story will begin "In the forest. In the minds of forest-dwellers" (Ambai 118). By locating her story outside the royal court and the official epic tradition, Ambai places it within the world of oral memory and folk imagination. In doing so, she challenges the long-standing opposition between civilization and wilderness, suggesting that the truths excluded from official history often survive in the very spaces that dominant culture dismisses as marginal.

Chenthiru's Denied Partnership

One of the most revealing moments in *A Forest*, when viewed through the lens of agnotology, takes place even before Chenthiru enters the forest. For fourteen years, she works tirelessly alongside Tirumalai, helping to build and expand the family business into a series of successful enterprises. Yet, despite her dedication and contribution, she is never given the recognition she deserves. As the narrator notes: "There was talk of making her an equal partner in the business. It didn't come to anything. ... The rejection was not a reason. Only the signal" (Ambai 128).

This seemingly ordinary incident captures one of the central concerns of agnotology: institutions often preserve authority while quietly erasing the labour that made that authority possible. Within the patriarchal structure of the business, Tirumalai is publicly recognized as the successful entrepreneur, while Chenthiru's years of hard work remain invisible. Her contribution is not openly denied; instead, it is simply left unacknowledged until it fades into social memory. As Robert N. Proctor argues, ignorance is often produced through institutional practices that decide whose work deserves recognition and whose does not. Chenthiru's exclusion from equal partnership is a clear example of this manufactured ignorance.

What makes this episode particularly significant is that Ambai never presents Chenthiru as lacking ability or financial independence. On the contrary, she is intelligent, capable, and highly experienced. She has the skills to manage, organize, and grow the business, yet patriarchal structures refuse to translate her knowledge into authority. Her expertise is visible in practice but invisible in recognition. This is a powerful example of epistemic invisibility, where women's knowledge and competence exist in plain sight but are systematically excluded from positions of power and legitimacy. As critics have observed, Ambai's fiction consistently reveals how patriarchal systems silence and marginalize women's voices, while also showing how women reclaim that very language and transform it into a means of resistance and self-assertion.

Sita's Voluntary Journey to the Forest: Recovering Erased Agency

Perhaps the most revolutionary intervention in *A Forest* is Ambai's rewriting of Sita's relationship with the forest. Traditional retellings generally emphasize Sita as the obedient wife who follows Rama during exile. Her agency is overshadowed by Rama's destiny. Ambai dismantles this narrative completely.

Sita no longer appears as someone merely accompanying her husband. Instead, she embraces the forest as a place of creativity, reflection, and authorship. Chenthiru herself announces, "The time has come to re-

write the epics" (Ambai 116). This statement is not simply literary ambition; it is an agnotological declaration. Rewriting becomes an act of recovering what patriarchal history has excluded .

Sita confirms this when she tells Valmiki:

You were a poet of the king's court. You created history. But I experienced it.

My language is different" (Ambai 118).

This single sentence overturns centuries of canonical authority . Valmiki represents official historical memory, while Sita represents lived experience that official history ignores. Her autobiography therefore becomes an act of epistemic resistance. She does not merely speak; she questions who has the right to produce knowledge itself.

Ravana as Guru

Perhaps the most original agnotological intervention in *A Forest* lies in Ambai's reimagining of Ravana. In dominant versions of the *Ramayana*, Ravana is remembered almost entirely as the villain—the man who abducted Sita and stood in opposition to Rama. His other identities as a great scholar, a devoted worshipper of Shiva, a gifted musician, and a philosopher are often pushed to the background. Ambai deliberately challenges this one-dimensional image by recovering the parts of Ravana that cultural memory has gradually forgotten.

In her retelling, Ravana does not abduct Sita or seek to possess her. Instead, he becomes her music teacher and offers her companionship based on learning and respect. Placing the Rudra Veena before her, he tells her:

I did battle for you once, and lost. Would I deny you music? I will be your
guru and give you lessons every day. Let the music break out of the *vinai* and
flow everywhere in the forest. Don't think of it as an ordinary musical
instrument. Think of it as your life, and play on it (Ambai 141).

This scene beautifully illustrates the central concern of agnotology. It asks why societies choose to remember only certain aspects of a person while allowing others to disappear from collective memory. Ravana has long been associated with immense scholarship, deep devotion to Shiva, mastery of music, and even the creation of the Rudra Veena. Yet these qualities are overshadowed in popular retellings by his image as the embodiment of evil. By restoring these forgotten dimensions of his character, Ambai challenges the selective way in which cultural memory is constructed.

Even more significant is Sita's willingness to learn from the very person whom patriarchal narratives taught her to fear. This moment suggests that knowledge cannot be neatly divided into categories of good and evil based on political or moral narratives. Traditional storytelling simplified Ravana because complexity unsettled the clear moral boundaries on which the epic depended. Ambai refuses this simplification. Instead, she creates a space where Sita gains not only musical knowledge but also a deeper understanding of herself. Ambai provides Sita with an opportunity to walk away and start afresh. She gives Sita space to think about herself, where she develops self-realization at the end and learns to control her body, mind and her life.

Another important silence that Ambai addresses is the absence of women's friendships in traditional epic narratives. Canonical versions often portray women as isolated figures whose identities revolve around fathers, husbands, or sons. *A Forest* offers a very different vision. In the forest, Chenthiru forms close relationships with Minabai, Rukminibai, and Savitabai. They share meals, songs, stories, laughter, and practical wisdom. They support one another, resolve conflicts together, and create a community built on mutual care rather than hierarchy.

A memorable example comes when Rukminibai settles a family dispute by saying:

Look here, I said, the vessel is ours and the milk is ours. Just because the man

gave a drop of buttermilk to turn the milk into curd, can we be expected to

hand over the whole pot of curd to him, I asked (Ambai 136).

Although expressed through a simple folk metaphor, her words offer a powerful reflection on motherhood, inheritance, and the value of women's labour. This kind of wisdom rarely finds a place in royal courts, religious texts, or official histories. From an agnotological perspective, it reveals that women have always produced rich forms of knowledge outside institutional archives. These voices were not forgotten because they lacked insight; they were overlooked because they were preserved through conversation, memory, and oral tradition rather than through texts recognized by patriarchal authority. In Ambai's novel, the forest therefore becomes much more than a setting, it becomes a living university where women's experiences, knowledge, and collective memory continue to thrive.

Walking as Epistemic Resistance

One of the most recurring and meaningful images in *A Forest* is that of walking. Throughout the novel, Chenthiru walks without a fixed destination, almost as if movement itself becomes a way of understanding her life. Whenever she faces a difficult emotional moment, whether it is the loss of her parents, disappointment in her marriage, or the rejection she experiences in her professional life, her first instinct is to walk. Her family even jokes that "the ants are biting her feet" (Ambai 126–27), suggesting that she can never stay in one place for long. What seems like an unusual habit, however, carries a much deeper significance when viewed through the lens of agnotology.

Patriarchal society has traditionally expected women to remain within the boundaries of the home, with their movements shaped and controlled by family, marriage, and social expectations. Chenthiru quietly resists these limitations. By choosing to walk, she refuses to confine herself to the spaces that society has assigned to her. Every journey becomes an act of freedom and self-discovery. Instead of accepting inherited beliefs or unquestioned traditions, she learns through her own experiences. Each path she follows introduces her to new people, unfamiliar places, unexpected stories, and different ways of seeing the world. In this sense, walking becomes much more than physical movement, it becomes a way of questioning accepted truths, recovering overlooked knowledge, and creating an identity shaped by lived experience rather than by social prescriptions.

Sita's Desire for Daughters

One of the most emotionally powerful moments in *A Forest* comes when Sita reflects on motherhood. As she watches Lava and Kusha run happily towards Rama, she begins to imagine how different her life might have been if she had given birth to daughters instead. She thinks:

Had they been girls, they might have stood close to their mother. They might

have looked upon a father who abandoned their mother in the forest with

suspicious eyes (Ambai 137).

In these few lines, Ambai gently but powerfully questions one of the deepest assumptions of patriarchal society. In traditional epics, sons are celebrated as the heirs who carry forward the family name, lineage, honour, and memory. Daughters, by contrast, are rarely given the same narrative importance or cultural authority. Ambai challenges this long-held belief by imagining daughters not simply as children, but as protectors of memory, empathy, and justice. Through Sita's imagination, daughters become those who would understand their mother's pain, question injustice, and preserve the truths that official histories often overlook.

Viewed through the lens of agnotology, this moment becomes even more significant. Patriarchal cultures do not only privilege sons; they also create ignorance by pushing women's experiences and maternal knowledge to the margins. The wisdom passed from mothers to daughters rarely finds a place in official histories or cultural archives. By imagining daughters who remember, question, and stand beside their mother, Ambai offers an alternative way of thinking about inheritance. Instead of passing down only bloodlines or family names, this imagined lineage preserves women's memories, emotions, resilience, and lived experiences across generations. In doing so, *A Forest* recovers a form of knowledge that patriarchal traditions have long left unseen.

Expansion Instead of Escape

Throughout the narrative, Chenthiru repeatedly insists that what she seeks is not renunciation but lightness. She tells Tirumalai, "I need to feel at ease. I need to feel light" (Ambai 126). Near the end of the story, the narrator explains her desire even more clearly: "She only hoped to achieve a sense of expansion. An expansion that knew no boundaries" (Ambai 127). This notion of expansion forms the philosophical centre of *A Forest*. Patriarchal systems often define women's liberation as either complete obedience or total renunciation. Ambai refuses this binary. Chenthiru neither rejects society entirely nor returns submissively to it. Instead, she seeks an expanded self capable of accommodating multiple identities: wife, artist, traveller, friend, and thinker.

CONCLUSION

An agnotological reading of *A Forest* shows that Ambai's achievement goes far beyond offering a feminist retelling of a familiar story. While the novel certainly gives space to voices that have long been silenced, its deeper contribution lies in revealing how that silence is created and sustained in the first place. Ambai invites readers to question the processes through which societies decide whose stories become history, whose labour is valued, whose relationships are remembered, and whose knowledge is considered worthy of preservation. From this perspective, ignorance is not simply a lack of information; it is something actively produced through selective memory, institutional authority, and cultural power.

Throughout the novel, Ambai uncovers these hidden processes in different ways. Through Chenthiru's life, she shows how a woman's years of labour can remain invisible even when they are essential to a family's economic success. Through Sita's decision to enter the forest willingly, she restores a sense of female agency that dominant versions of the Ramayana have largely overlooked. By reimagining Ravana as a teacher of the Rudra Veena rather than only as a villain, she brings back aspects of cultural memory that have been pushed aside over time. Likewise, the friendships Chenthiru shares with Minabai, Rukminibai, and Savitabai celebrate forms of women's knowledge that exist outside royal courts, sacred texts, and elite literary traditions. Finally, Sita's longing for daughters imagines a different kind of inheritance—one in which women pass on memory, empathy, and lived experience instead of silence and erasure.

Ultimately, *A Forest* suggests that true liberation is not achieved simply by breaking away from oppressive structures. It begins with recovering the histories, voices, and ways of knowing that have been forgotten or deliberately excluded. In Ambai's novel, the forest becomes much more than a physical landscape; it is an alternative archive where erased memories continue to live and where women reclaim the right to tell their own stories. Read through the lens of agnotology, *A Forest* demonstrates that recovering forgotten knowledge is itself an act of literary, cultural, and political resistance.

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