



Understanding Life through Colours and Rhythms: A Reading of Ambai's Yellow Fish

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ABSTRACT

Ambai's short story, *Yellow Fish* weaves together vivid natural imagery, fragments of memory, and subtle rhythms of language to create a narrative that is as much meditation as description. Through an attentive reading of its colours, metaphors, and images, this paper examines how the story constructs meaning through detail and juxtaposition rather than linear plot. The analysis demonstrates how Ambai's language-full of fragments, repetitions, and colour collages-captures the simultaneity of life and death, fragility and endurance, silence and expression. Close reading reveals how the yellow fish, lying gasping on the shore, becomes a central symbol of survival, continuity, and the merging of memory with natural rhythm. By linking the fish's breath with human breath, Ambai collapses the boundaries between the natural and human worlds, emphasizing a shared vulnerability. The eventual return of the fish to the sea signals both ecological renewal and philosophical acceptance of life's cyclical flow.

Introduction

Ambai, the pen name of C. S. Lakshmi, is renowned in Indian literature for her delicate yet powerful explorations of everyday life, especially the lives of women, filtered through images of memory, silence, and nature. Her writing resists linear storytelling; instead, it creates lyrical collages where colour, sound, and rhythm hold as much weight as characters or plot. *Yellow Fish* epitomizes this



style: it is not a conventional short story with rising action and resolution, but a layered text where a fish, a baby, and fragments of colour join together into an exploration of life's fragility and resilience. (Chugtai 100)

The story begins with a description of the oppressive heat and the sea, fragments of colour scattered like brushstrokes. Soon, a yellow fish washed ashore becomes the focal image. Its struggle for breath is described in rhythms of repetition, its colour paling like "withering leaves" (Ambai 101). The narrator then recalls infant Jalaja, her open mouth mirroring that of the fish. Memory of an urn filled with ashes interweaves with the natural scene, until the narrative closes with the fisherman's act of returning the fish to the sea, its colour dissolving back into blue and white.

This paper argues that *Yellow Fish* is best understood through close reading of its imagery and rhythm, rather than theoretical superimposition. Ambai's artistry lies in her ability to make colour and repetition perform the work of narrative progression. Each image carries not only descriptive but symbolic weight. It seeks to analyze how Ambai's use of colour imagery functions as a symbolic structure for exploring fragility and survival. Special attention will be given to the yellow fish—a fragile presence whose desperate struggle on the sand mirrors the memory of Jalaja's mouth—thus linking the human infant and the fish within a shared continuum of breath and mortality.

The Collage of Colours

From the beginning, Ambai sets the story in a visual and sensory frame. The white boat signals the return of the fishing fleet, and with it "bright spots begin to move. Bright colours: blinding indigo, demonic red, profound green, assaulting blue. They stand vibrant against the white boat upon a faded blue and ash-grey sea" (p.101). This language of colour is deliberate, expressively saturated with intensity, suggesting both vitality and danger of life of flora and fauna. Ambai then elaborates this impression directly as after reaching the shore the fishermen start sorting the fish: "Blackhands. Brown wood of boats. Between the meshes of the nets, white bellied-fish. Crowding near, the colours of the saris press upon the eyes gently but firmly. Painted troughs. Dry sand. An extraordinary collage of colours, on the shores of the wind-spread sea. A composition that imprints itself on the mind and memory" (p. 101). By calling it a collage, Ambai foregrounds fragmentation: separate colours, separate impressions, coming together to create a unified whole. This aesthetic technique mirrors the way life itself is experienced, not as a singular, seamless narrative but as fragments, textures, and overlapping memories.



Colour here is not passive description but symbolic structuring. The indigo and red evoke depth and violence, green signals fruitfulness, while blue merges with the “ash-grey sea” (p. 101), hinting at impermanence of life. Within this collage, Ambai plants the seeds for the introduction of yellow, a colour that will carry the weight of mortality.

The description’s rhythm, too, deserves attention. Each sentence is brief, declarative, almost photographic. The repetitions the simple syntax, create a staccato rhythm. This mirrors the fragmented, snapshot-like nature of memory, as though the narrator is piecing together recollections rather than narrating events.

Thus, the opening establishes Ambai’s method that uses colour and rhythm to construct meaning alongwith imagery. Therefore, the sea, the woman, the boat, the sari all fuse into a collage that holds together life, death, and memory in fragmentation of perceptions.

The Yellow Fish

The narrative turns inward with the sudden appearance of a yellow fish thrown onto the sand: “A yellow fish is thrown away on the sand. Of that palest yellow that comes before the withering and falling of leaves. It has black spots. As I stoop to watch, it begins to shudders and leap. The mouth gasps: gasps and closes, shudders and tosses on the hot sand. That mouth closes; closes and opens, desperate for water. Like Jalaja’s mouth” (p. 101). The description is instinctive. The palest yellow evokes decay, likened to leaves before withering, signalling mortality. The repeated verbs-shudders leap, gasps-emphasize the fragility of life on the threshold of death. The colour yellow is no longer celebratory rather it is spectral, predicting extinction.

Repetition dominates this passage: “that mouth closes; closes and opens” The rhythm mirrors the fish’s gasping, each sentence a breath. This is a prime example of how Ambai uses syntax as rhythm: the reader feels the slowing breath through the prose itself.

The fish becomes more than an object; it is a metaphor for survival and mortality. The repeated gasping gestures toward persistence-the instinct to breathe-even as death approaches. The image holds the reader in suspension as the fish is not yet dead, but dying, caught between survival and dissolution.

The pale yellow also recalls the ash-grey of the sea earlier. Yellow, fading into ash, ties life’s colour to death’s residue. The fish embodies the precarious line between colour and colourlessness, between rhythm and silence.



Ambai's focus on a single, simple image magnifies its resonance. By slowing down the description, by repeating the act of gasping, she makes the fish's struggle symbolic of a larger rhythm i.e. the persistence of life in the face of mortality.

Jalaja's Mouth: Linking Fish and Human Life

Ambai describes the connection between the fish's mouth and Jalaja in poignant detail: "The hasty infant Jalaja's mouth. She pushed and bumped her way out into the world... Her round eyes. Sometimes she would open and close her mouth, as if sucking. The ashes which Arun brought back from the electric crematorium were in a small urn... 'Why is the mouth closed?'... 'I want to see it open. I want to see it open.'" (p. 102) Jalaja's fragile, gasping mouth becomes a haunting memory that overlays the fish's struggle. The narrator's desire to see the mouth open again as she says "I want to see it open" (Ambai 102)-articulates the impossibility of return, the human yearning to resist death's finality.

The fish's breath and Jalaja's breath thus become interchangeable, symbolizing a range of existence where the boundaries between human and non-human dissolve. Ambai transforms colour (pale yellow) into an embodied metaphor for the breath of life shared across fragile bodies.

Here, memory intrudes into natural description. The baby's mouth, quivering in sleep, mirrors the fish's gasping mouth. The juxtaposition collapses distinctions between natural and human, between fish and child, between present perception and past memory. Ambai collapses distinctions between the fish and the human infant. The image of Jalaja's mouth intrudes into the scene, fusing memory with immediate perception. This move transforms the fish from an isolated image of death into a symbol of shared vulnerability across species.

The urn of ashes recalls the earlier description of the sea's faded blue as "the colour of ash." The repetition of ash links baby Jalaja's death to the sea and to the fish. Life, death, sea, ash, breath-all collapse into one associative field. The parallelism between fish and child shows how memory stitches together disparate images into one collage.

Return to the Sea: Survival and Continuity

The story's closing movement shifts from despair to renewal. The narrator summons a fisherboy to throw the fish back:

'Ekade, come here.' Will you throw this yellow fish back into the sea? A quick short of laughter. He grabs the fish firmly by its tail and starts running towards the sea. I run after him. He places it



on the crest of an incoming wave. For a moment it splutters, helpless, like a drunk who cannot find the way home. Again it opens its mouth to the water, taking it in. Then a swish of the tail. An arrogant leap. Once again it swishes its tail and moves forward. You can see its clear yellow for a very long time. Then it merges into the blue-grey-white of the sea. (p. 102-103)

This narrative rhythm mirrors the fish's journey. The fish, near death, regains life in the water. The verbs "spluttered, leapt" (Ambai 102) create a surge of energy, contrasting with the earlier fading breath. The fish's return to the sea marks both ecological survival and existential continuity. Its clear yellow lingers before merging into the "blue-grey-white of the sea" (p. 103), completing the cycle of life, colour, and memory.

This moment resists closure in despair. Instead, it affirms the possibility of renewal, even if transient. Colour once again is central: yellow does not end in decay but merges with blue and white, suggesting transcendence and continuity. The dissolution of yellow into blue-grey-white recalls the opening collage. The story closes where it began: colours juxtaposed, but now transformed. Yellow does not vanish but merges, suggesting continuity. Life persists, though in altered form.

Symbolically, the fisherman's act is one of release and renewal. The fish returns to its element; survival is restored. But the narrator's perception emphasizes not survival alone but the fusion of colours, as though individuality dissolves into the collective rhythm of the sea.

The fish's arrogant leap also mirrors the persistence of memory itself. Just as the fish refuses silence, memory refuses closure. The narrator's recollection of Jalaja, of ashes, of colour, persists. The leap embodies that insistence: life declares itself even as it merges with dissolution.

Conclusion

Ambai's *Yellow Fish* exemplifies how literature can create meaning not through plot but through close attention to imagery, rhythm, and colour. The story's fragments—a sari's red, a basket's green, a fish's pale yellow, a baby's mouth, ashes in an urn-form a collage that resists linear narration but captures the simultaneity of life and death.

Close reading reveals that the yellow fish symbolizes survival amid fragility, breath amid silence, continuity amid dissolution. The narrative's rhythm—through repetition of "opened and closed," through the breath-like syntax—makes the reader experience the fish's struggle physically. Memory and



perception fuse: Jalaja's death, the urn of ashes, and the sea's faded ash-blue all interweave with the fish's colour.

The fisherman's act of returning the fish to the sea closes the rhythm. The fish's arrogant leap and dissolution of yellow into blue-grey-white express survival, continuity, and merging. Ambai offers no linear story but instead a meditation that life is a collage of colours, fragile yet persistent, fragmented yet whole.

Thus, Yellow Fish stands as an extraordinary example of Ambai's craft. Through close reading of its colours and rhythms, one finds not only a narrative of a fish but a meditation on life's fragility and endurance, the persistence of memory, and the rhythm of survival.

Moreover, Ambai collapses the divide between human and non-human, personal memory and natural imagery, demonstrating that life is a fragile collage-fragmented, transient, yet enduring in its continuity. Through her use of colours, Ambai not only paints a scene but also offers a lens for comprehending existence itself.

Works Cited

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