

Unravelling The Power Conflict In Institutionalised Marriage In The Great Indian Kitchen And A Kitchen In The Corner Of The House

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Abstract

This article argues that equity in societal roles should be established irrespective of gender and the marital bond should not be a means to establish gender-related bias. A case study is provided to compare the book by Ambai, *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House* and the film, Jeo Baby's *The Great Indian Kitchen* which is based on it. Points of view are divided on the basis of societal, ethical, philosophical and timely comparisons of the film in the first part. Symbolism and unconventional portrayal of the events (with respect to other films sharing the same theme) and scenes are judged free of bias in most areas. Expansion and preservation of normative power and treatment of one particular gender as the 'other' are reached through discussion on the portrayal of the base structure of patriarchy. The final section of the text deals with the critical study on the book and an emphasis on the deep structure of images.

Keywords: Kitchen politics, patriarchy, normalised power, food culture.

Introduction

The *Great Indian Kitchen* yearns to shatter the spokes of the dynamic wheel of the sexual division of labour, which is prevalent across the 'orthodox' families of India to some conventional families in the West. Family is a miniature society and patriarchy determines the power distribution in most of the Eastern countries. The film takes the turn of a rather revolutionary though subtle self-empowerment of the female protagonist and disturbing the stubborn rules of time-old familial norms. The way oppression became a normalised form of power through gender difference – hitherto made omniscient in Indian society – is portrayed crystal clear by director Jeo Baby. How the source of the sense of freedom simply refused to surface from the side of the wife's family illuminates the disturbing but unreal sense of dependency on the male counterparts by the women. One could evidently juxtapose the case of the bird whose cage is opened – but the bird itself refusing to set itself free – here.

The male breadwinner and the female housewife are considered by the majority of families who claims them to be conventional. The male and female instruments are repeatedly preserved to such set roles by the society who claims that this exacts 'stability' in households. Food, love and understanding are taken to be granted if not an indictment by the husband of the matrimonial union in the film. The female 'expressive' love is expected from the psyche of the wife in addition to unpaid labour. The fluidity of the kitchen roles cannot be found or be even realised by the husband or the male kingdom or even – ironically – not by the female representatives (other than the Wife): 'Amma,' 'Ammayi' or 'Usha.'

This chained link of women with housework, both structurally and ideologically, is shown as the dominant value system even in the age of smartphones and in a developing nation. This results in a society that values masculine work over feminine work. The portrayal of recurring monotonous labour under the guise of housework can therefore be taken to be a rather institutionalised slavery and establishing a rutted concept of 'femininity' which intentionally forces women's loss of identity.

One can assume the indoctrination of the 'kitchen kingdom' to the wife and womankind, in general, can be linked to masculine fear of the scarcity of home cooks. However, in the early twentieth century, when technology has made the chores easier, the question of balance should not be shunned out of existence. Here we see the necessity of marriage be ceased to exist as an institution but instead as a union rooted in love and understanding.

Women's liberation doesn't mean severing the chains restricting her within the confines of the kitchen. The fear of equality can be seen visible when the husband takes criticism, by the wife, for spite. This equality in a family is misunderstood as the situation where woman is more powerful than men: the male counterparts cannot envision equal pay for equal work.

Society plays a significant role in naturalising assumptions concerning women, femininity and domestic roles; the outburst of domestic violence and hatred using instruments of religion to subdue the phenomenon of menstruation is a result of this normalising power. However, the tables can be seen turning when another female character takes the reign of the family by being a working woman. Here we can see class or money tilting the balance between genders. Society turned out to prioritise economy over abstract love or even profound – material well of wealth is the elixir of normalised love or any other emotion. The husband leaving for work (a professional job) and the wife being barred from pursuing her passion (of dance) is a clear icon of closing the loop of oppression: the wife is not respected as she is not the breadwinner and ironically she is not 'allowed' to be one either.

The prehistoric times of the human species indicate the fluidity in gender roles: man cooks when the woman can't and vice-versa. Usually, this was because of the innate physical strength-based dominion men had over the women. However, civilised man need not hunt to survive and the jobs can be done by women almost everywhere. The need to decentre the emphasis on the submissive nature of the kitchen is, therefore, a necessity of this (modern) age. The developed nation has women ruling the business sector and this shows that combined empowerment (irrespective of gender) lies at the root of a nation's development; it begins from the notion the community has of the family.

The food gaze in an omnipresent hegemony of the gender role attributed to the wife in the Great Indian Kitchen. Her aspiration lied somewhere outside within the confines of the kitchen. There are women who took the profession of chefs/cooks in the food industry, but so have men. This sheds light on the much-misconceived fact: men too 'can' cook. The men in the film or families reflecting similar conditions can be seen shown completely oblivious of the same fact. Nevertheless, one can say that the perspective of the film is one-sided; however, it draws inspiration from real life – from almost more than one conventional family.

The film emphasises the reconceptualisation of the kitchen as a space, rather than a site of ever-changing degrees of freedom, self-awareness, subjectivity and agency. The localisation of female roles in Indian films is to be blamed for normalising the hegemony of male domination as well. The reconstitution of the kitchen as something more than mandatory labour performed in the service of others is important to fit the narratives of Indian Women.

Conventional memories of home – for most of us – are the ones where the house belonged to women. The art of cooking was not synonymous with oppression and routine but with an expression of love, nurturance, creativity and sharing. The Great Indian Kitchen puts the card on the table of reality: all the nostalgia eventually becomes a route to escape the painful realities of racist oppression. The need for women to speak up and do it collectively is thus even if their goal lacks clarity is stressed satirically at different junctures in the film: when the wife is laughed at when the proposition of her career as a dancer is put forward, when the women raises calls of protests against women themselves scaling Sabarimala, and so on. What perceivable here are the negative reactions by the women who don't even understand that the hegemony of patriarchy is determining the way think.

Kitchen politics and Objectification of the Female

Indian feminist uprisings are deemed inclusive as the intersectionality of caste, class and culture are recognised by the nation. It is high time that the ever-expanding and hereditary void of equality in the spheres of marriage, divorce, succession and economic opportunities be recognised and holes be mended.

The strongest form of oppression is the one that self-nourishes from within (the oppressed). Dowry deaths and bride burning were neglected and undermined as accidental kitchen deaths more than fingers can fathom in our nation's history. How the existence of marital rape is inconceivable to the point unintelligible to the set marital 'business' for orthodox society is nothing short of inhumane. This can be found evident when the wife raises concerns regarding pleasure in intercourse. The brutal objectification of women touches the heart of the audience and undoubtedly reckons one's own default notions and beliefs regarding the same.

However, the mother-in-law is shown to not hurl violence against the daughter-in-law; she says ("you apply, dear" [00:52:54]) this stands different from popular TV shows and films of the like. The sort of understanding she has with the protagonist hints at the presence of hope despite how fragile it is: the wife's wish to dance is honoured by the mother-in-law. Even without the patriarchal bargain of dowry, lack of wealth and occupation chains the wife's ankles from dancing as long as she upholds the housewife's normative duties.

The tale told in the film is a case of classic patriarchy: the girl is 'given away' in marriage by a male head of the household to another household. This 'new home' is headed by the husband's father. As if in Kingdom, she becomes subordinate not only to all the men of the alien household but also to the more senior women. Here we

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should reinvent or at least look back at the necessity of doing all this in the first place. Man and woman are necessary for our species' survival and there is no consistent indicapowetor in nature that ordains which gender is superior. The film eyes on this sphere and therefore relaxes the tension with the mother-in-law.

However, the cyclical internalisation of women's oppression by women themselves is felt when 'Amma' of protagonist insists her youngest daughter to fetch water for her brother instead of fetching it by himself. The daughter who is studying is interrupted by the chore only to be halted by the protagonist as she storms at the boy for playing dominant.

In South India, women are generalised as the gatekeepers of the family pantry. This is backed by the belief that they can only be allowed to play the role in the everyday politics of food allocation within the household also seen restraining the protagonist from accomplishing her passion, he father-in-law emphasizes on saying ("The chickpea dish is marvellous" [00:52:19]). This phenomenon of food – food politics – is used as clockwork to express reward and retribution. The woman becomes invisible to an outsider in due process, and what seen rarely is never often believed.

This normative power is eventually used to isolate and seclude the woman, usually to the lowest in the pyramid of the power structure. The kitchen itself becomes the prison for the punishment of a crime of her not realising/actualising her freedom. Impurity associated with menstrual blood is nothing but an ingenious and long inherited tool of subjugation. How men are not associated with any sort of such impurity and why only the masculine is affected by them, comes to question here.

The divinity is another instrument as well: the holy beneficence during the making of the food and serving it to her family can be looked at as a way of keeping women in their 'place.' Here, she is shown as a priest but deemed unholy in a variety of instances. This role is venerated by women with the focus of keeping the cultural ties intact. This raises the issue of culture's lack of symbiosis with human ethics and positive development. Indian culture was once closely knit with nature and our corruption blighted off when the people started using gender inequalities for determining resource allowances – to the point that even freedom became non-mandatory for the female.

Status Quo and Contemporariness of the Problem

The influence of the Coronavirus pandemic is shown in the film albeit with a minimised light. However, it has disrupted gender roles in the real world. Even as both men and women are stranded at home, women are disproportionately undergoing the burden of domestic chores. The film brings the importance of men's involvement in these chores. The sheer neglect by the husband and his father is rooted in the belief that the household duties are not hard, especially owing to the superficial smile the wife wears whilst serving them. Her complaints arise only in relation to the kitchen department: the washing machine has broken, the pipe under the sink that never gets fixed, etc. How these issues are laughed off by the husband further consolidates his incognisance of the affairs in the kitchen – on how hard it is.

This awareness should be taught to the male kind at the infancy of cognition itself – which the kitchen is not a territory of mother alone and she should never feel alone. A certain complexity is associated with food work and the kitchen. This is because it consists of tasks closely knitted with planning, purchasing, storing, cooking and preparing food. This accentuated further when it comes to washing up and clearing away.

As food work and women's domestic engagement is not something that directly contributes to the productive economy, it has always been seen as lacking in value. This is why the dominant discourse amongst feminists has remained whether to accept the oppressive character of food work as drudgery or go beyond for a more nuanced understanding of the geographies of domestic power that have. One can think of reconfiguring the kitchen as an area of liberation rather than oppression if the husband and other male parties share the load of making what they eat.

The sanctification of the kitchen and believing in it is an indication of the start of a rather prolonged oppression. The need for food and the one who makes it to be respected is proved to be the pillar in a family if so ever the couple is to prosper with love and care, through the film. On the flip side, the answer to endless misunderstanding is a revolution and the kitchen remains a prison of choice. However, society and family will deter the course of this facultative freedom because they misunderstood stability for freedom. Changes for the better have always made the world pride in human history. Male and female prowess are different and the combined effort can only mean progress without deleterious repercussions.

The kitchen evolving into an ideological battleground is shown in the film as the same battle is fought by the wife day after day. The viewer can see that the place is not standardised and it is a technologically innovative kitchen space; the apparatuses are designed neither to be efficient and nor be functional (most of the time). It is only a matter of scientifically arranging the kitchen constituents to make it more convenient for the wife, thus easing her

burden. But this is not the case here. If the husband has eased up and understood the necessities, things would have been more productive and daily life and behaviour could also have changed. We can gather that it is the lack of these functionalist improvements that prompts her to take a leash over her own freedom and take off to live life by monetising her passion and chasing her dreams. Instead, the husband used the lack of time – as she is busy in her inept kitchen – for the needlessness for her to go to work.

The symbol of Greatnesses

The film can never be assumed as a tribute offered at the shrine of food/cutlery. The sarcasm burns bright beyond compare in the title, *The Great Indian Kitchen* – the irony ascends in strength as the monotonous chores are repeatedly portrayed, albeit it is the reality in almost all households. The movie is a barbed condemnation of the matrimonial patriarchal institution in India, which is present in 21st century India (or the world). Void of background music, the lion's share of sounds and visuals in *The Great Indian Kitchen* are from sporadic dialogues and the daily activities/chores that permeate throughout all Indian households. Cutting, chopping, frying, kneading, washing, sweeping and name-it-that-is-there are all unquestionably exacted by the women of the male kingdom. A certain precision is visible – gained by the perseverance of servitude. The wife who was betrothed with gold ornaments and a bright dress is shown as slowly blending into the monochromatic shades of the kitchen sink and washing machine. The first time she sees her husband reveals what her frail fate has in store for her:

While they sit uncomfortably close to each other, the groom says, “We are strangers, so what's there to talk about?” The woman smiles and nods – discomfort smeared across her face. She neither contradicts him nor demands to know him better. That's what she is taught, to be the wife of a man she barely knows. The next scene that we see is an extravagant wedding and a brand-new car parked in front of the groom's house (undoubtedly, a part of the 'dowry'). (Baby, Jeo. *Great Indian Kitchen*)

The women in the film work over the stove to prepare hot and flavourful meals for the men in their lives. They soon find themselves sitting in the midst of the waste/residues of what the men had eaten. Nimisha Sajayan's character can be later seen rattling Suraj Venjaramoodu's role when she recalls the husband's outburst of table-manner etiquette whilst dining outdoors. (“So, outside the home you follow table manners” [00:53:17-00:53:20]). Ridicule on the mask of double standards is entertained here, although the male ego is rendered at its zenith as well.

The health aspect of the women is not considered even after a day full of cleaning and cooking; the scene where she reflects on her once supple hands needs to be noted here. The paradox of dependence is criticised as well: the men self-imposes themselves with the authority to ‘think for’ rather grown women, withal being dependent on them for basic daily activities: brushing their teeth, wearing their slippers and lunch packing – to the point that they can be taken for infantile.

The Great Indian Kitchen makes the viewer observe how the patriarchy synthesises the base structure of society and family to solely take care of the male body and mind: veneering their hobbies, entertains their psyche and caters to physical well-being, from birth to retirement to death. We can hover over the barren land of opportunity for women in the film and come to realise that the female psyche tends to not yearn for freedom as long the mirage of the need for societal acceptance chains them. Menstruation is the source of leisure for women, save the nature of freedom here is a sort of forced isolation. It is to a greater degree a humiliation just like the priest says (“If made impure by the touch of a menstruating lady, you should follow fresh cow dung” [01:22:07-01:21:35]) rather than an offer of affection and care for the needs they actually deserve.

Women are either compelled to forget or apologise if their actions frown upon patriarchy. From applying for a job to requesting more foreplay, this trend can be seen. Not even a tidier dining table or sharing a video of positive social impact is ‘allowed’ by the strictly ‘traditional’ family. Thus, the needs of the women are rejected if not laughed at.

Regardless of sexual orientation of the audience, *The Great Indian Kitchen* can be considered a rather excruciating visual experience – of reality – especially if one expects the dopamine trigger familiar to an entertainment film. Director of the film has surely set one or more relatable scenes if the watcher is female. Those men viewers with patriarchal parameters, judging their thought process, will surely be moved if not reformed with a change in light of the things they will see women in their lives.

The routine day-to-day life of the homemaker woman in the country raises a mundane wonder; the intrigue regarding how the problem of oppression is resolved glues the audience until the end. The misogyny of male dominance is on spot and is handed on a silver platter and shed light on for optimal criticism. Morality in lives and relationship are genuine if only the parameters aid the conscience irrespective of gender in society. There is no place for biased morality if the individual agency of a particular gender is scrutinised and dissected by society. The director made sure that the mood is conveyed through the duration and repetition of certain scenes:

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My screenplay contains around 200 scenes in this 1 hour 40 minutes film, that's only because I wrote an editing screenplay. We purposefully made it like that because we wanted to get across how repetitive and endless the woman's job is. That's why we used lengthy shots and that's the actual reality in the kitchen, a woman mostly is alone in the kitchen, that's why we used that kind of a treatment in the film. (Jeo Baby, Filmmaker)

Gendered expectations of household chores are to be realised as constructs favouring the male kind in the film. If a man's mother or female kin cannot do the chores, it doesn't mean that he should marry for the sole sake of the same. The tasks should be shouldered by everyone in the society despite gender. Basic life skills are to be anointed at an early age itself and no institution should be entitled to the authority to decree who gets pigeonholed to certain roles.

Jeo Baby does all this without any pharisaical preaching. Here, cinematography unveils its most basic and yet most sophisticated form: letting a story unfold before the eyes of the viewers. The audience is brought to life of the characters by issuing and ridiculing tenets of their daily life. At the same time, the vantage position as an observer is preserved. He could have capped the train of thought at the patriarchal station of exploitation; instead, he expanded his roster of confrontation against corrupted/tenacious societal acts: the Sabarimala issue that determined religion, politics and patriarchy of Kerala. Conscientious effort to uphold his belief that the system should change is starkly visible here.

The film questions the outdated pieces of advice like "women are happier if they are always one step below the man." To be comfortable in one's own skin is a birthright and cannot be given by the other, for it was never possessed by any other than the self.

The trend of telescoping the role of the women to the Kitchen

A Kitchen in the Corner of the House inspired the film and the same is based on it – an attempt to encapsulate the experiences of multiple women. The book treads on dominant themes relevant to contemporary society: women liberation, stand of women across the barriers of time, icons of freedom and feminine renaissance. Women of Ajmir have their life revolving around the axis of the kitchen. Ambai, the author, intended to establish that Indian women spend most of their life within the confines of the kitchen. This confinement is regularly strengthened from the inside since sustaining the family is viewed as the central obligation of a lady in India. Ambai portrays the story from the point of view of Minakshi, the youngest daughter-in-law of the house. She is alien to the strict cultural background of Kishen, her husband. From the viewpoint of the outsider, she is able to notice the conventional joint family arrangement of her significant other analytically. Just like *The Great Indian Kitchen*, the forever battleground of women – the kitchen – is brought into focus shortly in the introduction of the plot in the book. The text compares the status of the women in general with the state/position of the kitchen; the kitchen stays "neglected" compared to the other parts of the house in terms of construction. Like the building, Minakshi's place too can be metaphorically juxtaposed as somewhere at the back of the house. Her view of kitchen:

Right at the end, stuck at the careless manner. Two windows. Underneath one, the tap and basin. The latter was too small to place even a single plate in it. Underneath that, the drainage area, without any ledge. As soon as the taps above are opened... within ten minutes there will be a small flood. (63)

The wife in both the movie and the book incinerate their hopes and opportunities at the sanctum sanctorum – fireplace – of the kitchen. The pocket of cutlery and stench of waste has sullied their dreams and passions and turned them into miseries and compromises for survival in the husband's household. In this story, Kishen's mother suffers heart failure. Even at the brink of death, her first thought is about the perilous state of the kitchen after her death and the aftermath of discontinued chores. Her belief that the kitchen is the holiest place in the house is exclusive in nature – oblivious to the male members. She takes pride over the moment when she single-handedly prepared food for the entire family. All these reveal how the bond between them and the kitchen was formed and made inextricable to the point where the mind autonomously synchronised with the state of the kitchen. On one hand, men enjoy a position of importance in the story, whereas, on the other hand, women are treated as second class citizens with circumscribed rights.

Men are regarded as normative representative of the society and women are treated as the other or additional entities. The consciousness of women is, unfortunately, structured by the masculine in both the book and the film. Housework soon takes the insignia of torture when it is repeated without change: the house gets soiled, it is cleaned, then others dirty the house, again it is cleaned and the endless loop ends through heredity.

For Ambai, food is taken as a sceptre of power within the family. Indian kitchen across the states turns out to be the fulcrum of family politics. Here, mother and wife emulate as chefs; they present most favoured delicacies to please the male: patriarchy equated this act of pleasing as a laurel in women's life. However, the authority of

mother-in-law is nothing short of illusory in nature but the complexity of the resultant hierarchy vexes the other female participants. Minakshi coined this tussle of power as “food war.” The condition of most of the Indian families is no different. The brutal fact is that the kitchen doesn’t undergo any innovation to ease the women’s chores even if the food the male members consume comes from them. It is Minakshi’s aura that resonates with the need for facilities in the kitchen.

Emancipation of women and liberty in its feminine essence is echoed by Ambai in the story. Towards the beginning of the story, one can find beautiful green mountains and temple images. The mountain symbolises freedom and power. The fact that the enchanting view of the landscape is visible from the window denotes that freedom is always at grasp and one needs to only be aware of that fact. However the cloth line veils the beautiful sight. This reflects how the vibrant hopes for freedom are shadowed by the influence of the kitchen. Women are blinded by society under the guise of power and equality and this works as hegemony among themselves: they teach one another to stay submissive. The presence of invisible cornerstones is solidified in the name of tradition and eventually, the lie became the truth after a thousand iterations through the ages. The depressing fact that women reinvent the instruments of their own oppression is to be realised: the knowledge that she is caged is necessary for her psyche to work towards freedom. In the story, the women folk involve themselves in the cooking and cleaning even when they are out for a picnic. From the knowledge from both the stories, we can understand that the invisible and unappreciated women labour has become so common that it became a factor that ties society together. No matter how green the surroundings are, the kitchen is the home to which the traditional family anchors the women. This trend pervaded time and the older the kitchen is, the more bonded the woman is. Ambai’s short story sheds light on the process of creation of gender by a society with respect to the internalisation of food politics within a family:

...the women appeared there (kitchen) like shadows, their heads covered, their deep coloured skirts melting in to the darkness of the room, slapping and kneading the chappati dough or stirring the fragrant , spicy dal. (66)

The damp and dark wall of the kitchen estimates the extent of the reign of patriarchy. The current socio-political scenario advocates equal participation in food making and household chores, irrespective of gender, as equality in labour has become a reality and this needs to be implemented to heal the corruption that patriarchy orchestrated. From the broken and never mended pipe in Jeo Baby’s mirroring of reality to Ambai’s discontentment with the representation of women characters as ‘unpaid servants’ and ‘submissive wives’, both the works search for the elixir of willpower which is necessary to realise one’s freedom. The clutches of gender-oriented normalised power can be dismantled only through an abrupt reaction from the women’s part; however, strength lies in numbers and collective reaction and a reformed/civilised psyche are arsenals for this breakthrough. The new normal is to be then preserved and productively utilised by generations after the inception of equity.

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