

Analyzing the Display of Gendered Identities Through the Patriarchal Set Up in *the Great Indian Kitchen*

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ABSTRACT

Every art form has the ability to comprehend and communicate with the audience by displaying an array of human feelings, emotions and understanding. Cinema too is an art that has in recent years gained a coveted position as one of the major sources of entertainment as well as edutainment. Indian cinema is one branch of the world cinema that is multilingual and diverse in its approach. The post-independence cinema in India has played a vital role in shaping, nurturing and binding the Indian society together. It has been the voice of the neglected and has been instrumental in providing a platform to the subjugated identities ranging from race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, gender, class, space etc. Amongst these mentioned identities it is the gendered identities that have been constructed through cinema either to affirm the social construct or subvert it. Indian cinema, whether commercial, parallel or regional in the recent times, has been a rich ground to study the justification of gendered identity in the patriarchal set up. Through this paper there will be an analysis of the Malayalam film *THE GREAT INDIAN KITCHEN* to study the display of gendered identities in the patriarchal set-up within Indian society and its far reaching impact on the society. The paper will also look into the core social issues prevalent in the society and its impact while exploring the effects of deep rooted patriarchy which has been responsible for the subjugation of the female gender. The paper will also look through the lens of the filmmaker the message to advocate for female rights that the film conveys for its audience.

Keywords- Cinema, gendered identities, patriarchy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Cinema is the most popular source of mass media. It has a strong influence on individuals as well as the society. It is the very reflection of the society and therefore shoulders the responsibility of being a precursor of bringing about social, political and intellectual change within it. The post –independence Cinema in India has been the very “expression of reality”¹ and therefore has been a rich source of scholarly engagement for cinemaphiles, critics and connoisseurs of cinema about which Indira Gandhi in her opening speech at the golden jubilee function of Indian Cinema had opined “A good film like any other

good art should be an experience. Cinema is entertainment. It is no less important instrument of social change and I believe that there is no dichotomy between the two”² This proves that when an art form shoulders the responsibility of social change it envisions an utopian outlook within the society and nurtures the humanitarian values that goes beyond the deeply rooted traditional and cultural ethos. The contemporary Indian cinema is realistic in nature and has transgressed the regional boundaries and has attained a global recognition for upholding issues related to survival, the varied subjugated identities and their inspirational journey of survival through all odds. The present paper will analyze the Malayalam film *THE GREAT INDIAN KITCHEN* to

¹ Valicha, Kishore, *The Moving Image: A Study of Indian Cinema*, Orient Longman, 1988

² Cherain, V.K, *Indian Film society Movement and its Impact*, Sage Publication, 2016

study the deeply rooted patriarchy in the society which is responsible for the gendered stereotyped roles and create gendered identities and space. The paper will also look into the attempt made by the film maker to bring about the transformation through the film to revitalize the society.

II. DISPLAY OF GENDERED IDENTITIES WITHIN THE PATRIARCHAL SET UP OF *THE GREAT KITCHEN*

Patriarchy in India finds its origin from the post vedic era where the emphasis was on creating a patriarchal setup and strengthening the control of male domination in the society. Merriam Webster Dictionary defines patriarchy as "A social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family"³ whereas Cambridge Dictionary defines it as a "society controlled by men in which they use their power to their own advantage"⁴ It was Sylvia Walby who in her book *Theorizing Patriarchy* defined it as "A system to social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women"⁵ In layman language it is a male dominated society where there are stereotyped and assigned rules for both male and the female gender. This stereotyping results due to the patriarchal mentality that excludes, includes, stigmatizes and displays a gender gap giving rise to gender identity which is "socially constructed"⁶ and determined by social and cultural influence. Debalina Banerjee in her work *Boundaries of the Self, Gender, Culture and Space* emphasis that "women as a category stands, bracketed as the 'other' by patriarchal norms and implies existence of boundaries that hem her in from all sides –cultural, moral, societal, familial and linguistics"⁷ Thus it is evident that the patriarchal set up has obstructed the growth and development of the female gender by disallowing them the physical, geographical as well as emotional space within the norms of the society.

Cinema is a reflection of society and Indian cinema is no different from it. The Industry itself is patriarchal in nature where there are very few female artists who can be named for their own creative inputs. The Commercial Cinema in India has always been the story of the hero who is always depicted as a chauvinistic messiah of the troubled. The female counterpart is always given the secondary status of a beloved, wife, mother, sister etc. each of them subjugated, controlled or sometimes the villainous vamp

symbolic of sex, beauty and treachery. It was the advent of realism into Indian cinema that led to the filmmakers handling complex and real-life situations and weaving them into simple stories appealing to the mass. Most of these were the stories of the neglected 'others' and the story of female gender helmed this approach. The Indian filmmakers followed their western counterparts to tell stories of the neglect, the mute sufferings, the subjugations, denial of space and became the voice of the millions. These film makers made cinema their weapon for social change and demanded the rightful place for the female within the society.

Indian Filmmaker Jeo Baby is no different from these filmmakers. His take on patriarchal mindset within Indian society has been the base of his films at the same time his films stand as answers to the desired change that the 'others' in the society expect. In an interview to Dipankar Sarkar the filmmaker talks of the deep rooted patriarchy within our society "Patriarchy in our society is itself creating these kinds of women. Some of them are living as slaves in the male-dominated society. But others want to break these shackles and prefer to live their lives in their world according to their wish"⁸

The Great Indian Kitchen is a 2021 critically acclaimed Malayalam cinema which was awarded the best film award by the Kerala State Government⁹. It tells a story of a newlywed bride who tries to reach up to the expectations of her husband, his family as well as the society. She becomes the part of the daily drudgery within the kitchen that is passed on to her from generations. She submissively accepts her responsibilities and tries to make amends within the new household. But in doing so she loses her self-identity and self-worth. The ultimate breakdown results in her walking out of the marriage and her home to gain back her freedom as well as her dignity.

Film maker Jeo Baby through this film displays the deep rooted patriarchal set up within Indian culture and how it is responsible for demarcating the gendered boundaries leading to gendered identities in the society. The filmmaker with the help of his ace cinematographer Salu Thomas brings "a transparent tale"¹⁰ of the thankless hours that females put into the kitchen to provide for the family. This paper enlists the following observations to show how the film tries to genuinely highlight the gendered identities displayed in the patriarchal set up

1. The film has no names for the characters. They are generalized as "They are everywhere in our society, in our houses and around us"¹¹ emphasizing not on

³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/patriarchy>

⁴ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/patriarchy>

⁵ Walby, Sylvia. *Theorising Patriarchy*, Wiley Publication, 1997

⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/gender-identity>

⁷ Banerjee, Debalina. *Boundaries of the Self: Gender, Culture and Space*, Cambridge scholars Publishing, 2014

⁸ <https://thestorymug.com/in-conversation-with-the-great-indian-kitchen-director-jeo-baby/>

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Great_Indian_Kitchen

¹⁰ <https://www.thenewsminute.com/kerala/why-don-t-you-men-enter-kitchens-director-jeo-baby-interview-141634>

¹¹ <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/malayalam/discrimination-begins-from-home-the-great-indian-kitchen-director-jeo-baby-7162003/>

the personal identity but gendered role and their identity. The characters are mere wife and husband; this identification is enough to show the generalized identities provided by the society. The wife once steps within the threshold of her husband's house is made aware of her duties vividly described by her husband, mother-in-law, father-in-law and also her parents. In this aspect she is the wife – an identity given by the society and the role assigned to her is also demarcated by the society.

2. The setup of the patriarchal household depicts the huge and palatial home but with a liminal space for the females of the house. According to Katrina Maurer “Women exist in a liminal space where they are existent but are not present, exposed yet overlooked to neither here nor there. Living in a liminal space lead to isolation”¹² The filmmaker exposes this liminal space of the protagonist in his story. For the newly wed the space is defined it's the kitchen for the entire day, the bedroom at night and the extra room when she is isolated from the family during her menstruation cycle. There is a monotony set in the life of the wife once the mother-in-law is away. The repetitive task of cleaning, cooking, and segregating the waste, and trying to fix the leakage are all thankless duties that she performs but there is no choice.
3. The camera focuses on the kitchen which is at the extreme end of the house. It is according to the patriarchal set up and hence is never given any importance while the females in the household adjust into it as it. The movements in the kitchen, the cutting, cleaning, chopping, and cooking are repetitive tasks that are performed every day, but the other members of the family are ignorant of this routine. For them these are unimportant tasks though done on a regular basis. The room used by the wife during her menstrual cycle is dingy and unkempt with minimalist requirements where the wife needs to get accustomed too. The men in the family are oblivious of her desires and aspirations and remember her existence only to get their needs satiated. Thus for the protagonist this space is liminal it is uncomfortable and a place for cyclical routine that is denunciative.
4. The film captures demarcation of duties and space on the basis of gender roles. There is a stark reality of a family set-up, daily rituals and space that every household witnesses globally. Through the lenses the filmmaker showcases the contrast in the leisure time spent by both the genders. Kitchen duty is a responsibility of the females. It is a part and parcel of their everyday life. This is not the same with the males in the family for them cooking can be a leisure activity to unwind from the daily routine.

The scene where the male members of the family decide to cook a spread as they come together is a leisure time. There is no leisure for the females in the household. While they are busy catering to the needs of the family. But, for the men folk it is leisure to have their morning tea while reading the newspaper, practicing yoga and even getting the toothpaste applied on the brush by the wife. Thus “Leisure becomes a gendered activity”¹³ which is always provided to the male to unwind.

5. The film emphasizes on the subjugation of the female within the patriarchal set up. There is always rejection and denial that is offered to the protagonist. Once she crosses the threshold of her husband's house she needs to be a ‘good and dutiful wife’ where her mission is to feed, clean and provide for the family in all aspects. She is trained to follow the rules that the patriarchal household has laid for the females in the house. The father in law is in charge of the financial matters so the jewelry of the bride is to be kept safe in his locker. The cooking of rice as well as the washing of the clothes must be done without the use of modern gadgets in the traditional way. So the rejection to any new introduction into the family is subtly emphasized through gentle reminders or long silences by the men in the house. She has no right to express herself to her husband and there is denial in every aspect including her need for consensual sex or applying for a job or for that matter supporting the women's movement for the Sabarimala verdict.
6. The kitchen in the patriarchal set-up becomes a place that “positions the women in the domestic space”¹⁴ It is the kitchen that they get identified with where the female gender is enslaved for a major part of her life. The film too identifies with the “pair of hands alternating between the piled up kitchen, the sink and the stove”¹⁵ The Great Indian Kitchen is not about the cooking happening in the kitchen but it is about the process of cooking which is a repetitive, backbreaking and thankless routine. The filmmaker states that “ while capturing the process of making food the focus was always how it enslaves the women”¹⁶
7. Religion has always had a greater impact on gender roles and their identities based on their physical strength and their societal acceptance. The film explores the socio-political space in which the

¹³ Mathew ,Saumya . *Analyzing Body Autonomy and Gendered Spaces in the Great Indian Kitchen*,feminismindia.com

¹⁴ Shaji, Sukanya, *feminismindia.com/2021/10/8/great-inidan-kitchen-state –awards jeo-baby*

¹⁵ Mathew, Soumya, *Analyzing Body, Autonomy and Gendered Spaces in the Great Indian Kitchen*, February 1, 2021, *feminismindia.com*

¹⁶ Roy, Priyanka, *Telegraphindia.com/entertainment/director/jeo-baby-on-the –great indian – kitchen/cid/1813047/april20,2021*

¹² Fempopculture.blogspot.com/2014/11/living –in-liminal-contemporary.html

female gender is always controlled. This control leads to the denial of her basic rights that includes her status in the society, isolation from the religious ceremonies and also abhorring for undergoing the menstruation process. The film mirrors the suffering of the female gender by focusing and highlighting the verdict of Sabarimala and its impact on the society. The refusal of the patriarchal society to accept the verdict and how the society responded to the females who supported the cause by terrorizing them and forcing them to delete their social media post brings out the real turmoil of the female within the Indian patriarchal system.

III. CONCLUSION

Cinema has always been the voice of the voiceless and the neglected. Through the analysis of this film *The Great Indian Kitchen* this paper tries to emphasize how the patriarchal set-up in every Indian household shapes the gender role and identities within a family. It also highlights how these gendered identities are responsible for defined social –political status which sets the role of gendered autonomy, especially the patriarchal autonomy within the social, political and physical spaces. The analysis also discusses how the film maker’s visual narrative impacts the viewers through its casual approach on sexism and patriarchy as it brings out the sufferings of every Indian woman within it. The film comes with a message that the female gender and its role within the society is more dignified and must be valued by giving them their status and dignity.

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