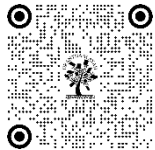


RAISING DAY TO DAY ISSUES OF INDIAN WOMEN THROUGH FILMS: AN ANALYSIS OF MALAYALAM FILM THE GREAT INDIAN KITCHEN

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ABSTRACT

Women's role in Indian society is still considered only as a housewife. Society has changed for the better but still, there is a dire need for the upliftment of women in society who are not just considered a housewife who will deal with all the household work and have no say in important decisions taken in day to day life and for themselves. The deep-rooted patriarchy and male chauvinism have always neglected women in Indian society and the small issues of daily life are neglected. Media and films have helped in raising gender issues. Still, it has been successful in raising popular and big issues that are generally faced by women while making big decisions in life like making career choices, which has helped in improving the literacy level of women. However, still, an educated woman is still expected to do household chores rather than doing a job. If a woman is working then also she is expected to work at home while the male members are expected to rest after a long tiring day at work. The Malayalam film "The Great Indian Kitchen" directed by Jeo Baby very firmly raises the day-to-day problems faced by women in society which are often neglected but are very important for women. The stigma around menstruation and the deprivation of women's rights is highlighted in the film very aptly. This study will analyse the film "The Great Indian Kitchen" through the content analysis method.

Keywords: Women, Films, Issues of Women, The Great Indian Kitchen

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite seven decades of democracy, the inner parts of homes remain largely dominated by the ideal family, which portrays women as mothers and goddesses. Still women are victims of patriarchy of the society. They are not allowed to do any work without the permission of males, they even can't do a job, doing all work of home from the kitchen to hygiene, etc. After marriage, women are marginalized as they are targeted for physical and psychological abuse by men and face unofficial control by their mother-in-law (T.S. & Jose, 2022). In a patriarchal family the idea of the ideal housewife, whose only goal is to meet her husband's personal and professional requirements, is strongly ingrained in women's minds (T.S. & Jose, 2022). The kitchen is considered the most antidemocratic and unfaithful space in a household and women are both victims and carriers of this patriarchal culture. Themes of patriarchy and atrocities on

women are well reflected in Indian films. Malayalam film director Joe Baby significantly added to this tradition through his film "The Great Indian Kitchen" which was released in 2021.

"The Great Indian Kitchen" is a film that delves into the complexities of patriarchy in India, focusing on a talented dancer's arranged marriage to a teacher in a patriarchal family, offering a powerful exploration of societal issues. The film follows Nimisha, a cheerful dancer who becomes a household chore-stress and becomes the ideal wife and daughter-in-law. The film highlights the power struggles between genders within and beyond the home. The movie highlights the need for the discontinuation of patriarchal norms and equal opportunities for both genders to grow mentally and emotionally. Women can use their power to fight the system and not blame society for their treatment. A change requires society to regard women as equal rather than doormats (Balraj, 2023).

Cinema, a significant mass media segment, significantly influences the audience's minds, influencing their thought processes and lifestyles. It projects contemporary lifestyles, portrays urban and rural women, and explores psychological aspects of human relationships. Bollywood's shift from portraying women as sex objects to obedient, peripheral figures is influenced by global cultural and economic flows. Recent movies reveal patriarchal anxieties in women's dominant roles (Ahad & Koç Akgül, 2020). Bollywood has historically portrayed female characters as stereotypes, but recent women-centric films like Queen, Pink, and Tumhari Sulu challenge this stereotype. These films explore women's perspectives and explore the journey of empowerment through rebellious women.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Movies like Stanley Ka Dabba, The Lunchbox, Kaaka Muttai, and The Great Indian Kitchen challenge gender roles and performances in Indian kitchens. Cooking, a woman's creative expression is often seen as a ritual and performance, highlighting the power relations surrounding culinary preparation and consumption (J. Alex & Justin, 2023). The portrayal of "happy housewives" reinforces in films and other gender stereotypes are easily identifiable which are natural and unquestionable (T.S. & Jose, 2022).

Indian films not only portrayed traditional housewives but also portrayed employed and independent women, who maintain balance in their personal as well as professional life. Films like Ki & Ka (2016) where traditional gender roles are reversed, Piku (2015) represents dual responsibilities faced by women, Queen (2014) depicts a journey of self-discovery and empowerment, Tumhari Sulu (2017) where the female protagonist balances her domestic life with her newfound work, Mission Mangal (2019) represents women's empowerment, breaking down of stereotypes, challenges gender norms. Indian cinema made such films too, in which female protagonists are represented as brave and convincing who prefer their individual identity over the role of a wife or a mother and are aware of their liberty (T.S. & Jose, 2022). Such films are English Vinglish (2012), Thappad (2020), Lipstick Under My Burkha (2016).

Afreen M. Sidique (2022) found a reflection of Cartesian dualism in the lives of women in the movie The Great Indian Kitchen, where women are exposed to Indian Patriarchy. Even in the films, the unequal distribution of roles leads to stereotypes and gender biases, reinforcing a male-dominated perspective (Deshmukh, 2020). Media should act as a powerful instrument for bringing social change for women, substituting traditional passive images with positive, encouraging attitudes. Priority should be given to changing women's image from passive observers to positive doers and achievers (Kumari & Joshi, 2015). The Indian films portray housewives as passive and meek, engaging themselves in cooking, serving, and cleaning (T.S. & Jose, 2022). There is a similar image of the kitchen in films that portray an ideal and happy housewife, where the happiness of an entire family is prepared and served (T.S. & Jose, 2022).

2.1. HISTORY OF WOMEN IN INDIAN CINEMA

Bollywood has a long history of portraying women characters in films, dating back to Raja Harishchandra's time when males predominantly played female roles. After he early start of films as a career woman from the marginalised strata of the society and foreign female artists started playing female characters in Indian cinema, as working in the film industry was looked down upon for women as artists in the society. Women working from the affluent sections of the society were given more room on the screen when artists like Devika Rani and Shanta Apte became the part of the cinema. During the 1940s-60s, the male characters became the lead characters and were protagonist of the film which were quintessential for the script, while the female characters were designed in stereotypic roles and were not part of the main plots of the story as were men, as male characters were portrayed as troubleshooters. Epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata had influenced the Hindi cinema deeply in its early years, and the characters of these epics like Sita,

Draupadi and Goddesses Durga and Lakshmi were more carved and offered to female characters as they were the role models for role of women in the society. The socio-political paradigm shift in the country in that era became the recipe of the Hindi cinema scripts and the antihero characters became more dominant on the screen and the rising unemployment became the central plot point of the films of Amitabh Bachan in the 1970s and the popular persona of “angry young man” was carved but there was no such character for the female actors which again advocated the hierarchical and patriarchal structure in the society and the film industry.

The female characters were objectified and commodified in the 1990s in Bollywood and later the films like ‘Taal’, ‘Hum Dil de Chuke Sanam’, and ‘Salaam Namaste’ expressed desires of women in the society. These films first tried to break the stereotypical roles of the female characters and a questioning look towards female sensibility was questioned through these films.

Bollywood has also portrayed strong female characters from time to time which challenged the patriarchal setup of the society and questioned the male dominance in the society. These characters were portrayed strong enough to break the wall around the female characters which depicted her as a homely and timid girl. The films after the 2010s have witnessed a strong portrayal of women in films which challenge the traditional image built around the female characters and the female character breaks the submissive and weak women’s image in the films and emerge as self-independent and vocal characters.

Hindi cinema has been a significant influence on Indian culture and society, shaping and expressing the changing scenarios and contours of society. The women in cinema have been used as a tool of selling point, with audiences enjoying song and dance routines, stereotypical images, and costumes. However, patriarchal undercurrents in society still dominate the portrayal of women, making them categorized and objectified. Globalization and Western culture have significantly influenced Bollywood’s depiction of women, but progress has been limited in terms of technological devices, locations, speech, and marketing. Women are still depicted as weak and dependent on heroes and everything around them is westernized. This has resulted in women being seen as commodities that need to be made a spectacle to sell well. Mythology, religion, and cultural ethos also influence Bollywood’s representation of women on screen. However, these values are ruled by patriarchy, and women are often represented submissively, submissive to these values. Women are portrayed as second wheel who carry the load of traditional values and have the onus to represent the community. In some films women are witnessed breaking these moulds and play bold, strong and independent characters but these films could not perform well at the box office. It is very evident that character of female artists are designed to attract the male attention and even if the female character is portrayed as strong and independent then also these are supplemented with dance and song sequences. (Representation of Women in Hindi Cinema Film Studies Essay, 2023).

Indian cinema has undergone significant changes since Independence, shifting from mythological blockbusters to Hollywoodized remakes. The largest global film industry produces over 1000 films annually, with women playing a significant role in bringing success to individual films. They have established records like Lata Mangeshkar as the world’s most recorded artist and Helen dancing in over a thousand films. Cinema plays a key role in depicting powerful characters, and women have not been far behind.

In 2017, the Geena Davis Institute reported that only one in ten Bollywood directors are women and female screen time is only 31.5 percent.

The women characters in Indian films are often objectified and sexualised and this phenomenon is majorly normalised. The women characters are reduced to sexuality and physical appearance. This diminishes women’s worth and reinforces gender stereotypes, limiting their choices and opportunities. The Indian film industry must take responsibility for these messages and create strong, independent female characters. They should focus on celebrating women’s accomplishments and promoting gender equality, challenging traditional gender roles to construct a society where women are given equitable and representation, a society where women are valued for their self being and not their bodies. (Breaking the Stereotypes: The Harmful Objectification and Sexualization of Women in Indian Cinema, 2023) Indian films often portray women as one-dimensional characters, lacking personal traits or substance. These stereotypes highlight male characters and perpetuate patriarchal values, highlighting their characteristics and highlighting patriarchal patriarchy (Bending the Gender: The Portrayal of Women in Films (Verve Magazine, 2017).

3. OBJECTIVES

- To analyse the women-centric film The Great Indian Kitchen.

- To understand the portrayal of women in Indian cinema through the film The Great Indian Kitchen.
- To study the issues faced by women in everyday life through the lens of a film.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this film is content analysis. To critically analyse the film through feminist lens, frame by frame and minute analysis of the film 'The Great Indian Kitchen' has been done.

The sample for this study is Purposive. The film was one of the best and critically acclaimed films of the year 2021. The film also won many state film awards that year. Since, the film's central theme is around gender issues and discrimination against women. Therefore, this film will be very important to understand the day to day issues of women.

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The Malayalam Movie, "The Great Indian Kitchen" released in 2021 deals with the plights of a married woman and can successfully transfer this message to the audience. India gained its Independence in 1947, which provided equal opportunity to every man and woman in this country. However, the burden of taking care of the family still falls on the shoulders of the woman. They are still left in charge of household chores and taking care of the family. Indian society has imparted this thought that the woman must do all household work. Even after toiling the whole day, they go through oppression, gender inequality, and living their lives under a patriarchal umbrella. The movie "The Great Indian Kitchen" talks about a society where women are forced to cook, clean, serve family members, and fulfill the needs of their husbands without complaining. This movie highlights the silent abuse, women's subjectivity, subjugation, cultural and traditional norms of the family, and also the patriarchy without actually portraying any kind of violence.

The film opens with shots of women happily dancing and some delicious sweets and snacks being cooked by a middle-class family. In the next shot, the camera catches the bride seeing the ceremony and marriage. The characters of the film are unnamed, Nimisha plays the role of the female protagonist and Suraj plays the role of her husband. The initial 30 minutes of this film depict an ongoing sequence of food preparation and women doing to household chores. At first, it may seem confusing, especially since the director has not used any background music during these scenes. However, as the story progresses, viewers gradually begin to understand the significance of these moments. The movie breaks away from the conventional portrayal of a stereotype mother-in-law mistreating her daughter-in-law. Instead, it portrays the mother-in-law as a supportive figure. Throughout the film, many meaningful moments demand close observation.

After the marriage newlywed bride is introduced to the kitchen and other household chores. She was expected to adopt to these roles by the family, which indicates the traditional gender roles of women in a house. Each morning female protagonist Nimisha with her mother-in-law prepare breakfast and do domestic chores while her husband exercises. Most of the time is devoted to the protagonist performing household chores, working in the kitchen, and serving the male, which are also the major shots of the film. Even the other characters of women shown in the film perform household chores and work in the kitchen. The screen time devoted to the female protagonist working in the kitchen and performing other household chores depicts domestic slavery. The mother-in-law brings a toothbrush with toothpaste on it for her husband who is sitting on an armchair and reading the newspaper. Also, he expects his wife to bring sleepers for him when he needs to go outside the house. Married women perform daily household chores without any pay and are treated like slaves. Even the male protagonist imitates his father and expects his wife to serve him similarly, to how his mother serves his father. These repetitive scenes of women performing household chores, bringing toothbrushes, sleepers, and cleaning highlight the seriousness of domestic slavery suffered by housewives. Also, Spain (1993) said women can't access certain spaces due to their inseparability from the kitchen which highlights the "division of labour". While heaving a meal the male puts food waste on the dining table, makes the table unhygienic, and expects women to pick up the waste and clean the table. This shows the lack of table manners from the male members of the family. Male dominance can be seen in the scene where the father-in-law asks Nimisha to cook food and traditionally wash clothes. During the menses, the woman was not allowed to enter in kitchen and not to touch any utensils or rest on the bed. She was not allowed to touch nor to come in front of her as during the same days her husband was on fast. This scene implies that how menses are still seen as a form of impurity is prevalent in society.

Every night after menses wife must make herself available to her husband to satisfy his sexual desires where her desires and pleasure are ignored and given no importance it. This scene represents that Indian patriarchal women are

expected to be obedient in the bedroom, while men exploit women's bodies and sexual desires. Women cannot have sexual cravings, while men can, as per the patriarchy, which restricts women's sexual desires. In another scene, the husband can be found scolding her wife for talking to a male relative on the phone. Also, she refused to do a job even after being selected for the post of dance teacher by male elders with a remark that household chores are more important than that of collectors' work. This controlling behaviour of the husband demonstrates the lack of personal freedom and autonomy that the wife experiences.

Amrita feels embarrassed in her marital home and realizes she is treated unfairly by her husband. The slap by her husband represents how badly women are treated in their marital homes, sometimes treated like objects degrading their dignity. After so much humiliation and mental torture, she realises her true value of her towards the end of the film. She makes a great decision by walking out of marriage breaking the family interlocks and getting independence from repetitive and monotonous life. These scenes mark her transformation and empowerment. In the last scene of the film, the male protagonist can be seen with another woman working in the kitchen. This highlights that the never-ending cycle of women's domestic responsibilities is such that when one woman breaks the boundary of the kitchen, another woman often finds herself caught in its web.

6. CONCLUSION

"The Great India Kitchen" effectively reflects the role of women in Indian households. This film successfully portrays complications, the voice of the voiceless, the usedness of every woman, and the infinite cycle of women in the kitchen. Scenes create the obedient image of women where women prepare food for their husbands and clean dirt created by them. The female protagonist of the film is passionate and ambitious but after getting married, their dreams are destroyed due to never-ending mental chores by her martial family. It shows how general practice and traditional norms of family are imposed on women and rights of women are violated in the patriarchal society. This film also shows the power struggle and how power is divided in the house and beyond through this gender base division. The movie also demonstrates that women can take their stand and can live independently in society as they have the power to fight with society. The protagonist leaves the house, as she cannot bear the continuous torture and patriarchy present in the house. She chose to walk out of the house instead of showing her suffering through words. This indicates the only way to come out of domestic violence is to break the family interlocks. The film focuses on the deeply rooted bias against women in traditional Indian households by portraying the oppression of women as a practice that is systematically and strategically carried out and passed from one generation to the next. Film shows highlight the never-ending cycle of women's domestic responsibilities. The film is a must-watch for every woman and man in the society. It is an eye-opener for all those people who still judge a woman for their cooking. It also shows the new generation of women who question these rigid thoughts and slavery put on women. It is a tribute to all those women who are quietly going through the same suffering for years.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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