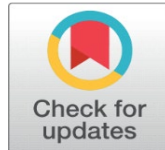
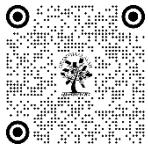


REIMAGINING DOMESTICITY: ANALYZING GENDER INEQUALITY AND PATRIARCHAL NORMS IN THE GREAT INDIAN KITCHEN AND ITS REFLECTION IN INDIAN LITERATURE AND CINEMA

Dr. Roselin Linitta George ¹

¹Principal, Oriental Education Society's Sanpada College of Commerce and Technology, Navi Mumbai



DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.4774](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.4774)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

In the context of Indian society, gender inequality has often been tied to domesticity, where the roles of women in the kitchen and home have been stereotyped and enforced for generations. Films and literature have long depicted the nuances of this inequality, offering a lens through which to critique the rigid gender norms that shape domestic spaces. The Malayalam film *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), directed by Jeo Baby, provides a poignant exploration of these themes, focusing on the experiences of a young woman who, after marriage, is subjected to the exhausting and largely invisible labor of the kitchen. This paper seeks to explore how *The Great Indian Kitchen* critiques the patriarchal norms that govern domesticity in India. By analyzing the film alongside representations of women in Indian literature and cinema, this paper will explore the intersection of gender, domestic labor, and patriarchal structures in the Indian sociocultural context. The primary aim of this paper is to critically examine how *The Great Indian Kitchen* subverts the traditional portrayal of domesticity in Indian culture. Additionally, it will explore the way this film fits into a broader discourse on gender inequality in Indian literature and cinema. The paper will also analyze the social critique embedded in the film, demonstrating how *The Great Indian Kitchen* challenges patriarchal ideologies by centering the domestic space as a site of both oppression and potential resistance.

Keywords: Domestic Labor, Domestic Spaces, Patriarchal Ideologies, Potential Resistance

1. INTRODUCTION

The representation of gender inequality in domestic spaces has been a subject of interest in both Indian literature and cinema. The patriarchal values that restrict women to household roles are commonly explored in novels, short stories, and films, where women's lives are often confined to the home, cooking, cleaning, and caregiving. In Indian literature, writers such as Kamala Das, Ismat Chughtai, and Arundhati Roy have explored how women's lives are constrained by societal expectations, particularly regarding their roles in the domestic sphere. Kamala Das's poetry, for instance, often critiques the sexual and social expectations placed on women, while Ismat Chughtai's short stories frequently highlight the struggles of women challenging traditional domestic roles.

The Feminine Mystique (1963), Betty Friedan critiques the cultural ideal of the "happy housewife" that was propagated in mid-20th-century America. Friedan argues that women were encouraged to find fulfillment solely through their roles as wives and mothers, particularly in suburban households. This idealization of domesticity led to widespread dissatisfaction among women, as it constrained their personal and professional ambitions and reduced their identity to the home and family.

Friedan's analysis connects the concept of "domestication" with the social pressures to conform to a narrow vision of womanhood. She argues that the expectation for women to derive meaning and fulfillment only through domestic labor, rather than through education or career pursuits, is a form of social control that limits their freedom and individuality. By reducing women to domestic roles, society suppresses their agency and restricts their potential beyond the home.

Elaine Showalter's feminist theory, particularly in her book *The Female Malady* (1985), touches on the concept of women's "double burden"—the simultaneous responsibility of domestic labor and paid work. While this concept does not focus exclusively on the "domestication" of women, it highlights how societal expectations of women to manage both home and work lead to a form of domestic control and subjugation.

Showalter's analysis emphasizes how women's roles in the domestic sphere are intertwined with expectations of emotional labor and caregiver. Even when women enter the workforce, the societal expectation that they will also maintain their domestic duties reinforces the notion that their value is primarily tied to their roles in the home. This "double burden" leads to emotional and physical exhaustion, reinforcing the idea that women's work, whether in the home or the workplace, is undervalued and taken for granted.

In cinema, many films have attempted to depict the lives of women within the family, such as *Mother India* (1957), *Dil Dhadakne Do* (2015), and *Piku* (2015). These films portray women as central figures in the household, yet they often reinforce traditional gender norms. However, *The Great Indian Kitchen* stands apart, offering a more direct critique of the burdens placed on women in the domestic sphere.

While much of the existing scholarship on Indian cinema and literature has focused on how domestic spaces reflect gender inequality, there is a gap in understanding how films like *The Great Indian Kitchen* actively deconstruct these roles. By offering a contemporary, critical perspective, this paper will contribute to filling that gap.

2. THE REPRESENTATION OF DOMESTICITY AND GENDER ROLES IN THE GREAT INDIAN KITCHEN

In *The Great Indian Kitchen*, the protagonist is forced into an unrelenting cycle of domestic labor after her marriage. The film takes place almost entirely within the confines of the kitchen, where the woman spends most of her time cooking, cleaning, and managing household chores. At the core of the film is the silent tension between the protagonist and her husband, who views her domestic labor as her sole purpose in life, with little appreciation or recognition.

The film uses the kitchen as a symbolic space where the protagonist's identity and freedom are confined. The repetitive nature of her daily tasks, along with her husband's disregard for her needs, underscores the suffocating effect of patriarchal expectations. The protagonist's silence and passive resistance eventually lead her to question her role and the deeply entrenched gender norms that dictate her life.

In analyzing the film through the lens of feminist theory, particularly Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, we can understand how the protagonist's position in the kitchen is emblematic of the broader societal tendency to reduce women to the role of the 'Other,' whose identity is defined solely by her relationship to the domestic sphere and her service to others. The film critiques this reductionist view, portraying the emotional and psychological toll it takes on women, as well as the hidden labor involved in maintaining domestic harmony.

Simone de Beauvoir's concept of "the Other" is central to understanding the experiences of women in the novel *The God of Small Things*. Ammu, the protagonist, is the embodiment of de Beauvoir's *Otherness*—she is trapped in a cycle of oppression because of her gender, class, and caste. As an abandoned woman with a history of failed relationships, she is relegated to a position of outsider status within her family and society. Her desire for autonomy, particularly her love for Velutha, is met with resistance, reflecting the patriarchal constraints placed upon women who challenge the established norms of caste and class. In the novel, domesticity plays a crucial role in the marginalization of women. Ammu's life is largely confined to the domestic sphere, where her responsibilities revolve around cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the household. Her rebellion, in seeking to love Velutha, an "untouchable," directly challenges the caste and gender-based hierarchy that imprisons her. However, this rebellion also leads to her eventual undoing, as society punishes her for stepping outside the roles assigned to her.

In contrast to Roy's exploration of gender and caste-based oppression, *The Great Indian Kitchen* offers a more direct, contemporary critique of gender roles and domestic labor. The film revolves around a newly married woman who is expected to fulfill the role of the ideal housewife—cooking, cleaning, and taking care of her husband's needs. The protagonist, played by Nimisha Sajayan, is submerged in the daily grind of household work, facing the emotional and physical toll of these responsibilities with little recognition.

The film critiques the deeply ingrained patriarchy that limits women's roles to domestic tasks, as the protagonist's life is consumed by her responsibilities in the kitchen. However, the film also highlights her growing awareness of the suffocating nature of these roles and her eventual decision to break free. Like Ammu in *The God of Small Things*, the protagonist in *The Great Indian Kitchen* represents the silent resistance of women who endure the unappreciated labor of domesticity. However, unlike Ammu's tragic fate, the protagonist's journey is one of gradual resistance, culminating in her refusal to continue fulfilling the domestic expectations imposed upon her.

Judith Butler's concept of gender permissivity provides a lens through which to analyze the protagonist's struggle in *The Great Indian Kitchen*. According to Butler, gender is not a static identity, but something that is performed through everyday actions. The protagonist's daily performance of domestic labor—her cooking, cleaning, and serving—is a form of gendered performance that is deeply ingrained in her identity. However, as she grows disillusioned with her role, she begins to reject these performances, subtly defying the patriarchal expectations of her. The film portrays the protagonist's growing agency through small acts of resistance, such as refusing to engage in the repetitive labor expected of her and ultimately walking away from the kitchen.

This rejection of domestic labor can be seen as a subversion of gender norms and a challenge to the patriarchy. By refusing to perform the role of the ideal wife and homemaker, the protagonist asserts her autonomy and imagines what domesticity can mean for women.

3. PATRIARCHAL NORMS IN INDIAN LITERATURE: HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

The representation of women's roles in the kitchen and the home has long been a focus in Indian literature. Writers have used the domestic sphere as a metaphor for the larger societal structures that oppress women. In Kamala Das's *My Story*, the domestic setting often reflects the limitations placed on women by the social structures they inhabit. This highlights the emotional and psychological toll of being confined to domestic roles and the frustration that arises from the limitations on women's agency. The concept of "domesticating women" is explored in *My Story* as Das reflects on the social and personal constraints that shape her identity and life choices.

Domesticity, in this sense, becomes both a physical and metaphorical prison for women, where their roles are defined by others and their desires suppressed in favor of family expectations. The narrative reveals a constant struggle with the roles society expects her to perform as a woman—primarily that of a dutiful wife, mother, and caretaker. Her marriage, arranged by her family, is portrayed not as an opportunity for self-expression but as an imposition of a patriarchal ideal. From the beginning of her adult life, Das is conditioned to accept the expectations of domesticity, a space traditionally relegated to women. Her story shows how women are taught to prioritize others' needs over their own, making them dependent and self-effacing in the process.

Through her writing, Kamala Das critiques the concept of women being "domesticated" in both a literal and figurative sense. She writes about how marriage is presented as the ultimate goal for women, a space in which their identity is completely bound to their husband's needs. This concept of "domesticating" women is mirrored in her personal experience. In her marriage, Das is expected to perform traditional roles: cooking, cleaning, and caring for the children, without room for her desires or ambitions. These responsibilities become all-consuming, reducing her to a passive, self-sacrificing figure in the domestic sphere, much like the stereotypical portrayal of women in patriarchal societies.

However, Das's autobiography also delves into her attempts to resist these domesticating forces. She is profoundly aware of the emotional and intellectual constraints placed upon her by the institution of marriage. Throughout *My Story*, there are instances where she describes her internal battles against the conventional roles of wife and mother. She acknowledges the disconnect between the identity imposed on her as a woman and her aspirations. She writes openly about her struggles with sexuality, the emotional toll of being constantly confined within the domestic sphere, and her longing for self-expression beyond the roles that society has mapped for her. Kamala Das's exploration of infidelity and extramarital relationships in *My Story* further challenges the notion of domesticity as a space where women are expected

to be emotionally and physically satisfied. Her extramarital affairs are not just about rebellion but also a search for identity and agency beyond the restrictive boundaries of the home. Through these experiences, she highlights how women are often forced into domestic roles that diminish their autonomy and individuality.

Ismat Chughtai's short stories, like *Lihaaf* (The Quilt), also explore the theme of women's confinement within the home. Chughtai's works often challenge the traditional portrayals of women in Indian society, exposing the contradictions and vulnerabilities within the domestic environment. *Lihaaf*, for instance, directly critiques the stifling effects of patriarchal structures and the unspoken suffering of women behind closed doors. In Indian cinema, the portrayal of women in domestic spaces often reinforces the idea of women's self-sacrifice for the sake of family. Films like *Mother India* and *Dil Dhadakne Do* feature women whose identities are deeply intertwined with their roles as mothers and caregivers. However, these films, while showing the struggles of women within these roles, often leave little room for active rebellion or change. Unlike these films, *The Great Indian Kitchen* offers a more critical, feminist perspective, questioning the very assumptions about women's roles in the household.

4. REIMAGINING DOMESTICITY: RESISTANCE AND AGENCY IN THE GREAT INDIAN KITCHEN

One of the central themes of *The Great Indian Kitchen* is the protagonist's journey from passive acceptance to active resistance against the patriarchal norms that confine her. Unlike traditional representations of women in Indian cinema and literature, where domestic roles are often unquestioned or glorified, the film allows the protagonist to question the very structure of domesticity. The protagonist's eventual rebellion is subtle but powerful. She begins to reject the notion that her worth is solely tied to her ability to fulfill domestic duties. This shift is not portrayed as an overt act of defiance but rather as an internal transformation, where she gains the strength to redefine her identity outside the narrow confines of domesticity.

This reimagining of domesticity in *The Great Indian Kitchen* can be seen as part of a broader movement in Indian cinema, where films increasingly challenge traditional gender norms. This trend mirrors similar shifts in literature, where the portrayal of women's roles is evolving from passive acceptance to active agency. The rise of feminist cinema and literature in India offers new ways of imagining women's lives beyond the kitchen and domestic space.

5. CONCLUSION

The Great Indian Kitchen offers a critical reimagining of the role of women in the domestic sphere, highlighting the gender inequality that persists within Indian households. Through its portrayal of the protagonist's silent struggle and eventual resistance, the film challenges patriarchal norms that have long defined domesticity. By comparing the film with Indian literature and cinema, it is clear that while traditional depictions of domestic roles often reinforce gender inequality, newer works like *The Great Indian Kitchen* encourage a rethinking of these norms.

As Indian cinema and literature continue to evolve, they offer more nuanced portrayals of women's lives, suggesting that domesticity is not a static, unchanging role but one that can be reimagined and reclaimed by women themselves. *The Great Indian Kitchen* serves as an important step in this journey, providing both a critique of patriarchal structures and a vision for a more equitable future.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Das, Kamala. *My Story*. Harcourt, 1976.
Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. Penguin Books, 1997.

Chughtai, Ismat. *Lihaaf (The Quilt)*. Translated by Agha Shahid Ali, Oxford UP, 1999.
The Great Indian Kitchen. Directed by Jeo Baby, 2021.
de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Vintage, 2009.
Mother India. Directed by Mehboob Khan, 1957.