



# Beyond Culinary Craft: The Kitchen As A Gendered Space In The Great Indian Kitchen

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## Abstract

Gender dynamics, patriarchy and woman's space at home have been fertile topics of discussion in literary studies. This research article observes the kitchen space which is frequently regarded as an archetypal domestic realm, portrayed as a complicated setting where deeply embedded gender norms and societal expectations collide.

Through an in-depth analysis of the Malayalam film *The Great Indian Kitchen*, this study endeavors to explore the social and cultural norms that have established the view of the kitchen as a largely feminine domain in which women are sidelined and expected to handle household responsibilities, particularly cooking. The plot and characters of the film are analyzed to show how they both reinforce and shatter these age-old preconceptions. The kitchen is both a metaphor for the chief woman character's entrapment and a vital setting for her experiences of oppression, isolation, entrapment, and, eventually, empowerment. Through the analysis of the female protagonist's hardships as she navigates through repressive limits, this study aims to widen the horizon of gendered space and thinking.

The study also explores the kitchen's capability for resistance and rebellion through an in-depth investigation of the protagonist's quiet disobedience within the kitchen, demonstrating how this normally private space can be a location of protest against the engrained gender norms. The study also sheds light on the film's bigger social themes such as marital oppression, marital rape, and Indian society's conventional expectations of female subordination.

**Keywords:** kitchen, gender norms, marital oppression, entrapment, subordination, resistance, liberation

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the domestic sphere, where the clinking of utensils forms a symphony of routine and the aroma of spices weaves tales of tradition, lies an arena often concealed by its mundane faced- the kitchen.

Nonetheless, beyond its innocent appearance, the kitchen reveals itself to be a complex battleground where intricate details of gendered power dynamics are specifically engraved. *The Great Indian Kitchen* brilliantly navigates the severity of marital oppression and the silent rebellion that brews under the surface of this culinary furnace.

As a timeless domain, the kitchen has long been associated with historical and cultural ideas that regard it as the ideal feminine realm. This article takes a cinematic look at how 'The Great Indian Kitchen' goes beyond basic culinary skills, delving into the significant implications of the kitchen as a gendered place. Within these sacred walls, the film reveals the harsh reality of female subservience and gives voice to its female protagonist's stubborn spirit—a voice that is often buried but never destroyed.

A voyage through this film takes us beyond the pure aesthetics of culinary expertise, pushing us to examine the core of gender roles and societal expectations. The dimensions of resistance via the lens of *The Great*

*Indian Kitchen*, which manifests not in noble actions but in subtle displays of defiance that resonate through the ages.

The audience witnesses the intersection of artistry and activism inside the limits of a seemingly regular kitchen as it unravels the thematic fragments that weave camera work and character interactions. The combination of culinary skill and marital oppression creates a dramatic scene, compelling us to reconsider the limits of tradition and the perseverance of the human spirit.

The kitchen, traditionally thought to be an embodiment of conformity, now invites the spectators to dive deeper and travel the tangled corridors of *The Great Indian Kitchen*, where culinary skill meets a bitter story of freedom and empowerment.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this paper will predominantly encompass analytical and descriptive approaches. This research will draw upon secondary sources, primarily comprising journal articles and books. These sources will be instrumental in providing a comprehensive foundation for the analysis and description of the themes, dynamics, and societal constructs explored within the context of the film "The Great Indian Kitchen." By critically examining existing scholarly literature and pertinent academic discourse, this paper aims to construct a nuanced and academically rigorous understanding of the film's themes, including gender roles, patriarchy, oppression, resistance, and marital dynamics.

## III. DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Debunking the gendered space in *The Great Indian Kitchen*

Women are doubly marginalized in marital homes as they are subject to the physical and psychological abuse unleashed by the men and the informal and uninstitutionalized authority the mothers-in-law exert over them. A married woman spends her life in "double powerlessness" "as she is both domestically servile and financially dependent on her male counterpart. Even when a woman contributes to the family's income, it is merely viewed as a "feminine obligation", "denying her access to economic resources.

A family is a microcosm of a "typical male supremacy space" that reveals social and gender hierarchical structures (Wang and Liang 2018, 180). The kitchen, as an epicenter of female oppression, maintains traditional forms of womanhood and carries patriarchal ideologies from generation to generation; women's "inseparability" from the kitchen limits women's "access to certain spaces," emphasizing an explicit "division of labor" (Spain 1993, 137-138).

In *The Great Indian Kitchen*, women's space is limited to the kitchen and the surrounding places that account for domestic subordination. The repeated images of the heroine laboring in the kitchen and serving the family are the films' most prominent shots. The additional screen time given to the heroine performing domestic duties emphasizes the misery of domestic servitude faced by housewives.

The kitchen and montages of multiple cooking-frames serve as the film's spatial setting, attesting to the fact that the kitchen is one of the most dynamic rooms in the house, where the majority of domestic activities take place.

A kitchen is frequently regarded as a metaphor for a woman; an absence of a woman at home or a cooking area conveys a sense of loss or deficiency. A reoccurring picture in films depicting an ideal and happy housewife is a kitchen environment, where she prepares and serves the happiness of the entire family. The traditional everyday routines of an ideal housewife echoes the prevailing dimensions of familial patriarchy, inscribing kitchen space as a "seat of women's oppression" (Floyd 2004, 62), affirming the gender division of domestic labour.

The female protagonist of *The Great Indian Kitchen*, a newlywed young wife, has no choice but to serve the men in the family and gets accustomed to the mundane domestic routine. Having been uprooted from a less conventional family and replanted into an orthodox patriarchal family, her life routine gets shaken, compelling her to adapt herself to the norms of the marital home.

She is instructed to step away from kitchen space, when she is on her menstrual cycle but is compelled to confine herself to a dingy room. She is prohibited from using the common space in the house, forbidding her from being visible to the men in the family, touching holy basil, and sleeping on a mattress. The new family offers her a life confined within the marital home, leaving her voiceless to the unidentified injustice inherent in the "ethical and moral task" (Leonard 2019, 108) of homemaking.

In *The Great Indian Kitchen*, the recurring shots of the perpetual chores in the kitchen space becomes a focal point exhibiting the cyclical and monotonous lives of the idealized housewives and thereby capturing gender injustice within the family as they execute all the domestic chores and preparing the kitchen for the next day, when every man in the family goes to sleep unmindful of the unrecognized and continual toil of women.

Domestic relationships within the family are characterized by a “sense of alienation” (Floyd 2004, 67) between those who cook and those who eat. In *The Great Indian Kitchen*, the zooming in of family portraits of different generations orchestrated by the sounds from the kitchen reinforces the entrapment of a kitchen that has refused female identity. Juxtaposing the montages of women toiling against the shots of men exercising and relaxing their bodies and minds amplifies the base of domestic slavery obscured by the image of an ideal housewife.

The film highlights the suppression of women as a practice systematically and strategically carried out and transmitted from one generation to another, throwing light on the deep-seated bias against women in traditional Indian households.

The males in the film are neither evil nor opposed to women, nor do they physically harm them; instead, they recline on the comforts given by their female counterparts, viewing it as their privilege and ignoring women's philanthropic contribution. In *The Great Indian Kitchen*, for example, the father-in-law sits in an armchair reading a newspaper while waiting for his wife to bring him his toothpaste-smear toothbrush. He also wants his wife to fetch his shoes when he goes out, regardless of the duties she has to do. The male lead mirrors his father and expects his wife to serve him in the same way that his mother serves his father.

According to Floyd, the kitchen

*[...] remains a site of dirty work of transhistorical, transcultural symbolic meaning: the space where the raw, the unclean and the undefiled are brought, and where the social rules attendant on civilized life are reiterated, where status is confirmed and exclusion practiced.*

Kitchen space, thus, becomes a site for dirty work, where women ceaselessly work to satisfy the family, disparaging themselves merely as domestic workers. The nameless husband in *The Great Indian Kitchen* kisses his wife on her forehead while she wipes the gut-churning leftovers of his food scattered on the dining table. Women cleaning the food scraps from the dining table, a complex form of domestic slavery, is idealized and regarded as one of the desired traits of a perfect housewife. The continual leaking and reeking kitchen sink symbolizes the shameless male dominance in the family, a plight housewives endure until the female individuality and identity get disdained. The exploited and abused women overlook and tolerate domestic injustice in silence, fearing social and familial isolation and social exclusion.

#### IV. THE METAMORPHOSIS OF THE UNNAMED PROTAGONIST

“One is not born a woman, but becomes one” was very correctly put into words by the famous existentialist feminist **Simone de Beauvoir** to explain the gendered patterns of women subordination in society whereby women are assigned the position of “subordinate others”.

The anonymity of the central character in "The Great Indian Kitchen" constitutes a deliberate narrative choice that carries profound narrative and thematic significance. The absence of a specific name for the protagonist serves to render her a more universal and relatable figure, transcending individuality to embody a collective female experience. This narrative technique enables viewers from diverse backgrounds to readily identify with her character, as she comes to symbolize not merely an individual but a representative of countless women sharing her predicament. Her anonymity fosters a narrative that resonates broadly, underscoring that her struggles are not solitary but emblematic of the experiences of numerous women. Moreover, it underscores the film's overarching message concerning the systemic oppression embedded within traditional gender roles.

The silence imposed upon the protagonist within the film finds an apt parallel in her lack of a name. This alignment emphasizes the systemic muting of her voice and agency within the confines of the patriarchal household. Her namelessness serves as a metaphor for the erasure of her identity and the suppression of her individuality. Furthermore, it enhances the character's relatability, as viewers can project their own experiences and emotions onto her, resulting in a more immersive and emotionally resonant viewing encounter.

The film artfully explores the disparity between the pre-and post-consumption phases within the context of maintaining a clean household. It meticulously delineates the often-overlooked aspects of domestic labour, unveiling the invisible and unpaid work integral to meal preparation, cooking, and subsequent cleanup. This omission from cinematic portrayals can be attributed to the predominantly male gaze and perspective characterizing many films, which omit the daily toils of women. "The Great Indian Kitchen" subverts this perspective, shifting the camera's focus to the female viewpoint and offering a vivid depiction of the frequently concealed aspects of domestic work.

It underscores that seemingly mundane tasks, such as peeling vegetables, carry profound implications for the unseen sacrifices made by women. By lingering on these peels, the film invites viewers to contemplate the hidden burdens borne by women. Additionally, the film highlights the stark gender disparity in dining practices, wherein men habitually consume their meals first, relegating women to the role of eating last. This practice is poignantly illustrated through the discomfort experienced by the newlywed daughter-in-law, who is urged to join the men for breakfast on her first day in the household.

The climactic scenes featuring the protagonist's act of throwing unclean water and her subsequent departure from the house mark a transformative and pivotal juncture in her character arc. These moments symbolize her liberation from the confines of traditional gender roles and societal expectations. The act of throwing unclean water serves as a potent symbol of defiance and rebellion, punctuating her breaking point and signaling her refusal to silently endure the oppressive conditions within the household. It represents a reclamation of agency and autonomy, a breaking free from the confines of a stifling and patriarchal environment. Subsequently, her decision to walk out of the house signifies her bold assertion of independence and her rejection of the cycle of silent suffering that has characterized her life. It is a literal and symbolic departure from not only the physical space of the house but also the societal norms and constraints that have stifled her. Crossing the threshold symbolizes her emergence as an individual with agency, desires, and the determination to lead life on her terms.

In sum, these climactic scenes encapsulate the film's central message. They underscore the transformation of the unnamed protagonist from a subdued and nameless figure into a symbol of resistance and protest. Her actions echo the broader struggle of women against ingrained gender norms and highlight the courage required to defy societal expectations. These scenes serve as a poignant reminder that within the ostensibly mundane routines of daily life, there exists the potential for profound acts of defiance and self-empowerment.

## V. CONCLUSION

The persistence of gender disparities within patriarchal family structures reflects deeply ingrained societal beliefs that validate them through inherent sex characteristics. Supported by numerous social institutions, these disparities perpetuate unequal power dynamics between men and women, reinforcing the sexual division of labour. Within the family, gender roles are constructed, resulting in a pervasive inequality that significantly harms women. Ideologies of gender oppression, bolstered by the subconscious acceptance of male dominance, impose domestic servility on women. The "implicit nostalgic image" (Nussbaum 2002, 51) of contented families confines women to caregiving roles, relegating the kitchen to a woman's domain.

This film acts as a powerful catalyst for introspection, compelling viewers to confront the entrenched institutional sexism that spans generations. It illuminates the privilege often overlooked, where the expectation of a three-course meal is normalized, yet the labour and effort required remain largely invisible. Society frequently trivializes the immense work of homemakers, leading to dismissal and belittlement within a context that fails to acknowledge the daily toil of home maintenance.

Suraj, the male character, is not depicted as inherently villainous but as a product of his upbringing and societal conditioning. His belief that men should provide financially while women manage child-rearing and family support reflects the values instilled in him from childhood. Suraj embodies countless individuals trapped in this mindset, where change seems unattainable. His communication and behaviour mirror the traditional values ingrained in him.

Conversely, Nimisha's character illustrates the harrowing predicament many women face. Her journey from a wide-eyed, cheerful individual to someone who grapples with antiquated family customs starkly highlights the toll of juggling multiple responsibilities. The film vividly captures her exhaustion, dishevelled appearance, and the fatigue in her eyes, resonating with the realities of countless women in similar situations.

Ultimately, the film offers a sobering commentary on the intersection of gender roles, societal expectations, and the toll they exact on individuals, both men and women. It underscores the urgent need to re-evaluate and challenge these deeply ingrained norms, fostering a broader understanding of the hidden labour and sacrifices in domestic settings. By doing so, it invites a collective reckoning with the structures that perpetuate gender inequality and calls for meaningful change toward a more equitable future.

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