

The Great Indian Kitchen- Cooking Its Way into the Indian Patriarchy System

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i7/16946> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i7/16946

Published Date: 05 July 2023

Abstract

Patriarchy affects women in different stages of their lives. In a patriarchal society, the male possesses most of the power and primary responsibility for leadership and property ownership. Women on the other hand, are at the mercy of the male's decision making regarding their education, marriage, and dreams. The Indian movie industry has also taken an interest in portraying the lives of women under the patriarchy umbrella and the toll it takes on their lives. The movie 'The Great Indian Kitchen' depicts the role and the power struggle of women after marriage and how much they are to relinquish their hopes and dreams to cater for the in laws. This conceptual paper discusses how Indian women are represented at home and how they are assigned roles by men and society.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Indian Women, Representation, Media

Introduction

The most emblematic hindrance to women's development and growth is patriarchy. Patriarchy has become a way of life to keep women submissive and subservient. It is a social construct that allows men to be regarded higher than women as the gender equality between men and women is in a constant power struggle due to traditional and social norms, caste, religions, and patriarchy ideology. In a patriarchal society, men possess ultimate power and primary responsibility for leadership and property ownership whereby as a father figure, they also exercise authority within the context of the family. The male members - husband, elder brother, and father, make decisions for the rest of the family, and for a women's physical and moral protection (Sonawat, 2001) leaving women to suffer constantly from denial of freedom even in the domains of their home, repression, and unnatural brainwashing (Nirola, 2017), inferior status and caste discrimination. Women are refused rights and access to many things that are readily accessible to men, which makes women's subjugation clear in many ways in both the public and private realms. Even before they are conceived, women are denied their worth by the patriarchal society. India has one of the greatest rates of female foeticide/infanticide in the world despite glorifying women as a national icon (Chakrabathi, 2022). According to UNICEF, India (n.d), India, being a large, populated country, witnesses

gender survival differential rate by 11 percent as more baby girls are dying than baby boys. Fast forward to marriage, which is deemed sacred, the grown woman does not have a voice and lives her life serving her husband, in-laws, and her children till the end of her days. If she remains unmarried, her mere existence is deemed void and has no value in the family (Madireddy, 2020).

The situations are well-known, ranging from her adopting a new surname to losing her originality and personality for the benefit of the family. Though looked upon as a burden, women have in the past stood up to fight the patriarchal system, but societal norms and moral codes work against women in their stand for gender equality (Shalini & Alamelu, 2020). It is reprehensible that society still demands a woman to be constantly dependent and dominated by the men around her, but what's more worrying is that women are on the bandwagon with these ideologies and succumb to the pressure of their family. It is often the women who are forced to make compromises in a male dominated household as they are seen as a liability in the relationship and are usually left with little or no say on marriage, children, or even sexual pleasures. Women are constantly taken for granted and the ones to face the brunt of men's lust, frustration, and anger.

These suppressions are often portrayed in the Indian cinema especially if the movie involves around a village setting. Women are depicted as solely a property owned by the husband and in laws and at times receives the wrath of her husband. And as usual, she is forbidden to return to her family home as this will bring shame to them. At the end, she is forced to live her life in misery with her in-laws. In the kitchen, where women traditionally are cooking, cleaning, and serving, there is a clear gender divide. Even if we take a closer look at cooking advertisements or kitchen appliances, advertisers all have women's practical requirements at heart. As in real life, gender spaces, domains, and movements of men, women, and servants are structurally delineated; their distinct territories and domains are demarcated and are strictly adhered. As a result, while most rooms are shared by people of all genders, the kitchen is always used by women only.

The movie 'The Great Indian Kitchen' by director Joe Baby shares the same ideology where women are forced to cook, clean, and serve the family members around the clock. The movie highlights the suppression of women and perpetuated by other women as a norm in their own homes. This suppression is carried out by generation to generation bringing to light the inbred bias against women which is ingrained in the Indian household. The motivation behind this study is to highlight the challenges, subjugation in the name of culture and patriarchy as practiced by the Indian household. This paper will discuss the patriarchy system in India, the representation of women in Indian cinema and an in-depth analysis of the movie which notes the suppression, silent abuse, socio-cultural and religious norms of an Indian patriarchy family.

Patriarchy and Challenges for The Indian Women

Patriarchy is a system that advocates the value of total control and domination in roles related to moral authority, social privilege, and control over property over a particular gender. India, like many other countries, has a long history of the patriarchy system which has in many ways affected women. In the Sanskrit verse 9.3 or Manusmriti dealing with Dharma, it is noted that *"The father guards her during virginity, the husband guards her in youth, the sons guard her in old age; the woman is never fit for independence"*. Though according to Jha (2019), the translated text does not specifically mean that a women should not be independent, rather it

is understood by the patriarchal members that her mind being is not under her control and is unable to protect herself as she does not possess the requisite strength.

The history of patriarchy dates to the Vedic period, which lasted from 1500 BCE to 500 BCE (McClish & Olivelle, 2012), during which the caste system was established. In this system, women were relegated to a lower position than men and were not allowed to read the Vedas (the sacred texts of Hinduism) and their main role was mainly confined to domestic labour and childbearing. The medieval period which lasted from the 6th century to the 18th century, further entrenched the patriarchy system where the practice of Sati, in which a widow was expected to sacrifice herself by sitting atop her deceased husband's pyre (Brule, 2020). Bengali Hindu society during the reigns of Raja Ram Mohan Ray and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar was rife with prejudice and illiteracy. The social structure at the time was being destroyed by issues such as child marriage, polygamy, the practise of Sati, the caste system, and lack of regard for women (Rahman, 2020). Both Raja Ram Mohan Ray and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar advocated for women's education and the abolishment of Sati.

India's independence in 1947, provided equal rights for men and women, however the patriarchy practises including sexual assault and domestic abuse continued in many parts of the country. One of the significant challenges faced by women is gender discrimination where they were denied equal access to education, employment opportunities and healthcare. Moreover, providing a woman education is deemed a wasted effort as her role will always be in the kitchen serving her family and in laws. Krishnaswamy (1984) pictures women as

A creature who, as a child, is sold off to strangers for a bridal price, or when she grows up, serves as a supplier of dowry for her husband's family; or who, as a widow, in a final act of obliteration, immolates herself on her dead husband's funeral pyre to be acclaimed as 'Sita-Savitri', as an immortal.

It is just not in childbirth that men have dominance, but also in nutrition, health, property rights to name a few (Saini, 2022). Workplace harassment, violence and abuse were often justified by cultural practises and gender roles. Another challenge is child marriage and the dowry system where a sum of payment is given to the bridegroom's family upon marriage. The dowry system is an innate financial burden for the family and can lead to infant death especially if the child is a girl. Not fulfilling the demands from the bridegroom's family can also lead to abuse and violence. Moreover, women often face challenges when reporting any injustice as it usually goes unreported or ignored by law enforcements officer (Sharma, 2015).

However, it is important to note that not all Indian households operate under a patriarchal system, and there are many families and individuals who are actively working to challenge gender norms and promote gender equality. There are significant efforts to improve women's life and access to education, healthcare, and work force and to protect their legal rights against sexual harassment and assault. There have been several legislative measures and social movements aimed at empowering women and promoting gender equality in India, all while with patriarchy still ruling certain families.

Representation of The Indian Women in Tamil Cinema

The topic of representation of women in Tamil cinema has been a topic of discussion among many scholars. Though it has evolved over the years, there is still a long way to go before

women can achieve gender equality and fairness in representation in education, healthcare, and the workforce. Historically, the representation of women is inclined towards cliché roles such as the damsel in distress, the materialistic girlfriend/ wife, the obedient wife; characters which were inclined towards their relationship with men. Deshmukh (2020) also opines that Indian cinema lacks balance and underrepresents women in general as they are casted in roles synonymous with nurturing and being submissive. John Berger in his 1972 essay "*Ways of seeing*", state in terms of cinema representation, 'Men act, women appear. Men watch, women watch themselves being watched'.

A typical scene would be a helpless woman being saved by the hero who will eventually fall in love with him. In some movies, women are made to feel culpable for choosing career over family such as their role should remain in the four walls of the kitchen. Women constantly get slut-shamed for exercising the right to design her own path in life (Lavanya, 2022). If not being stereotyped, the women is made to dance provocatively engaging in romantic relationship with male characters or shown in revealing clothes. These depictions often reinforce and contributes to the culture of objectification and normalization of sexual harassment and assault. The quixotic portrayal of women in Indian cinema can also have a negative impact on the self-esteem and body image of young girls.

However, it is pertinent to note that not all Tamil films depict women sexually as there are examples of movie which have female centric roles and have challenged the traditional gender roles. Overall while there have been some positive representations of women in Indian cinema, female sexualization is still a persistent issue and remains a concern for feminist alike. There is a dire need to ensure that women are given equal screen time as men in matters of empowerment and diversity.

The Great Indian Kitchen and the Representation of Women

Jeo Baby's 2021 Malayalam movie 'The Great Indian Kitchen' won the Best Film and Best Original Screenplay at the 51st Kerala State Film Awards. George (2021) from "The Times of India" praised the movie as an "eye-opener, at a time many women are still judged for their cooking skills than any other capabilities. It not only talks about the new-gen women who question such unsung slavery but is also a tribute to the women who have been silently managing it inside every home for centuries". The movie was translated in many languages including Telegu, Kannada and Tamil. The movie deconstructs gender politics and oppressive patriarchy dealing with the plight of women in India. Set in Kerala depicting a dominant caste and feudal family, the plot depicts the domestic labour the young bride faces after marriage. The movie puts focus on the laborious task the protagonist does daily; from chopping, peeling, cutting, boiling, frying etc just so that the men in the household can have a delicious meal fitting their taste buds. To add on, she must be ever ready to sexually pleasure her husband when required without hearing to her wants and needs. The young bride played by Indian actress Aishwarya Rajesh, an educated, aspiring dancer and marries a teacher in Kerala leaving behind her dreams and aspirations. She relocates to live with his family, who uphold patriarchal and conventional religious and cultural standards. The protagonist, who goes unnamed, is recalibrated to fit the mundane routine life, and does all household duties alone with no assistance no gratitude but constant dissatisfaction and criticism from the family.

The protagonist first shares the household duties with her mother-in-law who remains a servant in her husband's eye. The mother-in-law serves her husband right from giving him his toothbrush in the mornings to placing his slippers outside the house should he require to

go out. Then it's back to cooking and cleaning for the family. The men set the menu and even the method of preparation, while their wives toil endlessly to carry out their requests and sate their appetites. During the whole movie, top-angle shots of the kitchen's labour—vegetable cutting, food mixing, cooking, garnishing, frying, and stirring in pans and containers on stoves, cleaning, and garbage clearing occur, drawing the audience's attention to the inhumane daily grind (Venkiteswaran, 2020). The ladies only have their meals after the husbands had had theirs and the dinner table is usually littered with chewed drumsticks and other foods. This irks the protagonists but seeing her mother-in-law unperturbed, she too falls in line. When the mother-in-law leaves to look after her daughter after childbirth, the protagonist is left to fend for the family herself. Here her life takes a turn for the worst. Firstly, the father-in-law advises her on 'how to cook' by using traditional methods in preparing food such as the traditional grinder to 'make the food more delicious' to washing the clothes by hand and not using the machine as it destroys the clothes. With all the available appliances to make her life easy, the protagonist must resort to traditional ways of doing things.

The only time the protagonist has free time is when she gets her menses. She is forbidden to enter the kitchen or allowed to do or touch any household items. She is relegated to a space, asked to bathe in the river, wash all household items that she has touched and not allowed to use a mattress as her bleeding is considered impure. She is required to thoroughly clean herself after her menses and resume her duty as cook and wife then after. Every night post period, she must make herself available to satisfy her husband's pleasure and one night she suggests foreplay to entice the heat between them and the curt reply she gets from her husband is '*I should feel the same about you*' which implies that he is after all not attracted to her. Even when she is invited to attend a friend's function, she must request permission from her husband, and he replies saying that function as such are a waste of time and Sundays are the only days, he gets his way with her. Things slowly erupts in the protagonist when one day she refuses to do any work and when confronted by the husband and father-in-law, she ends up throwing the days waste on them and walks out of the house, having enough of the abuse and mental torture. The film ends with the protagonist reclaiming her role as a dance teacher while the ex-husband is married off to another woman where he tells her "*Our life till now was a rehearsal. Now let us go forward correcting the mistakes*", to which she dutifully nods in agreement while he leaves his cup near the sink for her to wash.

Conclusion

The patriarchal norms and ideologies occur in a socialisation process whereby an individual adjusts to the society they are socialised with and educate themselves with the teachings and ways of life as approved by that society. The Great Indian Kitchen undeniably reflects the role of women in the Indian household. Though the sequences where the women prepare food and clean for their husband may seem innocent, they are creating an impression of a submissive women. These kitchen acts construct power struggles between both gender both inside and beyond the home through this gender-based division of labour in the home that women are eventually unable to challenge unless the practice of patriarchy is discontinued and both genders are given equal opportunity to grow mentally and emotionally. The movie also showcases that women can and have the power in them to fight the system and not continuously blame society for the way they are being treated. A change is only possible if the society themselves regard women as an equal rather than doormat.

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