

Tasting Patriarchy: Toxic Masculinity and Female Resistance in the *Great Indian Kitchen*

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In India, men and women are living within a failed system. A system that consistently fails only for one gender: women. Male domination is still everywhere, no matter how much women empowerment is spoken about. The liberation of women cannot be achieved by living in this toxic masculine system. Here, women are being controlled, sacrificed to maintain male power, and thus slowly making them disempowered. Wherever she goes, patriarchal norms follow and bind her until death. This prevents a female from expressing who she is and blocks her from who she wants to be. Every Indian household is a training ground for women to study how to sacrifice so that men can rule. Such a tale is unfolding in the Malayalam movie *The Great Indian Kitchen*, directed by Jeo Baby. The leading role by Nimisha Sajayan is playing the character of a newly married woman who battles the oppressive shackles of a patriarchal household every day. The evolution of this character captures the transition of a woman from a silent sufferer to a resister. This movie is a powerful example of how the whole system of patriarchy is deeply embedded in culture, religion, and normalized within the structure of the family. So, this movie clearly articulates why marriage is daunting for every girl. This paper analyses the movie *The Great Indian Kitchen* under the paradigm of radical feminism.

Keywords: Patriarchy, oppression, resistance, radical feminism, male dominance, domestic labour, gender oppression, marriage.

Indian culture is widely celebrated everywhere, and in this modern age, people are in a rush to teach the new generation how to preserve it. Like everything, culture too has two sides. When we discuss the positive side, we see only men. The negative side is mostly associated with women. In other words, those sides are negative only for women, while men enjoy them. This is where patriarchy enters. When culture forms the system in which men and women live, it often allocates roles and societal expectations that reinforce power imbalances and inequality. This happens everywhere in society. In the system we live in, power is distributed mostly to men. They even have the power to control the opposite gender. The perpetuation of this system begins in the domestic sphere. The walls of an Indian household witness how injustice and

inequality originate inside a household, and later it spreads outside the home into the society like a wildfire.

Movies are a great way to portray the current state of our society. Directors who make films cover all the issues in the environment we live in. When people watch this, they become aware of societal problems and are prompted to think more deeply. In older times, directors portrayed domestic violence from a different angle. Most of the female characters are portrayed in a way that they are inferior to men, and they should live like that till the end of their lives. But now, there has been a shift from that perspective. Women now understand their value. They believe that they do not need to live in the shadow of a man. So, movies are coming up in recent times that show women who inspire and empower. Unlike older times,

directors started to make completely woman-centric films. Through movies, they announce that domestic violence cannot suppress them; they can achieve many more things in their life. In fact, these movies give a warning to the male community of our society. It tells them what the women in their kitchen are capable of, other than making food and serving it on the table.

So, this shift in the movies reflects the new thinking of people. There might be people who support this and others who are against it. The structure of the society is very strong. It is very hard to reconstruct it in a way that benefits both genders. People who think differently and support women's growth are the ones who reconstruct the strong foundation of society. It is indeed a slow process. They do it in different ways. Movies are one of the creative ways they express it. They really understand that the female gender is not a threat to Indian tradition. The American lawyer and jurist Sandra Day O'Connor once said, "As women achieve power, the barriers will fall. As society sees what women can do, as women see what women can do, there will be more women out there doing things, and we'll all be better off for it."

Radical feminism critiques the patriarchy and the system we live in. It says that to change the inequality in society, it is important to give treatment to the root structure that upholds the male dominance, mainly in the family, religion, culture, and sexuality. As the power is unequally distributed and is most used by men, they oppress the class of women. This toxic dominancy over women is inhumane. When we focus on the Indian households, the

patriarchy cuts off the dreams of women and makes them live like slaves inside their own homes. As Robin Morgan reflects, "We Can't Destroy the Inequities Between Men and Women Until We Destroy Marriage." Most of the issues occur in marriages. Their bodies are controlled by males, which shows that the dominant group wants women to act like machines. In the movie *The Great Indian Kitchen*, the social order of things is discussed as the primary reason for the struggles of the newlywed woman. Radical feminism demands that the institutions of family and religion should undergo a reformation so that they benefit both genders equally. The only solution to resolve the issue is to dismantle the existing structure and not support reforming it. To execute this, giving importance to female autonomy is what is important. If patriarchy starts from the households, female empowerment too should start from there itself. Kate Millet clearly explains that, "Patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society" (33)

The story of the Malayalam movie *The Great Indian Kitchen* is not an uncommon one. This is the story of most of the married women who are bound by patriarchy. The movie has won millions of hearts in India due to its realistic portrayal of the unseen struggle of the women's community. This is a comedy-drama film written and directed by Jeo Baby. This movie was remade in Tamil under the same name and in Hindi under the title *Mrs. So*. *The Great Indian Kitchen* narrates the story of a newlywed woman who is married to a highly toxic patriarchal family. It was a widely

successful film as it became the voice of common women and added motivation to their resistance. This movie is full of the normalized, silent struggle of women. This illustration suggests that these struggles in the household cannot be normalized, as this type of treatment causes discomfort and pain to them. In a way, this movie suggests that women should break the system like the female protagonist did in the climax of this film. Most of the reviews were positive reactions from the audience, especially from the women's community, who want to break the barrier. Soumya Rajendran from the online news platform named The News Minute stated that, "The Great Indian Kitchen rips through patriarchy, the bedrock of the institutions of family and religion."

The setting of *The Great Indian Kitchen* is Kerala. Kerala is known for its high literacy rate and development. At the same time, the people are protecting the tradition too. So, in this movie, the tension between the progressive mind and the patriarchal mind is exposed. Especially, the Hindu religion is rich in rituals, rules, and regulations for all practices. Customs about the household, rituals regarding the temple, religious journey, and menstrual taboos are portrayed in the film. The Hindu religion does not allow women who menstruate to enter the temple. In September 2018, a controversy sparked protests all over Kerala when the Supreme Court said that this restriction violates the equality and religious freedom of women. There were a lot of people who supported this by raising several arguments. On the other side, people did not accept this and protested. It was a battle

between the constitutional rights and tradition, also a battle between men and women. Generally, many female activists fought for their rights while men were adamant. There were exceptions, too. Still, women are not allowed to enter Sabarimala. The men who are going have to do certain rituals and follow many rules until they complete their journey and return. In *The Great Indian Kitchen*, attempts to include all sorts of issues faced by women who want to be independent but cannot due to the strong shackles of family, marriage, and religion.

The movie starts by displaying scenes of the dancing protagonist, which show her passion and a happy life. At the same time, the audience witnesses contrasting visuals of a lady cooking delicious food. The roles a woman wants to do and what society wants them to do are paralleled here. In most women's lives, they can only pursue one. Here, the lady is agreeing with arranged marriage; her family has found out, unaware that her husband's family is deeply rooted in patriarchy. Marriage is deeply rooted in culture. This institution is designed to crush the dreams of a woman. The society makes her believe that everything would be normal after marriage, and she can continue pursuing her goals; in most cases, that does not happen. Instead, she is forced to live according to her husband's wishes and support his dreams, not hers. Simone de Beauvoir observes about women that, "Her wings are cut and she is blamed for not knowing how to fly" (*The Second Sex* 277)

Throughout the film, it portrays gender roles. In the film, most of the women are always busy

with tasks such as cutting vegetables, cooking, serving, and cleaning, while the men in the family sit, relax, read newspapers, and even practice yoga. The family is ruled by the two men in the house. Her husband and father-in-law. They both make her life more miserable. They always need fresh food and do not adjust to the leftovers. Father-in-law does not want his clothes to be put in the washing machine. This makes her always work in the kitchen and not be able to come out of the loop. This movie does not have a background score. In usual cases, music is added according to the scenes, to show the intensity to the audience. Here, even in the absence of a background score, the audience can understand the pain the lady undergoes.

When she gets her period, they see her as an impure lady, no less than an untouchable. They believe that whatever she touches becomes impure like her. She is banned from doing all the household jobs. At one point, his family even suggested that she go and stay at a relative's place. In the system which they live makes women subaltern and impure, as their voices are silenced, making them feel impure. When she talks about getting a job as a dance teacher, her father-in-law calmly advises her that doing a job is not suitable for us. At the same time, he compliments her cooking. This means they like her to do the household chores, not a proper job to earn money. Money gives her power, and they want to keep her powerless. When she gets the interview letter, her father-in-law explains to him how great it is to stay at home and be a housewife.

The film portrays a scene of her husband, who is a government schoolteacher, teaching his

children about family. But, in the rest of the film, it is evident that he does not follow the good characteristics of a family. Similarly, when they both eat at a restaurant, he keeps his table manners. He keeps the waste in a separate plate. While at home, he keeps it casually on the table. When she points this out, he gets angry. He even makes her feel like it was her mistake to point this out and makes her say sorry. She clearly knows that it was not her mistake, but still, she says sorry to avoid further arguments. These incidents highlight the two faces of the male gender. In front of society, they keep up the face of a good husband. He becomes an animal in front of his wife. The power patriarchy gives him makes him believe that dominance is his birthright and that whatever he does, women should adjust and be obedient. He never sees the silent suffering of her wife. He believes that it is not his job to do so.

In the last half of the movie, religion interferes. When the husband decides to go to the holy place Sabarimala, the rules again become strict. He even banned touching his woman who is on her period, but he can eat whatever she makes. She, too, tries not to come in front of him. Her family is not the traditional one that believes in all this, but they tell her to obey whatever her husband's family says. She does not know about the customs to follow by a wife whose husband is going for a religious journey. Unknowingly, she gives food which she prepared the day before to her husband and father-in-law. Her husband gets angry and asks blames her that she did it intentionally. She says she did not know this custom but nobody believes. Men believes that these customs are

normal and followed by women. When religion interferes with marriage, it fails the life of women. The men act like religion and God is only for them and avoid women in everything. Religion makes women impure and men holy. Women's participation in religious rites is strictly prohibited. All they can do is the background work, which is again the kitchen duties, and not touch anything pure. Here, the patriarchal domination is veiled as faith, where the tradition and culture execute the exploitation of women's labour. Whenever she questions the injustice, they consider that disrespectful to culture and especially religion. So, religion here acts as a shield for patriarchy.

Then comes the resistance. In the climax of the movie, the lady gives a powerful answer to the men who have subjugated her up to this point. When she finds that she can no longer survive in this system, she reacts. She throws wastewater into the faces of her husband and father-in-law, who were involved in a religious ritual in their home. The situation was so intense. She gets out of the house and walks away without looking back. That house is a temple of patriarchy. However, as she now emerges, she breaks the system. Here, she commits this act without the help of any other human being. She grabs the courage alone. Anyway, this suggests that she does not need the help of anyone else, as she was the lone sufferer. She finally shows the patriarchy that women are not bound to be tame like animals. When she took the strong decision to leave the house and never come back, which turned into a motivation for other women who watched this. In the final scene, the audience can

witness the empowered version of the lady who becomes a dance teacher. The beginning of the movie shows the visuals of her passion for dance, and at the end of the movie, she becomes a dance teacher. In between, she suffered a lot. At first, she gave importance to the institution of marriage, unaware of its challenges. She tried to live for someone else. In this movie, the climax is satisfying for all the women and thought-provoking to non-progressive males. Not every problem of women who are married is discussed here, like problems related to dowry, reproduction, etc. This movie mostly centers around a kitchen. It reflects how the unending kitchen duties can give her endless trauma. The limited freedom and controlled autonomy can give hell to an educated woman.

After the heroine leaves, her previous husband marries another woman. She too holds full of hope and happiness, unaware of what is to come. There is a scene of the new woman happily doing the household chores while her husband comes to the kitchen for some small talk. This exact scene happens at the beginning of the movie, too, with the heroine. This makes the audience understand that the new woman's fate is also the same as the previous one. The man is making the same mistake, and he is not changing his behaviour. This means he still believes that it is the woman's mistake that his first marriage did not end well. At the same time, the audience appreciates the heroine's decision to break the marriage. The movie insinuates that the second woman would also do the same. This is why radical feminism is important.

The Great Indian Kitchen is rich in symbolism. The kitchen is a confined place that shows the limited mobility of a woman. She does not have access outside the house, especially away from the kitchen. The unending dirty utensils are not allowing her to go outside. When she is in her menstrual days, her mobility is confined to just one small room. This is no different than a bird that wants to fly in a cage. Water is another symbol. It washes the dirty vessels three to four times a day, which makes the women exhausted. Washing dishes, cleaning the kitchen, dining table, and scrubbing the floor give unending labour to women. There is one waste basket in the kitchen, which men do not have any connection with. That just portrays the life of women. Men treat women like a dustbin. When they eat at the dining table, they will leave the food waste on the table for the women to clean it. Along with watching the waste, women have to eat their food.

This movie has a strong connection to another Malayalam movie, *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey*. This movie was released in 2022. It is written and directed by Vipin Das, starring Darshana Rajendran and Basil Joseph. This movie too is a rebellion of a woman who finally decided to stand up for herself. Marriage is the central theme where they focus more on the issue of domestic violence from her husband. He slaps her even though there is a small inconvenience. Whatever she does, she will get slapped. The heroine secretly studies Karate through YouTube and fights back against her abusive husband. When she hits her husband and he bleeds, he is shocked to see what his wife is capable of. But not every

female character in the film supports her. Her mother-in-law supports her son and advises her to adjust. The family of the heroine also does not support her before and after marriage. They have not given her the right to choose anything in her life. Though she gets admission in a very good college, her parents deny her permission to go as the college is in another district. It was her family who made decisions for her, and every time, they were wrong. But the problem is, they won't admit it. At a point in her life, her husband's family and her own family blamed her for whatever happened; it was because of her. This is when she decided to stand up for herself. She understood she was alone. Her wings had been clipped down. But she tore the shackles, spread her wings and flew. She fought for herself in the court and won. This revolutionary spirit should be adapted by all the women. The Great Indian Kitchen also shows these problems. This means the domestic violence, not having authority to select choices, religious taboos and many more are there in all the houses and women really needs to come out from it.

The Radical feminist school of thought suggests breaking away from whatever makes a woman suffer. Here, the heroine completely rejects the institution of marriage. Finally, she gets the freedom she deserves. This is how radical feminism differs from other waves of feminism. There is no negotiation here, like in the case of liberal feminism. Some barriers cannot be dismantled through negotiation and policy reforms. If a revolution is necessary, a woman should execute it. It is a personal choice of the women to reject the traditional

norms completely. Also, it is a political act against patriarchy. As Shulamith Firestone says, “The goals of feminism can never be achieved through evolution, but only through revolution. Power, however, it has evolved, whatever its origins, will not be given up without a struggle.” (Firestone 31)

The Great Indian Kitchen is a powerful portrayal of the struggle against patriarchy, which echoes the arguments of radical feminism. Through the silent sufferings and repetitive domestic scenes of women, and eventually the woman’s final act of rebellion, the film tries to expose how tradition, culture, and religion act as tools to suppress female autonomy. According to radical feminism, the liberation of women is only possible by dismantling the existing societal systems entirely. It is important to reject it and replace it. Based on the movie, the male gender does not do it. If women need to come out of the cage, they should act alone. If they do not have the courage, then they cannot ever come out of the patriarchal system. According to Gerda Lerner, “The system of patriarchy is a historic creation; it has a beginning, it will have an end” (The Creation of Patriarchy 217). Yes, it should come to an end. The protagonist’s final act of leaving home symbolizes the radical break from the domestic cage. In this story, the audience can see the rebellion of one woman. Just like this, how would it be if all the Indian women took a stand? Patriarchy breaks there. So, this movie highlights personal emancipation and resistance against centuries of gender oppression. Also, it is a cinematic reminder that the personal is political, and even the kitchen can turn into a battleground.

“Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind” (Woolf 76).

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