

Film Criticism

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The Great Indian Kitchen:
When Men's Insouciance Rouses the Nora in their 'kitchen maid'



Woman is shut up in a kitchen or in a boudoir, and astonishment is expressed that her horizon is limited. Her wings are clipped, and it is found deplorable that she cannot fly. - **Simone Beauvoir**

The Malayalam film *The Great Indian Kitchen*, directed by Joe Baby, elegantly epitomises this truism to the T. Engaging and enterprising, but rather bit unidimensional in its approach, the film captures the quintessential dilemma every Indian woman faces even in this day and time.

The trials and tribulations she goes through, as she steps into matrimony. Conveniently relegated to manage her fiefdom – the kitchen. Virtually turned into a 'hausfrau' than a respected, appreciated, equal better half.

Any (mis)adventure to do so immediately dismissed with that patronising, patriarchal wisdom. The men of

the house – like father, like son, working in tandem to ensure the wife, the daughter-in-law, knows her rightful place, for “having a woman (tethered) at home is very auspicious in the family.”

Take for instance, when the wife, innocuously, but pertinently, asks her hubby, where are his table manners at home? While he is so particular and punctilious at the hostelry they are lunching. Quick comes the offended man's repartee “my home is my convenience. I'll do as I please. Go it!

Likewise, when the wife dutifully rushes to help her man who has slipped while taking out his scooter is rebuked: Don't touch. Don't you know that a person

maintaining abstinence prior to a pilgrimage should not be touched by a menstruating woman?

If that is son, the father-in-law is no better. For, strained to her sinews, when she takes to cooking rice in pressure cooker she is beseechingly bidden by her father-in-law not to do so and use the family traditional smoking-firewood oven (chulah). Similarly, he bids her to grind the chutney on the stone and not in the grinder and not wash his clothes in the washing machine but by hand.

Not that the mother-in-law is any better off. She is the epitome of servitude to her man from handing him the toothbrush with the paste as he scans through the daily newspaper lounging in his arm chair or bringing the footwear before him as he prepares to depart from home.

The unbearable, ignominious stench of matrimony coming across frame after frame, scene after scene, vividly captured through the expressions of the bride as she goes about the homily duties with utmost patience as possible.

As also through the various daily enervating chores that the newly wed bride is sucked into: cutting, chopping, frying, kneading, washing, sautéing, sweeping, mopping, in clockwise, mechanical manner, virtually driven to exhaustion, while steaming inside each passing day like a pressure cooker.

Through extreme close ups and trailing shots tailing the labouring women slowly leading to a crescendo and escalating to the dramatic point of no return and the bride decides enough is enough and walks away her head held high.

Director Jeo Baby's (his earlier outing being *Kunju Daivam*, 2 *Penkuttikal*) film comes at a time when gender parity has become the raging topic of public discourse. Where however, *The Great Indian Kitchen* fails to emerge as a fine piece of film making, is that it sacrifices esoteric aspirations, providing the proverbial solution to the marital discord.

Director Jeo Baby, in order to achieve his predestined resolution to a young wife's dilemma, conveniently paints the men in the darkest shades as possible making them villain in no uncertain terms.



Also, instead of leaving the film open ended, he goes for the proverbial closure with the woman pursuing her career aspirations of be a dance teacher. While even this could be taken in stride, by having the man wed another doormat wife, the director unfortunately antithetically perpetuates the very problem he has sought to stridently hold a mirror against.

You had a similar problem in the Hindi film *Thappad* as well. Despite being wronged the hurt and humiliated wife goes out of her way to serve her sick mother-in-law who did not fight her cause, unlike the mother-in-law in *The Great Indian Kitchen* who supports and counsels her daughter-in-law to apply for the job, while requesting her not to disclose that it was her advice.

And when the job offer comes you have the father-in-law mouthing another patriarchal wisdom: My wife is a post graduate. She also loved to work. However, I listened to my dad and today all our children are well settled.

While earlier on when she expresses her desire to apply for the job, the elder dismissively says: That won't suit us. Both son and father snidely sneering that she had even such a thought had occurred to her. However, one cannot chide either Joe Baby or Anubhav Sinha for adopting a more mundane, archaic approach. Never wanting to ruffle their constituents more than necessary, and inclined specifically to reach out to larger masses, they have consciously water down their otherwise laudable films.

Be that as it may, Joe Baby's *The Great Indian Kitchen* is a searing and sharp indictment of the traditional and given culture of oppression of the women of households. He pugnaciously presses home the point to men, and indirectly, at women too, not take it things lying down anymore.



As *The Great Indian Kitchen*'s bruised and bitter bride storms out of her homestead, humiliated and hurt, after splashing the men with the 'kitchen waste' a la Henrik Ibsen's *Nora*, one is reminded of Simone Beauvoir's another feisty feminist axiom: *The point*

is not for women simply to take power out of men's hands, since that wouldn't change anything about the world. It's a question precisely of destroying that notion of power.

As the film's background song plays out: *You are the Earth's music, its form, A flame that refuses to be put out, These worldly fetters you release from the all, Bestower of life, oh! Woman ... March on! Enough of your grief..* as the final credits roll by, you are reminded of Margaret Sanger's pithy advice: Woman must not accept; she must challenge. She must not be awed by that which has been built up around her; she must reverence that woman in her which struggles for expression.

Indeed that is what Ibsen's *Nora* did and Joe Baby's young bride of *The Great Indian Kitchen*, a fine film which woefully falls short of a masterclass, while making out an honest case for the womenfolk.

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