

Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Award 2021: Certificate of Merit

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The Politics of Positioning ‘Women as Kitchen Drudge’: Sisyphean Torture of Gendered Kitchen space in *The Great Indian Kitchen*

The Great Indian Kitchen, 2021, Malayalam, 100 minutes, Director: Jeo Baby

Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day. The housewife wears herself out marking time: she makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present. (Beauvoir 438)

To emancipate women is not only to open gates of the university, the law courts, or the parliaments to her, for the “emancipated woman” will always throw her domestic toil on to another woman. To emancipate a woman is to free her from the brutalizing toil of the kitchen and washhouse. (Kropotkin 67)

The kitchen can be delineated as a socio-political as well as temporal space that fosters the affirmation of gender roles and perpetuates an idealized kind of femininity from time immemorial. The intergenerational assignation of women as culinary diplomats by male-dominated culture and patriarchy has trapped women into subservient and servile roles of ‘captive wives’ and ‘housebound mothers.’ The oft-quoted culturally established norms of “a woman’s place is in the kitchen” and “the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach” has subjected half the humanity to the slavery of the hearth. Writer and director Jeo Baby’s influential film of critical acclaim *Mahattaya Bharatiya Adukkala* or *The Great Indian Kitchen* is a tale of universal oppression institutionalized by marriage that adapts and shapes women into a resident domestic goddess/servile to suit patriarchy’s needs and requirements. This critique attempts to understand the geographies of domestic power that orientate women as kitchen drudge and the complexities of the gendered nature of domestic space. The article also delves into the meticulously-designed mise-en-scene and recurring metaphors that exhibit the visually horrifying Sisyphean torture of housework in the locus of oppression.

The Great Indian Kitchen is a powerful feminist discourse of everyday oppression that contends the gender inequality and insidious sexism in the gendered and spatially-distributed household. The kitchen space characteristically becomes the site of gender-specific tension that literally and symbolically regulates and restricts women from escaping the world of domesticity. *The Great Indian Kitchen* is a film about the everywoman, about what day-to-day life looks like for the average middle-class woman from a respectable family who serves as an “all-purpose maid” and toils day and night in the dark, grimy kitchen. This appalling journey of the trials and tribulations of many women also depicts their frustrations and disquietude in an oppressive patriarchal society as well as finds answers to why multitudes of women suffered the same unbearable plight.

Set in contemporary Kerala society, the film chronicles the lives of unnamed characters who portray the reality of every modern-day Indian household in the male-dominated hegemonic gender order. The film opens with simultaneous shots of a happy and cheerful woman dancing in a studio intercut with the visuals and food and sweets prepared for the prospective groom’s family followed by a typical *pennu kaanal* (meeting of prospective bride and groom) scene. The visuals of deep-fried *unniyappam*, steaming bananas, and *pazham pori* combined with the merrily dancing woman foreshadows the future drudgery of household tasks. The marriage ceremony is also intercut with the contrasting visuals of food being cooked and the wedding feast

being served to the guests. The unnamed newly married couple, an educated dancer (played by Nimisha Sajayan), simply known as the Wife and the seemingly noble and quiet sociology teacher (played by Suraj Venjaramoodu), called the Husband, enjoy a short-lived and momentary bliss and happiness of their arranged marriage. At the beginning of the marriage, the Wife joins the loving and considerate mother-in-law in the duties of the kitchen and the household, bonding with each other in the process.

The Wife and mother-in-law occupy the gendered kitchen space preparing dishes and meals like clockwork, more or less playing the Victorian image of an ideal wife, “the Angel in the House,” who was devoted and submissive to her husband and his needs. (Fig. 1 and 3) The gendered division of labor is oppressive towards the women who work daily in the kitchen like a Trojan while the men engage in relaxing and leisurely pursuits. Every day, in the mornings, the Husband sips tea in the kitchen while the Wife cooks and leaves to practice yoga keeping the emptied cup for the Wife to clean. The father-in-law brushes his teeth only when his wife brings him the toothbrush after dutifully applying toothpaste on it and only leaves home to loiter outside when his wife brings his shoes. The mother-in-law breaks a sweat on the grinding stone because her husband prefers hand-ground chutneys and spices. (Fig. 2) He lounges in the chair all day, reading the newspaper, and at night, he spends his time scrolling mindlessly through his smartphone watching WhatsApp videos while his wife slaves and labors in the kitchen. The shots of the Husband performing yoga are juxtaposed with the women making breakfast in the kitchen, thus marking the kitchen as a site of suppression of women’s identity. (Fig. 4-6)

The second-wave feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and Germaine Greer likened housework to slavery and established that the concept of femininity emphasized by the results in women’s loss of personality and existence. Beauvoir, in her groundbreaking work of feminism, *The Second Sex*, says, “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” (573). According to Luce Giard, culinary practices “situate themselves at the most rudimentary level, at the most necessary and the most unrespected level” (156). And the practitioners of this interminable domestic slavery are extremely patient, repeating the gestures indefinitely without schedule or salary or productivity, falling prey to the victimization of internalized sexism and oppression.



Figure 1. Gendered Kitchen space: Wife and Mother-in-law as kitchen drudge



Figure 2. Gendered Kitchenspace: Mother-in-law grinding coconut for chutney over the grinding stone slab



Figure 3. Gendered Kitchenspace: Wife and Mother-in-law as kitchen drudge cutting vegetables



Figure 4. Gendered Kitchenspace: The mother-in-law engaging in the back-breaking chore of sweeping the floor

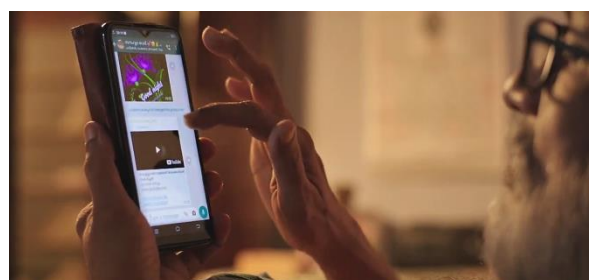


Figure 5 & 6. Gendered Kitchen space: The Husband and the father-in-law engage in relaxing and leisurely activities

When the quiet and supportive mother-in-law is summoned abroad by her pregnant daughter, the unpleasantness of the kitchen and the drudgery of the domestic sphere catches up on the Wife, who exerts herself alone in the kitchen from dawn to dusk. The inequitable division of domestic labor forces the Wife to prepare laboriously and singlehandedly breakfast, lunch, dinner, and in-between snacks. The Wife tries her best to appease the needs of the men bringing variety in the dishes of each meal. She prepares piping hot dosas, simmering sambar and fresh coconut chutney, *iddiyappams* and egg curry, and *puttu* and *kadala* curry for breakfast; rice cooked on firewood, curry, and veggies for lunch; and *rotis* and more curries for dinner, with the spices, painstakingly ground using mortar and pestle. (Fig. 7-9) According to Andrea Veltman, “the cyclical and repetitious work women perform as wives resemble “the torture of Sisyphus,” an activity of labour rather than work that creates nothing lasting but ceaselessly negated by the recurrence of more dirt and disorder.” (125). It is evident from the life of the mother-in-law that women who devote themselves to the upkeep of their families live an existence bereft of its own reason for being. Even though the mother-in-law was a postgraduate, she was dissuaded from dreaming or pursuing a career by her husband, saying a statement primed with benevolent sexism, “Having a woman at home is very auspicious for the family. What you do is much greater than what bureaucrats and ministers do.” (*The Great Indian Kitchen* 01:04:00-01:04:10) Thus by appropriating the role of a housewife, “she achieves nothing herself but transfers her *raison d’être* to those whom she lives and labor for.” (Beauvoir 448)



Figure 7. Sisyphian Torture: Recurring motif of breakfast (dosas, chutney, and sambar)



Figure 8. Sisyphian Torture: Recurring motif of breakfast (iddiyappams and egg curry)



Figure 9. Sisyphean Torture: Recurring motif of breakfast (puttu and kadala curry)

The kitchen and, by extension, food in this film serve as a primary reason for gender inequality and the sexual division of labor. The male figures control and dominate the household as consumers of the food, and the women as the producers are handcuffed to the fate of being a hopeless slaves obeying their patriarchal norms and dictates. The Husband, though soft-spoken, is egotistical and passive-aggressive and asserts his authority by disciplining the Wife when she steps out of line with his standards and beliefs. For instance, the Husband gets angry and agitated when the Wife comments about his manners at the restaurant and the lack of manners at dinner at home. The father-in-law strongly believes that women belong in the kitchen when the Wife applied for the job of a dance teacher. The father-in-law also insists on having rice cooked on firewood and advises her against using the mixer, grinder, or washing machine.

The film explores the spatial dimension of the kitchen in its entirety, where women are prescribed to rule, but in contrast, they are shackled to make sacrifices as well as contributions to the gender disparity for the coming generations. According to Jeo Baby, “A woman’s struggle in the kitchen is the story of almost all women in India. Men think women are machines, for making tea and washing clothes and raising kids.” (*BBC News*) The cultural milieu of Kerala also contributes to the deeply entrenched insensitivity because meals in Kerala are elaborate, with a lot of chopping, washing, grinding, tempering, and garnishing. The problematic gender roles teach women that her husband and the family are everything, that she exists just to make them happy, and she’s told to be a superwoman – a kitchen queen or a culinary goddess. It asserts the domination of men in the household with women’s domestic duties and housework “sinking into insignificance and a trifling auxiliary.” (Beauvoir 80)

The recurring metaphor of women’s hands performing household tasks is a principal motif employed in the narrative. The close-up shots of the hands in the kitchen accomplish several actions, which include cutting, chopping, grinding, kneading, cooking, wiping, washing, sweeping, and mopping - all done by the women of the household. With the absence of background music and sparse and infrequent dialogues, the lion’s share of the sounds and visuals are from the quotidian activities of the kitchen space. It is evident and perceptible from the visuals (Fig. 8-11) that these monotonous daily activities that permeate every household are carried out with precision by years of practice and a pregnant silence born out of weariness and enervation. In the film, the repetitive domestic drudgery commences unhurriedly and steadily with the first close-up shots of hands preparing the dishes elaborately, spending time to move slowly through the actions. But with the progression of days, the shots emerge and change rapidly, getting less elaborate and torturous, with uninterestedness and dullness, indicating the spectator’s awareness of the humdrum and mundane scene of every other household. These overhead close-up shots show how the women’s bodies are merely reduced to a pair of hands alternating between the piled-up kitchen sink and the stove, thereby invisibilising the personhood and individuality of women’s existence.



Figure 10. The close-up shot of the hands in the kitchen (making dosas)



Figure 11. The close-up shot of the hands in the kitchen (cutting mangoes for pickling)



Figure 12. The close-up shot of the hands in the kitchen (tempering curry for breakfast)



Figure 13. The close-up shot of the hands (wiping the dining table getting rid of garbage)



Figure 14. The shot of Wife scrubbing the floor with hands using a floorcloth

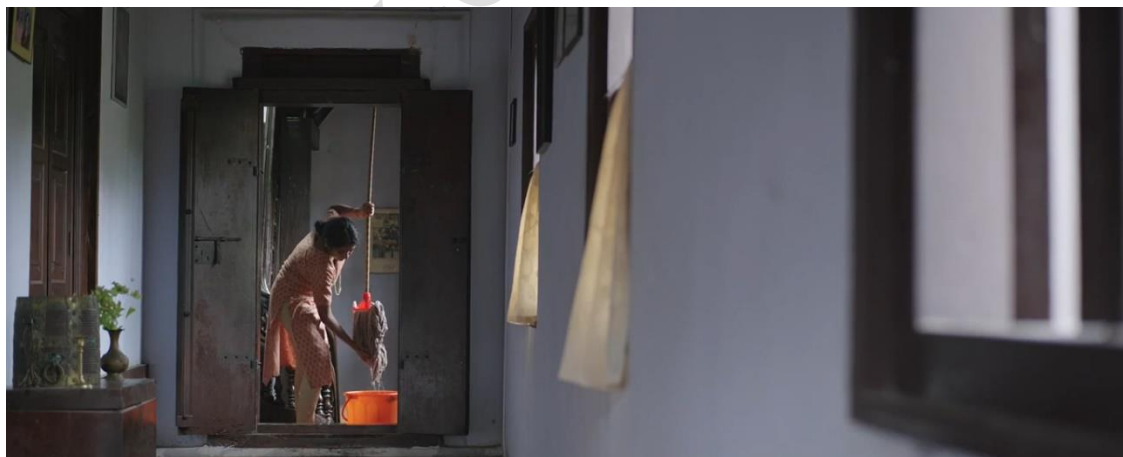


Figure 15. The shot of the Wife mopping the floor of the household singlehandedly

The claustrophobic space of the kitchen and the leaking sink with its uncomfortable and horrifying close-up shots of leftover food also becomes a metaphor of the patriarchal universe where the young heroine is restricted to. The kitchen serves as a hellish landscape that reminds the women of their lost dreams and pursuits and their loss of independence and identity. Women are not allowed to enjoy the pleasures of eating the food but are expected to cook and clean and serve the male members of the household. The women are expected to eat the leftover food, and it induced disgust and revulsion in the Wife as she looked at how the mother-in-law was eating from the same plate used by the father-in-law. The table where the food is served stands as a testament to the aftermath of the gastronomical exploits of men, littered with chewed-off

drumsticks to be picked up and cleaned by women. (Fig. 16-19). Women are always the kitchen drudge as they have to tend to the leaking sink, the overflowing smelly wastebasket, drain the murky waste-water from the washbasin, and the dining table smeared with leftovers that the men walk away coolly after a meal. The Wife grows averse to the unendingness and the repetitious uselessness and solitary confinement in the unremarkable kitchen, and the recurring images of garbage, flies, and rotting food fill her mind haunting and terrifying her.



Figure 16. Dumping Ground: The leftovers and the garbage being carried to the kitchen



Figure 17. Dumping Ground: The overhead shot of soiled plates left for the women to clean



Figure 18. Dumping Ground: The overhead shot of soiled plates left for the women to clean



Figure 19. Dumping Ground: The overhead shot of soiled plates left for the women to clean

The reality and duality of every Indian household are depicted in figure 20, in which the Wife tries to perform the juggling act of gratifying her desires and satisfying others' needs. Often women fall short in fulfilling their aspirations, implementing moderation, and relinquishing their rights. The image of the coconut scraper on one side and the figure of the Wife in front of a laptop on the other side, complemented with the burning stove in the background, shows her desire to follow her passions but feels restricted in the hellish kitchenscape of the androcentric world. Just before the cathartic scene of female rebellion and liberation, the film shows a forty-five-second montage of a series of photographs of married couples of each generation, where women had limited their freedom to the roles of wives, mothers, or the servile. (Fig. 21-23) The image on the wall accompanied by sounds of banal and everyday kitchen chores play in the background that of the grinding stone, the mixie, the grinder, the stove, and the cooker, which throws light into the struggles of women of the erstwhile generations. This mute and inflexible object from the past is a reminder of the reality that the happy couples in the photograph no longer exist.



Figure 20. The Superwoman: The juggling act or the 'double burden' of career and family



Figure 21 & 22. Signature of the past – A montage of photographs of married couples



Figure 23. *Frozen Image vs. Reality: The marriage photograph of Husband and Wife*

The kitchen becomes a site of rebellion in the third act as the wife is isolated and neglected because of the repressive and appalling conviction that menstruation makes her dirty and impure, segregating her from the household and the kitchen space. The rebellion against the retrogressive ideologies is executed by the Wife by throwing the dirty kitchen sink water on her husband and father-in-law and leaving the family for her freedom and dignity. The discontent at the gendered nature of the household that runs the cyclical nature of eat, browse, sleep, exercise, and copulate, without regard to displeasure and grievances, prompted the Wife to escape the prison of sexism and misogyny. She justifies her actions once more when she yells at her younger brother to get water for himself. (Fig. 24 and 25) The stinging double-slap is targeted at those who believe that a married woman's rightful place is in the kitchen and those who are convinced that conventional and orthodox practices are allotted exclusively for the womenfolk in the family. In the final moments of the film, a confident, smiling, and independent female protagonist emerge, embracing her new identity as a dance teacher rehearsing a dance sequence while the newly-remarried male protagonist leaves the soiled teacup behind for the successor to pick up, foreshadowing the same fate of the first wife. (Fig. 26 and 27)



Figure 24 & 25. *Freedom at last: Oh rebellious female, march on!*

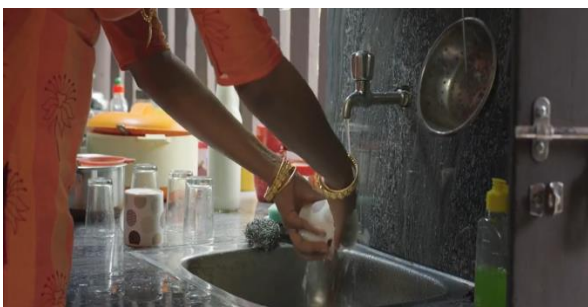


Figure 26 & 27. *Deja vu: Lather, Rinse, Repeat*

The Great Indian Kitchen can be likened to the 'kitchen sink' realism as it tells the visual tale of a woman's transition from a dewy-eyed and submissive new bride to a haggard woman of the house, whose primary responsibility is to churn out freshly-cooked meals three times a day. It can also be vaguely paralleled with Chantal Akerman's feminist arthouse classic *Jeanne Dielmann, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels*, as

it follows the daily routines of a domestic woman who cooks, cleans, and sets the house the whole day. The liberation of the women into the public space from the four walls of the kitchen was envisioned quite earlier by social reformist V T Bhattathiripad in his classic play *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku* (*From the Kitchen to the Stage*). The luminous adherence to the female gaze/perspective employed by the director to unveil and disclose the culture of oppression perfected over generations to keep women subservient to men portrays the patriarchy's oft-hidden yet profound and paralyzing grip on women's lives. In his article "Adukkalayude Abrajeevithamgal," Shaji Jacob calls the kitchen the most anti-democratic and unfaithful space in a household, "the domestic grave of any Malayali woman, who has not yet arrived on the stage." (*Marunadan Malayalee*) It is also an undeniable fact that women are not only victims of patriarchal culture but also carriers of the regressive and misogynistic ideologies, and that is the reason why the feminist movement and women empowerment efforts are still suffering micro-defeats at home. The film has not only garnered mass media attention but also raised conscious awareness and pricked the conscience of the patriarchal society that took for granted the hard labor of women in the kitchen space.

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