Domestic Confinement, Ritual Purity, and Structural Patriarchy: A Critical Analysis of the movie The Great Indian Kitchen

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***Abstract*—Jeo Baby's 2021 Malayalam film, The Great Indian Kitchen, provides a critique of institutionalized patriarchy and the pervasive domestic subjugation of women in contemporary Indian society. Through a nuanced narrative centered around an unnamed, educated female protagonist, the film exposes how everyday domestic labour and ritual purity taboos intersect to enforce female submission. Drawing upon Louis Althusser's theory of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and psycho-social perspectives on patriarchal hegemony, this paper explores the mechanisms through which the institution of the family reproduces gender inequality. Furthermore, it examines the narrative manifestation of ancient Hindu menstrual taboos-rooted in mythological constructs such as the Rig Vedic myth of Indra and Vritra-and analyzes how ritualistic purity logic serves as an instrument of spatial and physical regulation. The paper concludes by examining the protagonist's subversion of domestic oppression as a radical rupture of generational intolerance.**

***Index Terms*—Patriarchy, Domestic Labour, Ideological State Apparatus, Menstrual Taboo, The Great Indian Kitchen, Hegemony, Gender Roles**

I. Introduction

Indian cinema has increasingly become a site for interrogating systemic sociopolitical structures, particularly the institutionalized subjection of women within the domestic sphere. Jeo Baby's critically acclaimed 2021 film, The Great Indian Kitchen, stands out as a representation of domestic servitude. The film narrates the story of a newlywed, educated dancer who enters an arranged marriage with a schoolteacher in a traditional, upper-caste household in Kerala.

By keeping the characters deliberately nameless, the narrative elevates the protagonist's experience from a singular domestic grievance to a universal critique of patriarchal subjugation. The film meticulously documents the rhythmic, repetitive, and exhausting nature of housework-cleaning filthy utensils, clearing food waste, and coping with broken infrastructure like a leaking kitchen sink. Through this visual endurance, the narrative reveals how the family, operating as a primary ideological structure, conditions women to normalize their own disenfranchisement under the guise of tradition, custom, and marital duty.

II. The Family as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA)

In his seminal work *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Louis Althusser posits that state power is maintained not merely through Repressive State Apparatuses (like the police or military), but primarily through Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), such as religion, education, and the family (Althusser, 1971). In *The Great Indian Kitchen*, the family functions as a classic ISA, transmitting patriarchal values disguised as traditional morality and social prestige.

The film demonstrates how ideology persuades the female subject into accepting her subordinate position. When the young bride enters the household, her identity as an educated woman with personal aspirations is systematically eroded. The family's patriarchal figures use glorifying discourse to obscure unpaid labour:

"Having a woman at home is auspicious to the family. What you do is much greater than what bureaucrats and ministers do."

This rhetoric functions as a strategic ideological scheme. By placing domestic servitude on a moral pedestal, the patriarchs attempt to convince the protagonist that her physical toil is an eminent duty. Furthermore, when the bride attempts to voice her discomfort, her mother- who has herself internalized decades of patriarchal conditioning-advises her to accommodate the patriarchs' demands. She warns her:

"If they follow customs, consider yourself lucky. You obey what they say... You have become part of such a prestigious family."

Here, the family apparatus conditions the bride to substitute her personal self-worth with the honor of the marital lineage. Her obedience is framed as a privilege, effectively neutralizing any impulse toward resistance or self-assertion.

III. The Mythological Genealogies of Menstrual Taboos and Ritual Purity

A major thematic axis of the film is the regulation of the female body through ritual purity taboos. The narrative highlights various strict customary constraints imposed during menstruation:

- Prohibition from cooking or entering the kitchen.
- Spatial isolation in dark, poorly lit rooms.
- Bans on touching household items, beds, or sacred plants (e.g., the Tulsi plant).
- Mandated sleeping on mats and eating from separate plates.
- Absolute prohibition against meeting outsiders or leaving the home.
- Ritual purification of all used utensils and spaces with holy water after seven days.

These socio-cultural restrictions are historically grounded in mythological constructs that associate female biology with innate impurity. A primary textual origin of this taboo is found in the Rig Veda, which details the myth of Indra slaying Vritra, the demon of drought (Doniger, 1981). After killing Vritra-who was a learned Brahmana-Indra was consumed by the sin of Brahmahatya (Brahmanicide). To relieve himself of this cosmic guilt, Indra appealed to womankind to take a fraction of his sin upon themselves. In return, women were granted the capacity for eternal fertility, while menstruation was marked as the periodic physical manifestation of Indra's guilt (Leslie, 1989).

In *The Great Indian Kitchen*, these ancient taboos manifest in everyday interactions. When the husband prepares for the Sabarimala pilgrimage by taking a vow of celibacy (vratham), the burden of maintaining ritual purity falls entirely on the wife. When the husband accidentally slips from his scooter, the wife instinctively reaches out to assist him. Instead of expressing gratitude, he admonishes her for making physical contact, claiming her touch has embodied him "impure." To restore his ritual sanctity, he is required to undergo a purifying bath in the family pond. The fear of divine retribution and social ostracization coerces women into accepting these discriminatory practices as natural law.

IV. Patriarchal Hegemony and the Exploitation of Domestic Labour

Gramsci's concept of hegemony explains how dominant social groups maintain power not merely through force, but by winning the spontaneous consent of subjugated groups (Gramsci, 1971). In the film, domestic tasks are strictly gendered. While the men engage in leisure activities-practicing yoga, reading newspapers, scrolling through smartphones, or watching television-the women engage in non-stop, repetitive physical toil from dawn until late night.

The patriarchs' insistence on manual labour over labour-saving technology (such as demanding hand-ground chutney over using a blender, or hand-washed clothes despite having a washing machine) illustrates how the control of female time and labour is central to patriarchal authority.

Furthermore, the film highlights the systematic erasure of women's creative identities. When the protagonist-an educated and passionate dancer-secures a job as a dance teacher, her ambition is met with subtle resistance. Her husband dismisses the achievement by complimenting her culinary skills, while her father-in-law proudly notes that although his own wife holds a Master of Arts degree, *"household duty is the highest calling."*

In the intimate sphere, when the wife expresses her physical pain during sexual intercourse and requests foreplay, her husband bluntly states that he has no interest in foreplay. Patriarchal authority treats the female body as marital property meant solely for male satisfaction, completely denying her sexual autonomy and bodily consent.

V. Resistance, Subversion, and Breaking the Generational Cycle

The climax of *The Great Indian Kitchen* presents a departure from traditional narrative resolutions in mainstream Indian cinema, which often favour reconciliation or quiet endurance. The protagonist's boiling point coincides with the arrival of male relatives preparing for the Sabarimala pilgrimage, who expect absolute servitude while dismissing the hardship of domestic work.

When asked to serve tea to a group of men while her husband prepares for his pilgrimage, the protagonist takes a stand. She fills the glasses with the filthy, foul-smelling water collected from the clogged, leaking sink-a material symbol of her daily degradation. When her enraged husband attempts to strike her, she hurls the waste water directly at his face and walks out of the household.

This act of rebellion is an absolute rejection of patriarchal dominance and spatial subjugation. By returning to her passion for dance and establishing her independence as a dance teacher, the protagonist breaks the generational chain of submission. However, the film closes with a chilling reminder of structural persistence: the husband remarries, and his new bride immediately steps into the same cycle of domestic servitude. The narrative thereby emphasizes that individual acts of resistance, while liberating for the individual, must be matched by a broader structural critique to dismantle patriarchal institutions permanently.

VI. Conclusion

The Great Indian Kitchen is a critical cinematic text that exposes the intersection of domestic labour, religious taboos, and systemic patriarchy in modern India. By illustrating how the family operates as an Ideological State Apparatus, the film reveals the subtle mechanisms through which women are socialized

into submissive roles. By grounding its narrative in the lived, everyday realities of women-from the physical toll of kitchen work to the taboos surrounding menstruation-Jeo Baby offers a transformative vision of female agency that demands the dismantling of patriarchal traditions.

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