
THE STRUGGLES MARRIED WOMEN FACE IN SOCIETY – AN OUTLOOK BASED ON THE FILM THE GREAT INDIAN KITCHEN

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ABSTRACT

From the time a baby girl is born, society makes it seem like her wedding is the most monumental moment awaited in her life. Her sole purpose is to have a happy married life wherein she is expected to produce children and take care of her husband. Although women and men take part for marriages to occur, the responsibility of the household always lands on the women. The patriarchal society is such that women are expected to be confined to the four walls of their homes where they need to forget their dreams and aspirations in pursuit of becoming the “ideal housewife.”. The Great Indian Kitchen is one such Malayalam film that everybody can relate to, and it brilliantly portrays the struggles a woman faces in her married life. It connects with the audience in such a way that even somebody in favour of patriarchy might find such norms disturbing and wrong. This paper attempts to highlight how society has contrasting standards and norms for women and men while they are married. The main objective of this paper will be to emphasize the need to do away with such norms, customs, and traditions that designate some spaces and roles particularly, for women, and the rest particularly, for men, and really let individuals of both genders have a choice to decide for themselves.

Keywords: Women, Married Life, Sexism, Gender Roles, Patriarchy, Oppression

INTRODUCTION

We associate certain attributes to be more masculine and others to be more feminine. Little boys tend to play the role of a superhero who protects all his people. Whereas, girls tend to play with their kitchen sets. This seems to be the unproblematic norm we most certainly come across day-to-day. Precisely why this principle does not escape the roles men and women are designed to play later on in society. From adolescence to adulthood, girls, in particular, go through a cycle of drastic changes both physically as well as mentally. Even now, in most villages across the country, it is considered right to marry off young girls the minute they are able to reproduce. This very step of marrying away young girls before they are mentally ready to handle it can be compared to the “calm before the storm”.

Once young girls or women in fact are married, they are expected to fulfil duties, the most fundamental of them all being taking care of the household and raising kids who will go on to do great things in life and make society proud. Unfortunately, this mother will not be able to tell her daughter and son to dream on equal footing because she herself has been trapped by the chains put on her by society to do only what’s best for her family and not herself.

A typical morning routine for a married woman even if she happens to be working one looks something like this: “Wake up, rush to the kitchen to prepare breakfast and lunch for the kids to take to school, iron their uniform and her husband’s clothes, wake the kids up and dress them for school, feed them, the bus is outside already! Kiss the kids goodbye before heading to school, time to wake up the husband, give him coffee and breakfast, of course, the husband needs help finding his socks and car key, she helps him out with that and bids him goodbye and finally, it’s time for her to get changed for work and run to the office and most likely she hasn’t even had breakfast!”.

After a tiresome day at work, when all she wants is some rest, there’s more to cook! Back to the kitchen, she goes to prepare dinner while also trying to help the kids with their homework. Following dinner with the family, the kids are tucked in and off she goes to the kitchen again to do the dishes and tidying up. Just like that daily routine comes to an end.

These gender roles and stereotypes have a much heavier impact than it seems. When certain attributes are associated to be either masculine or feminine, it creates set ideas and perceptions in our minds. These influence how people think, speak and interact with each other on a daily. This leads to a myriad of other effects, one of the most notable being the stereotype threat, that

affects people who are expected to perform poorly, it's the fear of proving stereotypes about yourself as correct. Humans are affected by what other people perceive us and the stereotype threat plays on that.

When we eliminate stereotypes and gender roles we can enhance performance. As the stereotype threat is said to occupy space in the working memory and affect the productivity of the performance of the individual. (Catherine Gooda, 2003)

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This paper is being undertaken so as to bring light to a common phenomenon we come across right from our childhood, to understand and recognise the need to act upon it. To showcase the struggles women faces with reference to the Malayalam film "The Great Indian Kitchen". This paper will also analyse the characters and situations depicted in the movie. Most importantly, the aim of the paper was to sensitize both women and men that they are not bound by any particular gender role or stereotype before or after marriage and have the absolute freedom to put their needs above that of everyone else and that life after marriage must be one that shares equal responsibilities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this paper will largely be analytical and descriptive. The secondary sources utilized for research will compose of journal articles and books.

LITERATURE REVIEW

(Baby, 2021) This film was the primary focus of this paper and was used as a reference to analyse the life of married women and their struggles. It beautifully was able to encapsulate all the challenges a woman faces and put forth a very important message for the audience to ponder and act on.(Nobl, 2021) imparts analysis on how the kitchen is designated as a "woman's space" not just in life but also in various films with special attention to Malayalam films.(Catherine Gooda, 2003)This study helped understand the concept of stereotype threat and its implications on humans as well as how they affect the genders individually.(Narayan, 2021) This new article did a survey among women to see if the film truly depicted the real-life situation of married women in India. Unfortunately, it did and women were seen talking about how they are expected to do all the household chores even when their husband shares the same

salary package as them and career responsibilities. (Gupta, 2017) gives an insight as to the need for the hour is not just to educate girls but also to sensitize boys towards the problems women encounter, break old gender norms and in the name of tradition and to understand that there is no point of education if we are not able to apply it to daily life and situations. (Mathew, 2021) provides an analysis of certain aspects incorporated in the film and co-relates it to various parts of life, talks about how leisure is considered a gendered activity and emphasises on the scene where the heroine wasn't able to communicate her sexual needs to her partner. (Ebadi, 2004) this interview highlights how the situation of women is not just because of men and patriarchy but women as well and how they contribute to this process

ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTERS AND SITUATIONS DEPICTED IN THE FILM

This story is set in Kerala and revolves around a newly married couple who quite interestingly haven't been given names in this film. Like most marriages in India, this too was an arranged marriage. The husband and wife come from very different backgrounds. The heroine of this film is a dancer and had hopes of making it her career. The husband on the other hand was a school teacher. Once, the marriage takes place the heroine shifts to the husband's place where both of his parents live too. A tradition that is still followed in most parts of India. At first, this family seems like any other ordinary family, until it is seen how the mother-in-law talks about how her husband prefers things to be done the conventional way like "Washing clothes on the stone, cooking rice on the wooden stove and chutney prepared on a grindstone". Indirectly indicating that she was also expected to adapt to this. However, the same father-in-law who detests modernity is seen scrolling on his phone before his bedtime. There are multiple scenes where the prime focus is the happenings in the kitchen and unfortunately, all of them only show only women present in them which really depicts how society still considers the kitchen as a "woman's space". When the newlyweds visit their relatives, once again, we see the woman in that family along with her small daughter only eats after everyone is done with their meals, however, her small brother and father were eating with the guests, another example of how they are expected to take care of everyone else's needs before theirs and in return get praised for being the "ideal housewife" who cooks delicious meals and attends to all her husband's needs. As time goes on, the heroine starts to feel trapped in the kitchen where all she does is cook and clean and has no time for herself, to pursue her passions that she once loved, which now almost feels forgotten.

"Emotions, like food and eating are commonly regarded as the preserve of the embodied self,

rather than the disembodied, philosophizing mind. Like food and eating practices, the emotions are traditionally linked with the feminine, with the disempowered and marginalized” (Deborah, *Food, the body and self*, 1996)

Another important matter that should be discussed is how married life is different for women coming from different strata of society, it is seen that a friend of the heroine who got married around the same time to a more educated man had a rather different experience altogether as compared to the heroine. Her friend’s husband is seen actively helping to make meals and sharing the household chores. We must understand that this is not only because he was more educated as even the heroine’s husband was a school teacher, that too one who taught the social sciences and spoke volumes about equality. The key difference here is that her friend’s husband was more sensitized towards women and didn’t believe in gender roles imposed by society in the name of traditions and customs.

The film also touches on old age beliefs such as menstruation being a taboo and that women are considered to be impure while they menstruate and cannot enter the kitchen during that time and even draws light to the Sabarimala case, where she got scolded for reposting a video that encouraged women to talk for their rights. Ironically such thoughts, beliefs, and sexism aren’t being considered impure.

The film also dives into subjects like marital rape and how women don’t even have a right over their own bodies, which is a matter India needs to look into as we still don’t have any laws for it. Time and again, we see how women don’t really have a say or choice to do anything.

They are simply told and burdened with responsibilities that they have to take up which have no reasoning and logic behind them.

It is seen that when the heroine wants to apply for a job as a dance teacher and talks to her husband about it, her father-in-law interrupts them and says that the women in their family don’t do such things and then goes on to say the curry for breakfast was fabulous with a smile. The heroine is quite dejected and talks to her mother about her struggles as a new wife. Her mother is seen telling her that she did all these things too and this is what it meant to take care of a family. We must understand that not just men, but also women contribute to the injustices caused to them by not questioning and standing up against such customs, traditions and by normalizing their role to be just a wife and nothing more.

The heroine was tired of her double-faced husband, who acted so different at home and outside. For example- He would throw all the chicken bones outside the plate at home but would put them perfectly inside the plate when he was at a restaurant. He would tell her they will figure her job situation but when she applied, he scolded her for going against his father's will.

Eventually, she reached her breaking point and could no longer abide by such illogical norms and traditions. Another fascinating part of this film is that the climax did not have any powerful dialogues as such but powerful actions instead. She couldn't tolerate how her husband considered traditions more important than her worth as a human. She does the unthinkable and serves the dirty tap water as tea to her husband who was going to Sabarimala and could only be served fresh food according to the traditions, this scene really portrays her frustration and courage that made her stand up for herself to pursue her dreams and aspirations.

CONCLUSION

What we must realize is that talking alone about the need for equality and liberty for girls and women isn't going to make a difference. The process begins at home and actions must be taken from early on to treat both girls and boys at home equally. Mothers especially should not restrict girls from doing things in the name of customs and traditions. In addition, they must refrain from encouraging and praising only boys to do certain things (Ebadi, 2004) when they just don't make sense in present-day society. Boys should be sensitized to understand and respect women and their struggles. (Gupta, 2017) Women must not be afraid to speak about their needs and desires to their partners when it comes to sexual relationships and not tolerate abuse just because they are married and as stated "The body of the woman as shown in *The Great Indian Kitchen* is merely reduced to a pair of hands alternating between the piled-up kitchen sink and the stoves when not a vagina that should dutifully be available for the husband's pleasure when not bleeding". Mathew, 20. Pleasure too is a right that women are entitled to. Although this might seem like an uncomfortable topic to many there is a need to create awareness and these issues must break the walls of the bedroom just like women need to break out of the four walls of the kitchen. Marital rape is still an area where India doesn't have framed laws for hence must be looked into and to not forget as stated by Ruth Bader Ginsburg " Women belong in all places where decisions are being made".

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