



Research Paper

## Reconceptualising the Gendered Space of Kitchen: A Peep into Ambai's *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House* and Jeo Baby's *The Great Indian Kitchen*

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### ABSTRACT

In almost all sociocultural environments across the globe, family centric activities and work for financially supporting the family and caregiving are perceived as gender specific and reinforce gender stereotypes. In fact the process of growing up female in a patrilineal Indian society is challenged with layers of subtleties and complexities. As a girl child grows up in a patrilineal society, she is exposed to various mechanisms that aid in the construction of cultural ideologies. These cultural ideas and values in turn shape a girl's image as a woman and gradually become her guiding principles informing and directing her future. This article discusses how gender roles are conceived, enacted and learnt within a complex of relationships and mechanisms in a patriarchal society with special reference to one such dominant and prevalent mechanism of gender construction in Indian household, namely the space of the kitchen. Within this theoretical framework, this article refers to two such texts, Ambai's (C. S Laxmi) *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House* (2019) and a Malayalam movie written and directed by Jeo Baby, *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) to explore the various layers of meaning that are attached to this domestic space called kitchen to generate and perpetrate dynamics of power within and without this space and analyze how kitchen performs as a gendered space aiding in the process of gender construction. It will also investigate and analyze how in the selected texts patriarchal concept of kitchen as a gendered space to perpetuate oppression and marginalization of women have been contested and challenged by younger generation of women.

**Keywords:** Gender construction, patriarchal, cultural ideologies, domestic space, kitchen.

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### Introduction

At a time when emancipation of women in urban spaces in Indian society seems to have achieved a satisfactory height, with women scaling new heights in social and political spaces, science and technology, corporate and private sectors, the role of women to perform some gender specific functions still continue. Though women have been successfully able to challenge the binaries of inner and outer, domestic and public, personal and private spaces, there are still certain roles that a woman is conditioned to perform in order to fit into the socio-cultural construct of her identity as an ideal woman; an ideal daughter, wife and mother. Kitchen is one such space in a patriarchal society that offers a brazen look at who women are, who they wish they were, and the selves of which some are only dimly aware and others not at all.

### **Gender Construction in a Patriarchal Society**

Patriarchy as a system has manifested itself uniquely in different parts of the world as a result of many factors. Sylvia Walby (1990) in her book, "Theorising Patriarchy" calls it a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. In the context of the Indian subcontinent, culture, religion, caste and class are some of the factors which have greatly influenced this system. Gail Omvedt (1980), another feminist scholar, concludes that several factors like economic participation, the role of violence and force and ideology led to the creation of patriarchy in India. Kamla Bhasin's (1993) explanation of patriarchy as a system of complete male dominance in economic, social and political spaces which in turn provide them with more power to dominate women is undoubtedly another very valuable observation (3).

According to Uma Chakravarti (1993), patriarchy in India evolved historically as a result of caste and gender hierarchies. The Brahmanical Code<sup>1</sup> was established along these very lines of caste and gender hierarchies, which further reinforced the patriarchal system. Uma Chakravarti's definition of patriarchy as embedded in the caste and gender hierarchies in India comes closest to explaining the status of Indian women. However, in the Indian context, a definition and understanding of patriarchy remains incomplete without discussing its religious roots. In other words, in order to have a complete understanding of the position of women in a patriarchal society, one should understand how the cultural and religious ideologies inform the image of women in a patriarchal society.

A woman in Hindu society is depicted as both the Creator and Destroyer as is evident in the image of Durga<sup>2</sup> and Kali<sup>3</sup>, two most dominant faces of the female form. The *Devi Sukta* hymn of *Rig Veda*, a scripture of Hinduism, declares the feminine energy as the essence of the universe, the one who creates all matter and consciousness, the eternal and infinite, the metaphysical and empirical reality (Brahman), the soul (supreme self) of everything (McDaniel, 2009, 9-33). Reflecting on the high position of women that Indian women in Pre-Vedic Age used to enjoy, Gorwaney (1977) observes "ideally women were accepted as a living force in society, the embodiment of 'Skakti' and a symbol of purity religiousness, spirituality and sacrifice" (2).

Ironically, against the positive image of women reflected in the scriptures where the feminine energy is depicted as the source of creation and essence of all being, there are certain religious facets like laws and ideologies that control and confine them into roles of obedient daughter and wife, dutiful mother and subservient wife. In essence, the more constructive part of feminine self

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<sup>1</sup> Brahmanical Code are codes laid down by Brahmins that primarily focus on how a Brahmin must live his life, and their relationship with a king and warrior class

<sup>2</sup> Durga is a major deity in Hinduism. She is worshiped as a principal aspect of the mother goddess Devi and is one of the most popular and widely revered among Indian divinities. She is associated with protection, strength, motherhood, destruction and wars.

<sup>3</sup>Kali is a Hindu goddess and the chief of the Mahavidyas, a group of ten Tantric goddesses who each form a different aspect of the mother goddess Parvati. She is regarded as the destroyer of evil forces.

*Stridharma* operated at different levels, starting from a woman's girlhood through her wifehood and motherhood that was regarded as the most significant phase of a woman and was applicable even in her widowhood. The main objective of designing *stridharma* and expecting women to follow that was obviously to regulate and control their sexuality, which was always regarded as the points of entrance, 'gateways' to the caste system.

Leela Dube (1988), an eminent Indian sociologist, in her seminal essay, "On the Construction of Gender: Hindu Girls in Patrilineal India", observes that in the socialization of a Hindu girl there are certain "cultural ideas and values that shape the images and inform the visions" (11) of Indian women that perpetuate their secondary position in the society. Citing an example of a contemporary, street play in Marathi by a group of feminists, 'A Girl is Born', Leela Dube shows how the process of gender construction of a girl child starts immediately as she attains puberty.

Do not abandon the vow of womanhood taken by you  
You have to follow your mother, grandmother, and great grandmother  
You have to mind the hearth and children  
Do not ask odd questions, Do not exceed the boundaries  
Do not get out of control, Do not abandon the vow of womanhood.  
Do not speak with your face up, Be inside the house  
Wash clothes, clean the utensils, Cook and serve food,  
Clear the leavings and remove the soiled plates  
Sew and embroider, Sweep and draw designs on the floor  
Water the Tulsi plant, Circumambulate the sacred tree  
Observe fasts and perform vratas  
Bend your neck downwards, Look downwards without looking up,  
Do not let your eyes wander, Do not abandon the vow of womanhood (qtd in  
Dube 1988)

The unequivocal message in this street theatre, in fact, very aptly sums up the expectations of male dominated society from a female child as she grows up from a little girl to a responsible woman.

In a patriarchal society men subjugate women and also control them in a systematic manner to assert their superiority over women. Dube further enlists various mechanisms that the patriarchal society takes the help of to express and enforce the relation of power relegate them to a secondary position compared to men. According to Dube (1988), family, kinship, religion and caste have an intertwining effect on the socialization of a girl. She observes, "The very process of socialization of Hindu girls through rituals and ceremonies, the use of language, and practices within and in relation to the family" (11-19) instil in them a sense of carrying a less significant social role compared to their male counterpart.

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<sup>4</sup> *Stridharma* refers to the duties of a women

Uma Chakravarty in her essay, "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India" (1993), shows how the ideological constructs of Brahmanical Patriarchy helps to keep women sexuality under control. The *Stridharma* (Duty of women) that constitute an integral part of Brahmanical discourse defines the expected role of a woman as a daughter, wife and mother in a patriarchal society. Girlhood in Brahmanical society is perceived as a preparatory stage for the next stage, i.e., wifehood. As a daughter, a girl is expected to be obedient to her parents and other kinsmen and maintain her chastity till she is married and becomes a part of her marital or conjugal family. As a wife, she is expected to devote herself to the services of her husband and his family sincerely and without any complaints. As a mother the expectations from her are doubled. She is expected to sacrifice her life for her children and family; her children's happiness is hers. In all these roles as a daughter, wife and mother, a woman survives as the 'other' to male power.

According to Uma Chakravarti, as she puts it in *Gendering Caste* (2006), female sexuality started to be controlled through different devices for extracting best expected results at different levels. The objective of obtaining complete submissiveness of women was made possible through the ideological construct of *pativrata*<sup>5</sup>. Gradually, the *pativrata* became a symbolic representation of an ideal woman of a patriarchal society and was eulogized for her chastity, submissiveness and wifely devotion for her husband. The *pativrata* equated her husband with God and therefore accepted him as her Lord at the household level. She showed no objection to the fact that her sexuality was controlled by her Lord-like husband. The second mechanism entrusted male kinsmen, especially the husband and father-in-law to exercise their authoritative power on their wives to ensure their complete submission to their husband and other kinsmen. Coercion and physical chastisement formed an integral part of this mechanism. The third mechanism was the state control in which the king exercised his power to regulate and control female sexuality. In case of any violation of sexual norms by women they were subjected to the agencies of the king (147-51).

Chakravarti's observation on construction of patriarchal ideologies to control women's sexuality is not exclusive to the Indian scenario. Rather it is universal in nature. Even J. S. Mill (1982) shared a similar opinion on the conditioning of women in a patriarchal society and remarked that it clearly highlights identity construction of women. This can be best summed in his words as, "All women are brought up from the very earliest in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men, not self-will and government by self-control, but submission and yielding to the control of others" (232).

Shalini Shah (2012), a well-known sociologist, in her essay, "On Gender, Wives and Pativratas", elaborated on the ideal of '*pativrata*' that women internalized and ultimately locked themselves in their role as a wife to a husband, serving him as her 'Lord'. She also observes that ideological constructs like '*pativrata*' helped the patriarchal society to regulate the sexuality of women in compliance to patriarchal norms. Thus, it is through these ideologies of *stridharma* that a woman as a daughter, wife and mother unconsciously becomes the victims of the patriarchal society.

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<sup>5</sup> Pativrata is a term used in Hindu culture and traditions to refer to a married woman who is faithful and loyal to her husband.

In the discourse of family, marriage and motherhood stand out as the only possible way of exploring the significance of a woman's existence in the patriarchal unit of a family. The function of a woman in marriage lies in performing the rituals with her husband and her success lies in giving birth to a male heir to carry the family lineage. Though Mrinalini Sinha (1997) has rightly observed that though motherhood in the structure of family has a pivotal role to play, it is actually "glorification without empowerment" (49-57), women, as conditioned to cultural ideologies of *stridharma*, feel incomplete without sacrificing themselves in the role of a nurturer and caretaker.

### **Gender Construction and the Space of the Kitchen**

Closely associated with the cultural ideology of *stridharma* is sexual division of labor with women been invested with woman's responsibilities revolving primarily around the needs of reproduction, mothering, childcare, cooking the most nutritious food possible and serving it with utmost love and care to support the physically arduous work and socialization and that of men to earn. Hence, the space of kitchen emerged as the symbol of selfless work; a woman should embrace this space as this provides her a chance to nurture, support and take care of her family. This association of women with housework, both structurally and ideologically, though glorified, is actually an eye wash, a tool to confine women within their household. The different tools of cooking like mortar pestle, equivalent to modern mixer grinder, gas stove, stinking kitchen sink and several food preparation processes like steaming, boiling, frying, roasting etc. also imply the condition of women working and toiling in the kitchen.

This mechanism of restricting and stunting the growth and development of women by confining them to household work, especially to the kitchen was perceived as a matter of grave concern even by second-wave Western feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer etc. According to these Western feminists, household work that a woman embraces as a part of the value system actually leads to silent slavery and eventually leads to compromising a woman's identity.

### **The Kitchen: A Space of Subjugation and Silence**

Kitchen in the selected text of C. S. Laxmi (popularly known as Ambai) and movie by Jeo Baby is a powerful space. It is a site that is overloaded with significance and multiple layers of meaning. It is the sacred space in a house that ensures growth and development of all its dwellers. It is the space where women of the house toil day and night to ensure wellbeing of their family members. Yet this is the space that silences them, subjugates them and cuts them off from outside world. However, it is in this space that the oppressed and the subjugated ones engage themselves in a power struggle with other women who share this space and earn an identity of their own. The kitchen, therefore, is central to the lives of members of the family. However, in both the instances kitchen is portrayed as the most neglected space, relegated to the extreme end of the house or plot. In Ambai's short story *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House*, not much thought was given in the construction of the kitchen. The kitchen that was constructed in the end after the rooms were built, something that was just "stuck on in a careless manner." (*A Kitchen in the Corner of the House* 177) reflect the sheer neglect it attracted from the patriarchs of the family even before it was constructed. Ambai opens her story with the kitchen, indirectly

indicating at its significance in the development of the plot. Her description of the kitchen as one that has: "Two windows. Underneath one, the tap and basin. The latter was too small to place even a single plate in it. Underneath that, the drainage area, without any ledge. As soon as the taps above were opened, the feet standing beneath would begin to tingle. Within ten minutes there would be a small flood underfoot. Soles and heels would start cracking from that constant wetness" (*A Kitchen in the Corner of the House* 177). Ambai further describes, "A zero watt light bulb hung there. The women appeared there like shadows, their heads covered, their deep colored skirts melting into the darkness of the room, slapping and kneading the *chappati*<sup>6</sup> dough or stirring the fragrant, spicy dal" (*A Kitchen in the Corner of the House* 179). Her description of the kitchen is marked with multiple meanings. The darkness of the kitchen not only refers to the absence of light in the kitchen, but also indicates lack of maintenance of the kitchen and sheer negligence and lack of attention that the women who spend time in the kitchen are subjected to. Its lack of proper ventilation and drainage are the signposts of the women's lack of opportunities and consequent stunted growth.

The movie, *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), by Jeo Baby is another drama that unfolds in a dark, grimy kitchen in a "respectable", middle-class home. Though the story starts with a traditional arranged marriage, it focusses on the drudgery, the monotony and the repetitiveness of chores in the kitchen. The characters in the story have no names, they are identified as the man, wife and father-in-law to stress on the universality of the experiences showcased in the movie. The writer and director of the movie, Jeo Baby himself in his Facebook comment remarks on the absence of any name as, "It's a universal story. A woman's struggle in the kitchen is the story of almost all women in India."

Like Ambai's story, the kitchen in this movie too has been shown as a dingy space, with big mud oven burning coals and releasing suffocating smoke, leaking taps and choked drainage system that over floods the kitchen space with dirty water, heavy cookware that are used every day, grinding stone and the open dustbin. The movie focuses on the regular schedule of starting the day with making a heavy breakfast that involves a lot of chopping, slicing, washing, dicing, grinding, steaming, boiling and garnishing and takes up a lot of time. While she slogs to prepare

breakfast, the men in the house engage themselves in exercising for physical and mental fitness. Meanwhile, he does yoga before breakfast and at the office. By emphasizing on the repetitive nature of the kitchen chores that included making *sambhar*<sup>7</sup>, grinding rice for *dosa*<sup>8</sup> and *idli*,<sup>9</sup> steaming raw banana etc., the scriptwriter and the director not only indicate the monotony and drabness of the work but also at the oppressive nature of the kitchen space.

The space adjacent to the kitchen is the dining area and serves as another very crucial space in the movie that provides opportunities to exercise patriarchal powers. The dining table every day

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<sup>6</sup> Chappati: Indian flat bread made of wheat dough

<sup>7</sup> Sambar is a lentil-based vegetable stew/porridge/soup, cooked with pigeon pea and tamarind broth, popular in Southern part of Indian

<sup>8</sup> A dosa is a thin pancake or crepe, originating from South India, made from a fermented batter predominantly consisting of lentils and rice.

<sup>9</sup> Idli or idly are a type of savoury rice cake, originating from the Indian subcontinent, popular as breakfast foods in Southern India and in Sri Lanka

during breakfast and lunch is flooded with various food items, however it soon becomes a dirty space littered with food leftovers. The dining table, an important prop in the movie, signifies the prosperity of the family as well as the authoritative power and position of the man and his father. It is a space that vibrates with patriarchal power, the positioning of the table with only two chairs indirectly speaks about the traditional norm of an Indian family that women should eat only after the men finish with their eating. The usage of the used plates again without washing indicates the position of the women in a patriarchal family. When the newly wed woman, after finishing with cooking her breakfast and serving, wants to join her husband to have her breakfast, to her utter surprise she finds only two chairs available for sitting. Even the mother-in-law politely but quite sternly signals at her that they as women should patiently wait for their turn as the men have their food.

### **Perpetrators of Power in Kitchen**

Kitchen is a space that is loaded with responsibilities. The cultural ideology of an Indian woman or a *pativrata* not only conforms to the ideal image of Annapurna but also sees to it that young women are carefully introduced to this space with its set of rules and regulations. In *A Kitchen in the Corner of the House* the older matriarch has not only accepted the dark space that was constructed “in a careless manner” with only two windows and terrible drainage that is prone to flooding and causes the feet of the cooks to “start cracking from that constant wetness” but has also drawn a feasible solution for this problem. Despite this, “the actual details, the concrete facts of the kitchen and its space didn’t seem to matter to them. It was almost as if such things didn’t actually exist”. To have complete control over the kitchen, determining the menu of the day to take stock of the spices and other staples in store was a matter of pride and it was endowed only to the matriarch of the family. When Jiji, the old matriarch got married, her mother told her two important mantras that any woman should follow in her marital family, “Take control over the kitchen. Never forget to make yourself attractive”. Even after wasting her whole life in the kitchen slogging day and night, Jiji takes immense pride in her power over everything in the kitchen, including the spices kept under her control, and she boasts of herself as a Queen of the ‘place’; oblivious of the reality, she perceives the kitchen as the soul of her life.

In the *Great Indian Kitchen*, the father-in-law, in the absence of the matriarch of the family, functions as the power holder and controller of the kitchen; though from outside. He endeavors to retain the traditional system of cooking and other chores related to the kitchen. He pleasantly shows his displeasure with rice cooked in a pressure cooker. When the newly wed woman expressed her desire to apply for a job, the greatest concern was cooking. He again showed his rigidity towards a woman of his family going out for a job and also showed his abhorrence for refrigerated food.

### **Challenging the Space of the Kitchen: The Space for Exercising Agency and Resistance**

Unlike the older generation of women who silently bear with the metaphorical and literal darkness spread across their kitchen, the younger generation challenges the hectic work and traditional cooking processes. The newly wed woman in the movie, *The Great Indian Kitchen*, is