

Slamming the Door: Reinventing Kitchen Narratives in Contemporary Indian Movies

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Abstract

In the last ten years, Indian cinema has envisaged culinary spaces as patriarchal structures embedded with the hegemonic practices of the family. Subsequently, Indian cinematic spaces have wielded the kitchens of the Indian subcontinent to interrogate the issues related to gender, identity, culture, and the nation. The culinary is politicized; the domestic space that has depicted hegemonic masculinity and intersectionality for centuries has been analyzed, exposed, and reimagined in movies like *Stanley Ka Dabba* (Hindi, 2011), *The Lunchbox* (Hindi, 2013), *Kaaka Muttai* (Tamil, 2014), *Aamis* (Assamese, 2019), and *The Great Indian Kitchen* (Malayalam, 2021). These movies constantly interrogate and challenge the gender roles and performances prevalent in Indian kitchens. The act of cooking, an agent of a woman's creative expression, has long been understood as an act where food preparations become rituals and performances, and kitchen spaces become a prison house for women. These movies question the power relations which overlay the culinary preparation and consumption in kitchen spaces and thereby mimic the manifestation of gender politics and power play. With the increasing patrilocal families, especially in India, cooking is no more an art or a technique but a bonded labour. This paper investigates the practical ways in which the movies lay bare the issues related to the manifestation of gender identity and the representation of the hegemonic other by reimagining, reinventing, and redefining culinary spaces.

Keywords: Culinary spaces, Kitchen, Cooking, Gender performance, Identity contestation, Agency

Introduction

From the start of the twenty-first century, Indian movies started investigating the kitchen space as gendered. Though this space was envisaged as a domestic space, it was often found hostile to women. Movies like *Stanley Ka Dabba* (2011), *The Lunchbox* (2013), *Kaaka*

Muttai (2014), *Aamis* (2019), and *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) interrogated the problems related to gender, identity, culture, and the nation. They also exposed the paradoxical nature of the kitchen, which often became a creative space for exploring a women's culinary skills and simultaneously transformed into a smokehouse where the woman was forced to perform everyday routines forever. The kitchen also becomes storehouses where the hypocrisy and the double standards of patriarchy are played out; simultaneously, they also become the spaces where creative subversions originate, making the women (in some movies, children as well) more empowered in the same spaces that oppress them.

Kitchens as repressive and empowering spaces

The redundancy and physical strain involved in the performances inside the kitchen are linked to gender politics. Through discourse analysis, this paper takes a theoretical position in evaluating and assessing the complex relationship between women and the kitchen, the women's silence, and the women's revolutions within that space. As Cairns, Johnston, and Baumann rightly observe, "One could observe a historically naturalized connection between food and femininity that has served to legitimize women's disproportionate food labour and to reproduce gendered divisions between the public and the private spheres" (592). The movies discussed here question the power relations that overlay the culinary preparation and consumption in kitchen spaces, thereby investigating the art of cooking as a strategically perpetrated bonded labour.

While investigating the relationship between women, kitchen, and culinary skills, many critical inquiries were engaged in analyzing the process and performance of cooking. The 'notion' of caring was linked with 'doing' gender, conveying the emotional significance associated with being motherly or womanly and performing gender roles for the family members. This emotional linkage propagated a historically augmented sense of being womanly

or motherly, making it imperative to cook for others, expecting nothing in return (De Vault 1991, Charles and Kerr 1998, Lupton 1996). Food and kitchen can be seen as loci of power contestations and can be investigated as agencies that perpetuate the hierarchical distinctions between genders. The act of cooking for someone else is “an act of subservience and submission” (Hix 139).

Transforming Venues of Nourishment

To be precise, the mother's kitchen and preparations are often considered the most nourishing and valuable spaces for a child's health and nourishment. However, in the two movies selected for our investigation, where children are the protagonists, we can see that the role of the mother, or the lack of a home or kitchen, apparently presents the condition of contemporary India. *Stanley Ka Dabba* and *Kaaka Muttai*, look at the nuances of food as a metaphor from the institutions' point of view. Here the concept of family, school, education, media, and so on, are critiqued and investigated based on the semiotics of cultural meanings in them perpetrated through agencies like advertisements and school management systems.

Stanley Ka Dabba (2011), a Hindi comedy-drama film written, directed, and produced by Amole Gupte, is a movie that takes the lead in investigating the depiction of the institutionalized construct of kitchen spaces, be they at home or in a restaurant. One of the earliest movies in our selection, it is set against the contemporary backdrop of a middle-class Indian school. The Dabba or lunchbox packs a compact universe of nutrition, nourishment, safety, security, love, affection, and care. In essence, the institution of the family is concocted in the container. The lack of such a receptacle of nourishment keeps Stanley apart from the others. The culinary spaces, the kitchens, where mothers are cooking nutritious lunch packets for their kids, are juxtaposed with the persona of a cook, Akram, who carefully packs Stanley's Dabba, filling it with the leftovers of the restaurant. In this movie, we can observe the disparity

between the kitchen of a house and that of a restaurant. Thus, the connotative meanings of security, love, nourishment, and protection are presented from two extreme levels.

When analyzing contemporary India's socio-political and cultural realities, home and family are often considered value imparting institutions. The family is regarded as a haven in the Indian cultural perspective where the children are safe and will be provided safety and nourishment. The school is also a similar institution where values, knowledge, and wisdom are transferred to the students. The movie interrogates these (mis)conceptions regarding social institutions. The transference of taste/safety/nourishment from the home kitchen to the restaurant kitchen is interestingly depicted in the movie. Being an orphan, Stanley is forced to live with a callous uncle who leaves him to the support of the hotel staff. He shares the cook's cabin, who packs his lunch box to school. This movie critiques the school as an institution, where a mid-day meal is the only time the children share their meal. It aptly highlights the significance of Stanley's tiffin box.

In contrast to the well-packed lunch boxes of the kids, Stanley carries one which is contorted, old, dull, and damaged. However, that is just an outer covering. He fishes a shiny new lunch box out of the lacklustre tiffin carrier. Stanley also has a way of erasing food from his daily routine as he refuses to acknowledge anything related to food in his textbooks. The issue of food security is conveyed beautifully through this simple movie. However, at the same time, it poses specific critical queries about the significance of institutions and agencies related to the values they convey to society. The Hindi teacher, Mr Verma, a gourmand, plays the villain in Stanley's life as he insists that Stanley brings his own *Dabba* or else he must miss school. He also had the notoriety of stealing food from children. The entire class adopts Stanley, and they feed him from their tiffin boxes, thus disrupting the conventional notions of the institution. His classmates rally around him like a family in class, feeding him. Nevertheless,

Stanley finds a way out by packing the foodstuff from the hotel where he works, with the help of his friend and fellow-labourer, Akram, who feeds the entire school.

One could simultaneously compare the proud Stanley who bounces to the school with his unkempt hair with the 'well-bred' children of conventional families carrying hot, fresh, nutritious food in clean dresses and with happy faces. Despite all this, they want to devour the hotel delicacies from Stanley's *Dabba*. Stanley maintains his narrative that his mother makes all the food, keeping the illusion of family alive. The food, the source and agency of food production and the point where the raw gets transformed into edible and mouth-watering cuisines, and its reception among the perpetrators of the institution of family are the active agencies that could help in deciphering this movie.

Kaaka Muttai (2014) looks at contemporary socio-political India. The impact of globalization and the high-flying flags of India's economic growth are juxtaposed against the single-room house and the family that accommodates a mother, grandmother, and two children. The influence of mass media, especially advertisements and social media, is discussed in the movie. It has the vulnerable narrative of the two children whose only dream in life is to taste pizza from the newly opened pizza shop near their shack. These impoverished kids often find their nourishment from crow eggs. It is amid intolerable living conditions that media intrudes in the form of the free television sets gifted to them by the government. Television sets become intruders, disrupting their life cycles and tantalizing them with mouth-watering advertisements. The boys eye pizza advertisements with longing and consider pizzas unattainable ambrosia. Watching their desire, their grandma makes them a desi version of pizza using dosa batter. Italian cuisine is made desirable and tantalizing through print and audio-visual advertisements. The boys disparage the desi version of their granny's pizza and long for Italian pizza from the outlet.

The "gustatory subversion" (Lewis 79) that has occurred with the advent and spread of global food chains and fast food shops is relevant here. Whenever the boys see a fast food advertisement, they drool at its sight, unable to suppress their desire to take a bite from the food. Thus, the new foods are packaged inside the garb of superior modernity. The boys undertake all kinds of adventures to taste the manna they desire. However, ironically, when they taste pizza, they lose all their craving and awe for that food and accept that the grandmother's desi-dosa-pizza version is better than the original version. The hegemonic superiority associated with western foods, here pizza, for instance, is critiqued by these two boys who start praising the pizza dosa made by their grandmother. The culinary and cultural acceptance of childhood innocence is juxtaposed with the mediated visual manipulation of hegemonic culinary practices.

The children in these two movies confront a culinary culture exploited and manipulated by the visual media. This culture also holds the hegemonies of power, desire, and security. They also prompt us to relook at the institutions of family and media framed by the notion of food security and desirability, thereby giving the audience a better understanding of the current socio-political conditions of Indian middle and lower-middle-class societies. The institutionalized hegemonic practices and the feminization of poverty are critiqued through culinary semiotics, which appear as Stanley's tiffin box and the pizza. When we move to the gendered spaces of culinary practices and the kitchens in *The Lunchbox* and *The Great Indian Kitchen*, the space, the performer, and the medium of performance are to be critiqued.

“Dear Ila, the food was very salty today,” Sajan Fernandez responds to Ila after lapping up the delicious lunch she prepared for her husband. His colleague Shaikh, who will soon fill Sajan's place after retirement, also enjoys a bite. The movie is about the mistaken lunchbox identity, which turns romantic. The lunchbox Ila packs for her callous husband reaches Sajan's office table. This initiates the exchange of culinary skills from Ila's side and

palatable satiety from Sajan's side, which takes a fetishist turn which borders on eroticism. Sajan once fixes a date with Ila, but he backs out, realizing she is much younger than him. The empowerment that Ila gains through her lunchboxes (ignored by her husband), which is later relished and appreciated by a stranger, gives her the courage to embark upon a journey to Bhutan, leaving her past and her disinterested husband behind.

In the movie *The Lunchbox* (2013), cuisines and kitchen space are categorized as women's tools to keep the family bond more robust. Ila establishes her sole connection with her husband, who is detached and indifferent to her, through the delicious meals she prepares with care and skill and packs for him. Later, she realizes that he has an extramarital affair. The lunchbox she regularly packs for him is despatched to Sajan, a widower who meticulously relishes her dishes and appreciates them.

Food possesses that agency which fails to connect her; ironically, it connects her with a stranger who unwittingly empowers her with his consumption and appreciation. It is from this strength that she gets the courage to slam the door of her home/house and turn her back on the tepid and entropic institution of the family. The movie, through the dialogue between Ila and her neighbour Mrs. Deshpande, hints at how "Social institutions and popular culture have made the Kitchen a gendered space in which deeply held ideologies about natural feminine or masculine are evident" (Weedon 3).

The Lunchbox explores culinary spaces and interrogates gender and the supposed transgression of gender roles. Ila, the protagonist in *The Lunchbox*, believes in the institution of family and tries to win her husband's love through her delectable cooking. In the small kitchen space in which Ila works, the invisible neighbour, Mrs. Deshpande, who reminds her that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach and provides her reinforcements during cooking, points to the camaraderie within kitchen spaces and the subversive ways in which these spaces are negotiated and reinvented by women's friendship. However, Ila's efforts,

energy, and time spent in the kitchen are ignored by her husband. When the lunchbox is swapped accidentally to a stranger, Sajan Fernandez, he critiques, comments, and actively participates in the meal-making process. After her initial response, Ila reciprocates and eventually breaks away from the loneliness, misery, and indifference that the institution of the family dishes out for her.

When the movie begins, the pressure cooker that whistles is partisan to her emotional anxieties. After the lunchbox is swapped, Ila opens up to Sajan, and tells him that Bhutan is a place where everyone is happy and where the Gross National Happiness matters more, making it a desirable place to visit. This could be considered a journey of liberation and the ushering of happiness into her life. Ila, expecting to find happiness in the entire ritualistic process of food-making, leaves the suppressive kitchen space where she is unacknowledged and ignored and embarks on a journey of her own in pursuit of finding herself.

The societal expectations and the performative roles expected from a woman inside the culinary spaces force Ila and the 'wife' in *The Great Indian Kitchen* to prepare food, wash the utensils, and clean the kitchen. The kitchen appears as a disciplining space where enacting the gender roles of a daughter, wife, and mother compels women to engage in gender performances. The kitchen spaces in these movies are considered exclusively female and feminized. The engagements with the vessels, cleaning and washing, and lighting and snuffing the stove and fire, symbolize the woman's engagements with 'the essential spaces of her belonging'.

The Great Indian Kitchen (2021) is a kitchen-sink drama that politicizes social and personal issues. There is the recurring presence of filth, leftovers, the putrid leaking kitchen sink, the block in the kitchen sink, and the stinking waste basket, which are symbolic of the innate, embedded practices, performances, and expectations of a woman's trysts with the kitchen's spaces. They are also microcosmic expressions of the larger society's extreme sexism in all its manifold forms.

Even during the menstrual periods, when the wife is concerned about getting sanitary pads, her husband's sole concern is following the menstrual taboo rituals. The wife in this movie becomes a ritualistic performer, driven by mundane clockwork, who becomes a permanent fixture in the kitchen space. Another space which forces her to 'perform her duties' is the bedroom, where she faces the decay and pressure of conjugal sex. As Rebecca Swenson puts it, "The idea that food preparation is fun and pleasurable has its roots in its assignment to the happy homemaker, a wife and mother whose unpaid labour is done for loved ones because of natural, altruistic and maternal instincts" (139). The disparity between the man as a constant consumer of the benefits of family and the woman as the constant producer of meaning within the same institution with her hard work, routine, supplication, and sacrifice, as well as the constant struggle to efface herself and make herself invisible becomes the "natural and normal part of the discourse about the kitchen" (139).

"She peels, chops, grinds, cooks, serves, does the dishes, sweeps and mops the floor. He eats. She's rushed off her feet. He sits calmly, doing yoga - breathing in, breathing out" (Pandey, bbc.com). Domestic chores are often linked with one particular gender. The daily mundane rituals like cutting vegetables, mixing and cooking, cleaning the vessels, and cleaning the kitchen are often considered her natural expressions, manifesting her gendered relations to the kitchen space and the culinary. This is where the definitions for doing gender highlighted by West and Zimmerman could be discussed. The women's performances and activities inside the kitchen space enact their gender as an "outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimizing one of the most fundamental divisions of society" (West & Zimmerman 126).

In the film, the wife takes the ultimate and rebellious decision by walking out of the marriage to explore her dreams. She throws the putrid water from the sink on the faces of the

perpetrators of these gender disparities and walks out of her husband's home and marriage precisely when the preparations for the Sabarimala pilgrimage and the Pooja are going on. The auspiciousness of the occasion is contrasted with the crucial steps by an enlightened woman. The wife throws the kitchen sink dirt in the face of blatant sexism and thus impersonates Nora, who slammed the door on European patriarchy a hundred years back.

Desires Resist Hegemony

Aamis (2019), an Assamese film, explores the possibilities of hunger and desire, acceptable and prohibited, and attacks society's conventional and morally correct expectations. The movie revolves around the relationship between a PhD scholar and a married woman, and the culinary establishes an exquisite bond between the two. The varieties of exotic meat, including mutton, rabbit, and bat, are cooked along with taro, or banana flower, symbolizing the bond between the carnal and the ascetic. Sumon, a PhD scholar from the Department of Anthropology, specializes in the meat-eating habits of the North East and tries to establish a bond with Nirmali, a paediatrician.

The movie poses questions to the audience, including what is normal and abnormal. Suman explains to Nirmali the age-old argument regarding what is and isn't normal to eat. He then lists exotic animal meat varieties, making the listeners cringe. Nevertheless, Nirmali listens to it and is profoundly affected. Finally, he takes her on many gastronomic dates, and Nirmali looks forward to them.

However, the movie poses a series of questions to its readers. What could the nuances of the meat-eating culture mean to different people? The film also explores meat as a metaphor for raw sexuality. It is Sumon who starts the pattern of human meat consumption. Both Sumon and Nirmali explore exotic meat eating together; this is their exploration of the forbidden sexuality. The protagonists find a way to touch each other's lives by sharing meat, and

implicitly meat eating and the metaphorical consumption of desire become the main focus of the story. At the peak of self-effacement in love, Sumon feeds Nirmali his flesh till they reach the peak of consummation, which is unreal, in the sense that they do not even touch each other during their foodgasmic escapades.

Though he tries several times to touch her, the natural touch happens only towards the end of the movie, when the police arrest the two in connection with the murder of an auto driver. In a bizarre move, homicide and cannibalism connect them in inseparable ways. The presence of meat as an identity marker, as a signpost, reveals the characters of Sumon and Nirmali. At the same time, the movie locates the North East in culinary cartography.

Though Sumon deals with the meat consumption habits of the North East region, his relationship with Nirmali initiates a new contagious habit. Nirmali's anxieties and desires are mitigated by meat eating, and it also becomes an act of rebellion. Sumon introduces her to various meat preparations and enjoys her role as a connoisseur of the Meat Eaters Club. Nevertheless, Nirmali's act of meat eating is linked to her resistance to her professionally engaged husband, who does not respect his wife's emotional needs and demands. Through this process, Nirmali tries to break away from the conventional, modest, typecast wife and mother. Even her dietary explorations take a curious turn as she is insatiate and craves more and more human flesh. Meat eating becomes both food and hallucinogen for her. Though her husband, who is committed to his profession, brings fresh farm products during his house visit, and her maid prepares a table full of excellent vegetarian dishes, in between the dinner, Nirmali gets up and moves towards the refrigerator, devours meat, and enjoys that act of meat consumption. Thus, meat-eating is viewed from Sumon's vantage point of research, exploration, and investigation, whereas Nirmali takes it as a fetishist and liberating experience. Atkins and Bowler observe that "tastes are also derived from our culturally constructed inclinations for particular dishes and ingredients, and our socially derived desire for our consumption habits to

show us in the best possible light" (1). Here we could distinguish between sensations related to hunger, appetite, and erogenous desire. Reading the gustatory habits of Nirmali, it is not hunger or appetite for a morsel of grain or any food material, but instead, it is the scopophilic urge to taste, bite, and chew meat.

The vacuum she feels in her life is an extension of her unfulfilled desires and experiences. Sumon cooks his own body and presents them before Nirmali as haute cuisine. In contrast, for Nirmali, cooking her own body and feeding it to Sumon is nothing but another nuance of the gustatory adventure she enjoys. Through these bizarre paths, both of them question, reinterpret, and reinvent the notions of normal/abnormal. As the final act of surrender and exploration, Nirmali makes Sumon an accomplice in homicide.

Conclusion

Kitchen-sink movies and pattern movies depicting domesticity have been undergoing stages of experimentation and they have been reinventing spaces and cinematic paradigms to speak back to the mainstream cinema. This paper is an attempt to map the way cuisines and culinary tropes have been used in Indian movies to investigate and interrogate the constructions of gender, social identity, and female spaces. Food in many of these movies become a scrumptious trope which explores serious social, political, and gender issues. In these movies, we can see that food becomes an essential aspect of material culture, helps shape individuals and their identities, reshapes memories, and upsets hierarchies and hegemonies. Thus, food is neither neutral nor innocent but a product of dominant ideologies and power structures (Cussack-208). In addition, food becomes the most mouth-watering catalyst for thought, critique, and change.

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