

Domestic Spaces, Subaltern Voices: Reading “The Great Indian Kitchen and Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey”

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ABSTRACT

Atrocities against women have been voiced over and again, yet only the echoes remain. Mumbled and often unheard are the words in the heart of many married women. The term Subaltern is referred to as the of the general attribution of subordination of the South Asian society whether this is in terms of classification of caste, age, gender and office or in any manner. The word “subaltern” stands as “a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way”. The present study attempts a subaltern reading of the movies *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) and *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* (2022).

The Great Indian Kitchen pictures the predicament of a normal woman wedded off to a traditional Malayalee household. The story then enfolds her suffering in a male chauvinist house. Women are merely seen as humans, enclosed in the four walls of the house and expected to be available always. Her desire to pursue a job is received with ridicule and contempt. *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* features the horror and aftermath of a woman trapped in an abusive marriage. Jaya has always been seen as subaltern by her family members. The saga continues even after marriage. Her husband slaps her over trivial issues. The study focuses on the status of these women. Both movies have been impeccable accurate portrayals of the condition of married woman in Indian households.

KEYWORDS: Women, Subaltern, Movies, Gender, Identity, Marginalised, Oppressed

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INTRODUCTION

Liberty, prosperity and equality are promises told but unkept for many women in many Indian households. Reasons unknown women find it so difficult to acquire a sense of respect and dignity for what they do indoors and outdoors. Treated second in status and last in preference married women have been staying indoors and continuing to slough for labour that is unpaid and unnoticed. Women all over the world have remained marginalised. Oppression of women over different sectors gained attention towards the beginning of the 18th century. Initial struggles were focussed on her position in the society; little attention was gathered towards her domestic condition. If there was one point of commonality all over the world, it was the condition of women. Abandoned by the self, little did she try to overcome her plight. Many voices would have said - no case filed; no charges accused yet I was arrested. I was confined in a prison called Home. Not my home, my husband's. Acquiring courage was beyond all possibilities at that point of time and everything was blamed on destiny. The issue of intimate partner violence (marital abuse or IPV) is one of the most widespread ones on the gender-based violence map around the country and millions of women once entered matrimony have become its victims. This issue has a variety of aspects related to abuse and the most common ones are verbal, mental, physical, economic, and sexual. Statistics & facts lead to multifaceted pattern of control and coercion in intimate relationships that stretch much further than physical violence.

The marital abuse in the Indian context has an intergenerational and sociocultural foundation, and the totality of the patriarchal prerogative, the violence that transpires in dowry, and the traditional gender norms intermingling with the contemporary dreams ought to be well comprehended. When determining the direction of the further study of marital abuse in India, especially on the example of such states as Kerala, it is important to consider the advances that have been done in terms of lowering the rates of violence, as well as the existing issues that require selective interventions, policy changes, or community prevention efforts. Media has been in many ways been very influential in portraying life with all its vicissitudes. If one could put it as such, media plays a pivotal role in bringing out many cases of unseen misery. Movies form a platform where people connect to stories and vice versa. Through movies invisible and unheard cries find their reception in an audience who are able to identify with the characters. The impact of films on creating attitudes towards marital abuse in society forms a multi-dimensional and a continually unfolding story especially in the case of India where movies play an important part in influencing culture. Having romanticised violence to highlighting its unsavoury side, Indian films have come a long way to portray the unpalatable truth about domestic violence. The paper attempts to identify aspects of subaltern in two Malayalam movies.

A SUBALTERN READING OF THE MOVIES - *THE GREAT INDIAN KITCHEN AND JAYA JYA JAYA HEY*

Antonio Gramsci coined the term “Subaltern” which explains the socio-economic position of the native in an Imperial colony. The term “subaltern” as M.H. Abrahams mentions, is a British word for someone of inferior rank. It combines the Latin terms for

“under” (sub) and the other “alter”. Dating back to a time when the geography had boundaries laid by the English, colonies were formed and the human race saw the polarity of the oppressor and the oppressed, the latter having faintly a name and identity. With such a human crisis existing, the condition of women was muted or barely unseen. As per this marginalization, women are described as the subalterns. Except the common ground, women of different cultures have different issues which cause agitation to their group, that being born a daughter recklessly frames you into a category of being oppressed by the male counterpart. As feminism pleads equality subaltern unveils the position of being the inferior. In many ways, various realms of subaltern studies interpret it as the state of being marginalised or oppressed. On the oppressed its sovereign might is shadowed down by the oppressor, who never forgets his might. Both Subaltern Studies and *The Great Indian Kitchen* share the ability to point at the challenge of repressed populations but do it in dissimilar ways and with dissimilar audiences. The movie allows the audience to empathize with the situation of the main character introducing a realistic and emotionally charged image of personal experiences. Finding themselves helpless, the oppressed rarely find a way out; but once the light at the end of the tunnel is visible then the narrative changes. Women who have valour in them break the boundaries and seek respect in themselves. The movies *The Great Indian Kitchen* and *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* are both results of this courage that two women discretely garnered to flee from their traumatic and abusive marriages. The Great Indian Kitchen articulates the plight of a young, educated dancer who gets married off to a traditional patriarchal male chauvinist household. Being a newly married, the wife in the movie is carried away by the charms of early marriage days. The household chores including the piling up of unwashed plates and dirt is unseen as a problem. As time settles down things start to get difficult as she fails to understand why only women are cooking and cleaning while the men in the house are lavishly spending time doing nothing. The never-ending house chores shown in the movie resonate with Vijayalakshmi’s poem Bhagavata. She writes...

*At dusk you take your holydip
And away from the noises of the world
You read aloud the sacred book:
Bhagavata.*

*Why don't you come, come on
listen-your calls I hear'
But I am busy by the fire,
Cooking for you.
A hundred plates and Pots
Await me, to be washed
And a hundred little things,
Chores for tomorrow.*

*With my hands blackened by soot
I turn the leaves of a
Mighty Bhagavata that will end
Only when my life ends
And willingly go on reading it:
But you never come to hear me!*

Needless to say, the women in the poem and the woman in the movie are venting their sorrow. Both not knowing what hands have gripped their fate they continue to toil. The subaltern aspect of these women rise from their suffering within their own homes. The poet unwillingly survives through every day. In the movie apart from the tiring chores the wife is also bound to meet the sexual advances of her husband. The movie brings about the conventional gender Indian household roles played by males and females. Women are entrusted with the role of cooking, cleaning and serving the family whereas men receive more freedom and decision-making powers. The film clearly shows how monotonous and tiring the family chores, especially cooking and cleaning can be and how they are going to be the responsibility of a woman more than a man. The initial days of marriage are portrayed beautifully where the wife is completely in awe of the love received from her husband till reality sinks in. Slowly one after the other the layers of veracity unfold. From cooking to cleaning every household chore is looked upon by her with helplessness.

The Great Indian Kitchen is more like a disclosure of the harsh truth of women who have been condemned to the position of a housewife and needed to provide her family by the means of feeding and keeping it not demanding the change of the situation. The video represents through a feminist lens the strict conditions and norm females must live under at home because of the strict chains of roles enclosing them as wives and mothers. The protagonist Nimisha Sajayan acts on behalf of the silent agony of many females who are ruled under rigidity of families and confined to the roles of wives and mothers. This feminist study looks at how the film portrays female oppression, resistance, and the struggle for freedom in a patriarchal society. The audacity of men to carelessly leave leftover chewed food on the table and expecting women to clean this waste creates the vantage point of tolerance. While trying to voice her desire to go for work her idea is dismissed with ease making it even more difficult for her. She forgets her identity and her role as wife seemed to cloud on everything else. To her astonishment, menstruation is seen as impure by other family members in her husband’s house, and she is forced to remain locked up in a separate room, bathe in a river and sleep in another room, treated like an untouchable. This spurs the warrior in her and she decides to break all shackles. The turning point of the movie is when she throws the dirty water on her husband and runs away to her freedom. The climax of the movie celebrates her as an independent woman who drives her own car and is a dance teacher. The movie celebrates her choice to erase away her subaltern status. The analysis of social relations and the power may frequently become a part of scholarly writing and cinematic plots. A school of historical thought such as Subaltern Studies, developed by Ranajit Guha and others, and a moving Malayalam

film *The Great Indian Kitchen*, directed by Jeo Baby, will give us interesting insight into the relations between patriarchy, gender norms, and the lives of the subalterns in India. The movie is thus an effective filmic treatment of subaltern studies and the way in which the patriarchal framework actively suppresses the voice of women at the domestic level. The film reflects on the concept of subalternity, based on work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal piece on the topic, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* In her work, Spivak argues that subaltern is the subject that is subordinated in these subordinations. The protagonist in the film is living on several levels of subordination, first as a woman, followed by wife and then the daughter-in-law in a conventional Kerala family.

The subaltern nature of the protagonist is observable in her voicelessness in the hierarchy of her home. The suppression of women by women is proven in this case because most of the times in their own homes as depicted in the film and as Spivak argues, subaltern women are doubly colonized; the first being colonized by the patriarchy and the second by the familial structure. The movie is painstaking in its description of how the personality of the woman is swallowed by the shadows of the kitchen where they are working, their work is invisible and is not recognized at all, just as in the case of the subaltern who is never present in the mainstream narratives.

The story suggests the depth of frustrations and dissatisfaction of a married woman, and she is trapped in an attempt to fit into the pattern of patriarchal domesticity. This conflict reflects the subaltern condition when the resistance almost becomes impossible because of those structurally established disabling conditions. The kitchen as itself becomes the metaphor of the space of subalternity the place of oppression and helplessness.

The relevance of the film can be considered in how it stresses the transition of the protagonist to the state of speech. Being voiceless and obedient at the beginning, she is slowly starting to doubt and finally going against the oppressive systems. The story illustrates how subaltern struggle can also be developed even under the most stringent conditions. By unswervingly showing the specifics of female domestic work and repression of feelings, the movie proves Spivak and headless formerly about inferiority of the agency of the subaltern at the time placing the hope that females will find their way out through their conscious opposition and self-identity. Some of the most crucial moments of the movie condense the subordinate experience and the process of awakening of the main character. The menstruation cycle can also be deemed as one of the most effective symbols of patriarchal dominance as the main character is also segregated and considered untouchable and she has to sleep alone and eat with other utensils. This episode characterizes the most appropriate concept of gender, body politics, and religious orthodoxy that makes women subaltern in their own homes. This action of teaching dance to the girls is seen as an indirect way by the protagonist to assert control and to show a way to a world outside the domestic realms.

Mechanisms of hegemony that marginalize certain groups in society are the focus of both "*The Great Indian Kitchen*" and *Subaltern Studies*. The film displays, as it were, a plausible picture of a newlywed woman who has trouble facing the constraining demands of her in-laws and the society in general to the best of her ability. On the same level, *Subaltern Studies* seeks to rediscover the experiences of individuals who are oppressed and sidelined in the society whose experiences had not been taken seriously by the mainstream ideology. The prevalence of patriarchy and the adverse effects it has on individuals, and the society are brought into the limelight. *Subaltern Studies* and *The Great Indian Kitchen* offer two alternative perspectives on how patriarchy, subaltern, and resistance are linked with one another in Indian society. Together they enhance our understanding of how agency and power build the social realities and introduce an opportunity to engage in more complex discussion of social justice and emancipatory conflicts.

Marxist theories and observations aren't enough for the understanding of the real problem. Women are often objectified in movies. In the essay *The Problem That Has No Name*, Betty Frieden rightly says "... she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question – is this all?" The essay rightly focuses on the problem that women are scared to confront. Life has never been kind on them. The fact that she is unhappy is out there, but how many of them come to terms with it? The wife in the *great Indian Kitchen* for once decides to rise against all odds and listen to the inner anguish that perpetuated the courage to react revolt and run, run for her life.

A socially influential problem that includes series of challenges and misfortunes that are met, at one point, or the other, by a woman after getting married is the post-marriage trauma that women in India face. Even though marriage is considered a happy experience, among most Indian women, it may translate into different types of traumatic and distressing experiences caused by the expectations of marriage, gender roles, and cultural factors. *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* narrates the story of yet another educated girl who is married off very young. The subaltern story of *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* (2022) by Vipin Das makes a solid case as it is the documentation of the way Jayabharathi, one who was previously silenced and marginalized subject became a source of revolt in patriarchal order. The subaltern is signified by various subordinations that the main character goes through as a daughter who is deprived of the right to education and who has to see her brother getting favored because of his gender, and as a wife who is treated violently by the husband, Rajesh, and who also is ridiculed by him. The movie illustrates the idea by Gayatri Spivak about the voicelessness of the subaltern by using example of Jaya, who does not have the capabilities to express her oppression or be supported by her relatives and community at the beginning of the film. Her wishes to get an education and economic independence and become self-sufficient are all attempts at self-representation that are crushed by patriarchal gatekeepers systematically. Her desire to persuade higher education finds deaf ears of her parents who marry her off to a well reputed groom. Her desire to pursue her education is procrastinated by her rude and arrogant husband who ceased to understand the basics of equality among the two genders. He is a typical patriarch who sees women as mere server of men. She is repeatedly slapped by her husband over trivial matters. The slap started to resonate with her day-to-day errand. The sound of the slap captured in the movie echoes the plight of a large number of women. As the slap and its intensity increases day after day, she decides to help

herself by secretly learning self-defence through YouTube. Finally, one day the slap is answered with a powerful kick throwing her husband off the ground. Caught in the plethora of judgements in the society the husband tries to impregnate her so that she feels helpless. His plan fails as she finds out about it and her shock accompanied by her rise in blood pressure, she falls resulting in an abortion. She gets blamed by both the families, though Jaya tries to get the support of her parents, they tell her to “adjust” and continue being the ideal wife. Soon, Jaya realizes the hard truth that no one will come to her aid. And this ignites the spark in her to live for herself. The realisation that she needs emotional independence as well financial independence fuels her urge to stand up for herself and survive. She decides not to go back to either of the homes and stays in a hostel. On understanding that her husband has applied for divorce she decides to make the most out of it. Jaya unmasks Rajesh in the court when he argues that he “gives” her freedom. Towards the end of the movie, she starts her own business where she proves her faculty in defeating him in business. She becomes the rival of her husband’s business thus establishing herself as a powerful woman. But before signing the divorce paper Jaya sneeringly asks the price of chicken as a contrast with their first meeting. She informs him that she sells her chicken at a cheaper rate than he does and that since Rajesh had turned down her request of taking over the poultry farm of one of her rivals, she had ended up acquiring it. Her management resulted to her company receiving more profits due to her decisions. There are a number of important episodes in the movie that reveal how the subaltern traverses the path of silence to revolt. The time during which the parents of Jaya choose to invest a lot of money in the college education of her brother and send her to the local, less expensive educational institution sets the patriarchal order in which the opinion of Jaya takes a second place. Her forbidden access to Kalarippayattu and Karate via the internet in the form of her learning through the YouTube phenomenon is an underground acquisition of power the subaltern finding her voice of action through knowledge the patriarchy would not have allowed her to possess. The key moment when Jaya physically first rebels against the abuse by beating Rajesh when he attempts to snatch her cell phone is the first moment of voice by the subaltern through embodied performance. The episode about the miscarriage, which was prompted by the deceitful scheme of Rajesh to keep her in bondage using pregnancy, proves how women bodies are used as centres of patriarchal assertion and corruptions. It is in the climactic courtroom scene, where the subaltern really finds her voice, not only does Jaya get empowered to speak about her experience of abuse but Jaya also gets empowered to disclose the economic prosperity of having usurped the rival of her abuser and literally beating him at his own game and outselling him as well. Jaya’s story is in every way the story of a subaltern woman who is always unseen and unheard. Portrayal of helpless women have monopolised the audience for a very long time. Often this helpless woman had to be rescued by a stronger man owing to the association of physical strength to masculinity. Jaya on the other hand waits for no man and she redeems herself. When the whole world wanted to see her helpless and guilty, she rose to her own identity. Jaya is not willing to be the uncanny victim of the patriarchal society.

CONCLUSION

Both the movies showcase the trauma these women have undergone single handedly and these movies have been impeccable accurate portrayals of the condition of married woman in Indian households. Denied the basic right to survive, they are forced to give in to the gimmicks of their husbands. The way their husbands treated them as mere bodies of labour embodies in itself the subaltern marginalised footing of a woman. Born to have different dependent identities, a woman is never entitled her identity. It always belongs to the superior male persona of the family, either that of the father or/and that of the husband. In both the movies the married women are shown as helpless and unwanted by their own families. As Spivak rightly says subaltern means: It refers to those who don’t give orders; they only receive orders. The term subaltern can be extended to the questions of gender and sexual differences, which analyse the representation and offers a profound critique of subaltern history. Women in both the movies are clear representations of being the marginalised counterparts. Yet they chose to revolt and rise. Besides, the cultural implications of such films should not be reduced to the personal story of empowerment but rather see them as the events of a cultural awakening in both Malayalam cinema and the Indian society as a whole. Democratizing the scholarly language of subaltern studies, these works also make theoretical accounts of subaltern experience accessible to the mass audience by filtering these stories, because of their language, through the comprehensible language of cinema. The movies become the basis of social discourse, forcing the audience to face awkward realities basing on gender perceptions in their communities and family. The commercial success and critical approval of the film indicate that the modern Indian society is willing to access feminist discourses that destabilize established power of the dominant. In addition, these filmic portrayals form a counter narrative to the larger discourse of patriarchy in Indian media, making alternative markers of womanhood that are characterized by reclaiming agency over silence, voice over subordination and power over subservience. Through this process of doing, they are able to help in a gradual and profound transformation in cultural ways of knowing, experiencing and positioning the subaltern woman, whose experience is not just recognised but is legitimised and hailed as an acceptable ground of knowledge and opposition.

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