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Cooked in Silence: Marriage, Sex, Societal Pressure and Cultural Stigma in *The Great Indian Kitchen* and the Fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Arun Lakshman MR and Dr G. Brishya

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Agurchand Manmull Jain College, Meenambakkam, Chennai-600061

ABSTRACT.

This paper analyses how marriage, sexuality and cultural stigma are represented in Jeo Baby's Malayalam film *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), and in the fiction of the Indian American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, chiefly the story collection *Arranged Marriage* (1995) and the novels *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) and *Sister of My Heart* (1999). Drawing on feminist theory of marriage, domestic labour and purity, and on Goffman's account of stigma, the paper argues that both bodies of work expose the same structure: a marriage in which a woman's labour, body and desire are treated as family property, and in which social pressure converts that arrangement into silence. The film shows this structure through the daily routine of one kitchen, while Divakaruni shows it across generations, classes and continents. The paper also observes that the two differ in their endings: the film ends in rupture, while the fiction usually seeks survival through sisterhood and storytelling. It concludes that these works together show that the home, the bedroom and the temple are connected sites of gender politics.

Keywords: marriage, sexuality, domestic labour, menstruation, stigma, patriarchy, *The Great Indian Kitchen*, Divakaruni

1. Introduction

In Indian cultural life, marriage is often presented as the natural goal of a woman's life, and the family as a place of care. Yet many Indian women's narratives show the same institution as a site of silence, in which a woman is expected to cook, to serve, to submit in bed and to remain quiet about her own body. This paper reads two kinds of text that expose this pattern: a film and a body of fiction.

The Great Indian Kitchen was written and directed by Jeo Baby and released on the streaming platform Neestream in January 2021 ("The Great Indian Kitchen"). An official Tamil remake of the same name followed in theatres on 3 February 2023, with Aishwarya Rajesh in the lead role ("The Great Indian Kitchen (2023 Film)"). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is known for her portrayals of immigrant Indian women ("Divakaruni"), and her work has also reached Tamil audiences, since *Sister of My Heart* was adapted as a Tamil television series ("Sister of My Heart" [SuperSummary]).

The paper asks how these works represent the connection between marriage and sex, how social pressure and cultural stigma operate on women's bodies, and what forms of resistance they imagine.

2. Theoretical framework

Beauvoir's argument that woman is made, not born, is the starting point. Pateman extends it by arguing that the marriage contract has historically included a sexual contract, under which a wife's body is made available to her husband. Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality adds that the expectation of marriage and sex with a man is enforced through social pressure and not simply chosen. On the subject of work, Oakley and Hochschild show that housework and the so-called second shift are unpaid and unrecognised labour that falls mostly on women, even when they also work outside the home.

For the Indian context, Chakravarti's idea of brahmanical patriarchy shows how control over women's sexuality has been tied to caste purity, so that rules about who may marry, touch or cook are also rules about social hierarchy. Douglas's analysis of purity and pollution explains how bodily processes such as menstruation are turned into symbols of danger. Goffman's study of stigma shows how an attribute that society finds discreditable can spoil a person's whole identity. Together, these theories describe how a woman's labour, body and reputation become the property and the burden of the family.

3. *The Great Indian Kitchen*: the wife who is never named

Marriage and labour. The film follows a young woman, played by Nimisha Sajayan, a trained dancer, who enters an arranged marriage with a teacher played by Suraj Venjaramoodu ("The Great Indian Kitchen"; "Deconstruction"). The leading characters have no names ("Subtle"), a choice that makes

the wife a type instead of an individual. The early bliss of marriage soon gives way to a routine of cooking, serving and cleaning, while the men of the house are served their food and leave the dirty table, the clogged sink and the leaking pipe to her ("How an Indian Kitchen"). One reviewer notes that the film's strength lies in its lack of drama: it makes its point by repeating the same chores day after day ("India Currents"; "Reality"). In Hochschild's terms, the film depicts the second shift without a first. In Oakley's terms, it shows housework as invisible labour that the family treats as a woman's duty and a man's convenience. *[Add one or two scenes with timestamps.]*

Sex in marriage. The film is equally direct about the marital bed. Reviewers describe nightly sex in which the wife's desires are not considered and foreplay is refused ("How an Indian Kitchen"). When she explains that sex hurts and asks for more care, the husband becomes defensive and blames her for having had past experiences ("Deconstruction"). This is Pateman's sexual contract in domestic form: the wife's body is available by right, her pleasure is irrelevant, and her request is heard as an insult to the husband's ego. The silence around her experience is part of the stigma: sexual knowledge in a woman is treated as a stain, so she cannot speak about her own body without being judged.

Menstruation and purity. The most striking cultural stigma in the film is the treatment of menstruation. The family holds regressive beliefs about periods, and the wife is treated as dirty and untouchable and moved to a separate room ("Deconstruction"; "The Great Indian Kitchen"). The film sets this in the context of the Sabarimala controversy, following the Supreme Court verdict that menstruation is not an impurity and that women should be allowed to enter the temple ("The Great Indian Kitchen"). The husband's observance of the Sabarimala vow of celibacy provides the pretext for her isolation ("Deconstruction"). Here Douglas's analysis of purity and pollution and Chakravarti's idea of brahmanical patriarchy meet: the female body becomes a source of ritual danger, and the house is organised to protect male purity.

Resistance. The film does not resolve the conflict through negotiation. The wife's anger builds quietly, then boils over, and she leaves the house ("Reality"; "Mrs"). The film's closing credit, which names Jeo Baby and friends as the cooks, extends the point by suggesting that kitchen work is shared and could be shared differently ("Deconstruction"). The Tamil remake keeps the story's central structure of an arranged marriage to a teacher in a patriarchal family and is judged by one reviewer to stay true to the original ("The Great Indian Kitchen (2023 Film)"). Its existence shows that the problem it depicts is not confined to one language or state. *[Add your own analysis of the ending and, if possible, a comparison of the two versions.]*

4. Divakaruni: marriage, desire and silence across continents

Divakaruni's fiction approaches the same questions through different forms. *Arranged Marriage* collects stories about women, in India and in the United States, for whom marriages have been arranged, and who are caught between two cultures ("Divakaruni"). One critic describes these immigrant brides as both liberated and trapped by cultural change (qtd. in "Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni").

Pressure to produce a child. In *Sister of My Heart*, the cousins Anju and Sudha grow up in a Calcutta household of widowed women and are urged into arranged marriages that divide and frustrate them (Divakaruni, *Sister*; "Sister of My Heart" [Publishers Weekly]). Sudha moves to rural Bengal, where her mother-in-law turns to a goddess to cure Sudha's apparent barrenness instead of taking her sterile son to a doctor ("Sister of My Heart" [Publishers Weekly]). This episode shows how stigma works: the failure of the marriage to produce a child is placed on the woman's body, while the man's condition is protected by silence and ritual. The sequel, *The Vine of Desire*, finds Sudha leaving her abusive husband ("Divakaruni"). In Goffman's terms, Sudha carries a spoiled identity as a wife, while the man's discreditable attribute is hidden. *[Add textual evidence from the novel with page numbers.]*

Desire and renunciation. In *The Mistress of Spices*, the shopkeeper Tilo uses spices to ease the homesickness and alienation of Indian immigrants ("Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni"). Tilo is also bound by vows that deny her own desire. The novel's magical frame allows Divakaruni to treat sexual longing as something that a woman must manage, hide or renounce, which is a more poetic version of the film's silence about the wife's pleasure. *[Add textual evidence about Tilo's vows and desire.]*

Between two cultures. Divakaruni also places her women between the expectations of family and the promise of independence. The tension in *Sister of My Heart* between the mothers who embrace tradition and the daughters who are drawn to Western ideas ("Sister of My Heart Reader's Guide") shows that the pressure on women does not disappear with migration, but changes its form. Anju's life in California, with a husband who desires Sudha ("Sister of My Heart" [Publishers Weekly]), is a reminder that moving abroad does not by itself bring freedom within marriage.

5. Comparison

	<i>The Great Indian Kitchen</i>	Divakaruni's fiction
Marriage	Arranged marriage as a domestic labour arrangement	Arranged marriage as a source of both opportunity and constraint
Sex	Marital sex without consent or pleasure	Desire managed, denied or used as a source of tension
Pressure	Daily routine, family expectation, ritual rules	Family expectation, motherhood, tradition versus change
Stigma	Menstrual impurity, "dirty" female body	Barrenness blamed on the woman, spoiled reputation

	<i>The Great Indian Kitchen</i>	Divakaruni's fiction
Setting	One Kerala household	Calcutta, rural Bengal, California
Resistance	Rupture: the wife leaves	Survival through sisterhood, storytelling and migration
Form	Realist film built on repetition	Realism mixed with folklore, myth and poetic prose

Both works treat marriage as a structure that organises a woman's labour, body and silence. The film concentrates on one kitchen, so that the reader or viewer feels the slow weight of repetition. Divakaruni covers decades and continents, so that the pattern is shown to be flexible and persistent. Their resolutions differ. The film gives its heroine a decisive exit, while the fiction more often offers a negotiated survival, usually through the bond between women and through storytelling.

6. Discussion

Two limitations should be noted. First, both works focus mainly on middle-class and, in Divakaruni's case, often upper-caste or diaspora women. Intersectional analysis would ask how caste, class and migration status change the pressures on a woman, and what choices are available to women outside these groups. Second, the works show silence and rupture but offer fewer images of a marriage that is truly equal. The film hints at one through the friend whose husband treats her as an equal ("Mrs"), but it remains a brief contrast. A fuller picture of change would need more representations of partnership as well as protest.

Nevertheless, the pairing is valuable for teaching. A classroom that reads Divakaruni alongside *The Great Indian Kitchen* can help students see that domestic labour, sexual consent, menstrual stigma and the pressure to bear children are connected parts of a single system, and that talking about them breaks the silence on which the system depends.

7. Conclusion

The Great Indian Kitchen and Divakaruni's fiction approach marriage, sex and stigma from different positions but arrive at a shared insight: social pressure works most effectively through silence. In the film, the silence surrounds a woman's labour, her pleasure and her period; in Divakaruni's fiction, it surrounds her fertility, her desire and her unhappiness. Both works break that silence, one by showing a woman walking out and the other by giving women a voice and a sisterhood in which to tell their own stories. Taken together, they suggest that change will require a transformation of everyday habits in the kitchen, in the bedroom and in the family's idea of purity, and not only a change in law or custom.

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