

SEX AND GENDER BASED BINARIES IN INDIAN MOVIES

Namitha Thomas *

ABSTRACT

The gender binary refers to the notion that gender comes in two distinct flavours: men and women, in which men are masculine, women are feminine and importantly men are of the male sex and women are of the female sex. Much of the world around us is based upon this binary understanding of sex and gender. This gender distinction is evident from early childhood itself. The gender binary is such a prevalent and well accepted concept within our society that we tend to get upset when we are unable to place something or someone into one box or the other. Each of these genders are assigned specific roles that are constructed by the society and they are expected to behave according to this gender roles. The traditional view of the feminine gender role prescribes that the women should behave in ways that are nurturing. Men, on the other hand are presumed by traditional views of gender roles to be leaders. The paper focuses on the study of sex and gender binaries in the movie *The Great Indian Kitchen* and the short film *Freedom at Midnight*. Both the movies showcase how the socially-constructed gender binary affects each individual. *The Great Indian Kitchen* reflects a society where gender binary is prevalent and one gender is dominant over the other. Each and every scene in this movie shows how a gender is subjugated based on the norms and rules that are created by the patriarchal society. The film showcases a girl with a joyous and happy spirit portraying the role of what is expected of her in society. The movie also focuses on an arranged

* *St. Mary's College of Commerce and Management Studies Thuruthiply*

marriage and how the woman has to assimilate, understand and contribute with respect to the family and its customs and traditions. Similarly, the short film *Freedom at Midnight* revolves around the plight of a woman named Chandra who is frustrated with her married life. As the title suggests, the movie shows the quest for freedom of a woman who lives in her husband's house doing all kinds of works and taking care of the family. The movie raises several questions about freedom – Can freedom be conditional? What are its limits and who decides them? Both the movies show women who are the victims of sex and gender binaries created by society. Both the female characters in the movies live in a society that assigns specific roles to each gender – a society which considers women as inferior and men as superior and little has changed. The progressing society continues to show the supremacy of one gender over the other.

Keywords: gender, patriarchy, women as victims

INTRODUCTION

Gender is not something we are born with and not something we have, but something we do or something we perform. People tend to use the terms "sex" and "gender" interchangeably. But, while connected, the two terms are not equivalent. Generally, we assign a newborn's sex as either male or female based on the baby's genitals. Once a sex is assigned, we presume the child's gender. For some people, this is cause for little, if any, concern or further thought because their gender aligns with gender-related ideas and assumptions associated with their sex. Nevertheless, while gender may begin with the assignment of our sex, it doesn't end there. A person's gender is the complex interrelationship between three dimensions: body, identity, and social gender. Gender binary (also known as gender binarism, binarism, or ambiguously genderism) is the classification of gender into two distinct, opposite forms of masculine and feminine, whether by social system or cultural belief. Most cultures use a gender binary, having two genders (boys/men and girls/women). In

this binary model, sex, gender, and sexuality may be assumed by default to align, with aspects of one's gender inherently linked to one's genetic or gamete-based sex, or with one's sex assigned at birth. For example, when a male is born, gender binarism may assume the male will be masculine in appearance, character traits, and behavior, including having a heterosexual attraction to females. These aspects may include expectations of dressing, behavior, sexual orientation, names or pronouns, preferred restroom, or other qualities. These expectations may reinforce negative attitudes, bias, and discrimination towards people who display expressions of gender variance or nonconformity or whose gender identity is incongruent with their birth sex.

This paper is about the study of sex and gender- based binaries in Indian movies like *The Great Indian Kitchen* and *Freedom at Midnight*. *The Great Indian Kitchen* is a Malayalam movie directed by Jeo Baby and it is the reflection of a society where gender binary is prevalent and one gender is dominant to the other. It is the story of a woman who is supposed to spend her life in a kitchen looking after her husband and his family. An educated dancer, raised in Manama, Bahrain finds herself in an arranged marriage to a teacher in a very traditional and patriarchal family. While the domestic routine of the Wife begins in the sweet bliss of a new marriage, things begin to go down south. The drudgery of the kitchen and its many unpleasantnesses - cleaning, dirty vessels and leaking taps is left to the women while the men mostly indulge themselves with their phone or yoga. The family is so patriarchal that her mother-in-law hands the toothbrush to her husband, the father-in-law, in the morning for him to brush his teeth. The men eat their meals first and leave the place a mess without concern for how the women can eat food at the same place after them. Their convenience and comfort always come before consideration for their wives. While the new bride takes a while to adjust to these new surroundings and eventually somewhat makes peace with them, her mother-in-law goes to take care of her daughter who is seven months pregnant. The whole responsibility of cooking, cleaning and

other household chores falls on her. Her egotistical Husband is inconsiderate of her needs and feelings. When she tells him that it hurts when having sex and asks for some foreplay, he doubts that she has had previous experiences. Her father-in-law forbids her from finding employment, citing that a woman in the house brings prosperity to the family. When she gets her period, she is appalled to discover that the families' beliefs regarding menstruation are extremely regressive. She is asked to hole herself up in a room on the floor, bathe in the river, eat separately and wash all the things she touches. She is even asked to go stay with a relative or to sleep outside. While these events transpire, Kerala is grappling with the Sabarimala temple verdict where the courts decided that menstruation is not an impurity and so women should be allowed to visit the temple. A lot of people including the groom's family do not approve of the verdict. All these injustices boil over one day and end up with the wife throwing dirty kitchen sink water on her husband and father-in-law and leaving the family for her freedom and dignity. The film ends with a scene showing her as an independent dance teacher arriving in her own car while her ex-husband is married again and the second wife seems to meet the first one's fate.

Similarly, *Freedom at Midnight* is a short film directed by RJ Shaan which revolves around the plight of a woman named Chandra who is frustrated with her married life. Chandra (Anupama Parameswaran) and Das (Hakim Shahjahan) have been married for eight years and have a child. On what seems like a regular day, Chandra confronts her husband about her place in his home and as his wife. She craves some attention from him while he is only interested in her cooking. The situation intensifies and as the acrimony between the two increases, Chandra gets her husband thinking about sexual freedom, sharing her fantasy with him. Later, towards the end of the movie we realize that Chandra was actually trying to bring out her husband's illegal relationship with another woman. There are many instances in the movie where Chandra is denied her freedom and her husband confronts her that this is life and this is how women are supposed to

behave. The movie also raises several questions about freedom, Can freedom be conditional? What are its limits and who decides them?

Both the movies expressed different thoughts but it is connected somehow. The main characters are women who are subjugated by the society. We can see two women who spends their life in kitchen looking after their husband's family. They do not have their own opinion and doesn't have space for their desires. It is clear that women are most affected by the gender- based binaries. The gender binary is such a prevalent and well accepted concept within our society that we tend to get upset when we are unable to place something or someone into one box or the other. This is the main reason why the LGBTQ community have been neglected by the society. In the case of gender expression non-conformity, gaining social acceptance for a revised identity can be highly problematic. Transgender and transsexual people can suffer from the lack of continuity in their identity, a lack of self-esteem closely related to the lack of their social acceptance as well as from their overemphasized and unwanted distinctiveness. In places where normative gender role concepts and gender identities are losing their social organizing power, non-conventional gender expression won't necessarily lead to the development of threatened identities.

Gender roles can be considered as a consequence of the concept of gender binary. A gender role, also known as a sex role, is a social role encompassing a range of behaviors and attitudes that are generally considered acceptable, appropriate, or desirable for a person based on that person's sex. Gender roles are usually centered on conceptions of masculinity and femininity, although there are exceptions and variations. The specifics regarding these gendered expectations may vary substantially among cultures, while other characteristics may be common throughout a range of cultures. Gender roles influence a wide range of human behavior, often including the clothing a person chooses to wear, the profession a person pursues, and the personal relationships a person

enters. Various groups, most notably feminist movements, have led efforts to change aspects of prevailing gender roles that they believe are oppressive or inaccurate. Although research indicates that biology plays a role in gendered behavior, the extent of its effects on gender roles is less clear. The traditional view of the feminine gender role prescribes that the women should behave in ways that are nurturing. One way that a woman might engage in the traditional feminine gender role would be to nurture her family by working full-time within the home rather than taking employment outside the home. Men, on the other hand are presumed by traditional views of gender roles to be leaders. The traditional view of the masculine gender role therefore suggests that men should be the heads of their household by providing financially for the family and making important family decisions. Both men and women are supposed to behave according to the rules and concepts introduced by the society. This is evident in both the movies *The Great Indian Kitchen* and *Freedom at Midnight*. Considering the movie *The Great Indian Kitchen*, there are many instances where the main character is subjugated by others. Throughout the film, we see the wife and the servant cleaning, sweeping, wiping, polishing and scrubbing, and disposing dirt and waste. Even though these women clean the house endlessly, they are embodiments of impurity: when they menstruate they are treated as untouchables. On the other hand, the men at home, ever pure, eat, browse, sleep, exercise and copulate, according to their sweet will, bodily needs and spiritual routines. Any hint of discontent or instance of sloppiness at work by women is punished through gentle but brutal rebukes or silent but unrelenting commands. Take for example, two instances where the bride feebly attempts to cross the line: at the hotel where she comments on the husband's table manners and in the bedroom where she hints at foreplay. In both the cases, there is no explicit physical force or verbal abuse. But the deep, inherent and muted violence employed by both the husband and the father-in-law in the house to discipline and silence the women is far more

brutal and deep. Likewise, *Freedom at Midnight*, the thought-provoking short film revolves around the idea of freedom and what it means for the sexes. The ways in which sexual freedom can mean a certain thing for the husband but he has not even thought about the consequences when his wife expresses her wish to exercise her sexual freedom. It also makes one reflect on the ways in which women quickly and conveniently become relegated to the domestic space and are not even considered sexual beings, unlike men, for whom notions of masculinity are entwined with sexuality. At one point, frustrated, Chandra says, "I am everything in this house — doctor, waiter, cleaner, plumber, teacher", to which the husband unwittingly replies, "This is life", only to leave her seething with rage.

Though there are many changes happened in the recent years, still the gender binary and its consequences affect the minority. Society is said to be progressing but always a section in the society remains inferior. When children grow up being constantly separated and categorized by their specific gender, they will inevitably fall into the deep pit of normality, where uniqueness and the expression of one's inner self is a rarity. Their actions exude ordinariness, because their customary routines disallow them the ability to convey their true personas; the identities they may want to express, they must conceal, in order to fit into the monotonous ethical code our society makes mandatory. Even today, many schools have gender designated line formations or seating charts, and trying to find a school that doesn't have gender-designated sports is next to impossible. In high school, a girl who wants to join the football team, or a boy that wants to join the volleyball team, are looked at as if they are a different species. A girl doing a male dominated sport and a boy engaging in a female dominated one, utter chaos, right?

This is what society has come to, and the sad thing is that we let it happen. Many politicians, teachers, and administrators talk of embracing change and attempting to knockdown the gender barrier that preempts expression and opportunity, yet when the time comes to finally make a stand, they turn the other cheek and pretend our society is a utopia, where everyone is equal and no one is ever frowned upon. Society, as a whole, needs to stop labelling activities, trends, and appearances as "male" or "female." In fact, one could argue that by allowing girls to do more boy activities and vice versa, it will not only broaden the eligibility for participation, but will enhance the overall value and distinctiveness of the given activity. The educational system in this country isn't the only thing that invites gender bias without admitting it – the news media is also persuasive when it comes to influencing our views on gender. The countless forms of media in existence today work to manipulate our consciousness on a daily basis; they encapsulate our lives, while embedding stereotypical messages in our brain by conveying pictures of impractical and formulaic celebrities and icons. The media limits our perception on what is right and wrong, proper and improper. These images of celebrities are essentially interrogating our brain, stage-managing us into believing that we must look like them, and act like them, in order to enhance our own habitual progression. Gender bias in the media makes us believe that in order to achieve economic mobility and climb the social ladder in this country, we must dye our hair blonde, get a six-pack, or gel our hair back. Although, what is not readily transparent is the fact that individuality and uniqueness stem from the inner ability to accept who you are and wear it like a suit of armour. If we can teach kids from an early age that acceptance is the key to success, instead of mere conformity, then this world would be a much better place.

REFERENCES

1. Muzik247tz, director. *YouTube*, YouTube, 9 Jan. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GVo469qfWdg>.
2. *Prime Video*, https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0LPM9D6PWOSCEAUBEXO10YKQBB/ref=atv_dp_share_cu_r. 2022.
3. Rajendran, Sowmya. "'The Great Indian Kitchen' Review: Brilliant Take on Family, Religion & Patriarchy." *The News Minute*, The News Minute, 15 Jan. 2021, <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/great-indian-kitchen-review-brilliant-take-family-religion-patriarchy-141538>.
4. Republic World. "Freedom at Midnight Malayalam Movie Review: Anupama Shines Bright with RJ Shaan's Vision." *Republic World*, Republic World, 12 Jan. 2021, <https://www.republicworld.com/entertainment-news/regional-indian-cinema/freedom-at-midnight-malayalam-movie-review-anupama-shines-bright-with-rj-shaans-vision.html>.
5. *The Great Indian Kitchen Review: A Movie for Women Who Live out Their Lives in Kitchen*, The Times of India, 15 Jan. 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/web-series/reviews/malayalam/the-great-indian-kitchen/ottmoviereview/80287505.cms>.
6. The Great Indian Kitchen." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 6 Jan. 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Great_Indian_Kitchen.
7. "Watch: Anupama Parameswaran's Short Film 'Freedom @ Midnight' Teaser Out." *The News Minute*, 8 Jan. 2021, <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/watch-anupama-parameswaran-s-short-film-freedom-midnight-teaser-out-141082>.