



Emotional Abuse and Subtle Patriarchy in the Family Context: A Feminist Analysis of English Vinglish

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ABSTRACT:

“A woman is not a tool to be used, but a person to be understood.”

— *Unknown.*

Cinema often mirrors societal realities, shedding light on struggles that are otherwise ignored or normalized. *English Vinglish*, directed by Gauri Shinde, is one such film that explores the unspoken emotional challenges faced by homemakers in a patriarchal setup. The story follows Shashi Godbole, a dedicated homemaker, who silently endures the dismissive attitudes of her husband and children. Her journey of self-discovery begins when she decides to learn English, a decision that transforms her sense of self-worth and confidence.

At its core, the film critiques the subtle patriarchy embedded in everyday family dynamics and highlights the emotional abuse that women often face in the form of unappreciated labor and microaggressions. This paper analyzes Shashi's journey through a feminist lens, focusing on how *English Vinglish* portrays the psychological impact of such abuse, the symbolic role of language in her empowerment, and the broader cultural implications of undervaluing homemakers.

Keywords : Emotional Abuse, Patriarchy, Feminism, Language Empowerment, Women's Struggles.

Subtle Patriarchy in Family Dynamics:

Patriarchy in family setups is often subtle yet deeply entrenched. In *English Vinglish*, Shashi's family embodies this through their casual dismissals and patronizing remarks. Her husband, Satish, jokes that she is “born to make ladoos,” a comment meant to be humorous but loaded with patriarchal undertones that trivialize her identity and skills. Her daughter mirrors this disregard, showing embarrassment over Shashi's inability to speak English, treating her as inferior in a society that equates English proficiency with competence.

Such interactions, while normalized as banter, reveal the insidious nature of patriarchy, which strips women of individuality by reducing them to roles. These microaggressions accumulate, creating an environment of

emotional dependence and suppressed self-worth for women like Shashi. By portraying these dynamics, *English Vinglish* questions the normalized devaluation of homemakers in traditional family systems and emphasizes the need to respect women as individuals beyond their familial roles.

Internalization of Patriarchy and Shashi's Self-Perception:

A key aspect of Shashi's emotional struggle lies in how she internalizes patriarchal norms, which affects her self-perception and sense of worth. Despite being an intelligent and capable woman, Shashi has grown accustomed to seeing herself as inferior due to her limited role within the family. The lack of external validation, especially from her husband and children, leads Shashi to believe that she is of lesser value. This internalization of patriarchal views becomes a critical barrier to her empowerment. Through her journey of learning English, Shashi begins to challenge these ingrained beliefs, rediscovering her self-worth. This theme highlights how societal expectations can trap individuals in cycles of self-doubt, particularly women, who are taught to derive their value from familial roles rather than individual identity. Her journey illustrates the process of decolonizing the mind and freeing oneself from the shackles of internalized oppression.

Emotional Abuse and Psychological Impact:

Emotional abuse, though subtle, leaves lasting scars that often go unnoticed. In *English Vinglish*, Shashi experiences this abuse through constant belittlement and lack of acknowledgment from her family. Satish's dismissive comments, coupled with her daughter's overt criticism, make Shashi feel small and inadequate. These moments of humiliation erode her confidence, leaving her hesitant and unsure of herself.

Despite this, Shashi demonstrates resilience by stepping out of her comfort zone to learn English. This journey signifies a break from the cycle of emotional abuse, as it allows her to rediscover her self-worth. Through her transformation, the film highlights the psychological toll of emotional neglect while also showcasing the strength required to overcome it.

The Male Gaze and Shashi's Transformation:

A critical analysis of the male gaze and its influence on Shashi's transformation can reveal the intersection of gender and appearance. In the film, Shashi is often subjected to judgment based on her appearance, both by her family and by the men she encounters. The moment she begins to regain her confidence and her identity outside her role as a mother and wife, she is noticed by others, including a man from her English class, who admires her. This can be explored through the lens of the "male gaze" theory, examining how societal beauty standards and the objectification of women influence their self-worth.

Shashi's transformation into a confident, assertive woman is partly shaped by the attention she receives from a man in the English class. However, this dynamic also raises questions about the extent to which women's empowerment is often still linked to male validation in patriarchal societies. A critique of this aspect could offer a deeper reflection on how cultural norms around gender, beauty, and validation shape women's sense of identity.

Language as a Metaphor for Empowerment:

Language in *English Vinglish* functions as a metaphor for empowerment and self-expression. For Shashi, her inability to speak English is symbolic of the power dynamics in her family and society that silence her. Enrolling in an English class is her quiet rebellion—a declaration of her desire to grow and be respected.

Through her interactions in the class, Shashi finds a supportive environment where her kindness and intelligence are appreciated. This contrasts sharply with her treatment at home, helping her gain confidence and embrace her individuality. The pivotal moment of her journey is her speech at her niece's wedding, where she articulates her

thoughts in English. This act symbolizes her reclamation of voice and identity, proving that language can be a tool for liberation and self-worth.

Cinematic Techniques: Highlighting Shashi's Isolation and Empowerment:

The film's use of cinematic techniques, such as framing, lighting, and music, plays a significant role in conveying Shashi's emotional journey. This section can delve into how these techniques are used to visually represent Shashi's isolation at the beginning of the film and her gradual empowerment as she begins to challenge her own limitations. For example, the use of dull lighting and tight framing in scenes where Shashi is belittled could represent her emotional confinement, while the brighter scenes when she is learning English and speaking at her niece's wedding symbolize her emerging self-confidence.

Cinematic techniques work in tandem with the narrative to highlight Shashi's psychological journey. Early scenes, where Shashi is belittled and marginalized, often feature dim lighting, cluttered spaces, and isolating compositions, visually reflecting her emotional state. In contrast, scenes where Shashi grows in confidence—such as her English class and the wedding speech—are characterized by brighter lighting, open frames, and uplifting music. This contrast underscores her transformation from a woman constrained by familial expectations to someone who has reclaimed her voice.

Cultural Context: Undervaluation of Women:

In Indian society, women's contributions within the domestic sphere are often undervalued. Shashi's experiences reflect this cultural norm, as her hard work and dedication are taken for granted. Her husband and children view her as a caregiver whose worth lies in serving them, disregarding her individuality and aspirations.

The film critiques this mindset through Shashi's remark,

"When a man cooks, it's an art; when a woman cooks, it's her duty."

This statement underscores the double standards that persist in patriarchal cultures, where women's labor is normalized and devalued. By highlighting this disparity, English Vinglish challenges viewers to rethink the societal norms that undermine women's contributions and self-esteem.

CONCLUSION :

English Vinglish is more than a story of one woman's journey; it is a critique of the patriarchal structures that pervade familial relationships and undervalue women. Through Shashi's experiences, the film sheds light on the emotional abuse and subtle patriarchy faced by homemakers. It underscores the importance of self-expression and empowerment in breaking free from societal constraints and reclaiming one's identity.

Shashi's transformation serves as an inspiration, not just for women in similar circumstances but for society as a whole, to acknowledge and value the labor and individuality of women. The film calls for a cultural shift, urging families to foster respect, appreciation, and equality in their relationships.

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