



Domesticity And Defiance: A Marxist Feminist Study Of Arati Kadav's Mrs.

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Abstract: The concept of gender in Indian families and society needs no introduction, as the age-old gender discrimination has been so deeply internalized that it doesn't come as a surprise if a woman becomes a victim of such discrimination. The paper attempts to study a woman's world bound by patriarchy, class, and gender exploitation, followed by the subsequent resistance in Indian society as portrayed in Arati Kadav's film Mrs. (2024). A Marxist feminist literary approach guides the analysis of the cinematic text. The film projects a quietly powerful and thought-provoking portrayal of a woman caught between her aspirations and the weight of deeply rooted patriarchal expectations. At the heart of the film is Richa, played with striking vulnerability by actress Sanya Malhotra—a middle-class housewife whose routine existence is upended by an unexpected event. What unfolds is not just a story of disruption, but of awakening and resistance. The findings conclude that many Indian married women, like the female lead in the film, are trapped in the endless cycle of domestic chores and constant patriarchal scrutiny. The identity that the woman protagonist had is lost in transition and remains a victim of patriarchy, class, and gender discrimination. It is through passion for a fulfilling work or economic independence that paves the way to the protagonist's ultimate freedom and empowerment.

Keywords: patriarchy, gender, Marxist feminism, Mrs., resistance

Introduction:

The Indian cinema reflects Indian society as much as Indian literature does. It is a medium of infotainment that serves both information and entertainment purposes. Audiences connect with films that portray stories touching upon their lives, which is also a key reason behind their box-office success. Women in early Indian cinema were often shown in submissive roles such as mothers or wives (Dubey 2). And so, there has been a shift in the projection of women in Indian cinema, evolving from the self-sacrificed image of woman and mother, such as in the evergreen film Mother India (1957), to the voice of the New Woman in Queen (2013), followed by Thappad (2020) and now Mrs. (2024). In recent times, Indian cinema has focused on portraying Indian women from diverse geographic and ethno-religious backgrounds. However, no matter how different the diversity is, the suffering and victimisation of women remain universal. In the case of rural women, the degree of suffering and exploitation is much greater than that of urban women. Patriarchy has always found its way of justifying the gender norms in society in the name of upholding tradition and beliefs, while it has only made women's lives more oppressive.

The term 'gender' is one of the most debated concepts in literature and society. While a child is identified as 'male' or 'female' based on their biological differences, society, on the other hand, categorizes these two beings into man and woman with their masculine and feminine roles. Thus, gender is a socially and culturally constructed concept. Butler calls gender "an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 59). The role played by gender is to keep a check on the behaviours and freedom of women, and is internalized in their thinking that man is at the centre and woman belongs to the periphery. Right from

the choice of colours and types of dress to toys for boys and girls, society plays a major role in setting up the mindsets of children in tune with the existing gender discrimination. Culture and tradition shape the identity of a woman. Simone de Beauvoir rightly argues that woman is made by society and it's not an innate quality:

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” (de Beauvoir 301)

Looking back at the evolution of women's struggles and movements, feminism has progressed from the first wave of the suffrage movement to the present fourth wave in addressing and fighting against sexual harassment of women on digital and media platforms. The issues of oppression of women based on gender and class are the crux of Marxist feminism because one of the reasons for the inequality between men and women points toward the unequal distribution of labour and money. Marxist feminism thus underscores the “exploitation of women's labor under capitalism” (Gender Studies para. 3). Women's domestic labour is unpaid and invisible to the patriarchal world. There is no control over the power structure due to their failure in the capitalist structure. A man who is earning and working outside the familial structure has social status, superiority complex, economic freedom, and patriarchal control over the family, more than a woman who does household work with no income. The invisibility of women is not just physical but also social and psychological, as the image of women slowly disappears in the daily routine of repeated unpaid labour. The labour is repeated and expected without a trace of empathy and recognition.

The Film Mrs. at a Glance:

Arati Kadav's Mrs. (2024) is a Hindi film, adapted from the Malayalam hit film titled The Great Indian Kitchen (2021), starring Sanya Malhotra, Nishant Dahiya and Kanwaljit Singh as the lead actors. The film was first screened at the 2024 Indian Film Festival of Melbourne and then at the New York Indian Film Festival. It was later made available to the audience with its OTT release on ZEE5 on 7 February 2025.

Marriage and Journey of a Modern Indian Woman:

The plot of the film centres upon the journey of Richa (Sanya Malhotra) from silence to resilience. Marriage is generally an indispensable social institution in society, without which a woman is judged, her family is judged. As the story begins, Richa is seen as a lively and obedient eligible Indian woman whose marriage engagement went smoothly with the perfect prospective groom Diwakar (Nishant Dahiya), who is a gynaecologist by profession. As the marriage takes place, the exposition of the crux of the film slowly unfolds. Arati Kadav's shots are embedded with cultural and symbolic meanings. The first entrance of the bride is performed with the Hindu tradition of griha pravesh- stepping inside the groom's house with the right foot spilling the rice pot inside the house, symbolizing the auspicious entry of wealth and prosperity to the new house. The traditional practice includes the bride walking with her vermillion-soaked feet on the floor, marking her steps of abundance. This particular scene holds cultural significance with the climax of the film when the bride walks out of the house barefoot, drenched with water from the sink. It symbolizes the walking away of the Goddess of wealth from the house, as well as the exit of the protagonist from the man's life.

Another instance from the movie that reflects marriage concepts is the bridal gifts, which included food processors such as mixer grinders, casseroles, saris, jewellery, and a music ear pods. This highlights that a woman's world is both feminine and aesthetic at the same time, culinary and domestic. The gifts the protagonist Richa receives after her marriage can be considered as a hint towards her entrapment in the kitchen. It shows how the people around her expect her to behave with internalized consent after her marriage, with all the domestic duties assigned to her. The gifts are a reminder to all married women of the kitchen and its unending cycles of labor. And this slowly erases the identity of married women just as the smoke in the kitchen disappears into thin air.

Patriarchal Control and Invisible Labour:

Patriarchy in a society is the most widely accepted social structure, which emphasizes the superiority of men over women in thinking and actions. In a patriarchy, men dominate women in ideology and practice. The wish for power born out of this politics is termed as sexual politics. According to Kate Millet, gender is a socially and politically constructed concept. Millet states that:

Patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole. (Millett 33).

The value of a newly married woman is judged by how well she cooks, serves, and fulfils the demands of the family, especially her parents-in-law and her husband. In Mrs., Richa's experience in the kitchen is not just about cooking—it's about control. Despite receiving modern appliances as wedding gifts, tools designed to ease her labor and save time, she's discouraged—almost forbidden—from using them. Her in-laws insist on traditional methods that demand hours of physical effort, as if her exhaustion somehow validates her role as a wife. They do not approve of her using the gift appliances in the kitchen, which could complete the cooking or cutting of vegetables in a few minutes; rather, she is asked to use the traditional method of grinding the spices, and disapproves of the making of biriyani in a pressure cooker, calling it a 'pulao' and not a 'biryani'. They push her to go through the tedious work of preparation that demands her time and labour. There seems to be no use of the modern wedding gifts in the real sense. This isn't about preserving culture; it's about enforcing obedience and patriarchy. The appliances, symbolic of progress and autonomy, are rendered useless in a household that values ritual over relief. What is more troubling is how normalized this dynamic is. Richa's labor is under strict surveillance, judged, and measured—not by its outcome, but by how much of herself she sacrifices in the process. The message is clear: convenience is not for women. Her time, her body, her choices are not hers to claim. The film doesn't just show a woman cooking—it shows a woman being slowly erased under the guise of tradition. And that's the quiet violence Mrs. lays bare: the way love, duty, and culture can be weaponized to keep women in their place.

Another eye-opening scene in the film is the painful experience of Richa in the family when it comes to eating at the table. The family endorses a hierarchical order of prioritizing men of the house to eat first, to the women of the house. The mother-in-law seems to be giving in to these patriarchal orders of the family and demands no questions. However, Richa, for the first time, is disgusted to eat on the same table with the leftovers after all her labour and time.

Richa's labour in the family, especially inside the kitchen, becomes invisible, and she is expected to repeat her household chores without any complaint. By showing that gender roles are maintained through repetition, Mrs. aligns with Butler's assertion that these roles are not innate but constructed. One such example in the film is when she prepared perfect biryani after a tedious process and in good quantity, but her husband still prefers to eat something light for dinner. Richa is not only exhausted but also sad and feels trapped and unappreciated. The patriarchs of the family keep looking for ways to find an excuse to make Richa guilty despite her efforts in the family.

Apart from the invisible labour, an invisible control is seen through the surveillance of Richa by her father-in-law in many scenes. The father-in-law complains to his wife that she needs to teach and further the lessons of how to take care of the family in terms of washing clothes by hand rather than a washing machine, cooking in traditional methods, and serving the male members with their sudden demands of petty things like shoes, clothes, or even a watch. The father-in-law is surprised to see Richa enjoying dancing inside the kitchen when she is alone. He is threatened by Richa's craving for freedom, as no woman in the family has ever enjoyed their freedom before. In the film, the middle-class setting transforms domestic surveillance into a performative tool for maintaining social status and "family honour," rather than just completing chores. Unlike a working-class environment where labour might be driven by the necessity of survival, the surveillance Richa faces is rooted in the preservation of an "ideal" domestic image.

The protagonist is called "beta" by her father-in-law as well as by her parents. However, calling her with this name doesn't make her feel as equal in terms of hierarchical order or legal rights to her husband or her brother. It is one way of controlling her and reminding her of her gender roles in the family. By infantilizing the woman as a "child" (beta), the patriarchy justifies withholding her economic and legal autonomy, effectively keeping her in a state of "dependence" that facilitates the extraction of her unpaid labour. In the last part of the film, Richa protests the name-calling of "beta" as she finds it meaningless and works toward favouring the men in the family.

Marxist Feminism and Richa's Resistance:

Virginia Woolf truly said that to succeed as a writer, a woman needs money and a room of her own (Woolf 6). That room is a creative space that will provide a woman to grow as an individual and as a writer. And for a woman to live a happy life, economic independence or stability becomes crucial. Without financial freedom, a woman depends on someone who earns. The economic dependence makes it easy for patriarchal control and power structure. In a capitalist society, Marxist feminists demand wages for their unpaid labour in domesticity and reproductive labour for women, as such labour goes unnoticed and is not compensated by

the capitalist patriarchy to continue the subjugation of women. Friedrich Engels, who was a pioneer in laying down the foundation for Marxist feminism, argues in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884):

“The emancipation of woman will only be possible when woman can take part in production on a large, social scale, and domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of her time.” (Engels 137).

In the film, Richa’s a large part of her time invested in household chores. She often recollects memories of her passion for dance and her troupe. She seems to regret that she couldn’t meet her dance troupe or join them for rehearsals. At her friend’s dinner, Richa feels guilty after her husband perceives her comments about his supposed supportiveness as derision, since his behaviour at home contradicts that image.

Richa’s desire to interview for a dance teaching position is blocked by her father-in-law, who insists that women in their household must not work outside. By glorifying her mother-in-law’s sacrifice of a professional career despite holding a PhD in Economics, he validates women’s unpaid domestic labor as the family’s ‘prized possession’. By framing her lost career as a trophy, he reveals a specific middle-class Marxist tension: the woman’s intellectual and economic potential is repurposed into social capital for the family, proving their “superiority” through her total domestic confinement. This reflects a Marxist feminist critique: women’s labor is devalued under capitalism, confined to the private sphere, and celebrated only insofar as it sustains male breadwinning. Both her father-in-law’s and husband’s rejection of dance as a career underscores how patriarchal authority polices women’s economic independence. This creates a suffocating atmosphere, and her struggle is not merely against the sink or the stove, but against a class-based expectation that her education and dreams are secondary to the ritual of obedience that sustains the male breadwinner’s status.

Richa’s experience demonstrates how patriarchal authority intersects with capitalist exploitation. Her husband’s contradictory valuation of her domestic identity—first idealized, then disparaged—underscores the regulation of women’s sexuality as a means of control. Pregnancy and childbirth, framed as natural duties, become tools of systemic exploitation, consuming women’s time and energy while limiting their economic productivity beyond domestic walls. Richa’s assertion of reproductive autonomy through preventive pills disrupts this cycle, exposing the fragility of male dominance and widening the fissure in their relationship.

Richa’s viral dance performance on social media provokes hostility from her husband’s relatives, placing her dignity under patriarchal scrutiny. During her father-in-law’s birthday celebration, the mounting demands for domestic service catalyse her defiance: she deliberately serves sink water, a reminder of Diwaker’s neglect of household repairs despite her repeated appeals. When confronted angrily, she escalates this act of resistance by pouring the bucket of water on her husband, symbolically rejecting his authority. Her barefoot departure, mirroring her entry into the household, signifies both rupture and renewal—an assertion of autonomy that culminates in her fulfilment as a performer. Yet the narrative closes with Diwaker’s remarriage, exposing the persistence of patriarchal cycles that ensnare women anew.

Conclusion:

Arati Kadav’s *Mrs.* is not simply a story of one woman’s defiance; it is a mirror held up to the structures of patriarchy and class that shape everyday lives. Richa’s journey—from being silenced within domestic walls to reclaiming her voice on stage—embodies the tension between oppression and resistance that Marxist feminism lays bare. Her barefoot walk out of the patriarchal household is more than a cinematic gesture; it is a human cry for dignity, autonomy, and recognition of women’s labor beyond the confines of home. Yet the film’s ending, with Diwaker repeating the same cycle of control over another wife, reminds us that resistance is never final—it must be collective, sustained, and systemic. In this way, *Mrs.* becomes both a cautionary tale and a hopeful vision, cautioning us about the endurance of patriarchal class structures while affirming that women’s resistance—through art, labor, and voice—remains the most powerful force for change.

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