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Speaking Silence: Internalized Patriarchy in Indian Homes as Presented in Neeraj Ghaywan's Short Film *Juice*

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the 2017 short film *Juice* directed by Neeraj Ghaywan. It is a fourteen-minute short film that records the tittle tattle of a small get-together in a middle-class Indian home. The home referred here is Mr. Singh's (Manish Chaudhari) residence where some of his friends along with family members attend the party. The film records the gossip, fun and good times (for men and children primarily) shared by them. The party is a fine exemplification of a typical middle-class Indian home and its attitude towards women, particularly when it comes to gender dynamic between spouses. Manju, the wife of the host Mr. Singh, has reluctantly given up her career to take care of her family. The film primarily focuses on her subtle expressions and silences. Typically, silence is used to convey her abstinence from speech but communicating through her eyes and gestures. In other words, silence is an intentional state of muteness employed so effectively towards the end of the film to give vent to her building frustration and her eventual release. Silence can also be a physical state, an aesthetic, and a cultural device used so impressively by the director to show the otherwise not sounded frustration. Silence, in its paradoxical materiality, carries a broad category of expressions - heaviness, reluctance, frustration and emptiness. The situation in its ordinariness both explores and exposes an issue that is rarely given any importance. The film metaphorically underlines the ongoing disconcerting perspective of contemporary Indian society that belittles women's role in the family. The institution of marriage is almost a license to reinforce the domestic cliches. The film's portrayal of male and female characters suggests the silent exploitation by the mainstream patriarchal order in contemporary Indian society and at the same time hints at the perpetuating objectification of woman in the so-called educated nuclear family.

Keywords: gender, objectification, patriarchy, short film, silence.

Introduction

The film under examination and reading, is a short film that is made to both expose and critique gender equations that exists in most Indian homes. According to film experts, a film should be an instrument of information, education and propaganda as well as a creative treatment of reality. This short film hence is categorised under this broad umbrella source of entertainment, popularly known as realist films. The term 'realism' comes from a literary and art movement of the nineteenth century which went against the grand tradition of classical idealism and sought to portray 'life as it really was'. The focus is on ordinary life and the conditions that shapes their lived experiences. It purports to give a direct and 'truthful' view of the 'real world' through the presentation it provides of the characters and their environment. Realism functions in film on both the narrative level and the figurative (that is, pictorial/photographic). Generally speaking, realist films address social issues.

However, this form of realism on the whole may serve only to naturalize social problems and divisions and not provide any deep insight into causes. Taking these concepts and understandings into account, this short film too can be explored and read in this light. The treatment of reality as explored and presented in the film is a fine exemplification of the subtle gender equations that persists so strongly in almost all Indian societies, cultures and families. Such embedded notions of gender has tagged women in the most emaciated position. There is a massive treasure of ancient works and philosophies that views women as supplementary and weak. In this regard, the opinion of Aristotle on marriage and education appears relevant here, " Women is weak of will, and therefore incapable of independence of character or position; her best condition is a quiet home life in which, while ruled by the man in her external relations, she may be in domestic affairs supreme."

Such theoretical conceptualisation of women's status and role entails an understanding of socio-cultural perspectives of individuals in a given society and the institutions that engender it. The role of women and her relation to family and relationships within it may be considered a microcosmic reflection of a society's cultural ideologies which act as a determining force in structuring the lived lives of the community. Moreover, the socially and culturally conforming institutions of marriage and family act as a template through which various hegemonic practices are rendered legitimate and acceptable. Such nurturing in turn intend to produce docile bodies that would become in effect agencies of the dominant patriarchal ideology.

This short film *Juice* directed by Neeraj Ghaywan speaks about a large issue of internalised patriarchy and misogyny prevalent in most of the Indian homes. It is a fourteen-minute short film that records the tittle tattle of a small get-together in a middle class Indian home. The home referred here is Mr. Singh's residence where some of his friends along with family members attend the party. The film records the gossip, fun and good times (for men and children primarily) shared by them. It portrays a strikingly typical setting where the stereotypical notions regarding gender are socially constructed and accepted (silent) by the family using exploitative and manipulative discourses. A reading of this short film would thus entail an understanding of the regulatory strategies that are exercised through the institutions of marriage and family which reveal the gendered nature of the familial domain. One small get-together organised by Mr. Singh at his residence explicates the sharply demarcated spheres (both physical and social) of men and women. Manju's passive acceptance of familial roles of a mundanely monotonous role of wife and mother is what the film tries to focus.

Reading of the Film:

The film begins with a small party in the house and ends there. A housewife then, Manju (Shefali Shah) is cleaning up the leftover bones of chicken from a table where drunk men are rambling about various issues. She hears their criticism about their boss and women in general. Her serene expression reflects her detest for such opinions and values. She then is seen filling water in an air cooler that services the men's booze session, before she enters a steaming hot kitchen where the wives of her husband's friends are helping her with, the most obvious duty, cooking. Such cultural setting has facilitated the social marginalisation of women and thus are peripheralised.

"She was not likeable, she was not likeable, this thing you say about tough woman who doesn't conform to a kind of feminine woman."

At the very outset of the film, we hear these lines from an interview telecast on television. Mr. Singh and his friends are watching this and discussing about the changing political situation in America, especially mentioning Hilary Clinton, a woman not fit for administration. Their scorn remarks on women's role sums up their ingrained gender rigidity that belittles women's role as an administrator and as an authority. The office in which they work has a newly appointed woman, as an authority. The very condition to work under a female authority destabilizes their interest in work and they discuss about the perils of having a female boss. Mr. Singh categorically mentions about his new female boss, and doubts her capability

to manage with this unconventional challenging exhaustive job that demands constant moving and working late hours. Mr. Singh comments on this appointment, saying-

“Madam’s appointment is a bad decision.”

The very selection of a female boss in their office is metaphorically seen as unwelcoming, a threat to their conditioned professional space. It is viewed improper to follow the dictates of a female authority. Her selection is considered unjustified emphasizing their gendered attitude that prompts marginalization and objectification of women. Men in the living room also sound their opinion regarding the difference between men and women’s anatomy. They firmly believe that they are different and hence their capabilities too differ. Metaphorically, it conforms to the dominant underlying patriarchal ideology of the Indian society that constantly attempts to subjugate women’s position by representing them in such ways, as Sen argues, “ideological emphasis on women being seen primarily as wives and mothers rather than as career women or being able to lead independent productive lives” (quoted in Hanan, 2017: 246).

In between, Manju (Shefali Shah) enters the living room with plates of starters. She hears their criticism about their boss and women in general. Though she does not sound anything to counter their opinions, but her expression and silence conveys her detest for such opinions and values. The film anchors the story about patriarchy in Indian homes towering above everything else. Manju emotes primarily through her expressions. The film portrays Manju in dark light work of showing us her reluctant patience, her building frustration and eventual release, all the while trying to be civil and polite to her husband’s guests. She has her own issues, her own prejudices and her own boundaries, and her primary intention is to abide by them. Yet, there are definitive moments that may forever change one’s equation with others, and this film is about one such moment for a middle- class Indian woman. In this film, Manju, a representative Indian woman has reluctantly given up her career to take care of her family. It is a simple engaging film that has portrayed this commonplace situation existing in most of the Indian homes. It projects this gendered attitude in its daily intercourse circling around responses both with her words as well as her silence. This also serves as a metaphorical reference to how women’s lives are conditioned to internalize patriarchal discourses.

In this context, Kuhn’s theory of ‘socially sanctioned femininity’ seems most convincing. According to this Kuhn’s theory, a female is represented as transgressive, but mostly quite differently from her male counterpart. She puts on display the conflicts at the heart of feminine

identity and the concept of “socially sanctioned femininity” (Kuhn, 1990, 426). Manju at best reflects this concept of ‘socially sanctioned femininity’ – that is, motherhood, and integration into the family as accepted in a typical Indian family. The deep sowed conflicts and frustration in Manju, however, finds expression only at the end of the film.

Manju: An exemplification of both tradition and resistance

Neeraj Ghaywan builds a whole world around Manju’s character. In the lived-in nature of the home, the thoughtful exemplification of this commonplace situation in itself sums up the rigid gendered discourse that is so dominant in most of the household. The film captures the audience’s attention by its subtle handling of the given subject. The director has filled with all the fuel the character called Manju needs, and she acts aptly with her scanty words and more so through her silence. The final scene of the film, where her eyes do the talking and her husband’s eyes do the listening is quite impressive. He is dumbfounded by her silence and body gestures that installs a sense of fear and shock among all the members present in the party. In this case, silence functions as a sign, an empty space between words that is used for silence, in that it both expresses and threatens in some ways. The final scene of silence serves as indices for both meaning and warning. This moment of silence can signify as a metaphor on relationships of subjugation and socialization. This is played out in the gestural space of contemporary performance who use moments of silence as a method of (dis)figuration, (de)narrativization, and (dis)articulation.

The depiction of Manju as a traditional housemaker aims to expose women’s exploitation and belittling their role in the family. The same Manju is depicted as repelling her role in the kitchen. She is physically exhausted by continuously working and serving in the steaming kitchen. Her body demands rest and so she stops abruptly in the middle of cooking and serving affairs. She pours a glass of juice, not to offer to any of the guests but for herself. Her body is sweating hard to relax. She enters the comfort zone, the living room with a glass of juice, drags a chair for herself and turns the cooler towards herself, relaxing. She does not sound anything to anyone, but her eyes and body gestures conveys her anger, her long regret and frustration. She exhilarates to relax her body and mind. The film succeeds in both confirming the perpetual subtle gender exploitation and challenging it. Manju becomes a symbol of resistance against this gendered discourse. She induces a sense of fear and threat to all those present there. In conclusion, the film may depict just a simple situation of most of the

Indian household, but it carries deeper issues that imprints and justifies the gendered attitude sown traditionally.

For Manju, to choose for silence is to resist Mr. Singh's patriarchal attitude by defying the orders to serve the dinner for the moment and choosing to relieve herself from the steam and cooking toil. Silence is not just an absence of verbal communication, but a chance operation that reconfigures to express her resilience and frustration. While silence is typically attributed as an aural quality, the same silence can explode with meanings when words succumb to convey the given message. So, silence here is a visual attribute to showcase Manju's reluctance and frustration.

The Gender Contender and the treatment:

The film is a direct reference to the traditional medium of entertainment and guidance. The entire household is patriarchal both in gender relation among the characters where male characters are always privileged and also in the context where professional career too is male dominated. In this line of reasoning, the presence not only strengthens the mystical aspect of the film but also signifies the problematic gender relations. This is a society where women are socially and culturally subdued under a strong authoritarian and patriarchal regime where women's role in the family and society is marginalized. The film depicts typical male and female characters with a different treatment. The protagonist, Manju do show stereotypical female traits, such as being dependent, emotionally and socially upright. But she also counters Sarla bhabi's suggestion for Rajni to give up her job and concentrate on the would-be-born baby and child-care responsibilities. The deep dormant frustration however erupts at the end of the film, as a gesture of defiance through silence, to counter their gendered attitudes and values.

Manju and Sarla bhabi both are conformists, one unwillingly and the other willingly and are possible representations of what is normatively expected of women in a family. Having internalised the patriarchal norms passed down to them, they hardly recognize their marginalisation, particularly Sarla bhabi who advises other women to conform to that set rules and prejudices. She has internalized the patriarchal norms passed down to her and is not in a position to recognize her marginalization.

Rajni, Mr. Shukla's pregnant wife is greeted with warm wishes by all of them. However, Sarla bhabi advises her to quit job and take care of herself and household affairs. She suggests her to engage in affairs – familial and household. Among these women, there is Pubali, a Bengali woman who differs in opinion and values from the rest. She detests this cultural

obligation for a married woman to leave job for family. She seems to be independent, resilient, and is not chained to traditional social norms that bind women to certain fixed roles and positions which suggest a different negotiation of the gender relations. She counters Sarla bhabi's suggestion to Rajni for leaving her job. She has a different opinion about family and conjugal life. She says, "Why can't man and woman support each other and live independent?". She questions the very worth of serving the household and rearing children. Her opinion is supported by Manju who encourages her to continue her professional life. This response on her part seamlessly skins her deep regret and frustration at her own position. Women's capabilities and priorities are generally overruled under a patriarchal authority. The head of the family sees women's role as an investment to ensure a traditional 'secured' life as a wife and a mother. This marginalisation of women on one hand and their subsequent objectification are ways to captivate and restrict their boundaries. Men valorise rearing women as peaceful ambassadors who will toil in the house and kitchen to offer comfort for the dominant superior sex.

Among all the women present, Pubali is the one with a broader understanding of affairs. She is not pregnant and that ignites Sarla bhabi's comments on women's role in the family. She thinks that couples generally rear children as emotional and financial investment for old age. She is comparatively better positioned than others. But this is not welcoming for the other ladies. Sarla bhabi here cites the case of Manju who had left her job for family and children. But Manju supports Pubali and is against leaving one's job for family. She counters men's role in the family and expresses how men in the house are always privileged with recreation and entertainment.



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Pubali

This film explores the gendered attitudes towards women in the house, more specifically, by focusing on the objectification of women that equates women's worth with their biological functions, which—in this context—centres around their role in the family and the household. It is reflected through their response to various situations in the party. It can be best understood through their interactions among themselves. In the given context, the theory of objectification by Julia Kristeva defined as “the seeing and/or treating a person, usually a woman, as an object” (Papadaki, 2019) fits the given situation. Though the film does not suggest a sexual objectification of women, it specifically sees and considers woman's body as an object that has limited capabilities. Mr. Singh expresses his disapproval over the selection of a new female ‘boss’ in his office. He doubts her capability to run the office and to give ample time for the same. Her position demands frequent movement, decision- making and administering. To perform these responsibilities, Mr. Singh and his friends believe that women are not meant and capable of delivering such tasks. This kind of objectification of women and their bodies has almost become a trope in the Indian family where women are supposed to carry a mystical aura. Metaphorically, it conforms to the dominant underlying patriarchal ideology

of the Indian society that constantly attempts to subjugate women's position and their role in family and society.

“Man occupies the role of the ‘self’, or ‘subject’; woman is the ‘object’, the other. He is essential, incomplete, and mutilated. He extends out into the world to impose his will on it, whereas woman is doomed to immanence or inwardness.”

De Beauvoir *The Second Sex*

This analogy fits so well in the given context of the film. Men occupies the plum spaces in the house (living room) with all the comfort resources around them, whereas women are stocked in the steaming kitchen preparing food and beverages. This stark division of work and recreation sums up the dominant patriarchal hierarchy.

Beauvoir in her classic work, *The Second Sex* insists that women are not born “feminine” but shaped by a thousand external processes. Women, at each stage of her upbringing is conditioned into accepting passivity, dependence, repetition, and inwardness. Every force in society conspires to deprive her of subjectivity and flatten her into an object. Denied the possibility of independent work or creative fulfillment, woman must accept a dissatisfying life of housework, childbearing and sexual slavishness.

Sarla bhabi, in some ways reinforces her own dependency. Such women embrace their immanence by drawing ‘selfhood’ in an external object. She being complicit in her ‘otherness’, advocates this objectification by not distancing herself from such concepts of feminine, and by advocating other woman to accept the usual unfulfilling roles of a (house) wife and a mother. She considers motherhood to be the ultimate joy in a woman's life and that she must voluntarily sacrifice everything else for it.

The film examines the socio-cultural contexts which a family nurtures and seeks, through that broad optic, to explain why the current anger and disillusionment felt within Manju is running so high. The film revolves around Manju, who is depicted as a traditional educated wife and a mother, hardworking, skilled but ‘dependent’ woman. It shows a shift in gender relations mostly through her portrayal, her household skills. The narrative of men explicates their opinion on leadership, profession, politics and history that is reflective of their attitude in general and about women in particular. The screenshot below depicts the scene where Manju fixes an electronic fan for the other ladies in the steaming hot kitchen. She is equipped with skills other than cooking and not just a stereotypical household support for the family. This

aspect reflects her enduring skills and understanding of things beyond the household. Her skills are not put in the right place for she has been marginalized for the greater good of the family. She turns into a common object to support the family household and rearing children.



Manju fixing a fan

She even asks Mr. Singh to assist in this matter but he neglects her request. On the other hand, Manju solely toils hard to comfort the other ladies from the steaming kitchen. But in the process to comfort both men and women in the house, her hand gets burnt. She was putting ice on her burnt hand when Mr. Singh shouts and asks her to control the children. Sarla bhabi instructs her daughter to feed her brother, a typical cultural obligation for girls in the house. After sometime, Mr. Singh orders to get the dinner ready. In the kitchen, Manju is struggling with the chicken that gets stuck in the pan. He is not concerned about the conditions in which Manju was toiling to get everything ready. This scene is a provoking situation where women toils for the comfort of men in the house.

The treatment in the film is different though it presents a commonplace household situation. In the mainstream popular Indian cinema, the female body is almost always sexually represented but here there is no such sexual innuendo because it depicts a post marriage phase-

naked and realistic. The film symbolises a dissociation of the female body with sexuality that support its non-traditional portrayal of the female characters.

This depiction of the marginalised female, Manju as the protagonist is also a way of negotiating the gender relations by giving her a voice to challenge the traditional authority though at the end through her 'silence'. The film ends with a long silence of Manju, relaxing on a chair with a glass of juice. In this final scene, Manju's eyes do the talking with her silent lips. She glares at him with aggression, assertion, betrayal and confidence. This long stare at her husband surmounts a million failed words. The very act of looking into her husband's eyes without sounding is perhaps the release of the long-suppressed frustration. She is now feared and powerful. All the ladies in the kitchen peeps from the door to view her reaction. All the men stopped sounding anything, staring at her.



Manju staring at Mr. Singh

Women is the second sex, a support to the main stem, being inferior and objectified in ways, familiar and strange. The objectification becomes the leitmotif of the film as whatever is expressed and not expressed (Manju's silence at the end) however, unfolds their gendered attitudes. The film's portrayal of male and female characters suggests the silent exploitation

by the mainstream patriarchal order in contemporary Indian society and at the same time hints at the perpetuating objectification of woman in the so-called educated nuclear family.

Conclusion:

The film analyses the role of women in the context of creation of a 'modern' culture that still limits women within a given framework. Their representation and their role in the house and family reflects the social, political, economic and cultural conditions that is pertinent in exposing the subordinate role of women. Their living conditions has an enormous bearing on the status as it is in a society encumbered by patriarchy. Though the family reflects an evolving modern society but that is again another instance of gendered modernity.

The entire plot of the film is inscribed with a narrative of gender relations. The narrative unravels gender, at its heart, a structural power relation that rests upon a set of distinctions between categories of people, valuing one over the other. The underlying patriarchy is not overtly exploited but is presented through Manju's position and her role in supporting her family. The film succeeds in both confirming the perpetual subtle gender exploitation and challenging it. Manju becomes a symbol of resistance against this gendered discourse. She induces a sense of fear and threat to all those present there. In conclusion, the film may portray just a simple situation in most of the Indian household, but it carries deeper issues that imprints and justifies the gendered attitude sown traditionally. It critically exposes the institution of marriage that reinforces domestic cliches. The director in portraying the marginalised as the heroine, is also a way of negotiating the gender relations by showing her to express her disapproval and frustration through her silence.

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