Culinary Currency: Negotiating Identity, Intimacy, and Agency in *English Vinglish*, *The Lunchbox*, and *Darlings*

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Abstract

Food plays a crucial role in formulating the cultural identity of a given community, gender, ethnicity, among others. Women cooking food in contextual Indian cultural spaces like kitchens, and its subsequent consumption by men is critically represented in Bollywood films. The post-liberal, global capitalist economic policies have redefined the concept of 'new' Indian woman on celluloid promoting a progressive depiction of middle-class housewives owing to the rise of feminist filmmakers. These filmmakers defy the prevalent gendered norms by reimagining and redefining the mainstream Indian woman identity. They represent the 'new' middle-class urban woman as an aspiring individual asserting herself to convey her choices for acquiring the decision-making power. She is depicted transgressing her domiciliary into the public sphere and navigating through sociopolitical spaces; negotiating cultural, economic, and gendered identity (through her culinary currency: gastronomic prowess), acquiring agency, and establishing unconventional intimacies. Subsequently, the traditional familial hierarchy is either dismantled or else re-established on quasi equitable grounds following liberal reformative approaches. In such negotiations, her culinary currency becomes the 'language of love' cohesively binding the family together by either jeopardising or facilitating her self-sufficiency. The essay problematises such sociopolitical discursivities comprising food, identity, intimacy, and agency through the portrayal of Indian middle-class urban housewives in Gauri Shinde's *English Vinglish* (2012), Ritesh Batra's *The Lunchbox* (2013) and Jasmeet K. Reen's *Darlings* (2022). The theoretical framework draws perspectives from film studies, cultural studies, gender studies, and feminist food studies.

Keywords: Food;Heteropatriarchal; Heterotopia; Kitchen; New Woman

Introduction

India, the largest film-producing country in the world is the epicentre of

Bollywood, located in Mumbai. 'Bollywood' became a popular term to refer to the Hindi-film industry owing to the widespread propagation by the English-language press in the late 1970s (Ganti 12). The cinematic representation of women in celluloid has undergone a drastic transformation post the 1990s, especially in the last decade. The 'new woman' figure now portrayed in Hindi films is not a cultural monolith, but a culmination of modern femininities contrasting the earlier formulaic depictions of the 1990s in response to globalisation and economic liberalisation (Ghosh 197). The films produced after 2010 have commendably represented women characters assertively opposing and nullifying patriarchal ideologies and subverting social orders and conditions (Sengupta and Ganjoo 23). Depicted as an emblem of the 'new India,' she is also simultaneously an addressee of the new heteropatriarchal familial structures that constantly reinvent themselves (Anwer and Arora 6). Bollywood's fascination with the new woman identity has inaugurated many experimental portrayals. One such instance is manifested in the evolving dynamics of representation of Indian housewives on celluloid. Tulasi Srinivas in her seminal article, "'As Mother Made It,'" asserts that "the image of a good mother" is conceptualised as a "nurturing relationship between the mother and the child, where this dyad is a metaphor for relations of caretaking and dependency" (198). She further opines that "feeding the child and provisioning the family are key components of the role of mother and wife" (198). However, Bollywood is now attempting to project the Indian housewife, not necessarily in a paradigmatic fashion confined to the kitchen performing the sole role of a nourisher and a caregiver. She may continue sustaining familial dietary needs through her culinary connections, but would also simultaneously explore external or internal (mental landscape) spaces.

Food has been an intrinsic part of commercial Hindi films since its origin. With the emergence of new Indian women, food's essential gendered associations have been strategically interwoven into the narratives of mainstream Hindi films to reflect modernised portrayals. Food is regarded as a crucial medium of contact between humans, in a constantly evolving society and culture, depending upon regulation and evolution of such connections [thereby instituting familial relationships and intimacies]. It is also the focus of taxonomic and moral thought (Appadurai 495). Apart from establishing connections between men and women, it also promotes gendering, constitution

of hierarchies and power relations (Counihan 2). In the Introduction to *Food and Gender: Identity and Power*, Carol Counihan foregrounds the sexual division of labour: the different roles assumed by women and men in producing, providing, distributing, and consuming food respectively as the prime measure of their individual power. She further emphasises women's gastronomic agency in the context of food production in kitchens (2). The domiciliary authority enhances a woman's identity and dignity furthering her emancipation.

The essay underscores the portrayal of Indian middle-class urban housewives in the films *English Vinglish* (2012*), The Lunchbox* (2013), and *Darlings* (2022) by employing culinary lens. The films have been selected through a purposive sampling method for critical content and discourse analysis. *Darlings* represents a gastronomic discourse surrounding Muslim housewives hailing from a lower social class, whereas the other visual texts depict Hindu middle-class homemakers. The essay maps their culinary aspirations by incorporating perspectives from feminist food studies, cultural studies, and gender studies. The culinary currency of the protagonists encompasses their gastronomic knowledge, and cooking expertise. The essay establishes its usage in negotiation of sociopolitical discursivities of identity, and agency, for forging familiar (familial) and unfamiliar culinary networks of intimacy, friendship, and solidarity. It also delineates how food personified as a major character in the films, enables or disables agency, self-sufficiency, and the decision-making power of its protagonists. Overall, the essay explores the role of culinary currency in either appropriating conventional femininity or in subverting heteropatriarchal hierarchies.

English Vinglish: The Labour of Love

English Vinglish, written and directed by Gauri Shinde, released in 2012. It was a major critical and commercial success. The film is based on Shinde's mother who heralded a pickle business lacking English speaking skills which often subjected her to derision. Late Sridevi played the role of the protagonist, Shashi Godbole, an upper-middle class, ideal Maharashtrian homemaker. The film revolves around Shashi's self-discovery, foregrounding culinary exchanges in a foreign land based on her acquisition of conversational English skills through an English as a Second-Language (ESL) course that she enrols for while in New York.

Food plays a substantive role in defining and redefining Shashi's traditional and cosmopolitan, neoliberal identity in the film, which otherwise centres on linguistic inequities associated with conversational English. According to Mayuk Sen's blog review, "The Language of *Ladoos* in *English Vinglish*" for *Goya*: food takes on the language of currency to become a tongue in which Shashi is incomprehensible by her family. It helps her forge connections, intimacies, and friendships, some familial, other unfamiliar, in the USA (United States of America). The opening scene of the film through a close shot portrays Shashi waking up early in the morning to prepare four kinds of breakfast for four different family members delaying her own coffee drinking ritual (a motif) in the process by prioritising their sustenance (Laskey 149). The sequence also emphasises her undervalued emotional and reproductive labour and care work (Banerji and Desai 30). In return, her husband, Satish (Adil Hussain) and her teenage daughter Sapna (Navika Kotia) collectively gaslight her by mocking her disadvantaged English diction. Shashi manages a small-time venture of making and selling *ladoos*. She smilingly delivers *ladoo* boxes to clients and returns home with joyful earnings.

Appadurai opines in "Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia" that the wife cooks and serves, while the husband eats and criticises (501). In one of the proceeding scenes, Satish while consuming the dinner prepared by Shashi at the tablescape authoritatively asks her to relinquish her *ladoo* initiative in a heteropatriarchal fashion, to retain monopoly over her cooking. She retaliates by asserting that she would not abandon her only passion. It marks one of the first instances in the film where Shashi defies patriarchal orders by taking a stand for herself. Shashi's mother-in-law (late Sulabha Deshpande) and her 4 years old son, Sagar (Shivansh Kotia) form her domestic support-systems. Yet, she ends up feeling alienated from the kitchen which becomes a cage, not a theatre as her immediate family members fail to appreciate and acknowledge her culinary labour, a valid form of her self-expression and identity (Sen).

Shashi hesitatingly travels to the USA alone to assist her sister Manu (late Anjali Ram) in making arrangements for her daughter Meera's wedding. Food becomes the prime facilitator of culminating Shashi's anticipated 'new woman' identity as she discreetly enrols for an ESL course through her secret savings procured by selling *ladoos*. In the first class, upon introducing herself

as a cook, she is immediately identified as an 'entrepreneur' by her instructor, signifying an empowering moment. She traverses her heteropatriarchal domesticity into the public sphere befriending the empathetic French chef, Laurent (Mehdi Nebbou), a classmate at her ESL course who harbours romantic feelings for her. However, owing to her deeply internalised morality, Shashi only establishes a rather platonic, yet subtly intimate friendship with him. This unconventional culinary friendship and an unfamiliar intimacy is pivotal for Shashi's emancipation, as it offers her a safe, sustaining space inspiring internal growth. It also rekindles her self-confidence and dignity enabling agency, promoting self-love and self-respect, the reason why she endearingly thanks him at the end of the film. She is overwhelmed on being exposed to his romantic culinary metaphors directed at her in one of the classes and subsequently confesses obliterating how it felt being appreciated. Laurent's behaviour towards Shashi dramatically contradicts that of her family which never acknowledges her culinary prowess and takes her emotional and physical labour for granted (Laskey 148).

Verbal interactions between Shashi and Laurent often comprise an exchange of fears, frustrations, and anger, seamlessly executed in their individual languages (Hindi and French respectively). Neither of them can comprehend either's linguistic grammar, but can decode the associative spiritual meaning of each other's emotionally charged monologues. This is highly ironic as Shashi's family fails to understand her through her language of love – food, but a foreigner empathetically does that, surpassing all sociolinguistic barriers. During one of their conversations, Shashi addresses Laurent as a food expert. The sensible chef in return hails food as an art form, following which Shashi delivers one of the most impactful dialogues of the film: *"Mard khana banaye toh kala hai. Aurat banaye toh uska farz hai!"* [When a man cooks, it becomes art. When a woman cooks, it is her duty!] (*English Vinglish* 01:04:18–24) Shashi's aphoristic utterance echoes the universally gendered hypocrisy of glorification of male chefs and trivialisation of women's domestic culinary labour. Laurent subverts hegemonic masculinity by promptly hailing Shashi as an artist, leaving her overjoyed. This further enhances her dignity, worth, and confidence. Shashi's culinary currency propels an exchange of homemade food with Laurent, assisting her in establishing a platonic gastronomic connection.

Shashi discovers familial gastronomic intimacy and support in her sister, Manu, who acts as a foil to her docile character, subconsciously facilitating her empowerment project. Manu's daughter, Radha (Priya Anand) becomes Shashi's closest confidant perceiving her personhood beyond her culinary prowess. She even champions her awakening through consciousness raising sessions, and helps her attend ESL classes discreetly. Radha is also tolerant to the possibility of Shashi fostering feelings for Laurent. However, Shashi asserts that all she seeks is respect and not love. Shashi's intricate network of unfamiliar intimacies is intrinsically established through food, especially through *ladoos* which also help her forge friendships with her classmates at the ESL course.

The *ladoo* motif plays a significant role in furthering the film's heartwarming climax. Shashi recommends that guests attending Meera's wedding should be offered handmade *ladoos* as *shagun*, a token gift in return. On the wedding day, which also coincides with the final exam of her ESL course, the *ladoos* endearingly prepared by Shashi are damaged in an accident. The long-close shots of *ladoo* pieceson the floor being swept away by the cleaners symbolically portray Shashi's shattered dreams of gaining self-respect and acquiring a cosmopolitan identity. Shashi decides to make *ladoos* again, by forgoing the examination, clearing which would have hailed her as a professional ESL speaker. She cathartically exclaims to Radha that she would not achieve anything by failing in the subject she loved the most (making *ladoos*). The next few highly evocative long-shots pan over a melancholic Shashi silently making *ladoos*, aesthetically highlighting her poignant eyes brimming with sharp agony. Is preparing *ladoos* indeed her favourite subject? Does she exercise absolute culinary agency in taking such a decision or is it a byproduct of indoctrination facilitated by the heteropatriarchal kinship? The answer is undoubtedly the latter, but she does utilise absolute agency by rejecting assistance in making *ladoos*. Conveniently, Shashi succeeds overall, culminating capability and respect in her family as a part of the climactic plot trope adopted by Shinde to serve the audience an anticipated happy ending. All her ESL course classmates and the instructor David (Cory Hibbs) favourably attend the wedding to listen to her powerful climactic English speech, thereby enabling her felicitation with the much-anticipated course clearance certificate.

Following her empowering address, Shashi distributes *ladoos* to all her

friends, expresses gratitude to Laurent, and serves two *ladoos* to Satish (a focussing shot). Shashi's assertive culinary act of offering two *ladoos* (and only one to all, including Laurent) to a vulnerable Satish reaffirms her conjugal love. She renounces Laurent's love and departs to India as an enlightened, confident, cosmopolitan neoliberal feminist, fluent in basic conversational English. This marks her symbolic reinitiation into her heteropatriarchal domesticity with liberal reformations. By rejecting the English newspaper in the absence of a Hindi one on her return flight, she relinquishes her newly acquired agential identity (fostered through culinary connections) to continue serving her family and the nation, reassuming her original subservient position.

Shashi's character exposes Indian cinema's obsession with projecting the woman as a bearer of society's moral conscience and a preserver of [culinary, conjugal, and national] traditions, no matter however modern she becomes in her outlook and perspective (Sengupta and Ganjoo 23). She never abandons her *mangalsutra* and *saree* in New York (Ciolfi 299). Sridevi's Shashi emerges as the "new woman" shaping her ''incipient feminism to a radical cosmopolitan politics of intersectional inclusiveness'' conveyed through her pro-LGBTQIA+ stance as she empathises with David post his breakup with a man (Laskey 153). Her ''capacity to harness old and new becomes domesticated within neoliberal feminism as the conjoining of tradition and moral, but also local and global, modern and married'' (Banerjee and Desai 37-38).

The Lunchbox: Covert Culinary Correspondences

Ritesh Batra's *The Lunchbox* (2013), an independent low-budget venture may be perceived as a culinary text on a woman's pursuit of identity and independence by a male filmmaker. The inclusion of the film as a comparative text amongst those by female filmmakers would delineate the nuances of feminist solidarity through a gastrofeminist lens. The film's narrative explicates the systems of feminine intimacies by foregrounding culinary currency. It achieves that by destabilising and deconstructing a traditional patriarchal social order by deploying culinary imagery (Rahman 2). The film essentially revolves around an intimate platonic relationship that brews between its unhappy protagonists, Ila Singh (Nimrat Kaur) and Saajan Fernandes (late Irrfan Khan) nourished by their covert culinary correspondences through the medium of lunch boxes

that deliver appetising food and personal letters. Saajan, a middle-class Christian widower clerk on the verge of voluntary superannuation, seeks companionship post his wife's death. Whereas Ila, a middle-class Hindu homemaker ensnared in a loveless marriage frantically attempts to rekindle conjugality through her culinary currency. Their paths cross metaphorically in an unconventional occurrence (one in millions), a ''serendipitous error'' (Mannur 38), when the *dabbawalla* ends up delivering the *dabba* intended for Ila's husband to Saajan instead at a different workplace, initiating their epistolary correspondence.

Muzna Rahman advocates in her work "Covert Communications'' how the protagonists mutually feed each other's internal hunger of intimacy and connection "that takes the form of a return to the comforts and pleasures of the domestic scene, a heteronormative nuclear family, rooted in the familiar logic of culturally-mandated food production and consumption" (14). This is evident in the scene where Saajan receives Ila's tiffin for the first time at the dining hall of his administrative, *kafkaesque* office. Lunchtime reflects Saajan's cherished personal temporal space that forms the backdrop of his intimate association with Ila as she navigates through this space with her homecooked food, prepared in her domestic heterotopia: the kitchen. In a social-media driven world, they become ''the care-takers of each other's memories and stories'' by sharing personal anecdotes, life-learnings, traumatic musings, and painful recollections through a series of notes later transforming into ''epistles'' exchanged through the medium of the symbolic lunch boxes (Mannur 38-43). While tracing the links between food, gender and power, Counihan enunciates how women regulate, moderate and control cooking by manipulating the status and meaning systems embodied in food to mediate power relations between the sexes (*Gender and Power* 8). Ila, initially dismayed at the lack of appreciation for her ornately prepared lunch, decides to send Saajan an excessively spicy lunch the following day after he returns her first note exclaiming "Dear Ila, the food was very salty today" (*The Lunchbox* 00:22:29-00:22:32). If only Shashi could also emulate this strategy. Ila exercises her culinary agency and decides to consciously prepare food with love and get it delivered to Saajan after this initial ice-breaking event.

Mrs. Deshpande (Bharati Achrekar), Ila's neighbour, fondly referred to as 'auntie' assists Ila in cooking food for Saajan, evident through her prompt

suggestions and constant supply of ingredients from her kitchen window, thereby enhancing her culinary currency. Through her disembodied presence and ''acousmatic voice'' in the film, she nourishes a culinary camaraderie with Ila (Mannur 41). Auntie is the prime caregiver of her comatose husband. Ila's mother's character (Lillete Dubey) mirrors that of Mrs. Deshpande. Her mother is confined by the arduous task of caring for her ailing husband and is worried about the draining finances involving his treatment. She is so deeply engulfed in the process that she obliterates her natural cravings like that of hunger. She is evidently reminded of hunger only after her husband's death and complains to Ila about the same. This unsettling scene reflects the poignant reality of middle-aged Indian housewives' intense dedication to their husband's well-being that they end up sabotaging their identity, worth, and desires in the cumbersome process. Ila's mother parallels Lousie Mallard in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," where the protagonist, initially distraught with her husband's passing away, later experiences a sense of relief over her freshly acquired independence that subsequently kills her upon the discovery of her husband being alive. Mrs. Deshpande and Ila's mother's characters are visionary in nature, providing cautionary warning to Ila to act and save her future by not restricting herself to the normative identity of a mother, a wife, and a caregiver confined to a heteropatriarchal hierarchical framework.

Ila undergoes a series of transformations throughout the film. She feels empowered in utilising her culinary currency by cooking for Saajan as her ''[gastronomic] labour becomes valued'' (Mannur 40-41). According to Rhea Choudhury's article, "Lunchbox Movie: Ila's Evolution and Material Interactions" in Feminism in India (FII), food also becomes a means of self-expression for Ila [like Shashi] reflecting her myriad emotions and feelings of anxiety, uneasiness, happiness, and sadness by upending the ''violent banality of her everyday life'' (Mannur 37). Due to the flourishing culinary correspondences with Saajan, she even renounces her friendship with Mrs. Deshpande in the pursuit of a newfound intimacy. Subsequently, relying upon her old recipe book, she starts preparing lunch for Saajan without auntie's intervention.

Ila, upon discovering her husband's marital infidelity decides to repudiate her marriage unconventionally, as she contemplates using her savings to emigrate

to Bhutan with her daughter, intrigued by their lower cost of living and 'Gross Domestic Happiness.' She even entertains the idea of an anticipated future with Saajan by attempting to meet him at a restaurant. However, he hesitatingly observes her from a distance without showing up, owing to their evident age gap. Consequently, this newfound gastronomic "affective intimacy" enables the protagonists in abandoning their conventional lonesome existence to undertake an odyssey towards individual self-discovery, self-actualisation, and self-intimacy (Mannur 37).

Ila's kitchen is deliberately presented in an unorganised and cluttered manner reflecting her inner turmoil and claustrophobic marriage. The film relies on the actor-protagonists' body and faces instead of prioritising ''sexualized aesthetics and sensory semiotics of food'' to convey meaning indicating that food is undoubtedly crucial to the narrative but only secondary to their presence (Rahman 18-19). Ila's culinary ''labour is given a space to emerge and is presented in visually lush and thoughtful terms throughout the film'' (Mannur 40). Amidst her domestic chores, Ila is shown sipping tea in a glass instead of a cup enhancing a revised evaluation of a normative culinary discourse. This act may be perceived as her personal respite amidst domestic drudgery, complementing Saajan's occasional smoke breaks at his workplace. Ila is more emancipated and venturesome as she decides to depart from her heteropatriarchal domesticity to start afresh with her daughter as a single mother, aware of the challenges and added responsibilities, unlike Shashi, who returns to her problematic family with a renewed sense of identity, enlightened only to reclaim her former submissive familial role. Batra's directorial gaze is not androcentric and objectivist. It rather represents a layered, responsible, and empathetic portrayal of female characters in the film redefining the dynamics of women's representation on celluloid by men. His portrayal of Ila destabilises Bollywood's canonical androcentrism by not jeopardising gynocentric representations through a prejudiced counter narrative. It instead contributes to the emerging discourse in compliance with a self-reflexive standpoint of the cisgendered male contributor of this essay.

Darlings: Reclaiming Identity through Revenge

Netflix's production, *Darlings* directed by Jasmeet K. Reen, and co-written

by Parveez Shaikh is the most intrepid film under analysis. It is a dark comedy, a ''feminist revenge narrative'' with intergenerational trauma, domestic violence, and a quest for self-identity and self-realisation of a lower middle-class Muslim protagonist Badrunissa Shaikh (Alia Bhatt) and her feisty widowed mother Shamshunissa (Shefali Shah) against the alcoholic abuser Hamza Sheikh (Vijay Verma) (Ajgaonkar 210; Oishee 163). It is not essentially a food film unlike the other two; however, culinary discourse around the kitchen forms an intrinsic component of the film's narrative. Badru, ''a complacent, devoted wife'' is intensely in love with her government employed husband who leaves no opportunity to abuse and oppress her owing to his alcoholism (Oishee 168). In one of the sequences, Badru lovingly prepares Biryani for Hamza for dinner, only to be unassumingly tortured at the dining table in the proceeding scene. She wakes up traumatised the following day to prepare breakfast for Hamza. He cajoles and pleads to win her over, only to replicate the vicious cycle of violence in the evening. The cycle of ''perpetual abuse,'' manipulation and forgiving continues as Badru ignores her mother's pleas of either leaving Hamza or killing him, until one day she ends up having a miscarriage (Oishee 170). This is the turning point of the film which makes her contemplate suicide. In an epiphanic moment, she decides to avenge herself in order to reclaim her lost respectwith no intention to continue residing in the obnoxious heteronormative domiciliary. She extracts revenge on him in similar ways through Shamshu and Zulfi's (Mathew) assistance. Zulfi nurtures a soft corner for Shamshu. Shamshu and Zulfi initiate a food delivery enterprise with Badru's aid, inversing kitchen stereotypes according to the Film Companion review by Rahul Desai. During the ordeal of extracting revenge from Hamza, they simultaneously carry on with their business, comically concealing their revenge mechanisms. At the end, employing deus ex machina, Hamza's character is conveniently killed, leaving behind the mother and daughter independent, to start afresh with a renewed individuality.

Shamshu develops an unconventional culinary intimacy with Zulfi, who is almost half her age. He delivers *dabbas*, procures kitchen utensils and essentials at affordable prices, and helps her acquire more clients. Shamshu and Zulfi's gastronomic intimacy, sensibly portrayed, is political in nature, surpassing the age gap, highlighting mutual respect and compatibility. Initially,

Hamza assumes Badru to be in an illicit relationship with Zulfi, until Zulfi confesses in front of the police that he actually finds *Khaala* (aunt Shamshu) 'cute.' Owing to the frustration of being exposed and falsely framed by the police in the proceeding scene, he bursts forth threatening Shamshu that he would confess about their ongoing revenge project, when Shamshu tactfully kisses him, though out of genuine feelings for him, initiating their culinary romance.

In an unanticipated turn of events, through a flashback sequence, it is revealed how in an act of self-defence, years ago, Shamshu had to kill her husband, a sadistic psychopath and abuser like Hamza, and file a missing person report to protect the infant Badru and herself. She was aided by a butcher to restore normalcy post this traumatic episode. She overprotectively raises Badru, ensuring that she does not encounter a similar fate. However, the inevitable happens. Shamshu believes that all men are like scorpions while women are like frogs. The frog and the scorpion fable serves as a crucial cautionary emblem in the film representing the traits of the protagonists and the antagonist. Badru decides not to kill Hamza on moral grounds and works towards fostering self-respect.

''Every act of eating with others, or alone, is a form of intimacy'' (Mannur 9). Shamshu and Badru's mutual love for cooking and eating, demonstrating their individual and collective culinary currency, facilitates their camaraderie over cookery television shows and frequent culinary experiments. Food empowers them physically, emotionally, and financially. The kitchen as a safe feminine space fosters their consciousness-raising sessions thereby heightening their culinary agency. The upfront mother, while sharing life-learnings, constantly urges Badru to hold Hamza accountable for his violence. She also attempts to persuade her to leave him during their culinary activities: cooking, eating, and purchasing ingredients from the market. Food nourishes the mother-daughter bonding and aids a discourse of solidarity, seasoned through trauma-induced intimacy amongst the survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV).

The kitchen and the table at Badru's home is a ''vital site where normative families reproduce themselves'' (Mannur 11), as it becomes a contested site of propagation and perpetuation of androcentric conjugal violence. Contrastingly, the one at Shamshu's home offers Badru an outlet and a safe

space. They extract revenge from the oppressor only when the legal system fails them. In a desperate attempt to rectify and reform Hamza, Badru initially mixes alcohol de-addiction pills in Mutton Curry reflecting the use of culinary agency through the minuscule culinary power enjoyed by her in the film's beginning. The kitchen, the dining table, and the surrounding areas at Badru's domiciliary post episodic-violence, subsequently metamorphose into agential spaces for Badru and Shamshu facilitating a journey of individual and collective self-transformation. Reen's characterisation effectively ''foregrounds the experiences of economically disadvantaged women from a religious minority in India, who in mainstream representations remain in the periphery as subaltern and marginalized individuals'' (Oishee 166). As an IPV survivor, Shamshu dismantles her toxic heteropatriarchal domiciliary. Badru follows suit and breaks the vicious cycle of intergenerational trauma and abuse. In the last scene of the film, Badru is depicted celebrating her new-found independence and a renewed individuality, as she watches a film alone in the theatre, contrasting the opening sequence where she frantically waits for Hamza outside the theatre. By opting to stay single to assist her mother in her culinary enterprise, it becomes imperative that Badru would attain financial self-sufficiency and thereby renegotiate life on her own terms devoid of androcentric interventions.

Conclusion

Michel Foucault in his 1967 lecture "Of Other Spaces" introduces heterotopia as society's intrinsic component in every culture and civilisation as existing real places formed in the very founding of society (3). Contextually, the space inhabited by women in the kitchen, culturally a feminine space of othering may be construed through Foucauldian heterotopic lens. Kitchen is a temporal site where discipline and silent injustice is structurally imposed upon its subjects. Shashi's prevailing alienation in the kitchen and the surrounding tablescape, Ila's unsuccessful endeavours at reinstituting culinary conjugality in the kitchen, and Badru's gastronomic performativity and subsequent assault in the kitchen and on the tablescape constitute their individual heterotopias. Shashi negotiates a newer cosmopolitan neoliberal feminine identity transgressing domestic heterotopiato metamorphose it into a non-place through her travels and travails, not necessarily restricting her identity in binaries (Auge 77-78). Through her new woman identity, she advocates a ''radical reassessment of traditional

womanhood'' (Anwer and Arora 7). An empowered Shashi returns to her heteropatriarchal domiciliary overlooking unconventional intimacies, following an emblematic liberalised *bharatiyanari* [Indian woman] trope (Anwer and Arora 6). Ila advances further by sending across cooked food through her heterotopia to a stranger through an unorthodox flow of ''culinary messages'' via the eponymous lunch boxes (Mannur 36). A platonic epistolary romance with Saajan facilitates Ila's agential self-transformation enabling her to envision a future as a single mother with a renewed identity in Bhutan. However, before transgressing her domiciliary, she unsuccessfully seeks a revolutionary and an intimate alliance of equality with Saajan. Whether she resumes her conventional position in the familial framework or subverts it, remains ambiguous, as the film intentionally denies ''the narrative satisfaction of providing [a] definitive closure to their story'' (Mannur 43). Consequently, Badru and Shamshu's upending of their respective heterotopias, and dismissal of emphasised femininity is revolutionary (Connell 183). As an IPV survivor, Badru, inspired by her mother, avenges herself, and reinstates her confidence, identity, and agency, thereby discarding all heteronormative associations to lead a self-partnered, and suggestively, a financially independent life. Her journey is comprehensive, reflecting trauma, and survival; and her awakening, undeniably the most self-sufficient, self-sustaining, and accomplishing.

Subsequently, all three filmmakers astutely portray disturbing sociopolitical issues through an unconventional employment of feminist lens. However, Reen's *Darlings* stands apart, notwithstanding its trivialisation of violence against men and its endorsement as a [counter] solution for violence against women (Oishee 176). The portrayal of feminine domestic violence is otherwise nuanced, and satirical. All three films represent women in their connotative gastronomic heterotopias echoing Barbara Parker's words, "…we embody our relationships with food and our food practices define who we are. Food speaks to the core of our identities and to our relationships with each other and to the world around us" (''Introduction'' 5). Shashi, Shamshu, and Badru successfully monetise their culinary currency and passion, unlike Ila. The final outcome differs majorly, but some liberal reawakening and reformation is unanimously attained by all the protagonists. Anwer and Arora's words, thereby contextualise the new woman dynamics:

> "The new woman's self-fulfilment rests not just in her taming (as yet incomplete) and in the disavowal of her newness, but rather in the gradual shifts in society that might open up new opportunities and forms of romantic, sexual, emotional, and professional self-actualization are as yet inconceivable in the cinematic universe of the film[s]." ("Introduction" *Bollywood's New Woman* 11-12).

While the other films entertain possibilities, *Darlings* nearly realises this radical potential of envisioning an equitable feminist future for Badrunissa and Shamshunissa. However, it does not depict restorative justice for either of the protagonists, digressing from the quotidian reality of the aftermath of the survivors of IPV.

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