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.

Works Cited and Consulted

Augé, Marc. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Translated by John Howe, Verso, 1995.

Appadurai, Arjun. "Gastro Politics in Hindu South Asia." *American Ethnologist*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1981, pp. 494–511. https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1981.8.3.02a00050.

Anwer, Megha, and Anupama Arora, editors. "Introduction." *Bollywood's New Woman: Liberalization, Liberation, and Contested Bodies*, Rutgers University Press, 2021, pp. 1–26.

Banerjee, Koel, and Jigna Desai. "Mompreneur in the Multiplex: Entrepreneurial Technologies of the 'New Woman' Subject in the Age of Neoliberal Globalization." *Bollywood's New Woman: Liberalization, Liberation, and Contested Bodies*, edited by Megha Anwer and Anupama Arora, Rutgers University Press, 2021, pp. 27–39.

Bhattacharya, Rimli. "The Lunchbox – A Story of Untold Pain and Inspiration for Women." *Feminism in India*, 7 Jan. 2018, https://feminisminindia.com/2018/01/08/lunchbox-story-untold-pain-inspiration/

Bhushan, Neha. "Women Centric Movies in Bollywood: Growing Trend and Popularity." *Indian Journal of Human Relations*, vol. 51, no. 2, Jan. 2017, pp. 105–12. www.indianjournals.com/ijor.aspx?target=ijor:ijhr&volume=51&issue=2&article=012.

Chopin, Kate. "The Story of an Hour" *Owleyes.org*, 2018, https://www.owleyes.org/text/the-story-of-an-hour/read/chopins-short-story.

Choudhury, Rhea. "Lunchbox Movie: Ila's Evolution and Material Interactions." *Feminism in India*, 23 June 2022, https://feminisminindia.com/2022/06/23/the-lunchbox-ilas-evolution-and-material-interactions/.

Ciolfi, Sabrina. "Food and Fasting: Representing the Traditional Role of Women in Hindi Cinema." *A World of Nourishment: Reflections on Food in Indian Culture*, edited by Cinzia Pieruccini and Paola M. Rossi, vol. 3, Ledizioni eBooks, 2016, pp. 293–304. https://doi.org/10.13130/2611-8785/3.

Connell, R. W. *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*. Stanford UP, 1987.

Counihan, Carole M. *Food and Gender*. Routledge, 2013.

Darlings. Directed by Jasmeet K. Reen, performances by Alia Bhatt and Shefali Shah, Red Chillies Entertainment, 2022. *Netflix*, https://www.netflix.com/title/81537953.

Desai, Rahul. "*Darlings* Is Dense and Daring." *Film Companion*, 5 Aug. 2022, www.filmcompanion.in/reviews/streaming-reviews/darlings-movie-review-alia-bhatt-is-dense-and-daring/.

English Vinglish. Directed by Gauri Shinde, performance by Sridevi, Hope Productions/Eros International, 2012. *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jaKvU3A28vY.

Foucault, Michel, and Jay Miskowiec. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1986, pp. 22–27. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/464648.

Ganti, Tejaswini. "Introduction: How the Hindi Film Industry Became 'Bollywood'." *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry*, Duke University Press, 2012, pp. 1–38.

Ghosh, Tanushree. "Reshaping 'Bollywood': Dissident New Media Femininities and Hindi Cinema." *Bollywood's New Woman: Liberalization, Liberation, and Contested Bodies*, edited by Megha Anwer and Anupama Arora, Rutgers University Press, 2021, pp. 191–204. https://doi.org/10.36019/9781978814486-015.

Kumar, Neenu. "Representation of Identity Through Narrativization of Food in *Julie and Julia* (2009) and *The Lunchbox* (2013)." *Litinfinite Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1, July 2022, pp. 71–82. https://doi.org/10.47365/litinfinite.4.1.2022.71-82.

Laskey, Prathim-Maya Dora. "Learning to Love The(ir) World: Using Feminist Spaces and Cosmopolitan Impulses against the Heteropatriarchy in *Queen* and *English Vinglish*." *Bollywood's New Woman: Liberalization, Liberation, and Contested Bodies*, edited by Megha Anwer and Anupama Arora, Rutgers UP, 2021, pp. 146–56.

Mannur, Anita. "Introduction." *Intimate Eating: Racialized Spaces and Radical Futures*, Duke University Press, 2022, pp. 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478022442.

—. "The Tiffin Box and Gendered Mobility." *Intimate Eating: Racialized Spaces and Radical Futures*, Duke University Press, 2022, pp. 23–46. https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478022442.

Oishee, Rohini Zakaria. "Deconstructing Domestic Violence in Bollywood: Feminist Reflections on *Darlings* (2022)." *Crossings: A Journal of English Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2024, pp. 162–81. https://doi.org/10.59817/cjes.v15i1.584.

Parker, Barbara, et al., editors. "Introduction: This Is What Feminist Food Studies Looks Like." *Feminist Food Studies: Intersectional Perspectives*, Women's Press, 2019, pp. 1–12.

Raghunathan, Ranjana, and Spatica Ramanujam. "Dark Comedy in *Darlings* Sheds Light on the Complex Cycle of Abuse." *The Wire*, 29 Oct. 2022, https://livewire.thewire.in/livewire/dark-comedy-in-darlings-sheds-light-on-the-complex-cycle-of-abuse/.

Rahman, Muzna. "Covert Communications: Food in Transition in Ritesh Batra's *The Lunchbox*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 54, no. 4, Nov. 2018, pp. 484–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2018.1484796.

Sen, Mayukh. "Mother Tongue." *Film Comment*, 22 Apr. 2021, www.filmcomment.com/article/mother-tongue-sridevi-english-vinglish/

—. "The Language of Ladoos in *English Vinglish*." *Goya*, 15 Aug. 2018, www.goya.in/blog/the-language-of-ladoos-in-english-vinglish/.

Sengupta, Mihika, and Maithili Ganjoo. "The 'New Woman' in Bollywood: Reconstruction of the Feminine Identity and Its Social Acceptance." *Shodh Sarita*, vol. 8, no. 29, 2021, pp. 21–25.

Srinivas, Tulasi. "'As Mother Made It': The Cosmopolitan Indian Family, 'Authentic' Food and the Construction of Cultural Utopia." *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2006, pp. 191–221. www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/23030195.

The Lunchbox. Directed by Ritesh Batra, performances by Irrfan Khan and Nimrat Kaur, Dharma Productions, 2013. *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioWBFtZHVAw.

— * —