



# Culinary Narratives and Gendered Spaces: Women, Food, and the Cinematic Gaze in Hindi Films

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**Abstract.** On-screen portrayal of women in kitchens or culinary narratives is integrated into Hindi films. They mirror the gendered expectations and power structure of Indian society and sometimes contest them too. Food reflects social power ladder, cultural character, gender roles, and sentimental associations. It's a narrative tool and a symbolic device which draws boundaries for women characters as well as empowers them.

While existing literature explores culinary narratives as gendered sites of oppression or resistance in Indian cinema, it largely focuses on food-centric films like *The Great Indian Kitchen*, *Mrs.*, *Lunchbox*, *Stanley ka Dabba* and *English Vinglish*. These studies emphasize whole narratives rather than isolated culinary scenes, neglecting how fleeting food references serve as microcosms of social hierarchies. Filling this research gap this paper aims to explore the matrix of food, women characters and cinematic gaze in selected scenes in non-food Hindi movies. Using qualitative, scene-based content analysis integrating feminist film theory and semiotic analysis, this study discusses how the preparation, serving and consumption of food become rituals showcasing cultural associations related to femininity, subservience, and legacy transfer of cultural codes. Focussing on incidental culinary moments, it showcases how deeply engrained these practices are in the social framework. Cinematic techniques—including framing, mise-en-scène, and the use of point-of-view shots—construct and challenge the gaze, projecting how culinary practices cement as well as contest social hierarchies. Ultimately, the paper establishes a discourse that contests the so called 'normal' in everyday rituals which has been used as a patriarchal tool to establish and maintain the systemic hierarchies and gendered expectations in the Indian society.

**Keywords:** Hindi cinema, women, food, kitchen, female agency, culinary narratives, gendered identity.

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## 1 Introduction

Cinematic depictions of women in kitchens or food-centric scenarios are foundational to Hindi films, reflecting and sometimes challenging the gendered expectations of Indian society. Food appears persistently as a narrative and visual motif, whether it's a celebration or a mourning, in concern or in negligence, in acceptance or in denial, in its grandness or in its absence. Food often emerges as both a literal and symbolic apparatus—simultaneously marking boundaries and enabling breakthroughs for female characters.

While existing literature explores culinary narratives as gendered sites of oppression or resistance in Indian cinema, it largely focuses on food-centric films like *The Great Indian Kitchen*, *Mrs., Lunchbox*, *Stanley ka Dabba* and *English Vinglish*. (Alex, G. J., & Justin, B. (2023; Madhusudanan, M., 2024; Shalini, Lourdes & .C, Alamelu. 2022; Aleena k. noble, 2021). These studies emphasize whole narratives rather than isolated culinary scenes, neglecting how fleeting food references serve as microcosms of social hierarchies. Filling this research gap this paper aims to explore the matrix of food, women characters and cinematic gaze in selected scenes in non-food Hindi movies.

In examining some selected food scenes from non-food Hindi movies, this study asks: how are food and culinary spaces used to shape, complicate, or subvert women's identities in Hindi cinema? Using selected scenes from different movies rather than focusing on single film narratives, this article shifts the focus to food and culinary practices as recurring motifs across different films and scenes. This allows food itself — rather than the whole film — to become the central analytical category and to trace patterns, contrasts, and resonances across films (e.g., food as commentary on the creation of normativity and nonconformity in *The Royals*, as empowerment and site of discourse in *Laapata Ladies* and *Aap Jaisa Koi*, as a radical gesture of agency and resistance in *Shaandaar*, signifier of identity and Indianness in diaspora films like *Namaste London*, *Namesake* among others). This comparative approach highlights cinema's larger cultural discourse on food, gender, and power, not just the vision of a single filmmaker. By focusing on culinary practices in different cinematic texts rather than one or two food films, the paper situates cinema within larger discourses of material culture and embodied experience, and asks “What does food do in this scene?” rather than asking, “What does this film say?”. This reorients the analysis from narrative outcome to semiotic function: food becomes a language through which cinema encodes power, gender, memory, and identity.

## 2 Methodology

A qualitative, scene-based content analysis integrating feminist film theory and semiotic analysis is employed, with focus on scenes from:

- *Aap Jaisa Koi* (2025)
- Web series *The Royals* (2025)
- *Laapataa Ladies* (2024)

- Rocky aur Rani Ki Prem Kahani (2023)
- Shaandaar (2015)

Food and kitchen space in constructing female character dynamics and enabling transformation; varied kitchen topographies; culinary practices as potent feminine and cultural signifiers and the ignition of discourse; have been the deciding factors in the scene selection. These selected scenes have diverse kitchen settings—ranging from open to enclosed, rural to urban, and mundane to marital—leading to nuanced semiotic dissection of gendered spatial dynamics. All the selected scenes have at their centre so-called normal practices associated with food which are anything but normal and perpetuate or disrupt hierarchies.

This scene-centred, thematic methodology to film studies, shows how food practices traverse genres and narratives to shape the visual culture of gender and power in Hindi cinema. This emphasis on *mise-en-scène* as an indicator of power asymmetries, where food/kitchen encode patriarchal norms or subversive agency also dissects cultural politics which might be overlooked in single-film analyses.

### 3 Discussion and Analysis

#### 3.1 Gendered Food Practices: Women eating last and serving food

Laapataa Ladies is a comedy/drama which addresses women empowerment and societal taboos. This paper is not going to discuss the movie or these issues but study the scenes which have food or culinary space at its heart and serve as sites of negotiation, friendship, enlightenment, and self-discovery. There is a very significant scene where all the four women of Deepak's home are shown together where Jaya has been shown eating food and it seems others have done that. First thing which this shows is women having food after the males of the house. This scene has been recurring in Hindi movies since its inception and is there in a 2024 movie too along with the dining scenes from its contemporary movies Mrs., Rocky aur Rani Ki Prem Kahani, Aap Jaisa Koi, which shows how inseparably this practice is woven into the fabrics of Indian society. Historically, this practice arose in agrarian settings where men were viewed as the primary earners, performing heavy labour that symbolically justified eating first. Over time, this evolved into a marker of respect and family obedience. This clearly shows the patriarchal domestic structure where a woman comes at the end in the power ladder and man's authority and privilege are normalized. This cultural practice of women eating last fosters gendered self-sacrifice, conditioning them to place everyone else's needs first even draining themselves dry. This brings to light how such small, invisible, everyday acts like eating are tools for power display. In Rocky aur Rani Ki Prem Kahani, Rocky's mother's dialogue is the reality of how such practices are transferred from generation to generation stamping them right: "I like serving hot phulkas to my husband. My

mother used to make hot phulkas for my mother. So did my grandma. That's our tradition." The conditioning is such deep and strong that she believes it to be right and justifies this act of servitude. To her statement "there's nothing wrong in serving one's husband," Rani's answer is eye-opener when she says, "But if service is only one way, it isn't service, it's slavery." The narrative shown through the mother's body language and meditative music calls for contemplation and outcries for shared meals as acts of equality, mutual concern and respect positing that abolishing such customs is crucial to support gender parity. The same idea of shared meals is shown again in the aid campaign of Dhanlaxmi laddoos which shows men and women working together in the kitchen with a tagline "Soch nai, swad wahi" (new approach, same taste).

### **3.2 Indifference towards Women's Labour:**

Another important issue raised in this scene is indifference towards women's labour. When Jaya appreciates lotus stem stir-fry made by Deepak's mother, her response "Who goes around praising food?" makes it very obvious that she has never heard anyone praising food as it's taken for granted; it's a duty of a woman to cook and feed the family. What's there to appreciate this for? Same is a scene from the movie *Aap Jaisa Koi* where this indifference is shown more directly and powerfully. The close-up scene showing the minuteness of the culinary skill and the calmness on Kusum's face which is enhanced with her humming is followed by the scene where without a single word of appreciation for the beautiful presentation of the food everything in the plate is ruined by mixing all together. This ruining is symbolic of women's work which is ignored by the society. How a woman's identity is limited to her role of a caregiver is hammered down by Kusum's statement when she says, "If I send you food and medicines thrice a day, Bhanu, then you won't even sense my absence." This indifference to gendered labour in the kitchen is very strongly portrayed in the much-discussed movie *Mrs. 24X7* job confines women to the four walls of this internal space and subdues them.

### **3.3 Disregard for Women's Culinary Tastes:**

Third problem this scene raises is women's choice in food. "Family meals are masculine meals" in that "men's food preferences dominate family food choices" (Sobal, 142). Deepak's mother likes lotus stem stir-fry very much which is visible in her nostalgic expression but now she does not cook her most-loved dish because Deepak and his father don't like that. To this Jaya's statement "Make it for yourself." comes as a shocking surprise in a household where women's identities are subsumed by men's. The mockery with which mother responds, "Now, will the food prepared be of women's choice?" which is joined by her mother-in-law too, unveils how women's identities and likings are often ostracized in patriarchy. As a daughter they are taken care of by their mothers to some extent but after marriage their choices become a mean of mockery like this one. Rocky's mother too like all the Indian women shares the same destiny. She sings brilliantly. Before marriage she used to sing for radio station. And had aspirations but then she got married and as per her family, "getting married is a girl's greatest

dream". And then started the journey of self-abnegation which has no space for her dreams, desires and interests.

Women are so conditioned and the image of perfect wife is so much ingrained in them that putting others first every time, they forget about themselves. Deepak's mother admits this with a sigh which is again shared by her mother-in-law, "The problem is I don't even remember what I used to like." which exposes the women's generational self-effacement.

Women's practice of eating after males, serving food preferentially, and cooking to men's tastes embodies Bourdieu's habitus as a gendered system of lasting habits that normalize patriarchal hierarchies through unconscious, ingrained food practices, rendering inequality as intuitive "common sense". Rocky's and Deepak's mothers' habitus is shaped by observing their families' women's deference to men by feeding them and prioritizing their culinary tastes.

Food, which should give pleasure, satiate taste buds, and be a medium of emotional expression, here, for women, becomes a shackle of duty and responsibility of taking care of family, tied to her feet, which erases her identity, preferences, choices and dreams. Here the belief and acceptance of Rocky's and Deepak's mothers of the patriarchal dictum that a "good wife and mother" exists to serve, not to desire speak loudly of the internalization of this dictum.

The gentle challenges to such patriarchal scripts—Jaya encouraging Deepak's mother to rediscover and act on her own culinary tastes, Rani advocating shared meals and inspiring Rocky's mother to pursue her dream of singing— disrupt this cycle of erasure and work as a powerful but compassionate expression of feminism. Jaya's insistence that Deepak's mother think of her taste and cook for herself too makes food again a mean of pleasure, taste and identity formation, a language of selfhood and confrontation, freeing it from a tool of bondage. This is not a simple act of eating or taste, but a step towards autonomy and agency; asserting that women can be both at the same time- the provider and consumer; can serve as well as desire. It also demonstrates that small actions can be powerful and bring change.

### **3.4 Kitchen as a Site of Resistance:**

In all these scenes kitchen becomes a site of sisterhood where awakening and self-awareness takes place. From generations this place has been a space for women confinement, invisible labour and oppression; but these scenes have shown women turning this space into a sanctuary of empowerment. Rani, Rocky's sister and his mother make bonds, sing, dance, eat as well as contest the gender biases. Rocky's mother who has erased her identity completely after her marriage, uses this space to be herself by singing which she loves. In *Laapataa Ladies* too, all four women laugh together, think of each-others' emotions, share their heart, and talk of sisterhood. In *Phool's* journey of self-awareness too, kitchen plays the role of catalyst. Thus, kitchen being a place for solidarity and discourse, supports gender parity.

Phool finds shelter at a railway tea stall owned by a self-employed older woman, Manju Mai, who got rid of her abusive husband and is now living a life on her own terms. This kitchen is different from the earlier settings as it provides autonomy through

economic independence. Manju Mai, a strong, independent, rebellious but content woman, comes out as a soft breeze, showing the possibility of accomplishment beyond domestic confines. The skill which made Manju Mai economically independent and gave her courage to raise her voice against her exploiters and abusers is her cooking skills. Phool denies to go to her home without her husband as she is a “respectable girl” and was “raised with good values and had a good upbringing” which Manju Mai calls a fraud of the patriarchal society. When Manju Mai says she has been turned into a fool, Phool objects to it and says she knows all the house work which includes cooking too with other homely works like sewing, singing, and praying. Once she says “adjusting to other’s kitchen is the one thing her mother has taught her”, foregrounds the connection between a good house wife and cooking. Like Deepak’s and Rocky’s mother she too has this social script imbibed. All the important questions of gender discrimination and female subjugation are discussed at the tea-stall only while cooking, foregrounding the power of food and culinary skills of women when it’s pulled out of the kitchen’s traditional confinement. These discourses at the tea-stall opens Phool’s eyes and makes her realise her worth. There is a scene after she decides to do some work when she is back home where she is shown in the washroom; a replica of hers being at the same washroom after she got lost. Then she was horrified, helpless and crying. Showing Phool at the same place but with confidence, autonomy and assertion in her body language shows her empowerment.

### 3.5 Masculinity and Culinary Secrecy:

The Royals is a tale of glamour, appetite, and agency. But there is a very crucial scene, where Prince Digvijay reveals his passion for cooking alongside his siblings’ confessions about non-normative sexual identities. Jinny’s lesbian identity, Aviraaj’s revelation of their father’s homosexuality, and Digvijay’s culinary passion are put together in the same frame and given the same intensity and secrecy by Digvijay which offers a rich site for cultural analysis as it interrogates the intersection of gender, labour, identity, masculinity, and taboo in the Indian social context as well as foregrounds how cultural hierarchies shape what counts as a legitimate or transgressive secret.

Masculinity is defined as a sociocultural construct tied to gender roles, social expectations, and power relations. Masculine gender-role norms reinforce the “masculine ideal” which emphasizes toughness, stoicism, self-sufficiency, and dominance (Leaper & Friedman, 2007). Royal masculinity goes one step further displaying leadership, power, military prowess, and control. Societal expectations pressure men to conform to these roles, nourishing traditional gender pyramids and shaping male identity from childhood. Any deviation from such roles invites social criticism and shame for the individual and the family. Prince Digvijay too is tied with these gendered royal expectations. He needs to display royal masculinity. And his passion for cooking does not go with this as cooking has been associated with domesticity, servitude, femininity, lack of physical strength, and indecisiveness which clash with the ideals of sovereign and commanding royal masculinity. The nurturing, caring qualities associated with cooking also don’t go with the hegemonic principles of royal masculinity rooted in authority, autonomy and domination. Additionally, self-cooking in royals is seen below status,

dignity and questions masculinity. It's perceived as a lowly duty as servants or professional male chefs are hired for that (The masculine art of cooking). Therefore, Digvijay keeps his passion for cooking a secret. There are scenes where he thinks people came to know about this and the tension and fear on his face, highlighted through close-ups, speak of a prince caught up in these cultural scripts of royal masculinity. Secrecy of Digvijay's cooking passion also hammers down how disgraceful, degrading, demeaning and demasculinizing male domesticity can be, and public revelation of this forfeits "patriarchal dividend", risking emasculation. Raewyn Connell (2005, *Masculinities*, p. 79) defines patriarchal dividend as: "The advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women." It refers to the unearned structural advantages—authority, resources, respect, and power.

In a royal, patriarchal family, homosexuality has always been a closed closet phenomenon which should remained closed as its coming out would ruin not only individual's reputation but the family's too. Homosexuality implies a sense of secrecy, stigma, shame, and concealment due to fear of judgement, rejection or repercussions. Putting Digvijay's secret—his culinary passion—in the same frame with equal intensity and seriousness, suggests that the revelation of his culinary passion will rupture the family name equally as the disclosure of non-normative sexual orientations of his family members. It also highlights that in cultural systems ideologies of gender and power determine meaning not the inherent morality. Also, this equation unmasks the politics of taboo; anything which does not fit into the straight jacket of normalcy designed by patriarchy is excluded and considered a threat to the social order. Be it homosexuality or cooking by royals, in this case, is treated intimidating as they both don't align with patriarchy and hierarchal power structures.

This parallel construction brings to light how personal pleasures, whether of food or sexuality, are equally silenced under patriarchal structures that demand conformity to rigid roles. It also underscores how practices like cooking cannot be separated from notions of identity and power.

But at the end Digvijay's revealing his real identity at the gastronomic show shows his coming out of the closet; his freeing himself from the shackles of cultural codes. His moving towards "healthy masculinity" which is defined as, "being honest with oneself about your own feelings, needs and desires. It also means treating all others with the kindness and respect that you deserve" ("What is Healthy, Respectful Masculinity?") which is contrary to dominance or rigid gender roles which is suffocating for both the genders. His disclosure of his culinary passion calls for a haven for plural, non-normative forms of gender expression and labour which is essential for an integrating society. Undermining age-old sociocultural constructs, this scene demands for a more inclusive, less shame-driven understanding of selfhood and family legacy.

### **3.6 Food: Agentive Apparatus of Emancipation**

Shaandaar is a romantic comedy which with its sub-plot of Esha and Robin questions the absurdities of Indian arranged marriages. But this paper is going to discuss its climax wedding scene. When Esha reaches the mandap and sits for pheras her dress gets torn. To her shock, the bridegroom starts laughing who has been mocking at her body

weight and eating habits. Esha's mockery, here, shows her lacking "bodily capital", a term coined by Bourdieu. A slim female body is considered capital especially in the marriage 'field'- spaces where appearances are valued more as per Bourdieu.

Esha's facial expression shifts from humiliation to affirmation. She undresses herself and stands there in her corset and eats a laddoo rejecting not only the marriage but also the shaming attached to her appetite and body. The public nature of this wedding scene makes it more powerful. All the earlier scenes discussed were either set in domestic space- kitchen or the interiors of the house- or if outside house as in the case of Phool and Manju Mai at a railway station, they were private in nature as the discourse was limited to the two women only. No public response or participation or spectatorship was involved.

Analysed using feminist film studies, this scene contests the male gaze in the form of the groom's mockery and the body shaming culture- both reducing women to mere aesthetic commodities for male pleasure.

Esha who is fond of sweets has been shown constantly curbing this desire of hers to fit in the tight bridal dress, an emblem of patriarchal restraint and societal scrutiny of the female body. But she fondly eats laddoo at her own wedding and relishes it. The laddoo is a food which reminds one of festivity, auspiciousness and celebration, and is connected with indulgence and taste. Esha's act of eating laddoo, here, in a response to the mockery aimed at her body and that too by her own going-to-be husband converts laddoo into a sign of retrieving pleasure and bodily autonomy. Thus, food, once a means of ridicule and humiliation, transforms into an instrument for empowerment. conceptualize appetite and food choice (or food refusal) as "an important voice in the identity of a woman" (Brumberg, 168 1988). Esha's eating laddoo reminds of grandmother's desire for "unexpected inappropriate" food (Hariharan 2004, p. 58) from Githa Hariharan's "The Remains of the Feast". "This realignment can best be described as a silent protest against the pedagogy of distaste that she has been schooled into." (Malhotra, S., et.al. 2020)

Esha's act of putting off the bridal outfit and eating laddoo not only disrupts the cinematic script of the submissive, docile bride who matches the patriarchal expectations of beauty, obedience, discipline, and bodily control but becomes a radical gesture of agency, self-acceptance and resistance also.

The public rebelliousness of the bride not only discards groom's ridicule but sets an example for the other girls too present there not to erase their individuality. Robin's laughter, which brought humiliation for Esha and her loved ones in the beginning, became a sign of supremacy and scorn, which soon turns meaningless by Esha's bold denial to be shamed through her act of eating. Woman's body which has been a site of oppression, violence, and subjugation has been redefined as a sanctuary of autonomy, control, strength and subversion.

Culturally, Indian weddings are public display of its social and cultural codes including beauty, honour, status, and gender roles among others. Food plays a big role into almost all these cultural codes: lavish food being a marker of high status and honour, men eating and drinking openly without resisting gluttony of devouring delicacies while women eating in a controlled way showcasing gender roles. Bride and groom too

play their gendered roles which includes bride's being slim, attractive, ornamented and controlled reinforcing broader patriarchal ideals. This scene is a counter-narrative to established cultural scripts of Indian society as it challenges the deep-rooted narrow cultural norms of beauty by placing a fat female body along with its appetite at the centre with acceptance and assertion not ridicule, questions the institution of marriage where money and family reputation not love is the determining factor by bride cancelling it and the gendered power dynamics by giving voice, agency and choice (in food/appetite) to the bride who publicly stands for herself.

Eating is often perceived as a private act for women in Indian society and sometimes even censored in the form of fasting to preserve feminine modesty (cementing this point with the fact that there is almost no fast for men, especially in Hindu society). Carole Counihan too connects fasting with idealism in women. She says, "Fasting becomes a dominant image of the 'ideal' woman... synonymous with abstinence," contrasting masculine feasting as indulgent authority (*The Anthropology of Food and Body*, 1999, p.155). Esha's public eating is, here, showcased as a display of rebelliousness.

The scene is remarkable as it conceptualizes appetite and food choice as "an important voice in the identity of a woman" (Brumberg, 1988, p.168). By making her appetite (by eating laddoo) and body (by stripping her into her corset) visible and unshamed, the protagonist re-centres the narrative from shame and ridicule to acceptance and empowerment—turning the wedding ritual from a site of humiliation into an act of feminist rebellion and cultural disruption.

### 3.7 The Transformative Role of Discourse

One important aspect which all these scenes bring forward is the importance of discourse. In *Rocky aur Rani ki Prem Kahani*, cinematic language shows that Rocky's mother contemplates on this cultural script of "good wife" and in the end takes radical step for fulfilling her dream of singing. Her daughter raises her voice against body shaming, asserts her consent and choice in marriage and decides to do job for economic independence and for her identity. In *Laapataa Ladies*, Jaya's feminist consciousness sparks a rethinking in the older woman, which is visible in her dialogue when she asks her mother-in-law if they can be friends. Phool after having dialogues with Manju Mai gets enlightenment and decides not to lose her identity and become economically independent. Shaandaar too initiates a series of vent outs and confessions after Esha's confrontation which includes one man throwing his wig and accepting his baldness among others. Kusum's stand-off makes Sree realise his mistake, how his rigid masculinity destroys equality and discriminates between him and Madhu and thus make him understand Madhu's stand.

## 4 Conclusion

Based on the study of these selected scenes bringing to light the complex interplay of food, gender, and cinematic display, it can be concluded that Hindi cinema both reflects and forms changing social realities. Older paradigms depict the kitchen as a site of duty

and limitation; newer ones make food a voice. Small, mundane acts like cooking, eating are cultural codes and naturalise patriarchal domination. Public ceremonies like weddings featuring food can be sites of regulation of cultural norms as well as public display of confrontation; turning individuality into solidarity, private into public sphere. Framing dull domestic acts Hindi cinema is brewing discourse on gendered labour, thus, contributing to gender parity and women empowerment.

This scene-level feminist semiotic analysis of incidental culinary depictions within mainstream Bollywood films contributes to film and gender studies. By investigating non-thematic mise-en-scene through Mulvey's cinematic gaze, Bourdieu's habitus, and Connell's patriarchal dividend, this study reveals persistent patriarchal semiotics—temporal hierarchies, spatial enclosures, and bodily capital deficits. This mise-en-scene approach, revealing how fleeting culinary moments of commercial cinema normalise power structures in patriarchy, shifts the attention from art to mass cinema for intersectional culinary discourse analysis.

This study is limited in its focus on select scenes from contemporary Bollywood films (2015–2025), leaving earlier cinematic periods or regional Indian cinema unexplored. Comparative studies across periods and regions would bring to light habitus variations or uniformity.

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