



# Carceral Kitchen, Culinary Labour and Cumulative Trauma: A Reading of Arati Kadav's *Mrs.*

Pandit, Mansea<sup>1\*</sup>, Tiwari, Anoop Kumar<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, NIT Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India  
Email: panditmansi01@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, NIT Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India  
Email: aktiwari.eng@nitr.ac.in

**Abstract.** Within the tapestry of Indian culture, the domestic space of the kitchen has always been viewed as an area of caregiving and nourishment. While early Indian cinema has largely showcased this view, offering a counter-narrative is the 2024 Hindi film *Mrs.* by Arati Kadav. It dismantles the romanticised notion linked with food and cooking while reimagining it as a site of psychological violence and trauma. The film follows the story of Richa, whose marriage to Diwakar forces her into the stifling environment of the domestic kitchen. The endless cycles of culinary labour gradually make her lose self-worth and erase her identity, leading to physical exhaustion and psychological wounding. The paper thus reimagines the domestic kitchen which is culturally associated with care and nourishment, as restrictive space that causes gradual psychological violence and trauma. It construes how domestic culinary labour can become a source of profound psychological distress. The study tries to examine how relentless and unacknowledged culinary labour can manifest into cumulative trauma, which is a form of psychological injury arising from everyday stressors. Drawing upon Trauma Theory and Affect Theory, the paper attempts a close reading of the film's visual and aural landscape in order to chart the protagonist's gradual psychological deterioration. It further interprets the film's climax of throwing filthy kitchen water as a moment of cathartic rupture and reclamation of self. The study thus offers a critical perspective within the scholarship of Food Studies by analysing domestic kitchens as confining and restrictive spaces that can cause psychological harm. It also questions the romantic notions attributed to culinary work and highlights how it can cause deep emotional and gendered trauma, calling for greater attention to the emotional realities of women's domestic lives.

**Keywords:** Culinary Labour, Cumulative Trauma, Food Studies, Affect Theory, Domestic Space, Gendered Violence, Psychological Suffering

## 1 Introduction

The domestic kitchen has always been understood as a sanctified space of caregiving and nourishment within the cultural tapestry of India, and Indian housewives are often associated with Annapurna, the Hindu Goddess of food and feeding. This view is also mirrored in cinematic representations of Indian households, where the kitchen is portrayed as a space of care and nourishment. Here, women carefully prepare food for their family as a way to express their love while continuing their family's traditions. Though this view is pervasive within Indian society and traditional Indian cinema, this idea upholds patriarchal dominance and overlooks the physical and emotional exhaustion that accompanies it. *Mrs.* (2024), based on the movie *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), challenges and questions this idyllic vision. It reframes the domestic kitchen as a site of oppression and relentless labour, which severs individuals from their identity, thus transforming it from a site of nourishment into a carceral environment.

The recent conversation in the Indian cinema attempts to critique the façade of traditional domesticity. Films like *Thappad* (2020) shatter the idea of an ideal woman who endures violence from her partner in the name of love and showcase how a single act of violence could shatter the illusion of respectful companionship. *English Vinglish* (2012) traces the story of a middle-class Indian housewife, Shashi, whose exceptional skills at being a homemaker and a cook are viewed as “normal”, while her inability to speak English is seen as a “defect”. It exposes how a woman's labour remains unacknowledged and undervalued. *The Great Indian Kitchen* which was originally released in Malayalam in 2021, was remade into Tamil in 2023. It tells the tale of a newly married woman whose life gets consumed by the endless cycle of cooking, cleaning, and serving. These everyday rituals turn into servitude while her in-laws and husband remain indifferent toward her. *Mrs.* builds on this foundation, exposing the patriarchal hypocrisy while also turning attention towards the psychological effects such as relentless, unacknowledged labour. Although, domestic spaces have been studied through feminist lens, critiquing these as sites of gendered violence in research concerning Indian cinema, literature that approaches them through a psychological or affective framework is scant. Moreover, most analyses focus on external, visible patriarchal and social structures, often overlooking the invisible, internal suffering that women go through.

This paper analysing *Mrs.* (2024), attempts to reimagine the domestic kitchen which is often culturally associated with care and nourishment, as restrictive space that causes gradual psychological violence and trauma. It seeks to examine how relentless and unacknowledged culinary labour can manifest into cumulative trauma, a form of psychological injury arising from everyday stressors. Drawing upon Trauma Theory and Affect Theory, the study attempts a close reading of the film's visual and aural landscape to chart the protagonist's gradual psychological deterioration. It further interprets the film's climax of throwing filthy kitchen water as a moment of cathartic rupture and reclamation of self. Ultimately, the study offers a critical perspective and insights within the scholarship of Food Studies by examining how culinary labour can give rise to gendered trauma, calling for greater attention to the lived realities of Indian women.

The film powerfully taps into the socio-cultural conflict of Indian society, where women's independence and social ambitions exist in tension with the deeply entrenched societal expectations of her role as a homemaker and caregiver. Empirical surveys reveal domestic responsibilities and care labour exclude more than half of Indian women from the workforce (International Labour Organization), this gender disparity is further exposed by data from the National Statistical Office, which shows that women aged between 15 and 59 years devote an average of 305 minutes per day to unpaid domestic services in contrast to men who spend 86 minutes (National Statistical Office).

Directed by Arati Kadav, *Mrs.* stars Sanya Malhotra in the lead role as Richa. It traces the story of a flamboyant dancer who enters into an arranged marriage with Gynaecologist Diwakar. Their marriage begins with a lot of hope and anticipation but gradually goes on to reveal a rigid patriarchal hierarchy, within which she is forced to conform to the ascendancy of her husband and her father-in-law. This domestic setup increasingly binds her to relentless culinary labour and endless cycles of cooking, cleaning and doing the dishes. The plot takes a contrasting turn where she reaches a breaking point and reacts against her oppression. The film concludes by Richa reclaiming her identity as a dancer and breaking free from Diwakar's toxic household. However, the closing scene of Diwakar remarrying another girl offers a chilling reminder of the continuity of patriarchal oppression and control.

## 2 Understanding Trauma and Affective Structures

At the turn of the 20th century, the works of Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud began the modern discourse on trauma. Initially, he interpreted trauma as stemming from repressed childhood desires, which are often sexual in nature. However, after encountering World War I soldiers afflicted with shell shock, he observed that these men were haunted by their experiences in the war, often reliving their unwanted memories through dreams. This observation contradicted his earlier work on “pleasure principle”, leading him to define trauma as a fundamental disruption in a person’s psyche. In his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud defines trauma as a “sudden influx of excessive stimulation that overwhelms the mind” (29). He describes it as a “breach in the protective barrier,” that floods his psychic apparatus leaving him in a state of profound helplessness (29). The core, therefore, of Freud’s understanding of trauma is shock – a singular event, of overwhelming magnitude that leaves an indelible mark on an individual’s psyche.

Building on Freud’s foundation, Caruth explained trauma as an “unclaimed experience” (11). Due to its overwhelming nature, it was never fully “owned” or claimed by the person as a part of their life (11). This makes trauma a haunting re-experience or, as she puts it, “a wound that cries out” (4). But like Freud’s understanding, Caruth’s theory was limited in its understanding of trauma as a single catastrophic or life-threatening event that has been repressed for long and often returns to haunt.

During the 1960’s psychologist Masud Khan introduced a revolutionary angle in understanding trauma. He asked what if trauma isn’t always a single, violent event but could also be a result of a slow “strain”? Khan coined the term “cumulative trauma” and borrowing Freud’s metaphor argued that the “protective shield” could also erode over time, instead of a single blow (290). He defines trauma as “breaches in the protective shield... over a period of time” (290-291). Though his theory focuses on the mother-child relationship, explaining how repeated minor failures of empathy on the mother’s part during a person’s childhood can manifest as trauma, the understanding of trauma as a death by a thousand cuts could be applicable universally.

Maria Root later expanded on this concept by explaining “insidious trauma” which arises due to living under continuous oppression (240). Root explains how daily microaggressions, stereotyping or invalidation could be harmful to one’s psychological wellbeing and as powerfully damaging as a single catastrophic event. According to her, this “trauma is cumulative and continues to be threatening” (241).

Similarly, psychiatrist Judith Herman’s work on Complex PTSD (C-PTSD) is helpful in understanding how prolonged entrapping situations such as domestic abuse could result in disintegration of one’s identity and psychology leading them to feel that their “inner world is a scene of utter devastation” (52). Therefore, this study attempts to highlight how repetitive, unacknowledged and insidious culinary labour done by Richa everyday gradually manifests into cumulative trauma.

Affect theory is a framework to understand the body’s unconscious, visceral reactions to external stimuli. It is a raw bodily experience that comes before a named emotion. During the 17th century philosopher Baruch Spinoza laid the concept of affectus to explain how the body has capacity to “affect and be affected”, that is to have an affect on the world and be affected by it (Spinoza).

Though in psychology, the concept of affect was introduced only during the 20th century by psychologist Silvan Tomkins in his four-volume work *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (1962–1992). He posits that human life is driven by innate biological affects controlling our emotions and social life. He did not agree with Freud’s explanation of unconscious drives like sex (Eros) and aggression (Thanatos) as the primary motivators of human behaviour. Instead, he identified nine fundamental affects, including both positive and negative. Positive affects include interest, excitement and enjoyment–joy while negative affects include fear–terror, distress–anguish, anger–rage, shame–humiliation, disgust and surprise–startle. These affects are not learned but pre-wired into the human brain and are automatically triggered in response to external stimuli and internal state.

Further, Canadian Philosopher Brian Massumi in his work *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (2002), draws a crucial distinction between “Affect” and “Emotion”. He defines affect as a pre-conscious, bodily sensation that precedes cognitive recognition. It is felt by the body before the mind could fathom it. By contrast, emotion is a conscious, qualified feeling that could be interpreted and defined by the mind (Masumi 28).

While Massumi focuses on bodily sensations, Sara Ahmed, a feminist and postcolonial theorist, shifts the focus of affect theory towards social and political critique. In her works, such as *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* introduces an intersectional lens into the Affect Theory, making it feminist and ethical. Ahmed introduces the concept of “Sticky” Affects (Ahmed 119). According to this, emotions are not free floating, rather they attach or associate themselves with certain objects or words as a result of repeated associations, leading to “stickiness” (Ahmed 119). It is due to this that emotions either get people closer or pull them apart. This showcases how emotions are not just personal but socially and politically charged attachments that carry ideologies. From a feminist perspective, Ahmed explains how such associations are employed as a tool of patriarchal control. For example, by associating women with traits like sensitivity and irrationality, patriarchal structures justify their dominance.

This study argues that *Mrs.*, through the employment of various sensory tools, makes the audience feel a non-specific intensity of irritation, confinement and dread that Richa goes through. Sara Ahmed’s concept of sticky affects is used as a primary analytical tool to argue how objects such as the leaky pipe, perpetually overflowing bin, and the clogged sink become “sticky” with the affects of distress, unease and disgust (Ahmed 119).

Arati Kadav's *Mrs.* focuses on atmospheric violence to portray how the kitchen turns into a hostile environment and mundane tasks such as cooking and cleaning manifest into profound psychological trauma. This message that the film extrudes is not through dramatic plot points but through meticulously constructed sensory ambience. This analysis employs dual lens of Trauma Theory and Affect Theory, delving to film's formal and aesthetic strategies to demonstrate how the kitchen transforms from a space of love and care to that of trauma and psychological suffering. The film transmits the protagonist Richa's cumulative trauma to the audience by making her suffering a tangible experience through a specific visual language of confinement, associating mundane objects with negative affect, an oppressive aural landscape leading to a final cathartic rupture that breaks the atmospheric spell.

### 3 Kitchen as a Carceral Space

Psychoanalyst Masud Khan's notion of cumulative trauma which arises due to repeated "breaches in the protective shield" of an individual's psyche (290), resonates powerfully within *Mrs.* In the film, the domestic kitchen becomes a site where Richa's psychological defenses are dismantled due to slow and systemic erosion of her identity as a dancer. The baseline of freedom vs entrapment is established clearly in the opening sequence. Richa is seen dancing in a vibrant red and yellow suit, with her hair flowing freely as she moves against the backdrop swing propelling upward into the air symbolising her unstrained selfhood, autonomy and aspirations. Her movements are a blend of classical grace and carefree contemporary freedom, showcasing her free spirit. Parallel to this, the film juxtaposes shots of food being cooked in the kitchen, for the suitor's family who is visiting to see Richa foreshadowing the domestic confinement which awaits her. These shots set a tragic benchmark against which her gradual confinement is measured. Movement forms the core of her identity as a dancer, but this very quality is systematically restricted as she enters the domestic sphere. This psychic and corporeal erosion is masterfully captured by contrasting Richa's former and present life. Flashbacks of her pre-marital life, in which she cherishes her identity as a dancer are characterized by fluid camera movements and open spaces, creating an affective register of freedom. In contrast, the camera language inverts as she gets married and is forced into confinement in the kitchen.

The kitchen mirrors what Michel Foucault calls a disciplinary space. According to him, institutions such as prisons, schools, and barracks create “docile bodies” (Foucault 136). These bodies are controlled through time, space and gesture. In the movie, the kitchen functions in a similar fashion. The implicit gaze of her husband and father-in-law carries the cultural expectations associated with a housewife, acting as a powerful mode of surveillance. Their very gaze disciplines her body into performing the correct, efficient motions as per the societal expectations.

Richa’s new bounded reality is signalled by a shot of balloons from her wedding reception which are pressed immobile against the kitchen ceiling, instead of floating freely in the air. This shot serves as a visual metaphor for Richa’s identity and freedom, which will be permanently curtailed within the bounded domains of the kitchen. The wedding gifts she receives further solidify predetermined future. She receives a casserole, food processor, and similar cooking devices that give out a clear and immediate message, that her role as a cook is predestined in the kitchen.

The cinematography is the primary tool employed to reinforce this entrapment. Initially shots of the film employ fluid and dynamic camera movement, which becomes increasingly static as the film progresses. The expansive camera motion of the opening dance sequence is replaced by a predominantly static and restrictive frame, mirroring the stagnant, repetitive nature of her new life. Richa is consistently framed through restrictive apertures like doors, and windows of the kitchen which symbolise visual bars. Richa longingly gazes outside the window as she tries to relive her identity as an independent dancer by watching her old videos.

The film employs close-ups and half-body shots within the kitchen; this visual language denies her a complete, agentive presence in the frame. Her physical transformation also marks her psychological decline, her vibrant attire in the beginning of the film slowly fades into muted, drab colours. Her hair, which she once wore open, turns into a functional bun signifying her loss of self. This is not merely an aesthetic choice, it showcases how spirit was systematically muted, and her vibrant personality was disciplined into a functional role to serve the patriarchs of the family. This erasure was symbolised in a haunting shot where her image becomes blurred due the steam rising from a pressure cooker, this highlights how her very identity dissipates into the burdening atmosphere of her kitchen.

A direct attack on Richa's identity and art occurs when her husband instructs her to delete her dance videos from social media. This act could be interpreted as a form of psychological violence, an effort to amputate the part of her that exists beyond the confined domains of the kitchen, of her role as his wife. Richa's trauma becomes so internalized that she herself participates in her identity erasure by blocking her dancer friend, thus cutting herself off from all ties to her former life. Notably, All of these acts take place within the domain of the kitchen, transforming it from a site of care and nourishment to that of surveillance and subjugation. Hence, kitchen in *Mrs.* is not just a room, but an ideological space where Richa is enforced with societal expectations and her individual independent self is forced to fade away.

#### 4 Culinary Labour as a Traumatic Mechanism

The analysis of the environment of the domestic kitchen reveals how oppression takes place. However, it also becomes necessary to identify the specific mechanism through which trauma is administered. In *Mrs.*, trauma is not generated through Richa's presence in the kitchen, but through the process of labour she performs there. The film meticulously charts repetitive, physically demanding, and psychologically draining tasks that constitute Richa's day. It frames cooking not as a series of creative, loving acts but as relentless, devalued labour.

The trauma doesn't arise from a single tragic event but is embedded within the Sisyphean nature of the work itself. Her culinary labour denies her the sense of accomplishment or purpose, which is fundamental to the human nature of existence and well-being. A cleaned kitchen becomes dirty again, the stomach of people she has to feed gets empty again, the dishes get dirty again. Her labour is trapped in an endless present, with no past to build upon or no future to look forward to. This psychological trap is temporal in nature and its confinement is as powerful as the kitchen's physical walls. This labour is captured through meticulous cinematography, there are several shots throughout the film that capture close-ups of Richa's hands, cooking, chopping, kneading, doing dishes. These shots deny her complete individuality, turning her into just a working pair of mechanical hands. Richa articulates the futility and endless nature of her cooking chores: "My work here never ends" (Kadav).

Furthermore, every meal becomes a performance for Richa, fraught with anxiety and a fear of potential failure in meeting the patriarchal expectations of her father-in-law and husband. Hence, the very nature of cooking shifts from a creative, nourishing tasks to one of servitude. Her cooking doesn't let her express herself; there are various instances in the movie where she tries to do so but is systematically restricted. Once she tries to make breakfast the way she had at home, but her father-in-law is quick to show his displeasure and labels the dish as too sweet. In another instance, she attempts to use a food processor to make her tasks easier, but again her in-laws quickly tell her how these

modern appliances can't compete with traditional methods of cooking. Her father-in-law is often seen dictating methods of her labour; he rejects chutney prepared in a mixer grinder in favour of traditional silbatta (grinding stone).

It is not merely a tradition but an imposition of more arduous labour, leaving Richa's eyes burning from grinding chilies. Similarly, she is expected to perform on-demand services such as serving freshly made rotis, which frequently results in burnt fingers. These physical wounds mirror her psychological injuries. Her hands, which were once a medium to express her art, are reduced to instruments of relentless mechanical labour. Through the daily culinary labour that she performs in the kitchen, it turns into a space of psychological and physical confinement. Kadav films her husband and father-in-law consuming elaborate meals prepared by her without any sense of gratitude, often finding flaws in the way she cooks or the meals she prepares. This very act emerges as the most cruel aspect of her labour, which is not viewed as a contribution but as an obligatory duty that she is born to perform.

Every unappreciated dish and each leftover meal reveal the profound invisibility of her work, transforming into a form of psychological invalidation. Such moments manifest as symbolic cuts, a microaggression that reinforces the growing sense of identity erasure. It makes her believe that her time, efforts, work, and by extension, she herself, do not matter. This poignantly depicts how Richa's worth is tied to her function. Kadav captures how relentless culinary labour fraught with performance anxiety manifests as cumulative trauma as it becomes a part of her daily existence.

## 5 Affective Texture and Sensory Violence

The sensory atmosphere of the kitchen is employed to convey the affective texture of Richa's cumulative trauma. Sara Ahmed's concept of "sticky objects" (119) can be applied in order to understand how everyday mundane objects become charged with the psychological weight of repeated wounds. The film depicts various forms of sensory assault that Richa goes through. These assaults, auditory, olfactory, and tactile, compound to turn the very atmosphere of the kitchen into an antagonist.

The leaky pipe below the kitchen counter is the primary auditory stressor employed by the film. When Richa enters the Kumar household kitchen, it begins as a minor inconvenience which she initially tries to overlook and fix herself, but as the film progresses, it turns into an incessant, irritating drip which she requires help to fix. The sound of drip grows more prominent as the time passes and perhaps becomes the sonic manifestation of her deteriorating psyche and increasing trauma. The fact that complaints about the leaky pipe, throughout the film, are conveniently ignored by the men highlighting how ignorant they are towards her physical and mental burden. Richa, as a gesture of refined futility places a small bucket to contain the water, later replacing it with a bigger one. This very act becomes a visual metaphor for her assault and trauma, which is not

being fixed, but is only increasing and being managed on a larger level with each passing day.

The piling of garbage under the sink again highlights the putrefaction of her identity and dreams, rendering the kitchen “sticky” with the affects of decay and futility (Ahmed 119). The perpetually choked sink further emerges as a site of abject horror. In one scene, Richa is forced to unclog it with her bare hands. The trauma she undergoes while doing that is both visceral and somatic. This leads her to smell her hands almost compulsively with self-disgust and wash them obsessively over and over. This scene highlights a moment of profound psychological deterioration where she starts feeling revulsion towards her own body. Adding to this toxicity, her husband, who initially used to romanticise her culinary labour with words like, “You smell like the kitchen and it’s the sexiest smell in the world” (Kadav 33:52), later weaponises the same sensory detail against her, saying, “Have you seen your face lately? You stink of the kitchen” (Kadav 01:19:48). This humiliation through verbal assault highlights how culinary labour is only valued in society until it remains aestheticized and invisible.

## 6 Conclusion

*Mrs.* provides a critical intervention into the culturally celebrated and idealised representation of Indian women and their culinary labour. It dismantles the socially cherished idea of the kitchen as a site of care by reconstructing it as a space of deep psychological degradation. This paper depicts how the film highlights cumulative trauma through its oppressive sensory architecture. By employing a dual framework of Trauma and Affect theory, the analysis demonstrates how through the visual and aural landscape of the film transforms the abstract concept of trauma into a visceral somatic experience. The kitchen transforms into a carceral space, stripping an individual off of their identity. The climax of the film reveals how Richa’s rupture was not only an act of rebellion but an active reclamation of a selfhood, which disrupts the cycle of normalised oppression. The contribution of this study is two-fold: first, it adds a critical perspective within the scholarship of Food Studies by deconstructing the romanticised notions linked with food and cooking. Second, it calls for a critical re-evaluation of domestic labour and highlights the lived experiences of countless Indian women. In doing so, the paper underscores the urgent need to recognise domestic kitchens as emotionally charged sites of gendered power and trauma.

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