

Literariness Journal

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly
Journal of Literature and Cultural
Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614
E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

Vol. 1, Issue. 3 June 2026

© 2026 by the author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



A Literariness.org Project

Stirring the Pot: Exploring the Intersection of Food, Space and Gender in Neeraj Ghaywan's *Juice*

ALPANA

Assistant Professor in English
Government College, Jatauli Haily
Mandi, Gurugram, Haryana

Abstract: Traditionally, the task of food preparation has been predominantly allocated to female household members. The kitchen becomes a distinct site of a variety of cuisines, methods, and meanings. However, it also emerges as a symbol of oppression and empowerment, cultural memory and nostalgia, confinement and innovation, a cultural narrative and therefore, a means of transmission as well. That's how the kitchen becomes a contesting space witnessing the constant making and remaking of gendered identities. In *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, Pramod K. Nayar rightly underlines the role of capitalism and patriarchy in demanding certain gender roles from women in public as well as private space. (Nayar 131) This paper puts in perspective the connection among food, space and gender being intricately intertwined in an award-winning Hindi short film, Neeraj Ghaywan's *Juice* (2017). The proposed study relates to Edward Soja's concept of "thirdspace" by looking at the domestic space, in this case, a kitchen, problematizing the conventional gendered roles by creating a counter-discourse. I intend to look at how a possibility of renegotiation and reformation in terms of space and the resultant identity emerges towards the end of the short film. The paper also explores how a film surfaces as a potent vehicle of representation constructed through the strategic deployment of camera, lighting, a peculiar arrangement of props, and other similar techniques involved in filmmaking. My paper attempts to analyze gender politics and its representation in films in order to understand the positioning of such a film in the broader spectrum of OTT-enabled viewership and/or consumption.

Keywords: *Domesticity, Space, Food, Gendered Identity, Patriarchy, Hindi Short Film*

Neeraj Ghaywan's *Juice* begins with Manju (Shefali Shah) clearing the leftover bones from the drawing table while the men can be seen indulging in sexist conversations drawing indecent parallel between an email and a female. Manju's nonchalance and men's utter ignorance of females laboring to provide continuous food and drinks are highlighted by Ghaywan in a sepia-tinged frame. The representation of the polarity between gendered roles of men in the airy drawing room and women in the sweltering kitchen is hard-hitting. Manju along with all other female guests are cramped up in the kitchen to prepare food while they sweat and toil for a get-together not targeted for their ease and comfort. Nevertheless, Manju is persistently striving to make the evening special while she experiences burns on her fingers, gasps for breathing space, retaliates to misogynist societal expectations and yet, largely remains a silent observer of the patriarchal mode of everyday functioning. However, her endurance explodes amidst her husband's blaring calls for chicken gravy, keeping kids off the drawing room and laying the plates for dinner. She drags a chair along with a glass of juice to the drawing room, the men's territory, and rightfully claims her place in front of the air cooler, the air all the women have been denied. The entire film echoes with the politics of space and how women remain distanced from the spaces of ease and comfort, like the drawing room in the given case. The film ends with her face full of angst confronting the gendered roles thrust upon women, pointing towards a re-negotiation of space and identity.

This paper aims to explore the link between food, space and gender by analyzing an award winning Hindi short film highlighting the emergent offshoots of the politics of gender identity, food and spatiality. This particular short film stands out because of its subtle representation of gender politics in daily life. The attempt is to study close relation between food, space and gender in order to delineate the continuous transformation one experiences in everyday life. The space being at the focus of this paper is the domestic space of an Indian middle-class family, where Manju, the protagonist, finds her ways to redefine the connotations of home, food and the gendered roles in her household. The paper uses the theory of materialist feminism to some extent in order to unspool the characterization of the protagonist of the short film along with Edward Soja's concept of thirdspace. Soja's concept helps in understanding the nuances of identity politics being in a constant state of performance as well as remodelling in the space called home. The paper also aims to grasp the perpetual tension among the many layers of one's identity in a private space, contributing to the shift from being imperceptible to being strikingly perceptible.

Pramod K. Nayar explains the theory of materialist feminism in his comprehensive work called *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. The theory of materialist feminism helps in decoding the semantically dense nature of gendered roles women in the given short film perform without fail. Anita Mannur's *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian*

Diasporic Culture helps in understanding the intrinsic link existing among food, space and gender equations by examining the intricacies involved in shaping one's gendered identity and the role that food plays in fashioning it. The title of the short film emanates a certain taste and mood, hence, indicating towards the encompassing power food possesses. Edward W. Soja talks about the concept of thirdspace, a flexible term indicating fluidity of space in his epochal work called *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Soja's work which helps in understanding the concept of space and spatiality in the context of gendered spaces as evident in the life of Manju of *Juice*. Besides these two works, an essay by Elizabeth Jackson's essay titled "Gender and Space in Postcolonial Fiction- South Asian novelists re-imagining women's spatial boundaries" has been referred to as it presents a clear picture of how the centre and the margin in a structure deeply rooted in gendered identities functions. Her essay helps in comprehending the complexity of home as a palpating site when it comes to women as portrayed in the aforementioned short film. The film ends with a crescendo beckoning towards being a harbinger of drastic change. However, what remains uncovered in this paper is the aftermath of such crescendos, whether the change, if imagined in the foreseeable future, is readily accepted/sustained or not.

Cinema has always been a stark reminder of what transpires in a society. It plays an influential role in shaping the public psyche and vice-versa, and that's why, it becomes crucial to reflect upon the content that is projected on screen. The cinematic works surrounding gendered roles, food politics and the significance of spatiality in determining the ethos of the day have been constructed in Hindi cinema with a considerable mass appeal. Furthermore, the voices of dissent surfacing in the form of characters challenging the conventional concepts are gradually becoming more notable and acceptable as well. The unlearning of traditional gendered roles, the shifting meaning of spaces as intimate as home and the surging complexity of the semiotics of food point towards a shift in the nature of films as well as the audience.

According to Anita Mannur, "The home, never a neutral space divested of ideological constructions of gendered nationhood, is a site that produces gendered citizens of the nation. Homes are the sites that produce members of the nation in specifically sexualized terms" (Mannur 51). In Neeraj Ghaywan's *Juice*, home is the site of action where Indian middle-class families exude patriarchal orientation of every day routine laced with peculiar oddity of familial relations, especially, the matrimonial relation. This oddity is accepted unquestioningly in the garb of traditional perspective which confines women to domestic space, so much so that it commences to resonate with oppression, abjection and rejection of the female members of the household. This rejection pushes them to the margin, away from the centre embodied in the form of drawing room conversations accompanied with endless food and drinks, and/or the chit-chat over a bar counter where only a certain type of people can

have the privilege of access to. Home, a space synonymous with safe haven, escape, refuge and peace, develops connotations of a contested site where the tension between men and women, as depicted in the film, does not find a closure or getaway.



Opening Scene, *Juice*, 2017 (YouTube)

Manju Singh, the protagonist of *Juice*, is an educated middle-aged housewife who struggles to accept the conventional gender role she is expected to perform in order to “uphold the dynamics of domestic familiarity” (Mannur 52). When her home becomes the space of a get together of friends and their families, it converts into a spatial domain laying bare the conventionally determined ontological demeanor of women battling patriarchy on a daily basis but to no avail. The heteronormativity of home surfaces as a natural way of being functional, hence, always admissible implicitly. The film opens with the voice of men in the background dismissing behavior of a female at work while Manju, the protagonist, is on her knees clearing the table cluttered with left-over bones and waste tissues. The first scene positions Manju in a central space, her body performing while on floor, unlike the men on sofa, occupied with discussions disregardful of women. The sexist comparison between an email and a female followed by distasteful laughter of all the men is a reflection of deeply rooted patriarchal perspective. The composure of Manju points towards the unquestioned ways of practicing gender disparity in everyday life. While the men are busy questioning women in power, justifying a meagre

number of women in top positions because according to them, women are not programmed to bear “the heat, dust and crazy shifts”, Manju and other women are performing all the physically exhausting tasks. Ironically, the gravity of their so-called concern is punctured when Manju is being seen refilling the air cooler while the men are judging the women in workforce. In the sweltering heat of the weather, Ghaywan portrays Manju and other women visiting her for dinner as deprived and dispossessed of space, all being cramped up in the kitchen of her home. Mannur rightly points out when she writes about disciplining women into performing wifeliness (Mannur 55).

Manju’s home is also a fitting example of what Soja refers to when he talks about spaces being always in a process of changing. Home for Manju is a site to manifest her role being a dutiful wife whereas the same home holds different meaning for her husband. Such polarity is obviously sustained by the disparity in gender roles and responsibilities distinctively etched by the traditional norms of patriarchy. The house party they are hosting in their home is inherently gendered at its core. For the women performing their roles as dutiful and hard-working wives, the assignment is to remain confined to food preparation in the broiling kitchen. For the men, it is an evening with endless food and liquor in the well-lit and ventilated drawing room, while being oblivious to the grinding domestic labor performed by women in the house. Home, as already mentioned, is deemed to be equivalent to rest and rejuvenation but in the given situation, it becomes another space premised upon differentiation and hierarchical order. Soja emphasizes upon the rising relevance of practical and political relevance of “spatial dimension of human life” because spaces fashion human behavior and vice-versa. If drawing room represents the centre, the kitchen stands for the margin, which can be accessed at the end of a poorly lit corridor where household items have been haphazardly placed. The dirty mirror on the wash basin, disordered closets and the overall shabby appearance together make way to the mesh door of the kitchen where food, the fuel for the body and content for the soul, is prepared.



Dingy corridor to the kitchen, *Juice*, 2017 (YouTube)

Kitchen is brimming with stimulating sounds of tempering of spices in hot oil, the clanking of the utensils and flashes of women gasping for relief. Sarla, one of the female guests, compares kitchen to a gas chamber, indicating towards the absence of air for women to breathe. This is in stark contrast to the drawing room, the men’s territory which is cool, cosy and conducive to breathing without inhibitions. This brings into light the link between patriarchy and capitalism which Pramod K. Nayar notably points out in his section on materialist views of gender. According to Nayar, it is this domestic labor which is “invisible” and “rarely seen as productive” (Nayar 132). Such invisibility of domestic labor delineates the performative roles that women have to put up in order to uphold the familial structure integrity as well as keep the family nurtured and well-fed. For a male, there is an obsession with “rigid patriarchal vision” which demands a clean house, good food and an authoritative rank, unopposed and unquestioned. On the other hand, a female is often found struggling with endless chores which will eventually be declared equivalent to nil. The men in the drawing room can be seen tickled by indulging in mindless conversations reeking of misogyny. But the women in the kitchen can be spotted addressing genuine problems pertaining to society being cynical when women reject the idea of motherhood, the burgeoning pressure to give up financial independence and be in charge of

raising kids, etc. This echoes the concerns of Virginia Woolf in her seminal work called *A Room of One's Own* delineating the significance of space, financial independence, economic autonomy and artistic inclination. It is interesting to note how the singularity of home as a well-sketched space is further dissected into drawing room and kitchen, each signifying either the centre or the periphery within the unified space of a home. Elizabeth Jackson rightly elaborates “the spatial politics of difference” in her crucial essay titled “Gender and space in postcolonial fiction: South Asian novelists re-imagining woman’s spatial boundaries”. She emphasizes upon the “preoccupation with boundaries and space” and infers how “invisible boundaries affect human behavior.” Manju dragging her chair from kitchen to the drawing room symbolizes the transgression of patriarchal code of conduct laden with possibility of renegotiation of what meanings spaces hold.

Edward W. Soja addresses the “patriarchal urban order” where home is “a veiled cartography of power and exploitation” (Soja 110). He further discusses the gendering of space and daily life as prominently being observed in the home this short film is set in. He elucidates how space is not just a matter of concern for geographers, cartographers, architects and engineers but goes beyond the obvious understanding towards a much broader and more flexible perspective. Analyzing home through the theoretical lens of Soja’s “thirdspace”, one can chart out the three offshoots quite distinctively. ‘Firstspace’ refers to the perceived facet of spatiality which delves into the objective markers of a space such as area, structure, and design. ‘Secondspace’ is about the conceived facet of spatiality, in other words, the touchstones of the ‘firstspace’. For example, the kitchen of Manju is the site of their everyday display of gendered performances. Being the ‘firstspace,’ kitchen is constructed in a certain manner by keeping in mind the functionality and other needs meant for everyday food preparation. The ‘secondspace’ as manifested in kitchen refers to the purpose behind constructing such a space, which is to cook and store comestibles, also upholding certain socio-cultural norms. However, Soja introduces the concept of ‘thirdspace’ in order to capture the unprecedented interaction between the concepts of ‘firstspace’ and ‘secondspace’. For example, “thirdspace” comes into being when kitchen becomes a site of women bonding with women, a space to share stories of enslavement as well as transgression. This is what Soja implies when he refers to ‘thirdspace’ capturing what is “constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances and meanings” (Soja 2).

If spaces are semantically dense and profoundly gendered, food occupies a distinct position as well. The eponymous drink, juice, which plays a key role in building up to the crescendo in the film, is a carrier of various connotations and implications. According to Mannur, food must be studied as “a subject for cultural and literary inquiry” (Mannur 10). This implies the complexity of semiotic function of food in a household where food preparation is largely associated with femininity. In a broader perspective, food becomes a carrier of nostalgia, memories, cultural and national identity. For example,

the large number of Indian food joints in the United States of America satiates the memory banks of the country's diasporic population indulging in "hyperreal eating". On the contrary, however, within the walls of a quintessential middle class Indian household, as depicted in the film being in focus here, food is not merely about culinary accoutrements but a rich reserve of symbols and metaphors. The "micro and macro-epistemologies of food" reveal dense semantics being central to daily food consumption patterns. Clearly, its value is unfathomable in a given socio-cultural scenario in terms of its dynamic functionality with respect to being an influential force as well as an influenced entity. According to Meredith E. Abarca, the author of *Voices in the Kitchen*, "the language of food serves different mood" (Mannur 70). She emphasizes upon "the savory, symbolic and theoretical meanings of food." Food can be an art manifestation, a source of nutrition, fuel for the human body, a means to express love or eke out economic survival.

In *Juice*, it is parallel to merriment for the men and dutifulness for the women. In the entire film, women are not seen eating anything. They only drink tea which is ironical as per their miserable condition in the kitchen seething with repressed desires and pounding feelings. Gaston Bachelard expounds the idea of home in his potent work, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*, by looking upon it as not merely architectural or constructive in nature but a space inhabited by one's dreams, memories, intimacy and attachment. Hence, the space becomes central to the whole narrative that the maker of the film intends to portray.

Space not only shapes the human psyche but also has the potential to attribute a specific set of connotations to a particular item. One such item which surfaces distinctively in Ghaywan's film is fan. There are two types of fans as shown in the film, one which is atop a cupboard, hard to fetch, and nonfunctional, and another which is positioned in the drawing room, refilled timely, well-maintained and functional. The nonfunctional fan witnesses the misery of women in the kitchen, struggling for breath whereas the functional fan is testament to men being unobservant of women's labor. The peculiarity of how different spaces are comprised of different items in order to uphold the patriarchal borderlines highlights the magnitude of relevance of studying spatiality when it comes to human relations. The fans stand for the air which too has been rendered gendered or biased. The female characters are depicted experiencing significant distress, struggling to catch breath while they toil away in the kitchen. The filmmakers employ a deliberate juxtaposition of two distinct fans, further highlighted by how Mr. Singh, Manju's husband, dismisses her request for fixing the nonoperational fan as inconsequential or unworthy of his attention.



The nonfunctional fan, *Juice*, 2017 (YouTube)

Another example of space attributing different meanings is of the eponymous drink, the juice. A glass of chilled juice brings the exasperating hardwork of Manju to a grinding halt. Juice is a soft drink which soothes the palate and refreshes the mind. The orange color of the juice which Manju pours for herself offers a striking color contrast to an almost sepia tinged frame of the entire film. Interestingly, Mr. Faiz, one of the men in the drawing room has been drinking juice since the beginning of the movie, apparently because he is a teetotaler. However, women in the kitchen are not conditioned to even think of consuming chilled juice in the “gas-chamber” like kitchen. It is supposed to be for the male guest, positioned in the drawing room. Thus, a glass of juice becomes another marker of how space ascribes distinct meanings to a common entity. The glass of chilled juice gives her relief from the heat, the literal and the metaphorical. In this manner, a glassful of juice trespasses the conventional relation between human body and food, and eventually, it becomes a symbol of dissent. Mannur underscores how “food transforms the female body” in a way that obliquely or evenly challenges the patriarchal oppression.



The charred chicken, *Juice*, 2017 (YouTube)

In the final scenes, the film echoes with striking symbolic visuals questioning the traditional structure of an Indian household. In one scene, Manju frustratingly tries to scratch the charred chicken pieces off the surface of a cauldron. This is when her husband's blaring calls from drawing room to "lay the plates" for dinner steer the narrative towards a dramatic crescendo. She fills up a glass of juice for herself and drags a chair towards the drawing room, takes one pause to transgress into the men's space and rightfully claims her place in front of the air cooler. In the introduction to *Postcolonial Spaces: The Politics of Place in Contemporary Culture*, the editors talk about the shift in critical spatial perspectives, from being merely concerned about mapping, location, cartography and landscape to striving for "solid materialist exposition of real politics and oppression" (Teverson and Upstone X). Manju's presence brings sudden changes to the space (the drawing room) she permeates, the laughter comes to abrupt halt, the postures shift, the facial expressions turn sombre and the husband can be seen fuming, then, regretful. In the entire film, Manju remains a silent onlooker most of the time, except for few dialogues where she can be heard condemning the everyday gender discrimination her ilk faces. Her intriguing expressions play a major role in delivering the potent response in the last scenes.



The final scene, *Juice*, 2017 (YouTube)

In the end, the film freezes on Manju confronting the men, focusing on the convolution she endures as illustrated by her facial expression; her nose flares, nerves are twitching, eyes are teary but the gaze is unflinching. Her gaze targets all the men bestowing value upon the patriarchal order marginalizing the women. Manju's gaze breaks the fourth wall and challenges the patriarchal discourse persistent in the society. This scenario prompts several intriguing questions like who owns the space anyway? What happens when the conventional idea of male gaze is transformed into a female gaze? If all the meanings are rendered impermanent, what then validates structures like patriarchy? These questions of spatial ownership, spectatorship and impermanence of the structures in control are addressed by the character of Manju, underscoring the heterogeneity existing within the females. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her seminal essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarships and Colonial Discourses", underlines the need to question such status of homogeneity conferred upon women irrespective of their individual lived experiences. This is the reason why, only Manju takes the leap to resist the patriarchy while all her female guests remain mute onlookers of her defiance by choosing to stay behind the closed mesh door of the drawing room. During the course of the entire film, the makers have deftly used the symbolic significance of movements of its various characters. The women are always in motion, frantically moving, a reflection upon their instability and lack of power. The men on the other hand are seated in the drawing room, static and firm in their presence,

hence, giving an impression of power and control. The final frame of Manju with air cooler next to her is a strategic depiction of befitting claim she has over the air to breath, her chair providing her the space where she can sit with comfort and the glass of juice which she gulps to replenish her “charred” self-worth. By being seated at the centre of their home, the drawing room, Manju’s character depicts a strong female presence who has reversed the discourse of patriarchy. All these components of everyday lived experiences become the tools deployed to resist the persistent gendering of her day-to-day grind. Juice, which has been projected as a symbol of privilege, power and comfort, becomes a metaphor of dissent as well as silent protest. Mannur concludes that “Food becomes an agent of change, not a priori fixed comestible, but something whose essence eludes complete mastery and understanding. We might thus consider food as a vehicle of protest or agent of change, not merely a passive vessel to reflect cultural norms” (Mannur 116). Manju’s character unsettles the dichotomies, exploitation and hierarchies propagating subjugation of the women in a society allowing burgeoning bias and the resultant marginalization. Her actions in the end materialize the dismissal of prejudices and rehabilitate the precarious positioning of women within a middle-class Indian household where patriarchal setup is praised as the ideal state. Thus, Ghaywan’s *Juice* is not just a mere representation of an Indian household functioning in a certain way, rather it is purposeful cinematic work pinpointing the nuances of interconnectedness of food, space and gender in an interesting simulation. Nayar rightly places weight in cultural products like films which must be consumed in particular contexts. He writes, “Such products explain the world to us.” The portrayal of Manju and her home reflects upon the social, political and personal anxieties of women and how a space like home can become a site of revolt as well as redemption. In other words, the ordinariness of Manju’s house emerges as a critical mise-en-scène uncovering the non-ordinariness of domesticity represented in a visceral and palpable form. The overall cinematic impact delivers the purposeful and meticulous arrangement of character positioning, utility of props, spatial demarcations, verbal and non-verbal communication in a much-convoluted manner. It further adds to the thematic depth of the subject being addressed in the narrative and validates the deployment of the medium of short film on an OTT platform landing among its audience with a concise and momentous critique of gender norms and spatial dynamics.

Works Cited

- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*. Beacon Press, 1994.
- Ghaywan, Neeraj, director. *Juice*. 2017.
- Jackson, Elizabeth. “Gender and Space in Postcolonial Fiction- South Asian Novelists Re-imagining Women’s Spatial Boundaries.” *Postcolonial Spaces: The Politics of Space in Contemporary*

Culture, edited by Andrew Teverson and Sandra Upstone, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 57–66.

Mannur, Anita. *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture*. Temple University Press, 2010.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.” *boundary 2*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1984, pp. 333–358.

Soja, Edward W. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Blackwell Publishers, 1996.