
The Ibsenesque Impact: An Analysis of Geo Baby’s The Great Indian Kitchen and Kaathal- The Core

Ms. ATHIRA THOMAS

Assistant Professor on contract, Department of English
Pavanatma College, Murickassery, Idukki, Kerala

ABSTRACT

Key Words:
Societal norms,
Ibsenesque elements,
status quo,
conventions, gender
roles, sexual
orientation

Literature serves as a reflection of the cultural and societal norms of its time in various ways. Literature, through its different genres, acts as a mirror through which people can examine the values, beliefs, and attitudes that prevailed during period in which it was written. It often features characters who embody the social roles and expectations of their era. But there are certain writers who broke themselves free from the conventions of the society. Henrik Ibsen is such a writer who broke the shells of tradition and depicted characters such as Nora in *A Doll’s House*. The Ibsenesque elements can also be seen in later literatures as well as in certain movies. The Malayalam movie director Jeo Baby’s critically acclaimed movies, *The Great Indian Kitchen* and *Kaathal- The Core* depicts some Ibsenesque traits in its female characters. Jeo Baby’s unnamed wife character in *The Great Indian Kitchen* and Omana in *Kaathal- The Core* are very much similar to the character of Nora Helmer in *A Doll’s House*.

1.0 Introduction

It has long been recognised that literature has the power to initiate social change and challenge the status quo. Writers from different ages used written word to elicit empathy from readers and motivate activism through the craft of narrative. Throughout history, numerous literary movements and individual works have played important roles in shifting cultural norms, influencing public opinion and advocating for justice.

Henrik Ibsen, famous not only for his plays and poems, but also for his deep philosophical and revolutionary ideas, has certainly achieved a unique and peculiar place among the most significant modern dramatists. An underlying subject in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* is the refusal to conform to social standards in order to pursue one’s own beliefs. This concept is reflected upon the various characters of the play, who defies the societal standards and acting on their own convictions. No character exemplifies this better than Nora. She defies social norms through various ways, first by breaking the law, and then by leaving her husband and children, a drastic step which rewrites all the conventions. By walking out, she takes a position equal to her husband Torvald and destroys the very foundation of society’s expectations of a wife and a mother.

Jeo Baby's Filmography

Jeo Baby is an Indian film director, scriptwriter, and actor who works in Malayalam films. The Great Indian Kitchen and Kaathal- The Core are his two movies which received much critical acclaim mostly for deviating from the conventional societal expectations. The Great Indian Kitchen was released in the year 2021 starring Nimisha Sajayan and Suraj Venjaramood in lead roles. The film portrays the story of a newly-wed woman, played by Nimisha Sajayan, who struggles to be the submissive wife that her husband (Suraj Venjaramood) and her family expects her to be.

The girl from an affluent urban family married into a wealthy family from a rural landscape. She had to suffer a lot as a wife and as a daughter-in-law. As the male figures in the family- the husband and the father-in-law- indulges themselves in Yoga or in phone, the wife and mother are left with all house chore works such as cleaning, cooking, washing and some filthy utensils and leaking taps. The prejudiced attitude of men towards the sexual feelings of women was also seen in the film. The husband's convenience and comfort always come before consideration for his wife. He ignores her feelings and needs, and when she openly tells him that having sex hurts and that she wants some foreplay, he comments that she seems to know everything about sex and condescendingly tells her that he should be attracted to her first for foreplay, causing her to cry herself to sleep.

When the girl wanted to find an employment, her father-in-law forbids her by claiming that having a woman inside the house brings prosperity to the family. The age-old conventions regarding menstruation are also exemplified through these characters. When she gets her period, the family instructs her to isolate her from others, sleep in a separate room, bathe in the river, and to wash everything she touches, claiming menstruation is something impure. It was the time when the courts of Kerala declared that menstruation is not an impurity and so women should be allowed to visit the temple. Many people, including the husband's family do not approve of the verdict.

But the girl pushed her away out of that 'prestigious mansion', seeking liberation from physical as well as mental torture, and the suffocating atmosphere she was living in. She endured silently till the end, and when she reached her breaking point, she announced her revolt, not in a silent manner, but through her actions. She throws the murky kitchen sink water on her husband and father-in-law and leaves the family for her freedom and dignity. The film ends with showing the girl as an independent dance teacher arriving in her own car and instructing the dance steps to her students which is also symbolic of the resurrection of women from the chains of patriarchy. The movie portrays the patriarchal norms that confines women to the kitchen and domestic duties.

Comparison of Jeo Baby's Protagonists and Ibsen's Nora

Ibsen's Nora of A Doll's House is very much related to Jeo baby's unnamed protagonist in The Great Indian Kitchen. She is Nora in many ways. But the difference is that Nora went out through an open door, but this protagonist locked the door of her torture room from outside and went out to the free wind. Film and literature are filled with female characters such Nora, but this girl from The Great Indian Kitchen is different, and she reflected her uniqueness in the action of hooking the door from outside. The character played by Nimisha Sajayan is that of a newly married woman who struggles within the domestic oppressions and the oppressive domestic expectations placed upon her by her husband and his family. It

showcases her repetitive and laborious household works, which symbolizes the unrecognised labor of women in any traditional household all throughout the ages. Henrik Ibsen depicts Nora as a woman who lacks a sense of autonomy. Her husband Torvald always reinforces the fact that she was just transferred from her father's guardianship to that of her husband, and has no change in her emotional life. Torvald always tried to keep Nora the ever immature and girlish wife and he compels her to dress up like a 'Capri fisher girl' and encourages her to dance in front of him only to arouse his sexual desires towards her, considering her only as an ornamented sex object.

"Kaathal - The Core"

If The Great Indian Kitchen ends with a divorce, Jeo Baby's another critically acclaimed movie, Kaathal- the Core, begins with a divorce petition. Released on 23 November 2023, the film opened to positive reviews from critics praising the performances of Mammooty and Jyothika in its lead roles.

Kaathal is about the crisis that the female lead Omana, played by Jyothika, faces, eventually leads her to filing a divorce from her husband Mathew Devassy, played by Mammooty, after twenty years of marriage. She alleges her husband being a closet homosexual in relationship with another man and pointing out the denial of her sexual rights and cruel deprivation of her body. Mathew denies all these claims publicly but Omana and he never argue over it. So the spectators do not get to know what the couple actually feels. But gradually, the complexities of their life unravel before the audience. As Mathew is about to represent his party in byelections, the news about Mathew's divorce and his sexuality spreads in the village. Many of them asks Omana to rethink about her decision. Mathew is now reluctant to participate in the election, but his party is now even more interested, as they have a 'progressive card'.

Unquestionably Jeo Baby's daring attempt to depict the nuanced feelings of human reconciliation, Kaathal- The Core struck the core of society on many levels. Despite spending twenty years in a fictitious marriage, the audience witness how Mathew and Omana grow to have a lasting love that only leaves a vacuum in each other's lives. "Omana is a woman who not only wants to free herself from the turmoil she has been facing for the past twenty years but also save her husband from the emotional turbulence he goes through, by putting an end to the double life he got settled into", says Anjali Ram in her review of the movie.

Through the character of Omana, Jeo Baby challenges a fundamental social issue by calling for everyone to have the freedom and dignity to live a life free from discrimination and humiliation, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Omana need not to say any lies to get a divorce, and no resentment or guilt is expressed and nobody is to blame. Mathew's helplessness and Omana's clarity, as well as their desire for freedom after two decades of being together in a loveless marriage life are all being stated there. Omana deserves to have a happy life with someone who embraces her, not someone who has to put up with her. She realizes this by herself and moves out of that loveless marriage life even when she is having a teenage daughter. In a world where women had to suffer all such problems silently, and to look after their children and in-laws, Omana takes the brave decision of walking out of the shell of a loveless marriage.

Just like Henrik Ibsen explores the dynamics of marriage and relationships through his various characters, Jeo Baby successfully scrutinizes the same in his movie Kaathal-The Core and answers the question, how societal expectations impact personal connections through its protagonists. Ibsen's Nora struggles to find a place for herself among her own personal desires as a woman or as an individual and societal obligations of a daughter, wife and of a mother. The inner conflict that Nora struggles to cope up with is in a way similar to the characters of Jeo Baby. Both Omana and Mathew are victims of the obligations imposed upon them by the society.

Ibsenesque Themes in Jeo Baby's Works

Ibsen can be considered as a realistic writer who portrays the everyday experiences of his characters. Jeo Baby too keeps such a realistic narrative style focusing on the ordinary lives of his characters which are relatable to many, to expose certain societal issues. Jeo Baby's above mentioned two movies- The Great Indian Kitchen and Kaathal-The Core- resonates with Ibsenesque themes through their realistic depiction of societal norms, detailed character development and symbolic use of setting and objects. As the timeless A Doll's House of Ibsen, the two movies of Jeo Baby also focuses on individuals within a broader societal context, and creates a conversation about gender roles, autonomy, and the pressures of societal expectations. The Great Indian Kitchen and Kaathal-The Core expresses the contemporary societal issues in India, which makes the spectators remember about the social realism and thematic intensity found in Henrik Ibsen's works. As Ibsen's A Doll's House delves deep into the expectations and roles imposed upon individuals by society, Jeo Baby's films looks deep into the intricacies of societal expectations and roles placed upon Indian women within the broad cultural context of India.

When Jeo Baby's unnamed girl of The Great Indian Kitchen and Omana of Kaathal- The Core move out of their marriage life, an Ibsenesque moment in Malayalam cinema had taken place. As Nora walking out leaving her husband and three children, was a startling twist to the well-made but cliched melodrama, the above- mentioned female characters of Jeo Baby were also a breakthrough from the conventional climax of Malayalam movies where characters cried, laughed and waited for everything to get resolved finally.

Conclusion

The article explores the themes of social change and defiance against societal norms depicted in Henrik Ibsen's play "A Doll's House" and Jeo Baby's Malayalam films "The Great Indian Kitchen" and "Kaathal - The Core." Both Ibsen and Baby use their respective mediums to highlight the struggles of women against patriarchal expectations and oppressive domestic roles. Through their protagonists—Nora in Ibsen's play, and the unnamed woman and Omana in Jeo Baby's films—both creators showcase the journey towards self-liberation and autonomy. While Ibsen's Nora leaves her family to assert her individuality, Jeo Baby's characters challenge entrenched cultural practices and prejudices to claim their dignity and freedom. The works of both creators resonate with each other in their realistic portrayal of societal expectations and the personal conflicts of individuals trapped within them, sparking conversations about gender roles and personal autonomy.

REFERENCES

1. Ibsen, Henrik. A Doll's House. Translated by William Archer, Project Gutenberg 2008. www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2542.
2. Joseph, Ranjini. "The Silent Rebellion: Feminist Undercurrents in Geo Baby's 'The Great Indian Kitchen'." *Film Criticism Journal*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2021.
3. *Kaathal: The Core*. Directed by Jeo Baby, Performance by Mammooty and Jyothika, Mammooty Company, 2023.
4. Ram, Anjali. "Kaathal Review: A Breakthrough In Embracing Complex Conversations". *Feminism in India*. <https://feminisminindia.com/2023/12/01/kaathal-review-a-breakthrough-in-embracing-complex-conversations/>.
5. Tharoor, Arundhati. "Kaathal and Kitchen: Geo Baby's Films as Modern Social Dramas." *New Indian Cinema Review*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2022, pp. 34-49.
6. *The Great Indian Kitchen*. Directed by Jeo Baby, Performance by Nimisha Sajayan and Suraj Venjaramoodu, Symmetry Cinemas, 2021.