

**FASCIST FEMINISM VS ALPHA MALE: IS THE NEW PATRIARCHAL
NARRATIVE OF 'WOMEN QUESTION' TRULY FASCIST?**

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyses the concept of women's body politics in the 21st century. Centering the debate that arose with the pro-female film *Mrs.*, a Hindi version of Malayalam film *The Great Indian Kitchen*. This article explores the perspective of subtle yet systematic patriarchal abuse in the name of creating 'true wife', the silence of women in the aspect of their body being used as a vassal for nationalistic discourse and the narrative of civility and modernity, and family honour. I have concentrated more on the concept of *ardhangini* or on the idea of the better half, the alternate terminology for spouses and the notion of violation of women civil and human rights in the name of 'ideal Hindu wife'. I have analysed the phenomenological process of body discipline that not only limits her body but also dehumanises them to a level of object that men possess.

With the release of the film *Mrs.*, a Hindi version of Malayalam Drama Film - *The Great Indian Kitchen* instigated a whole new controversy over it portraying 'Fascist Feminism'. Let us take a moment to understand, what is Fascist feminism? How much the film *Mrs.* is or isn't a fascist feminism and the claim that inaugurates a whole new debate of how men identify feminism and what feminism or feminist perspective of reality is?

The prominent understanding of Feminism is 'equality', women claiming equal rights as men. However with the global shift in politics and the rise of fascism in Europe, there emit a need to restore 'traditional gender norms' i.e. women retreat from all socio-political and economic space by letting men once again be incharge of the world. Like when They were not in charge of the world? In the early 20th century in Italy, Mussolini initially lured women with the illusion of their association with political decision-making through the vote that significantly shapes the future of Italy. By 1926, he cancelled all forms of elections, and asserted that women's place was not in the political arena and they should retreat back to traditional gender roles(see Gori, 2012). Similarly the Nazis never obscured the profoundly masculinist roots of their ideology, which conceived the nation as a *Männerbund* (community of men), in which the primary function of women (exclusively Aryan

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women) was to reproduce the race and keep the household running(see Gupta, 1991). However, the film *Mrs.* defines these narratives and the protagonist's effort to reestablish herself as human with civic and political rights resulted in heated debate over social media for the past couple of weeks. The film captures the subtle yet prominent aspect of misogynistic subjugation which apparently triggers male anxiety, arising terminologies like 'Anti-men', 'Fascist Feminism'. Clearly there is a misrepresentation of the term, which the liberal media tried to clarify with an alternate terminology 'toxic feminism'. In the midst of all the terminology the primary dialogue of women's rights in domestic and social space in the film seems to sideline, introducing a new set of discourse in gender studies.

This isn't the first time films, dramas, literature are setting societal norms, drafting a newer fashion of gendered reality. We have seen rather prominently for the first time in 19th century colonial India during *Bhadrolok* nationalism but particularly with the introduction of Judiciary in India. The judicial judgement was used as a pathway to penetrate into Indian society and ingrain colonial politics in India. It was women's bodies and her private life that was used as a vessel to superimpose Western culture on Indian society in the name of modernity. These courtroom dramas further became the genesis of Indian Theater society - the need to update the general public, the uneducated mass about the court proceeding. Methods like pictographic representation on the walls, concrete, saree to enacting the court proceeding to a mass in a park (see Sarkar, 1997: 2001). Thus, setting gender norms and women's body politics via popular culture. This article attempts to locate the new gender narrative and women body politics and their opinion in the midst of the current gender narrative. I intend to present an evaluatory lens to the contemporary gendered practice and the idea of *ardhangini* (or wife who is considered to be half the spiritual body of the husband) in this new patriarchy that is arising with the advancement of technology and interconnected world. My epistemic debate will evolve around popular culture and its means of drafting everyday ordinary narrative that relinquished our lives.

Historical perspective: the Inception of public opinion and theatre society

The academic debate of scandalous events or 'gossips' and its constituent element relegated it to the status of contemporary data which has enjoyed little emphasis in the study of gender and class. Ranajit Guha(1987), Gayatri Spivak(1994) and other subaltern writer has highlighted the rise in criminal cases and police reports with the endeavour of legal abolishment, making rape, adultery, murder an aspect courtroom trials and public humiliation an aspect everyday entertainment to the mass. Events of such kind are so intimidating and

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overwhelming that their trial procedure publicity intensifies the sentimental and moral speculation, almost making it an occasion for individuals to ponder upon the very constitution of their identity and existence in society (Bannerji, 1993). Cases like Elokeshi's *Ketchha* (Bengali counterpart of 'scandal'), previously were speculated in moral court within private space but colonisers previous failure in reformation project by censorious national ideology as argued by Sumit Sarkar(1985) turn their lens inward, towards the structure of social and religious institution i.e. family and spiritual domain(Chatterjee, 1989). A reaction to this attempt intensified anxiety and excitement that it became a relatable theme of scandalous events which got adopted in song, literature, poetry, painting in order to anticipate the predicament of such circumstances(Sen, 1993; Banerji, 1993).

Family has always been the intimate, private and spiritual domain for Indian society, a supplement to the cruel world out there. Partha Chatterjee in his famous book *Nation and its Fragments*(1998) highlighted the bifurcation of Indian domesticity into *andar*(interior) and *bahar*(exterior) and the introduction of 'New Patriarchy' which started completely refurbishing the *andar*, a space owned by the women, arose as a major threat, challenging the fundamental identity of authentic India. The idea of women was not only spiritual but an aspect that needs to be protected by men because their prestige, identity, culture, heritage are all enmeshed within women's honour dignity, illuminating a distinct level of body politics that Foucault argues completely redefined the idea of civility and sanity, it reiterated the understanding and definition of 'state' that cannot be distinguished from women's body. As stated by Prasad Das Goswami(1896) a man's life is completed only when he taking a wife, which makes the women their *ardhangin* or 'half bearer', highlighting the cruel hegemonic imperial politics that penetrated not only to the spiritual core of Indian society but also viciously violators women's body, disciplining, limiting rehearse her body practice in the name of civilizing and modernity, violating women's natural, human and civil right while ingraining colonialism. In the midst of this the *ardhangini* finds herself enmeshed in the web of a new patriarchy, trying to fit in within the new defined of Indian women i.e. *Bhadramahila*(Gentle women) - women who don't dress uncivil like the traditional women and wear a petticoat and blouse, have basic education and are experts in extracurriculars like knitting, singing etc. By adopting these norms they assumed to become eligible companions to their newly english educated gentleman, the *Bhadralok* in the new colonial India. Sibaji Bandyopadhyay(1994) further elaborates the qualities like: 'natural nurtur', 'passive meditation' and the ability to ignite new sensibility and resonate

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the cord of behaviour, making the *ardhangini* the modulator of social reform. This new version of women, as Tanika Sarkar says, was designed to present the image of ‘true Hindu wife’.

This palimpsestic narrative of imperialism completely overrules the objective reality with the subjective interpretation of the colonial subject of ‘other’. In other words, the entire aspect of women's opinion has never been taken into consideration. The narrative of women's bodies were used as a bet between the white superimposition politics and Indian nationalistic politics to define civility and modernity and during this entire period danced in the exact way the patriarchy wanted. These were deduced particularly by the women journals, magazines written by men for the women to be the ‘new women’ the *bhadramahila* as stated by Judith E. Walsh in her book *Domesticity in colonial India*, this let Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak questions - ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ and Ranajit Guha explained the historiography elitism - colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism of Indian nationalism completely shadowed ‘women’s aspiration’ in ‘women question’ rather a *babu* culture or the chauvinist elitist personality was achieved through British colonial rule.

Evolution Contemporary Narrative: women’s body politic in 21st century

The status of Indian women since then has radically changed while gender and gender politics have meticulously played their prominent role especially with literature, motion picture, cinema, music punctilious drafting the societal dialogue of everyday nomenclature, women body politics and their position as a societal forum. The 1980s and 1990s saw a massive boom in mass media film became a prominent means to construct everyday reality. The films like *Biwi ho to Aisi*, *Maine Pyar kiya*, to films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Baazigar*, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* completely rehearsed the idea and position of women. However, the definition of women’s body politics became a mere evolved version of the *Bhadralok Nationalism* in the nineteenth century, and the understanding of women as *Bhadramahila* or *memshaheb* (westernized version of Indian women) was reestablished but at a mass level, an level that British couldn’t reach that cinema did. Thus, creating a prominent parity that stood in the pre and post independent era in the design of women in the societal domain. The prominent different was women inclusion but as a peripheral character embellishing the male protagonist, reiterating conservative culture and ideological value of women and her sexuality. While the society in the real world was bargaining for equal status in academic, employment and to manage to gain control of their own body politics. Equal Remuneration Act (ERA) of 1976, Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act of 1971, Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986; Protection of

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Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005, The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 and other prominent acts and judgement promulgated women's position in society and work force. However, this didn't end women being objectified, limited to an inferior position and an aspect of male violence. Movies like *Insaff ki Taraze*(1980), *Pratighaat*(1987), *Zakhmi Aurat*(1988) - further illuminated women body violence, rape and failure of judiciary (see Gopalan, 1997), making terminologies like '*balatkar*'(rape) a part of everyday discourse, setting gender expectation to whole new level.

The hitherto presupposition of women in Cinema in last couple of decades have significantly evolved, presenting women more in the protagonist position in areas like sports, crime, romance like *Dangal*(2016), *Pink*(2016), *Chak De India*(2007), *English Vinglish*(2012), *Kahani*(2012) and others, presenting a strong role, confidence about their sexuality and bodies which continues to be use for inscription of cultural value and meaning that ignites patriarchal anxiety. Waseem Ahad and Selma Koc Akgul(2020) argued that this marginalization and objectification of female sexuality by bollywood finds a strong resonance in traditional mythology, where women represent two distinct characteristics embodied by *Menaka* and *Sita*. The former represent an erotic and sexual power and can lead men to transgression while the latter is chaste, obedient and domestic who submits herself to the will of men(see Nijhawan, 2009). Such mythical significance in the nationalistic imagination of India women repeatedly gets rehashed by the mainstream bollywood movies. However, with the release of new motion pictures like *Gunjan Saxena: the Kargil Girl*, *Mary Kom*, *Razzi*, and others presenting real life examples altering the traditional conservative narrative of women. Mukherjee(2018) highlighted this strong and dominant female role in Bollywood expressess not only the confident and assertive expressing of their sexuality, but in a dormant manner excites men anxiety and their devaluation with women emancipation from generation of patriarchal subjugation. Therefore, justifying the rising debate of fascist feminism over the release of *Mrs.*, and arisal of films like *Kabir Singh* and *Animal* to subside the uprising male anxiety by trying to portray the traditional male gender design, which is entirely enmesh in violence against women. What is more terrifying is public appreciation of those films over films like *Mrs.* or *Thappard*, where the terminologies like 'toxic men' or 'fascist masculinity' doesn't bother the society rather they become one of the greatest hits in the India box office.

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Present Debate and women's voice

A distinctive shift that arose with globalization, highlighting a trans-national image of women's position that arose out of the global narrative led to women empowerment. However, this simultaneously arose men's right organization stating that women's upliftment and judicial safeguard leads to the violation of men's rights and make them victims of women violence. Like the recent case of Atul Shubash, an alleged wife beater whose choice of words for his wife is horrifying; or the Manav Sharma case where the wife is blamed for his suicide over his alcohol addiction and suicidal tendencies, have legit assaulted his wife while being intoxicated. However, popularist claim completely overshadowed men victims of their own action while pointing fingers at women as the culprit, her retaliation in this case to claim her civil and fundamental rights makes her a bad woman, an unfit wife. The aspect of obeying men and residing as the objective property as elucidated by Partha Chatterjee in his *Nationalist Thought and Colonial World*(1986) in the entire eighteenth and nineteenth century has completely been altered with women in the 20th and 21st centuries taking prominent decision making positions like CEO or Managing Directors or IAS or IPS, omitting the need for men being the single source of provider. Figures like Sarajini Naidu, Indira Gandhi, Aruna Asaf Ali and others had already been an aspect of terror not only to National but also International male ego. Today figures like Sudha Murthy, Leena Nair, Supriya Sule, Arundhuti Roy and others are a significant example that women can surpass male ego and be a prominent national and internationally sensational.

In the midst of the narrative, film like *Thappard* or *Mrs.* where the narrative unfolded with of women claiming her civil and fundamental rights, retaliating against the idea of 'good wife' who pertain through all the domestic and societal expectation and terror to meet those expectation just to live up to the definition of 'true wife' - who subscribe to traditional gender role, obey men and meticulously performing household chores. These are the women who are usually awarded with inhuman psychological and physiological assault not only by male members but also by the female members in her in-laws house. Thus, one can claim that the reality for women hasn't changed much in the last three to four hundred years, as Ramachandra Guha(2010), Partha Chatterjee(1986), Ranajit Guha(1987) and other subaltern writers explain while historiographically tracing the evolution of subaltern discourse.

The film *Mrs.* which is based on the contemporary socio-political theme, emerged after the Sabarimala temple's landmark judgement, focusing on Marital rape and demonstrating the meticulous abrogation of

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women's right in the name of 'true Hindu wife'(Gairola, 2002). The film highlights the everyday effort of cooking, cleaning and overlooking the household as 'women's duty', rather 'only duty of the women', dehumanizing women to an extent that her needs, desires are completely smashed. In the film, the husband, being a gynaecologist, is indifferent to his wife's hesitation or lack of consent. When she brings up foreplay, he scoffs that her knowledge of the term makes her "experienced"— elucidating the notion of disparity in women's right to consciousness, even her knowledge. Men being experienced is considered normal, and women even being aware of anything related to sex and sexuality is amount to 'shame'. This once again highlight, women's identity and shame are enmeshed within each other, even the same narrative are repeated in the case of rape, sexual harrasment - it is women's body that is violated and the men who does it goes on with their ordinary life. This aspect has recently been exemplified by the Bilkis Bano case, where the guilty convicts were not only released from jail but were garlanded - portraying the absence of state, failure of judiciary to give justice over such level of physical assault, rape, murder of Bilkis Bano's entire family. Therefore, women's body politics, her safety, security when portrayed in mainstream media becomes an attack to men's ego rather than broadcasting awareness of how women's bodies and right violation looks from a female perspective.

Conclusion

I have analysed the 21st century women question where mainstream media portraying the design of patriarchal assault on women and their retaliation against it arose as a direct threat to men's ego. The argument of paid labour and unpaid labour and the maintenance of domesticity becomes an aspect of debate between 'toxic femininity' and 'idea wife', the entire rising scenario has been called 'fascist feminist', a clear misinterpreting of the word while trying to explain the non-compromising nature of women just to subscribe to the idea of 'true Hindu women' or *ardhangini*. Therefore the popular claim that men's 9 to 5 hussle are never been broadcasted over any movies or literature, clearly demonstrating a masculine amnesia, deliberately failing to remember the last hundred years since the invention of television, it is men and their life were broadcasted everyday with woman being their side character. Before that, radio, magazines, and literature only highlighted men and their constructive reality of society. However, with the release of just one film completely the pro-men community is completely baffled. The augment of 'anti-male' completely overlooks the crucial point that the systemic patriarchy places the burden of unpaid labour and familial harmony disproportionately on women

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while denying them agency over their own lives. Even a survey by UN Women and the National Statistics Office of Georgia justifies the time spent by women on unpaid domestic and care work is 17.8%, around five times the time spent by men (3.7%)—far more than the global average gender gap.¹ Therefore the claim that men's rights are being violated, doesn't counter the degree women rights have been violated for centuries, over generations, making any level of comparison improper. Coming to this conclusion I have demonstrated the historical evolution and the absence of women's voice, their opinion while nationalistic discourse was drafted through their body, demonstrates a subtle yet an intense level of violence that completely alters psychical imagination of societal imagination of men and women, this consciousness now has been generationally ingrained among all the distinct gendered. I have also explained the way cinema, social media, and any other popular culture have over the time reiterated the socio-cultural reality via the narrative presented in the cinema, or films. I have also highlighted the aspect of 'shame' and women's body discipline, a way of defining the cultural values and dignity of the male counterpart and the family they are part off.

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¹ In order to know more: Sharma, Ananya, and Ananya Ganotra. 2025. "Pro-women Vs Anti-men: What People's Contradictory Responses to Mrs. Say About Women's Issues Today." *YourStory*, March 4, 2025. <https://yourstory.com/herstory/2025/03/pro-women-vs-anti-men-what-peoples-contradictory-r>.

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