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Kashyapi Ghosh  
*IIT Tirupati*

V. Vamshi Krishna Reddy  
*University of Hyderabad*

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## The Mundane Female Space: Re-evaluating the Dynamics of Women in the Transnational Kitchen

By Kashyapi Ghosh<sup>1</sup> and V. Vamshi Krishna Reddy<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

The kitchen space has often been read as the ultimate arena for women's manifold repression, discomfiture, and gendered labour. This article aims to evaluate the nature of the kitchen space through the analysis of movies, which give a significant amount of visibility to the kitchen space. The arguments investigated in this article are laid out in two ways: one, to re-assess the stereotypical notions about the mundane space as prevalent in the literature, and two, to problematise the space and understand it from multiple perspectives and dimensions. We consider these two arguments while conducting a textual analysis and thematic network analysis of two movies, *Julie and Julia* (2009) and *The Lunchbox* (2013) for such an assessment, because of the many facets of the kitchen space that are underlined in their narratives. We evaluate the twin concepts of emancipation and emasculation visible in kitchen or food work through Abarca's "culinary epistemology". The difference between how the three women protagonists "do gender" is another important point that we put into perspective. Zimmerman and West identified "doing gender" as performing work based on the social script. Care work primarily work in the kitchen can therefore be categorised as gendered since it is bound by societal norms. Both the movies deal at large with female protagonists (identified by me as "Gastronome Women"), their interactions with the kitchen space, and the gendered work that does not always tantamount to drudgery that they perform in their respective social positions. The movies also analyse the role of men as willing participants and agencies that help women achieve, instead of throttling their desires. This study also aims to understand the nature of the relationship that women share with the kitchen space and the difference of gendered performance in each of these women. The kitchen space has multiple connotations: this article aims to ameliorate them without dictating a singular, unilinear view.

*Keywords:* Gastronome, Gender, Kitchen space, Repression, Women, Textual analysis.

### Introduction

On a bright, sunny morning, Julie Powell walks into a post 9/11 bureaucratic office, does her work, and comes home exhausted. She seeks respite in her kitchen and frantically starts beating eggs and cream; her joy lies in cooking. In 1950s Paris, Julia Child finds herself in the Le Corde Bleu kitchen, cooking among obnoxious classmates, while Ila, a homemaker in metropolitan Mumbai, gets rid of the shackles of her mundane life through her grandmother's recipes. All three of them find their alter ego—their safe haven—in the kitchen. But women have often been associated with household work and entrapped in the different strands of domestic life by the coded norms of society. As Betty Freidan notes in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963,11) about an unknown, unaddressed problem that "Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slip-cover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and

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<sup>1</sup> Kashyapi Ghosh is a PhD scholar at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Tirupati, working in the area of gender studies. For her doctoral thesis, she is looking at the changing dynamics of the kitchen space through visual culture. She can be reached at [hs18d504@iittp.ac.in](mailto:hs18d504@iittp.ac.in)

<sup>2</sup> Dr. V. Vamshi Krishna Reddy is working as an assistant professor at the Centre for Comparative Literature, School of Humanities, University of Hyderabad. His major field of interests are Cultural Studies, Film Studies and Critical Theory. He can be reached at [vamshi.vemireddy@uohyd.ac.in](mailto:vamshi.vemireddy@uohyd.ac.in),

Brownies, and lay beside her husband at night she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question: “Is that all?” This feeling of insignificance and the limitations of women to remain within the bounds of the familial was questioned by several feminists. In the arena of the home and the world, a woman has always been the ‘Other’. Nancy Chodorow, an American sociologist and feminist psychoanalyst, in her famous treatise *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1999,11) argues that “women’s family role became centred on childcare and taking care of men. This role involved more than physical labour. It was relational and personal and, in the case of both children and men, maternal”. The role of running the family has often been the crux of women’s identities. Women have been offered the servile position of ‘captive wives’ and ‘housebound mothers’ (Gavron 1966). The female figure has been socialised to adhere to the normative constructs of the society which engrain the images of captive wives and housebound mothers. Germaine Greer opines about the housewife being an unpaid employee in her husband’s house in return for the social security of being a permanent employee (Greer 1970). Most feminists have considered domestic labour as gendered and detrimental to the growth of women as individuals (De Beauvoir 1949; Friedan 1963; Oakley 1974; Julier 2004). Sociologists Arlie Hochschild and Anne Machung in their book *The Second Shift; Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (1989, xxiv) researched the number of hours women spent on general housework and discovered that it accounted for approximately an extra month of work each year in relation to men. This unequal sharing of domestic work can be traced back to the Industrial Revolution. Sigfried Gideon, (1948) an eminent historian, notes that with the progress of the Industrial Revolution, household labour became gender marked; it was of no consequence in comparison to men’s work in the factory or “market work”. Kitchen space, which forms the pivot of the domestic household work, has often been called out by feminist scholars as the worst form of repression and masculine hegemonic propaganda. Kitchen space is a site of gendered division of labour, mostly unskilled and routine touched by a sense of alienation (Floyd 2004). Feminist geographers have time and again argued that “space is gendered”, “place doesn’t just reflect gender, it produces it” (Nelson & Seager 2005,4). The kitchen is a place where we constantly “do gender”. In the Indian sub-continent, women are conditioned to believe that the kitchen space is where they should derive their identity from (Katrak 1997), thereby reiterating the idea that the kitchen space is indeed a gendered place. However, there are women who elevated cooking for a large number of women and transformed it into an act of excitement and an expression of love, giving them confidence and liberation (Matthew 2002; Supski 2011).

Some critics have agreed that the kitchen space or household chores like cooking are much more complex and cannot be treated in simplistic terms of drudgery and repression (Avakian 2005; Hughes 1997). Rather, everyday cooking is a language of creative expression for those who do not comprehend or relate to feminist discourse in their daily lives. The kitchen, then, in this aforementioned conceptualization is no longer a private sphere of domination but of resilience and liberation (Abarca 2006; hooks 1990). The “apron-clad” feminist, is not an oxymoron but a pervasive media image (Williams 2014); this particular image of a feminist might not be in congruence with her reality. This gives rise to the image of a gastronome woman: a woman in love with food and its multiple associations. So, where then do we place the “Gastronome Woman” –the woman who has a strong affiliation with the kitchen-space, irrespective of the drudgery? Can we posit the “Gastronome Woman” in between the acts of emasculation and emancipation? This idea of the “Gastronome Woman” will be deliberated through the textual analysis and thematic network analysis of the movies.

This article looks at two movies *Julie and Julia* (2002) and *The Lunchbox* (2013) and deliberates upon the representation of women in cinema with regard to the manner in which they acclimatize and rediscover themselves to the domestic world, especially to the kitchen space, and the manner in which they create a niche for themselves in a world of their own

which is predominantly masculine. Despite the patriarchal hegemony, women in the movies make a successful attempt to “experience influence, authority, achievement and healing” (Wade-Gayles 1999,97) and “claim a space of respect” (Abarca 2011,14) in the oft-called out repressive kitchen space. The transnational kitchen space is significant to both the movies and the shifting dynamics of the space can be traced in both wherein a discourse of self-discovery has been mapped. The “transnational” kitchen space is a common bridge between the women in the movies hailing from different countries, talking about their love for cooking. It is symbolic of the transformation of the women from where they have been to where they want to be. This article aims to evaluate the selected movies under the twin perspectives of the kitchen as a contradictory space of entrapment and liberation. The interaction of the male characters within the kitchen space is significant and worthy of an observation since a man’s entry into the kitchen causes so much discomfort to the woman (Meah 2014). The understanding of a male positioning himself in the kitchen space is different from that of a female (Thrush 2020); there is always a fair amount of distance from the space in terms of dedication and involvement. We examine the problematic strain of thought that posits women in the kitchen space only as an act of a repression. The kitchen-space is not just a place where women are entrapped, rather, it is possible for them to create an alternative narrative of expression of love, creativity, and self-knowledge within the systemic oppression.

We use a textual analysis method to examine the portrayal of women and their association with the kitchen space in these films. We analyse two movies, *The Lunchbox* and *Julie and Julia*, keeping in mind their basic thematic similarity and the prominence of the role of the female in the kitchen space. We look at ways to ameliorate the dual facets of the kitchen space, that of oppression and liberation, telescoping creative expression, and converting the space into one’s own world of divergent culinary epistemology (Abarca 2006).

### **A Brief Review of the Films**

*Julie and Julia* (2009) directed by Nora Ephron was aimed at the servant-less American woman balancing work with life and the evolution of the ‘New Woman’<sup>3</sup>. *Julie and Julia* isn’t merely a movie about two women (Julia Child and Julie Powell played by Meryl Streep and Amy Adams respectively) cooking their way through life; it is more about the centrality of women who are happy in the domestic space and how they generate free-flowing love and support from their respective partners who understand their daily struggle to create an identity of their own. The central plotline revolves around the twin lives of Julie Powell, a thirty-something American woman, and Julia Child, a middle-aged trailing spouse who is yet to find a passion to keep herself busy as she travels with her husband from one country to another. The story of Julie Powell and Julia Child runs in a parallel frame. Both of them are striving to find their passion as they go about the monotony of their ordinary lives. At one point, the story converges with Julie Powell imbibing the persona and culinary facade of Julia Child as she makes her mark after a long struggle to complete 524 recipes in 365 days. In the two timelines, one in which Julia Child fiercely struggles to find herself, and the other where Julie Powell seeks respite from her bureaucratic job, both women take refuge in the kitchen space. A space which provides them a respite from the scheduled monotony. The filmmaker effortlessly brings about the transition from 1949 Paris to 2004 USA. *Julie and Julia* form an unusual feminine narrative in a time when women were unable to come out of their roles as dependents and transform to cuisine conquerors. It illustrates the journey of two women from

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<sup>3</sup> The idea of New Woman emerged in the twentieth century and was emblematic of changing gender norms wherein the Victorian ideals of femininity and domesticity were questioned. This term was further popularised by Henry James to describe women with a feminist ideal, educated and independent.

different time periods trying to find an identity for themselves in disparate male-driven hierarchical worlds.

*The Lunchbox* (2013), a Bollywood film, directed by Ritesh Batra, did not earn popular attention until it gained critical accolades at various film festivals across the world. The film uses an epistolary narrative to unearth a simple yet extraordinary love story between a young woman in her thirties and a gentleman nearing his retirement. It delineates the isolation and loneliness of a young woman, Ila (played by Nimrat Kaur) in metropolitan Mumbai and her chance encounter with a stranger, Saajan Fernandes (played by Irrfan Khan) who happens to connect with her through the food which erroneously reaches him through the robust delivery system of the Mumbai Dabbawalas<sup>4</sup>. Ila finds subtle peace in cooking delicacies for the mysterious Mr. Fernandes who receives the dabba by an inadvertent mistake in the delivery system. This connection initiates when Mr. Fernandes, overwhelmed with the sumptuous food, slips in a note of gratitude as well as that of criticism in the empty tiffin box. This creates a ripple in Ila, who extends the conversation by sending handwritten notes along with the box. Unknowingly, she initiates a bond with the widowed Fernandes and shares with him the loneliness and decadence of her marital life. Metropolitan Mumbai, the buzzing background to the story, is the city that never sleeps and a city that is witness to countless emotions, including the one blossoming between two strangers living in different parts of the city. The movie is not a fast-paced one but one that moves gently from one scape to another, highlighting notes of companionship, loneliness, and tender feelings.

### Doing Gender, Doing Kitchen

*Julie and Julia* and *The Lunchbox* revolves around three female characters, Julie Powell, Julia Child and Ila respectively, who hail from different parts of the world, and the manner in which they perform their roles of homemakers or working women are quite different from each other. "Doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987,126) is essentially doing work that is pre-assigned by the social script. Being a woman inherently allocates household labour as "women's work" or the kitchen as a "woman's space" The three women, Julia, Julie and Ila, perform roles that are essentially gender-marked. In a particular scene, Julie complains to her husband Eric, "*How am I supposed to do anything in this kitchen?*" The kitchen space is insufficient for her to be creative and stifles her. Despite the disadvantages of a small kitchen, Julie is driven by her passion for cooking and successfully completes her Julie/Julia project. Julia Child in Paris or Julie Powell in America has the potential to live their life on their own terms despite being married. They are financially independent women from the "first world"; both work in a bureaucratic office setup. This scenario is distinct from the one that Ila experiences in the metropolitan city. Hailing from a middle-class background, and as a homemaker with no source of income she is entrapped in the "domesticity" that Beauvoir says attaches us to our fathers and husbands (Beauvoir 1989). Women like Ila are expected to abide by societal norms and gender roles that are prescriptive. For Ila, the kitchen is a major site of oppression (Ahrentzen 1997). They do not have enough willpower to walk away from their situation; here a failing marriage. Ila follows the advice, given by her elderly neighbour Deshmukh aunty, to cook a new recipe to please her husband and save her disintegrating marriage. The elderly experienced neighbour gives her valuable advice: "*Dekhna ye Recipe tere liye kaam kar jayegi*" (Trans: Just wait and see how the recipe will work perfectly for your marriage). Deshmukh aunt's conviction that food will smoothen the creased marriage is at par

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<sup>4</sup>A common delivery system of tiffin boxes to and from households or restaurants to respective corporate offices or working organisations to provide lunch. This was inaugurated in 1890 Bombay by Mahadeo Havaji Bacche. It comprises of a vigorous chain of workers who collect and deliver tiffin boxes door to door. It has been used as a case study for logistics and supply management on multiple occasions. The delivery system has often been lauded for its punctual services.

with the idea that “a women’s marriage might depend upon good home cooking” (Neuhaus 2003,71). The idea of marriage has always been different in India. In a parallel world in USA or Paris, the norms are not as ingrained as in the cultural setup of India. After a meltdown, Julie fights with her husband who leaves the house but comes back the following day. Julie does not have to cook elaborate meals to draw the strings of her husband’s heart. There are no elaborate efforts from Julie’s end to prove her point or justify herself. Similarly, Julia is not required to undertake tedious household labour or cook according to her husband’s whims. Women like Julie or Julia are privileged enough to be relieved from the monotony of everyday “food work”. Ila, however, has no alternative but to run the house without any motivation or support from her husband. Women in the fortunate Julie/Julia world can venture to move out from the ‘protection’ of their husbands and live an independent life owing to their self-assertion and financial stability which women like Ila cannot claim. For them, the domestic space does not represent the exertion of everyday activities, but a space that allows them to express their fervour. Doing gender and thereby doing kitchen work may be primarily an act of appeasement towards partners, but it also allows them to create their own unique identities, just as observed in these leading ladies.

### **The Cuisine Connexion**

The kitchen is the “site of women’s multiple subjectivities: wife, mother, housewife, homemaker” (Johnson 2006, 128). In these subjectivities, food stands as a pivot between men and women, creating differences as well as a channel of connection (Counihan 1998) and communication (Abarca 2006). In both the movies, the central characters Ila, Julie, and Julia are the peptic backbone of their family, recreating the bridge of communication through food. In *The Lunchbox*, Ila tirelessly works in the dingy kitchen to provide food for her family. Despite any acknowledgement, she performs the role of a giver, dishing out delicacies and maintaining the nutrition of her family which Pollan observes is “the wisdom of our mothers and grandmothers (Pollan 2008,13). She adheres to the homemakers’ asset of preparing good food (Dooven 1928). However, despite the drudgery, it is through cooking that she creates a heart-warming connection with her pen-pal Mr. Saajan Fernandes. Her correspondence with Fernandes is her liberation from a marriage that is decadent. This camaraderie is symbolic of a return to normalcy in her life. The decadence in her marriage is evident in her conversations with her husband. The dining table conversations are slack, curt, and cut short at regular intervals. The sharing of food has no touch of warmth and love. It is more like a routine eating activity instead of an active sharing of food along with emotions.

In *Julie and Julia*, both Julia and Julie act as nutritionists for their husbands. Though Julie Powell is a working woman, she comes home and cooks for her husband, thereby reinforcing the normative codes of domesticity, albeit differently. Similarly, for Julia Child, cooking for Paul remains of utmost importance for her and she neatly balances it with her Cordon Bleu classes. Julia writes to her pen-pal Avis de Veto about how she comes back from her culinary classes and enjoys her luncheon with Paul. The sharing and consuming of food together are unique to both the films. In *Julie and Julia*, the women engage an active participation from their respective husbands for the delicacies that they prepare. Paul and Eric both have a similar sense of enthusiasm for the food their respective partners cook. Eric finds the chocolate pie prepared by Julie “a masterpiece”; Paul and Julia share the same passion for food in the way they greet each other with “Bon Appetit” before a meal. Julia Child confesses in romantic scene, “*I love you so much. I will let you take the first bite.*” This sharing of food is a picture of domestic bliss and companionship. This sharing is reminiscent of the fine balance between the twin roles of cooking: “an avenue for artistic expression and a dutiful chore, a symbol of both selfless love and oppression” (Long 2011,85). Ila, on the other hand, leads a mundane life of routine in the quotidian kitchen, serving her husband Rajeev who does not

engage at all with the household affairs, showing how this relationship is biased. In one of the scenes, after returning from the office, Rajeev complains to Ila about being served *gobi* (cauliflower) every day for lunch. Men demonstrate their power over women by rejecting the food served to them and women on the other hand can do the same by refusing to cook (Counihan 1997). Rajeev demonstrates his power over Ila by complaining about her cooking which refutes the nutrition standards that she is expected to provide. Ila on the other hand, refuses to cook and sends an empty lunchbox to Mr. Fernandes as an expression of anger and disappointment for not showing up at the restaurant where they were supposed to meet. Refusing food is a rejection of the other's presence, this rejection can be understood in multiple ways: refusal of an identity, refusal to accept the responsibility of being the nourisher as well refusal of the status quo which women are supposed to adhere to. This is why Ila intentionally never rectifies the "dabbawalla" when food doesn't reach her husband's office. Their marriage is a loveless one that cannot be revived through the sharing of food or affection. However, Ila's correspondence with Saajan Fernandes kindles a unique bonding that is shared over food. They share a simple bond that is created through her cooking of new recipes and his gentle admiration/critique of her culinary skills. Providing for the soon-to-be superannuated accountant, Saajan Fernandes brings them a little closer, in a city that has often been alleged of being emotionally drained. Both of them find solace in this mutual sharing of food and emotions. Sharing of food becomes a metaphor for a blissful companionship, as well as that of healing. Ila, Julie, and Julia see the kitchen space as representative of their individual healing. The kitchen is where the gender roles—"doing gender"—is remade and subverted (Johnson 2006), enabling the creation of newer roles and unusual relationships like the one shared by Ila and Mr. Fernandes.

### Haute Cuisine: A Rediscovery of the Self

"The kitchen is the place in the house where the ordinary becomes the extraordinary."  
(Busch 1999, 50).

The common yet unusual themes of rediscovery and emancipation through food and the gendered perspective of cooking and how it provides an alternative for the protagonists are prevalent throughout these films. The kitchen as a space then becomes witness to a different dimension of freedom and self-awareness (Abarca 2004). Women are not merely masticated by domesticity but choose to carve their own niche in a world that tries to clip their wings. Preparation of food plays an active role in enhancing creativity and skill and may not necessarily be stereotyped as drudgery (Meah 2014). In *Julie and Julia*, rediscovery of the self through cooking is a recurring idea. Julie Powell, despite having a 9-5 desk job at Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, finds her work environment stifling and insignificant to her personal development and discovery. As a thirty-year-old with friends who are over-achievers—Ivy League graduates—Julie feels she hasn't "arrived" yet and takes the cooking challenge as a resurrection to her underachieving self. She dreads the Ritual Cobb Salad meeting with her friends as she has nothing to brag about and does not have an extended list of achievements, unlike her successful friends. It is through the unearthing of Julia Child's famous cookbook "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" that she rekindles her zest for life. She channels all her energy into giving shape to Child's recipes despite the initial floundering over eggs and a crustacean. In one scene, she acknowledges that "*cooking is a way I get away from what I do all day.*" Julie draws inspiration from Julia Child's cookbook and sets herself a goal of 524 recipes in 365 days with the sole motive of pushing her boundaries and awakening her soul, her calling. The completion of the Julie/Julia project is a personal ambition she sets for herself to achieve in order to boost her confidence and her sense of personal success. While

her mornings are spent dealing with obnoxious callers at the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, evenings are spent with her passion of cooking. Her passion is demonstrated when she explains to her husband

*“you know what I love about cooking? I love that after a day when nothing is sure, and when I say nothing, I mean nothing. You can come home and absolutely know that if you add egg yolks to chocolate and sugar and milk it will get thick. It’s such a comfort.”*

Cooking, for Julie, no longer remains a repressive household chore but an emancipation from a gruesome work schedule. Within the sulking and sobbing of a mundane working life, it is in cooking that she rediscovers her passion and challenges herself to start a blog dedicated to the recipes. This in turn helped her work towards the long-lost dream of becoming a writer. She starts blogging about the Julie/Julia project and becomes one of the most read blogs on a popular blogging forum.

Julia Child, Julie’s muse, travelling with her embassy-employed husband, tries her hand at hat-making, playing bridge, and learning French, only to make peace with a course at the reputed Le Cordon Bleu. In one of the scenes, she acknowledges how she had been searching for a career all her life, and cooking fit her wants perfectly. At Le Cordon Bleu, she experiences gender discrimination, very commonplace in the culinary industry in the 1950s, by the course instructor Madame Brassart and her fellow male classmates who consider her “a frivolous housewife just looking for a way to kill time.” She subdues all stereotypes and emerges as a successful cook, no lesser than her male counterparts. She faces the unfriendliness from her classmates at Cordon Bleu with a positive outlook. When she is unable to chop onions like her superior male classmates and is reproached by the instructor, she takes it in her stride, goes back home, practices and comes back the following day finishing each task before anyone. She manages to survive these challenges, never quitting, and successfully completes the course.

At the end of the film, Julie Powell observes that both of them (Julia and herself) were lost and found themselves through food. Cooking saved them from failing miserably in their lives. Both of them find common ground in terms of their love for cooking and cuisine as a “third space- borderless boundary space” (Abarca 2005, 38). The kitchen space is not a space of mere bondage but that of a celebration of liberation from an individual perspective. Both Julie and Julia find their spirits awakened in their interactions with food. Julia Child, who did not know how to boil an egg to begin with, became the co-author of one of the most celebrated cookbooks in America and the most iconic culinary personalities of all times. Michael Pollan observes, “As with Julia, so with Julie: cooking saved her life, giving her a project and, eventually, a path to literary success” (2009); both Julie Powell and Julia Child discover their identity through their discovery of cooking as a hobby. On the other hand, *The Lunchbox* brings out a contrasting scenario altogether. The middle-class Ila follows the norms of an Indian homemaker and cooks for her family, but here food work is tantamount to oppression and dissatisfaction, worsened by the modern household (Basu 1995; Szabo 2011). Cooking without any appreciation makes it a grinding monotonous process. Several scenes in the film show Ila in front of the gas stove preparing food, packing it in a container, and getting her daughter ready for school. Ila’s single-handed devotion in the kitchen is fruitless and redundant. Her husband rarely acknowledges the food that she prepares. Yet this situation does not deter Ila from involving herself in “food work”. She churns out recipes from her grandmother’s recipe book. Her body language is eclectic when she cooks *malai kofta* (a popular North Indian dish made of vegetable balls) *bhindi masala* (A spicy dish made of okra and other condiments), or some other exquisite dish from her heirloom recipe books. The act of cooking does not remain a drudgery but is a release and also her last hope to fix her relationship; Mr. Fernandes, the



widowed accountant accustomed to the bland, insipid food provided by the *dabbawalas* finds the food prepared by Ila incredibly tasty. Interestingly, he slips in small notes of appreciation which comes across as a major boost to Ila's dwindling self-esteem. Her interactions with food are quite interesting, it is in the kitchen that she resurrects herself on a regular basis and gives expression to the innumerable silences in her life. What initiated as an intention to resolve the complications of her marriage gives Ila a fresh take on life and, later, emancipation from her marriage. All three women in their different time frames find food as a means of self-discovery and rejuvenate themselves to cope with the ordeals of everyday life.

### **Wok(e) Women: A Celebration**

The different timelines in which *Julie and Julia* functions have a visible difference. Julia Child works in 1950s Europe, wherein women aspiring to take up a culinary profession or any profession for that matter was rare. Women were subject to rampant misogyny, and because of a lack of equal opportunities had to give up their careers. Julie Powell, however, lives in the twenty-first century wherein the fight for equal rights for women has already been well-established. Her odds at work are much less than that of Julia. She represents the young American working woman who must balance work, household management, and life.

Unlike Julia, Julie does not come from an aristocratic background and must work hard to make ends meet in downtown Queens, New York. The only additional access that Julie has is that of technology. While Julia Child in the 1950s is constantly on the move to get her book published, Julie can easily access the internet and broadcast her thoughts and ideas through her blog. In the early twenty-first century, blogging was an important media of self-expression before social media giants like Facebook and Instagram took over. It is the blog about her cooking challenge that makes Julie reachable to many people at one click. Ila has very little access to technology, yet that doesn't dissuade her from cooking. She prepares the most delectable dishes and waits eagerly for the review. In a world taken over by technology, she hardly communicates through cell phones; instead, she prefers sending letters, the traditional way. However, Ila does not have the freedom that Julia Child or Julie Powell enjoy because of her social position. The two movies examined in this article showcase a contrasting worldview of the way women characters are portrayed. Central to the movies are the portraits of Ila, Julia Child, and Julie Powell and the manner in which womanhood is problematised across continents. In a middle-class cosmopolitan world of Mumbai, Ila is mostly lost in meeting the everyday household demands of her family, with little time left to discover herself. Her relationship with her husband is formal and distant. It is only through her correspondence with Mr. Fernandes that we get a glimpse of the real Ila. She pours her heart out both in her letters and the food she cooks.

Probably for the first time in her life, Ila starts feeling empowered in the kitchen space. She finds meaning in her kitchen work and uses "cooking as a language" (Abarca 2006,3) to re-define herself and reassert her identity. It is Mr. Fernandes who makes her realize the importance of her individuality. The appreciation she expects from her husband is given by a stranger with whom she bonds over food. Food forms an important factor in Ila's rediscovery of herself and her liberation from a marriage that entraps her. She is restless when the tiffin box arrives with a note each day; this is a restlessness that she does not feel in anticipation for her husband's arrival. The Lunchbox and the letter create an anticipation within her almost akin to that of a teenager's. Saajan Fernandes is able to transform her life into a happier one for a period of time. Food remains central to their brief encounter, acting as an agency that allows the "de-routinisation of everyday life" (Warde 1999); before opening the lunchbox, Mr. Fernandes inhales the aroma of the food as if it carries an important part of her. These strangers even have a coded fight when Ila refuses to send her delicacies and instead sends an empty tiffin when he doesn't show up at the restaurant. The metaphor of sharing food

is an act of equality but this equalising connection is rejected by Fernandes on two grounds; his age and his widowerhood. There is a subtle love coded in their banter and there is a depth in their conversations which is lacking in Ila's marriage. Food brings both of them together despite their existence in disparate worlds. Women can rarely escape from a world that doesn't tie them to the domesticity of family life, but the onus is on women to cull out an individual space of creative expression for themselves instead of waiting for a validation from their male counterparts.

### **Culinary Companions**

Cuisine stories, more often than not, capture the evolution of familial relationships as well as the intimate space of home (Sciocluna 2017). The role of men in the movies capture a significant aspect of the cuisine stories. Though Maria Christie opines, "Kitchenspace is a privileged and gendered site of social and cultural reproduction... Kitchenspaces are women's domain. Men sit down to be fed, eat, and leave their dishes on the table" (Christie 2003,1-2). In the movies, however, the kitchen space, though gendered, is more flexible and allows the male subject to move freely and occasionally participate indirectly in this arena. The husbands Paul and Eric are supportive partners, helping their spouses in the smallest of their endeavours. Cooking and the sharing of the kitchen space with a companion can turn out to be a "therapeutic activity" (Diamond 2011,13). Eric helps Julie in most of her culinary ventures in the *Julie/Julia* project. Paul too is overtly helpful and encouraging of Julia's experiments with cooking. He translates recipes from French to help her understand the instructions. The kitchen space thereby becomes a ground for an increased visibility and access. It no longer remains a women's only ground for appeasement, but a site of volitional participation.

Though *The Lunchbox* does not visibly present any of the male characters inside the kitchen space, *Julie and Julia* goes to great lengths to depict the participation of the male in the kitchen space, both actively and passively. Both Paul and Eric are enthusiastically involved in the cooking trials of their partners. For Julia Child, in a parallel dynamic world of 1950s Paris, she finds solace and support in her husband. Her husband plays an indispensable role in her becoming the celebrated chef, Julia Child. 1950 was not an era of progressive worldviews; many restrictions were imposed on women in this time period. It was not until 1963 when Betty Friedan declared "the problem with no name" (Friedan 1963,11) as a fundamental women's problem that the situation changed. Paul, however, is a man who goes to great lengths as a supportive husband to the childlike Julia. In a particular scene, when a renowned publisher refuses to publish Julia's book, it is Paul who consoles her and gives her meaningful advice. In her moments of angst and despair, Julia counts on Paul to comfort her, and he never fails her. She complains to Paul about her obnoxious course instructor who refuses to promote her to the advanced level. Paul watches as she brings delectable treats to the dinner table and as she becomes a gourmand chef. Paul shares her enthusiasm as he writes to his twin brother, Charles that "*Julia in front of her stove has the same fascination for [him] as watching a kettle drummer at the symphony.*" It is not without Paul's unflinching support that she lands as a culinary expert and co-writes the renowned book "Mastering the Art of Cooking", dedicated to the servantless American wives. Like Paul, Eric extends his support in every aspect of her life. From sharing household chores to helping her make meaning of life, Eric is Julie's cornerstone; he is always by her side as she faces various life obstacles. Eric plays the perfect assistant to Julie when she needs help in the kitchen killing crustaceans or poaching eggs. Eric comes across as a connoisseur of food and a competent husband to Julie. He is enthusiastic about the novel experiments that Julie undertakes in cooking. It is Eric who helps Julie overcome her emotional turmoil and urges her to begin a blog, giving her smaller, more-attainable goals to complete. At the axis of Julie's experimental nature and her emotional breakdown remains Eric, her husband, her cornerstone. Eric, like Paul (Julia's husband),

witnesses Julie's transformation from an under-confident telecaller to a phenomenal blog writer and achiever. Eric actively participates in her culinary adventures, inspires her to push her limits each time, and is at the receiving end of all her emotional outbreaks. He is the patient husband and a touchstone to Julie's achievements. To begin with, Julie who has never eaten egg and is unable to poach an egg, it is Eric who comes to her rescue and helps her. More than a husband, Eric is a companion who shares responsibilities of domestic life and her undying passion for cooking with her. In another instance, when Julie is sceptical about killing a crustacean to make lobster thermidor, he helps her, despite being called "useless" formerly. He is sincerely supportive of Julie's adventures and choices; he actively participates in her experiences. Their bond involves teamwork and participation from both sides. Despite Julie's fluctuating emotions, Eric supports her ambition and pushes her to achieve more than she can. We only see him lose his cool over Julie's temper tantrums in one instance, but he immediately comes around.

In *The Lunchbox*, Ila's husband is a silent, inactive observer, or complains of the food served to him while Mr. Fernandes actively participates in her efforts, giving his review in little notes slipped into the lunchbox. Ila never receives unflinching support from her husband in "food work" or in the domestic sharing of responsibilities. Mr. Fernandes, however, is the perfect companion, giving Ila solace, advice, and encouragement whenever she needs it. But he does not hesitate to critique the food she makes. In one incident, he writes a note which reads, "*Dear Ila; the food was very salty today*". Despite being strangers, he does not shy away from giving compliments or friendly advice. In *Julie and Julia*, both Eric and Paul emerge as proactive participants to their enthusiastic counterparts and in *The Lunchbox*, Mr. Fernandes takes up the role of inspiring Ila to push her boundaries. At the crux of the three stories is the evolution of love, companionship, and compassion. They do not adhere to the definition of a man in a patriarchal setup. They dismantle the setup that they essentially belong to, going out of their way to support their female counterparts. Men in the essentially "female" space function like an agency which helps them realise their goals and pushes them forward to attain it. The relationship cannot be merely defined by the stereotypical oppressor/oppressed or homemaker/breadwinner binaries. We can rethink the male as the volitional participant instead of the repressive perpetrator and the kitchen space as one which is conducive to "shaping relationships and identities" (Szabo 2011,553).

## Conclusion

The movies discussed in this article try to ameliorate a fundamental notion: the kitchen space might be one that is monotonous or even oppressive, but it also allows women to create a world of liberation within the stereotypes of drudgery and inequality. It gives them an independent space to think, create, and understand themselves. Food helps to create a new meaning in human relationships (Super 2002). It will still take some decades for women like Ila to reach the kind of independence that is enjoyed by Julie and Julia in their respective ages and worlds. However, the factor that remains significant to both the films is the centrality of food as an emotional backdrop and the dynamics of the kitchen space. Food work brings out multi-faceted relationships with the self, the "other", and the inner being. It is not merely a consumer/producer relationship but one which goes to a deeper level and brings out varied aspects of self-discovery, self-love, and the renewal of novel human relationships. Despite the limitation of the canvas, both the movies bring out heart-warming messages through their interactions with food including love in the face of disappointment, despair and loneliness, and the nature of companionship that stands the test of time. Food is significant to the identity of these women, despite their different cultural identities. It is not as a restricting aspect of domestic life but a space where women can find liberation from the engagements of domesticity. It gives women a fresh take on life and helps them find a better understanding of

the self. The “Gastronome Woman” is not a woman defined merely held by the domesticities of household life, but the one who is driven by the love of good food, the desire to create something new, and the inherent nature of being the nourisher and caretaker of the ‘other’. Though the ‘other’ might appear to impede these women’s growth, these women create a space of their own in the dually oppressive/liberating private space, “the transnational kitchen space”. She owns the kitchen and brings out her best self in it, reimagining this complex space.

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