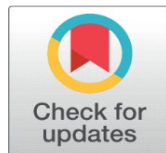


WHEN SHE STOPS WORKING: REFRAMING SOCIAL REPRODUCTIVE LABOUR IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYALAM CINEMA

C. Labeeba ¹, Dr. Sreebitha P. V. ²

¹ Senior Research Fellow, Area of Film Studies, Department of Studies in English, Kannur University, Kerala, India

² Associate Professor, Department of Studies in English, Kannur University, Kerala, India



Received 19 February 2026

Accepted 23 April 2026

Published 15 May 2026

Corresponding Author

Dr. Sreebitha. P. V.,
sreebithapv@kannuruniv.ac.in

DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v7.i8s.2026.7916](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v7.i8s.2026.7916)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

Building on feminist theories of social reproductive labour, the paper examines the obscured domain of social reproductive labour in contemporary Malayalam cinema. Using Veruthe Oru Bharya (2008), Njandukalude Naattil Oridavela (2017), and The Great Indian Kitchen (2021) as primary texts, the paper demonstrates how these films negate the usual glorification of women's social reproductive labour as markers of femininity by presenting instances of its disruption through voluntary withdrawal. Veruthe Oru Bharya (2008) portrays how the withdrawal from domestic work of Bindu, a housewife, exposes her highly oppressive patriarchal husband Sugunan to the hitherto invisible labour she performed. In Njandukalude Naattil Oridavela (2017), the intentional temporary withdrawal of Sheela, a working mother, from her domestic role after her cancer diagnosis, compels the household to confront the naturalised double burden borne by working women. The Great Indian Kitchen (2021) presents a powerful depiction of the unpaid gendered labour, culminating in the female protagonists' walkout. We argue that by interrupting the flow of reproductive labour, these films call for a critical rethinking of the gendered roles underpinning domestic life, while signalling Malayalam cinema's growing engagement with feminist questions of labour.

Keywords: Malayalam Cinema, Unpaid Labour, Emotional Labour, Gendered Labour, Reproductive Labour, Feminist Resistance

1. INTRODUCTION

Many Indian households function only because women perform the essential labour that sustains them – cooking, cleaning, and caring – yet this labour is counted as gendered labour and remains unacknowledged. Feminist scholars have argued that such domestic and affective labour, termed 'reproductive labour,' is integral to the functioning of not just the household but also the broader capitalist economy (Federici 2004; Dalla Costa and James 1972; Hochschild

1989). However, it remains unpaid, invisible and naturalised as a woman's duty. Although Malayalam cinema¹ idealises women's 'reproductive labour', three popular domestic melodramas: *Veruthe Oru Bharya* (2008), *Njandukalude Naattil Oridavela* (Dir. Althaf Salim, 2017), and *The Great Indian Kitchen* (Dir. Jeo Baby, 2021) depict a moment of crisis brought about by women's voluntary or involuntary withdrawal from reproductive labour. We argue that by interrupting the flow of reproductive labour, these films call for a critical rethinking of gendered roles and expose the affective economies underpinning domestic life. The paper further shows how Malayalam cinema is beginning to engage with feminist questions of labour, visibility, and gendered crisis through close readings of narrative structure, mise-en-scène, and affective framing in the selected films.

The scholarship connecting labour with Malayalam cinema can be grouped into two major trajectories: studies that investigate the labour involved in the film industry and those that scrutinise the cinematic representations of labour. The labour conditions in the Malayalam cinema industry have long been influenced by gendered hierarchies (Mannil) and neoliberal regimes (Mini), resulting in structural inequalities that have curbed the welfare of labourers. The second body of scholarship turns to cinematic texts as sites where labour is visualised. Films that dealt with labour migration were studied to show how it reshapes a region (Yadukrishnan). Later studies also contested the home as a site of labour for women. The paper extends these debates by exploring the intersections of gender and labour within selected Malayalam films.

Reproductive labour could be defined as 'a complex of activities and relations by which our life and labour are daily reconstituted'²(Federici 5). Federici, along with Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, was central to the Wages for Housework movement³, which demanded recognition and remuneration for housework. They highlighted how capitalism systematically devalues women's domestic contributions by relegating them to the private sphere and naturalising them as expressions of love or duty rather than labour. This global feminist critique of unpaid domestic labour by women finds its resonances in the Indian context as well, although India has not witnessed such a mass movement explicitly demanding wages for housework. However, the idea has appeared periodically in political debates, for instance, in 2021, Tamil actor and politician Kamal Haasan made a proposal to provide wages to housewives for their undervalued and unrecognised household work as part of his political party *Makkal Needhi Maiam*⁴'s election manifesto in Tamil Nadu (Narayanan, 2021). Similarly, in Kerala, the Left Democratic Front (LDF) promised to introduce a monthly pension scheme for housewives in their 2021 election manifesto, hinting at a growing recognition towards domestic work as a matter of public policy (John & Jayarajan, 2021). There is this tendency to dismiss women's unpaid domestic and caregiving labour as 'non-work', which serves to naturalise these activities as extensions of femininity rather than a form of economic labour. Conversely, actual productive labour, which becomes a part of the global capitalist economy, gets devalued as mere 'domestic activity' because it was done by women inside their homes⁵.

In the Kerala context, much of the existing literature on women's labour is focused on the transnational context, particularly in the context of migration (Kodoth and Varghese 2011; Pattadath 2008). Similarly, scholarly attention has been paid to the question of gendered labour within the kitchen space in Indian cinema. For instance, Gigy J. Alex and Babitha Marina Justin examine select movies that include *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) and argue that the film questions the power relations that overlay the culinary preparation and consumption in kitchen spaces, thereby investigating the art of cooking as a strategically perpetrated bonded labour (8). In contrast to this, Kashyapi Ghosh and V. Vamshi Krishna Reddy reassess the notion of the kitchen space not always as a repressive space, but rather that facilitates a liberatory experience.

It is in the light of the above-discussed theoretical understandings of gendered labour that we put forth the conceptual backbone of this paper's key analytical tool: 'disrupted reproductive labour'. This term, here, refers to a

¹ Refers to the film industry based in the southern Indian state of Kerala, producing films in Malayalam language.

² The term does not include the biological or commercial reproductive activities such as surrogacy.

³ A movement that emerged in the 1970s as a transnational feminist campaign, originated in Italy and the UK and later expanded to the US, demanding remuneration for housework.

⁴ The Makkal Needhi Maiam is an Indian regional political party in the state of Tamil Nadu and the union territory of Puducherry. The party was founded by Kamal Haasan at Madurai on 21 February 2018.

⁵ As noted in Maria Mies's study of the lace-makers in Narsapur, which foregrounds the entanglement of women's domestic labour with global capitalist production. Mies argues that their productive labour was ideologically constructed by capitalist patriarchy as an extension of their domestic duties. For more details, see Maria Mies, *The Lace Makers of Narsapur: Indian Housewives Produce for the World Market* (Zed Books, 1982), 12–14.

condition in which the taken-for-granted availability of women's domestic and affective labour is withdrawn by choice. It is only in such moments of disruption that the invisibility of reproductive labour is temporarily removed, highlighting the structural dependencies it sustains. The invisibility of this labour lies in its seamless continuity and repetitiveness; it becomes perceptible only when it is not done.

Cinema, as a representational medium, is uniquely positioned to render this otherwise invisible labour visible. Through framing, repetition, silence, and visual rhythm, films can dramatise the persistence of domestic tasks or the vacuum left by their interruption. Malayalam cinema, with its increasing interest in everyday life and the domestic interior, offers fertile ground for examining how disrupted reproductive labour becomes a narrative and aesthetic problem. This paper, therefore, proposes that moments of disruption of labour in domestic narratives serve as cinematic interventions into the structures of reproductive labour. They allow the audience to witness the affective and logistical chaos that ensues when the gendered economy of care collapses, thereby inviting a re-evaluation of what is often taken for granted.

2. THE POLITICS OF REFUSAL: DISRUPTED DOMESTIC ORDER IN *VERUTHE ORU BHARYA*

Released in 2008, *Veruthe Oru Bharya* (dir. Akku Akbar) was one of the first Malayalam films to engage with the question of social reproductive labour in the Malayali middle-class household. Bindu, the female protagonist of the film, withdraws from her domestic duties in response to her husband Sugunan's constant devaluation of her labour. Although the film's narrative ultimately reinscribes the patriarchal domestic order through Bindu's return to the family, it is significant as it makes women's domestic labour visible as 'labour' rather than a naturalised feminine attribute.

The film opens with a shot of an alarm clock ringing and Bindu waking up in the early morning, indicating that for women, the day breaks earlier. The following scenes trace her unending circuit of domestic labour: milking the cow, cleaning its shed, washing clothes by hand, washing vessels, and supervising her daughter's studies. The next day breaks, and the cycle repeats, pointing at the repetitive nature of household work.

When Bindu complains about the malfunctioning washing machine and grinder, Sugunan dismisses her by saying that the women of older times managed without such machines. This remark indicates a highly problematic nostalgia for pretechnological womanhood, contrasted with the "modern woman" who "just needs to press the switch and watch." He also adds that this use of the machines is the cause for increased c-section deliveries in women nowadays, suggesting that the use of machines has rendered it unproductive.

The conversations between Sugunan and Bindu reflect the paradoxical positioning of women's labour within middle-class Kerala society. When Sugunan, who works as an overseer at the KSEB, contends that Bindu knows nothing about the amount of work that he has to do at the office, she responds that even she does a lot of work, but it never gets any attention. Sugunan dismisses this claim by saying a cultural refrain that most Malayali men use in their conversations with their wives: "What huge work do you actually have in here?". This indicates the middle-class ideology that both demands and devalues women's domestic labour.

The narrative trigger for the withdrawal of Bindu from the household duties occurs when Sugunan refuses to let her visit her ailing mother, resulting in her mother's death before she could visit her. This leads her to rethink her roles as the "giver" for the family whereas she is denied even the most basic rights of an individual. Her ensuing declaration of "voluntary retirement" from domestic duties, makes her husband wonder whether she has lost her mind. The film's interval tagline- "some rest for this housewife" frames Bindu's refusal as a temporary relief rather than a political statement. It is only then that Sugunan is confronted with the magnitude of all the tasks performed by Bindu. Sugunan asks his daughter, "Is your mother playing harthai inside the house?". "If she can't do household work, she shouldn't have married; she should have gone to the ashram instead."

Sugunan's friends attribute Bindu's behaviour to sexual frustration, suggesting that her unfulfilled sexual desires are the root cause of all this drama. When Sugunan attempts to initiate intimacy, Bindu sharply responds, "Did you think that I am longing to share bed with you? I have stopped all duties of a wife, and 'sex' is also a part of it". Enraged by this, Sugunan beats her, prompting Bindu to leave and return to her parental home. He then appoints a male domestic worker but the man misbehaves with their daughter and is promptly dismissed. Determined to prove himself, Sugunan takes on the household chores alone. Before sweeping, he discreetly checks to ensure no one is watching—highlighting the stigma attached to men performing domestic work. His attempts at housework are framed comically, as he repeatedly fails to complete the tasks effectively.

The film also mocks women who pursue professional roles. Tara Madam, Sugunan's superior officer, is depicted as someone who neglects her official duties in favour of participating in women's empowerment campaigns, thereby reinforcing the film's dismissive stance toward working women. In Bindu's absence, Sugunan gives their daughter a mobile phone, which she misuses and becomes involved in a romantic relationship with the neighbour's son. But when they go out together, another gang attempts to molest Anju, and Sugunan saves her from them. The situation leads to a traumatic experience for Sugunan, who begins to suffer from hallucinations, imagining that everyone around him poses a threat to his daughter. As his condition worsens, he is admitted to a mental hospital.

The psychiatrist advises Sugunan to stop treating his wife like a servant, yet reinforces patriarchal notions by asserting that women are the natural peacekeepers of the family and that only a mother can truly understand her daughter. To Bindu, the psychiatrist delivers a moral lecture, accusing her of committing a grave mistake by leaving her teenage daughter alone. He explains that Sugunan sought maternal affection from his wife, which she failed to provide, and that his habit of finding fault in everything she did stemmed from this emotional void. "Why did you leave your husband—because he didn't pay you for housework?" he asks, concluding that a husband's love and protection are a woman's greatest assets.

The film closes with a reconciliatory ending: when their daughter pleads that she needs both her parents, Bindu and Sugunan reunite, restoring the traditional family order that the narrative ultimately upholds. In the film's final moments, Sugunan is seen serving tea to his daughter as she reads the newspaper. Glancing at the gold rate section, he asks Bindu what she would like as a gift. She replies softly that she doesn't want anything—only his presence. The closing shot features a functioning washing machine, mixer grinder, and a new pressure cooker, symbolising the restoration of domestic harmony and the reinstatement of traditional household order.

3. NJANDUKALUDE NAATTIL ORIDAVELA: ILLNESS AS RUPTURE IN THE DUAL LABOUR

Njandukalude Naattil Oridavela (2017), directed by Althaf Salim, offers a gentler yet equally incisive portrayal of disrupted reproductive labour, this time through the figure of a working mother who is temporarily withdraws from her domestic role when she falls sick. Based on Chandramathi's autobiographical writing about her cancer journey, the film tracks the diagnosis and treatment of Sheela Chacko (Shanthi Krishna), and her family's evolving response to her illness. The labour that Sheela does for the family—cooking, cleaning, caring for her husband and his elderly father—is woven so seamlessly into daily life that it becomes invisible—until she is diagnosed with cancer. From the beginning itself, the film establishes that the household functions only because of Sheela's labour. It points out men's expectations of being cared for, disregarding women's efforts.

The moment of diagnosis functions as a disruption of both narrative flow and household rhythm. As Sheela begins chemotherapy, she withdraws from her usual activities. She makes use of her state of being ill to bring changes to the patriarchal setup of the family. In a scene where Kurien Chacko (Sheela's son) asks her to wash his clothes, Sheela refuses to do so, and instead asks him to start washing his clothes from then on. We also see Sarah Chacko (Sheela's daughter) asking her mother to make some tea for her as it is time for her to leave for work. Sheela refuses this demand as well and commands her to make tea by herself. We see a reluctant Kurien dumping his clothes into the washing machine, and Sarah grudgingly making some tea for herself. In another scene, Sheela asks Chacko to clean up his cigarette buds, a request that visibly takes him aback, suggesting his unfamiliarity or discomfort with performing such a domestic task. In a scene where Sheela declares that she is all set to fight a war with the disease, she is seen as carrying a spatula, indicating that she is in the midst of cooking something. Sheela ends the conversation by handing over the spatula that she was carrying to Chacko. The spatula here could be conceived of as a metaphor/symbol of household work. This action could be read as Sheela's way of saying that all the household work is to be handled by Chacko from then on. Sheela is here trying to make them realise the injustice in the division of labour inside the house. This symbolic gesture aims at making the home a gender-sensitive space. As Sheela becomes a care recipient rather than a caregiver, the film reverses the usual gendered flow of care, compelling the family members to relearn roles they had taken for granted.

However, Sheela soon resumes the role of the cook at the home, although the other role of taking care of the father-in-law is now the duty of the newly appointed male nurse, Yesudas. The presence of the male nurse and his paid labour further emphasises the unpaid labour of Sheela. This male nurse confidently states his needs for food and lodging. He insists that he won't just be a guard when the family plans any tour. This is an indication of the practice in Kerala culture where women are often expected to stay back with the elderly parents or ailing family members when other members

of the family plan to travel. Although it indicates that there is a possibility of asserting one's rights when it is paid labour, at a later point, like Sheela, we see him also compromising on his terms. For instance, he is seen carrying the clothes to wash, and the younger daughter then asks him to wash hers too, showing how the class and probably the age subverts the gendered labour as she is the youngest member of the family. In one of the earlier scenes, we also see her asking her mother to iron her clothes. We can also argue that the daughter's attitude reveals how the idea of domestic labour as a woman's duty is imbibed by her, indicating that these values get transferred irrespective of one's gender.

The film clearly shows how married women in the family still do most of the housework even if they are working women. Arlie Russel Hochschild's concept of 'the second shift' offers a useful framework to understand how the film portrays the burden of dual responsibilities of the working women. In her seminal work *The Second Shift*, Hochschild talks about how working women shoulder a double burden, managing both professional responsibilities and household duties. Interestingly, the men, Kurien and Tony Edayadi, both know how to cook because they've lived, at some point, away from home for studies or work. However, they never cook at home and are always seen sitting at the dining table while the women prepare meals. There are specific moments that highlight this. When Rachel says she needs to learn cooking before she gets married, Kurien blabbers that he knows cooking and that she should just marry him. Similarly, Tony proudly says he used to cook and even wash his inner clothes when he lived in Bangalore, claiming he doesn't like to rely on anyone. Yet, when his wife Mary plans to be away for two months, he seems completely lost about who will take care of him, their daughter, and his mother.

Although the film highlights how the double labour is taken for granted, the disruption of which due to her illness unsettles the family dynamic. The moments of frustration and anger are shown only when she is sick, and one may also anticipate that she would resume the labour once she recovers from the illness. If the disruption of labour here is dictated by the illness, in Malayalam cinema, there have been attempts to portray women characters who display agency to resist the burden of intensive domestic labour conferred on them, as in *Veruthe Oru Bharya* (2008).

4. WOMEN'S AGENCY AND WALK OUT IN THE GREAT INDIAN KITCHEN

Jeo Baby's *The Great Indian Kitchen* (referred to as *TGIK* henceforth) is perhaps one of the most striking recent cinematic articulations of social reproductive labour and its disruption. Set almost entirely within the domestic space of a newly married woman's marital home, the film uses repetition, silence, and sensory excess to highlight the exhausting monotony and invisibility of domestic labour performed by women. At the beginning of the film, the unnamed protagonist (Nimisha Sajayan) enters what appears to be a Nair⁶ middle-class household. However, as the days progress, she is increasingly burdened with unpaid domestic work: cooking elaborate meals, cleaning greasy kitchen floors, waiting to eat until the men finish eating, and even dealing with a leaking pipe in the kitchen. The camera lingers on the mundane chores with deliberate, almost meditative slowness—cooking meals, scrubbing vessels, washing clothes. This repetition visually and affectively constructs the ceaseless cycle of reproductive labour, dramatising what is usually taken for granted.

At the same time, the film also projects the disgust of the female protagonist while indulging in tasks like cleaning the dining table, dishes, discarding the wastewater, and cleaning the toilet. All the work done by the female protagonist in the household is depicted in real time, drawing attention to its time-consuming nature and denying the viewer the usual cinematic shortcuts that render such work invisible. This durational aesthetic creates what Laura U Marks calls a 'haptic visuality'- use of images that encourages the viewers to engage with the screen not just visually, but in a bodily and sensual level, evoking the textures, surfaces and material presence of what is seen (162-65). The camera lingers on the repetitive actions of cooking, scrubbing, cleaning and hence makes the viewer develop a tactile relationship with the image on screen, thereby evoking the textures, smells and exhaustion of unpaid domestic work. In a sense, the film does not show the intensity of domestic labour, instead, it forces the viewer to feel its drudgery. There are also multiple shots of the same tasks that are being carried out every day on different days by different women, indicating the repetitiveness and monotony of household chores. In the beginning itself, we are introduced to the character of the mother-in-law and the tedious work that she does in the household. It is the character of the mother-in-law who shares the major workload. The burden falls upon her when she is asked to go and serve her daughter, who lives abroad and is expecting her due

⁶ A historically dominant upper caste-community in Kerala, South India.

date. Mothering and taking care of one's grandchildren is also expected from elderly women, and it is another layer of unpaid labour that the cinema addresses.

The language of the film leaves the viewer with no choice but to become complicit in the woman's daily drudgery, experiencing the tedium and physicality of work that is neither acknowledged nor appreciated. The absence of a background score, the minimal dialogue, and the static camera collectively heighten the sense of suffocation. The kitchen here is no longer a nurturing feminine space—it has become a site of systemic exploitation and emotional erasure. As the film progresses, the woman begins to silently resist this labour. Her first acts of rebellion are minor—delaying tasks, expressing irritation, and showing disgust. Eventually, she starts refusing to comply. Her resistance climaxes in a moment of protest when she serves the guest wastewater from the kitchen in place of tea. She also splashes the wastewater into the face of her husband and father-in-law. The kitchen wastewater becomes symbolic of her resistance. Her final act is to walk out of the house, leaving behind the world that has confined her to unacknowledged servitude.

Importantly, *TGIK* reclaims the kitchen from the romanticised figure of the all-sacrificing mother or wife and transforms it into a contested political space. The protagonist's refusal challenges the cultural scripts that equate femininity with self-effacement. It also questions the normalcy of women's unpaid labour in Indian households, showing that the family is not a 'natural' unit but a deeply structured site of gendered inequality. Cinematically, Jeo Baby subverts dominant visual codes. Women are usually objectified through the *male gaze* in mainstream cinema, but here, the gaze is domestic, repetitive, and claustrophobic. The labour of the woman becomes the film's visual and narrative core. Even the title—*The Great Indian Kitchen*—is ironic; it is not a celebration but a critique of the institution that demands unpaid, unending, and unrecognised work from women in the name of tradition.

Moreover, the film refrains from providing resolution in conventional terms. There are several moments of resistance and articulation from her side. For instance, he forces her to engage in monotonous sexual 'labour' every night, and she openly states it is painful and also suggests her desire to have some foreplay before the act. In another scene in the restaurant, when he shows table manners, she points out his cold attitude of not following them at home. In both cases, he responds to her in a dismissive and arrogant manner. However, realising that nothing is going to change, she decides to end the relationship and leaves the house. This radical exit echoes Silvia Federici's call for refusal as a feminist political strategy: to refuse the terms of unpaid labour, to refuse the domesticity that sustains capitalism, and to imagine other ways of being.

By showing what happens when a woman refuses to work, *TGIK* not only renders reproductive labour visible—it makes its withdrawal a powerful act of subversion. The disruption caused by her refusal is both material and symbolic, shaking the foundations of domestic order. But, the climax of the film reiterates that the system is bound to be continued through the image of another woman in the same costume as the former, as the second wife of the husband. The omnipresence of this unjust social reproductive labour is made explicit through the director's choice of leaving the protagonists unnamed.

5. CONTRAST BETWEEN PAID AND UNPAID DOMESTIC LABOUR

In a scene in *Veruthe Oru Bharya*, Bindu warns her daughter to study hard and get employment, failing which she would end up like her mother, who is now reduced to a maid who is not even entitled to a salary. Bindu says that employment as a paid domestic house help would at least guarantee monthly remuneration. This juxtaposition between waged domestic service and her own unwaged reproductive labour constitutes a moment of ideological critique.

The film *The Great Indian Kitchen* also addresses a similar juxtaposition through the conversation of the female protagonist and the Dalit domestic worker. The unnamed female protagonist's unwaged domestic labour is contrasted with the paid domestic service of the Dalit female character. The film puts forth a perspective on labour from the vantage point of a Dalit house help, Usha, the only named character in the film. The scholars have argued about the unpaid labour of the protagonist and the underpaid labour of the house help, noting how the film generalised the experience of upper caste women as that of all women and how the Dalit woman's commodified labour provides the protagonist a sense of economic freedom (Krishna and Kadavath, 2025; Herbert, 2021). However, it is only in emergency situations (when the female protagonist is menstruating and forbidden from doing the household chores and the context in which the protagonist's mother-in-law is getting prepared for her foreign trip) that she is allowed to cook in the kitchen. In a scene, Usha reveals that she works even during her days of menstruation, indicating that leisure itself becomes a privilege as the lower caste woman is not entitled to it even when her body is in need of it. Usha also mentions there was a time when

her mother was not allowed to enter their house and was entrusted with the domestic chores outside the house, highlighting the caste practice in the past. However, the caste of the Kitchen resurfaces when the men in the house take a vow to go on the Sabarimala pilgrimage. Then, the menstruated woman and the Dalit woman are not allowed to do any task at home, and it is their women relatives who take up the duty in their place. Hence, we contend that the film uses the Dalit character to mark caste in the kitchen space.

6. DINING, LEISURE AND ASSISTANCE

A common thread that one finds in the selected movies is the recurring images of women's relentless labour and busy movements in the kitchen juxtaposed with the privileged and dominant presence of the men in the dining space as well as their indulgence in leisure activities. *Njandukalude Naattil Oridavela* also shows similar instances wherein the men assume that it is their right to demand assistance from the women even for minor tasks. In the scene where we get introduced to Chacko who is in the toilet and is frustrated as he cannot light the cigarette, he calls out loudly and asks Sheela to prepare tea. This shows he expects her to be constantly available to fulfil his domestic needs, regardless of his or her current activity. It highlights a lack of consideration for her time or other tasks, emphasising the gendered division of labour.

In *TGIK* we find that the mother-in-law habitually hands over the toothbrush along with the toothpaste to the father-in-law every morning while he is reading the newspaper sitting in the armchair⁷. She is also expected to hand over his footwear¹¹ every time he leaves the house. The film also portrays how the daughter-in-law takes over these duties in the absence of the mother-in-law. Every scene where women's labour is depicted is juxtaposed with scenes depicting moments of relaxation and self-care, which is a luxury that only men can afford, as far as Indian households are concerned.

Other than the serving duty and the disgusting labour of cleaning the table and the plates used by men, with the leftovers done by the female protagonists, the dining table is used as a symbol of male power and the only space where the family discuss important matters. *Njandukalude Naattil Oridavela* strategically utilises the dining table as the setting for key family dialogues, making it the central location where all members converge for meaningful conversations. The recurring imagery of the home – both its exterior and interior spaces, particularly the dining table – throughout the film—from the 'Friday out' sequence to scenes within the house and even the men's conversations during the birthday party—reiterates the centrality of this domestic space in the characters' daily lives. Even in one of the climax scenes in which Kurien imagines her death and the first Christmas afterwards, we see the women in the family happily preparing meals and setting the dinner table.

In *TGIK*, women in the house are not seen having food by sitting along with the men at home. In fact, they are eating from the same table that is filled with the leftovers and spit-out food. The scenes in which we find her dining along with the men are when they are invited for a feast after the wedding and when they dine out at a restaurant. Here, it is important to note that when the young daughter of the hosts is asked to join them for food, the mother refuses the request, saying that she would eat along with her.

In all of these films, we find that although in the modern Kerala context the dining space becomes an inclusive space (with the help of architectural innovations), it is still a hierarchical space.

7. CONCLUSION

An intersectional reading of these films foregrounds the reproductive labour of women characters from various social locations—such as upper-middle-class Christian (Sheela), middle-class (*Veruthe oru Bharya*), and upper-caste middle class (the unnamed protagonist in *TGIK*)—engaged in different modes of labour (double, unpaid) and its diverse physical, emotional, and sexual dimensions. All of them are bound to reproductive labour, and it is only in the film *TGIK*

⁷ A similar visual grammar is employed in *Elippathayam* (1981), wherein the recurring image of Unni, the male protagonist, is almost always seen as glued to the armchair, which functions as a symbol of an inert form of masculinity.

that one finds a woman breaking these conventions and setting herself free by choosing the career of a classical dance instructor, another labour that involves physical movements.

As already discussed, reinstating another woman in the place of unnamed protagonist in *TGIK*, the imagined climax scene of *Njandukalute Nattil Oridavela* where we find the family members in the joyous mood in the absence of Sheela, and the visual images of the father figure and the son struggling to do the household chores after the death of the female protagonist reiterates that reproductive labour is the necessary evil of a “happy” patriarchal family. The show will run with or without the reproductive labour of these female protagonists, and the other female members in the family would take up the labour while men will continue to enjoy their privilege. However, these films could be read as feminist films as they mark moments of disruption in reproductive labour, unsettling the household.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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