

Beyond Domestic Boundaries: A look through Evolving and Emotional Kitchen Spaces in Malayalam Cinema

Jahnvi Nair¹ and Dr. Pushpam M²

¹Research Scholar, Dept. of Sociology, University of Kerala, Kariavattom Campus, Trivandrum - 695581

²Supervisor, Porfessor, Dept. of Sociology, University of Kerala, Kariavattom Campus, Trivandrum – 695581

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ABSTRACT

Regarded traditionally as domain of domesticity, kitchens in Malayalam films extended its roots beyond functional settings by becoming dynamic spaces that paves ways for character growth, familial dynamics and shifting of societal values. The early portrayals in cinema often strengthened gender roles, representing kitchen as a space for 'women's' duties and a representation of her 'identity' within the family structure. The gradual evolvement of Malayalam cinema made kitchens emerge as surroundings where characters especially women to be opinionated and strong by navigating themselves from personal struggles and confront social expectations. The evolution portrayed men in kitchen and household with more accuracy and precision by bringing in characters who cooks and cleans and make a living out of cooking. Filmmakers from Malayalam employ kitchen as a space or a domestic sphere to convey nuanced emotional depth, challenge traditional gender norms and comment on the intersections of family and identity as they serve as critical sites for emotional, social and cultural narratives. They act as spaces that perceives a lot of emotions. This paper is a look through of few stories that convey diverse emotions such as happiness, curiosity, frustration and survival while exploring the evolution of the kitchen as a non-gendered space in Malayalam cinema. It analyses how kitchen spaces are represented across films, irrespective of gender by positioning the kitchen as a dynamic and transformative social centre.

Keywords: Kitchen, Malayalam Cinema, Cooking, Emotions, Narratives, Gender

Introduction

Cinema has long functioned as a cultural archive through which societies narrate everyday life, social relations and ideological transformations. Within this visual and narrative play, domestic spaces occupy a crucial role by serving as intimate sites where power, emotion and social norms are continuously negotiated. In Malayalam cinema, one such domestic space; the kitchen transcends its functional identity to rises above its functional purpose by emerging as a symbolic space where cultural, social and gender dynamics of family and other social institutions are intricately woven into the narrative fabric. Rather than being a mere backdrop for routine household activities, the kitchen operates as a miniature copy of familial relationships, gendered labour, cultural expectations and shifting social values within Kerala's socio-cultural context.

Historically, Malayalam cinema has been deeply invested in portraying the everyday lives of ordinary people. Family-oriented narratives formed its thematic backbone. Through these narratives, traditionally, kitchens have been depicted as a feminised space which is closely associated with women's domestic responsibilities and sacrifice. It is considered as a space to fulfil the moral duties. Early Malayalam films, especially those produced from the 1950s through the 1970s, the kitchen spaces largely strengthened standardizing gender roles. Women were frequently placed within the frames of kitchens by labelling her as dutiful wives, nurturing and self-effacing caregivers and responsible and gentle mothers. A naturalising domestic labour as an extension of feminine identity can be viewed here. These representations mirrored the prevailing socio-cultural expectations in Kerala, where women's value was often measured through their dedication to family and household management.

Over the years, increased literacy, women's education, migration and shifts in family structures strengthened Kerala's broader social transformations. Thus, symbolic meanings attached to domestic spaces began to change and its reflections were portrayed by Malayalam cinema. Towards late 20th century, filmmakers increasingly employed the kitchen rather than mere domestic routine to as a site of emotional tension, introspection and negotiation. Kitchens became spaces where unspoken conflicts surfaced, generational differences were articulated and emotional labour was submitted to visibility. This shift reflected to a broader cinematic movement from idealised domestic harmony towards more layered, realistic portrayals of family life and households.

The transformation of Kitchen's in Malayalam cinema is significantly particular in its engagement with gender dynamics. When earlier films positioned women as silent anchors of domestic stability the later narratives began to explore women's agency, dissatisfaction, resistance and self-discovery within the very space that once symbolised confinement. Thus, evolving into a paradoxical space, the kitchen simultaneously allowed filmmakers to subtly

critique patriarchal norms. Moments of solitude, confrontation and emotional breakdown staged within kitchens offer insight into women's inner lives, revealing how domestic spaces shape, constrain and occasionally enable self-expression. Contemporary Malayalam cinema further expands the symbolic potential of kitchen spaces by situating them within changing familial and social structures. With the rise of narratives centred on nuclear families, ageing parents, sibling relationships and a non-traditional household, increasingly kitchens started to function as shared spaces of interaction across gender and generational lines. Most of the recent films, cooking and household labour become sites of bonding, healing, emotional reconciliation, particularly among male characters. A challenge to the rigid gendering of domestic work happens here.

This article examines the evolving representation of kitchen spaces in Malayalam cinema over the years by placing its key focus on to the 21st century films by situating these portrayals within Kerala's shifting socio-cultural landscape. By analysing selected films, an investigation of how kitchens function as emotionally charged narrative spaces that reflect transformations in gender roles, family dynamics and cultural values. The article also argues that the kitchen in Malayalam cinema is not merely a domain of domesticity but a dynamic, contested space that reflects the complexities of Kerala's evolving cultural identity and a change in gender stereotyping associated with Kitchens in households. The article intends to explore how filmmakers employ the kitchen to depict intimacy and distance, care and conflict, continuity and change.

Existing research and articles on Malayalam cinema have extensively examined themes of social realism, gender representation, family structures and women's subjectivity. Studies have also engaged with domesticity and the private sphere, majorly focusing on women's roles within the household and the ideological construction of family in cinematic narratives. Feminist film studies have foregrounded the depiction of women's labour, sacrifice and resistance, while sociological analyses have explored how Malayalam cinema reflects Kerala's socio-cultural transformations. Studies addressing kitchens functioning as uniquely gendered, emotionally charged and ideologically loaded spaces where power relations, labour divisions and unspoken conflicts are enacted in everyday life.

Early Portrayals and Evolving Narratives

Kitchen spaces in early Malayalam Cinema were predominantly portrayed as fixed, feminised domains that reinforced normative gender roles and idealised notions of domestic order. They extensively portrayed women as homemakers, strengthening traditional roles and idealizing domestic settings. The kitchen and household chores that forms an ideal home were symbols of a woman's duty to her family, reflecting the cultural expectation of women to prioritize family needs above personal aspirations. '*Veruthe oru Bharya*' released in 2008 projects kitchen as a quietly repressive yet emotionally stimulating domestic space where gendered labour and

imbalances in marital relations unfold through routine. Here repetitive acts of cooking, serving, and cleaning frame Bindu's emotional exhaustion and social invisibility, exposing how unpaid domestic work becomes naturalised within marriage. Through silences and everyday interactions, the kitchen emerges as a site of frustration, endurance, and suppressed desire, while also enabling Chandran's gradual self-realisation as he confronts his complicity in normalised patriarchy. By grounding its critique in realism and emotional restraint, the film positions the kitchen as a crucial narrative space that reveals the affective costs of domesticity and anticipates later, more explicit feminist interventions in Malayalam cinema.

Female characters were almost consistently positioned within the boundaries of kitchens as caregivers and moral anchors of the family. They were restricted as mere representatives for performing repetitive domestic labour with little narrative emphasis on individuality or emotional inwardness. Women depicted in these films who confined within the walls of Kitchen were dressed up in mere clothes that showed their stereotyping of helplessness and vulnerability. *Ponnamma* (Adimakal,1969), *Balamani* (Nandanam,2002) are classic examples of tying them in such constrains. Kitchens were considered the happy place for a woman to act herself and free, but looking from the sociological lens, a patriarchal emphasizing of submissiveness can be viewed and identified. Male characters in contrast, remained largely absent from kitchens, establishing the rigid division in gender roles.

The emergence of film societies and feminist movements made filmmakers rethink cinematic patterns thus leading representations of woman characters to slowly start evolving. Kitchens reinforced gender roles. Women portrayals on screen became more opinionated and stronger. The kitchen spaces in cinematic narratives started reflecting personal struggles and social expectations. A shift happened towards gender inclusivity in household chores. From being represented as spaces for women's duties and identity and a symbol of the family structure and domestic expectations, Cinema slowly changed the story settings by adapting male characters to these '*untouched*' spaces. In contemporary Malayalam cinema, the kitchen increasingly appears as a site of negotiation rather than submission. The kitchens and household chores started being replaced by Men. They were portrayed as equal labour sharing partners. Film makers later used Kitchen as a space for emotional depth and storytelling from a non-gendered perspective. It became spaces of bonding, friendships, shared responsibilities, men taking up once said to women's duties. A slow shift and challenges were imposed upon traditional gender norms. Artists and film experts supported this and gradually it started to represent the intersections of family, identity and social expectations. Films began interrogating the naturalization of domestic work. Women characters navigate their struggles, confront familial expectations and reconfigure their identities within kitchen spaces. The camera's gaze shifts to rather than romanticizing sacrifice, it critiques systemic inequities embedded in everyday routines.

Men portrayed in cinematic kitchens were either single, divorced, deals with sick people in the house or the only bread winner of the family. Narratives later changed this stereotypical concept of placing a man in distress to more accurate portrayals of men cooking and cleaning. A shift from 'it's a women's duty' to a shared form of human responsibility was injected to the idea of spectators. Cinema also generalised cooking as a nongendered way of money making by introducing male characters who make a living out of cooking which broke the traditional gender stereotypes in domestic settings. The kitchen thus becomes a political space: a miniature where larger debates about autonomy, labour division and gender justice unfold.

In its contemporary form, the kitchen in Malayalam cinema operates as a narrative hub. It is no longer merely a background location but a dynamic space that intersects with class, caste, migration, and modernity. Urban apartments, traditional *tharavadu* kitchens, commercial culinary spaces and migrant kitchens each embody distinct socio-cultural textures. Through these varied representations, filmmakers' comment on evolving family structures, economic transitions and shifting moral codes. The kitchen becomes a lens to examine the emotional negotiations within marriage, intergenerational conflicts, aspirations for independence, survival strategies in precarious conditions and reimagining of masculinity and femininity. It simultaneously also functions as a repository of tradition, theatre of emotional expression, site of invisible labour, platform for resistance and a non-gendered social centre. Through this evolution, Malayalam cinema repositions the kitchen beyond domestic boundaries, transforming it into a critical site for exploring identity, power and social change.

Emotional Spectrum in Kitchens

In Malayalam cinema, kitchens functions as an affective microcosm where a wide spectrum of emotions is articulated through everyday acts of cooking, serving and cleaning. Happiness and intimacy are often conveyed through shared culinary moments through meals prepared for loved ones, festive cooking or quiet companionship when and where food becomes a language of care and belonging. Such scenes frame the kitchen as a site of emotional warmth, anchoring familial cohesion and interpersonal bonds.

Simultaneously, kitchens are also charged with tension, fatigue and unspoken resentment. Repetitive domestic labour, silences between spouses and moments of interruption or surveillance transform the same space into one of frustration and emotional exhaustion. In several narratives, the kitchen becomes the setting where women's suppressed desires and constrained agency surface through pauses, gestures or breakdowns that reveals the psychological cost of gendered expectations tied to domesticity.

Contemporary films expand this emotional register by presenting kitchens as spaces of negotiation, resistance and redefinition. The presence of men cooking, shared domestic labour and professional culinary identities reframes the kitchen as a non-gendered arena of survival, aspiration and selfhood. In films such as *The Great Indian Kitchen*, the accumulation of mundane kitchen routines exposes structural patriarchy, while in *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* the kitchen intermittently oscillates between obedience and insubordination. Across these representations, the kitchen emerges not merely as a physical setting but as an emotionally drenched narrative of holding joy, curiosity, anger, endurance and transformation within its boundaries.

Consistently engaging with emotional realism, Malayalam Cinema often situates within everyday domestic environments. Among these, the kitchen emerges as a particularly potent cinematic space, the one that registers a wide emotional spectrum ranging from warmth and intimacy to alienation and survival anxiety. Reading kitchen spaces as affective landscape, it allows us to understand how Malayalam films construct emotional narratives through spatial politics. In several films, the kitchen becomes a site of familial bonding and relational warmth.

In '*Kumbalangi Nights*' (2019) directed by Madhu C Narayanan, the kitchen appears as a familial space that is shared. Here cooking and eating together symbolise vulnerability. It stands as a space of care and recovery from trauma. It is a symbolic area that represents transformation through familial bonding in various emotional spectrums. As a critique of hegemonic masculinity, *Kumbalangi Nights* disrupts conventional cinematic tropes that position women as the primary occupants of kitchen spaces. Instead, the film relocates men to the centre of domestic labour, particularly cooking, thereby reconfiguring the kitchen as a site of male vulnerability, care and emotional growth. By portraying men who cook, clean and nurture, the narrative dismantles rigid gender binaries and frames domestic participation not as emasculation but as a marker of psychological growth and ethical responsibility. In doing so, the film reframes masculinity as relational, emotionally expressive and grounded in shared domesticity rather than dominance. Being a film that gives ground for drama, there is a contrast between two Kitchens. The kitchen in Shammi's (Fahadh Faasil) house represents toxic masculinity and rigid gender roles, women are expected to cook and serve, reinforcing traditional patriarchal structures and Shammi, the self-proclaimed "*complete man*," controls his household but never engages in cooking or cleaning, emphasizing his dominance whereas on the other hand cooking becomes a gender-neutral and shared activity, breaking stereotypes about masculinity.

Frustration, Exhaustion and Invisible Labour

One of the most powerful emotional registers associated with kitchen spaces in Malayalam cinema is frustration. The repetitive rhythms of chopping, stirring and cleaning often signify the

monotony of unpaid domestic labour. In *The Great Indian Kitchen*, the kitchen becomes a claustrophobic arena that visually and narratively foregrounds exhaustion and systemic inequality. The camera's lingering focus on routine labour exposes the emotional and physical toll of patriarchal expectations, the kitchen is not comforting but suffocating.

More than just a domestic setting, Jeo Baby's *The Great Indian Kitchen* released in 2021 serves as a powerful metaphor for patriarchy, gender roles and societal expectations in Indian households. This film endures women labour in the name of tradition by making the feeling of a trap by placing cooking as a job and the protagonist confined to the kitchen, expected to cook, clean and serve the men in the family. Jeo Baby highlights the endless cycle of household work by portraying it as a form of silent servitude. The use of sound of sizzling oil, clanking utensils and water dripping creates an immersive experience, reinforcing the monotonous nature of her labor. While men in the house enjoy meals without acknowledging the effort behind them, the husband's refusal to help or understand her struggles reflects deep-rooted patriarchy and the effects of conditioning. In its concluding movement, '*The Great Indian Kitchen*' traces a gradual transformation of the kitchen from a site of routine and confinement to a symbolic space of resistance and liberation. The shift is not merely spatial but ideological: the kitchen ceases to function as a neutral domestic setting and is revealed as a structure embedded in gendered oppression. By foregrounding the protagonist's refusal to sustain invisible labour, the film redefines the kitchen as a contested arena where resistance emerges against normalized patriarchal expectations.

Curiosity and Self-Discovery

The kitchen also becomes a space of curiosity where characters experiment, learn and reconfigure identities. Particularly in narratives where cooking becomes choice, the emotional tone moves toward self-exploration. Culinary engagement in contemporary narratives, often signals aspiration and transformation. Characters who enter kitchens by choice rather than compulsion embody evolving subjectivities. The kitchen thus becomes a site where gendered expectations are unsettled, allowing individuals to negotiate autonomy. The 2014 release '*Om Shanti Oshana*' directed by Jude Anthany Joseph and *Spanish Masala* by Lal Jose in 2012 explored cooking in more positive way by showcasing how kitchen transforms into spaces of experiment. In these two films, the representation of kitchen spaces moves beyond their conventional framing as sites of oppression and gender stereotyping. Instead, the kitchen is reimagined as a space of happiness, curiosity and shared experience. It becomes a setting where relationships are nurtured, creativity unfolds and emotional connections deepen.

In *Spanish Masala*, through Dileep's character, director Lal Jose tries to embody a reconfigured masculinity through his relationship with cooking. As a professional chef, his presence in the

kitchen is not incidental but central to his identity and a reason to make a living. Culinary expertise becomes a marker of aspiration, mobility and emotional depth. The kitchen is not feminized labour but a space of skill, discipline and intercultural negotiation. His engagement with food bridges Kerala and Spain, positioning cooking as creative labour and global connectivity rather than domestic obligation. In this context, the kitchen reflects ambition and self-fashioning, thereby destabilizing conventional gender binaries.

In contrast, in *Om Shanti Oshana*, Pooja's mother's character represents a more traditional yet affectively warm embodiment of kitchen space. Annie; Pooja's mother's culinary practices move beyond routine domesticity and enter the realm of experimentation and self-expression. Her willingness to try new recipes, modify flavours and innovate within the kitchen reflects an autonomous engagement with food rather than a mechanical fulfilment of 'her' duty. Cooking becomes a space where she exercises choice and creativity. Her moments of self-appreciation complimenting her own dishes is notable and taking visible pride in her culinary outcomes signals an important shift in representation. Instead of embodying silent, self-effacing maternal labour, she articulates satisfaction and confidence in her work. This self-affirmation subtly challenges the expectation that domestic labour must remain invisible and unacknowledged. Her kitchen, functions as a site of spirited experimentation and personal agency. Choosing to cook according to her preferences and sustaining enthusiasm for innovation, she transforms the domestic sphere into a space of joy, curiosity and self-validation.

Happiness and Intimacy

In Malayalam cinema, the kitchen frequently operates as an affective nucleus where happiness and intimacy are cultivated through everyday practices. Far from being a mere domestic backdrop, it becomes a relational space where emotional warmth is enacted through shared labour, conversation and food. Happiness in kitchen spaces often emerges through collective participation by cutting vegetables together, tasting dishes, playful teasing or gathering around a meal. These gestures produce a sense of solidity and belonging. In numerous films, the kitchen functions as a venue of familial intimacy and emotional warmth. Acts of shared cooking and casual exchanges around the household signify relational consistency and a sense of security. The sensory dimensions of food, visuals of rising steam, enduring aromas and the ambient sounds of culinary activity are cinematically mobilized to evoke nostalgia, continuity and belonging.

Intimacy is constructed through proximity and shared vulnerability. Cooking together requires coordination, trust and attentiveness. It becomes a subtle language of care. *Salt N' Pepper* directed by Aashiq Abu (2011) depicts culinary exchange mediates romantic longing and companionship. The act of preparing and sharing food bridges emotional distance, allowing

characters to express affection indirectly yet profoundly. *Salt N' Pepper* used food and kitchen interactions to explore romance, companionship and emotional rediscovery. The kitchen functions as an intimate communicative sphere in *Salt N' Pepper*. Envisioned as an affectively rich space inhabited by true-hearted food lovers who delight in every stage of culinary creation, kitchen and cooking is framed as an enjoyable and joyful process rather than an imposed domestic task. The film's vibrant and sensorial depiction of food through its colours, textures and aromas transforms the kitchen into a lively aesthetic space that celebrates gourmet pleasure. At the narrative core lies the intimate relationship between food and human connection. Culinary conversations and shared tastes function as emotional bridges, enabling characters to experience personal growth and deep bonding.

Kalidasan's kitchen reflects his solitary and meticulously structured life. It is orderly, controlled and reflective; mirroring his emotional containment. In contrast, Maya's kitchen initially exists as an unseen and imagined space. Though not visually foregrounded in the same way, it symbolizes longing and emotional yearning. For Maya, cooking becomes a source of solace amid personal disappointments, allowing her to express care and vulnerability. Through this portrayal, *Salt N' Pepper* redefines the kitchen as a space of happiness, longing and emotional fulfilment, positioning it as an intimate refuge where relationships are nurtured and identities are gently reshaped.

'*Ustad Hotel*' (2012) directed by Anwar Rasheed, the kitchen operates as a space of intergenerational affection and ethical learning. Cooking transcends domestic labour and becomes a medium of love, cultural transmission and moral reflection. It represents traditional knowledge passed down through generation and gives emphasis to food as an art rooted in love and care. It also talks about how culinary practice is not reduced to technical skill but it also embodies inherited wisdom, affective labour and moral philosophy.

Through Kareemikka's mentorship, food is framed as an art rooted in compassion, dignity and embracing the marginalized by dissolving class boundaries through shared sustenance. Cooking is also feeding the hungry and the concept of "*food is for everyone*" extends beyond commerce and into social responsibility. For Faizi, the kitchen also functions as a space of self-realization and renovation. The kitchen slowly became a place to prove himself. Initially driven by ambition and global mobility, he gradually internalizes the ethical depth of culinary labour. The hotel kitchen becomes a proving ground where masculinity is reshaped not through dominance, but through humility, service and emotional maturation. The culinary space in *Ustad Hotel* operates simultaneously as a moral classroom and a site of personal transformation.

Cooking and kitchen spaces are closely tied to themes of aspiration, dignity and self-reinvention in *Vijay Superum Pournamiyum* directed by Jis Joy released in 2019. In contrast with earlier

cinematic contexts that limited the kitchen to gendered domesticity, this film situates culinary practice within the discourse of professional ambition and urban uncertainty. For Vijay, who struggles with unemployment and social expectation, the kitchen becomes more than a functional space. Culinary engagement is framed as skill-based labour rather than feminized domestic work and cooking signals compliance and flexibility in a rapidly shifting socio-economic environment. The act of preparing food aligns with the film's broader narrative of redefining success beyond conventional markers such as corporate employment or social prestige. The kitchen here is not oppressive, instead, it becomes a site of negotiation between survival and self-worth. It reflects middle-class anxieties and economic instability. *Vijay Superum Pournamiyum*, operates at the intersection of livelihood, aspiration and emotional grounding. The kitchen here transforms into a space where professional reinvention and relational stability coexist, reinforcing its evolution in Malayalam cinema from a static domestic backdrop to a dynamic socio-economic and psychological arena.

Conclusion

The emotional spectrum of Malayalam cinema when read through kitchen spaces reveals a layered affective architecture. The evolving representation of kitchen spaces in Malayalam cinema reflects a broader cultural reconfiguration of domesticity, gender and emotional life within Kerala's socio-social landscape. What once functioned as a fixed, feminised domain symbolising duty, sacrifice and silent endurance has gradually transformed into a dynamic narrative site charged with ideological, emotional and political meaning. The kitchen, in these cinematic trajectories, is no longer confined to its utilitarian function but as a site that operates as a symbolic miniature where labour, love, resistance, aspiration and identity intersect.

Early portrayals naturalised women's association with domestic labour, embedding the kitchen within patriarchal frameworks of obedience and moral responsibility. Subsequently narrative shifts exposed the emotional cost of such structures through films such as *The Great Indian Kitchen* where it foregrounded the monotony and invisibility of unpaid labour, revealing the kitchen as a site of systemic gendered oppression while simultaneously transforming it into a space of refusal and resistance as endurance evolves into assertion and detention gives way to ideological rupture.

Simultaneously, contemporary Malayalam cinema reimagines the kitchen as a non-gendered arena of care, creativity and collaboration. In *Kumbalangi Nights*, domestic participation reshapes masculinity by situating men within shared culinary labour, thereby challenging hegemonic notions of dominance. In *Salt N' Pepper*, the kitchen becomes an affective refuge where food mediates romance and companionship. *Ustad Hotel* elevates the kitchen into a moral classroom, positioning culinary practice as compassion, intergenerational knowledge and social

responsibility. Similarly, *Spanish Masala*, *Om Shanti Oshana* and *Vijay Superum Pournamiyum* frame cooking as aspiration, experimentation and professional reinvention, further destabilising rigid gender binaries.

Across these varied representations, the kitchen emerges as an emotionally layered and politically resonant space. It holds happiness through shared meals, intimacy through collaborative labour, curiosity through experimentation, frustration through invisible work, survival through economic resilience and transformation through negotiation and resistance. Its cinematic evolution mirrors Kerala's shifting family structures, changing gender relations and broader socio-cultural transitions.

Eventually, the kitchen in Malayalam cinema stands as more than a domestic interior and becomes a critical narrative terrain through which filmmakers interrogate power, articulate vulnerability and imagine alternative forms of relationality. By repositioning the kitchen beyond the confines of domestic duty, Malayalam cinema redefines it as a transformative social centre the one that captures the complexities of identity, emotion and cultural change in contemporary society.

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