

A Comparative Study of Lived Space of Chettiar Women vs. Lived Space of Sala in the Movie *Pirivom Sandhipom*: A Lefebvrian Perspective

L. Ramalakshmi¹ & Arulselvan. S.²

¹Research Scholar in the Dept. of Electronic Media & Mass Communication,
School of Media & Communication, Pondicherry University, Puducherry
(Asst. Professor, School of Media Technology & Communication,
Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Sagunthala R&D Institute of Science & Technology, Chennai)
Email address: ramalakshmi.l.lakshmanan@gmail.com

²Associate Professor, Dept. of Electronic Media & Mass Communication,
School of Media & Communication, Pondicherry University, Puducherry 605014.
Email address: arulselvan.senthivel@gmail.com

Abstract

Production of space can vary across cultures. Gender is a social factor that affects the lived space of women in patriarchal cultures. Spatial segregation produces social patterns and relationships. Imagination seeks to change and appropriate lived space, experienced by inhabitants, users, artists or creators who express in their work (Lefebvre, 1991). The ancestral homes of *Chettians*, a merchant community from South India, have an innermost zone designated for women. In the theoretical light of Lefebvre's Production of Spaces, the study aims to compare the lived space of women users of the ancestral home with that of the lived space of Sala, the female protagonist, in the Tamil movie *Pirivom Sandhipom*. Narrative inquiry with 7 *Chettiar* women and participant observation of the first author, were used to analyze their lived space. Critical Discourse Analysis was used to understand the narratives of Sala's lived space in the movie *Pirivom Sandhipom*. The researchers interpret how respondents ascribe meanings to their reality that is shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts in contrast to how it is represented in the film space. The axiological dimension of the research is thus the researcher's standpoint perspective mapped in relation to the observed and interpreted reality. The study finds that changes in the social space due to education and socialization have affected the spatial practices in the ancestral home. Millennial women are able to appropriate space due to changes in the social space. In the film narrative, Sala's spatiality is much more liberal compared to that of respondents.

Keywords: Millennial women; Space; Communication; *Chettiar* ancestral homes

Space and Gender

Domestic physical space, a material attribute, helps humans organize their everyday life. Each house was meant for a family or a group of families who shared the space for everyday purposes. Space embraces a multitude of intersections between the family (the social relations of reproduction inclusive of the specific organization of the family) and the division of labor and its organization in the form of hierarchical social functions. Gender is a culturally acknowledged and socially constructed attribute associated with biological sex. The difference between sexes based on the role they play has been constructed and reinforced through the allocation and use of space. One of the common forms of social hierarchy is the gendered allocation of space. The use of space by women and men explains how gender and domestic roles intersect. Cultural norms shape behavior and dictate spatial use. Space, integral to everyday life, is changing and closely bound by rituals and activities (Rendell, J., 2002). Certain cultures use space differently. For example, in *Chettians*, gender is a criterion that affects the use of domestic space. This aspect is being analyzed in the theoretical light of Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad.

Lefebvre's Spatial Triad

Henri Lefebvre introduces spatial in the social. His core argument is that space is lived and produced before it is perceived and read respectively. Lefebvre (1991) explains the mediation of social space through social

actions carried out in physical spaces. The concept of “spatial practice” embraces production and reproduction. Lefebvre explains the dialectic tension between perceived space, conceived space, and lived space that produces the social space. The intervening space between the conceived and the lived interact as it produces architecture with ideological influences and lived experiences respectively. Lefebvre elucidates that appropriated space is the space produced by society through its spatial practices. In this triad, it is evident that social relations are sustained and social space is produced by the constant dialectic tension. In this dialectic tension, the conceived space (representation of space) leaves less room for lived space (representational space) with minimal symbolic force through images and memories. The conceived space has a positive connotation that is bound to power though it has a negative relation to what forms the base of it. Ideology, practice, and knowledge are three aspects that are indispensably distinguished by space. Analysis of human action in physical space helps to understand how space is appropriated and how it in turn produces social space.

Using this spatial triad, the researchers analyze the contribution of space, communication, and gender to the lived experience of respondents and that of the protagonist *Sala* in the movie *Pirivom Sandhipom*.

Existing Research on Space and Films

As Foucault (1984) points out, architecture is a means to allocate people in certain space that determines their reciprocal relations that establish and maintains the social distribution of power. Foucault insists on studying the habitat. Ravetz, A. & Turkington, R., (2013) states that the notions of the family reflect in the physical design of the house through these ‘idealized’ notions are partly relevant to the way they live. Beebeejaun, Y. (2017) states that these dwellings are often neglected and there is immense scope to identify and analyze “processes of negotiation, challenge, or appropriation that mediate everyday spatial practices and where gender relations are discursively created”. Madigan, R. & Munro, M. (2002) argue that individuals often found ways to negotiate spatial restrictions enforced by the physical design of the house and the gendered family ideologies. Rezeanu (2015) enquires about the scope of “identifying agency and change through individualization and detraditionalization of gender identities”. Andrews and Shahrokni (2014) describe patriarchal accommodations as that which enables women in developing countries to gain entry into a space to work and gain knowledge by adapting to existing gender norms to suit the global economic scenario. Studies on Ashanti Fetish houses in Africa, Bedouin tents and Mayan houses, (Rapoport, A., 1990), houses in Anatolia culture (Lewis, 2004), traditional Agacbekler household (Erdogan, N., 2017), Nigerian Hausa houses, traditional Iranian houses (Spain 1992; Bellal, 2004), Berger house (Bellal, 2004), Bohra Muslims of Gujarat (Desai, 2007) explain cultural similarities and differences in gender-based spatial segregation.

As Lefebvre (1991) explains, lived space is not the only experience of inhabitants but can also be that of artists who represent it in their work in the form of memories, images, film, etc. Socio-cultural spaces are produced within film spaces. Scholars such as Mannel (2010), Konstantarakos (2010), and Pradeep. K (2018) have analyzed film locales, specific to locating women in these narratives. Given the increasing importance given to feminist discourse in films as well as the influence of films in shaping attitudes, it is important to discuss the representation of women’s spatial practices in films.

Rationale of Study

The *Chettiars* are historically known for their rich cultural practices, sumptuous cuisine, ethical business practices, organized banking, exquisite diamond jewelry, unmatched philanthropy, and their large palatial mansions. The *Chettiars* are identified as a culture with flourished economically and were exposed to different cultures due to their overseas presence. *Chettiars* often attributed their success to the women in the family. The managerial ability of *Chettiar* women is well-known and nothing can escape their purview in the household. Yet, they used only segregated space in the ancestral home. The socio-spatial dimension concerning women in gaining importance is feminist discussions. *Chettiar* culture has been directly and indirectly referred to in several films. *Pirivom Sandhipom* is a film that documents various social and cultural practices of *Chettiars*. Films mirror society and culture in more ways than one. In studying film as a cultural artifact that reflects a certain culture, the gap in existing literature offers the scope to analyze spatial and communicative practices of women characters in the film. This study is an attempt to understand the dynamics of gender, space, and communication in the ancestral home as against its representation in the film. The goal of this study is to analyze the film as representational space or lived space of the protagonist *Sala* vis-a-vis as the lived space of respondents concerning their spatiality as well as communicative practices in their ancestral home.

Background

The Chettiars¹ also called *Nagarathars*² or *Naatukottai Nagarathars*³, are a mercantile community in Tamil Nadu, India. They have their roots in Kaaviripoompattinam⁴ and later migrated to villages in Sivagangai and Pudukottai districts. The Chettiars settled for many centuries and traded salt, who built large houses with spaces designated for men and women. The houses spanning 75mts -115mts with rectangular spaces have many parts linearly arranged such that the doorway to the backyard is visible from the entrance, gradually indicating the distinction between public and private space (Ramamrutham, B. & Michell, G. 2015, Hannigan, T., 2017, Muthiah, S. et al, 2017). The purpose of building such larger houses which were jointly owned, mainly for the economic welfare of the family (Nishimura, 1993). Such holding strengthens kinship relations. The house witnessed bustling activities until the 1940s. After World War II and forced eviction from Burma due to insurgency, Chettiars were forced to leave behind immense wealth and many Chettiars were left impoverished. The Chettiars returned to their roots. Over the years, the houses have witnessed various social actions in this physical space that became a social reality.

The distinction between innermost and outmost spaces emphasizes gender-based hierarchy and traditional values of everyday life. The ancestral homes are conceived to accommodate the daily activities of men and women in the household. The men used the outermost zone of the house where they carried out business activities and entertained outsiders. The innermost zone of the house was meant for the women for supervision of kitchen, maintenance of children and overall management of the household. The intermediate space is used by men and women, but women face restrictions in accessing the intermediate space and the outermost zone. The spatial and communicative practices were rigid in the yesteryears. Chettiars began migrating to towns and cities in large numbers for the sake of education and employment. Migration led to several houses being locked down with no activity. Some of these houses were occupied with only one or two families with very few members. In such cases, they used only one part of the house due to several reasons such as want of limited space, maintenance issues on a regular basis and also other don't live here. Given this scenario, spatial and communicative practices have greatly improved compared to the yesteryears. With time, spatial practices changed but the physical space remains constant. In view of spatial and communicative practices, the researchers question how millennial Chettiar women have appropriated space in their ancestral home.

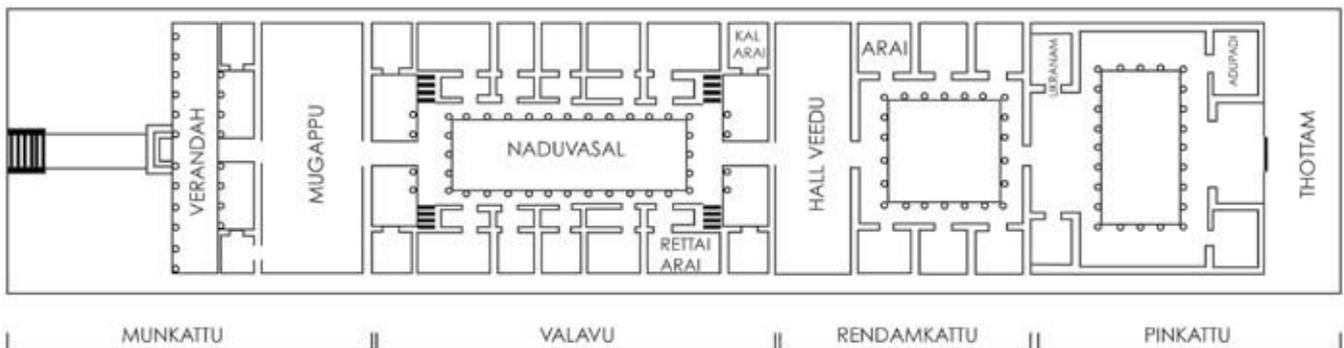


Figure 1: Layout of Chettiar Ancestral Home

Research Design

The study uses direct observation and narrative inquiry to document spatial practices of women in the domestic space and critical discourse analysis to understand the lived space of *Sala*, the protagonist in the film. Direct Observation is used to document incidents that kindled curiosity about spatial and communicative practices of women in the ancestral home. Narrative inquiry in the form of in-depth interviews was conducted to document the experiences of Chettiar women. Snowball sampling is the technique adopted, because respondents were easily accessible to the researcher. Such a non-random purposive approach had to be adopted because the researcher was engaging in an inquiry about the personal lives of the samples and a certain degree of familiarity and trust was needed to gather the information.

The research documents the narratives of 7 women in the age group of 25 - 35 years who have access to the ancestral home. These respondents share an affiliation (natal village or matrimonial village) to Devakottai, one of the foremost villages in the Chettinad belt. Devakottai is known for its conservative mindset and rigid practices (Sridevi S., 2005). All respondents grew up in other towns and cities. They visited the ancestral home only for family

ceremonies, temple festivals, and holidays. Two respondents moved back to Devakottai along with their families, of which one resides in the ancestral home and other in a modern house. Refer Table 1 for profile of respondents.

Interview questions were developed for in-depth interviews based on the research questions and objectives of the study. The respondents shared their experiences about their mobility according to their domestic roles; their conditioning and communication practices in the ancestral home vis-a-vis modern housing. The narrative analysis of this study focuses on the self (respondent) and their responses to the questions about the context under study.

The film *Pirivom Sandhipom* (2007) is a Tamil language film chosen for this study, because indirectly the film refers to *Chettiar* culture, and it is a film that has maximum similarity to the lived experiences of *Chettiar* women in reality. Though the film is a work of fiction, the director of the film is familiar with the culture as he hails from the same community. This insider's perspective of the social and domestic life of *Chettiars* essentially distinguishes this film in terms of representation of culture from other film discourses. The film was read several times to understand the character of *Sala*. Multiple viewings also helped to understand her lived experience in the film concerning gender, space, and communication.

Pirivom Sandhipom: Movie Plot

Set in the Chettinad town of Karaikudi, the film presents the story of Natesan and Visalakshi (alias) Sala. While Natesan works as an engineer in the electricity board, while Sala is pursuing her collegiate education. Natesan grew up in a *Chettiar* ancestral home in a large joint family. Another character, Sala lives in a modern house in Karaikudi with her parents and her friends regularly spend time with Sala at her residence. A relative refers to Sala's father that Natesan would be a potential alliance for Sala. In a wedding that both families attend, Sala is surprised to see Natesan's large joint family and is happy to learn that all of them live in the same house. Sala accepts her father's proposal of marrying Natesan. After marriage, Sala cherishes living in a joint family with so many members. Natesan is upset that he has minimal personal time with Sala as she is busy with domestic chores and loves to spend time with her new family members. He finds an opportunity in the form of a job transfer to Attakatti, a hill town. While Natesan is happy that he will have more time with his wife in the new place, Sala is upset about leaving the joint family. The couple moves to Attakatti where Sala is lonely and bored while Natesan goes for work. She **yearns** for the routine in the joint family. Gradually she is psychologically affected by loneliness and longing. She develops a hobby to record sounds in her house and neighborhood and listens to those recordings when she is alone. Fascinated by the laughter of her neighbor's baby, Sala makes the baby laugh continuously so that she can record the sound. When the baby faints, Sala is petrified. The child is saved. The doctor identifies the psychological issue that Sala is facing and advises her husband about her disorder. Natesan ignores the Doctor's advice. Due to depression, Sala consumes excess sleeping pills. She is saved. The doctor advises Natesan that the only cure for Sala is living in a joint family with all their relatives. The couple moves back to Karaikudi to live with their large joint family in their ancestral home.

Spatial and Communicative Practices of Users of Ancestral Homes

Perceived space is identified as that are culturally sanctioned as what is supposed to be carried out in the physical space of the ancestral home. The layout of the ancestral home is identified as conceived space. The lived experience in the form of memories and narratives of users of the ancestral home as well as the representation of the spatiality of Sala in *Privom Sandhipom* is identified as lived space.

The spatial practice that prevailed up to the 1960s is that the women in the family did not have access to all parts of the house while girl children had liberal access before puberty. Recalling their lived experience, all respondents confirm that before puberty they had no restriction in the ancestral home and the modern house or independent bungalow. They recall playing with cousins and cross cousins in the *valavu veedu*.

“We girls as children used to wear long silk skirts. We used to swirl our skirts and sit such that it forms a balloon of air when we sit. The boys, our cousins, would try to break the balloon. It used to be so much fun.”
(Interviewee 5, Age: 37)

As young girls, the respondents observed which place was meant for women in the house. Culturally, the respondents were trained to respect patriarchy, acknowledge men as great, and thereby regarding themselves as inferior to men. As they grow, they observe and learn to celebrate ‘masculine hegemony’ (Rezeanu, 2015).

The respondents acknowledge that they have progressed much more when compared to the previous generations who were a lot more restricted in terms of spatial use, interpersonal interaction, decision making, and financial

independence. Unlike the previous generations, the respondents were permitted to pursue their higher education. Being a homemaker or opting for employment or entrepreneurship was a choice they could make.

“I think even up-to 2005, women did not move about the *valavu* [courtyard] comfortably because it was a self-imposed cultural restriction and they were scared.” (Interviewee 5, Age: 37)

During menstruation, women refrain from going inside the *valavu veedu* for four days due to the perceived pollution. They stay in isolation in the *pathi* [corridor in the third zone of the house] during menstruation as the ancestral home is treated as pure and sacred. They are also expected to stay in isolation in the independent bungalow in a secluded room or verandah. During menstruation, only after head bath on the fifth day, respondents can enter the *valavu* or the main part of the independent bungalow. Respondents acknowledge that this kind of isolation dampens their spirit and causes embarrassment.

“I used to feel ashamed because everyone in the house would know that I am menstruating. Food, coffee, water everything was brought to the *othaipathi* and served to me from a distance. Even water was poured from another tumbler into mine such that even my tumbler is not touched. This practice did not give me a pleasant feeling” (Interviewee 6, Age: 34)

During menstruation, the respondents stay in the modern houses in Devakottai and go to the ancestral home only to participate in the ceremonies held there.

Women enter the ancestral home through the front door and do acknowledge the presence of men through greeting or reciprocating the greeting after which they are comfortable in the *valavu pathi* [corridor around courtyard], *melapettagasalai* [plinth near courtyard for women] and *naduvasal* [courtyard]. **The respondents use the *mugappu*** [outermost zone meant for men] as a thoroughfare which was not the case with the earlier generations.

Respondents do not have restrictions in moving about the town on their own or in the company of other women. Unmarried girls or women are often escorted wherever they go. It is a common practice to say that unmarried women should be safeguarded until they are handed over to the prospective groom. It is a matter of family honor.

“I don’t go out alone. I am not permitted. No one should mistake me. No one should blame my grandmother because of my behavior” (Interviewee 7, Age: 25)

For ceremonies, *Chettiar* women need to adorn silk sarees and diamond jewelry. With modernization, migration, and exposure to other cultures, women have opted for other kinds of clothes. Women can choose to wear sarees in other fabrics along with contemporary jewelry to wedding houses. The first author says that her mother used to insist that she wears traditional silk attire weddings along with diamond jewelry. She was often told that kith and kin would laugh or criticize if she did not adhere. Women feared the tales carried about them which would tarnish their image and affect marital prospects. It was important to carry oneself a certain way for these reasons.

The respondents admit that they would not talk to boys especially around their age of puberty. They were conditioned that way, either they were told or learned through observation or understanding through gut instinct.

“I was told once that when boys or men are there, I shouldn’t sit. So I don’t sit even in front of my father when I eat” (Interviewee 7, Age: 25).

“No one restricted me from talking to boys after puberty. But I think I naturally subdued especially when I was due for marrying my cross-cousin. Gradually, we stopped talking...not even a hi or hello” (Interviewee 5, Age: 37).

Married respondents do not hesitate to talk to the opposite sex in the ancestral home. Only one unmarried respondent has reservations because of her name and her family’s honor in talking to outsiders but not with her brothers or cousins. The respondent shares that she restricts communicating to outsiders, particularly men, because it may tarnish her image and spoil her marriage prospects. In the movie, Sala is comfortable interacting with her father. Before the wedding, though she is pursuing a Master’s degree in a co-education college, she is seen only interacting or going out only with girls. Post-marriage, Sala talks comfortably with the men in her matrimonial family though there are very few such occasions.

The *valavu veedu* is less used for living and has become an occasion-based home. Their occasional visits also began spacing out anywhere ranging between few times in a month to once in few months to once in a couple of years. Only one unmarried respondent lives in their family's ancestral home. The respondent who lives in Malaysia stays in the ancestral home when she visits India. The narratives explain that these women have appropriated the space as a house of ceremony due to the migration of *Chettiars* for employment and education.

When the large family came together for occasions, independent bungalows and ancestral homes were not comfortable to stay for shorter visits. For the sake of comfort and convenience and to cater to their professional commitments, respondents make flying visits to attend ceremonies. The entire ancestral home turns jubilant during ceremonies. During these visits for ceremonies, women had access to almost all parts of the house. But they were conditioned to move in a restricted manner where men were seated, especially the *mugappu*.

The respondents do not feel that the ancestral home is suitable for living anymore. Since the 1990s, it became a practice to celebrate key festivals wherever they have settled instead of traveling to ancestral town to celebrate in the ancestral home. The two respondents who live in the ancestral town celebrate the main festivals such as *Pongal*⁶ in the *valavu veedu*.

“My children know the difference and value of celebrating festivals in the ancestral home as against celebrating in Chennai. They like to celebrate in the ancestral home. In Chennai, they used to watch TV during *Pongal*. But here, they have the enthusiasm of competing [with other family members in the *valavu*] in cooking *Pongal*” (Interviewee 6, Age: 34).

The respondents are unaware of the community practices in the ancestral home during their growing up years when compared to those who grew up in the ancestral home. They could not participate in celebrations in their natal town as they were unable to take leave from school. They were least informed about familial practices. They follow what was told or done. This brings about a sense of alienation among the younger generation. The first author agrees that she doesn't fathom many rituals and either follows suit with other women doing it or she is advised how to do it. Married women manage their jewelry in lockers and have control over the keys of their cupboards and belongings, unlike the previous generations. Yet, the main keys of the rooms in the ancestral home is under the control of the senior-most woman in the family. Women gain access to these rooms upon request or when asked to access it.

The women who dwelled in the ancestral homes in the earlier generations 'drew power' (Sridevi, 2005) to the *rendamkattu* and dominated the household. The women managed the household, property, and social relations with great ease and sophistication. **The** *rendamkattu* is seen as a space that guaranteed privacy or that confined women and restricted their mobility. From the standpoint of respondents, it is clear that space was not contested for its purpose either through acceptance of a norm or understanding of such a norm. They used the *rendamkattu* because other women in the family used it as that's how it was supposed to be.

“I don't know if the *rendamkattu* was a restriction. But I think I took it for granted for what it is. I thought the *arai* (room) in the *rendamkattu* was my own space. Even my husband wouldn't come here. He had a separate bag and would keep it in the front. This room was like my room. We didn't do much there but the thought that it is my own space was more empowering. It gave me an ecstatic or a drugged feeling” (Interviewee 1, Age: 37).

Knowledge is power. Access to education and employment/entrepreneurship bestowed respondents with financial independence, decision making, and agency significantly. The respondents did not explicitly disclose abuse that they faced in their marriages but showed signs of normalization of abuse and overcoming the same. One respondent discussed reasons and the agency to divorce and remarry. In her second marriage, she is normalizing violence for the sake of her children. Another respondent believes that someday her marital life will get better. Interviewee 5 (Age 37) sees subordination as a smart way of accomplishing what we want. Usually, domination doesn't help her argument.

“It might be a small function, a wedding, or a dinner... all decision-making is vested with the women. We call the shots. That's our managerial skills. We show the men in the limelight but we do the work behind to call the shots. Some women dominate their husbands and give up on the result” (Interviewee 5, Age 37).

Mobility was highly regulated and enforced, in *Chettiar* ancestral homes. Observation and everyday practices helped to every member to learn it, flawless. Violation of a norm would call for punishment from the elderly womenfolk of the household and shaming by kith and kin who carry gossip tales. Even up to the 2000s, girls were reprimanded by mothers, aunts, and grandmothers when they make mistakes or failed to participate in chores. The elderly women reprimand stating future mothers-in-law will blame the elders for the girl's incompetency in carrying out domestic chores. Girls were conditioned that they belonged to the domestic sphere and were made to believe that the impression that the mother-in-law is an authority figure who must be feared. When a girl nears her age of puberty, she is conditioned to refrain from speaking to any other man other than her father. She is conditioned not to interact with her brothers or cousins because they are 'boys'. This was common even up to the 1980s though it reduced in the later years.

Women began entering via *mugappu* and it was no more treated as a violation. This became a practice due to lifestyle changes. Still, conditioning of women in terms of how they carried themselves and how they moved about was largely gendered despite an increase in their exposure. While women could enter or exit through the *mugappu*, women do not sit in the *mugappu* along with men. The women find themselves more comfortable in the *valavu*, *rendaamkattu*, or the ladies' room. In the 1990s, the first author recalls how she dragged her older cousin (who had attained puberty) to play with her in the *naduvasal* [courtyard] during a wedding. Her cousin refused by quickly running back to the *paththi* [corridor] because she was afraid people around will scold her or carry gossip tales. Sometimes, during functions such as weddings, women of the household may make themselves comfortable in the *pattagasalais* (where men sit) after a long day's work, once the guests have left. Also, their interaction with the opposite gender has increased over the years.

In 2016, when the first author was producing a documentary in her ancestral town, a former cook of the household flabbergasted that a young woman (more so, the grand-daughter of his superior) was around the streets with a camera. He politely asked her why she did not come along with an escort (father, grandfather, brother, or a housemaid). He was further surprised when she retorted as to why she needs an escort in her native town. This shows that even people who are peripherally associated with the household expect women to 'behave' a certain way.

In 2017, during a family wedding, the first author's cousin sister was hesitant to step into the *valavu* as she was menstruating for three days. She is a 35-year-old post-graduate and an entrepreneur who lives in an apartment in Bengaluru city. In the ancestral home, she was hesitant to move around because of her belief that the house is the abode of her forefathers who are worshipped periodically. This purity and sanctity that the respondents associate with the house has conditioned them to restrict mobility during menstruation. On the same day of the wedding, as the first author steps out of her ancestral home, she sees another young female relative driving an XUV with her father-in-law seated on the front seat and her husband and mother-in-law comfortably seating behind. This is a rare sight and was unheard of a decade ago. The contrast between the two instances demonstrates the changes in the gendered spaces in *Chettiar* homes and public spaces.

With respect to access to media and technology in the ancestral home, the respondents are that all of them have access to smartphones which they use comfortably without anyone's interference or control. Since the ancestral homes are locked up, there is no television set, radio, or newspaper in any of these ancestral homes. One respondent living in the ancestral house has access to television which is placed in the *rendamkattu*. She can tune into the television or listen to the radio on her smartphone as per her choice. For other respondents, who do not live in the ancestral home, there is no need for exclusive access to television, radio or newspaper. They have access to these mediums in their respective places of dwelling.

Spatial and Communicative Practices of Sala, the Protagonist

In the film, Sala lives in a modern house with her parents in Karaikudi, a developed *Chettiar* town. Occasionally, she visits her natal ancestral home to pray. In this scene, it is implied that her family hails from a neighboring village in the *Chettinad* belt and her family has migrated to Karaikudi for business. Also, her wedding takes place in her natal ancestral home which turned jubilant with kith and kin participating in the celebration. On other days, this house is locked up. *Sala* aspires to live in such a large ancestral home with many family members. Her wish comes true as she is married in such a large family living in the ancestral home.

Sala has access to all parts of the house in her natal home (a modern house) as well as her matrimonial home (traditional ancestral house). *Sala* uses *mugappu* comfortably. 'Masculine hegemony' (Rezeanu, 2015) is instilled

as a value in *Sala* in the temple as she is getting ready for the bride seeing ceremony. In this scene, both families meet for the bride seeing ceremony in the temple. Sala and her mother are behind the sanctum sanctorum of the god while others are seated in the *mandapam* [gathering space]. As the mother and daughter wait, Sala's mother advises Sala about how she must behave when she is called to meet the groom's family. She also mentions that Sala can sit only when the elders ask her to sit. Sala quickly retorts what if they don't ask her to sit for which her mother says "stand until you are asked to; sit once they mention!" Sala worriedly asks what if they don't ask her to sit until the end. Her mother finds her question baseless (implying she cannot sit until she is asked to). Also when Sala meets her fiancée for breakfast, Sala gets up from her chair to welcome him as a mark of respect, while her friends remain seated. Sala goes to college and other places such as restaurants along with her friends. When her fiancée invites her to a restaurant, she takes her friends along to meet him. The only place she goes alone is to the temple for no specific reason. When she goes to the temple, she greets her fiancée's unclean aunt. They enquire if she came alone and ask her not to go alone. They drop her home. Sala lives with her parents in an independent bungalow where Sala's friends come for a sleepover but Sala doesn't go to stay in any of her friend's houses. Sala visits her natal ancestral home in *salwar kameez*⁵. Before her wedding, Sala wears modern clothes but after her wedding, she drapes only sarees in her matrimonial home.

Though Sala lives in a town in the *Chettinad* belt, there is no reference to her participating in any of the cultural practices. Her life before her wedding is a modern lifestyle. Post-wedding, there is no specific reference to rituals and festivities. The only festivity and corresponding rituals she participates in is her wedding.

Sala has her keepsake things after marriage. There is no reference to her access to keys or locker. Also, there is no reference to her locker or how she manages her dowry although her dowry is given during a ritual in the wedding to her father-in-law as it is a common practice in reality for in-laws to manage the dowry until a married couple is declared as a nuclear family unit.

Sala enjoys being in the company of other women in the *rendamkattu* attending to chores. As she is doing her chores, Sala's husband blindfolds Sala and takes her to the Pooja room to show a God she has never seen before. As they walk towards the Pooja room, other women and children follow them to witness the surprise. When he takes off his hands from her eyes, Sala sees herself in the large mirror in the Pooja room. Her husband praises her as the most beautiful god who lives in their house. In response, Sala kisses him though other women and children are around. Such public display of affection doesn't happen in reality these days though the *Rettaiarai* [A double bedroom with a single door that leads to a Pooja room and Bedroom] was used for procreation many decades ago.

Sala agrees to an arranged marriage, as it is the community norm in reality too. While it seems that Sala's husband is loving and nurturing, she is forced to agree to his choice of moving out of town as he has got a transfer. The rest of the story is all about how Sala suffers due to loneliness and her husband is forced to seek a transfer back to his native town to live with his family.

In her natal home, Sala comfortably watches television along with friends and reads newspapers along with her father as they are having morning coffee. After marriage, though Sala lives in the ancestral home, there is no reference to her access to media. It gives the benefit of the doubt that she was often held up with household chores. There is no reference to Sala owning a mobile phone. Once Sala moves to the ancestral home, she has access to television, telephone as well as a sound recorder which she uses often.

Lived Space of Users of Ancestral Home vs. Lived Space of Sala, the Protagonist

In a Lefebvrian perspective, 'Representational Space' or 'Lived Space' in the *Chettiars'* ancestral home prevails in the lived experience of users or inhabitants that they presented as narratives. Their lived experience reflects their Ideals. When women move to towns and cities, they live in houses that are smaller in size and utilitarian in design that suit the requirement of everyday city life. These modern houses are not as gendered in design as the ancestral home and some of the gendered practices such as seclusion or isolation during menstruation may not be practiced as it is in the ancestral home. In these towns and cities, women have better exposure through socialization, education, and employment. They have an opportunity to meet people from different cultures and socialize with them. In the film, the public display of affection between Sala and her husband in front of other family members and Sala's psychological disorder due to migration are exaggerated drama in the film narrative. Among the 7 respondents interviewed, one respondent (35 years old) shared close similarities with the protagonist *Sala* in terms of how she interacts, how she uses or appropriates space, her everyday life, and so on. Two key differences are that the respondent has migrated along with her husband post-marriage to another city and has

no issues in coping with the new place, unlike Sala. The film has no reference to Sala's upbringing and her routine during menstruation before and after wedding in the modern house as well the ancestral home. In the context of the film, Sala's loneliness and subsequent psychological condition is an exaggeration and a matter of fiction. The protagonist shares an affinity towards her kith and kin as well as the family's ancestral home. This trait is found among the two respondents living in their ancestral town. Other respondents experience alienation in terms of practices and share a lesser affinity towards the ancestral home. They find it least suitable for everyday living given their lifestyle. From a gender perspective, these intersections between the family, division of labor, and hierarchy have been highly influenced by socialization and exposure. The Perceived Space and Conceived Space affect the Lived Space of real users of the ancestral home and Sala in the film.

Conclusion

The changes in other spaces, be it the social, the perceived, or the conceived, affects the perceptions, identity, and the ideals of women. Changes in the social spheres like cultural imperialism, globalization, social activism, policy decisions, etc. threw open a gamut of opportunities for women. Such influences open up their perceptions and thereby changing their practices and ideals. Changes in Social Space affect Perceived, Conceived, and Lived Spaces, leading to the appropriation of space. Space is constantly produced and reproduced as a dialectic tension between these aspects. The film as a representational space of Sala is an attempt to document the cultural practices of *Chettiars*. Sala's spatiality belongs to the narrative process of the film. Gender norms as dictated by a patriarchal society is clearly outlined in the film designating the public sphere for men and the domestic sphere for women. Historically, the community is accustomed to migration, getting used to new places, and making the best out of opportunities.

While *Chettiar* women, in reality, are identified as de-facto managers who managed the complete household in the absence of their husband, the film has exaggerated and diluted the character of Sala after migration to Attakatti. The film serves as an immediate reference point of discussion to outsiders who are not familiar with the culture. The only ceremony discussed in detail in the film is the wedding while every ritual is celebrated like a festival in reality. The wedding scenes also included the gender-based spatial use of men and women in the ancestral home.

The spatial and communicative practices of *Chettiar* women are affected by the social actions that they carry out in the social space and the changes that happen in the social space mediate the social actions carried out in the physical space. In reality, Through a Lefebvrian perspective, it is evident that Spatial Practice or Perceived Space in *Chettiars'* ancestral home refers to the Spatial Practices that have changed over a period of time. The appropriation of space in the ancestral home is a change in spatial practices. The dwelling space is appropriated as a ceremonial space and storage space. Millennial women have appropriated their space in the *valavu* and have no inhibition to use the *mugappu*. From a time when women barely came to the *mugappu*, the transition happened as a continuum where they gradually progressed to ascertain their presence in the *valavu vasal*. From posing for a formal photograph, women have appropriated their space to taking selfies and shooting videos on their smartphones.

Once space is appropriated, the architecture or the design no longer guides the purpose it was designed for. Need and social influences affect motivation to appropriate space. When a conjugal unit moves to a modern house, the design or architecture of that house guides their dwelling. When they get used to modern house design and modern lifestyle, their lived experience is altered. This alteration extends to their perception and leads to a change in mindset. From the narrative inquiry, direct observation, and analysis of the film, it is evident that when there is a change in the house design, it affected the spatial practices and the lived experiences of the respondents.

End Notes

¹Chettiars refer to the business community (Thurston, 1909: Vol 2)

²The term *nagarathar* means people who migrated from towns (Somalay, 1953:15)

³*NaatukottaiNagarathars* or *NaatukottaiChettiars* refers to members of the business community who live in fort like houses (Annamalai, 1988)

⁴*Kaaviripoompattinam* is a village in Tamil Nadu where Chettiars settled for many centuries and traded salt (Rudner, D. W.,1987).

⁵*Salwar kameez* is a popular attire that is culturally and socially viewed as the most decent attire for Pan Indian Women though the attire is traditional to North India.

⁶*Pongal* is a harvest festival celebrated in Tamil Nadu, India.

Table 1: Profile of Respondents

S.No	Name (Changed)	Age	Marital Status	Education	Occupation	Place of Residence	Place of Upbringing	Native Town
1	Interviewee 1	37	Remarried	Professional Qualification	Consultant	Chennai	Chennai	Kothamanglam
2	Interviewee 2	32	Married	Post-Graduate Diploma	Home-Maker	Malaysia	Chennai	Karaikudi
3	First Author	32	Married	Post-Graduate	Entrepreneur	Chennai	Chennai	Devakottai
4	Interviewee 3	34	Married	Post-Graduate	Supports husband in Business	Chennai	Karaikudi	Aranmanai Siruvayal
5	Interviewee 4	37	Married	Post-Graduate	Home-Maker	Bangalore	Coimbatore	Kadiyapatti
6	Interviewee 5	34	Married	Bachelor's	Entrepreneur	Devakottai	Rajapalayam	Devakottai
7	Interviewee 6	25	Unmarried	Class 10	Stay-at-home	Devakottai	Karur / Devakottai	Devakottai

References

- Andrews, Abigail and Nazanin Shahrokni. 2014. "Patriarchal Accommodations: Women's Mobility and Policies of Gender Difference from Urban Iran to Migrant Mexico." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 4(2):148-75.
- Annamalai, P. 1988. *Nagarathar Kanakkial Murai*. Chennai, Tamil Nadu: M.M.Muthiah Research Centre.
- Beebeejaun, Yasminah. 2017. "Gender, Urban Space, and the Right to Everyday Life." *Journal of Urban Affairs* 39(3):323-34.
- Bellal, Tahar. 2004. "Understanding Home Cultures through Syntactic Analysis: The Case of Berber Housing." *Housing, Theory and Society* 21(3):111-27.
- Desai, Madhavi. 2007. *Gender and the Built Environment in India*. New Delhi: Zubaan.
- Erdoğan, Nevnihal. 2017. *Cultural Traditions and Domestic Space: Ağaçbekler Home*. Vol. 7. 3rd ed. SAGE Open.
- Foucault, Michel. 1984. *The Foucault Reader*. Vintage.
- Hannigan, Tim. 2017. *South India*. London: APA Publications (UK) Ltd.
- Kostantarakos, M. (2000). *Space in European cinema*: London. Intellect books.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Lewis, Reina. 2004. *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and The Ottoman Harem*. Vol. 4. London: Rutgers University Press.
- Madigan, Ruth and Moira Munro. 2002. "The More We Are Together': Domestic Space, Gender and Privacy." Pp. 61-72 in *In Ideal Homes? Social Change and the Experience of the Home*. London: Routledge.
- Mannel. (2010). *Turkish cinema in the new millennium: site, sound, and screens*. New York: Berghabn Books.
- Muthiah, S., Meenakshi Meyappan, Visalakshi Ramaswamy, and V. Muthuraman. 2017. *The Chettiar Heritage*. Chennai: The Chettiar Heritage.
- Nishimura, Yuko. 1993. *Gender, kinship and property rights: Nagarattar womanhood in South India*. PhD diss., London School of Economics.
- Pradeep, K. (2018). Production of Space Mediation in Narrative Location of Protagonist: A Critical Discourse Analysis Methodology. *Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies*, 6(51), 12479-12491.
- Ramamrutham, Bharath and George Michell. 2015. *Mansions of Chettinad = Manoirs Du Chettinad*. S.I.: s.n.
- Rapoport, Amos. 1990. *The Meaning of the Built Environment: A Nonverbal Communication Approach*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.
- Ravetz, Alison and Richard Turkington. 2013. *The Place of Home: English Domestic Environments, 1914-2000*. New York: Taylor & Francis.

- Rendell, Jane, Barbara Penner, and Iain Borden, eds. 2002. *Gender Space Architecture: an Interdisciplinary Introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Rezeanu, Catalina-Ionela. 2015. "The Relationship between Domestic Space and Gender Identity: Some Signs of Emergence of Alternative Domestic Femininity and Masculinity." *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology* 6(2):9-29.
- Rudner, David West. 1987. "Religious Gifting and Inland Commerce in Seventeenth-Century South India." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 46(2):361-79.
- Somalay, Chettiar. 1953. *Chettinadum Tamilum*. Madras, Tamil Nadu: Vanathi Padipagam.
- Spain, Daphne. 1992. *Gendered Spaces*. Chapel Hill u.a.: Univ. of North Carolina Press.
- Sridevi, S. 2005. "Local banking and material culture amongst the Nattukottai Chettiars of Tamil Nadu". PhD diss., Jawaharlal Nehru University.
- Thurston, Edgar and K. Rangachari. 1909. *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*. Vol. 2. Madras: Gov. Press.