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Housing as Ideological Apparatus: Class, Gender, and Neoliberal Urbanism in Tamil Cinema

Dr. M. Muthukumar

This paper examines housing narratives in contemporary Tamil cinema through a Marxist theoretical framework, analyzing five films spanning four decades: *Veedu* (1988), *To Let* (2017), *House Owner* (2019), *Kudumbasthan* (2025), and *3BHK* (2025). Drawing on Marx's commodity form, Althusser's ideological state apparatus, Harvey's accumulation by dispossession, and Marxist-feminist theories of social reproduction, the paper argues that these films function as cultural documents recording India's transition from a state-mediated housing regime to a neoliberal, market-dominated order. The analysis demonstrates how cinematic representations of domestic space expose the home not as refuge but as a site where class position is reproduced, gendered labour rendered invisible, and market ideology internalized as personal aspiration. Each film illuminates distinct facets of the housing crisis: bureaucratic extraction, caste-coded rental exclusion, unpaid care work, masculine precarity, and the temporal violence of long-term debt. The paper contributes to undertheorized intersections of Tamil cinema studies, urban political economy, and ideology critique, proposing the category of "critical domestic realism" to characterize films that refuse consolatory narratives of homeownership while exposing housing as capitalism's disciplinary mechanism.

Keywords: Tamil cinema, housing, neoliberalism, ideology, social re-production

Introduction: Shelter as Speculation

We are told, almost as catechism, that food, clothing, and shelter constitute the unshakable pillars of human need. Yet in the neoliberal order, each has been stripped of its elemental dignity and re-engineered as a speculative asset. Food is traded in futures. Clothing is a vehicle for brand capital. Shelter—the most intimate and enduring of needs—has become an investment class (Harvey, 2005). It no longer exists in the realm of necessity; it lives in the realm of aspiration. To imagine a house today as one imagines water—a right, a resource, a guarantee of survival—feels almost absurd. The system has trained us to desire it as luxury, not expect it as birthright.

In the pre-liberalization decades, the Indian working class knew a different compact. Factory workers were not merely employed; they were housed, rationed, and often schooled by the very institutions that extracted their labour (Bhattacharya, 2016). State-linked bodies such as the Tamil Nadu Housing Board and the Slum Clearance Board marked a period when mass housing was imagined as infrastructure, not as a portfolio line. This was never universal—sector, city, and firm mattered—but the principle that shelter could be embedded within the wage and within public provisioning was legible, lived, and politically defensible (Raman, 2015).

By contrast, the post-1991 economy reorganized itself around services and finance. IT parks, banks, and hospitality chains consolidated in enclaves where land values promised higher returns from offices, malls, and speculation than from worker housing (Goldman, 2011). Even where the state offered subsidised land and generous regimes—special economic zones established under the SEZ Act of 2005, industrial parks, and fast-track approvals—the obligation to house employees quietly vanished from the development script (Levien, 2018). In practice, worker accommodation was externalised to the rental market; families were pushed to become perpetual tenants, and ownership became a decades-long wager against inflation.

The historical arc is visible in bricks and mortar. In older rural

economies, one could stake a claim to land, build with local materials, and anchor a family without navigating a bureaucratic labyrinth. Then came the state as gatekeeper: regulating construction through bodies like the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority, formalizing ownership, standardizing the very idea of housing (Coelho & Raman, 2013). Now, under neoliberalism's doctrine of market freedom, even that regulation is recoded—not to protect the poor, but to ensure that real estate capital moves unimpeded by the needs of those who dwell within its commodities. Commercial zoning and premium floor space valuations in IT corridors make it economically irrational to allocate central land to affordable accommodation; the very geographies of services growth manufacture scarcity as a profitable condition (Srivathsan, 2014).

It is within this transformation that Tamil cinema's housing narratives acquire their diagnostic power. To speak of housing in these films is to speak of what Marx (1867/1990) identified as the commodity form—something whose value is determined not by its use as shelter, but by its exchangeability in the market. Louis Althusser's (1971) concept of the ideological state apparatus offers a second lens: the home is not simply the backdrop to life but one of the quiet institutions through which ideology operates, where subjects are shaped to accept the existing order. The domestic interior is presented as a space of refuge, the natural endpoint of ambition—the place where the working class learns to believe that long-term debt is not exploitation but responsibility, that the mortgage is not a chain but a milestone.

Marxist-feminist critiques deepen the analysis by locating housing within the sphere of social reproduction (Federici, 2012). The home is not simply where workers rest; it is where they are remade. It is the site of unpaid labour—cooking, cleaning, caregiving—that sustains the workforce and produces the next generation of labourers. In a market-driven housing system, the cost of maintaining this reproductive space is shifted onto families, particularly onto women, whose domestic labour remains uncompensated even as the cost of the space itself rises beyond reach (Bhattacharya, 2017).

When these frameworks converge, the house in Tamil cin-

ema appears as both economic object and ideological tool—a thing to be bought and sold, but also a site where subjects learn their place in the hierarchy of capital. The films under consideration—*Veedu* (Mahendra, 1988), *To Let* (Chezhiyan, 2017), *House Owner* (Ramakrishnan, 2019), *Kudumbasthan* (Kalisamy, 2025), and *3BHK* (Ganesh, 2025)—become case studies in the political economy of shelter, documents that chart the shift from a regulated, state-mediated housing regime to a neoliberal, market-dominated order. They record how the meaning of home has been redefined from necessity to aspiration, from right to reward.

Veedu: Petit-Bourgeois Aspiration and the Slow Violence of Reification

Balu Mahendra's *Veedu* (1988) unfolds in the twilight of India's mixed economy, just before the neoliberal tide would recast the urban housing market. Its protagonist, Sudha—a twenty-two-year-old unmarried woman supporting her grandfather and younger sister—embodies what Marx (1852/1963) identified as the *petit bourgeois*: a class suspended between the threat of downward mobility into wage labour and the dream of upward movement into property ownership. For this class, a house is not just shelter; it is the fragile lifeline to imagined stability.

The achievement of *Veedu* lies in how it strips this dream of sentimentality. The act of building a home becomes a slow-motion erosion of the self. In one of the film's most telling sequences, Sudha sits in a municipal office, surrounded by piles of paper and indifferent clerks, her body language a portrait of fatigue as she attempts to secure permits. When an official dismissively asks her to return another day, her quiet acceptance speaks volumes about the bureaucratic violence that predates market violence. In another scene, she pores over construction bills late at night, her face drawn and silent, the weight of each rupee visibly pressing against her youth. These quiet details render what Lukács (1923/1971) called reification: the process by which human qualities and relationships are transformed into thing-like, mechanical functions under capitalism.

Mahendra drew inspiration from his own life—recalling how

his mother “*became temperamental... forgot to laugh*” during their family's house-building ordeal (Venkatesh, 2012)—and this memory echoes in Sudha's gradual dimming. The warmth of family interactions gives way to the cold calculations of cement prices, contractor delays, and bureaucratic demands. When Sudha's grandfather watches her transformation with helpless concern, the film visualizes how the pursuit of property consumes not just the aspirant but the entire household. The home, which ought to be the stage for human flourishing, becomes the site where vitality is drained in service of a commodity.

When the family is dragged into court to defend their allegedly illegal structure, the law reveals its class function with startling clarity. The judge's procedural language, the lawyers' fees that Sudha can barely afford, the very architecture of the courtroom that dwarfs her—all expose justice not as the equitable distribution of shelter but as the enforcement of property norms that keep ownership precarious for the poor and secure for the propertied (Bhan, 2016).

Mahendra's aesthetic choices reinforce this critique. He eschews the song-and-dance conventions of mainstream Tamil cinema, replacing them with Ilaiyaraaja's understated classical-fusion score that never allows emotional release. His use of natural light—what he called 'God's light' (Venkatesh, 2012)—ironically illuminates the profoundly earthly struggle of those whose only hope for relief rests in divine intervention. The absence of visual ornament strips the house of ideological glamour; what remains is a structure-in-progress, unfinished both physically and emotionally. *Veedu* thus stands as a quiet but devastating reminder that even before the full force of neoliberal policy, the dream of homeownership was already bound up in systemic extraction.

To Let: Neoliberal Displacement and the Violence of Market Fundamentalism

Chezhian's *To Let* (2017) marks a decisive shift in Tamil cinema's housing narratives. If *Veedu* depicts a pre-liberalization struggle shaped by bureaucratic inertia, *To Let* captures the ruthless logic of post-liberalization India—where state indifference and market aggression converge to push working families to the margins.

Set during Chennai's IT boom, the film follows Ilango, an assistant film director, his wife Amudha, and their young son, as they are abruptly evicted from their rented home. Their crime is not non-payment; it is their landlord's discovery that IT professionals can pay far more for the same space. When the landlord matter-of-factly explains that “software people” will pay double the rent, the scene crystallizes Harvey's (2003) concept of accumulation by dispossession: existing residents are stripped of housing so that capital can be reallocated to higher-yield tenants. The very boom celebrated as Tamil Nadu's entry into the global service economy translates, for Ilango's family, into sudden homelessness.

The irony of the film's title is deliberate. 'To Let' suggests availability, an open door. But here, it marks exclusion. The market does not simply decide who can pay; it decides who is permitted to exist in proximity to opportunity. As Ilango and Amudha navigate the city's labyrinth of rentals, they encounter a series of rejections that reveal the intimate overlap of caste and class. They are turned away for being non-Brahmin—landlords citing 'vegetarian only' requirements that function as caste codes (Deshpande, 2013). They are rejected for working in the film industry, deemed unstable. They are refused for having a child, whose presence threatens wear on the property. Each refusal layers a hierarchy upon the next, creating what the film renders as a geography of exclusion.

Chezhiyan grounds this critique in repetition and forensic detail. The family packs their meagre belongings into boxes, only to unpack them days later in yet another temporary space. The act becomes a ritual of displacement, each cardboard box a metonym for impermanence. When Amudha carefully wraps their son's few toys, her hands moving with practiced efficiency, we see how precarity has become routine—how the working class learns to live in perpetual readiness for expulsion. When Ilango contemplates selling his film script without credit in order to secure an advance for rent, the commodification is complete: not only shelter but creativity itself is stripped from its maker and exchanged for mere access to space.

The film's neorealist style sharpens its politics. Chezhiyan

works with non-professional actors whose faces carry the texture of lived experience rather than performed emotion. He employs natural lighting and unscored silences that deny the audience the consolation of catharsis. In one extended sequence, we watch the family eat a simple meal in their temporary accommodation, the camera holding on ordinary gestures—the passing of rice, the quiet chewing—until domesticity itself becomes estranged, revealed as a privilege rather than a given. Where *Veedu* still held onto the possibility of achieving stability through persistence, *To Let* presents persistence itself as futility.

House Owner: Gendered Labour, Disaster, and the Economy of Care

Lakshmy Ramakrishnan's *House Owner* (2019) shifts the housing question from market access to the labour that sustains life within the home. Set against the backdrop of the 2015 Chennai floods, the film is less concerned with acquisition or eviction than with the intimate, daily work that allows a household to function—work that capitalism depends on but refuses to value (Federici, 2012).

The story follows Radha, who cares for her husband Vasu, a retired army officer living with Alzheimer's disease. On paper, the household survives on Vasu's military pension, a predictable income that ought to provide stability. But the film makes clear that the pension is only part of the economy of survival. Without Radha's unpaid, round-the-clock care—bathing, feeding, coaxing him through confusion, managing his medications, anticipating his needs before he can articulate them—the pension would be meaningless. Here, the Marxist-feminist lens of social reproduction comes sharply into focus: the home is not simply a place where life happens, but where the labour of maintaining life is performed without wage, recognition, or rest (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Ramakrishnan's directorial choices insist that we see this labour. Unlike films that treat caregiving as background action, *House Owner* lingers on its physical reality. We watch Radha help Vasu to the bathroom, her body braced against his unsteady weight. We see her wash clothes by hand when the power fails, her movements automatic from decades of repetition. We observe her prepare his food,

cutting it into manageable pieces, testing the temperature, bringing the spoon to his lips when his coordination fails. These are not melodramatic flourishes but documentary attention to work that remains invisible precisely because it is gendered, unpaid, and performed within domestic walls.

The choice to set this narrative during the floods is deliberate. By 2015, Chennai had become infamous for unregulated real estate development and the encroachment of wetlands and water bodies—patterns that urban critics argued amplified the disaster's severity (Arabindoo, 2016). The very forces that made housing unaffordable—speculative development, deregulated zoning, displacement of the poor to flood-prone peripheries—also made it unsafe. In *House Owner*, the rising water is not merely meteorological; it is the visible outcome of a system that privileges real-estate value over human life.

The film's most devastating images capture the collision of care work and catastrophe. Radha, waist-deep in floodwater, steadies Vasu as he stumbles, her arms stretched between his frailty and the collapsing infrastructure around them. In another sequence, she attempts to coax him to eat while water seeps into their kitchen, transforming a domestic ritual into a desperate act of preservation. When neighbours offer to help evacuate Vasu, Radha's hesitation speaks to a deeper truth: she knows that the institutional alternatives—hospitals, shelters, care homes—cannot replicate the intimate knowledge she has accumulated over years of tending to him. Her labour is irreplaceable precisely because it is unrecognized.

Vasu's Alzheimer's disease functions as metaphor. He slips between past and present, remembering Radha only in her youth, confusing her lived reality with nostalgic fragments. This selective memory mirrors capitalism's own: it romanticizes the home as haven while erasing the exploitation and vulnerability that underpin it. Just as Vasu cannot reliably see Radha in the present, dominant ideology cannot see women's domestic labour as work in its own right—it is remembered sentimentally, but never recognized structurally.

By resisting melodramatic closure—no miraculous rescue, no sudden recovery, no tearful reconciliation that resolves the crisis—

Ramakrishnan refuses to let the home be mythologized. The house is not saved, nor is Radha's burden magically lifted. Instead, the film closes in ambiguity, the waters receding but the structural conditions unchanged. House Owner reframes the housing crisis not only as a question of market access or legal ownership, but as a crisis of care itself: what does it mean to have a house if the labour that sustains it remains invisible, unprotected, and constantly at risk of being swept away?

Kudumbasthan: Masculinity, Debt, and the Family as Ideological Shield

Rajeshwar Kalisamy's *Kudumbasthan* (2025) brings the housing narrative into direct confrontation with the question of masculine identity under capitalism. Its protagonist, Naveen, is a middle-class man whose sense of self is bound tightly to his role as breadwinner. When he loses his job after refusing to apologize to an authoritarian boss, the domestic sphere—his supposed sanctuary—becomes the stage where both economic and personal crises are enacted.

Naveen's unemployment is not an aberration. It reflects a larger transformation in post-liberalization India, where permanent jobs gave way to contractual work, performance-linked retention, and the constant threat of layoffs (Standing, 2011). Unlike the older industrial compact, which bound worker and employer in longer-term arrangements—sometimes with housing included—the service-sector compact is brutally temporary: the worker is disposable, their livelihood revocable at a moment's notice. Naveen is cast into this precarity, but he experiences it not as structural violence—the outcome of deregulated labour regimes—but as a private humiliation.

What follows is a performance of stability that the film renders with both comedy and dread. Each morning, Naveen dresses in his office clothes, picks up his bag, kisses his wife goodbye, and leaves the house as though going to work. He spends his days in public spaces—parks, libraries, cafés—killing time until evening, when he returns home with fabricated stories about office politics and project deadlines. When his wife asks about a promised promotion, he invents elaborate explanations. When his mother inquires about festival bo-

nuses, he manufactures delays. This daily theatre embodies what Althusser (1971) would call interpellation: the ideological demand that he continue to play the role of the 'family man' even as the material basis of that role collapses. The house is less a shelter than a stage, and masculinity itself is the script.

Debt enters as the silent co-star. To maintain appearances, Naveen borrows from friends, relatives, and informal lenders, juggling obligations in the hope that a new job will materialize before exposure. One particularly painful sequence shows him rehearsing his request for a loan, practicing casual delivery in front of a mirror before approaching an old college friend. The friend's visible discomfort, the way he glances at his phone as if calculating his own precarity, reveals how debt functions as a distributed crisis—Naveen's shame becomes his friend's anxiety. Debt here is not an indulgence but a structural necessity, the mechanism through which middle-class respectability is performed in the absence of wages (Guérin et al., 2014).

Caste fractures intensify the crisis. Naveen's marriage across caste lines had already strained relations with his parents; unemployment reactivates these tensions. In moments of confrontation, old prejudices resurface—his mother's barely concealed suggestion that his wife's family 'cursed' their prospects, his father's muttered references to 'these people.' The film does not present caste as a separate issue from class but as its intimate accomplice: precarity does not produce solidarity; it sharpens exclusion (Jodhka & Newman, 2007).

Kalisamy tempers this critique with a dark comic sensibility. Scenes of Naveen improvising excuses, dodging creditors, or rehearsing his 'office stories' carry a lightness that makes the underlying desperation more acute. In one memorable scene, he attends a job interview only to discover that the interviewer is a former subordinate, now his potential boss. The comedy of manners—the awkward handshakes, the power dynamics inverting before our eyes—masks the vertigo of class demotion. Yet the laughter is uneasy. It underscores the absurdity of a system where the working man must act out the role of stability for his family, even when the very conditions for stability have been stripped away.

By its end, the house remains intact, but its function as refuge is shattered. It is revealed as a stage for performance, a space where debt and deception mask structural fragility. Kudumbasthan thus exposes the family home not as protection from capitalism, but as one of its primary ideological theatres—the place where debt, gender, and caste collaborate to uphold the very system that undermines them.

3BHK: The Temporal Prison of Debt and the Triumph of Market Ideology

Sri Ganesh's 3BHK (2025) stretches the housing struggle across two decades, chronicling the Vasudevan family's twenty-one-year pursuit of a home they can call their own. Where *Veedu* depicted the immediate erosion of spirit in the act of construction, and *To Let* portrayed eviction as the new normal, 3BHK reveals the long arc of neoliberal housing: the way entire lifetimes are mortgaged to capital, and decades of sacrifice are reframed as achievement.

The film begins in 2004, when Vasudevan, a bank employee, sets aside seven and a half lakh rupees as the foundation for his family's dream. At the time, it seems substantial—a clerk's lifetime of careful saving. But by 2025, Chennai's housing market has outpaced him many times over: residential property values in key corridors have risen three- to fivefold, while salaries have grown only marginally (Sami, 2013). The deposit that once promised security is steadily devalued, each economic crisis—from the 2008 global recession to the 2020 pandemic—pushing ownership further out of reach. What Marx (1867/1990) called the temporal logic of capital—the conversion of human lifetime into the circulation time of commodities—is rendered here as lived experience. The 'property ladder' reveals itself not as a climb but as a treadmill: a structure designed to expend effort without producing mobility.

The cost is not only financial. Over two decades, the pursuit of the house reshapes the family's emotional terrain. Vasudevan becomes increasingly authoritarian, subordinating every personal decision to the project of ownership. When his son Prabhu falls in love with Aishu, a woman from a lower economic class, Vasudevan's response is revealing: 'We are saving for a house, not for your love

marriages.' The reduction of human connection to economic calculation is complete. His daughter Aarthi, married into what appears to be material security, suffers domestic abuse—but her plight is sidelined by the family's singular obsession with housing. 'Let her adjust,' Vasudevan tells his wife, unwilling to let marital crisis derail the property timeline. The yet-unrealized house has already succeeded in re-ordering relationships: it disciplines love, suppresses solidarity, and sanctifies sacrifice.

Ganesh underscores this slow violence through recurring visual motifs. Construction sites appear throughout the film's background—skeletal structures of concrete and rebar that never seem to advance. Vasudevan is repeatedly shown watching these half-built towers, his face a mixture of longing and despair, while the soundtrack of drills and hammers renders construction not as creation but as endless deferral. The house exists perpetually as promise, never as possession. In one devastating montage, we see the same plot of land across fifteen years: first empty, then excavated, then half-built, then stalled, then resumed—each stage accompanied by a new price that pushes Vasudevan's goal further away.

When the family finally receives their flat—a modest 3BHK in Guduvancheri, far from Chennai's core—the victory is geographically hollow. The distance consigns them to punishing commutes, erasing hours each day in transit. State-led resettlement schemes have long enacted this same logic, pushing families from the Slum Clearance Board to distant Kannagi Nagar and Perumbakkam, dozens of kilometres from workplaces and schools (Coelho et al., 2012). Peripheral containment masquerades as ownership. In the film's final scene, Vasudevan fixes the nameplate 'Vasudevan & Family' to the door, his expression proud, even triumphant. The audience is invited to share the relief.

Yet the irony is stark. Two decades have been bartered away for a property that secures legal title but not central belonging, a home that cements marginality rather than transcends it. Here the ideological operation is complete. The market has not only extracted two decades of labour and sacrifice; it has also authored the family's emo-

tional script. The suffering itself becomes sanctified—proof of virtue rather than evidence of exploitation. 3BHK demonstrates something bleaker than denial: that even when the house is won, it is won on the market's terms. Its final lesson is not liberation but absorption—the ideological embrace of the very system that has diminished life in the name of ownership.

Conclusion: Toward a Critical Domestic Realism

From Veedu's weary petit-bourgeois struggle to 3BHK's long-delayed 'victory,' Tamil cinema offers not isolated domestic tales but a continuous record of capital's failure to secure the most basic of needs. Each film exposes the same contradiction: in an economy with unprecedented productive capacity, the working class must mortgage decades, relationships, and dignity to secure a roof.

What unites these works is their insistence that housing is never just a backdrop. It is the stage where ideology is rehearsed and enforced: in Veedu, the bureaucratic grind that consumes Sudha's youth; in *To Let*, the caste-coded exclusions of the rental market; in *House Owner*, the invisibility of reproductive labour; in *Kudumbasthan*, the fragile masculinity of the unemployed provider; and in 3BHK, the sanctification of suffering as success. Each story makes visible how the home, far from refuge, is a battlefield where class, caste, gender, and capital collide.

The emergence of multiple housing-centred films in recent years is not coincidence. It reflects a growing social recognition that shelter, once assumed as necessity, is now lived as crisis. The cinema that stages this crisis does more than comment; it intervenes. By stripping housing of its ideological glamour and revealing it as a commodity that disciplines life, these films prepare the ground for what might be called critical domestic realism: a mode of filmmaking that refuses consolation, resists the myth of homeownership as deliverance, and insists on showing the cost of survival under neoliberal urbanism.

Yet a tension remains. These films diagnose with precision, but their conclusions often accommodate the very structures they critique. Vasudevan's pride at his nameplate, the audience's invited relief—these moments suggest that even critical cinema cannot fully

escape the gravitational pull of market ideology. The films expose the system's violence but largely accept its emotional grammar. Perhaps this is the limit of critique within the commodity form: the film itself must be consumed, must satisfy, must provide some resolution that enables the audience to leave the theatre (Jameson, 1991).

Still, the diagnostic work these films perform is not nothing. To make visible what ideology labours to conceal—that the housing crisis is not personal failure but structural design, not temporary hardship but capitalism's perfected mechanism of control—is to open a space for political imagination. These films remind us that the cost of a house is never measured in rupees alone. It is measured in years deferred, in relationships strained, in labour exhausted, in geographies redrawn. To represent this truthfully is to refuse ideology's seductions. To imagine otherwise—to envision a world where shelter is not bought at the expense of life itself—remains the unfinished work that cinema can provoke but cannot complete.

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