



Just a ‘Housewife’: Unpacking Domestic Stress of Women in the Short Film “Juice”

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Abstract

A housewife has been defined as "a woman responsible for running her home, whether she performs the tasks herself or hires people to do them" (Lopata, 1971). The word ‘housewife’ is the product of marriage between capitalism and patriarchy where ‘House’ indicates the site of labour – the private sphere, and with ‘wife’ being an ascribed status in relation to a man legally bound as a husband through the marriage contract. The role of a married woman as house wife is to perform domestic labour in the home without being paid in terms of leave or rest to keep herself decompressed from the assigned gender roles. This paper uncovers the unnoticed stress that is suffered by the housewives while the working men have holidays to revive their work stress. It examines the trammel that housewives experience in their everyday lives in the Hindi short film “ Juice” and the need for leisure. With a psychological and textual analysis of the short film, the research paper communicates domestic stress which also exposes the gender disparity in domestic roles.

Keywords: Housewife, Kitchen, Domestic roles, Domestic stress, Leisure

Introduction

The term “housewife” epitomizes the societal framework that diminishes the autonomy of married women by defining them solely within the context of their familial relationships and domestic responsibilities. This term emerges from the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy, which dictates a woman's societal position. “House” signifies the domain of unpaid labor—the private sphere—while “wife” denotes a status in relation to a man bound by marriage. Together, these words normalize the expectation that a married woman will undertake unpaid domestic duties within the home. In rural studies, the word *housewife* is occasionally used as a term for “a woman who does the majority of the chores within a farm's compound”, as opposed to field and livestock work.

According to Lopata's definition, a housewife is tasked with managing household affairs, whether she performs these duties herself or delegates them to others. The introductory chapter of *Occupation: Housewife* explores the concept of a lifecycle within the housewife role, delineating various stages and social roles. These stages include transitioning into the role of wife, the “expanding circle” phase following the birth of the first child, the “full house plateau” encompassing the primary focus on motherhood, and the “shrinking circle” stage marked by empty nesting or widowhood. In Francis Bacon's essay “Of Marriage and Single Life,” he posits “wives are young men's mistresses; companions for middle age; and old men's nurses”. Betty Friedan, in *The Feminine Mystique*, argues that labeling women as housewives and mothers has been a tool for societal repression, confining them to a limited domestic sphere.

To delve into the theme of domestic stress, the focus of my research paper centers on the domestic space—particularly the kitchen—where housewives are entrenched in gendered roles. This examination underscores the necessity of leisure for maintaining a healthy lifestyle, alleviating the stress associated with incessant domestic chores. Despite being perceived as superwomen, the reality often manifests as the superwoman syndrome, wherein housewives are expected to fulfill others' needs without respite.

The Kitchen and the Women

The kitchen, as a fundamental component of household interiors, delineates a realm of interactivity crucial to the organic functioning of individuals within society. Traditionally, it has been designated as a gendered domain, reserved for women's engagement in activities related to food preparation, serving, and maintenance.

Gender dynamics extend beyond the public sphere and are also entrenched within the private domain of households, as noted by Daphne Spain (2014), highlighting the mutual reinforcement of space and gender roles. Feminist and gender theorists emphasize that households serve as primary arenas for the reinforcement, conformity, and performance of gender roles in daily life.

Domestic spaces, as articulated by Leif Jerram (2006), possess a dualistic nature, serving as sites for familial interaction, socialization, relaxation, and leisure, alongside labor and work. Nivedita Menon (2012), a professor at JNU, underscores how the sexual division of labor impacts women's roles as citizens, prompting planners, architects, and policymakers to scrutinize kitchen design in their quest to shape the ideal home, city, and citizen.

In considering the architecture of the kitchen, two pivotal questions emerge: i) Should the kitchen be an open or enclosed space ii) Should individuals engage in kitchen activities while sitting or standing?

These inquiries shed light on the spatial context where women spend their everyday lives and underscore the potential health implications thereof, warranting significant attention and consideration.

Inside the four walls of the kitchen, housewives put in a lot of physical effort all day long. They don't have any schedules. They have to stay active from the moment they wake up to the time they go to sleep. They have to take care of their family's needs from personal care to food. The housewife takes care of the dependent family member. Housewives also have to keep their homes clean and tidy. It's never-ending as they do this every day. The worst part is that they feel worthless because of the routine nature of their work. They organize things for no reason and then rearrange them again the next day.

Susan Bassnett asserts that the societal perception of wives is that of mere instruments for their husbands' utility—a role relegated to caregiving, comforting, and fulfilling men's desires. In this view, wives are stripped of individuality, agency, and even their humanity, reduced to mere objects devoid of autonomy. Their existence is portrayed as transactional, with men holding supreme power while women are relegated to the status of robotic servitude. This paper aims to intertwine spatial analyses of the home from various disciplines such as sociology, human geography, and consumer culture studies with gender studies focused on masculinity and femininity. By doing so, it seeks to explore how women's domestic identities are formed within the confines of societal norms and expectations.

Domestic Stress among Housewives

Housewifery emerges as a predominant gender role imposed on women, often leading to mental health issues (Kaplan, 2021a, 2021b). Irrespective of their employment status, women are compelled to assume this role, especially within patriarchal societies, wherein they are expected to exhibit passive, emotional, obedient, and self-sacrificing behaviors (Vizard, 2019; Boz et al., 2018). These societal expectations, ingrained since childhood, deeply influence women's self-perception and social relations, perpetuating the cycle of gendered norms (Soylu & Kagnici, 2015).

Oakley (1974) notes the overlooking of housework as a legitimate work role within sociology, instead framing it as an extension of women's familial duties. This naturalization of domestic chores as exclusively women's work is a critical aspect of discussions surrounding the domestic sphere and feminist theories.

The daily routines of household tasks parallel the mythological plight of Sisyphus, condemned to endlessly roll a boulder uphill, only to watch it roll back down—an allegory for the perpetual struggle faced by housewives against life's inherent absurdity. Despite the societal portrayal of housewives as superhuman figures, this idealized image masks the reality of their struggles, leading to what is termed the “superwomen syndrome.”

This syndrome, akin to Viktor Frankl's concept of existential vacuum, reflects modern individuals' loss of inherent behavioral guidelines, resulting in feelings of aimlessness and conformity. Viktor E. Frankl speaks “no instinct tells him what he has to do, and no tradition tells him what he ought to do; sometimes he does not even know what he wishes to do. Instead, he either wishes to do what other people do (conformism) or he does what other people wish him to do (totalitarianism)” (1992).

Within the context of a housewife's daily life, this existential vacuum manifests as severe mental health issues, including stress, low self-esteem, obsessive thoughts, perfectionism, denial, burnout, loneliness, sexual problems, and an exaggerated sense of responsibility (Craske & Stein, 2016; Kaplan, 2021a, 2021b).

The primary factor contributing to this negative assessment is believed to be the caregiver role (Dastan et al., 2015). Caregiver responsibilities typically involve ensuring the well-being of family members, including supporting healthy development, aiding recovery from illness or accidents, and caring for disabled or ill individuals within the family (Ancel, 2017; Malhotra & Shah, 2015). These ongoing and often unshared duties gradually lead women to become codependent individuals (Ancel, 2017). Codependency is characterized by neglecting one's own needs, excessive focus on others, difficulty expressing emotions, and deriving satisfaction mainly from relationships with others. It is more prevalent among women (Ançel, 2017; Karaca and Unsal, 2012; Orbon et al., 2021; Panaghi et al., 2016). While there are various perspectives on the origins of codependency, such as learned behavior, personality disorders, or relationship addictions, it is widely recognized as a consequence of family dynamics (Cermak, 1991; Cruse & Wegscheider-Cruse, 2012; Hands & Dear, 1994; Stafford, 2001). Consequently, codependency is more common among women, who are disproportionately affected by family interactions and societal gender roles (Ancel, 2017; Lancer, 2014). Their roles often lead to unhealthy relationships characterized by unequal give-and-take, blurred personal boundaries, and a constant focus on others (Karaca and Unsal, 2012). Such relationships fuel the cycle of codependency, contributing to mental health issues such as low self-esteem, obsessive thinking, perfectionism, denial, difficulty setting boundaries, burnout, loneliness, sexual problems, and an exaggerated sense of responsibility (Ancel, 2017; Chmielewska, 2012; Cruse & Wegscheider-Cruse, 2012; Kaplan, 2021b; Reyome et al., 2010).

Housewives often face elevated levels of stress, with household chores being identified as a significant contributor to their chronic stress levels (Brantley et al., 2005). Research highlights that women who do not engage in paid employment outside the home are more prone to experiencing mental health issues (Haggett, 2009). Studies have consistently shown that employed women tend to exhibit better psychological well-being compared to housewives (Dadsetan et al., 2006; Sinha, 2017; Smadi, 2019). Conversely, housewives frequently report higher levels of stress and burnout (Fallahzadeh et al., 2014; Smadi, 2019), along with lower quality of life (Saravi et al., 2012) and life satisfaction, and increased stress levels compared to their employed counterparts (Panwar & Srivastava, 2019). Additionally, anxiety symptoms are prevalent among housewives (Kaur et al., 2011; Lebert-Charron et al., 2021), with recent meta-analyses demonstrating a significant association between burnout and anxiety (Koutsimani et al., 2019).

These findings suggest various factors contributing to housewives' heightened risk of mental health problems. The traditional roles associated with domestic and home care responsibilities are recognized as particularly stressful (Sinha, 2017). Moreover, employed women are more likely to seek assistance with household tasks compared to housewives (Mo et al., 2020). Consequently, being a housewife is identified as a significant risk factor for poor mental health.

Research on the definitions of women's leisure

Over the past decade, researchers focusing on women's leisure have encountered a dual challenge. Firstly, the study of women itself has often been marginalized, and secondly, the study of leisure activities has not always been considered a serious academic pursuit. There has been an assumption that women's leisure is similar to

men's, or that leisure behavior does not warrant scholarly investigation because it is seen as something innate and universally understood.

Historically, women's leisure has been overlooked in academic research, with early scholars prioritizing topics such as paid employment and leisure pursuits traditionally associated with men. The feminist movement has brought critical issues such as economic equality and reproductive rights to the forefront, often relegating the study of leisure to a lower priority. However, there is a growing recognition of the importance of women's leisure in contributing to overall quality of life.

Recent efforts have begun to address these challenges by affirming the significance and visibility of women's leisure. Scholars such as Bella (1990), Deem (1986), Henderson et al. (1989), and Wimbush & Talbot (1988) have highlighted the importance of studying women's leisure activities as integral components of a fulfilling life for all women.

Henderson et al. (1989) argued that examining women's lifestyles provides a broader understanding of their leisure activities. They suggested that analyzing women's leisure choices can offer insights into their broader choices and experiences of oppression. There are commonalities between the limitations women may face in their leisure pursuits and those in other aspects of their lives. This suggests that studying leisure is not just about the allocation of time; it also involves understanding the quality of time and the autonomy associated with leisure decisions, which are no longer incidental for women.

According to Henderson et al. (1989), engaging in leisure activities can help women develop self-value and confidence as individuals. It may empower them to challenge societal gender norms and stereotypes. In this way, involvement in leisure pursuits can serve as a means of liberation from restrictive gender roles and contribute to women's empowerment.

Until 1982, there was minimal research attention given to women and their leisure activities, with most literature focusing on sex and gender differences as secondary aspects. Only a few exceptions acknowledged women's leisure experiences, while the prevailing assumption was that leisure was universally the same for both genders.

In contemporary society, women are increasingly recognized for their individual experiences and perspectives, rather than solely in relation to men. Researchers now acknowledge the distinctiveness of women's leisure experiences and the commonalities in leisure meanings shared by both genders. The evolving frameworks for studying women range from liberal perspectives advocating for equality in leisure participation (e.g., Henderson, Stalnaker, & Taylor, 1988) to radical approaches seeking to establish leisure expressions defined by women themselves (e.g., Bella, 1986).

In traditional industrialized societies, free time has been synonymous with leisure, referring to discretionary periods available for personal activities. Leisure encompasses the time beyond work or daily obligations, allowing individuals to engage in activities of their choosing. Often, leisure is associated with recreational pursuits, including sports, cultural events, or volunteer work. The concept of leisure as a meaningful experience emphasizes the importance of freedom in choice, with individual feelings about an activity taking precedence over its nature or timing. This subjective view highlights the significance of choice and intrinsic satisfaction, shaping attitudes toward leisure activities.

Women's leisure has been explored through various conceptualizations, including time budget studies to analyze available leisure time. However, leisure as time may not fully apply to women, as many feel they lack the time or deserve leisure. The division between work and leisure is less clear for women, especially with domestic responsibilities. While some women may now identify with this dichotomy, leisure time remains fragmented or limited due to gender roles. Therefore, understanding women's leisure requires considering broader contexts beyond just time.

When delving into the lives of women, viewing leisure as a meaningful experience has proven to be the most insightful approach. Dixey (1987) suggests that understanding women's leisure necessitates an examination of their societal roles and the resulting outcomes, rather than simply analyzing their activities or time allocation.

Many women find comprehensive meaning in various aspects of their lives, which may be categorized as leisure activities. Conversely, as Bella (1990) contends, what observers may perceive as “leisure” often entails demanding, obligatory, or work-related tasks for women. Leisure can manifest in diverse forms, including family interactions, community service, social engagements, work outside the home, and personal downtime. Numerous elements contribute to defining the leisure experience, such as perceived freedom, intrinsic motivation, enjoyment, relaxation, interpersonal dynamics, personal engagement, and self-expression. Additionally, as Kelly (1983) suggests, leisure experiences serve as vital arenas for individuals to shape their self-conceptions and express their identities. While time and activity dimensions are essential, focusing on the meaning derived from leisure experiences offers a broader contextual framework that integrates these dimensions. Moreover, exploring leisure through the lens of experience and meaning sheds light on various contextual facets of women's lives.

The multifaceted roles that women undertake in society, encompassing duties as wives, mothers, daughters, and caregivers, often deprive them of the fundamental right to rest. In contrast, within the feminist discourse, there is recognition that men's labor in the workforce grants them the privilege of relaxation, while women face societal scrutiny and judgment for seeking the same respite. This disparity in treatment directly impacts women's self-perception and overall well-being, undermining their ability to engage in self-care and social interaction.

Moreover, due to pervasive social, cultural, and economic biases, women encounter significant obstacles in accessing spaces where they can unwind and enjoy leisure without constraints. Many public spaces remain unwelcoming and unsafe for women, perpetuating a sense of vulnerability and constraining their freedom of movement. Consequently, women often find themselves deprived of opportunities for carefree moments of relaxation and leisure, further exacerbating the inequalities they face in society.

Research conducted by NIMHANS reveals alarming statistics regarding the prevalence of depressive illness in India, with one in every 15 adult Indians suffering from this condition. Additionally, it is projected that up to 40% of the population may experience clinical depression in their lifetime, posing a significant public health concern. The World Health Organization's report further emphasizes the gravity of the situation, indicating that depression is poised to become the most common illness globally, particularly affecting women.

The rising levels of stress, coupled with the demands of work, familial responsibilities, and limited leisure activities, contribute to the escalating rates of depression. A study conducted by Madhu Mathur from Meerut University sheds light on the correlation between household activities and depression among middle-aged women. Findings suggest that women who spend more time engaged in household chores, as opposed to leisure pursuits or employment, are at a higher risk of developing depression. Mathur's research sample predominantly comprised educated women from lower to middle-class backgrounds, highlighting the widespread impact of household obligations on mental health.

The primary responsibility of a housewife revolves around the care of her family and home, imposing both physical and mental strains. While the physical exertion may not be overly strenuous, it is characterized by continuous, unrelenting demands, leading to a gradual deterioration in health. Housewives lack structured schedules, remaining active from dawn to dusk to meet their family's needs. From personal hygiene to meal preparation, they shoulder the entirety of domestic responsibilities, with the additional burden of caring for dependent family members falling squarely on their shoulders. This perpetual cycle of caregiving underscores the immense pressure faced by housewives, contributing to their vulnerability to mental health issues such as depression.

In addition to fulfilling their caregiving duties, housewives are tasked with maintaining order and cleanliness within their homes. This responsibility is perpetual, demanding daily attention and effort. However, the monotonous nature of this work often leaves housewives feeling unfulfilled and undervalued, as they engage in repetitive tasks without tangible long-term outcomes. The cyclical nature of tidying up today only to repeat the process tomorrow exacerbates this sense of futility.

Furthermore, women encounter disparities in accessing leisure opportunities and spaces. Research conducted in Milton Keynes, UK, highlights the intricate interplay between women's gender roles and their leisure

experiences. The study elucidates how various factors, including domestic responsibilities, the attitudes and behavior of male partners, childcare obligations, limited financial autonomy, and lack of transportation, constrain women's ability to engage in leisure activities. Notably, women who are married, have young children, possess minimal education, and lack independent means of transport are particularly marginalized in terms of leisure participation. These findings underscore the broader societal dynamics that perpetuate women's subordinate status and contribute to the scarcity of leisure opportunities available to them.

Women and the Definition of Leisure

The literature on women's leisure, viewed through a feminist lens, underscores the disparities in leisure experiences between men and women. While leisure may be more accessible to certain demographics, such as the middle class and educated, women across various life situations encounter considerable variations in their leisure pursuits. Patriarchal capitalist ideologies construct leisure as a realm of freedom, yet paradoxically, it becomes a space where women's behaviors are closely monitored and regulated, limiting their opportunities for leisure and prioritizing male leisure experiences. Women often find themselves with less time and priority for leisure activities compared to men, further exacerbated by societal norms and gender roles that dictate their familial and social obligations (Carrington et al., 1987; Woodward & Green, 1988).

For many women, leisure is deeply intertwined with social interactions, particularly within familial contexts. They often perceive their leisure as intertwined with family activities or prioritize family leisure over individual pursuits. Gender socialization channels women towards roles of caregiving and nurturing, shaping their leisure preferences and activities. The home emerges as the primary locus of women's leisure, driven by factors such as household responsibilities, limited opportunities for recreation outside the home, and safety concerns. However, leisure within the home is often fragmented and laden with domestic obligations, challenging women's ability to fully experience leisure (Glyptis & Chambers, 1982; Henderson & Rannells, 1988).

A pervasive theme in women's leisure studies is the struggle for entitlement to leisure. Many women internalize societal expectations and do not believe they deserve leisure, viewing it as antithetical to their role obligations. Conflicting findings emerge regarding women's perceptions of entitlement to leisure, influenced by factors such as employment status and household dynamics. While some employed women may feel more entitled to leisure due to financial independence and better time management, others, especially those working at home, may experience less conflict over leisure pursuits. Overall, the entitlement to leisure for women intersects with various aspects of their lives, reflecting broader societal norms and gender dynamics (Deem, 1986; Wimbush & Talbot, 1988; Bialeschki & Henderson, 1986).

“Juice”

“Juice” is a poignant Indian Hindi-language family drama short film released in 2017, directed by Neeraj Ghaywan and produced by Lalit Prem Sharma under the banner of Royal Stag Barrel Select Large Short Films. It portrays the everyday life of a middle-class housewife, Manju Singh, played by Shefali Shah, as she navigates through the gendered dynamics of a get-together she hosts with her husband Brijesh, portrayed by Manish Chaudhari, on a sweltering evening. The film delves into themes of gender roles, domestic stress, and inequality, shedding light on the stark contrast between the experiences of men and women within the household.

The narrative unfolds with a familiar scene that resonates with many middle-class Indian households: Manju diligently cleans up after her husband and his friends, ensuring their comfort by tending to household chores like watering the cooler. Meanwhile, her husband engages in casual misogyny, recounting an incident with his female boss. The segregation between men and women becomes evident as the guests arrive, with men congregating in the living room, indulging in leisurely activities, while women gather in the kitchen, assuming the roles of domestic caretakers. *Juice* shows a stark difference between the two areas in the same house— “hot” versus “cool”, “comfort” versus “discomfort”, “party” versus “duty” and finally “relaxed” versus “chaotic”; the only common factor linking them being internalized patriarchy. This division highlights the entrenched gender norms and the unequal distribution of labor within the household.

As the story progresses, the film juxtaposes the contrasting environments of the male and female spaces. While the men enjoy the cool comfort of the living room, the women toil away in the stifling heat of the kitchen, their labor unacknowledged and their leisure constrained by societal expectations. The disparity in leisure time between men and women is underscored, with women afforded limited opportunities for relaxation and recreation compared to men, who enjoy unrestricted access to leisure spaces.

Furthermore, the film underscores the detrimental impact of gendered roles on women's mental health. This research underscores the urgent need to address gender inequalities and challenge traditional norms that perpetuate the marginalization of women within domestic spaces. "Juice" serves as a powerful commentary on the pervasive effects of patriarchy and the importance of dismantling gendered hierarchies to foster equality and well-being within society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evidence strongly suggests that the mental health of Indian housewives is significantly at risk. It is imperative to address this issue promptly and proactively by prioritizing the need for leisure time for these women. By granting them the opportunity to engage in meaningful leisure activities, they can cultivate a sense of purpose and identity in their lives, paving the way for a healthier and more fulfilling existence. However, it is essential to recognize that the responsibility for initiating this change lies primarily with the women themselves. From their perspective, they must advocate for their right to leisure and actively incorporate leisure activities into their daily routines. By doing so, they can take proactive steps towards mitigating stress and enhancing their overall well-being. Ultimately, empowering Indian housewives to embrace leisure as an essential aspect of life is crucial for fostering a society where women can thrive and lead fulfilling lives free from the burden of mental health challenges.

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