

Domestic Violence and the Subaltern Reality of Indian Women in Malaysian Tamil Folk Songs

Dhilip Kumar Agilan, Associate Professor Dr. Kartheges
Ponniah, Associate Professor Dr. Kingston Pal Thamburaj
Faculty of Language and Communication, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, 35900 Tanjong
Malim, Perak

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Abstract

This study examines the domestic violence endured by Indian women in colonial Malaya as reflected in Malaysian Tamil folk songs. These songs function as cultural archives that document the lived realities, emotional pain and silenced voices of women within the exploitative British rubber plantation system. Drawing on 23 purposively selected songs from major documented collections, the analysis identifies two dominant forms of abuse which were violence committed by intoxicated husbands and violence perpetrated by sober husbands. Across these songs, domestic violence appears through multiple dimensions such as physical assault, marital rape, humiliation, psychological intimidation, emotional neglect, infidelity, abandonment and economic deprivation. Historical, descriptive and explanatory research designs were employed to interpret women's experiences in their socio-cultural context. Thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework enabled the identification of recurring patterns of oppression. Narrative and discourse analyses were also used to uncover symbolic meaning, linguistic choices and emotional tone within the lyrics. A translation process was incorporated using Tamil lexical resources to preserve cultural nuances, idiomatic expressions and metaphors while rendering them into English. The findings reveal that domestic violence was deeply rooted in patriarchy, economic dependency, caste norms and the structural conditions of plantation life, leading some women to express death as a final escape from relentless suffering and subaltern existence.

Keywords: Malaysian Tamil Folk Songs, Domestic Violence, Indian Women, Colonial Malaya, Patriarchy, Translation, Toddy Consumption, Subalternity

Introduction

Domestic violence remains one of the most pervasive violations of women's rights globally, affecting women across socio-economic groups, cultures and historical periods. According to the World Health Organization (2024), more than one quarter of women aged fifteen to forty-nine worldwide have experienced physical and or sexual violence by an intimate partner. Emotional, psychological, technological and economic forms of abuse are also widespread,

although they continue to be significantly underreported (Boruah, 2023). Scholars emphasize that domestic violence should be understood not merely as interpersonal misconduct but as a structural issue rooted in gender inequality, cultural norms, economic dependency and inadequate institutional support systems that fail to protect women (Siregar, 2024). In Malaysia, domestic violence remains a serious national concern. Zulkifli Manzor (2024) recorded 2,794 reported cases between 2021 and 2023. More recent statistics provided by Datuk Seri Nancy Shukri, the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, indicate a twenty-nine percent increase, raising the number of cases to 7,116 (Berita RTM, 2025). Within the Malaysian Indian community, domestic violence carries distinct sociocultural meanings. A study by Nithiya and Bada (2023) identifies three common perceptions. Some community members view domestic violence as a normal component of married life. Others regard it as a clear violation of fundamental human rights. Certain men interpret it as an expression of male authority within the household. These contradictory perceptions reflect deep cultural tensions and reveal how domestic violence becomes normalized within particular environments. The origins of domestic violence in the Malaysian Indian community can be connected to the colonial era. From the nineteenth century until the early twentieth century, large numbers of South Indian labourers were brought to Malaya under the kangani system to work on British-owned rubber plantations. These plantations operated within rigid patriarchal structures that involved caste segregation, exploitative labour systems, low wages and restricted mobility. Indian women on the estates lived under precarious conditions shaped by economic dependency, limited legal protection, and strict gender expectations. These factors created environments where domestic violence could occur with minimal consequence. Many women lacked access to support networks or protective mechanisms, which intensified their vulnerability and reinforced their subaltern status.

One of the richest sources for understanding the lived experiences of these women is Malaysian Tamil folk songs. These songs, transmitted orally and later documented by scholars such as Thandayutham, Muthammal Palanisamy, Murasu Nedumaran and Logeswari Arumugam, serve as cultural and historical testimonies of plantation life. They portray women's emotions and everyday struggles, including fear, hardship, sacrifice, endurance and subtle forms of resistance. Domestic violence appears frequently in these songs and is intertwined with themes such as poverty, alcoholism, patriarchal control and marital instability. Although these songs contain valuable information, academic attention to domestic violence in Malaysian Tamil folk songs remains limited. Most existing studies focus on musicology, cultural identity, labour experiences or religious symbolism. These contributions are significant but rarely place Indian women at the centre of analysis. For example, the work of Logeswari and Kingston (2017) applies transport theory to examine how Tamil labourers navigated migration-related difficulties under British rule. Dhilip Kumar's study published in 2023, titled "Goddess Kali in Malaysian Tamil Folk Songs", concentrates on deity representation but includes some references to the struggles of Indian women. When connected with the broader study by Kingston, Ponniah, Saravanakumar and Ilangumaran published in 2020 on folk religion, a wider cultural context becomes visible. This research explains the worship of village deities among Malaysian Tamils and highlights how folk songs preserve spiritual expression, cultural values and community beliefs.

Studies that examine broader social and historical themes also contribute to understanding plantation life. For example, Logeswari and Kingston (2023) analyse symbols such as plot numbers and brinjal to describe the traumatic experiences of Tamil labourers. Their findings illuminate experiences of famine, displacement and sexual exploitation, particularly among young female workers. In addition, their article on maladaptive behaviour highlights suicidal tendencies, alcoholism and psychological distress among Tamil labourers (Logeswari & Kingston, 2017). It also includes specific references to women's experiences of suicide attempts, sexual exploitation by intoxicated husbands and the absence of support systems. Logeswari's (2017) master's thesis uses trauma theory to analyse 146 folk songs, revealing patterns of segregation, physical abuse, psychological trauma, economic hardship and cultural erosion. Further contributions come from research that examines plantation social life more broadly. Kingston's (2015) article on alcohol usage discusses how toddy addiction among Tamil men caused family instability, loss of employment and disruption of household responsibilities. Baskaran Nadesan's (2015) article provides an extensive overview of Malaysian Tamil life during the colonial and Japanese occupation periods. Although these works offer valuable insights, they concentrate primarily on general plantation hardships instead of focusing specifically on domestic violence against women.

The small number of studies that directly examine domestic violence do so in narrow ways. The study titled "Drinking Habits and Domestic Violence against Indian Women by Husbands" written by Dhillip Kumar in 2025 concentrates mainly on violence committed by intoxicated husbands. It does not explore violence by non-intoxicated husbands or the broader structural causes of domestic violence. Contemporary sociological studies, including the work of Nithiya and Bada in 2023 and the study "Intimate Partner Violence and Poverty" by Karupiah and Gopal in 2017, analyse domestic violence in modern Malaysian Indian households but do not address its historical development or its cultural representation in folk songs. As a result, the historical experiences of Indian women in colonial Malaya remain insufficiently analysed. This gap is notable because folk songs document the full spectrum of abuse faced by Indian women. These include physical beatings, wife battering associated with alcohol consumption, marital rape, sexual coercion, economic deprivation, humiliation, emotional torment, abandonment, infidelity and suicidal thoughts. The songs reveal how violence became embedded in domestic life through toddy addiction, low wages, financial instability and patriarchal expectations. They also highlight women's coping mechanisms, such as silence, endurance, small acts of defiance, escape and contemplation of self-harm. Although there is a substantial body of research on Malaysian Tamil folk songs, most studies emphasise collective labour struggles rather than individual gendered experiences. The emotional lives of women, their domestic conflicts and their encounters with violence remain overshadowed. This creates a significant research gap because no study has systematically examined domestic violence in Malaysian Tamil folk songs through a thematic approach that considers all forms of abuse, compares intoxicated and non-intoxicated husbands, and situates these depictions within the socio-economic and patriarchal structures of colonial Malaya. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding the historical foundations of domestic violence within the Malaysian Indian community. Folk songs function as cultural archives that preserve the voices and lived realities of subaltern women and provide deeper insights into how violence was experienced, interpreted and resisted. The present study aims to address this gap by analysing twenty-three Malaysian Tamil folk songs from the colonial period. Using historical interpretation and thematic analysis, this study examines the forms

of domestic violence represented in these songs and explores how women responded to the violence they faced within the plantation system. The findings contribute to feminist historiography, subaltern studies and the cultural history of the Indian diaspora in Malaya.

Data Sources of the Study

Primary Data

The primary materials for this study were drawn from four key compilations of Malaysian Tamil folk songs: *Malēciya Nāṭṭuppurap Pāṭalkaḷ* by Thandayutham, *Malēciya Nāṭṭuppurappāṭalkaḷil Eṇṇ Payaṇam* by Mutthammal Palanisamy, *Malēciyat Tamiḷk Kavitaik Kaḷaṇciyam* by Murasu Nedumaran, and Shantini Pillai's *Transnational Collaboration and Media Industry in South India: Case of the Malaysian–Indian Diaspora*. To broaden the corpus, three folk songs from a previous related study and three songs documented by Logeswari Arumugam (2017) during her research on Malaysian Tamil folk songs were also included. From the total of 531 documented Malaysian Tamil folk songs, 23 songs were ultimately selected for analysis based on their relevance to the study's focus.

Secondary Data

Secondary sources, also referred to as second-hand data, played a crucial role in augmenting the comprehension and interpretation of the primary data in this study. These sources were used to provide supplementary information and to serve as supporting evidence, thereby strengthening the analysis and enhancing the overall validity and reliability of the findings. The secondary materials consisted of books, journal articles, research papers, dictionaries, interviews, magazines, webpages, newspapers, and dissertations that examined themes such as the subaltern status of women, male patriarchy, women's struggles, and the physical, psychological, and social impacts of these struggles. Works related to Malaysian Tamil Folk Songs, Tamil Folk Songs, and the broader cultural, historical, and societal contexts of these songs were also included. Collectively, these secondary sources provided additional layers of insight and depth, enriching the interpretation of the primary data and broadening the understanding of the lived experiences of Indian women and their portrayal within the folk song tradition.

Sampling Criteria

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select songs that directly or indirectly depict the experiences of Indian women, particularly in relation to domestic life and abuse. Purposive sampling in qualitative research refers to the intentional selection of data sources that can provide rich, in-depth information relevant to the research objectives. This approach enables researchers to focus on information-rich cases in order to explore complex social and cultural phenomena with depth and clarity (Tajik, Golzar and Noor, 2024). Out of the 531 documented Malaysian Tamil folk songs, 23 songs were identified as suitable for analysis based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria

- I. Songs describing the daily lives of Indian women in plantation settings
- II. Songs referencing marriage, family life, toddy consumption, or male authority
- III. Songs containing depictions of physical, emotional, psychological, economic, or sexual violence
- IV. Songs portraying women's struggles, subalternity, or forms of resistance

Exclusion Criteria

- I. Purely devotional songs unrelated to socio-cultural contexts
- II. Songs focusing exclusively on male laborers
- III. Songs that do not reference women or domestic environments

This sampling method follows the approach used by scholars such as Logeswari and Kingston (2017, 2023), who employed purposive selection when analysing Malaysian Tamil folk songs for cultural, historical, and gendered insights. The deliberate narrowing of the dataset ensured that the songs chosen were directly relevant to the core focus of the study and capable of providing meaningful perspectives on the subaltern experiences of Indian women during the colonial plantation era.

Methodology*Research Design*

This study employed a combination of historical, descriptive, and explanatory research designs to form a cohesive and comprehensive approach. Integrating multiple designs enhanced the authenticity and validity of the findings, a methodological principle emphasized by Martella (2013), who argues that multi-dimensional designs strengthen the reliability of qualitative inquiry. The selection of these designs was based on the nature of the topic, in line with Vaus (2001), who stressed that the design of a study must align with whether the inquiry is descriptive, interpretive, or explanatory. An explanatory design was incorporated to gain deeper insight into the embedded meanings, symbolism, and socio-cultural contexts reflected in the folk songs, following the recommendation of Mohd, Kazi, Rohaan, and Suhit (2022), who highlight the value of explanatory methods when dealing with complex cultural phenomena. A descriptive design was also used to outline the social environments of plantation life and to describe the experiences of women as portrayed in the songs.

Given the historical embeddedness of the songs, a historical research design was essential for uncovering and interpreting past experiences. This approach aligns with the views of Lok, Sonelal, Rabin, Umesh, and Teknath (2023), who argue that historical research helps illuminate how past events shape cultural expressions. Howell (2001) similarly asserts that the purpose of historical research is to collect, verify, and synthesise evidence from the past to form factual and contextual understanding. A two-step analytical process guided the historical interpretation:

- I. Examining the relationship between historical events and the narratives in the folk songs, particularly themes relating to toddy addiction, patriarchy, labor exploitation, and caste structures.
- II. Analyzing figurative language, terms, and symbols that reflected the lived realities of Indian women during colonial Malaya.

This integrated design allowed the researcher to uncover the socio-economic and cultural conditions that shaped domestic violence experienced by Indian women in Malaysian plantation communities.

Data Analysis

The data collected for this study were analysed using thematic analysis, supported by narrative analysis, discourse analysis, and translation analysis. This combined approach enabled a comprehensive examination of the symbolic meanings, emotional expressions, and socio-cultural messages embedded in Malaysian Tamil folk songs that depict the domestic experiences of Indian women during colonial Malaya.

Thematic Analysis

The study followed the six-phase thematic analysis framework introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006), which is widely used in qualitative research to systematically organise and interpret patterned meaning within data.

Familiarisation with the Data

The researcher first immersed himself in the selected Malaysian Tamil folk songs by repeatedly reading and transcribing them. This stage involved identifying early ideas related to women's experiences, domestic relationships, and various forms of violence depicted in the lyrics. Repeated engagement with the texts helped the researcher develop a deep understanding of the narratives within the songs.

Generating Initial Codes

Next, the researcher coded meaningful sections of the songs by identifying words, phrases, and verses that reflected physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, or economic violence. Open, axial, and selective coding techniques were applied to ensure a systematic organisation of ideas. To strengthen reliability and reduce researcher bias, the codes were reviewed and verified by both the supervisor and co-supervisor, ensuring consistency in interpretation.

Searching for Themes

After coding, the researcher grouped related codes into broader themes. Themes were derived using both inductive and deductive approaches. Inductive analysis was used to identify themes emerging naturally from the folk songs. Deductive analysis was guided by the research objectives and existing literature on patriarchy, domestic violence, and subalternity. Themes represented core patterns within the songs, such as violence associated with toddy consumption, violence by non-intoxicated husbands, emotional and psychological suffering, patriarchal control, economic dependency, and women's strategies of endurance or resistance.

Reviewing Themes

The preliminary themes were refined to ensure coherence and meaningful representation. The researcher assessed whether each theme was sufficiently supported by the data and whether the themes accurately reflected the realities depicted in the folk songs. This step ensured internal consistency and alignment with the objectives of the study.

Defining and Naming Themes

The themes were then clearly defined by identifying their underlying essence, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). Each theme was articulated both in general terms and within the patriarchal plantation context to enhance clarity and depth.

Writing Up

The final step involved synthesising the themes into a coherent narrative. The findings were written by interpreting the content of Malaysian Tamil folk songs and linking them to the socio-cultural and historical realities of Indian women in colonial Malaya. This ensured that the analysis remained aligned with the study's objectives and research questions.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis focuses on the use of stories to convey human experiences and meaning (Oliver, 1998; Kayi, 2020). Since Malaysian Tamil folk songs often narrate lived experiences, emotions, and struggles in story form, narrative analysis was used to explore how these songs depict women's lives and domestic realities. This method enabled the researcher to understand how the stories within the songs construct meaning around suffering, violence, resilience, and subalternity.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis examines how language is used to communicate meaning, emotions, and cultural values (Kristina and Lindsey, 2017; Syarif, 2023). This method was applied to analyse how expressive language, metaphors, and culturally specific terms in the songs reveal deeper emotional and social dimensions of women's experiences. Through this analysis, the study explored how emotions such as fear, despair, humiliation, or resistance are constructed linguistically in the folk songs.

Translation

The researcher employed discourse analysis to translate Malaysian Tamil folk songs from Tamil to English. The Tamil section of the Digital Dictionaries of South Asia served as a key reference throughout the translation process. This section comprises the following seven sub-dictionaries:

1. Kriyāviṇṇaṁ Taṛkālat Tamil Akarāti: Tamil-Tamil-Āṅkilam
2. J. P. Fabricius's Tamil and English Dictionary
3. N. Kathiraiver Pillai's Tamil Moli Akarathi: Tamil-Tamil Dictionary
4. David W. McAlpin's A Core Vocabulary for Tamil
5. Taṛkālat Tamil Maraputtoṭar Akarāti: Tamil-Tamil-Āṅkilam
6. University of Madras Tamil Lexicon
7. Miron Winslow's A Comprehensive Tamil and English Dictionary of High and Low Tamil

Among the seven dictionaries listed, only three were utilized in this research. The following table outlines how these dictionaries were applied within the context of the study:

Table 1.0

Utilization of Dictionaries in the Translation Process

Bil	Dictionary	Utilization
1.	Kriyāvin̄ Taṛkālat Tamiḷ Akarāti: Tamiḷ-Tamiḷ-Āṅkilam	Utilized to obtain the meanings of words in a Tamil-to-Tamil format to understand their contextual significance, and subsequently to identify their equivalent meanings in English.
2.	J. P. Fabricius's Tamil and English Dictionary	Utilized to reconfirm the meanings of words and to identify accurate English equivalents.
3.	Taṛkālat Tamiḷ Maraputtoṭar Akarāti: Tamiḷ-Tamiḷ-Āṅkilam	Utilized to obtain the meanings of idiomatic expressions in Malaysian Tamil folk songs.

The primary objective of the translation process was to enhance comprehension for non-Tamil readers, enabling them to fully grasp the content of Malaysian Tamil folk songs. This study adopted both direct and contextual translation approaches. Direct translation aims to closely replicate the source text (Smith, 2008). Therefore, every word related to Indian women, their struggles, and the impact of those struggles as portrayed in the folk songs was translated directly. In contrast, contextual translation involves interpreting the meaning of a word or expression based on its usage within a specific context, in order to convey its intended significance accurately (Ellington, 1989). This method was applied to understand particular verses in the songs along with their contextual framework. Recognizing that contextual meaning offers a more comprehensive understanding of the song, the researcher consistently referred to these interpretations during the analysis.

Findings and Discussions

In colonial Malaya, Indian women living on rubber plantations were especially vulnerable to domestic violence and hardship. Their husbands often engaged in behaviours such as excessive toddy drinking, gambling, physical abuse, and strict control over women's freedom, which caused significant suffering. This section examines the violence experienced by these women in two main categories, namely violence perpetrated by intoxicated husbands and violence committed by husbands who did not consume alcohol.

Intoxicated Conduct

The toddy consumption among Indian laborers in Malaya increased drastically due to its affordability and easy accessibility (Krishnan & Raman, 2018). Laborers became heavily dependent on it, believing it helped them work better and remain productive under demanding conditions (Ishak, Dali, Ishak & Roslan, 2024). Both men and some women turned to toddy to cope with the grueling physical and emotional toll of plantation labor and domestic responsibilities (Gopal & Musa, 2020). For many Indian women, alcohol became a way to manage overwhelming stress, a pattern highlighted in the 1931 report by the Agent of the Government of India, which documented widespread alcohol dependence among laborers, including women and even children. Male laborers often drank to escape financial

burdens, family conflicts, and the harsh realities of plantation life (Krishnan & Raman, 2020). However, the consequences of male drinking were particularly severe, with many engaging in fights, abusing their wives and children, committing theft, trespassing, injuring others, skipping work, and even participating in violent crimes such as murder (Krishnan & Raman, 2020; Krishnan, Dali, Ghazali & Subramaniam, 2014). Many men spent a large portion of their wages at toddy shops, leaving little to no income for their families and perpetuating cycles of poverty (Ray & Mishra, n.d.). These circumstances impacted Indian women domestically on multiple levels—physically, psychologically, emotionally, and sexually—leaving lasting scars on their lives. The following diagram clearly illustrates the harms resulting from the husbands' intoxicated addiction and its devastating consequences on their wives.

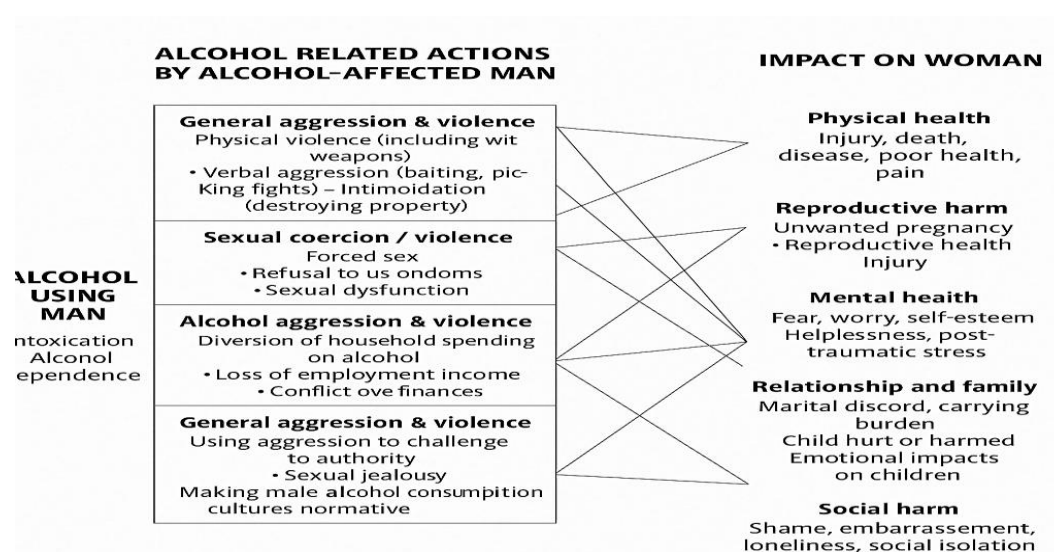


Figure 1.0. Framework of Harms Stemming from Men's Drinking and Their Impact on Women (Wilson, Willoughby, Tanyos, Graham, Walker, Laslett, A.-M. & Ramsoomar, 2024)

Toddy and Economical Violence

Indian laborers in Malaya began consuming toddy excessively and without restraint. The establishment of toddy shops on rubber estates, strategically located near their living areas, only worsened the problem. The easy availability, low prices, and the early age at which drinking began made it difficult for laborers to overcome their dependency (Krishnan & Raman, 2018). As a result, a significant portion of their income was spent on toddy, leading to financial strain and economic violence within their families. This form of economic violence had a profound impact on mothers and wives, who were economically marginalized and burdened with the responsibility of maintaining household stability, often with inadequate financial support. They expressed deep concern about the negative impact of spending money on alcohol rather than on essential needs for the family (Krishnan, 2014).

Malaysian Tamil folk songs highlight this economic violence, depicting Indian women as subaltern figures enduring immense hardships due to their husbands' drinking habits. These men, after receiving their wages, often headed straight to toddy shops, leaving their families destitute. The following song verses reflect this distressing reality:

“
 Mampuṭṭiyattāṅ kaiyi leṭuttā
Hoe hand pick
 muppatu kācuampaḷam tāṇṭā kaṭavuḷē!
Thirty cents wage give God!
 Viṭṭukku varumpōtu
House coming
 kuḷiccu muḷukikiṭṭu
Bath
 kaḷḷuk kaṭaikkup pōkumpōtu kaṭavuḷē!
Toddy shop going God!
”
 (Thandayutham, Kūli aṭimai, 24)

“With a hoe in hand,
 I earn thirty cents wage, oh God!
 When returning home,
 I bathe and refresh,
 Then off to the toddy shop, oh God!”

“
 Kaḷḷu kuṭikkap pōyi
Toddy drinking went
 kācu pōccuṭaṭi attē
Money gone
”

(Thandayutham, Kaḷ, 234)

“Went off to drink toddy,
 All the money is gone”

As noted by Krishnan (2014), a typical Indian family during this period predominantly spent their wages on purchasing food. However, under colonial rule, Indian laborers frequently faced wage exploitation by British administrators and plantation owners. Administrators often reduced wages whenever rubber prices fell, and laborers sometimes lost their jobs entirely (Sundram & Dali, 2022). Despite significant contributions to the rubber industry's development, these laborers received insufficient compensation and faced constant wage cuts (Arokiam & Raja, 2019). Consequently, their earnings were inadequate to sustain their families, worsening economic violence against women (Logeswari, 2017). The widespread addiction to toddy exacerbated the financial struggles, leaving women further oppressed and subjugated.

This economic violence and subaltern status forced Indian women into a cycle of borrowing, as they were left with no savings and no means of financial independence. The following verse illustrates this dire situation:

“

Aṭutta vīṭṭukkāraṇ kiṭṭa

Neighbour from

ampatu paicā vāṅkikiṭṭu

Fifty cents borrow

.....”

(Thandayutham, Kuṭi keṭṭukkum kuṭi, 234)

“Borrow fifty cents from the neighbor.”

Thus, Indian women were trapped in a cycle of economic violence and subalternity, continually striving for a stable life despite relentless financial and social hardships in the plantations. The lack of economic autonomy and systemic oppression deepened their marginalization, leaving them in a perpetual state of struggle and vulnerability. Furthermore, this economic violence often created tense and abusive situations within families. Husbands, traumatized by the harsh realities of plantation work, frequently exploited their wives physically and sexually, using violence to release their frustrations and seeking more money to continue their toddy consumption.

Toddy and Physical / Sexual Violence

Under the influence of excessive toddy consumption, Indian male laborers often lost control, becoming helpless and engaging in harmful behaviors, such as the sexual exploitation and physical abuse of their wives (Kingston, 2015; Krishnan & Raman, 2019). In some cases, they even forced their wives into prostitution and subjected them to physical abuse if they refused (Katigason & Dali, 2022). The following songs illustrate these acts committed by husbands toward their wives:

“

...kuṭṭimārkaḷaiyum kūṭṭikiṭṭu- ennaik

young women bring along me

kunta veccu vuṭṭupitṭu

squat left

paṇam vāṅkkiṭṭu

money taken

aṭa kūru keṭṭa māmā

characterless husband

kuṇamiḷanta māmā

quality lost

ninaiviḷantu pōkalāmā...

unconsciousness

.....”

(Thandayutham, keṭṭup pōna maccān, 78)

“You came with young women,
Leaving me squatted, helpless.
You took the money, my husband—
Honor lost, virtues gone,

And even your consciousness
Has slipped away..."

".....
kaḷḷukkuḷḷa tēḷiruntā
inside toddy if there is a scorpion
taḷḷipputṭ kuṭikkac collum
Brush aside drink
cōttukkuḷḷa kalliruntā
Inside rice if there is a stone
poṇṭāṭṭiyai aṭikkac collum!
wife beat
(Thandayutham, kuṭikāraṇiṇ vīram, 85)

"If there is a scorpion inside the toddy,
Brush it aside and drink.
If there is a stone in the rice,
The wife gets beaten!"

".....
Viṭuvēṇāṭi cum'mā
I won't leave you lady
vaippēṇ uṇṇaik kum'mā
Will beat you
....."
(Thandayutham, Kaḷḷukkaṭai pāṭal – 2, 89)

"I won't let you go, lady,
I'll strike you."

".....
Poṇṭāṭṭikkiṭṭa muṇaikkirāṇ
Wife He staring
....."
(Thandayutham, Kuṭi keṭukkum kuṭi, 234)

"He is staring at the wife."

This subjugation had profound emotional and psychological effects on Indian women in Malaysian Tamil folk songs. Consequently, they took actions in response to their frustrations, which ultimately undermined the family institution within the plantations.

Toddy and Emotional / Psychological Violence

Excessive toddy consumption causes Indian male laborers to lose self-control and behave recklessly. They frequently justify their addiction by referencing the tradition of toddy consumption passed down through generations by their elders. The following verses illustrate their justification for such irresponsible behavior:

“

Nāṇ maṭṭumtāṇ kuṭikkirēṇṇu,
Me only drinking toddy
 niṇaikkātaṭi kaṇṇē - itu
Don't think My Dear - This
 nā - nālu - talaimuraṭiyāy
For four generation
 naṭakkutaṭi peṇṇē!
Happening Oh Lady!
 (Muthammal, Kaḷḷukkaṭai pāṭal – 2, 89)

“Me alone drinking toddy,
 Don't think so, My Dear—
 This has been happening, Oh Lady,
 For four generations!”

When examining the history of toddy consumption among Indian laborers in Malaya, it is evident that drinking toddy became a widespread and significant habit, especially during the period of British colonization. According to Sandhu (2010), this behavior was an unethical practice brought over from their motherland when they migrated to Malaya. However, Arasaratnam (1970) argues that the majority of laborers developed this habit only after arriving in Malaya. Initially, toddy consumption began as a way to relieve the stress and trauma of working on plantations, but over time, it evolved into an addiction that led to numerous behavioral problems among the laborers. Some of them became heavily intoxicated, collapsing in front of toddy shops, suffering injuries, and even dying. The following verses illustrate their actions:

“

Kaḷḷukkuṭitta veṇṇilē,
Drinking toddy intoxicated
 kaṇṇum maṇṇum teriyalē,
Eye blurriness
”
 (Muthammal, Kaḷḷukkaṭai pāṭal – 2, 89)

“In the intoxication from drinking toddy,
 Eyes blurred, unable to see clearly,”

“

Kaḷḷuk kaṭaiyila tāṇṭā
Toddy shop
 kavuntukiṭṭu kiṭanta paiyaṇṭā
Collapsed young men
”
 (Thandayutham, Tillālē pāṭṭu, 80)
 "At the toddy shop,
 Collapsed young men."

“
 Maccāṇ mūccumuṭṭa
Breat ceased
 kaḷḷak kuṭikkaiyilē
Toddy drinking
 kīlē viḷuntu maṇṭaiyaṭ
fell down
 pōṭṭāṇām poṇṇumē tillālē...
Died Oh lady...
 (Thandayutham, Kaḷḷut taṇṇi, 307)

"Continuously consuming toddy,
 He gave up his life."

When analyzing the situation, it becomes clear that Indian male laborers suffer severe health issues due to their consumption of adulterated toddy. Shopkeepers commonly mix toddy with substances such as lime, marijuana, datura, alcohol, samsu, flour, water, and other additives to enhance the drink's addictive properties. This adulteration has a detrimental effect on their health, causing indigestion and diarrhea, as the drink's acidic nature disrupts the digestive system. Additionally, it leads to a state of collapse, subnormal body temperature, cold, clammy skin, and a soft, rapid pulse that may be weak or absent. Victims also experience persistent vomiting, severe diarrhea, and partial or complete suppression of urine. These symptoms typically emerge within hours of consumption, and without prompt medical intervention, death can occur within 36 hours. However, the laborers continue to drink it due to their inability to afford pure, high-quality toddy. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, some of them become entangled in disputes and conflicts and get arrested by the police. Some of them return home late. While others force their wives to prepare food for them after getting drunk. The following verses show this:

“
 Kuṭicca veriyiṇālē –
Drunken intoxication
 ulaikaḷ ventiṭātu
Boiling rice not cooked
 taṭiyaṭi veṭṭuk kuttu tāmpariya
Beating using sticks cutting stabbing
”
 (Thandayutham, Kuṭikka māṭṭēṇ!, 235)

"Through drunken intoxication,
 The rice remains uncooked,
 Assaulted with sticks, slashed, and stabbed."

“
 Mūccu mūccā cārāyatta kuṭikkirāṇ
Limitless toddy drinking
 muccantilē niṇṇutāṇē muṇaikkirāṇ.
Junction standing staring

Muraiccup pārkkum jaṇaṅkaḷa
Staring people
 iluttup pōṭṭu mitikkirāṇ.
Kicking them
 Pōliskāraṇ koṇṭu pōyi
Policeman bring Him
 kum'māṅkum māṅkaṇṇu kutturāṇ
Punching hardly

.....”
 (Thandayutham, Kuṭi keṭukkum kuṭi, 234)

"He drinks toddy without limit,
 Stands at the junction, glaring around.
 People gather and watch as he mutters,
 Then he kicks them away.
 A policeman takes him,
 Dragging him off as he stumbles along."

“.....
 Eṇṇa kaṛi ākkinā?
What meat she cooked?
 Pōṭam'mā reṇṭu tuṇṭu,
Put two slices
 pōtai nallā ēraṭṭum.
Intoxication will rise.

(Muthammal, Kaḷḷukkaṭai pāṭal 1, 88)

"What meat did she cook?
 Put two slices,
 The intoxication will rise well."

These hardships and intense situations significantly impact the emotional and psychological well-being of Indian women in families. The study by Pathath, Begum, & Ali (2018) reinforces the idea that heavy drinking by husbands is strongly linked to depressive symptoms in wives. These wives often experience emotional distress (K & Kuruvilla, 2024; Kashyap, Kashyap & Lalhmingmawii, 2024) and end up taking on the roles of both parents (Narayan, Tripathi, Mehdi & Jain, 2024). Indian women depicted in Malaysian Tamil folk songs also find themselves in similar situations. They are frustrated and affected by depression. Trapped as housewives, working as rubber tappers alongside their husbands to earn extra income, and taking care of their children, they have no way to release their stress. The irresponsibility of their husbands only adds to their burden, leaving them voiceless and patient for long periods. However, at some point, these women make certain decisions to escape their circumstances. First, they lock the front door to prevent their drunken husbands from entering. Second, they leave their families and return to their father's home. The following verses illustrate this situation.

“
 Katavait tiraṭi am'mā
Door open Oh Lady
 vampu paṇṇātē cum'mā
Mischief don't simply
”

(Muthammal, Kaḷḷukkaṭai pāṭal 1, 88)

"Open the door, Oh Lady,
 Don't simply cause mischief."

“
 Puḷḷaiyellām puruṣaṇ
All children husband
 kiṭṭa puṭiccu koṭuttukiṭṭu
leaves

 appaṇ vīṭu pōy cērā!
Father home went to
”

(Thandayutham, Kuṭi keṭukkum kuṭi, 234)

"She leaves all the children with the husband,
 And goes to her father's home."

In conclusion, these songs depict the resilience of Indian women who, despite enduring immense hardships due to their husbands' toddy addiction and the resulting domestic violence, ultimately find ways to assert their agency. Even wives of non-drinking husbands face similar challenges in these narratives, reflecting a broader struggle within their domestic and social roles.

Physical Violence by Non-drinking Spouses

The lives of some Indian women as wives on plantations are often difficult and filled with hardship. Husbands, influenced by a patriarchal mindset, either physically mistreat their wives or threaten them with violence. The following three songs depict this situation:

“
 Ākkip pōṭṭa teṇṭattukku allilō
Cooked for the sake
 tūkkip pōṭṭu uṭaikkirāṇṭi allilō!!!
Breaking all He!!!
”

(Thandayutham, Allilēlalō pāṭṭu, 252)

"I cooked for him,
 But he's breaking it all!"

“
 Uḷḷata nī colrīyā
”

*Truth you tell me or not
aṭi aṭipaṭṭu nī cāvaṛīyā?
Get beat you die?*

.....
*Uḷḷatta nī colṛīyā
Truth you tell me or not
utapaṭṭu cāvaṛīyā?
Get kicked die?*

.....”
(Thandayutham, Uḷḷataic col, 330)

“Are you going to tell me the truth, or die by getting beaten?
Are you going to tell me the truth, or die by getting kicked?”

.....”
Inta viṭṭila āmpīḷa irukkiṛāṇṇu payam'miruntākkā
*If she is scared on the men in this house
veḷiyē pōyi vekunēramā tāmatippāḷō?
Will she be late
Varaṭṭum iṇṇaikkū
After she back home today
iraṇṭula oṇṇu pāṭṭiṭuvēmnā-
I will enquire her
Anta
that
varaṇṭa ciṛukki nittup puṭuvēnnā!
Lady will beat
Eṇṇa poṇṇa innēramā
Oh lady until this time
eṇkiṭṭukkā pōyiruntē
where you went
oṇṇum puriyala! Oṇṇum puriyala!
Nothing is understand!
Pūcai eṇṇaikkū vāṅkap pōṛīyō teriyala!
Don't know when you will get beaten by me!*
.....”
(Thandayutham, Mīṇ viṛkac ceṇṇavaḷ, 206)

“If she were afraid of the men in this house,
Would she be so late outside?
Once she comes home today,
I will question her—
That girl will get beaten today!
Oh woman, until this hour,
Where did you go?
I don't understand anything! I don't understand anything!
I don't know when I'll have to beat you!”.

The wives, feeling subordinate, refrain from openly challenging their husbands' actions, instead choosing to express their sorrow indirectly. The following song reflects this experience:

“
 Eṇṇaik kaṭṭik koṭuttāṅka
Me given married
 kaṭṇaiyum kaḷiccāṅka!
Responsibility accomplished
 Nam'muṇṇa vīṭṭu vācalilē
Front house door
 muḷḷu muḷḷā kuttutam'mā
Thorns prick
”
 (Thandayutham, Īrōṭṭut taṇṇiyila..., 207)

"They got me married off,
 And fulfilled their responsibility.
 But at the front door of our house,
 Thorns prick me still."

In this song, "thorns pricking" symbolizes the physical violence endured by Indian women as wives, highlighting the pain inflicted on them. The imagery reflects the harsh, ongoing physical torment they face in their married lives. They feel this violence occurs because their husbands do not value them. The following verses reveal their thoughts on this neglect and mistreatment.

“
 Koṇṭu vanta rājaṇukku
Married me Husband
 eṇṇōṭa kuṇamum teriyalayē!
My good qualities don't know!

 Eṇṇai alaiccu vanta pāvikku
Me invited husband
 nī petta poṇṇu – arumai
Your Daughter – Good qualities
 teriyalayē!
Don't know
”
 (Thandayutham, Oru maratṭiṇ kīlē, 212)

To the man who married me,
 My virtues are unknown to him!
 To the man who took me,
 He doesn't know your daughter's virtues.

As a result, the wives in Malaysian Tamil folk songs attempt to cope and escape these circumstances in two ways. The first is through suicide. Married Indian women on Malayan plantations took their own lives after enduring physical violence from their husbands. A statement by an Indian woman named “Chinama” reflects the decision she made to end her life by drinking a mixture of grass poison, after repeatedly enduring physical violence from her husband. The statement below illustrates this:

“On July 1, 1941, around 9 AM, I took some grass poison stored by two workers, Mardai and Ramasamy, in the ‘cooly line’ house at Escote Estate. While they were out for a coffee break, I grabbed a handful of the powder, went back home, mixed the green powder with cold water in a glass, and drank it. I chose to end my life because my husband often argued with me, insulted me, beat me, and even threatened to kill me. Just the day before, on June 30, 1941, though I don’t remember the exact time, he had insulted me again, and that final incident drove me to this decision.”

(Adapted from Dali & Krishnan, 2020)

Similarly, a woman in the song titled “Īrōṭṭu taṇṇiyila...” (Thandayutham, 207) contemplates that drowning in water would be preferable to enduring a life of ongoing suffering. The following lyrics illustrate this:

“.....
 Īrōṭṭu taṇṇiyila
 Erode water
 iraṅkiṭṭālum kuttamilla!
 If get off no harm!
 (Thandayutham, Īrōṭṭu taṇṇiyila..., 207)

“In the waters of Erode,
 If I sink down, there’s no fault in that!”

Apart from this, Indian women in Malaysian Tamil folk songs express their dissatisfaction with their husbands’ actions as a second approach. The following lyrics portray this sentiment:

“.....
 Poṇṇā poṇantā ennēramum
 As a Women all the time
 oṇṇōṭa paṭarappāṭu cakikkala
 With you struggling don’t like
 nijamā puṭikkala
 Really don’t like
 koṇcam kūṭaṭ puṭikkala!
 Little bit also don’t like!
 (Thandayutham, Mīṇ viṇkac ceṇṇavaḷ, 206)
 "As a woman, I don’t like constantly struggling with you.
 I really don’t like it,
 Not even a little bit!"

These circumstances render their lives increasingly difficult. While enduring these hardships, they must also contend with the complexities introduced by their husbands' involvement with mistresses and secondary relationships. Such conditions destabilize their lives, leaving them in a state of profound disquiet.

Infidelity

In Malaysian Tamil folk songs, a nominal proportion of men are portrayed as engaging in infidelity with other Indian women rather than remaining faithful to their wives. Infidelity, defined as breaking the commitment to emotional and sexual exclusivity within a marriage through a romantic or sexual relationship outside of it (Suhailah & Afiatin, 2020; Haseli, Shariati, Nazari, Keramat & Emamian, 2019; Agbo, Agbo & Nnamani, 2022), is a recurring theme in these narratives. According to Khumas, Indahari, and Rachman (2019), individuals engaged in extramarital relationships often demonstrate noticeable behavioral changes, such as diminished attention to their children, alterations in routines and personal appearance, frequent traveling, heightened reliance on communication devices, and reduced levels of communication and intimacy within the marital relationship. Reflecting these observations, the husbands depicted in these songs develop emotional and physical attachments to their mistresses, neglecting their marital commitments as their attention and loyalty shift away from their wives. This results in deceit, abandonment, and, in many cases, an eventual departure with their romantic partners.

The song “Kaṭṭiyavaḷaik kaiviṭṭavaṇ” (Thandayutham, 203) vividly illustrates this theme, depicting a husband who frequently lies to his wife, claiming he was at the cinema each time he returns home late. However, one day, his wife catches him leaving through the back door of his mistress’s house, though he insists he was merely returning from the theater. In another instance of deception, he arranges for a car to take his wife and children to her mother’s home for an extended stay, enabling him to spend uninterrupted time with his mistress. This scenario is vividly depicted in the following verses:

“.....
 Toṭṭut tāli kaṭṭiṇa kaṇavā,
Sacred thread tied Husband

 pattu maṇikkē varṇiyō
Ten O'clock come
 nī eṇkatāṇ pōvīyēṇṇu teriyaḷā!
You where going I don't know!

 Nāṇ ciṇimā pākkap pōṇaṇṇu colṛāṇē
Me Cinema watched went tell

 oḷiṇciruntu pākkumpōtu
When hide and see
 antak kolla vācalait tiṛantu vītiyilē varumpōtu
That backdoor open on the road coming
 ayya eṇkaṇa pōyiṭṭu vantēṇṇā
Where you went asked
 ṭirāmāk koṭṭakaikkup

*Drama theatre to
pōyiṭṭu vantēṇṇu colrāṇē.
Went He said.*

.....
Kāṭitāṇ puṭicuk koṇṭu vantu
Car booked brought

.....
tāy takappa pārutiṇṇu
Mother father visit
colliṭṭu nāṇ nālunāḷ
told Me four days
kaḷiccu varrēṇṇutāṇ collipuṭarāṇ.
After come he told.

....."
(Thandayutham, Kaṭṭiyavaḷaik kaiviṭṭavan, 203)

"Sacred thread-tied husband,
At ten o'clock you came home,
I don't know where you go!
You tell me you went to watch a movie,
But when I looked secretly,
I saw you coming through the back door.
When I asked where you went,
You replied you were at the theater.
He brought a car for us,
Saying, go visit your parents,
And stay there for four days,
I'll return after that," he said."

Similarly, in another song titled "Ōṭi vantēṇ" (Thandayutham, 76), the husband abandons his wife to elope with his romantic partner. He leaves his wife without any remorse, highlighting his disregard for their marital commitment. This irresponsible behavior of the husband is depicted in the following verses:

"
Nā kaṭṭuṇa maṇaiviyaik
Me my married wife
kaṇkaṭṭa viṭṭuṭṭu- peṇṇē
Blindfolded leaved – Oh Lady
uṇkūṭa ōṭi vantēṇ.
With you run come

....."
(Thandayutham, Ōṭi vantēṇ, 76)
I left my wedded wife,
Blindfolded, Oh lady,
And ran away with you.

In another song, the husband is depicted getting dressed up to meet his mistress at the market. He wears freshly laundered dhotis before leaving to see her, showcasing his excitement and disregard for his wife. This scene is portrayed in the following verses:

“Calavai vēṭṭi reṇṭaiyum kaṭṭi
Laundered dhoti two wear

.....
cantaikkut tāṇ pōṇa maccāṇ
Market went husband

.....
cantaiyila cakkaḷatti tamācāmā
At market mistress jolly

.....”

(Thandayutham, Tamācāmā, 263)

"Wore two laundered dhotis,
The husband went to the market,
At the market, he joyfully spent time with his mistress."

These behaviors contribute to significant emotional distress among wives in Malaysian Tamil folk songs, often resulting in heightened levels of depression and anxiety (Chacko & I, 2024). They experience a deep sense of loss, perceiving their lives as being overshadowed and undermined by their husband's infidelity and the affair. In certain circumstances, they harbor a desire for the demise of the mistress. Four songs vividly depict this emotional turmoil.

In the first song, the wife symbolically expresses her complete loss of life to the mistress, mentioning that the mistress took her life at the opportune moment. The verse "Pārttirunta cakkaḷatti pāṇaiyōṭa tūkkiṭṭā!" from the song (Thandayutham, Ēmāntavaḷ, 335) translates to "Watched, the mistress took it with the pot," symbolizing her grief. The phrase "pāṇaiyōṭa tūkkiṭṭā!" metaphorically represents the taking of her entire life, illustrating the profound emotional loss the wife feels in the face of her husband's infidelity. While in the second and third song, the wives lamenting their loss of married life pointing their sacred thread and losing of their husband. The following lyrics illustrate this grief:

“

Tāli poruttamilla
Sacred thread no suitable

.....
Tāy māmaṇ contamilla!
Maternal uncle no own to me

.....”

(Thandayutham, Nāṇ petta teḷḷa makaḷē!, 301)

"

The sacred thread is no longer suitable

.....
My maternal uncle is no longer mine."

“
 Cīrumiḷaku tāli paṇṇinān
Small pepper sacred thread he did
”
 (Thandayutham, Cakkaḷatti, 301)

“He tied the small pepper sacred thread”

The "small pepper" in this verse represents something delicate or unstable, and tying the sacred thread to it suggests that the marriage is not firmly established or is prone to breakage. This interpretation reflects the emotional turmoil and insecurity within the relationship, further underlining the theme of instability in the marriage. Faced with such circumstances, the wives express a longing for the mistress to face misfortunes or tragedies, ultimately leading to her demise, as a way to alleviate their anguish and restore their marital stability. This sentiment is revealed in the verses from the song titled “Kāci viciṛi varum” (Thandayutham, 130).

“
 Avaḷa vaṇṭu kaṭikkātā
She beetle will bite?
 vappāṭṭi cāvālā?
Mistress will die or not?

 Avaḷa tēlu kaṭikkātā
She scorpion will bite
 antap parattaiyava cāvālā!
That mistress die or not!
”
 (Thandayutham, Kāci viciṛi varum, 130)

Will a beetle bite her?
 Will the mistress die or not?

 Will a scorpion sting her?
 Will that mistress die or not?

In addition to these, there are instances in Malaysian Tamil folk songs where Indian women are portrayed as cohabiting under the same roof as their husband's second wife; however, their relationship is depicted as strained and discordant. In the song entitled “Nālu Paṇam Paṭuttiya Pāṭu” (Thandayutham, 230), the second wife mentions purchasing an egg for the first wife, who deliberately turns her face away in response. This interaction vividly illustrates the tension and lack of harmony between the two wives. These portrayals in Malaysian Tamil folk songs highlight the complex emotional and social challenges faced by Indian women due to infidelity and polygamous relationships. They underscore the enduring struggles of these women, emphasizing themes of betrayal, emotional turmoil, and strained domestic dynamics.

Conclusion

The analysis of Malaysian Tamil folk songs shows that domestic violence was a significant part of the lives of Indian women in colonial Malaya, affecting both families where alcohol was present and those where it was not. The songs describe husbands who, supported by the easy availability of toddy and traditional male authority, caused physical and sexual harm, spent family earnings irresponsibly, and created ongoing emotional and psychological distress. Infidelity and secondary relationships added to this hardship, breaking trust, causing humiliation, and pushing women to cope in desperate ways such as locking doors, returning to their parental homes, or in some cases thinking about suicide. Set within a plantation economy marked by colonial exploitation, low wages, and caste-based control, these songs show how personal abuse was strengthened by wider social and economic conditions and often accepted as normal. At the same time, they record moments where women spoke out, refused entry to drunk husbands, or expressed their dissatisfaction, showing small but important forms of resistance. As historical evidence, these songs help explain how patriarchy, alcohol-related abuse, and colonial systems worked together to keep Indian women in a vulnerable and subordinate position in Malaya.

Research Contribution

This study contributes to both subaltern theory and Malaysian Indian historiography by uncovering the silenced experiences of Indian women on colonial plantations through the thematic analysis of Malaysian Tamil folk songs. Theoretically, it applies subaltern theory to demonstrate that women who could not speak openly about domestic violence used folk songs as indirect historical archives to express suffering, resistance, and survival—thereby expanding the theory to include cultural texts as valid empirical sources. It also establishes that domestic violence was not merely interpersonal but structurally rooted in patriarchy, economic deprivation, caste hierarchy, and the colonial labor system. Contextually, the study fills a major research gap by shifting scholarly attention from general plantation struggles to gendered domestic experiences, highlighting the intersections of alcohol-related abuse, economic marginalization, marital instability, and emotional suppression. By recovering these overlooked narratives, the research strengthens feminist historiography and provides a foundation for future studies on gender violence, oral traditions, diaspora history, and subalternity in South and Southeast Asia.

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