Narrative Persuasion and the Politics of Unpaid Labour: Feminist Resistance in *Mrs.* (2024)

Manjari Johri
Rohit Yadav

Abstract: Stories have the power to reshape beliefs and attitudes by immersing the audience in a narrative world, leading to a phenomenon called 'transportation' (Green & Appel, 2024). The Bollywood film *Mrs.* (2024) is an adaptation of the Malayalam film *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021). It portrays Richa, a professional dancer who copes with the demands of marriage and undervalued housework with resilience until she encounters an existential crisis and chooses to walk out of the restrictive, socially defined role of a submissive 'wife'. The narrative deftly foregrounds gender disparity in the division of unpaid work in India. Richa's transition marks a moment of feminist awakening and resistance against male supremacy and self-destructive exploitation in the guise of family commitment.

Empirical studies reveal that more than 16 billion hours are devoted to unpaid domestic and care work (UDCW), most of which is carried out by women—equivalent to 40% of the global GDP (ILO). Citing key feminist thinkers, this paper probes how *Mrs.* (2024) contributes to the discourse on wages for housework and critiques unpaid domestic labour as a form of economic exploitation in patriarchal traditional Indian families. The paper concludes that such cinematic portrayals can transform attitudes, facilitate women's participation in the workforce, and advance gender equality in both private and public spheres.

***Keywords*:** Narrative Persuasion, Marxist Feminism, UDCW, Gender Inequality, Devalued Housework, Work from Home

Introduction

Narrative transportation can change people's attitudes and beliefs by allowing them to absorb the story through imagery, affect, and focus (Green & Brock, 2000). A persuasive narrative can transport the audience/reader to adopt an altered perspective, regardless of whether the story is factual or fictional. Green & Appel (2024) refer to "narrative

transportation" as an "experiential state of immersion in which all mental processes are concentrated on the events occurring in the narrative" (p.2). In this state, the recipient is cognitively and emotionally involved in the story. They can "visualise vivid mental images." Such "immersion in a work of literature may allow the implications of the narrative to become part of the reader's real-life beliefs" (Green, 2004, p.247). Transportation theory also suggests that the receiver derives enjoyment from losing oneself in a narrative world, which happens through their ability to relate to the characters (Green et al., 2004, p.311).

In a similar study conducted by Igartua (2010) and de Graaf et al. (2012), researchers concluded that the audience's identification with the characters and subsequent change in attitudes is determined by the perspective from which a story is told. Their study indicated that identification can be a mechanism of narrative persuasion. It has also been demonstrated that the content we consume as readers or viewers can impact our behavioural choices through emulation (Gunther et al., 2006; Bell & Dittmar, 2011). There is sufficient empirical evidence to suggest that narratives have the potential to influence recipients and change their outlook and attitudes, akin to learning through personal experience. While the audience may not undergo the instance personally in the physical world, the extent of identification with the lead characters makes the learning experiential in nature.

It is, therefore, argued that films and mass media have a significant impact on transforming perceptions about gender discrimination, isolation of sexual minorities, and prejudices related to class, caste, and race. Movies have the power to inspire change by addressing socially significant themes. One of the key markers of gender discrimination globally is the disproportionate burden of unpaid household and care work that women support. It is not only exploitative and oppressive but is also identified as a significant deterrent to women's economic participation.

This paper analyzes statistical information from economic surveys carried out by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Time Use Survey (TUS) to highlight how the Bollywood film *Mrs.* (2024) portrays women's oppression due to unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities. It highlights the broader discussion regarding compensation for housework, a cause championed by second-wave feminists during the 1970s. Global statistics confirm that the discussion remains relevant. It is argued that films like *Mrs.* play a significant role in highlighting pressing social issues, sparking dialogue around gender equality, identity, and the restrictive roles perpetuated through cultural practices and institutions such as marriage.

The Portrayal of Household Work Oppression in *Mrs.* (2024)

Directed by Arati Kadav, *Mrs.*, a Hindi adaptation of the 2021 Malayalam cult classic *The Great Indian Kitchen*, talks about patriarchal society, societal expectations placed on a woman after an arranged marriage, abuse without physical violence, the conditioning of women, gaslighting, among other things" (Thakur). *Mrs.* challenges the stereotypical gender roles assigned to wives, limiting them to domestic drudgery. They are treated as symbols of social prestige and are expected to raise children and attend to family members, extended family, and guests. Sanya Malhotra performs Richa's leading role. She is a free-spirited woman with a dance troupe through which she earns her income while pursuing her life's passion - dancing.

Richa is married to Diwakar, a gynaecologist who runs his own nursing home. The film presents the irony of even a gynaecologist's inability to empathise with his wife's needs. Reviewing the film in *The Business Standard*, the writer comments, "Some movies entertain, some transport us to a different world, and some, like *Mrs.*, hold up a mirror so unfiltered that looking away feels impossible…*Mrs.* is an experience. It simmers like a slow-cooked dish,

revealing layer upon layer of a woman's struggles, her invisible labour, and the suffocating walls of domesticity that close in around her" (Singh).

Richa's parents raised her to fulfil the duties of a wife who can cook delicacies in the kitchen, is educated, pretty, and always presentable. Through her socialisation within her family, she internalised the essence of an ideal wife: to ignore her desires and become the self-sacrificing woman who ungrudgingly performs household chores. From the day of her marriage, she assists her mother-in-law, who takes care of her son and husband—from serving tea in bed to ensuring, late at night, that the kitchen is ready for the hustle and bustle of the next day. Richa tries to keep pace, pleases her parents-in-law with her enthusiastic participation, and—despite her fatigue—allows her husband to indulge in forced sex with her. He turns to sleep after the mechanical act, which gradually becomes merely a mechanism to release work stress and impregnate his wife, with no concern for her pleasure, desire, or needs.

The men in the family are privileged: they demand that a mixer grinder should not be used as it "kills the natural enzymes," that they be served hot meals at the table, that they eat first while the women eat from their leftovers. It is customary for Richa's husband, Diwakar, to demand that his office clothes be laid out on the bed before he goes to work. All of this is an ironic reflection of how most men in Indian families expect to be treated. The narrative shifts when Richa is left alone after her mother-in-law temporarily leaves the house. Richa tries hard to meet the bar of excellence set by the senior lady; she juggles cooking, cleaning, and care work while pushing her own desires into the background. Her only respite comes during menstruation, when she is offered help by a staff member from her husband's nursing home. She cooks and serves basic meals, which the men quietly consume.

Richa's realisation of her demeaning treatment dawns when her efforts are mocked, trivialised, and taken for granted. Her husband does not attend to the leaking sink in the

kitchen; guests continue to pour in; and the 'buaji' condescendingly blesses her on *Karwa Chauth*, a fast observed by Indian women for their husbands' long lives. Her breaking point arrives; she picks up the car keys and leaves Diwakar's house, splashing a bucket of water from the leaking sink on his face before walking out. She returns to her parents and resists their advice to apologise to her husband. Her complaint to her parents echoes the plight of millions of daughters in India who, despite being educated, are taught to be subservient and self-sacrificing members of the 'second sex'. Her ultimate self-liberation is achieved by returning to her profession as a dancer, which is also her passion.

The story of Richa is the story of millions of women globally who are reduced to unpaid, unsung, devalued, and invisible domestic labour. Women's unpaid work does not generate income or salary; hence, it is taken for granted. Social expectations assume it to be a woman's expression of love and duty. The institution of marriage and the glorification of the sacrificing mother and wife have exacerbated the problem, which is further intensified because women are not always educated or professionally trained to become economically independent. In her review of the film in *The Hindu*, Shilpa Anand observes, "*Mrs.* is a worthy remake of *The Great Indian Kitchen*, and director Arati Kadav brings in nuance because, perhaps, she is a woman … *Mrs.* leaves one with a heavy heart. As much as it is cautionary, it also gives women the confidence to say 'enough is enough'" (2025).

Unpaid Domestic and Care Work (UDCW)

Unpaid Domestic and Care Work (UDCW) includes domestic household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children and family members. In its *Modular Time Use Measurement Project* (2021), the International Labour Organization (ILO) reported the persistent presence of gender inequalities in the distribution of unpaid domestic and care work. The disparity in male and female participation in unpaid work serves both as a cause and a consequence of women's economic and social marginalisation. It restricts their access

to decent employment and fundamental rights to health, education, and participation in public life.

The *Time Use Survey (TUS)* Report, published by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, indicates a glaring gap in how men and women used their time from January to December 2024. While 60.8% of men participated in employment and related activities, only 20.7% of women were engaged as part of the active workforce. Most women spent their time on domestic and caregiving work. The report revealed that 27.1% of men devoted time to domestic work and 17.9% to caregiving of family members. For women, these statistics were significantly higher—81.5% and 34%, respectively. Women spent 19.8% of their time on unpaid work, while men spent only 2.7%. For women, unpaid work was the second most time-consuming activity, while for men, it was leisure and socialising.

In India, though there has been some attitudinal shift in how men and women view household chores and caregiving—as reflected in the TUS reports of 2019 and 2024—the burden is still largely shouldered by women among heterosexual couples. Interestingly, the reports indicate that household responsibilities are shared more equally among same-sex couples (Gerrit, 2016; Lazarus & Hadas, 2023). According to the UN, globally, women perform two-and-a-half times more unpaid work than men, an amount that could equal 10–39% of gross GDP (“The Guardian View”).

Emily Callaci’s recent publication, *Wages for Housework: The Story of a Movement, an Idea, a Promise* (2025), traces the impact of the Marxist feminist movement that gained momentum in the 1970s. Feminist activists such as Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and Selma James spearheaded the International Wages for Housework Campaign (IWFHC) in 1972, demanding recognition and compensation for care work and domestic labour. In her booklet *Wages Against Housework* (1975), Federici famously stated, “They say it is love. We

say it is unwaged work" (p. 74). Federici confronted the exploitation of women's unpaid labour and argued for the need to compensate domestic work economically. She emphasised the distinction between housework and employment: while employment offers compensation and agency, housework is not only unpaid but also represents a form of violence against women. Rooted in Marxist ideology, the movement promoted the organisation of autonomous sectors from the bottom up to dismantle existing power relations.

In *Wages for Housework* (2025), Callaci reflects on how, growing up in the 1990s, she believed her liberation would come through education and professional success. She assumed she would not need to battle the "expectation of feminised domesticity," which she saw as a "quaint preoccupation—the relic of an older generation's outdated and irrational beliefs about gender" (p. 2). As a working mother of two sons, however, she grapples with the burdens of domestic and care work and questions why it should not be paid on par with, say, a professor's job. Why should a babysitter earn less than a history professor when both are working? She critiques the economic logic of capitalism, which only pays for hired labour, ignoring the unpaid caregiving and domestic work done by family members. If economically quantified, such labour would contribute significantly to GDP. Callaci writes:

> The systematic exploitation of women's unpaid work is hidden by a powerful myth that women are naturally suited to housework. For a woman, keeping house and caring for family fulfils her natural desires and should be reward enough… Capitalism relies on this myth to keep women in their roles, allowing others to profit from their work. *Wages for Housework* was so jarring to people because it demanded compensation for something that was supposed to be free from market forces and which women were supposed to provide out of love. (p. 4)

Such mythical assumptions amount to emotional blackmail. The demand for wages for housework makes women's labour visible and dismantles the false dichotomy between waged employment and unpaid domestic labour. In her book, Callaci also explores the work of leading feminist thinkers from the 1970s who helped launch the campaign, thus establishing the continued relevance of the unpaid labour discourse in contemporary times.

There is now an urgent need to shift political thinking and envision a world focused on equality, rather than one driven by capitalist growth, environmental degradation, and profit-based productivity. In her book *Seeing Like a Feminist* (2012), Nivedita Menon—a leading Indian feminist and professor of political thought—reiterates the gender-based disparity in household workloads. Rural women in India engage in:

> collection of fuel, fodder and water; animal husbandry, post-harvest processing, livestock maintenance, kitchen gardening and raising poultry that augments family resources… so naturalized are assumptions about gender roles that the Indian census did not recognise this as 'work' for a long time, since it is not performed for a wage, but is unpaid labour around the family (p. 12).

She further notes that this sexual division of labour limits women's roles as citizens by positioning them as primary caregivers. Menon contends that unpaid domestic work indirectly supports the economy; therefore, the sexual division of labour cannot be viewed merely as a domestic or private matter. Feminist thinkers—both Western and Indian—have consistently critiqued this discrimination in the distribution of household work, which restricts women's personal growth and professional advancement.

The Feminisation of Domestic Work

Women's unpaid work affects their emotional and physical well-being. They remain committed to the drudgery due to glorified notions of being a devoted wife and mother, but

such work remains invisible and is often ignored as an essential duty. The social role attributed to women since childhood compels them to undertake lustreless, uninspiring tasks, leading to feelings of low self-worth, bitterness, and emotional distress. In an interview titled *"Naming the Work"* for *The Drift* (2020), Silvia Federici remarks that even today, housework, reproductive labour, and especially the aspect of reproductive work related to child-rearing—particularly during the first five to six years of a child's life—constitutes the most significant portion of work globally.

Sahoo et al. (2024) attempted a quantitative measure of the value of unpaid household activities in India. Their findings revealed that in 2022–23, while women spent 4.6 hours per day on domestic chores, men spent only 2.2 hours on average. They used the replacement cost and gross opportunity cost approach to estimate that the value of such work ranged from 26% to 36% of gross domestic product in 2022–23. Singh & Pattnaik (2020) identified three factors for women's engagement in unpaid domestic work, which include social and religious constraints, the inability of the state to furnish provisions, and the lack of career opportunities for household work. This keeps them out of 'economic activities' and forces them to become invisible, lying beyond the purview of economic policy. Due to the disproportionate burden of household and care work on women, they have been at a greater risk of anxiety and depression. Despite being educated and employed, women share the primary responsibility of housekeeping, which impacts their career prospects and puts them under undue emotional pressure and stress.

Seedat & Rondon (2021) examined how women's emotional health was adversely affected due to gender inequality in the time spent on household work. Their study focused on the situation during the COVID-19 pandemic. During that time, due to government lockdowns and physical distancing, all family members were confined within their homes, and women shouldered major care work and domestic chores. They observe:

> Gendered social norms construct women as caregivers and providers, yet unpaid work is clearly associated with poorer mental health for women. The pandemic has magnified these inequities and placed women at an even greater risk of depression, anxiety, and other common mental disorder…The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the urgency of integrating service delivery and improved access for women to mental and physical health services, income and employee support, social welfare, and legal and justice systems. (p. 2–3)

Silvia Federici remarks, "The pandemic has not created a crisis, but has intensified an existing one, showing more than ever the need for a real mobilization by women to change the conditions of our reproduction" (*"Naming the Work" - The Drift*, 2020).

In February 2025, WION Television Channel highlighted the key findings of the Time Use Survey 2024 to expose the glaring gap in male and female participation at home (*Indian Women Spend 7 Hours on Unpaid Housework | Gravitas*). *India Today* News Channel ran a story in its news bulletin on women's household work in 2023. According to the channel, women in India spend five extra hours daily than men on household chores. If all women in India demanded payment for their work, they would need to be paid Rs 22.7 Lakh Crores or 7.5% of India's GDP (*"If All The Women Ask Money For Household Work..."*).

In a podcast by the International Monetary Fund in 2021, Indian economist Jayati Ghosh summarised the key issues in her talk. She remarked that women's work at home is devalued and rendered invisible as it has no economic worth. Consequently, when they go out to work, their labour is underpaid and clustered into occupations often equated with care work (*Women in Economics: Jayati Ghosh on Unpaid Care Work*). Ghosh says:

> India is one of the most extreme examples of how terrible it is to devalue work and what implications it has, not just for women but

> for the whole society and economy. In India, we have one of the largest gender gaps in wages in the world… it was as low as 36% in the 1990s, and it's down to 18%. The latest data suggests that it's even 14%... In an economy that was supposedly growing at five to 10% for two decades… we have a massive decline in women's workforce participation… A large part of that is related to an increase in the number of women doing unpaid work at home." (*Women in Economics: Jayati Ghosh on Unpaid Care Work*)

Confinement of such a large proportion of women to drudgery reduces the number of women in more productive activities. If the work were more equally distributed between men and women, human resources could be maximised.

The National Statistics Office in India conducted the first Time Use Survey (TUS) in 2019 and its second in 2024. It assesses how men and women are engaged in paid and unpaid activities. It serves as a valuable resource for understanding the amount of time spent in unpaid caregiving, volunteer efforts, and domestic tasks performed by household members. It also offers insights into the time men and women allocate for learning, socialising, leisure, and self-care activities. The report, available in the public domain, reveals the shocking state of work distribution between men and women at home. Though there is a slight improvement in the statistics for 2024, the overall picture is still grim.

Unpaid Domestic and Care Work in the Indian Context

According to the *Economic Survey 2024–25*, there has been a consistent increase in the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) over the past seven years. It has risen steadily from 23.3% in 2017–18 to 41.7% in 2023–24. This rise was primarily driven by an increase in women entering the workforce in rural India. The rural FLFPR rose from 24.6%

to 47.6% since 2017 (Doshi). This growth has been achieved due to government schemes such as *Mudra Yojana*, *Skill India*, *Start-Up India*, and *Stand-Up India*, which enabled entrepreneurship, provided skill training, and developed sustainable avenues of livelihood. According to the Press Information Bureau, "initiatives like PM Employment Guarantee Programme, SANKALP, PM Micro Food Processing Scheme, Adivasi Mahila Sashaktikaran Yojana, Swayam Shakti Sahakar Yojna, DAY-NRLM etc. are promoting women-led enterprises by offering women entrepreneurs financial support, training, and mentorship, empowering them to start and scale their businesses" (2025).

Though the figures show an improvement, compared to the male population, the number of women engaged in paid jobs is still staggeringly low. The figures issued by TUS issued by NSO in 2025 reveal the gender disparity in women's paid and unpaid work.

S.No	Activity/Engagement	Male Participation	Female Participation
1	Participation in Employment and Related Activities (Ages 15-59):	75%	25%
	Time Spent on Employment and Related Activities (Per Day):	421 minutes	305 minutes
2	Unpaid Domestic Services for Household Members	27.1%	81.5%
	Time Spent (Per Day):	88 minutes	289 minutes
3	Unpaid Caregiving Services for Household Members	21.4%	41%

	Time Spent (Per Day):	74 minutes	140 minutes

Source: "Time Use Survey January – December 2024"

In an article titled *"The Structure of Care Work and Inequalities Among Care Workers"*, Professor Jayati Ghosh studied the Time Use Survey of 24 developed and developing countries, revealing that women and girls account for 70% of the time spent on household work. The situation is more severe in poorer countries with lower per capita income, where the amount of time per day spent on unpaid home care work is higher. Ghosh observes:

> Unpaid care work, though embedded in feelings of obligation and commitment to others' well-being, is also rooted in patriarchal structures that interact with it. The issue that is often referred to as 'work/life balance' and is seen to be particularly important for working women, is really often about balancing care work responsibilities with paid employment. (p.3)

She expresses concern that without government regulations and policies, this situation can lead to lower wages, deteriorating working conditions, and limited social protection for care workers (ibid.). From both micro and macroeconomic perspectives, it is urgently necessary to safeguard the well-being of care workers, which can be achieved through public awareness, sensitisation, reduction of gender disparity, and equal gender opportunities.

Women's Empowerment Through Government Schemes in India

To transform women's lives, it is essential to implement policies that acknowledge, minimise, and redistribute unpaid care work. Government subsidies and schemes can be instrumental in allowing women to join the paid workforce and engage in "leisure activities,

to have more time for themselves, and to safeguard their careers with arguably less compromise to…their mental health and general wellbeing." (Seedat & Rondon, p.3) In her study of women's involvement in domestic work in Assam, Kotiswaran (2022) stated that the 2021 state assembly elections in Assam "offered a unique and unexpected opportunity for the recognition of women's unpaid domestic and care work through the promises of unconditional cash transfers" (14). The Government of India supports the cause of women's empowerment through schemes like *Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojna*, *Swadhar Greh*, *Ujjawala Scheme*, and *Mahila Udhyam Nidhi Scheme*, aimed at alleviating the economic status of women and enabling them to gain financial stability and autonomy. Yet, a vast gap must still be bridged, which can only be achieved by changing people's mindsets. This transformation can be facilitated by raising awareness among women about their contributions and promoting gender equality through critical discourse.

Conclusion

In light of the above discussion, it is argued that bridging the glaring gender disparity in employment opportunities, education, skill-building, and the roles attributed to men and women within the family structure and society can significantly shift public perception and mindsets. In this context, films can play a very significant role in triggering dialogue on such crucial, though often invisible, issues.

Citing the Time Use Survey of 20 countries, Jayati Ghosh studied the gender-wise demographics of time use (p.2). The reports reveal that watching television and listening to the radio are the most sought-after leisure activities for both men and women. This insight underscores the power of visual media to have a broad outreach. Watching a film like *Mrs.* with family members can enlighten millions of women who unquestioningly bear the yoke of daily chores, accepting it as their gendered social role that has traditionally been naturalised in Indian culture.

Richa's rejection of her subordinate status marks a paradigm shift and awakens women to the possibility of seeking autonomy and agency. It leads the audience to question and look for solutions. The film is a stinging critique of the patriarchal structure of the Indian family system that privileges male members and renders women's participation invisible and devalued. The empirical evidence drawn by researchers supports the idea that narrative persuasion can lead to 'transportation'. It can change attitudes and prejudices that are regressive and limiting to women's status as equals to their male counterparts.

Empirical studies on narrative persuasion support the idea that media can induce "transportation"—a psychological state wherein viewers become deeply engaged with a story, leading to attitude and behaviour change. By drawing attention to the statistical realities of gendered inequality in domestic spaces, *Mrs.* challenges regressive norms and invites its audience to question the status quo.

Ultimately, the film ignites debate around the longstanding demand for wages for housework and offers women an empowering alternative: to break the glass ceiling, escape the drudgery symbolised by the "leaking sink," and dance toward lives of agency, recognition, and self-worth.

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Bionote

Dr. Manjari Johri serves as Assistant Professor at the Amity School of Languages, Amity University Lucknow, and brings over 25 years of experience in teaching literature at the university level. She earned her Ph.D. in English from the University of Lucknow in 2009. Her academic interests lie in the teaching of drama and poetry, with a particular focus on feminist writing and theory. Her research areas include Cultural Studies, Feminism, Masculinities, and Gender Studies.

Dr. Rohit Yadav is an Assistant Professor at the Amity School of Languages, Amity University, Lucknow. He holds a Ph.D. in English from the University of Lucknow and has over nine years of teaching experience in higher education. His academic and research interests lie in Drama, Indian Theatre, Performance Studies, Film Studies, and Cultural and Media Communication. He actively engages in interdisciplinary research, exploring the intersections of gender, space, and cultural representation in literature and media.

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