

**Fluid Geographies: Water, Patriarchy, and Space in Christo Tomy's *Ullozhukku***

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**Abstract**

Malayalam cinema has long been recognized as one of the most significant traditions in Indian filmmaking, distinguished by its nuanced storytelling, compelling performances, and sustained engagement with social realities. This research paper examines how Christo Tomy's *Ullozhukku* (2024) employs water both as a literal geographical force and as a structuring metaphor that shapes the film's narrative, visual language, and ideological concerns. Set against the monsoon floods of Kuttanad—a unique region of Kerala's backwaters reclaimed and sustained below sea level through more than a century of colonial-era engineering and caste-based labour—the film presents an intimate domestic drama centred on Leelamma and her daughter-in-law, Anju. Their lives are constrained by patriarchal expectations even as their home is physically submerged by rising floodwaters. The study argues that rain, flooding, and the undercurrent function as recurring symbolic motifs that articulate concealed tensions, unstable authority, and the circulation of grief, desire, repression, and resistance. Central to the narrative is the indefinitely delayed burial, which the paper interprets as a metaphor for the historical politics of water governance in Kuttanad, where the regulation of drainage, reclamation, and hydrological infrastructure has long determined whose land, labour, and voices are preserved or erased. Reading the film's title, meaning “undercurrent,” as its primary interpretive framework, the paper demonstrates how *Ullozhukku* intertwines feminist discourse with environmental and geopolitical histories. It contends that the fragile solidarity forged between the two women cannot be understood independently of the contested landscape they inhabit. Ultimately, the film is read as a layered cinematic text in which floodwater becomes a geopolitical metaphor for contested territory, shifting boundaries, submerged agency, and the persistence of marginalized voices beneath dominant social structures.

**Keywords:** Malayalam Cinema; *Ullozhukku*; Feminist Geopolitics; Political Ecology; Water Metaphor; Kuttanad; Gendered Space; Environmental Humanities.

Christo Tomy's *Ullozhukku* (2024) exemplifies the capacity of Malayalam cinema to transform an intimate domestic crisis into a broader interrogation of power, belonging, and socio-spatial order. Situated amidst incessant monsoon rainfall and rising floodwaters in Kerala's backwaters, the film chronicles a family awaiting the burial of a deceased son while long-suppressed truths gradually surface, rendering water both a material environmental force and a structuring metaphor through which meaning is produced. Although the film does not explicitly engage with conventional geopolitics associated with borders, territorial disputes, or statecraft, it is profoundly geopolitical in its representation of space, kinship, class, and gendered authority, each configured through unequal material conditions and historically embedded power relations.

The narrative opens with death and concludes with a departing boat, while the intervening cinematic space remains persistently inundated. Set in Kuttanad, Kerala's low-lying deltaic backwater region, the film follows Leelamma and her daughter-in-law Anju as repeated attempts to bury Leelamma's son, Thomaskutty, are thwarted by relentless monsoon flooding. On one level, *Ullozhukku* is a domestic narrative of grief, secrecy, and the fraught relationship between two women bound by patriarchal structures embodied in the absent male figure. However, the film's title and its sustained deployment of water as a dominant visual and sonic motif invite a reading that extends beyond the domestic sphere.

Kuttanad functions not merely as a backdrop but as a historically produced geopolitical landscape, sustained through more than a century of colonial land reclamation, hydraulic engineering, caste-based labour, and continuing ecological precarity. Interpreting water solely as a psychological metaphor for submerged emotion overlooks the extent to which the film's affective politics are inseparable from the geopolitical histories embedded within this terrain. In *Ullozhukku*, water transcends its meteorological function to become the central metaphor through which social instability, emotional repression, contested authority, and the subterranean circulation of power are articulated.

The title *Ullozhukku*, literally meaning undercurrent, establishes the film's central hermeneutic principle: the most significant forces shaping human experience remain concealed beneath the visible surface. Water operates not merely as an environmental backdrop but as a persistent symbolic undercurrent through which grief, desire, shame, resistance, and memory circulate until

they rupture the social order. Christo Tomy mobilizes the flood as a cinematic strategy to expose the fragility of domestic space, revealing that the household is never insulated from larger structures of patriarchal authority, religious morality, and class privilege. The domestic sphere consequently emerges as a political space where gendered identities are regulated, inherited norms are reproduced, and power is exercised through everyday practices rather than overt coercion. Water, therefore, functions as a metaphor for the invisible circulation of authority, destabilizing the illusion of permanence upon which familial and social institutions depend.

The geopolitical significance of Ullozhukku becomes particularly evident through its location in Kuttanad, whose landscape is itself a product of historical intervention rather than natural formation. Often described as one of the few regions in the world where agriculture is practiced below sea level, Kuttanad was transformed through extensive reclamation projects initiated during the late nineteenth century under colonial administration. Vast stretches of the Vembanad wetland were embanked, drained, and converted into paddy fields through hydraulic engineering that fundamentally altered the region's ecological character (Chandran and Purkayastha 69–73). These reclamation projects simultaneously produced new agrarian economies and entrenched social inequalities, as ownership of reclaimed land remained concentrated among dominant landlord communities while the physical labour of reclamation was performed largely by marginalized caste groups. Consequently, the geography of Kuttanad cannot be understood independently of the intersecting histories of colonial governance, caste hierarchy, labour exploitation, and environmental transformation (Mathew 217–23).

The film's flooded landscape therefore possesses a historical density that extends beyond its narrative function. Rather than serving as a passive setting, Kuttanad operates as an active geopolitical space in which ecological processes continually intersect with social relations. The region's continued habitability depends upon an intricate network of bunds, canals, sluice gates, and pumping systems designed to prevent water from reclaiming the land. Yet these engineered interventions remain inherently precarious, requiring continuous human regulation against the persistent force of water. Contemporary climate change, intensified monsoon variability, and recurrent flooding have further exposed the vulnerability of this hydraulic landscape, rendering the boundaries between habitation and inundation increasingly unstable (Chandran and Purkayastha 76). The film's persistent visual emphasis on rising water thus resonates with the lived ecological uncertainty that characterizes Kuttanad today.

Within this context, Ullozhukku reconfigures water from a mere natural phenomenon into a geopolitical agent that simultaneously shapes landscape, memory, and social relations. The repeated postponement of Thomaskutty's burial acquires symbolic significance precisely because both death and mourning become subject to environmental conditions that exceed human control. The flood interrupts ritual, suspends patriarchal authority, and gradually destabilizes the moral certainties governing the household. As water traverses physical boundaries, it likewise dissolves emotional and ideological boundaries, allowing concealed truths to surface while exposing the instability of social hierarchies previously perceived as immutable. The undercurrent invoked by the title therefore signifies not only hidden emotions but also the submerged histories of labour, environmental transformation, and unequal power that structure the landscape itself.

Reading through a geopolitical framework, Ullozhukku demonstrates that domestic experience cannot be separated from the material histories of the spaces in which it unfolds. The intimate conflicts between Leelamma and Anju are embedded within a terrain historically constituted through colonial reclamation, caste-based labour, hydraulic governance, and ecological precarity. Water consequently emerges as the film's primary epistemological and political metaphor, revealing that beneath the apparent stability of both family and landscape lie unresolved histories of domination, displacement, resistance, and survival. In doing so, Christo Tomy's film transcends the conventions of domestic melodrama to offer a profound meditation on how environmental space, gendered subjectivity, and geopolitical history remain fundamentally intertwined.

Ullozhukku transposes this historical tension into the domestic sphere. The ancestral household, much like Kuttanad's reclaimed polders, is represented as a space continually negotiated against the encroachment of water and, by extension, instability. The flood that repeatedly postpones Thomaskutty's burial is not merely a narrative device but a manifestation of the ecological realities that define the region. It reflects the precarious condition of a landscape whose habitability has always depended upon sustained human intervention. Consequently, the image of two women confined within a flooded house alongside an unburied corpse becomes an evocative geopolitical metaphor, materializing Kuttanad's enduring condition as a terrain maintained through hydraulic control yet perpetually vulnerable to the agency of water.

If water in Kuttanad signifies a historical struggle over territory, its cinematic representation simultaneously articulates a struggle over women's bodies, identities, and agency. Tomy employs the flood as a recurring narrative strategy that compels physical proximity, emotional confrontation,

and the gradual erosion of patriarchal certainties. The film suggests that patriarchal domesticity submerges female subjectivity much as floodwater inundates reclaimed land. Anju's marriage, imposed against her wishes, positions her personal desires beneath the weight of familial obligation, religious morality, and social propriety. Her pregnancy, revealed following Thomaskutty's death and exposing her continuing relationship with Rajeev, becomes the locus upon which familial anxieties surrounding honour, lineage, and inheritance are projected. Her body consequently functions as a contested political site, displacing unresolved grief onto the reproductive female body while exposing the mechanisms through which patriarchal authority regulates women's lives.

Leelamma embodies an earlier generation's accommodation to the same structures of domination. Having devoted her life to an unfulfilling marriage and the care of an ailing son, she initially directs her resentment towards Anju rather than questioning the patriarchal order that has shaped both of their lives. The narrative thus explores the evolving relationship between two generations of women—one socialized into silent endurance and the other seeking autonomy—whose uneasy solidarity gradually emerges through shared vulnerability. Water becomes the medium through which this transformation is articulated. While the flood isolates the household from the outside world, it simultaneously dismantles the social performances of mourning, religious ritual, and familial respectability that ordinarily regulate emotional expression. Left without these institutional structures, the women confront one another with unprecedented honesty. Just as Kuttanad's reclaimed land remains inseparable from the waters from which it emerged, Leelamma and Anju remain bound by a common history of patriarchal subordination. Their movement from antagonism to solidarity, like the film's titular undercurrent, reveals the submerged structures of gendered oppression that continue to shape both domestic life and the geopolitical landscape in which it unfolds.

Water performs its most significant geopolitical function in *Ullozhukku* through its capacity to defer burial, where delay itself becomes a political act rather than a neutral narrative interruption. Thomaskutty's coffin remains above ground for a substantial portion of the film, transforming deferred burial into a mechanism through which established forms of patriarchal authority are reproduced. Leelamma repeatedly postpones the funeral as a means of regulating Anju's attempts to confront her circumstances and exercise personal autonomy, demonstrating how control over death, mourning, and ritual becomes an extension of familial governance. This domestic politics of delay

parallels the historical politics of water management in Kuttanad, where decisions regarding the opening of sluice gates, reinforcement of bunds, and regulation of drainage have long been determined by landlords, colonial administrators, and state agencies rather than by the communities whose livelihoods depended upon them (Chandran and Purkayastha 69–73). Consequently, the governance of water emerges as a governance of time itself, regulating not only the landscape but also the rhythms of everyday life, labour, and survival.

Within the film's domestic microcosm, the authority to determine when the floodwaters recede simultaneously becomes the authority to regulate when truth, judgement, reconciliation, and forgiveness are permitted to emerge. The burial narrative therefore occupies the centre of the film's political imagination. Death in *Ullozhukku* is never represented as an exclusively private experience but is instead embedded within intersecting structures of religious ritual, familial honour, communal expectations, and patriarchal lineage. The continued postponement of burial transforms Thomaskutty's corpse into a political object whose treatment becomes inseparable from the moral legitimacy of the surviving family members. Read through a geopolitical framework, this deferred burial illustrates that power is exercised not only through territorial control but also through the regulation of bodies, ritual practices, temporalities, and domestic spaces (Agnew 9–12).

The dead son's body consequently becomes the focal point around which competing claims to legitimacy, inheritance, kinship, and moral authority converge. Simultaneously, Anju's pregnancy becomes implicated within these competing narratives, as her reproductive body is subjected to scrutiny through questions of loyalty, honour, and lineage. Water intensifies these tensions by rendering burial physically impossible, thereby transforming the landscape itself into an active participant in the suspension of social closure. Rather than functioning as a passive environmental backdrop, the flooded terrain acquires political agency by disrupting ritual continuity, exposing concealed conflicts, and destabilizing established structures of authority. As scholars of political geography have argued, space is never merely the setting in which power operates but is actively produced through social relations and institutional practices (Massey 154–57). In *Ullozhukku*, the floodwater similarly operates as a geopolitical force that reconfigures domestic space, interrupts patriarchal order, and compels submerged truths to surface.

The film's title, *Ullozhukku*—translated as *undercurrent*—establishes the central interpretive principle through which its politics of water may be understood. The metaphor of the undercurrent directs attention not to visible inundation alone but to the concealed movements of power, memory,

desire, and resistance that persist beneath the apparent stability of domestic and social life. By the film's conclusion, the flood does not simply recede to restore the patriarchal order; rather, the narrative culminates in an unexpected alliance between Anju and Leelamma. Their fragile solidarity emerges precisely because the flood compels them into an unmediated encounter with each other's grief, vulnerability, and shared oppression. The relationship thus becomes the basis for a tentative ethical restoration, offering an alternative to the patriarchal structures that have governed their lives (Ahmed 174–76). The closing image of a boat moving across the flooded landscape does not signify escape from Kuttanad's geography but instead gestures towards the continual negotiation between human life and an environment characterized by instability and ecological precarity (Chandran and Purkayastha 75–78).

One of the film's most significant aesthetic strategies is the continual transformation of water across multiple material and symbolic registers. Water circulates through the narrative as rain, floodwater, tears, bodily fluid, and amniotic fluid, refusing any singular symbolic meaning. This instability resists conventional cinematic associations of water with purification or renewal and instead foregrounds its capacity to embody uncertainty, vulnerability, and transformation. The fluidity of water mirrors the instability of patriarchal authority itself, exposing how women's bodies become sites upon which emotional, reproductive, and social burdens are repeatedly inscribed (Douglas 141). The flooded household functions simultaneously as a physical environment and an affective landscape, reflecting the emotional saturation experienced by its inhabitants. Confinement, grief, and unresolved conflict accumulate within this enclosed domestic space until submerged relationships, suppressed desires, and moral contradictions inevitably surface during the prolonged postponement of burial. Water thus acquires epistemological significance by making visible that which patriarchal order seeks to repress (Bachelard 13–18).

*Ullozhukku* succeeds as a feminist domestic drama precisely because it refuses to reduce its setting to mere visual atmosphere. Instead, the historical geopolitics of Kuttanad provide the material conditions through which the film's emotional and political concerns acquire meaning. As a landscape produced through colonial reclamation, sustained by fragile hydraulic infrastructures, and historically dependent upon caste-based labour, Kuttanad constitutes a politically charged geography rather than a neutral backdrop (Mathew 217–23). Water consequently operates simultaneously as environmental reality and geopolitical metaphor, signifying both the historically contingent terrain beneath the characters' feet and the patriarchal structures that have submerged

women's subjectivities beneath obligation, propriety, and silence. By interweaving these environmental and gendered registers, Christo Tomy demonstrates that struggles for agency—whether over land, memory, or bodily autonomy—are never singular acts of liberation but ongoing negotiations with deeply embedded structures of power (Massey 154–57).

Anju and Leelamma remain the primary ethical and political agents through whom this hydro-political metaphor acquires its fullest expression. Anju seeks emotional autonomy, sexual freedom, and a future beyond an imposed marriage, whereas Leelamma initially remains invested in grief, religious devotion, and inherited notions of familial honour. Despite their apparent opposition, both women are ultimately constrained by the same patriarchal order that assigns women the responsibility of preserving kinship, lineage, and domestic respectability. Their antagonism is therefore not simply interpersonal but structurally produced through gendered systems of authority and social reproduction. Within this context, water functions as a radical leveller. The flood surrounds both women without distinction, dissolving hierarchical boundaries and exposing their shared precarity. Their eventual solidarity does not represent complete reconciliation but rather a fragile feminist ethics grounded in mutual recognition and collective vulnerability. The film's concluding movement thus locates hope not in the restoration of patriarchal stability but in the emergence of relational forms of resistance capable of flowing, like the titular undercurrent, beneath dominant structures of power.

The film's geopolitical dimensions are further articulated through its representation of class and social hierarchy. Leelamma's family occupies a position of greater economic and social privilege than Anju's, and these inequalities are repeatedly foregrounded through interpersonal interactions, domestic practices, and everyday dialogue. Such distinctions are not merely incidental markers of social status but constitute the conditions through which authority is exercised, morality is defined, and bodily autonomy is regulated. Class privilege determines whose grief is publicly validated, whose voice carries legitimacy, and whose body becomes subject to surveillance and control. From a geopolitical perspective, the film exposes a politics of internal stratification in which power is unevenly distributed within the same domestic and social landscape, demonstrating that domination operates through localized hierarchies as much as through larger political structures (Massey 154–57). Although the flood physically inundates the landscape without distinction, it does not eliminate these hierarchies; rather, it reveals their contingency by exposing the fragility of social order when ordinary systems of authority begin to collapse. Water consequently functions as both an equalizing

and destabilizing force, simultaneously levelling physical space while rendering entrenched inequalities increasingly visible (Agnew 9–12).

The film's treatment of pregnancy further intensifies the geopolitical and symbolic significance of water. Anju's pregnancy extends beyond the realm of private experience to become a contested site where questions of lineage, inheritance, legitimacy, and patriarchal continuity converge. The unborn child is transformed into a symbolic repository for familial expectations, collapsing the boundaries between birth and death, continuity and loss. The juxtaposition of Thomaskutty's unburied corpse with Anju's pregnancy establishes a profound relationship between the politics of reproduction and the politics of mourning, revealing how patriarchal authority simultaneously governs both life and death. Water, particularly through its association with amniotic fluid, reinforces this symbolic convergence by linking maternity with vulnerability, transformation, and renewal while exposing the reproductive female body as a site of political regulation (Ahmed 21–25). Anju's body is consequently interpreted not as an autonomous subject but as a vessel through which masculine lineage may be preserved and familial honour restored. The film thereby demonstrates how reproductive meaning is socially constructed and politically controlled within patriarchal kinship structures, where women's bodies become repositories of collective identity rather than expressions of individual agency (Butler 45–49).

Tomy's cinematic style further reinforces these thematic concerns through a sustained aesthetic of confinement, silence, and visual repetition. Much of the narrative unfolds within the flooded ancestral house, producing an atmosphere of spatial enclosure in which dialogue is frequently displaced by gestures, silences, and sustained visual observation. This formal strategy transforms the domestic interior into a politically charged space where movement, speech, and emotional expression are continually regulated by surveillance, expectation, and inherited authority. The house ceases to function merely as a familial setting and instead becomes a microcosm of broader structures of social governance, illustrating how power is exercised through everyday domestic practices rather than explicit coercion (Foucault 170–73). Simultaneously, the fluctuating water levels operate as a visual index of temporal progression while registering the intensifying emotional, ethical, and political tensions within the household. Water therefore exceeds the role of environmental backdrop to become the film's principal visual grammar of instability. It constitutes a dynamic pressure system through which concealed anxieties, contested relationships, and

submerged histories continually threaten to surface, preventing both the narrative and its social order from attaining closure or certainty.

*Ullozhukku* ultimately demonstrates that water is neither a passive environmental element nor a purely symbolic motif; rather, it constitutes the film's central geopolitical and epistemological framework through which questions of space, power, gender, and memory are negotiated. The film's conclusion deliberately resists the conventional logic of restoration. The recession of the flood does not signify the re-establishment of patriarchal order or the resolution of social conflict. Instead, it marks the emergence of an alternative ethical possibility grounded in the fragile yet transformative solidarity between Anju and Leelamma. Their relationship, forged through shared vulnerability rather than inherited obligation, represents a reconfiguration of kinship that challenges the patriarchal structures governing both domestic and social life. As several critical readings have observed, the flood functions not merely as an agent of destruction but as a condition that makes new forms of recognition and relationality possible.

The film's concluding movement reinforces the argument that water remains fundamentally resistant to containment. It is simultaneously material reality, historical archive, ecological force, and political metaphor, refusing fixed or singular interpretation. Rather than restoring equilibrium, water continually destabilizes the boundaries separating public and private, nature and culture, life and death, domination and resistance. In doing so, *Ullozhukku* reimagines Kuttanad not simply as a geographical location but as a historically constituted geopolitical landscape where colonial reclamation, hydraulic engineering, caste-based labour, environmental precarity, and patriarchal authority converge to produce everyday lived experience. The domestic household consequently emerges as a micro-geopolitical space in which broader historical and political processes are reproduced, contested, and occasionally transformed.

This study has argued that the film's titular *undercurrent* functions as a critical interpretive paradigm through which its environmental, feminist, and geopolitical concerns become mutually intelligible. The undercurrent signifies not only concealed emotions but also the submerged infrastructures of power that regulate bodies, territories, kinship, and memory. By embedding intimate domestic conflicts within the historically engineered landscape of Kuttanad, Christo Tomy dismantles the binary between the personal and the political, demonstrating that environmental space is inseparable from the social relations through which it is continuously produced and governed. The recurring imagery of water therefore exceeds metaphorical representation to become

a cinematic articulation of hydro-politics, wherein ecological processes and political authority remain fundamentally intertwined.

Viewed through the intersecting lenses of feminist geopolitics, political ecology, and spatial theory, *Ullozhukku* expands the possibilities of contemporary Malayalam cinema by relocating geopolitics from the conventional domains of statecraft, territorial conflict, and national borders to the intimate terrains of home, family, embodiment, and affect. The film reveals that sovereignty is exercised not only through institutions of governance but also through the regulation of domestic space, reproductive bodies, mourning rituals, and emotional economies. Its most profound intervention lies in exposing how structures of domination persist beneath the apparent stability of everyday life, while simultaneously imagining forms of resistance that emerge through empathy, shared precarity, and relational care.

*Ullozhukku* compels a reconceptualization of water as both historical agent and critical methodology. The film proposes that landscapes are repositories of memory, violence, and resistance, and that the politics of environment cannot be disentangled from the politics of gender, labour, caste, and belonging. In this sense, the undercurrent becomes more than a narrative motif; it emerges as the organizing principle of the social world itself—a dynamic field of submerged forces through which authority is continually negotiated, contested, and reconfigured. By transforming floodwater into a medium through which hidden histories surface and inherited hierarchies are unsettled, *Ullozhukku* establishes itself as a sophisticated cinematic meditation on the inseparability of ecology, geopolitics, and feminist agency, affirming the enduring capacity of Malayalam cinema to interrogate the complex intersections of landscape, power, and lived experience.

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