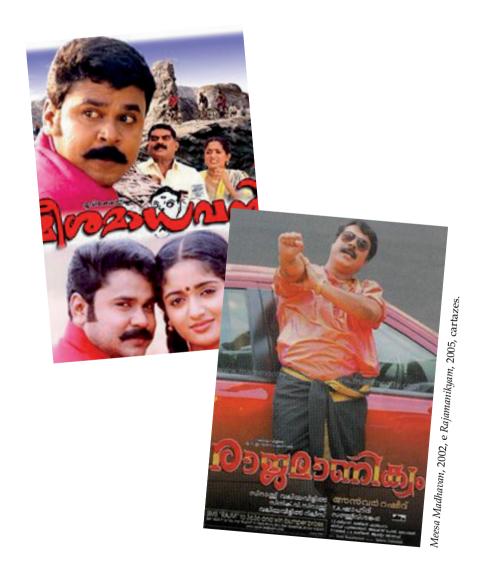# Hegemonic masculinities in two comic films in Malayalam: Meesa Madhavan e Rajamanikyam

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Hegemonic masculinities in two comic films in Malayalam:
Meesa Madhavan e *Rajamanikyam*

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates how the films evoke a specific notion of masculinity, and valorise normative male ideals – aggression, violence, and a gendered division of space and labour. Violence and dominance are legitimised and constructed as "natural" of the male "will to power". The paper also evaluates the populist appeal of the film as a reaction against attempts to inscribe a "new man" into the paradigms of gender – the proletarian heroes are traditional male supremacists who dichotomise public and private domains and discipline women to function within the norms of family. Further, it analyses the semiotics of film that work collaboratively to create the masculine image.

KEYWORDS: Malayalam cinema; masculinity; gendered violence.

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Mainstream popular cinema is a hyper-real, transcoded space of dominant social and cultural discourses, with comic films, in particular, enunciating the inherent and acceptable value systems. In India, Malayalam popular films from Kerala in the Southernmost tip of the country, has traditionally been accorded high respect as being radical, forward- thinking and promoting modern social values. In the 1980s, laughter – films or *chiripadangal* (*chiri* – laughter, and *padam* – picture/ film) became popular Malayalam cinema and, since then, no decade has gone by without a comic film becoming a major commercial success. During the 2000s, two comic films, *Meesa Madhavan* (Lal Jose, 2002)[1] and *Rajamanikyam* (Anwar Rasheed, 2005)[2] were the highest grossing films of their respective years, and the decade saw Dileep, who started and starred as a comic film hero, become the most commercially successful actor in the industry. The enormous popularity of comic films putatively means that the politics of laughter can consistently serve as a barometer to assess the ideologies of society. An analysis of these films reveals the inscription of a new patriarchy – of heroes who articulate stereotypes of acceptable male behaviour and present a neo-conservative picture of dominant hyper masculinity – and a discourse that elides female agency and prepotency. Malayalam cinema was at the forefront of a project of reform since 1906 when the first screening of the Lumiere movies was done in Kerala. From its inception, it was also regarded as intellectually and socially conscious and egalitarian, constructing

public consciousness regarding social and political problems. Cinema took up the modernist proposition of tackling contemporary social issues, such as highlighting and neutralizing caste and gender disparities – and rarely focusing on mythologicals like Bollywood or other regional cinema did. Since the release of *Vigathakumaran* (J.C. Daniels, 1928), Malayalam cinema maintained its distinct identity in story, themes, narration, music, characters, etc. Historicals (*Marthandavarama*, 1941), drama (*Balan*, 1938), caste, gender and labour clashes (*Navalokam*, 1951; *Jeevitha Nauka*, 1951; *Neelakuyil*, 1954; *Mudiyanaya Putran*, 1961) occupied centre stage. Malayalam cinema also saw the influence of the Progressive Writers Movement with its policies of social reform and revolutionary politics, and the co-opting of theatre actors onto the screen. By the 1970s, came the dichotomisation of high and popular art with the Film Society Movement creating Art Cinema. Both art and commercial cinema were engaged in the disruption of old divisions and the dismantling of hierarchies – the amelioration of the lower castes, the working class and women were at the forefront of its aims till the early years of the 1970s.

The transgressive potential of cinema to represent and perpetuate hegemonic doctrines is enormously rich, but the ideology of patriarchy, embodied in the dominant male, was a late development in Malayalam cinema. Unlike Bollywood and other regional films, Malayalam cinema did not foster either the Angry Young Man paradigm, deployed by Amitabh Bacchan in Hindi, or the super-hero persona and the exalted celebrity status of an N. T. Rama Rao or an M. G. Ramachandran, with their colossal cut-outs and hysterical fan-following.

The hero of the 60s and 70s in Malayalam was Prem Nazir, gentle and almost feminized, who constructed an image of the ideal conjugal. Men and women were corollaries but with separate spheres of influence. Madhu encapsulated the romantic- sensitive and self- sacrificing, crooning tender sentiments. Satyan, who played a number of subaltern roles, portrayed the working- class marginalized masculinity, but in his upper-caste representations, he too was suave and sophisticated. They were low- key heroes, mild and even powerless sometimes, which left enough space where "heroines like Sarada and Sheela and to some extent Jayabharathi could either dominate or assert equality" (Nair 36)[3]. The heroines demurred to the dictates of men, followed expectations of conjugal behaviour, were circumscribed but not forcefully subordinated. The closest to hyper- masculine character in the 1970s was the first action hero of Malayalam cinema, Jayan. With his muscular physique cultivated through body-building, trademark swagger and temerarious stunts, he epitomised the male capacity for adventure and heroism, and easy conquest of the modern sophisticated women. However, Jayan's films catered to a niche audience – few movies were seen as 'family films' and they were mostly cheap low budget remakes of successful films from other regions. The cinema of the period was not a means of socializing men to assume hegemonic positions of power.

The 80s was the decade of the *chiripadam* or the laughter- films. A spate of comic hits such as *Boeing, Boeing* (1985, Priyadarshan), *Gandhi Nagar 2nd Street* (1986, Satyan Anthikad), *Kilukkam* (1991, Priyadarshan), saw the increased popularity of comic actors such as Mukesh, Innocent, Jagadish, Mamukoya. These actors, who had performed "at the periphery of the cinematic world" (Rowena 134)[4], become paramount to the success of a film. The male protagonist was no longer the benevolent and dominating

[2] *Rajamanikyam*. Dir. Anwar Rasheed. Perf. Mammooty, Manoj K. Jayan, Saikumar and Rahman. Valiyaveetil Relaease, 2005. Film.

[3] Nair, P. K. "Gender Equations in Malayalam Cinema." *Women in Malayalam Cinema: Naturalising Gender Hierarchies.* Meena Pillai, ed. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010. Print.

[4] Rowena, Jenny. "The 'Laughter-Films' and the Reconfiguration of Masculinities." *Women in Malayalam Cinema: Naturalising Gender Hierarchies.* Meena Pillai, ed. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010. Print.

[5] Rowena, Jenny. "The 'Laughter-Films' and the Reconfiguration of Masculinities." *Women in Malayalam Cinema: Naturalising Gender Hierarchies.* Meena Pillai, ed. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010. Print.

[6] Rowena, Jenny. "The 'Laughter-Films' and the Reconfiguration of Masculinities." *Women in Malayalam Cinema: Naturalising Gender Hierarchies.* Meena Pillai, ed. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010. Print.

[7] Connell, R. W. *Masculinities.* 2nd ed. California: U of California Press, 2005. Print.

[8] Ravi, Shamika, and Anuradha Sajjanhar. "Beginning a new conversation on women." *The Hindu.* 21 June 2014, Op.ed: 11. Print.

[9] Connell, R. W. *Masculinities.* 2nd ed. California: U of California Press, 2005. Print.

[10] Sreedharan, Janaky. "Marriage and Family in Malayalam Cinema." *Women in Malayalam Cinema: Naturalising Gender Hierarchies.* Meena Pillai, ed. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010. Print.

[11] Sreedharan, Janaky. "Marriage and Family in Malayalam Cinema."

patriarch and the image of the authoritarian hero transmogrified into the likeness of desperate, fumbling men "attempting the most desperate means to find employment, chasing disinterested women, trying to escape debtors, being humiliated by family members; frantic and distressed, and totally unheroic. They were symbolic of male incompetence and powerlessness" (131)[5]. The ineffectual heroes formed groups of male communities on screen and heroines were either marginalized as unimportant to the main concern of the film or had hostility characterizing their relationship with the hero.

The 80s was, further, the period of the Gulf boom, with the migration of men from marginal communities and with a large number of women managing households. Conterminous with the influx of Gulf money, the liberal humanist, anti-feudal ideals of an earlier era of cinema were abandoned to reflect the new capitalist economy, and to reflect the "rising non-hegemonic male communities and the dominant women members" (Rowena 135)[6]. The male insecurity at upper-caste female assertiveness and desire of upwardly mobile backward communities also looking for the ideological control of their own women (ibid) was first seen in the 80s which was reflected in the problematization of the gendered relationships on screen.

By the 1990s, the liberalized economy saw the indigenous gender regimes being dismantled under the pressure of global culture. Neo-liberalism is inherently gender-neutral because "the market delivers advantage to the smartest entrepreneur, not to men or women as such ... neo-liberalism is inconsistent with traditional patriarchy" (Connell 254-55)[7]. A study conducted by the National Sample Survey Organization found that while the female labour force in 1981 constituted only 19.7% of the total, in 1991, it rose to 22.3%, peaking at over 40% from the early to the mid-1990s, though it then fell steadily from 29.4% in 2004-05 to 23.3% in 2009-10 and hitting a low of 22.5% in 2011-12 (cited in Ravi and Sajjanhar 11)[8]. However though neo-liberalism enabled the entry of women into the workforce, it also was also accompanied by "a sharp deterioration in the position of women" (Connell 255)[9] witnessed in the precipitous rise in chauvinistic discourses of society and cinema.

The influx of women into the workforce in the 90s and its domestic and professional gender conflicts began to be explored in cinema. *Ramji Rao Speaking* (Siddique-Lal, 1989), a hugely successful 'laughter-film' on the social factors affecting Kerala also commences with an altercation over employment between a man and a woman, with the woman eventually co-opted by marriage. "Ambitious and successful working women became a number to be reckoned with, and the conflicts between their professional and domestic lives began to be tentatively explored in film" (Sreedharan 84)[10]. The "insecure husband, uncertain and riddled with inferiority complexes" in movies such as *Vadakkunokku Yantram* (1989), *Chintavishtayaya Shyamala* (1998) prefigured the male fear of female agency (Sreedharan 74)[11].

This masculine anxiety of power set in motion the reconfiguration of the film hero and the revival and the whole-hearted endorsement of the patrilineal and patriarchal family structure. The masterful male head of the family in a number of movies – Mammooty in *Valsalyam* (Cochin Haneefa, 1993) and Mohanlal in *Balettan* (V. M. Vinu, 2003) portrayed the good father, the responsible son, the decisive and firm husband. Under the pervasive power of patriarchy, cinema tried to construct the ideal of conjugal love and family, which resulted in the stereotyped projection of women in spite

of the fact that Kerala has a matrilineal society. In films, characters on screen represented types, with strong and independent women traditionally depicted as 'bad', while 'good' women have been suffering victims. The portrayal of the threatening female subject was a cinematic backlash against the autonomy of the urban educated working woman. *Valsalyam* works on this anxiety of the financially independent, urban woman wrecking the ethos of the joint family because of the man's misplaced desire for upward social mobility. "*Urbanized sensibilities are pictured as divisive and disruptive, and the native values of patience and forbearance are idealized in the rustic belle ... subservience to the husband and tolerance of his waywardness becomes a value in itself*. (Sreedharan 82)[12].

The decade also saw the emergence of the ideal of hegemonic masculinity, where superheroes like Mammooty, Mohanlal and Suresh Gopi single-handedly defeat mighty enemies – *Commissioner* (Renji Panicker, 1994), *Ekalavyan* (Shaji Kailas, 1993), *Devaasuram* (I. V. Sasi, 1993) - and where women play no significant role. These films also reconfigure the public space as exclusively male and the woman interloper is firmly relegated to the margins. In *The King* (Shaji Kailas, 1995), Mammooty contemptuously puts a woman police officer in her place. "Even when you acknowledge the unmistakable presence of a senior woman police officer, administrator, lawyer or journalist, they have to be exposed for what they ultimately are - mere women" (Harris 62)[13]. When women did not play a submissive role or require to be nurtured and protected, they became objects of antagonism, and any romantic liaison between the hero and the assertive heroine was reconciled by ultimately subduing her to her primary, traditional role. The plots became misogynistic and women were inferiorised to magnify the macho image of the hero (Sreedharan 84)[14].

The acerbic raillery against female assertion was first exhibited in comic films in *Godfather* (1991, Siddique- Lal), with the rise of the dauntless male protagonist, and in which the acrimony between the families of Anjooran and Achamma is settled with the conclusive defeat of the female antagonist. The *chiripadam* of the 2000s presents the continuum of this backlash in the persona of the hegemonic hyper-masculine hero, first seen in the near- celibate male community of the 'Godfather'. However, unlike the elite heroes of the 1990s, or the bumbling nondescript commoner of the 80s comic films, the hero of the *chiripadam* of the 21st century conflates within himself both the unremarkable social position of the latter with the hardiness and dominance of the former. The "descent of the hero from aristocracy to the lower class" (Gates 33)[15] represents the reaction of the threatened masculinities of various strata of society.

The hero of the *chiripadam* of the 2000s is a member of the upper-caste that has lost its pre-eminent position as a result of revolutionary politics and affirmative action, and a member of the lower- class, who, at a disadvantage in the post- liberalization era in the face of the influx of corporates and deployment of women into the workforce, can no longer take his supreme position for granted. The subject position of the hero appeals to the male spectator across disparate social and economic strata – the upwardly mobile, lower caste male whose economic empowerment has only marginally ameliorated his social status, the rich upper-caste male and the poor lower caste whose supremacy is threatened at home and in the workplace by increasingly assertive women. While in most regions of the world, men monopolized corporate and social power, Kerala, with

[12] Sreedharan, Janaky. "Marriage and Family in Malayalam Cinema."

[13] Harris, V. C. "Engendering Popular Cinema in Malayalam." *Women in Malayalam Cinema: Naturalising Gender Hierarchies*. Meena Pillai, ed. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010. Print.

[14] Sreedharan, Janaky. "Marriage and Family in Malayalam Cinema." *Women in Malayalam Cinema: Naturalising Gender Hierarchies*. Meena Pillai, ed. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010. Print.

[15] Gates, Philippa. *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film*. Albany: State of New York Press. Web. 7 Aug. 2013.

[16] Janasree Gender Mission. "Gender Equality in Kerala." Janasreegendermission.org. Web. 21 June, 2014.

its high levels of female education, saw boys and men losing ground in general education with the result that women became strong contenders for corporate resources. According to the Statistics of Higher and Technical Education, at the tertiary level of enrolment in Kerala, females outnumber males in all fields (arts, sciences, medicine) except for engineering and technology (Janasree Gender Mission np)[16]. With higher levels of economic participation, women's income went up and men position as sole recipients of paid labour or predominant authority over institutions was threatened. In *Meesa Madhavan* and *Rajamanikyam*, the upper-caste hero is forced by circumstances to occupy lower- class space and engage in demeaning occupations, and reclaims his masculinity through violence and the subjugation/ marginalization of women.

Meesha Madhavan commences with the clash between Bhageerathan Pillai and Gangadharan Nair. The reiteration of the caste name, 'Nair', and statements like "*Valiya Nairaa*" (He is a member of the eminent Nair caste) serves no structural purpose, as none of the cultural identities of the Nair community come into play in the film. *Rajamanikyam* showcases a Brahmin wedding and the upper-caste background of the hero who eventually trades in cattle. Laughter in *Rajamanikyam* arises from the illiteracy and boorish behaviour Bellary Raja exhibits, his lack of finesse, the rusticity of his language, the showy extravagance of his deference to those who are educated and well-placed. The cinematic sequences juxtapose these scenes with ones where those who deride the cattle- trader are routed by him for which he earns the approbation of the spectators. *Meesa Madhavan*'s comedy is situated in the slapstick scenarios where the shrewd and affluent Bhagheerathan Pillai is outwitted by the indigent but astute Madhavan. Both Madhavan and Bellary Raja imbricate the unexceptional protagonists of the 80s *chiripadam*, with the mega- star heroics of the 90s heroes. They are the benevolent patrons, venerated by their English- educated aides and companions – Raja and Rukmini. The discrete categories of caste and class are conflated in the characters of Madhavan and Bellary Raja, and they reclaim their masculine primacy through subordinating their social superiors.

Malayalam cinema, thus, becomes a site where the fears of men across all strata are articulated. In these films, the mythical and historical allusions signify the masculine assertions of the marginalized male. The romantic alliance between Madhavan and Rukmini are evocative of the mythical Krishna's daring abduction of Rukmini against the wishes of her family, since Krishna, the Yadava, belonged to a lower stratum of society. The image of Madhavan turning the bicycle around over his head has the mythic overtones of Krishna spinning his Sudarshan Chakra to decimate his enemies. The title song, in which he is seated on a buffalo swinging a noose and singing "Today, you will die", is also redolent of male mythic imagery – the picture of Yama, the God of death. Bellary Raja is a cattle trader and his use in the opening sequences of his appearance swinging the bell- chain of bulls to maim and kill his opponents is reminiscent of the image of Yama, the deity of death or Shiva, the Destroyer. Both Siva and Yama are Gods associated with ghouls and goblins, the desideratum of the mythic world. The mythic references to Krishna, Shiva and Yama resonates with the overtones of ridicule that they, who either belonged to lower castes (Krishna was a Yadava) or associated with lower beings (Shiva inhabited cremation grounds) encountered. Considered many times as unworthy

of worship, their aggressive retaliation earns them respect as they prove themselves far more potent than the other divine beings. Madhavan is also introduced first as Osama Bin Ladan on horseback with the captive Pillai dressed as Bush, an image that not only appeals to the Muslim minority sentiment, but also culturally acceptable in that Saddam and Osama were seen as Orientals who belligerently stood up to the hegemony of Western political and corporate powers.

The perception of crisis in social order and transitioning social structures provokes attempts to restore a dominant masculinity. The composition of the *chiripadam* of 2000s engenders the construction a particular sense of masculine identity that provides men with a sense of potency and maintains a power relation between men and women. According to Connell, the existence of a structure of inequality engenders violence (44)[17]. Violence is predicated as masculine from the very first sequence in *Meesha Madhavan* when dualist gender stereotypes of aggressive/ passive are naturalized: boys fighting while girls laugh and clap in encouragement. Violence is incumbent in the gender politics among men to assert supremacy. As an adult, Madhavan is capable of taking on a dozen goons sent to assault him and his opponents are envious admiring of how only he can deliver resounding hidings when they tend to the battered Eapan Papachi. In *Rajamanikyam*, violence goes further with blood and gore spattering the scene intermittently. Bellary Raja is referred to as "*Elloori Raja*" (one who can dislocate bones). Men who have been beaten up by the heroes, like Eapan Papachi and Simon Nadar, require ayurvedic massage treatments. The 'eye-for-an-eye' philosophy makes the male manly and Bellary Raja is advised by the politician who releases Raju from custody, to "go see who you have to see, and give what you have to give". Boys also have to be trained to fight – Raju is incited to settle scores with Inspector Vikraman by his older comrades, Bellary Raja and Varkychan, who appraise the boy's methods of fighting. "*Payyan aadiyam onnu padariyangilum...*" (Though the boy wavered initially, now he is fighting well). The film reifies the ingenious resourcefulness of Bellary Raja's coterie when they assert their expertise in combat – the ability to identify an assailant by assessing the depth of the wound and the number of stitches required.

Violence is not only legitimized as voyeuristic entertainment; it also bestows legitimacy. Bellary Raja's illiteracy and uncouth behaviour are excused and he can preen and swagger before college boys once he thrashes the lecturer- molester. Selvam is co-opted into the ideals of hegemonic masculinity when he speaks the language of violence: "If you are a man, come alone [to fight]. If you are the son of a single father, come alone." Manliness is inextricably linked to the ability to re/act violently.

Assaulting the body, whether another's or one's own, is a sign of masculine achievement. Torture and physical agony must be unflinchingly borne and casually dismissed. Bellary Raja adjusts his watch strap between beating his opponents; and Raju, wounds as yet unhealed, removes his bandages with his teeth before taking on Sub-inspector Vikraman who assaulted him in custody. The semantics of altercation, *thaar uduthu* (wearing the wrestler's loin cloth) also point to a hyper-masculine pastime – wrestling. The primary means of recovering masculinity in the *chiripadam* is through physical aggression, and the expressions of sensitivity and compassion as exhibited by the caste- patriarchs of an earlier cinema were abandoned to create an identity that is "driven, externalised and self- centred" (Rowena

[17] Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. 2nd ed. California: U of California Press, 2005. Print.

[18] Rowena, Jenny. "The 'Laughter-Films' and the Reconfiguration of Masculinities." *Women in Malayalam Cinema: Naturalising Gender Hierarchies.* Meena Pillai, ed. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010. Print.

[19] Connell, R. W. *Masculinities.* 2nd ed. California: U of California Press, 2005. Print.

[20] International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and Macro Interrnational. *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3), 2005-06: India: Volume I.* Mumbai: IIPS. 2007.

[21] Janasree Gender Mission. "Gender Equality in Kerala." Janasreegendermission.org. Web. 21 June, 2014.

141)[18]. When the Malayali male could no longer assert his identity through the genteel patriarch of the land- family network, he sought to remasculinise himself through a reassertion of patriarchal values. As a reaction to the feeling of ineptness and insecurity, the films reinforce the belief system that normalise men's violence.

Toughness is also reinforced through the ideal of manual labour. The jobs that both heroes engage in are male bastions. Madhavan engages in the dishonourable work of a petty thief, while Bellary Raja trades in cattle, a menial job, but both of which demand toughness – the one, mental, and the other, physical. Connell comments on how "heavy manual work calls for strength, endurance, a degree of insensitivity … and group solidarity … a means of asserting superiority over women" (55)[19]. Bellary Raja reminds his assailants that he is "used to dealing with four-legged animals" which, implicitly, engenders hyper aggressiveness.

Violence – physical and emotional – is used to sustain dominance over woman. The rise of knowledge- based industries and the growth of higher education weakened men's ascendance over women, who no longer modelled themselves on helpless and dependent housewives. The New Man, comfortable with and encouraging of his independent and autonomous woman was seen as feminized and effete. In the 2000s, the figure of a powerful, masterful man capable of subduing a woman became prevalent and popular. According to the National Family Health Survey-3 crimes against women more than doubled between 1990 and 2011, with 40% of the injuries inflicted by husbands or family members. In Kerala, 65.7% of women and 54.2% of men believed that spousal violence was justified if there was sufficient cause such as the neglect of the household or children, disrespect shown to in-laws or suspected infidelity. This is higher than the national average of 54.1% of women and 51% of men who justified domestic violence (NFHS- 3 511)[20]. Nationally, married and widowed women have a much higher prevalence of violence against them (37% and 38%). Kerala is one of the top six states in crimes against women. Although it accounts for only 2.75% of the total population it accounts for 4% of crimes against women (Janasree Gender Mission np)[21]. In films, the hegemonic societal structures legitimize the violence against women by the patriarchs of the family – Rukmini is thrashed by her father, and Rajaratnam Pillai slaps his wife on their wedding night when she denies that the urchin at the door is her son. The political significance of these patriarchal paradigms of violence, ruthlessness and dominance is that the qualities associated with belligerent masculinity are normalized and reinforced.

Men subdue women both by perpetuating and threatening violence, and by making women objects of gaze. Madhavan whispers to the sleeping Rukmini, that if he raped her, she would walk around in disgrace with a bulging stomach for ten months. He dares to steal her gold hip-chain while she is asleep, because revealing the theft would only serve to dishonor her. When he uses his teeth to pries the hook and employs a feather to stroke her stomach as she sleeps, the sexual overtones make her an object of fetishistic scopophilia. The woman has not offered herself but her body is appropriated as an object of desire by the male protagonist. Women's bodies are fragmented – hips, lips, waist – and offered as a titillating spectacle for the male spectator. The sense of threatened masculinity when the primary roles of earning wages and being providers were being taken over by women, young men saw "aggressiveness and sexual domination as a

form of masculinity, not just to prove their masculinity but to also stamp their superiority on the other gender" (Dasgupta np)[22]. The link between women's employment and domestic violence is seen in the National family Health Survey Report that recodes a higher prevalence of violence against employed women (39-49%) than against women not employed (29%) (Ravi and Sajjanhar 11)[23]. This goes against the notion that women engaged in 'gainful employment' are at reduced risk of violence.

The conflict between men and women is inevitable if she has agency or refuses to be submissive. The clash between the unemployed, uneducated Madhavan and Rukmini – educated in an 'English- medium Palakkad college' (Palakkad being urban as opposed to the rural background of the hero) – forms an integral part of the diegesis of the film. Rukmini's tactics are ineffectual against the incisive Madhavan, and she eventually submits to him.

> *Mainstream cinema hit upon a successful formula with the first half of the film focusing on an encounter between a self-willed heroine and a macho hero, while the second half witnesses a systematic and extremely popular process of breaking her down … Cinema becomes a very important site of male backlash against women who have … become vociferous about their rights and self- respect. …The figure of the vamp that used to set off the virtuous woman gives way to the woman in control…, woman in power…, a Malayali girl with a cosmopolitan exposure…* (Sreedharan 83)[24].

The transmogrification of character is seen as another form of violence inflicted on women – "not on her body but on identity" (Muraleedharan 2002, 19)[25]. In *Rajamanikyam*, the 'good' women – Muthulakshmi, Malli – are docile and deferential, while Raniratnam is a negative character, not only because she is deployed against the hero, but also because she arrogates power. As the male monopoly over resources is abbreviated, cinema seeks to reassert the ideology of supremacy through violence.

The 'deep masculine' is reiterated through a high level of gender stereotyping and sex-role portrayals. The 'male breadwinner ideology' determined that men worked outside for pay while women were home makers. In both films, the differentially assigned roles showcase familial responsibility as essentially a male concern while women are mainly confined to being good housewives and affectionate mothers. In Kerala, the challenge to the cultural norm was swiftly countered and the state Human Development Report 2005 showed that only 23% of women in Kerala were economically active as compared to the higher figures nationwide. In a 2009 paper sponsored by the State Planning Board, states "the work participation of women in Kerala is lower than the national average as well as those of other Southern States." According to the 2001 census, out of a labour force of 10.3 million, only 2.5 million are women, which is lower than Sri Lanka and similar to conservative countries like UAE and Lebanon. This is not because women opt to stay at home. The economic review of 2010 shows that women outnumber men in seeking employment through employment exchanges in all districts of Kerala though 71% of educated women are unemployed compared to the 18% of men[26].

Donaldson and Howson state that the invariable gender roles give men "their sense of self and masculinity regardless of nationality, education, family background and experience" (Donaldson, 2009, p. 212)[27]. The

[22] Dasgupta, Rohit K. and K. Moti Gokulsing. Masculinity and Its Challenges in India: Essays on Changing Perceptions. North Carolina: Mc Farland and Co, Inc: 2014. E-book.

[23] Ravi, Shamika, and Anuradha Sajjanhar. "Beginning a new conversation on women." *The Hindu*. 21 June 2014, Op.ed: 11. Print.

[24] Sreedharan, Janaky. "Marriage and Family in Malayalam Cinema." *Women in Malayalam Cinema: Naturalising Gender Hierarchies*. Meena Pillai, ed. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010. Print.

[25] Muraleedharan, T. "Women's Friendship in Malayalam Cinema." *Women in Malayalam Cinema: Naturalising Gender Hierarchies*. Meena Pillai, ed. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010. Print.

[26] Janasree Gender Mission. "Gender Equality in Kerala." Janasreegendermission.org. Web. 21 June, 2014.

[27] Donaldson, M, R. Hibbins, R. Howson, and B. Pease, eds. *Migrant Men: Critical Studies of Masculinites and the Migrant Experience*. Oxon: Routledge, 2009. Print.

[28] Rowena, Jenny. "The 'Laughter-Films' and the Reconfiguration of Masculinities." *Women in Malayalam Cinema: Naturalising Gender Hierarchies.* Meena Pillai, ed. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010. Print.

boy Madhavan is the embodiment of traditional sex role behaviour – he abandons his childish games and fights when summoned by a companion about the debtor at his door, "Your mother is crying." He is forced into thieving to support his family, abandon his studies so that his brother could continue his education. His elder brother, under the control of his spouse and never having borne the responsibility of his parental home, exemplifies subordinate masculinity - effete and ineffective. *Rajamanikyam*, likewise, begins with the iteration of masculine identity and independence. As Muthulakshmi weeps after her second marriage, she is asked not to worry about the child, "*After all, he is a boy*." When Rajaratnam Pillai wishes to retire but worries about his children, he leans not on his wife but his adopted son. The patriarch's chair symbolizes his lordship over his household – Shelvan lays claim to it, but he cannot sit on it because he does not take up the responsibility of the family. Even in the case of women, paternalistic masculinity constructs men as responsible for her care and security. The college students who protest the assault on Mali's sister are all boys. The key roles that men play in the movie are those of bread winners/ providers and guardians. The comedy arises from the opposition they face and decimate in the execution of their duties. The narrative and representational strategies encapsulates the sex-role expectations of patriarchy - a response to the threat posed to the survival of sexual division of labour.

The concept that men and women ideally perform prescribed roles and society functions harmoniously because of the biologically- determined division of labour is re-introduced in the films. Men who performed what are perceived as 'women's tasks' are ridiculed/ subordinated. Those who "*wash women's underskirts*" (*Rajamanikyam*) are expelled from the privileged circle of dominant males. Rajaratnam Pillai remarries only because he requires a mother for his son – "*I only wanted a mother for Shelvan*" – the woman is required to serve a domestic purpose, not to be a companion or lover. Muthulakshmi serves Rajaratnam Pillai while he lies back in his easy chair – a seat which the son not a daughter claims, "*Achan muthalai irunne kaserayil, eneem makan modalali irikkum*" (The father owner sat on this chair, now the son owner is entitled to sit). The more women stormed the male bastions of employment post-liberalization, the more allocation of tasks and roles to 'those that are naturally suited to execute them' becomes the normative in the cinema.

Women are used as commodities, of little value apart from the services they offer. In *Rajamanikyam*, where women are on the periphery of the narrative, the woman is metaphorically compared to a beast of prey. Bellary Raja, the hero of the narrative, declares "whether a buffalo or a woman, she should be pedigreed. Does Aishwarya Rai and Annamma chetathi in the kitchen have the same value, though they are both women?". Madhavan plots to romance Rukmini so as to have access to her father's wealth, while Pillai, once an ordinary canal- contractor, comes into money, by marrying the wealthy Santhamma, after getting her pregnant. The threat to male identity posed by assertive women was handled by reducing them to commodities/ objects/ bodies for physical and visual pleasure (Rowena, 145)[28].

Women are not only subordinated and precluded from the public space in cinema but also marginalised in the private. Films created 'male conglomerations" that exhibited the "homosocial bond" (Rowena 136) as a source of strength. In spite of Rukmini being integral to the narrative in *Meesa Madhavan*, she quickly fades to the background when the com-

plications arise; and Madhavan is aided by Achuthan Namboothiri and Mukundan Unni. *Rajamanikyam* is devoid of love interests – women are either objects of lust, or causes of complications. Bellary Raja's associates and companions are Varghese, Varkeychan and Raju; and the film closes with the one- eyed Raja, his arms around Raju, his protégé and Rajaselvam, the prodigal brother, pronouncing that in their company, he "now has both eyes". The prodigal, repentant sister does not figure even in the final scenes. Horrocks comments on how the male needs "to distance himself from females and femininity, in order to prove that he is a male" (33)[29]. In films, escapades with male companions replaced the earlier romantic themes and the binary between men and women, with men as sources of strength and companionship, is firmly established.

Women are 'othered' and a dualism built up to naturalise the assumed differences between the genders. Men are responsible, rational, level-headed, disciplined and tough. Women, in contrast, are dependent, irrational, docile and weak – physically and emotionally. Madhavan is represented as aiding in Prabha's marriage though there exists a mutual attraction between them, because he recognizes the impracticability of their union, while she puts her belief in his tenderness down to the fancies of her "silly brain" (*potta budhi*). Women are frail, vulnerable and emotional, where as men are cool, controlled and confident.

Tears are the trope of a woman and female subjects who refuse to cry but stand strong and unyielding are presented as cruel. Rukmini is transformed from a wilful, defiant opponent, and articulated as demure and desirable when she sheds tears of repentance for her opposition to Madhavan. *Rajamanikyam* commences with the bride crying in isolation. Unable to acknowledge the son from a previous marriage, she weeps when slapped by her husband. Bellary Raja, on the other hand, speaks lightly of his inability or refusal to shed tears "I hate tears...I see it as a childish act, fit to be laughed at" (*kalithamasha*). The tradition of toughness is performed by exhibiting men as divided from and disdaining emotions. Rajaratnam Pillai states that he desires to see his children as affectionate siblings, but hastens to add that it is not because he has lost his inner toughness as a man (*karithu*). This is a familiar theme in the construction of masculinity ideology – the use of a binary feminine.

Visual and verbal semiotics re-imagines the destabilized machinations of patriarchy into a universalized norm of masculinity. Visually, *Meesa Madhavan* evokes the universal ideal of manhood – Tarzan – when Madhavan swings into the cinematic frame on a rope, the first time when Prabha entices him, the second to rescue Rukmini. The films also employ a series of phallic symbols that intersperse the film – the ladder and platform in *Meesha Madhavan* and the windmills in *Rajamanikyam* – located in open grasslands where men congregate. Another visual trope that is emblematic of a man is the moustache: both heroes and villains in *Rajamanikyam* sport thick moustaches which they twirl to showcase machismo. *Meesa Madhavan*'s narrative turns on the fear instilled in the community when Madhavan twirls his moustache, indicating that he would enter and steal from their homes that night. The moustache is a metaphorical and metonymic indication of the masculine virtue: resolution and invincibility. The film closes with Madhavan telling Eapan Papachi that the latter's moustache is not "thick enough" (he is not man enough) to vanquish him.

Verbally, the utterances evoke approbation in masculine terms – when

[29] Horrocks, R. *Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies and Realities*. New York: St. Martins' Press, 1994. Print.

the child Muthu refuses to return to the mother who fails to acknowledge him, Rajarathnam Pillai commends his self-respect: "Midukkan aanu, aan kutty" (You are a smart fellow, a *boy*). Pillai, therefore, changes his name from "Muthu" (pearl) which can be used for both sexes, to 'Manikyam/ Rajamanikyam' (diamond) which is purely masculine. The film counters the unstable and fractured notions of male power by asserting the postulate that repudiating the female is an integral part of being male. The filmic and linguistic syntagms are discursively framed to reify the received notions of phallocracy.

The two films demonstrate the transition of the hero from the inept protagonist accidentally finding love and success in the early *chiripadam* to the champions who in spite of their apparent inferiority assert themselves and subdue opposition. In the global, post-modern age, as upper-caste men lose their hegemonic position through affirmative action, the lower-classes disadvantaged by entry of corporates, and women step out into the public domain as educated professionals, a neo-conservative patriarchy, partially borrowed from Western cultural settings, prevails in Malayalam cinema. The heroes in the comic films of the 2000s are representative of large sections of the populace unable to take advantage of the benefits of globalization, and witnessing the dominant role of men in public and private places being eroded. The reaction against the loss of potency and fear of failure in the lived experience of the 21st century male resulted in the reaffirmation of the normative 'generic man'. To validate their masculinity through heroes spew patriarchal vitriol, indulge in violence, practice domination, exhibit coldness, eschew English education and exemplify its futility, objectify women and reaffirm gender hierarchies and sex-roles. The *chiripadam* becomes an interpellated and interpellating space where the new patriarchal paradigm is reified by laughter.

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