

Article

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A Study of Masculinities in Ratheesh Ravi's *Ishq* and Madhu C Narayanan's *Kumbalangi Nights*

Malayalam Cinema has seen a revival off-late with content driven cinemas reaching beyond the shores Kerala or its own overseas audiences. Film connoisseurs and experts have always watched World Cinema through subtitles, but with the rise of OTT platforms and other new mediums - it has reached the common man too. This has helped the usually difficult to understand or pronounceable language to the non-Malayali to reach a larger audience than ever before.

New Wave

A few years ago, it was on the verge of being relegated to a soft porn movies producing industry, or at least that had started to be the perception of the non-Malayali audience. Even though the thespian duo Mammooty and Mohanlal rocked the nation and world cinema audience now and then with masterpieces of performances, it wouldn't have been wrong to say that Malayalam Cinema was in a crisis. Such industry fought out of its crisis with a new crop of filmmakers and artists who have come into the scene. They have brought a paradigm shift in how Malayalam Cinema is viewed across the world. The new style of filmmaking had stuck to the industry's legacy and practicality of low budgets. But, it was a

much more informed set of filmmakers who were educated in World Cinema and urban in their thought process. This helped their films to be both native yet global in its outlook and with subtitles it had no bounds for its reach.

The content of their films, today is known to be more sensitive to the issues of the world than other contemporary industries. Especially women characters developed and portrayed by the new crop of filmmakers and artists are always spoken about. Deconstruction of the hero is also something they have consciously done through the years and have become a model for the rest of the industries to follow.

New Crisis - Actor's Abduction Case

However, for an industry with such a progressive outlook, it fell into another crisis. This time off screen, in real life, an actress was abducted and was allegedly molested by unknown men while she was travelling on road. A case was registered and one of the well-known actors of the industry was charged with conspiracy to do this act.

This episode caused an important churn in the industry even before the MeToo movement had shocked the world with the horrors of Harvey Weinstein. However, the matter is still in the court of law. But, this episode has certainly started the debate in the industry which is still ongoing.

Multiple like-minded actors of the industry consolidated to condemn the act and demanded a boycott of the accused actor from AMMA (Malayalam Movies Artists Association). But, it was also met with resistance from the establishment of the organisation by not agreeing to remove the actor from its body - as it could also be said that it was an allegation and the actor was not guilty until proven.

Formation of WCC

Nevertheless, this episode started showing the ugly belly of an industry which symbolised progress earlier. Like-minded women actors also formed Women's Collective in Cinema (WCC) in 2017. This organisation has since stood for women's issues in the industry including the demand for separate washrooms for women on the sets of films.



Parvathy's Comment on Kasaba

One of its members, Parvathy, the actor also started an entire debate on portrayal of women and the glorification misogyny in popular Malayalam cinema. It was December 2017 and Parvathy was speaking at

one of the sessions of a film festival. Speaking of misogyny, she particularly called out "*Kasaba*" (2016) starring Mammootty. The film had a scene in which the hero, a superior police officer, holds a woman subordinate inappropriately while she is trying to salute him.

Misogynist Trolling

The film was being spoken about such portrayals right from its release. But, when a recognised woman actor said it on a public forum, things got ugly. Legions of fans of the *Kasaba* actor Mammootty trolled Parvathy relentlessly on the internet and issued rape and death threats. Mammootty himself later clarified that he had called and spoken to Parvathy about the issue.

Portrayal of Men on Screen

Again, the industry seems to have an insider's response to this crisis. The reason to support that statement is how in 2019, a few films which were released were exactly dealing with the issue - 'portrayal of men on screen'. *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019) and *Ishq* (2019)

Ishq (2019) directed by Ratheesh Ravi is a romantic thriller starring Shane Nigam and Ann Sheetal. It follows the perilous night journey of a young couple who gets into trouble and what followed after that night. The film attempts to handle the issue of moral policing. But, as the mixed reviews suggest it is also problematic in its solution to the problem.

Kumbalangi Nights (2019) directed by Madhu C Narayanan stars Fahadh Faazil, Soubin Shahir and Shane Nigam among others. It tells the tale of a dysfunctional family of four brothers who don't get along with each other. It is set in a quaint fishing village with the house of the brothers in the end of the village as moral outcasts. The film received rave reviews from all over the world.

Theoretical Framework

The study shall begin by defining 'masculinities' and bringing the context of the study is a few points on star culture in India. Leading to the importance of 'role models' in masculinities, it further discusses the

tyranny of sex roles on especially on men. It does so with various characters of the two films. Then, it shifts to the problematic portrayal of 'revenge' in *Ishq* (2019) and again discusses toxic masculinities referring to characters in both the films. It further ponders upon the notion of a perpetual crisis in masculinities through these two films. Concluding, it goes back to the original point of view, these two films being part of an insider's response from the industry.

What are masculinities?

Gender Studies as a discipline has tried to define gender as opposed to biological sex since a long time now and many iterations have also come in this respect. Bell Hooks called gender as 'performative'. Nonetheless stereotypes are attached to biological sexes and a heteronormativity is the prevalent binary identifier of sex.

But, the discipline was also dominated by women's studies for a very long time. Various feminist movements would sometimes give it an activist tonality. Although, since the 1980s Men's studies too has been an emerging area of study in the discipline. John Beynon wrote "Masculinities and Culture" in 2002 covering the various studies that have happened in the field. He notes how masculinities are always in plural and can never be singular. This kind of singular notion is always attached to the biological sex. But, masculinities are always interpolated by cultural, geographical and historical locations.

Star Culture

Indian Cinema with multiple languages and their film industries popularly representing their own subcultures, has one thing common across - star culture. The film stars across the world are idealised and are followed by their legions of fans. But, in India it is at another level. Film Stars have gone on to become chief ministers of their states and have attained no less than a demi-god status in their fans' minds. Temples have been built for film stars, a fact which stands as a testament to the kind of roles they play in popular culture and how important it is in the discourse of a society of young minds who are looking for role models to follow.

Role Model

Also, as discussed by Rupert & Tosh 'role model' is a very important aspect of masculinity and popular culture. The masculinity on screen is much more seductive and attractive to a common man than the father, brother and uncle around him.

This makes it important for us to think about how men are portrayed on screen. Just like how feminist or women's studies have made the portrayal of women on screen problematic and to much success it has resulted in improved portrayals or also more women making films that tells women's stories.

The nascent field of men's studies must also problematize the portrayal of men on screen. In fact, it has done so and many researchers have analyzed war films especially as masculinity is always attached to action. But, there is also a need to analyse these portrayals in more environments than the obvious ones.

Sex Roles & Masculinities

Sex roles are defined by expectations and norms attaching to the biological status. (Connell) This, in fact, is a much contested area of masculinities. Although, present consensus on the matter of sex and gender is clear, earlier researchers have went after looking into the science of sex roles. The results are presumably inclining towards it having no basis in Science rather in external factors like culture and society. But, the probe has helped raise questions on the formulation of sex roles.

Freudian researchers have also found that 'superego' is formed as an aftermath of Oedipus Complex. The gendered character of a child, especially in boys are found to be formed after its interaction with the father. Even, the sociological aspects of the line of research support how through the father or any other role model in a patriarchal setup transfer the roles from one generation to the other. (Connell)

The sociobiological aspects of sex roles explored in the works of Alici Rossi takes another route in saying that gender differentiation is done through the primary function of reproducing the species. Thus,

masculinities and the role of masculinities are also in line with the biological function of the fatherhood. (Rossi)

Shammi, The Complete Man

Shammi, a character played by Fahadh Faazil in *Kumbalangi Nights* is an example of toxic masculinity. He is a simple barber in the town who is newly married and has a wife, wife's sister and their mother all of whom he deems it his responsibility to look after. Connell defines bodily masculinity as occupying physical space, to have physical space in the world. (Connell)

A scene in the film shows how he establishes his authority at the dinner table, seating himself at the center and other family members to his sides, he makes sure that they all sit for dinner at the same time and report the events of their day to him. He also verbally says that from now on the responsibility and honour of this family would be in his hands from then on.

The male role of the breadwinner and the protector of the family is an idea to which he completely adheres to. The three women of the family are his responsibilities and only he knew what is best for them. In fact, the mother-in-law and the wife never raise a word against him and he is quite happy for them to be under his control. But, Baby Mol, his wife's sister unlike the other two women, had a job and was unmarried. She had a life outside of the house which always threatened his authority. In fact, in another scene we see how a football being played by kids comes to their compound and how he deflates it before shouting at the kids. He is so engulfed in the idea of being a protector, that their house becomes a space and these three women who have to be not let out of that space in order to be protected. Baby Mol has a relationship with Bobby. He makes sure he enquires about him and comes to know that he doesn't fit his idea of a respectable man who is from a respectable family and has a respectable job. So, he, as the patriarch, rejects the proposal of Bobby who is from a dysfunctional family and doesn't have a proper job.

The best scene to depict his idea of his own self is perhaps the scene in which he is in front of a mirror perfecting his faultless moustache one strand of hair at a time. He admires himself in the mirror and proudly announces himself to be Raymond 'the complete man'. He also removes the *bindi* on the mirror, quite miffed by it to have spoiled his spotless reflection in the mirror. Also a splendid display of Fahadh Fazil's acting prowess, the scene which comes very early in the film as a precursor to the tone of his character, it shows how attached this man is to his identity and its expectations and how far he wanted to conform to it.

Saji, The Incomplete Man

Saji played by Soubin Shahir is one of the four brothers of the dysfunctional family of the film. A listless teenager in the guise of a grownup man seems to be the adequate description to this character. Out of the brothers he is the most affected by their parents' separation, he doesn't have a job that he does other than the traditional fishing which he never does. He lives off Murgan who has an ironing cart. Murugan & Sati were the eloped couple, who were once helped by Saji when everyone had outcast them.

This makes us wonder if Saji had done this help because he knew the pains of being 'marginalised'. As a man, he never fit the role of 'hegemonic masculinity' or any other traditional traits of masculinities as a strong man or as a breadwinner to his family. Among the groups of masculinities, the kind of masculinities which don't fit the role of hegemonic masculinities, are often subject to subordination and are looked down upon by other groups of masculinities. (Connell)

This character is a contrast to Shammi, who admires himself in knowing that he is 'the complete man'. As discussed earlier, Shammi looks down upon Saji when he had gone to him with the proposal of getting his brother Bobby married to Baby Mol. The semiotics of that scene suggests how Shammi looks down upon him, especially after they leave the space, he is twirling his perfectly trimmed moustache and having a laugh with his colleague about them.

Bobby, the man without role models

Bobby, the third brother in the family is a young man who is in the stage of forming his identity. All three brothers except the youngest, Frankie, hate each other. Bonny, who is the only mellow one, is affectionate of Frankie and vice versa. Otherwise, Saji and Bobby are left with no companions in the family and they hate each other.

One of the events of the film is Bobby's love affair with Shammi's sister-in-law Baby Mol. He always enjoyed her company and they were madly in love with each other. However, after Shammi insults Saji and Bobby, he is forced to take up a job at a fish processing factory, which he never enjoyed and left sooner than he had joined there. In a scene, Baby Mol innocently jokes with him asking him how many fathers he had. This upsets him badly and as an audience we come to know the hubris of his character and also of his brothers'.

Another important problem that seems to be for Bobby is the lack of role models to follow. As discussed earlier in the paper, 'role models' are important factors in formulation of masculinities. Only after Saji is a reformed man who takes up fishing, their family profession, Bobby too takes it up. He hated it earlier, but in multiple scenes he is already shown as a gifted fisherman who could catch rare fishes with bare hands and bare legs.

Problematic "Ishq"

Alwin

The film tackles the issue of moral policing in the state. Morality is another area which is assumed to be theirs by certain kinds of hegemonic masculinities. Alwin, a character played by Shine Tom Chacko in *Ishq* is one such example. An ambulance driver who preys on a young couple in the guise of a police officer at night. He may not be someone driven by notions of moral policing exactly, but he uses it to prey on a young couple who appeared to be isolated kissing in a car. The whole night he and his mate call themselves police and torture the couple by blackmailing them for money and also behaving indecently with them. For Alwin, it seems to be very difficult to believe that the woman with the boy cant

be anything other than a sex worker and his behaviour with the woman suggests how he takes domination as matter of fact and also his pornographic notions of women in general.

But, at home Alwin is a whole new person altogether. This is revealed at the latter half of the film. At home he is a normal husband and a father. Cornell terms this as 'complicity' of hegemonic masculinities towards a few women close to them. He also says that it doesn't mean that they are any less violent or oppressive towards other women



The 'problematic' revenge of Sachi

Sachi of *Ishq* who faces the abuse of Alwin in the first half of the film reverts to him in the second half of the film. While the story arc is very familiar to the audience from the regular commercial cinema, how the film handles the subject in the familiar arc has become quite controversial. Two things that Sachi does are found very problematic. The first is how insistent he is in finding out whether his partner is 'defiled' from the horror filled night with the abuser. This obviously turns equally harassing for the partner and the director provides a poetic justice at the end. But, how he seeks revenge on Alwin and how innately justified his actions are controversial. He does or at least tries to do the same thing with Alwin and his wife. Things turn ugly during these scenes. This can be argued that the director is deliberately doing so. But, the familiar arc of the hero taking revenge and tit for tat, does make one wonder if the violence here is glorified.

Masculinities in crisis

The notion of a 'perpetual crisis' is seen by many as an inherent part of masculinities. This crisis is not fixed, yet timeless. Each generation experiences it differently as discussed in *Masculinities and Culture*

(2002) by John Beynon. The expectations of adhering to the male sex role and many other factors lead to this. This process of adhering to it or failing to do so can become toxic too leading to harming one's self or others.

Sachi of *Ishq* who is supposed to be representing the 'new-man' (Beynon) who is educated in a post-feminist world duely behaves so in the first half of the film. But, he too seems to show his inherent sexism when he is insistent on knowing that Vasudha had not been 'defiled' and is 'pure'. The struggle between new manisms and traditional machismo masculinities can be seen here.

Alwin of *Ishq* who is toxic to stranger women is a family man at home to his wife and his only child. His pornographic notions of women are confined to a woman who doesn't fit his notion of being at home late in the night perhaps. But, this 'complicity' makes him no softer as discussed earlier.

Bobby of *Kumbalangi Nights* is another example of the masculinities in crisis. The lack of role models as discussed earlier, seems to be the reason for his confusion in how to behave and be a man.

Men & Mental Health

Kumbalangi Nights has two other extreme examples of Masculinities in crisis. Shammi suffers from mental illness and behavioral issues. The revealing of which happens in the pre-climax when he is acting

hysterical and attacking everyone also periodically going into attacks of certain kinds of psychological problems. His stress on being 'The Complete Man' (a clever pun on the popular Raymonds ad by the director), for which he had to present himself perfectly - dress perfectly and trim his moustache perfectly. All of which reaching a saturation point affects his mind presumably. Although, this portrayal of mental health of Shammi has also received criticisms of trivialising the issue.

On the other hand Saji of *Kumbalangi Nights*, after the accidental death of Murugan and his guilt of inadvertently being the reason for it, puts him into depression and perhaps a violent recurrence of a perpetual depression that he had spent most of his childhood and adult life in. He knows that there is something wrong with him and asks Frankie to take him to a doctor. This changes him completely, he takes care of Sati, Murugan's wife who was pregnant and also taking up his family profession of fishing.

Conclusion

2019, can be seen as an important year in Malayalam Cinema when it comes to negotiating the portrayal of men screen. It can't be said it was the exact reaction of the events happening in the industry. But, it can be said that the series of films released in the year including these two and *Uyare* (2019) can be perceived as a response from the industry to the ongoing debates off screen.

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