Hybridized Hegemonies: The Changing Face of the Male Protagonist in Malayalam Cinema

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In cinema, hegemonic masculine behaviour is exhibited by the traditional hero-the tough physically attractive male who displays the normative values of the masculine ideal. Hegemonic masculinity can even be demonstrated by a hero of lower social order by adopting certain stylistic features – being muscular, violent, dominating, and sexually assertive. A study of select Malayalam films produced post-2015 – Varnanae Avashyamundu, Vikruthi, Home- however, reveals a different kind of male protagonist – physically and emotionally crippled, diffident, ineffectual, blustering, unattractive, unimpressive, and victimized. This paper borrows from the theory of 'hybrid' masculinity proposed by Demetrius and 'inclusive' masculinity as put forth by Anderson to argue that since hegemonic masculinity is culturally and historically situated and reconfigures itself by appropriating and embodying diverse elements from other variants of masculinity, this cinematic trend demonstrates the shifting ideals of hegemonic masculinity in Malayalam cinema. The hero strategically borrows elements from the styles associated with marginalized masculinities, and the 'female' side of the male protagonist – being unathletic, compassionate, nurturing, shy, emotional – is eventually not erased or explained away, but is applauded or accepted. Demetrius' idea of 'dialectical pragmatism', further, describes how hegemonic masculinity

appropriates elements of marginalized and subordinated masculinities to maintain existing systems of power and dominance. This paper, however, goes beyond Demetrius' theory and argues that though patriarchy is not eroded nor are women emancipated, since the structures of power remain fundamentally unaltered, this model of male protagonists bucks the trend and counters the growing glorification of toxic manliness in Malayalam cinema with its display the anti-feminine rhetoric. The paper, thus, seeks to investigate the hybridity in the heroic code of Malayalam cinema and argues that the stylized variations, wherein power and control eventually rests with the male, make hegemonic masculinity not inclusive but simply plural.

Key words: Masculinity, hegemony, hybrid masculinity, inclusive masculinity, Malayalam films, patriarchy

Since the publication of R. W. Connell's gender order theory in *Gender and Power*, the concept of masculinity, like feminisms, has been seen as a set of performances deemed appropriate for a male subject. The patterns of masculinity are not unitary or fixed, but vary with age, class, ethnicity and period, and masculinities are multiple, contested, fractured, fluid, and always in the process of being made. While there are many kinds of masculinities that are produced and consumed – hegemonic, complicit, marginalized, subordinated, protest – there is one form that becomes normative or 'hegemonic'. This is the practice that is deemed as appropriate for man in a society at a specific period and becomes dominant over the other kinds. Though not the most prevalent, it is the "culturally idealized form of masculine character" and is contingent on a range of subject positions such as class, profession, race, sexuality, behavior, etc. (Connell 1990, p.83). Since all men do not have the social currency or agency to conform to hegemonic standards, their performance of masculinity is subordinated or marginalized. Hierarchically, hegemonic ideals are ascribed greater power, but it is not a result of aggressive domination – hegemonic masculinity is a result of cultural consent, institutionalization of normative ideals, and the marginalization or delegitimization of alternative forms. However, hegemonic norms are historically, socially, and culturally situated, always ontoformative and, like the concept of masculinities

itself, is provisional and plural. Traditional hegemonic masculine practices included dominance, aggression, competitiveness, pragmatism, rationality, objectivity, athletic and sexual prowess, stoicism, self-control, capacity for physical violence, etc. Traditional form of hegemonic masculinities also associated virility with certain physical characteristics and postures – muscularity, height, rugged features, hirsuteness – as well as specific occupations – the military, law enforcement, construction and labour were masculine occupations, but teaching, nursing, secretarial posts were construed as feminine. When, in the postmodern period, domination by physical strength is deemed old-fashioned, managerial ability and technical competence is seen as a form of masculine ascendence. However, the alpha male or the sensitive, caring new-age man still retained dominance over women and other men. These socially constructed behaviours of hegemonic masculinities were embodied in cultural texts, like popular films, as desirable and powerful.

However, a study of select films produced in Malayalam post-2015 – *Varnanae Avashyamundu, Vikruthi, Home,* reveals a different kind of male protagonist – physically and emotionally crippled, diffident, ineffectual, blustering, unattractive, unimpressive, and victimized, which conform to the roles of marginalized masculinities. This seems to indicate that since hegemonic masculinity is neither homogeneous, fixed, or undifferentiated and reconfigures itself by appropriating and embodying diverse elements from other variants of masculinity, this cinematic trend demonstrates the shifting ideals of hegemonic masculinity in Malayalam cinema.

Hegemonic masculinities produce different versions of masculine ideals and, in India, are constructed through varied factors such as caste, class, community, region, profession etc. Cinema, as both a social agent and a barometer of societal values, reconstructs and reflects the character of hegemonic masculinities – engaging with and renegotiating the contours of male dominance. Since hegemony is "ascendency achieved through culture, institution and persuasion", cinematic narrative is a factor in configuring new patterns of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Massserschmidt, 2005, p.832). Though the form of masculinity valourized in mythic texts is that of

the Maryada Purushottam, Lord Rama, the devoted, compassionate, strong, self-sacrificing man, the popular societal ideal of desirable male behaviour has followed the global context – a man of power, in control of himself and others, successful, aggressive, assertive, sexually heteronormative. However, post 2015, many popular Malayalam films have portrayed male protagonists on screen who do not adhere to the traditional forms of masculine behaviour, but display traits traditionally associated with a 'failed' or marginalized masculinities – physically unimposing, socially inept, and emotionally labile. From the analysis of movies such as *Vikruthi* (2019), *Varanae Aavashyamundu* (2020), *Home* (2021), this paper posits that local hegemonic masculinities of Kerala are being renegotiated to cut across social divisions and is being replaced by a modern model that incorporates elements of marginalized masculinity.

Vikruthi (2019) is a Malayalam comedy drama, based on a real life incident in Kochi Metro, of a photograph that was shared on social media of Eldo, a sleeping speech and hearing impaired man. It was taken by a commuter, Sameer, who assumed the sleeping man was drunk. The movie deals with the fallout of the action on Eldho and his family, and the fear, guilt and remorse of Sameer. Both the characters in the film belong to the lower social strata, and the film displays the helplessness of the characters in face of the media and legal system that they are unable to control.

Varnae Aavashyamundu (2020) is a romantic comedy of a divorced mother, Neena, whose daughter is looking for a groom. The twist in the tale occurs when Neena and her next door neighbour, retired Major Unnikrishnan, a reclusive, cantankerous, inhibited army man develop romantic feelings for each other. This leads to Nikki's prospective fiancé breaking off with her. Though devastated at the loss and resentful of her mother, Nikki moves on, eventually finding love with Bibeesh, her next door neighbour, who lives with his serial actress aunt and brother. While the film follows the romantic turns of Nikki, Neena's daughter, it is the Neena-Unnikrishnan plot line that propels the story forward and Unnikrishnan's development of character the audience is privy to.

Home (2021) is a comic drama of a middle-class aged father ignored by his tech savvy sons, and the imbroglio he is embroiled in when he attempts to use his new mobile phone. The crux of the film hinges on the respect he earns from his elder son, Antony, who, having dismissed his father as ineffectual, inefficient and unworthy, discovers that the former's heroic deed had saved the life of his prospective father-in-law, a man Antony lionized. Significantly, Joseph Lopez, Antony's father-in-law to-be, epitomizes traditional hegemonic masculinity – successful, strong, inspiring, and 'extra-ordinary'. The film illustrates that meek, weak, bungling men can also be 'extraordinary' and display private heroisms worthy of esteem.

The three films were all critical and commercial successes and garnered a number of awards – Suraj Venjaramood won the Kerala State Award for Best Actor in *Vikruthi*; Shobana won the Best Actress Award, Anoop Sathyan won Best Debut Director, Kalyani Priyadarshan won Best Debut Actress, and Johny Antony won Best Actor in a Comedy Role at 10th South Indian International Movie Awards for the movie *Varanae Avashyamundu*; and Indrans won the Best Actor while Rojin Thomas won the Best Director Award at the Samayam Awards for the movie *Home*. The wide popularity of the films attests to the zeitgeist that accepted the gender ideologies disseminated by the narrative – that of marginalized men as capable of heroism and worthy of respect.

As cultural texts, the change in the concept of the male protagonist in movies is reflective of a larger transformation in the people, processes and practices that constructs the concepts of masculinity in society. According to Anderson, when homohysteria declines, the long held codes that differentiates between the masculine and feminine or gay becomes blurred and traditional forms of masculinity are problematised. Homohysteria is the fear of being socially perceived as gay, and a culture is homohysteric if it is antipathetic towards gays, there is a public awareness of the number of gays in society, and there is lack of distinction between sex and gender (Anderson and McCormic, 2006, p.2). The subordination and marginalization of gay men occurs because of their construction as effeminate, and, therefore, homophobia arises not out of fear of

homosexuality, but out of disdain for men who act like women. "The fear of homosexuality … is often more about distancing from the feminine due to the perceived object of desire being that 'natural' to women than the fear of being homosexualized (de Boise, 2005, p.329). Homohysteria decreases when there is an improvement in the perception of LGBTQ people along with other legal, social and cultural changes (Anderson and McCormic, 2006, p.3).

In Kerala, the decrease in both homophobia and stigmatization of different sexualities can be witnessed in the success of gay pride movements, the popularity of K-pop groups, as well as in the popularity of metrosexual stars, like Ranveer Singh, who subvert sartorial gender norms. The state has witnessed a variety of agitations and revolutionary changes for gay and transgender rights, particularly since 2016. In 2016, the state government introduced free sex reassignment surgeries in government hospitals; Kannur district assigned a budget towards skilling programmes for transgenders; and the first transgender school in the country was opened in Kochi with teachers also from the transgender community. In 2017, the clothing line 'Red Lotus' hired two transgender models for their sari collection 'Mazavil" or "rainbow" dedicated to transgenders. Kerala Queer Pride has been held annually since 2010 to advocate LGBT issues and the annual pride walk by Queerythm has been organized in Thiruvanathapuram since 2017. The efforts and growing acceptance of these advocacy groups and movements that has brought in an awareness and sensitivity of gender fluidity helps, as Anderson says, to minimise the cultural association of masculinity with heterosexuality, and this inclusiveness is a fundamental challenge to the inequalities engendered by an adherence to hegemonic masculinity.

Similarly, the increase in viewership and popularity of K-pop artists suggests the decreasing bifurcation in gendering of dress and demeanour. K-pop groups, boy bands who wear gender non-conforming clothes, apply make-up, sport smooth chins, have been derogated about being gay and lacking talent. However, in December 2021, *The New Indian Express* reported how, according to the Women and Child Development Department, youngsters, especially teenagers required therapy and psychological intervention because of their addiction to

BTS (Bangtan Sonyondan), the popular South Korean pop group (Mohan, 2001, np). Nationally, the music app Spotify reported a 350 percent rise in K-pop streaming and appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone India* in 2017 and 2020 (Nehra). In an interview to *The Times of India* on "K-pop's Kerala Army", Rose Antony, a software engineer and enthusiast, asserts that BTS challenges the norms of masculinity:

> They are men who aren't afraid to show their emotions. They wear make-up … pose cutely … take care of their skin.... At the same time, they enjoy beers and video games. They effortlessly combine the so called masculine and feminine. In short, they challenge toxic masculinity and truthfully, that makes some people uncomfortable because these seven men challenge the very foundation of their belief that men should always and only be rough and tough" (Mathews, 2019, np).

Similarly, a primary means to express gender identity is clothes and modes of dressing. In a 2019 feature on the eccentric sartorial choices of Ranveer Singh, the BBC reported how Singh wore the kind of clothes and behaviour that he felt were most authentic – skirts during movie promotions in 2015 and kohl or eye-make up to a major award ceremony in 2017. Writing on the strategic intentionality of Singh's subversiveness in dress, Haroon Rashid says, "Through his outfits, he has achieved something fairly unusual. He's managed to slowly subvert or change the ideas around men's clothes, and the way they should dress – he's opened up this space, showing men how they can get away with sporting some eyeliner or pulling off an all-pink suit"(2019, np). The enjoyment of fashion, according to Edwards (2011), has been coded as both gay and feminine and Anderson asserts that the changing sartorial trends are indicative of the inclusion of feminine traits among heterosexual men with the consequent expansion of the repertoire of hegemonic masculinities. Rashid (2019) also writes on the sexually ambiguous protagonist played by Ranveer Singh in *Padmavat* in 2018 and as well as the character who displayed bursts of emotional weakness often breaking down in tears, "a display of vulnerability and softness that is fairly unusual in the way men are so often portrayed in Bollywood" (np). Connell and Masserschmidt explain how empirically existing hegemonic masculinities should be analysed

at the global, regional and local levels, since these become important in gender politics. Regional hegemonic masculinities, according to them, as constructed by feature-film actors, "provide cultural frameworks that may be materialised in daily practices and interactions" (Messerschmidt, 2018, p.53).

In Kerala, movies like *Jallikettu* (2019), *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019), *Joji* (2019) depict the bane of toxic masculinity, while movies like *Njaan Marykutty* (2018), *Moothon* (2019), *Mumbai Police* (2013), *Arthanaari* (2012) daringly and sensitively depict the predicament of gays, transgenders and gender fluid characters. The slow but definite growing acceptance of alternate sexualities and diverse masculine performances, according to Anderson, represents a paradigm shift in the practices of masculinities and leads to an 'inclusiveness' of gender codes that are reflected in popular culture. The assimilation of the normatively feminine into the masculine behaviour erodes the gender binary, and this is more pronounced in the case of gender within masculinity (Anderson, 2009, p.20). The change may be viewed as a historical shift transposing gender hierarchies and including new forms of masculinity into the hegemonic gender norms.

In the movies analysed, the male protagonists fail to signal traits associated with hegemonic masculinity: if men must have respectability, athleticism, restraint, strength, confidence, power, prestige, adventurousness, and social status, these are marginalised, clumsy, emotional, weak, diffident, timid, fearful, risk averse, insignificant, timorous and ordinary. Physically, they are mostly unattractive and unimpressive – unlike the brawny, muscular, strong jawed hero of orthodox masculine norms. Oliver Twist is short, scrawny, dark, balding with a reedy voice. Sameer, in *Vikruthi*, is the caricature of the labouring-class Gulf-returnee –sporting an awkward goatee, loud and tacky clothes, stereotyped Rayban glasses, with a receding hairline and an effeminate voice. Both Oliver and Sameer stand shorter than their female co-stars, a trait that is regarded as unmasculine and inferior according to traditional norms that values physical dominance. In spite of his heavier build, Eldho in *Vikruthi*, the contours of his body, with its rounded shoulders, is not one that is

traditionally associated with the normative muscular physique. Bibish in *Varanae Aavashyamundu*, is the ordinary looking middle class boy next door, shorter than Nikki's fiancée and not as stylish or well-proportioned as the latter. If hegemonic heroes are powerful and have hypermasculine bodies and the bodily ability to overcome opposition, then these men lack physical prowess – Oliver runs when he hears a dog bark, Eldho gets knocked off a bike and has to be hospitalized, and even the retired Major is first picturized in a wheelchair after having been beaten up by members of the servant class. Disabled men are considered the best example of marginalised masculinity because they are "marginalised by their reduced vigour and athleticism" (Edley, 2017, p.45). Unnikrishnan is first depicted as wheelchair bound and then weakly lying on his sofa, devoid of the masculine attributes of strength, stamina, and vitality. When Oliver apologizes to his father for upbraiding the latter's incontinence, he declares, "I am weaker than you … it is because I am tired" (*Home*). Analysing the stylistic variations of hegemonic masculinity, Chen (1999) states that all the variations "perform dominance by physical size and strength, if not outright violence, against smaller and physically weaker men and women, homosexuals" (5). But, like the marginalised category of men, the protagonists are vulnerable and incapable of defending themselves.

Other traits that signal hegemonic masculinity are professionalism, respectability, power, prestige and social status. However, most of these protagonists do not embody the hegemonic configurations – they belong to the middle or lower class – Eldho is a peon, Sameer a wage labourer, Oliver Twist ran a failed video rental store, his father was a typist, and Bibish is a tech worker, but at the lower level. Bibish's girlfriend berates his lack of ambition, a trait traditionally constructed as feminine. The feminizing marginality is underlined in Oliver's son's derision: "I am Oliver Twist. I had a shop which I closed down because I didn't move with the times. Now I look after vegetables and do nothing" (*Home*). Unnikrishnan belongs to the upper middle class, but though a retired Major from the Army, he admits to his lack of self-confidence facing the public or addressing women and in his social encounters he is not treated with any special

deference. One of the traits of hegemonic masculinity according to the Bem Sex Role inventory is the capacity to act like a leader, which Unnikrishnan does not initially exhibit (Bem, 1974, p.156).

Prestige further accrues to men who are sexually empowered, and sex role socialization normalises the sexual domination, sexual freedom, conquest and control by men. Movies like *Kasaba* (2016), starring the hegemonically masculine hero, Mammooty, reveal aggressive machismo towards the female leads – the police officer hero grabs the belt of his female superior and tells her that he can disrupt her menstrual cycle if he wishes to. On the other hand, these movies revolve around the meekness of the males before women. The plot of *Varanae* is centered around Unnikrishnan's diffidence and shyness before women. Sameer lacks the confidence to approach the girl he is in love with, and his anxiety over his legal trouble makes him temporarily impotent. Oliver Twist is dominated by his wife and he is obediently meek. Eldho shares only one tender moment with his wife, when she offers him moral support when he expresses his helpless victimization. Similarly in heterosexual relationships, men are normatively assertive and confident while shyness and submission are recognised as feminine. In *Varanae*, Neena invites Unnikrishnan to a date, and he is confused and embarrassed. During the date, he is hesitant, nervous and overawed in her presence, while she retains her amused composure. Sameer is awkward in his first meeting with Zeenath, while she is bold and collected. Oliver is docile and submissive with his wife and dares not flout her instructions openly. While dominance is a trait coded as masculine, Unnikrishnan's temper is deemed toxic and a psychological problem requiring treatment.

The dialectics of masculinity is predicated on the gendering of emotions – while women are emotionally expressive, men are stoic and restrained. Chen (1999) details how a "key part of the self-control necessary to present oneself as hegemonically masculine is to conform to rules of stoic emotional display. Love, affection, pain, and grief are improper displays of emotion." (4). In the movies analysed the male protagonists are emotionally fragile – Neena is amused when Unnikrishnan pleads with her not to cry because it makes him incapable of withholding tears. Oliver cries and is unable to sleep when his son

dismisses his achievements. Both Sameer and Eldho exhibit helplessness and vulnerability, and are passive in face of the problems they encounter – all culturally coded as feminine traits. Sameer collapses in fear when he overhears the possibility of legal repercussions for his actions and, in an infantilizing image, his friends lie on either side of him for him to be able to sleep. He is effeminately petulant at his friend not 'liking' his Facebook photographs and bashful when others ask about his marriage. On the other hand, women, traditionally seen as fragile, emotional and dependent, seem stronger – Nikki declares that though she is devastated, she will not cry in public – illustrating how gendered behaviours are subverted and overlap in these films.

When the norms of hegemonic masculinity was constructed in opposition to the female, women were considered to embody the qualities of nurturance and domesticity. In the three movies, men are involved in domestic service and attendance to children that would challenge traditional patriarchal discourses. Eldho participates in child care and household tasks including cooking the evening meal, getting children ready for school, brushing and tying his daughter's hair, and remains the sole bystander at the hospital. He is successful in getting his daughter to consume her medicine while his wife is not. Oliver cleans his father's urine, he dusts and mops the floor and offers to rearrange the fridge for his wife. Both Unnikrishnan and Bibish are picturized cooking, and in the latter's case, he wakes up his 'aunt' with breakfast, and she samples and comments on his culinary skills. Gendered norms are doubly subverted when Oliver is taught to use the smart phone by Molly, the female domestic help of Dr. Franklin, who is both female and of the marginalized class. These expressions challenge the traditional ideas of patriarchal traditional masculinity, and create acceptance of a differential masculinity.

Nevertheless, in spite of adopting a variety of behaviours and practices that are emblematic of marginalized masculinities and normative femininity, gender hegemony continues to be resilient among male protagonists. Eldho reacts firmly to the disability association and forbids them from raising money fraudulently using his cause. In the last scene, he demonstrates the behaviour of hegemonic masculinity

– the ability to protect others – when he literally lends his shoulder to a weak somnolent (marginalised) old man. When Dr. Bose enquires about the safety of Unnikrishnan's house, he reminds the former that the army is the first to be summoned during floods – "After all I am a soldier". He may be afraid to speak to women, but he turns chivalrous saviour when he threatens the local thug to buy 'cookeramma' a new pressure cooker. Oliver epitomises the hegemonic role of the determined and compassionate male protector. He protects, advices, and rescues a grown woman and her child, and she yields to his guidance. Her son, Joseph Lopez, embodying the ideal of manliness whether in physical prowess, financial supremacy or emotional resilience, is indebted to the docile, passive, denigrated Oliver. Masserschmidt (2018) cites how the plurality of masculine configurations in family is seen in the participation of men in household and child care. He details how what the men did were not excessively feminized through the performance of these tasks – rather they orchestrated a new configuration of hegemonic masculinity – by "defining themselves as 'better' at feminine tasks than women" (83). This is illustrated in Eldho's dismissal of his wife when she attempts to give their recalcitrant daughter her medication, and succeed in doing it himself. The ideals of hegemonic masculinity have not been rejected in these films, it has only been expanded and amplified to include other behavioural models.

This selective incorporation of performance styles, opinions, and behavioural elements that are associated with marginalized masculinities or femininities into the repertoire of culturally acceptable male performance has been recently conceptualised under the term 'hybrid masculinity.' However, unlike what Anderson theorized as 'inclusive masculinity', this transformation in behavioural patterns does not challenge the supremacy of the gendered male or dismantle gender inequality, it merely extends the privilege of hegemony to a new set of identities. Messner (1993) examines the changes in American men in emotional expressiveness and involvement in family matters, and describes them as "more style than substance" (724), because systems of power and pre-eminence remain stable. This is illustrated in the closing scenes of the films. Unnikrishnan validates his masculinity by

winning the applause and admiration of the public when he acquires the confidence to speak in public with the moral support of his 'help-meet', though he is still awkward and shy with her in the next scene. Oliver welcomes Annamachi and Joseph Lopez who come to pay their homage to him. Both Oliver and Eldho are recipients of the folded handed gratitude of the mothers whose sons they deliver. Bibish runs into trouble with the law when he capitulates to Nikki's desire not to wear a helmet, and he is warned by the traffic officer that he has a "lifetime penalty" in the form of Nikki with him. When she enquires about the date they no longer have money for, he asserts his masculine authority and tells her they can just have tea, to which she petulantly acquiesces. Thus, they are not feminized, their mode of masculinity has been reconfigured and co-opted into the hegemonically desirable. Demetriou (2001) uses the phrase 'dialectical pragmatism' to describe how hegemonic masculinities maintain their power by appropriating "what appears pragmatically useful and constructive for the project of domination at a particular historical moment" (345). Thus, gender inequality is not dismantled or problematized. The styles of acceptable masculinity is simply remodelled and amplified.

This model of the subordinated male hero Malayalam cinema constructs an alternate code of manhood by co-opting marginalised and feminised traits, and thus, serves to counter the growing glorification of the toxic masculine and its normalisation of aggression and rape culture as revealed in movies like *Kasaba* (2016), *Chocolate* (2007), and *Meesa Madhavan* (2002). However, by reiterating the superiority of the male, even these films continue to 'other' the female identity. The male protagonists who display sensitivity, lack the physique, strength and domination of traditional hegemonic ideals of masculinity continue to be interpellated into the system of gendered superiority by a reiteration of the ultimate control that rests with them. In response to the 'crisis' of the rejection of a toxic masculine model, hybridity embraces the aesthetics of the marginalised male without disrupting the existing paradigms of power.

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