





## PADMARAJAN'S CREATIVE ILLUSTRATION OF MASCULINITIES

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**Abstract.** Padmarajan is an eminent personality of Indian cinema whose passionate and exquisite oeuvre of films grappled with the minds of viewers in India but remains underexplored in international academia. This article focuses on the creative representation of masculinities by Padmarajan with the aid of varied masculinity theories starting from the foundational masculinity ideas of Raewyn Connell to the alternate masculinity concepts rooted in the South Asian socio-cultural milieu. The paper examines how skilfully Padmarajan presents different forms of masculinity primarily subverting the traditional depictions in his select films.

**Keywords:** Malayalam cinema, masculinities, Padmarajan, performance, subversion.

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### 1. Introduction

Indian cinema is mainly woven out of and intended to promote the intricate social strictures that define, mould, restrict, and direct the social, cultural, and political ideologies of the people. According to Raghavendra (2013, p. 1), the Founder-Editor of *Deep Focus: A Film Quarterly*, in *Director's Cut: 50 Major Film-Makers of the Modern Era*, "Indian Cinema is a phrase that lost currency after it became evident that there were different cinemas in India". He tries to establish the importance of regional cinema when he says,

"Bollywood addresses Indians in a popular – national idiom and is still to gain artistic respectability internationally, there are regional language cinemas which are either in the popular local idiom or international platforms" (Raghavendra, 2013, p. 1).

Indian cinema, from its inception, owes much to religious texts, mainly the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, drawing stories from them. There followed a transmogrification of these religious adaptations to present mortal beings as heroes and superstars. Depictions of masculinity in Indian cinema are rooted in "ideal" representations, following stereotypical notions, which always get a warm welcome from the audience.

In Malayalam, Indian New Wave parallel film first appeared in the 1970s, directed by directors who were educated at the Film and Television Institute of India, India. The 1980s and 1990s were Malayalam cinema's golden age, during which time semi-parallel genres emerged, skilfully fusing elements of mainstream and parallel cinema (Radhakrishnan, 2012). The 1990s then saw a rise in popular cinema that made the distinction between commercial and artistic films less clear. Despite being regarded as the century of cinema, the 21st century saw a slow decline in the industry.

A very distinctive collection of films that have persisted to this day were released in Malayalam cinema during this period. People witnessed a new form of cinema that is a combination of both popular and art house films, which came to be known as “middle-stream cinema”. The main distinction between middle cinema and parallel cinema is that the former focuses more on artistic expression and social issues, and it frequently appeals to a niche audience seeking provocative films. In contrast, the latter seeks to strike a balance between commercial elements and more subtle storytelling, making it appealing to a wider audience and providing content that goes beyond typical mainstream entertainment. Among the pioneers in this discipline were Bharathan, Kulakkattil Geevarghese George, and Padmarajan, whose films would serve as the primary basis for this research.

Padmarajan is a director who has caught the imagination of the youth of his day as well as the contemporary world, the germane reason for his widespread popularity and acceptance in the present time. According to Stein (1982, p. 73), “Padmarajan has a fine gift for supple and exuberant narrative and an unpatronizing affection for primitive personae”. He explored the vulnerabilities, conflicts, and emotional depth of male characters, which often went unnoticed in academia. He highlighted the pressures and societal expectations faced by men while also portraying their emotional struggles, desires, and relationships in a more realistic and humanistic manner. Padmarajan’s first two films *High Road Temple* (orig. *Peruvazhiyambalam*, 1979) and *There Lived a Wrestler* (orig. *Oridathoru Phayalvaan*, 1981) demonstrate severe machoness, deftly manifesting their correlation. *Pavithran, the Thief* (orig. *Kallan Pavithran*, directed by Padmarajan, 1981) is yet another provincial narrative detailing the unexpected twists and turns in the life of a thief. Padmarajan’s directorial *oeuvre* includes other films such as *November’s Loss* (orig. *Novemberinte Nashtam*, 1982), *Where Is Your Nest?* (orig. *Koodevide*, 1983), *Soaring Soaring Soaring* (orig. *Parannu Parannu Parannu*, 1984), *Monday, an Auspicious Day* (orig. *Thinkalaazhcha Nalla Divasam*, 1985) to name a few among the eighteen films. He is a creator of realistic movies that are genuine depictions of gender relations, and his movies are deeply insightful, and pliable to meticulous probing and subtle interpretations, yielding layers of meanings related to human psychology and relationships. His creative depiction of masculinities ranges from the typical hegemonic males to the vulnerable subordinate males, even the metrosexual men belonging to that socio-cultural milieu.

The existing literature on Padmarajan mainly focused on themes including the duality of existence (Nandakumar, 2017), love and sensuality (Menon, 2021), enigmatic and enduring relationships in his films (Aiyappan, 2020), a comparative study of Padmarajan’s stories and their film adaptations (Meghana & Sreenivasan, 2016), mythical archetypes of his films (Sreeraj et al., 2021), the wonderful fusion of rain into his movies (Banerjee, 2019). Apart from that, the majority of studies are done on the female characters in Padmarajan’s films (Sreedevi & Ravi, 2020). Also, an analysis was made on *There Lived a Wrestler* (Ratnakaran et al., 2015) regarding the sexual disorder, arising from the misconception that ejaculation leads to the draining of energy and the wrestler must abstain from it by leading a celibate life. Kurup (2020) explicates how *High Road Temple* can be considered a precursor of “angry young men” films in Malayalam cinema. Also, an analysis was made on *Migratory Birds Don’t Cry* (orig. *Deshadanakkili Karayarilla*, directed by Padmarajan, 1986) regarding the representation of homosociality and female masculinity, as well as on the enactment of violence by the male characters in the select films of Padmarajan (Niranjana & Sreenivasulu, 2022, 2023).

In this paper, the focus is on the creative representations of various masculinities in Padmarajan's films, carefully detailing how there is a reverse shift in the hegemonic authority within the hierarchy, antagonistic representation of toxic masculinity, subversion of masculine authority by women and also the portrayal of lenient or forgiving masculinity, which is a rare form of manhood found in the films belonging to that era. One can witness the subversive as well as stereotypical representation of masculinities in the varied movies of Padmarajan.

The terms macho-maleness and hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987) at times are generally used interchangeably though they hold different meanings. While macho-male features hypermasculine behaviours and attitudes including toughness, strength, dominance, and a moving away from feminine qualities, hegemonic masculinity becomes the dominant form of masculinity in a particular culture or society. Nevertheless, both concepts underline the socially constructed nature of gender roles. The term *hegemony*, a rather important contribution to Marxist thinking, was first used by Antonio Gramsci to analyse class relations that prevailed in Italy. Hegemony does not mean utter controlling and subordination but it

"allows for resistance, opposition, gaps, and unevenness in the projects of the dominant, and it also encourages us to look at the process by which the dominated fall into agreement with the dominant – not by violence or force but by persuasion" (C. Osella & F. Osella, 2006, p. 49).

Masculinity is neither static nor fixed, rather it undergoes drastic changes when placed in individual contexts especially spatially and temporally. Connell's perspective on masculinity goes beyond just being a set of behaviours associated with being male. She argues that masculinity is not just about fulfilling a traditional role based on biological sex, but it encompasses a broader range of practices that occur in everyday life. Masculinity, according to Connell, is multifaceted. It involves the position that men hold in relation to gender dynamics, the actions and behaviours they engage in to maintain that position, and the impact of these practices on their physical experiences, personality traits, and cultural influences (Connell, 2005, p. 71). In the Indian scenario, masculinity is not only perceived as an opposite entity, but could be looked at from different intersections including caste, religion, class, and so forth. In every socio-cultural scenario, a particular form of masculinity exists as a hegemonic construction and historically these masculinities dominate and exercise unequal power relations due to their long-standing proximity to power. But again, masculinity is "contingent and iterative" and it is self-fashioned as a result of the discursive practices and structures of everyday life (Gopinath & Sundar, 2020).

The common masculinity perceptions of the populace have been extensively relied upon by their cinematic representations. The cinematic representations of gender roles and ideologies play a detrimental role in the reinforcement of societal norms. One of the recurring arguments that arises when this is pointed out is that movies only mirror what exists in society and it by no means influences masses to mimic what is exhibited in the films. But the problem lies in the fact that though gendered violence and other patriarchal moorings are inherent in society when it reaches the common populace via media, the same is normalised as if there is no wrong in the ill-treatment and misbehaviour meted out to women. But still, there is a dual motive in the representation of violent masculinity in cinema. Men's toxicity can be shown to distinguish what is acceptable and not acceptable behaviour. So, it can be

either subverting the existing patriarchal ideologies or normalising the same. Nonetheless, the positive representation can encourage conversation about alternative forms of masculinity and promote more inclusive and progressive views. In the context of Malayalam cinema, for instance, in the movie *Kumbalangi Nights* (directed by Madhu C. Narayanan, 2019), the crucial antagonist Shammi Sreenivasan is a violent toxic male depicted in such a fashion that the audience loathes him and his toxicity, whereas in films like *The Man-Lion* (orig. *Narasimham*, directed by Shaji Kailas, 2000), toxic hegemonic masculinity is glorified in the guise of male heroic stardom.

Though Kerala, India has a history of matrilineal kinship, the society by and large has always been male-dominated. The wider societal expectations are often spearheaded at the traditional gender roles where men are always assumed as the protectors and women are only fit for domestic roles. In Kerala, like many other communities all over the world, features like assertiveness, strength, etc. are expected of men, and they face societal pressure to conform to these expectations. Prominent religious institutions and the individualized interpretations of religious scriptures also play a vital role in the enforcement and maintenance of gender norms that favor male authority and leadership.

When it comes to Malayalam cinema, the scripts and directions by various filmmakers did not fail to showcase the masculine authority, sidelining the female characters for their vulnerability and needing protection whereas lime-lighting the heroes as the protectors with their idealized physical and mental qualities sprinkled with admirable charisma. The trope of projecting men as the head of the family where *varacha varayil nilkkunna pennungal* (women who do not cross the line drawn by their men) was quite a common spectacle, especially in the early 2000s. For instance, in the movie *Vesham* (2004) directed by V. M. Vinu, the elder sister in the family advises the younger sister that “our heaven lies in the feet of our husbands”. The projection of masculinity in Malayalam cinema often aims to establish male dominance in public spheres, pushing domestic and respectable women to the periphery (Pillai, 2013, p. 110). There are umpteen examples from the 2000 era itself where the dominant masculinity played its fair share in Malayalam cinema. Also, romanticizing the I-get-the-girl-I-want attitude of men which falls to borderline stalking was/is quite common in the different film industries in India. It is at this juncture, that Padmarajan and his movies like *Yesterday* (orig. *Innale*, 1990), stand out even before the advent of the above-mentioned movies.

The societal scrutiny of gender performances has been a constant whether it is femininity or masculinity. The existence of multitudes of masculinity and the inherent hierarchies needs to be acknowledged. It results in highlighting the flexibility of gender constructs and how certain types of masculinities are labeled as the accepted or ideal form and certain other types as the alternate or marginalized masculinities. The creative works of Padmarajan show various faces of masculinity and their interconnectedness thus warranting a careful examination.

## 2. Conforming and challenging masculine norms

In *High Road Temple*, Padmarajan brings to the forefront a typical hegemonic male Prabhakaran Pillai, the local goon who terrorises people and abuses women. Here, the representation of hegemonic masculinity turns a wild turn when Padmarajan projects the “true face” of

the villagers (mostly men who appear in the rural public) or rather the so-called powerless complicit masculinity in paving the way for hegemonic masculinity. Prabhakaran Pillai's manifestation of toxic masculinity establishes his authority where his power is synonymous with brutality and exertion of control. The villagers feel a sense of emotional exhilaration when Prabhakaran Pillai sets out to threaten and bash people. The spectacle of a village gathering sprinting to get a glimpse of the local fights that happen between men or goons is very common in the realm of Malayalam cinema as well as in the communal zones in the countryside. Consequently, the villagers can be seen as the puppeteers who force Prabhakaran Pillai to indulge in heinous crimes. It becomes more like an obligation for him to perpetuate terror that he feels his masculinity relies on it and he is being constantly judged by the people. In certain cultures, even if hegemonic masculinity is not prevalent or practiced by a large number of men, there may still be a significant portion of men who contribute to upholding the dominant model of masculinity. This means that while only a smaller group of men actively embody hegemonic masculinity, a larger number of men indirectly support or participate in maintaining this dominant form of masculinity. This complicity can manifest in various ways, such as through reinforcing traditional gender norms, conforming to societal expectations of masculinity, or not challenging the existing power structures that privilege hegemonic masculinity. By not actively resisting or questioning the dominant model of masculinity, even men who do not fully embody it can still play a role in perpetuating its influence within a culture or society (Reeser, 2023). The so-called complicit masculinity is intriguing in that individuals benefit from the "patriarchal dividend" (Connell, 2005, p. 79) simply by conforming to the entrenched patriarchy associated with hegemonic masculinity. By effortlessly reaping the rewards of patriarchy, they show no inclination to challenge hegemonic masculinity or patriarchal norms. Here, yet again, Padmarajan does not eulogize hegemonic masculinity. He through his careful narration, holds light on how these complicit masculinities inadvertently urge hegemonic men to indulge in activities they cannot, due to other reasons including being powerless and disempowered in society.

Further, the narrative takes a transformative turn when a young boy, Raman/Mani accidentally kills Prabhakaran Pillai following a chase and ruckus. This act challenges the established power structures and traditional notions of masculinity within the village. But the villagers' reaction to this event is pivotal when their appropriation of reverence passes on to Raman/Mani on killing Prabhakaran Pillai. This commences a rite of passage for Raman/Mani, transforming him from a slender adolescent boy into a burgeoning hegemonic male who garners the attention and respect of his fellow villagers. In essence, Padmarajan critically shows the multifaceted nature of masculinity. Through an interplay of characters and their responses to Prabhakaran Pilla, the film challenges societal norms and questions how hegemonic males are shaped by society and the complicity of the community in perpetuating toxic masculinity.

*Where Is Your Nest?* also has a traditional male with masculine glam and vigour. But what distinguishes him from the other contemporary male characters is that there is no submission on the part of his female counterpart. Alice does not only cater to the unreasonable whims and fancies of Captain Thomas but also goes to the extent of cancelling their wedding instead of going along with his obstinance. Alice is a schoolteacher in Ooty, Tamil Nadu, India who

encounters an unruly student, the son of a Member of Parliament of India whose academic performance has been neglected. Alice through her incessant efforts uplifts his academic status and incredibly transforms him into one of the brightest students in the school, cementing the teacher–student relationship into more like a mother–son relationship. Nonetheless, Captain Thomas, Alice’s fiancé experiences profound jealousy due to the considerable attention Alice bestows on Ravi Puthooran. His jealousy reaches its extreme when he chases Ravi Puthooran in his car and the latter dies accidentally in the following ruckus. Though Padmarajan creates a toxic masculine hero, he is inadvertently subverted by the female character herself, putting a bridle on the unreasonable whims of Captain Thomas. But what is the purpose of Captain Thomas’ toxicity here? He is nothing more than a manifestation of *Kottayam achayan* trope (an example of a wealthy Catholic Christian patriarch from Central Kerala, characterised by egotistical pride in his family lineage, social status, and power) who expects his wife to be an obedient, subservient woman. As per the ideas mentioned above, there are dual forms of hegemonic representation. Though Captain Thomas could be deduced as a typical hegemonic male, his representation on screen does not encourage the masses to be like him. Instead, Padmarajan projects Captain Thomas in such a way that the audience moves away from the reality of Captain Thomas. Captain Thomas’ toxic behaviour and extreme possessiveness are looked down upon and spark the revelation that this is not acceptable behaviour. That is where Padmarajan marks his entrance into the future realm where only after decades, have filmmakers started following this duality of hegemonic portrayals.

When it comes to *Vineyards for Us to Dwell in* (orig. *Namukku Parkkan Munthirithoppukal*, 1986), Padmarajan again plays with the duality of hegemonic masculinities. In this film, Sofia is seen restricted in the household by Paul Pailokkaran, Sofia’s step-father. He feels threatened when she plans on leaving the house after enduring all the hardships meted out to her by Paul Pailokkaran. Paul Pailokkaran’s belief that Sofia’s illegitimate background prevents her from getting accepted elsewhere is overturned when Solomon comes to the scenario and loves her unconditionally. Here, Padmarajan creatively presents two forms of men: one, the ruthless man – Paul Pailokkaran, and the other, the one who subverts Paul Pailokkaran’s hegemony. Solomon is no less of a hegemonic male. But what makes him different is his treatment of the female characters. When Paul Pailokkaran bashes the women and even rapes his step-daughter, Solomon accepts his girlfriend who was raped by Paul Pailokkaran. It was rather a huge milestone then when the protagonist embraced and accepted a woman who had been the victim of rape. But Padmarajan went out on a limb and sporadically showcased it in the movie attracting criticisms and praises alike. Solomon is also a typical male with the intended masculine energy and fervour but it is this minute change that tiles the way into normalising the fact that rape is not the end of a woman’s life.

The concept of domination in masculinity involves the idea that men while exerting dominance over others, can also be constrained and negatively impacted by the very system of masculinity they uphold. This internalised domination can lead to men experiencing suffering and pressure to conform to societal expectations of masculinity. In response to traditional notions of masculinity, there has emerged a discourse that promotes an alternative form of masculinity often referred to as the “new age sensitive man” (Reeser, 2023). This portrayal of masculinity emphasises qualities such as kindness, emotional sensitivity, and an

acknowledgment of one's feminine side. By challenging traditional masculine norms, this discourse seeks to redefine masculinity in a more inclusive and emotionally expressive way. However, the coexistence of these contrasting discourses creates a complex landscape of masculinities. Men may feel torn between conforming to traditional ideals of masculinity and embracing more progressive and sensitive forms of masculinity. This tension between different discourses results in the construction of contradictory and sometimes conflicting representations of masculinity, highlighting the diverse and evolving nature of gender identities.

Nevertheless, caring, nurturing, and forgiving masculinities can be witnessed in Padmarajan's *Yesterday*. *Yesterday* has two prominent male characters: Sarath Menon and Dr. Narendran. When Maya/Gauri is rescued from a bus accident by Sarath Menon, she suffers a memory loss and completely forgets her past. Gradually they fall in love and start planning their wedding and that is when Maya/Gauri's husband Dr. Narendran comes into the scenario in search of his lost wife. Devoid of memory she does not even recognise her husband and Dr. Narendran leaves the place without revealing to Maya/Gauri and Sarath Menon that he is her husband. The movie remains a throb in the audience's hearts and urges them to empathise with the husband who let go of his wife without shattering the newly bloomed hopes of Maya/Gauri and Sarath Menon. Now, when we look into the myriad ways men are portrayed in Malayalam cinema, especially in the 1980s, this is one completely overturned depiction of masculinity. This impression subverts the common concept of men fighting for a woman and brings to the forefront an entirely new man lacking conventional masculinity convictions. The common trope of men fighting for a woman is overruled when Dr. Narendran though with a heavy heart lets go of his wife to restrain himself from shattering her heart. An observed pattern within Padmarajan's works reveals a gradual dissolution of stereotypes, paving the way for fresh interpretations of gender, human connections, and nuanced explorations of sexuality and related themes.

### 3. Conclusions

Padmarajan's depiction of masculinity was multidimensional showcasing men who were introspective, flawed, and capable of experiencing a wide range of emotions. His narratives did not fail to depart from the conventional ideas revolving around masculinity and explored the impact of societal norms on individual identity. Predominantly, Padmarajan's portraiture of masculinity is marked by a culmination of sensitivity, depth, and a deflection from the accustomed representations thereby contributing significantly to an in-depth exploration of male characters in Indian cinema.

Moviemaking has always essentially been a revenue-generating venture apart from being an entertainment, and it largely depends on the audience's reception. Since the producers of films, particularly mainstream films, are aware of the general public's attitude toward the medium, they would rather foster the people's inclination for the familiar than deviate from the norm by producing unique and unexpected works of art, leading to the creation of stereotypes. Stereotyping, especially of gender roles, is a risk since it persuades viewers to accept the current situation without considering whether they would prefer a different one. Padmarajan yet again commands attention when he brings to the fore multifarious forms of masculinity subverting the extensively existing stereotypes in Malayalam cinema during his



time. It might be one of the compelling reasons for the failure of his films at the box office. However, decades later, recognition of his significance and the intricate narrative elements surged, leading to an increased scholarly focus on Padmarajan.

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