

Chapter III

Undoing the Masculine Hero: “New Generation” Films and Fahadh Faasil’s Stardom in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema

While mapping the changes in masculinities in the vernacular public sphere of Kerala, Malayalam cinema, as one of the most popular and influential sites of representation of masculinity, demands closer attention. By focussing on the actor Fahadh Faasil, this chapter traces the changes in representation and notions of masculinity, heroism, and stardom in contemporary Malayalam cinema, especially within what is termed as “New Generation” Malayalam films. By employing the theoretical framework of Star Studies and Masculinity Studies to historically place and analyse Faasil, the chapter argues that Faasil and his films are paradigmatic of the changing nature of masculine representations in Malayalam cinema. Rising to fame in the 2010s as a significant figure of the “New Generation” cinema in Malayalam, Faasil has been part of several movies that complicate the centrality of the male star in the film narrative while disrupting the hegemonic models of heroic masculinity. The chapter aims to understand Faasil’s stardom as a marker of a notable shift from the existing models of masculinity, heroism, and stardom in Malayalam cinema while acknowledging and figuring out the contexts which made such a change possible. The chapter is organised into three sections: the first section, “Stardom, Masculinity and Malayali Men: Mohanlal vs Mammooty in the 1990s”, studies the stardom and masculinity of the two superstars of Malayalam cinema, Mohanlal and Mammooty in the 1990s, in order to understand the shifts brought in by

actors like Faasil in contemporary Malayalam cinema. The second section, “Understanding New Generation Malayalam Cinema: Contextualising the Changes in Representations of Masculinity”, places Faasil within the larger context of defining features of “New Generation” cinema in Malayalam and changes in the film industry with regard to gender especially following the attack on a notable actress in 2017 and the subsequent formation of WCC (Women in Cinema Collective), the first of its kind of organisation for women working in all spheres of the Malayalam film industry. The third section, “Undoing the Masculine Hero: Fahadh Faasil’s Stardom in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema,” does a detailed thematic analysis of Faasil’s select films and his star persona to see how his film career and characters contribute to the undoing of masculinity, heroism, and stardom, which made him an emblematic figure embodying the changing nature of representations of masculinities in Malayalam cinema.

I

Stardom, Masculinity and Malayali Men: Mohanlal vs Mammooty in the 1990s

To understand how Faasil disrupts the existing models of masculinity, heroism, and stardom in Malayalam cinema, he has to be studied vis-à-vis the two major superstars of the industry—Mohanlal and Mammooty—especially in relation to the set of upper caste or feudal characters played by them that contributed to their prominence during the 1990s. The heroic masculinity popularised by these stars during this period is quintessential in understanding the stardom and masculinity in contemporary Malayalam

cinema. In this section, I engage with the complex linkages of stardom and masculinity of these two prominent stars, which made them hugely popular in the Malayali public sphere in the 1990s.

Films, to a great extent, provide an ideal platform for the study of masculinity in Kerala and reflect the dynamics of contemporary gender politics. In this context, it is imperative to pay closer attention to the two major “superstars” in Malayalam—Mohanlal and Mammooty. Osellas’ (2004) work, which was one of the earliest major attempts to study their stardom, notes that Malayali fans (*payyans*, meaning young men, as Osellas called them) are caught in a “mimetic economy” where both Mohanlal and Mammooty play an important role:

They (fans) take and exchange characteristics, parts of self and other, with their on-screen heroes and with each other, reproducing and newly fashioning over each generation and with each shift in masculine style what it means to be a Malayali man, negotiating the demands of modernity and finding a way to move through the various arenas - family, work, leisure - around him (p. 258).

Both Mohanlal and Mammooty occupy a predominant position within the films and in the public milieu of Kerala through their constant association with the dominant models of masculinity. It was through their constant embodiment of the “ideal Malayali man” that both Mohanlal and Mammooty built their stardom. Their characters act as what Richard Dyer terms “compensation” where these stars “compensate people for qualities they are lacking in their (fans/audience) lives” (Dyer, 2002, p. 28-30). With such a role,

these male stars epitomise hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987). Such constant engagements with hegemonic masculinity contribute to the star personae of Mohanlal and Mammooty in multitudinous ways. However, it has to be noted that this type of masculinity is constructed in relation to women and subordinated masculinities. In Malayalam films, this is especially relevant as both women and subaltern masculinities are frequently marginalised (S. K. Parayil, 2014; Pillai, 2017). Also, certain communities are typecasted or stereotyped through the films:

Popular Malayalam cinema uses different visual and narrative techniques to reestablish the preconceived cultural notions of typified subaltern castes through indirect (without mentioning the caste identity of the characters) but certain legitimised signs and norms—such as name, habits, occupation, body, behaviour and occupied space (Parayil, 2014, p. 68).

It is through the demasculinisation of subaltern men and by typecasting certain communities that Mohanlal and Mammooty built up their stardom in the 1990s. Also, the location of the film narrative in specific cultural contexts (mostly feudal upper caste spaces) grants these stars absolute power over other male characters and women. In the context of Kerala, known for its secular and human development achievements (Drèze & Sen, 1995), the upper caste masculine hero becoming the champion reinforcing the Brahminical Hindutva model and thereby furthering the re-masculinisation and the re-feudalisation of the film parlance in the 1990s is a less explored area in gender and film studies.

Mohanlal vs Mammooty and the Politics of Masculinity in the 1990s

Malayalam cinema, called Mollywood in film parlance, has been dominated by male heroes throughout its history. Before Mammooty and Mohanlal, actors like Thikkurissy Sukumaran Nair (popularly called the “first superstar of Mollywood”), Sathyan, Prem Nazir, Madhu, Jayan, and Sukumaran were the most influential in the industry during different periods of its history. The dominance of Mammooty and Mohanlal has been continuing for more than three decades and they still occupy an indisputable position in the film industry. Film critics argue that the supremacy of these two stars is more than any other star in the history of Malayalam cinema (Chandrasekhar & Balakrishnan, 2012). However, their rise to prominence was also significantly influenced by the growth of digital technologies following liberalisation as well as the increased popularity of television (Venkiteswaran, 2011). This has to be also understood in tandem with the larger socio-economic transformations Kerala has been undergoing.

The coming in of globalisation and the large inflow of global capital necessitated a change in consumption practices in the people of Kerala. Kerala, which has a continuous link with Gulf nations and the Middle East, rapidly appropriated these changes in the 1990s. The state moved its focus from the primary sector to secondary and tertiary sectors during this period²⁹. The economy's shift to the service sector also led to

²⁹ The Economic Review prepared by the State Planning Board details the changes Kerala has been undergoing over the decades. The report shows a rapid decline of Primary sector accompanied by a growth in the tertiary sector. The report states that the share of Primary sector in Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) in 1960-61 was 52.16 percent while in 2019-20 it is just 8.44 percent. On the other hand, share of tertiary sector which was just 33.12 percent during 1960-61 is almost doubled to 63.31 percent during 2019-20. This clearly shows how the Kerala is

massive pressure on the land in Kerala, most of which was used for agriculture and allied activities. The boom of real estate during this time represents this trend. The film industry became an unprofitable business during this era, leading to non-profitable theatres being converted into shopping malls or flats. Reports suggest that over 2000 theatres during the 1990s were reduced to less than 1000 by the millennium (Sreesanth & Balasaravanan, 2020). The arrival of multinational electronic companies with liberalisation also led to a rapid spread of televisions, which further deepened the crisis of the already weak theatre industry. Subsequently, the filmmakers had to consider the television audience before making a film.

Television rights of a film rely heavily on stardom, which forced many directors to cast established stars in their films. Thus, the period post 1990 saw the film makers' hold weakening and the stars gaining more power in Malayalam cinema. This change in film dynamics, focusing largely on the stars, also led to the reinforcement of feudal/upper caste masculinity in the Malayalam filmic space. The audience now saw male characters gaining supremacy primarily through their upper caste selves, and there was a reconfiguration of the nostalgia of the "aristocratic egalitarian feudal" past through the male stars³⁰. Thus, the years post 1990 saw a bolstering of stardom as well as upper caste sensitivities, especially through a newfound device like television. The roles of film and

undergoing a shift from an agriculture-based economy to a service-based economy. See the report in https://spb.kerala.gov.in/sites/default/files/2021-01/English-Vol-1_0.pdf

³⁰ It is also interesting to look at the titles of films during this time which celebrate the feudal past: *Araram Thampuran* (1997), *Ravanaprabhu* (2001), *Natturajavu* (2004), and others.

television in the reinforcement of such ideologies are noted by Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge (1995). They observe,

Film is perhaps the single strongest agency for the creation of a nationalist mythology of heroism, consumerism, leisure, and sociality... The culture of cinema in contemporary India affects almost every arena of public life. Yet the power of cinema in India today can only be understood in relation to the arrival of television (Appadurai & Breckenridge, 1995, p. 8-9).

This decadal shift in stardom led to notable changes in the film industry, with the upper caste male body becoming hegemonic and women and certain masculinities becoming marginalised. After all, it was through systematic masculinisation and the reinstating of feudalism in the Malayalam cinema that both Mammooty and Mohanlal established hegemony in the 1990s (Pillai, 2020a). This interconnection between masculinity and stardom is common to many of the South Indian stars and was even employed to achieve their political goals as well (Prasad, 1999).

The interesting trait of dual hero domination throughout the history of Malayalam film is crucial while examining the stardom of Mammooty and Mohanlal. Mammooty-Mohanlal, in that way, is a continuation of the Sathyan-Prem Nazir duo. Distinctive and sometimes contrasting traits are ascribed to them, where one is an epitome of masculinity and the other is a romantic hero with a touch of tender, “feminine” qualities (Venkiteswaran, 2004). In the case of Mammooty and Mohanlal, Mammooty epitomises the former while Mohanlal exhibits the latter’s qualities just like in Sathyan and Nazir

where Sathyan is known for playing serious roles while Nazir is celebrated as the *nithyatharitha nayakan* (evergreen hero). Osellas (2004) also note this difference in the characters played by Mammooty and Mohanlal. Mammooty, on the one hand, plays “tough character”, “family man, a person who can make decisions on his own” (C. Osella & Osella, 2004, p. 230). He is noted for his roles as “repentant son, tragically widowed father, capable brother” and also as “‘elder brother’, ‘policeman’ and ‘Christian’” (C. Osella & Osella, 2004, p. 230). Osellas call him a “man of action or phallic hero” (C. Osella & Osella, 2004, p. 231). On the other hand, Mohanlal started his career playing negative characters and later on took up character and hero roles. He is often perceived as “a regular guy next door,” “song and dance man” and mainly enacts “pre-marriage romantic fantasies” (C. Osella & Osella, 2004, p. 232-235). These oppositional traits ascribed to them do not hierarchise their stardom, and both are different manifestations of hegemonic masculinity. Venkiteswaran (2004) notes that the duality of stardom as well as the oppositional constructions of hegemonic masculinity in both the stars reflect the ambivalence of the conception of an ideal Malayali male. I extend this to propose that the ideal male hero in Malayalam cinema after the 1990s is a complex amalgam of feudal as well as hypermasculine representations. The films of this time, especially those of Mohanlal and Mammooty, offer a site for the critique of Kerala modernity itself, with the reinstatement of feudal memory and caste patriarchy in the Kerala public sphere. In such films that render nostalgic overtones of a feudal past, Mammooty and Mohanlal perform two types of functions, and their regional and cultural origins have specific influences on their characters and reception.

Mohanlal was born in an upper caste Nair family in the former Travancore region of Kerala, while Mammooty is a Muslim from central Kerala. Mohanlal became hugely popular in the 1990s through his characters with feudal backgrounds like *Devasuram* (1993), *Aaram Thampuran* (1997), *Ravanaprabhu* (2001) and others. Though Mammooty also played as a feudal hero in many films, it was Mohanlal's stardom and masculinity in such films that were celebrated with much more fervour across Kerala (Y. Thomas, 2011a). Mohanlal became a mark of celebration of Malayali masculinity and he, wearing a *mundu* (a traditional wear) and sporting a twirled moustache, emerged as a dominant image among Malayali men in the 1990s. It is interesting to note that most of these feudal characters of Mohanlal cross over into domains of toxicity and indulge in caste violence. In the film *Devasuram* (1993), he plays the role of Mangalasseri Neelakandan, a feudal lord who ill-treats everyone who challenges him, including women, to protect his waning supremacy. However, the film narrative glosses over the hero's flaws and raises Neelakantan/Mohanlal to the supreme level of stardom and idealness. This "divinisation" of stardom (Morin, 1957) is of substantial interest across film cultures, especially in South India (Srinivas, 1997). The violence inflicted by the central character on other men and women in the film is conveniently overlooked, and moreover, such instances contribute to the celebration of what I call the "feudal stardom" of Mohanlal in the 1990s.

In the films where Mammooty plays the role of a feudal hero, as compared to those of Mohanlal, the focus is more on the righteousness of the character and it manifests in the form of an ideal elder brother or as an ideal husband or sometimes as an intelligent or honest officer. The feudal locations in such films only act as a space for the

character's (hegemonic) masculine enforcement. The films like *Dhruvam* (1993), *Hitler* (1996) and *Valliettan* (2000) fit into that category. In *Dhruvam* (1993), the central character Narasimha Mannadiar (a Kshatriya and a local feudal lord) kills Hyder Marakkar (a Muslim, played by Tiger Prabhakar) when the justice system fails to punish Hyder for the atrocities he committed, including killing Mannadiar's brother. Through such a characterisation, Mammotty (a Muslim himself) is employed for othering Muslims in the cinema and it is one of the major features of his stardom (Ramachandran, 2007). Even in the films where he plays Muslim roles, he is presented as a "good" Muslim, reiterating the preoccupation with good vs bad Muslim representations, which became popular in Indian cinema after the 1990s (Kabir, 2010). In such representations, Hindus become "truly secular" while the "communal Muslim" is defined through the process of exclusion" (Niranjana, 1994, p. 80). I argue that Mammooty's characterisation as an upper caste hero is limited as the character is permitted to act only in a particular manner that aligns with "good Muslimness" and any breach of that boundary is not taken well. However, Mohanlal's characters do not have any such restraint. They break all the limits to the extent of committing molestation of women (*Devasuram* [1993]) or hooliganism (*Narasimham* [2000], *Ravanaprabhu* [2001]) or even to the extent of becoming an underworld don who evacuates Dharavi (the notorious slum in Bombay) in a single night (*Aaram Thamburan* [1997]). Such difference in the exercising of stardom is because of the specific and dissimilar nature of star personae of both the stars, that are influenced by the type of characters they performed earlier and both the actors' cultural and regional origins. Similar to the manner in which Mammooty's characterisation is limited while playing feudal characters, Mohanlal's characterisation limits itself while playing non-

Hindu characters because of the overshadowing of his upper caste Nair Hindu identity. Rowena (2007) notes that he remains a half Hindu even while playing Muslim or Christian roles³¹. On the other hand, Mammooty's characters are not bound by any caste or religious dynamics and he can play any character. It is because of this that Mammooty becomes Salim (*Ee Nadu* [1982]), Vasu (*Abkari* [1988]), Roy (*Oru Sindooru Pottinte Ormaykku* [1987]), Major Ravindran Nair (*Nair Sab* [1989]), Sethurama Iyer in his CBI films, Gulan (*Thuruppu Gulan* [2006]) or Ambedkar (*Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* [2000]). He is a multilayered, complex cultural symbol. Besides being a practising Muslim with a Muslim name, Mammooty has played characters that embody hypermasculinity, upper caste beliefs as well as those from diverse cultural backgrounds (Rowena, 2007).

Mohanlal as the Celebrated Malayali Feudal Star

Representations of stars within the narrative, especially by casting the male lead in the feudal upper caste backgrounds, played an important role in establishing the stardom and masculinity in the 1990s. The films of Mohanlal and Mammooty during this era were noted for the considerable focus which were given to the star body. Such a projection of the star body was also influenced by the advancement in the new technologies after the liberalisation of the Indian economy. In the Malayalam film industry, both Mammooty and Mohanlal utilised these opportunities provided by liberalisation and globalisation,

³¹ Rowena (2007) notes this feature of his stardom by taking examples from the films like *His Highness Abdullah* (1990), *Thacholi Varghese Chekavar* (1995), *Manichithrathazhu* (1993) and others.

and they emerged as “superstars”, “megastars”, and so on. Thus, the rise to prominence of these stars during this time was inseparably linked to the large capital inflow into the economy and the advancement in film technologies.

The star bodies play a crucial role in building up their aura (Nayar, 2009) and this has been an important feature of Malayalam films, especially in the films of the superstars Mohanlal and Mammooty. The star body has emerged as a site where different symbolic and ideological constructs intersect, raising it to the supreme level of devotion and desire. Such representations are at their peak in the introductory scenes of these stars, where feudal stardom is celebrated with all its fervour. In such films, Mohanlal received more attention than any other star in Malayalam. During this period, the theatrical release of his films was accompanied by the installation of his big cutouts across Kerala and celebrations inside the cinema hall when the hero first appeared on the screen. It has to be noted that in the opening days of such films, the audience comprised mostly of males, led by fan clubs; the theatres across Kerala turned into homosocial male spaces celebrating the male star on screen. Thus, the feudal stardom signifies a crucial intersection between the desires of Malayali men off-screen and the hegemonic masculinity of stars on screen. This correlation of Mohanlal’s stardom with the desires of the Malayali male audience marks the Malayalam cinema’s attempt to recreate the “egalitarian” feudal past where the figure of the feudal lord reincarnates through stars like Mohanlal.

A film that marked the pinnacle of Mohanlal’s feudal stardom is *Narasimham* (2000), directed by Shaji Kailas. The film was a blockbuster and created history in

Malayalam cinema with the largest ever collection at the box office. In Hindu mythology, Narasimha signifies the ferocious avatar of God Vishnu. God Narasimha is part-lion and part-human (*nara* meaning man and *simha* meaning lion) who took his form to destroy evil and restore *dharma* or righteousness. In the film, Mohanlal's character is frequently likened to God Narasimha. This attribution of divinity to the protagonist/Mohanlal is well evident in the hero's introduction scene, which is augmented by camera, music, and editing work. Mohanlal's character Induchoodan (another name for God Shiva³²) is introduced in the film amidst the ritual of immersion of the ashes of his rival Manappalli Madhavan Nambiar (played by Kozhikode Narayanan Nair) in the holy river Nila by his son Manappalli Pavithran (played by N. F. Varghese). Induchoodan is first seen emerging from the holy river Nila, breaking the water surface, with the song *Dhyanam dheyam Narasimham* (song celebrating God Narasimha) in the background. Following it, he is seen walking towards Pavithran across the river bank, shown with intermittent close-ups and long shots marking the hero vividly in the induced holy ambience. Induchoodan is shown wearing a black attire, traditionally associated with the devotees of the Lord Ayyappa (a celibate deity believed to be the son of two male gods, Shiva and Vishnu) and a neck chain with the *Om* sign³³. Shots capturing the walking hero/Mohanlal are juxtaposed with those of a prancing lion to indicate the hero's majesty. Here, the animal image is integrated with the star/Mohanlal's body. Furthermore, a ferocious, masculine,

³² It is interesting to note that Mohanlal's characters during the era have the various names of the Hindu God Siva (Neelakantan [*Devasuram*,1993], Jagannadhan [*Aaram Thampuran*,1997], Viswanathan [*Kanmadam*,1998], Parameswaran [*Ustaad*,1999] and others).

³³ *Om* is a major symbol of Hinduism considered to be the very sacred among the believers.

divine aura is constructed around Mohanlal by associating him with the revengeful incarnation of God Vishnu (*Narasimha*) along with allusions to two other hypermasculine deities in Hindu mythology – Shiva (through his name Induchoodan) and Ayyappa (through his attire). Towards the end of this scene, the hero announces, “Induchoodan is not merely an individual”, pointing to a large crowd behind him. This indicates that he is fighting for the people. Here the upper caste feudal hero played by Mohanlal becomes symbolic of the all-powerful hero with a divine purpose who fights against the state that unfairly incarcerated him and also oppressed other members of the society. This disharmony between tradition and modernity is well evident in the film. The hero who enjoyed the benefits of modern education (Induchoodan was a first rank holder in the prestigious Civil Services Examination) and legal system (by getting the term of his imprisonment reduced) fights against the same system with his feudal privileges and bringing in an animal (lion) to compare him with further complicates the star persona of Mohanlal.

The introductory scene is followed by a song sequence where these semi-divine and feudalistic attributes of the hero are taken to new heights. The hero is seen in a posture of penance on the river bank and brooding amidst lanterns in the inner courtyard of his *tharavadu* (ancestral home). The turbulent mental state of the hero as well as his desire to take revenge are depicted by juxtaposing him with a roaring lion symbolising the God *Narasimha*. The song sequence also frequently shows the hero’s ancestral house (*tharavadu*). It has to be noted that the different locations depicted in these scenes (like

tharavadu, *nalukettu*³⁴ and others) are symbols of the feudal castes and the rituals associated with them. By using such indicators of upper caste background throughout the film, the attempt is to homogenise the Hindu community, placing the feudal hero Induchoodan/Mohanlal at its centre. By placing Mohanlal's body as the centre of attention through the character Induchoodan, the upper caste male body becomes a site of desire and worship within the film and outside. In such a process of narrativisation, women and other men around the hero like Bharathan (played by Kalabhavan Mani), Jayakrishnan (played by Vijayakumar) Anuradha (played by Aishwarya) and Indulekha (played by Kanaka) do not serve any major purpose other than accentuating the stardom of the protagonist through their subservience to him.

³⁴ *Nalukettu* is a traditional quadrangular style building found in Kerala usually associated with feudal castes including Nairs and Brahmins.



Figure 1: All four images are from the heroic introductory song of Mohanlal's character in *Narasimham* (2000). The first image shows him emerging from the holy River Nila and is the scene where Mohanlal first appears in the film. The second one represents him in a yogic position in the middle of the Hindu religious symbol Om. The third image shows him walking amidst fire, and the fourth image which is shot from below, marks him in a powerful position typical of the many feudal characters in Malayalam cinema (Courtesy of Aashirvad Cinemas)

Mohanlal rose to fame by playing a set of villainous characters which was later followed by character and hero roles depicting the crises of Malayali youth during the time. By employing the image of the lion and God Narasimha, the film *Narasimham* (2000) led to a major transformation of the star persona of Mohanlal. Osellas point out the Shiva/Krishna archetype associated with interpreting Mohanlal's and Mammooty's star

personae (C. Osella & Osella, 2004). According to this, Mohanlal is compared to Krishna, a romantic hero with his playfulness and a touch of villainy while Mammooty is Shiva, the man of perfection or the phallic hero. With the film *Narasimham*, the Krishna archetype associated with Mohanlal is fused with the myth of Narasimha or the ferocious man-lion figure. His stardom is shown to possess irresistible and divine power that no one can defeat. The historical blending of both these features gives sanction for Mohanlal's characters to breach into the domain of traits that are villainous and playful but at the same time this gets a greater reception among the audience. Mohanlal can romanticise and can even touch upon sexual fantasies, which is not possible for Mammooty's characters. Mohanlal can breach the moral conventions of society in becoming a superhero. The feudal stardom, in that way, adds celebrated villainy to his star persona.³⁵

A star's fame is also "understood within a specifically visual and bodily language that carries over from previous films and performances" (P. Gopinath, 2018, p. 7). Mohanlal's unprecedented success after the 1990s is thus partially attributed to the historical construction of his stardom, which is in constant interaction with the upper caste masculine aspirations and crises. He has played angry young men and villainous characters in his early career (*Manjil Virinja Pookkal* [1980], *Irupatham Noottandu*

³⁵ Mohanlal rose to fame through a set of negative characters. The historical construction of his stardom, which is a blend of villainy sanctions a famous star like Mohanlal to the extent of playing a character like Raghuraman in *Guru* (1997) where an upper caste brahmin becomes a suicide bomber (Chandrasekhar & Balakrishnan, 2012). Likewise, in *Summer in Bethlehem* (1998), Mohanlal plays the role of Niranjana, who is sentenced to death for killing a family (including kids) to fulfil his extreme political ambitions.

[1987] and others) followed by crisis-ridden Nair youth characters in the 1980s (*T P Balagopalan MA* [1986], *Nadodikkattu* [1987] and others). In the 1990s, he depicted crises within families through films like *Chenkol* (1993), *Sphadikam* (1995), etc. It was around this time that he moved on to hyper-masculine characters with feudal backgrounds. The millennial rise of Mohanlal to the epoch of feudal stardom is in that way a magnification of his villainy which is deeply embedded in his star persona. It is further supported by his own privileged origins and the upper caste identity of most of his characters. His feudal stardom and star persona unique to Malayali ethos also made him hugely popular in the socio-cultural sphere of the state. Even though Mammooty moved into the Left camp by becoming the Director of Kairali, a channel run by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)], Mohanlal has never yet openly sided with any political party. However, this peculiar feature of his stardom derived in the 1990s ensures his predominant position within the film industry and in the neoliberal Hindutva social milieu of Kerala.³⁶

The next part of the chapter discusses the developments in the late 2000s and the 2010s that significantly challenged the superstar domination in the Malayalam industry. It details how the supremacy of the male stars was challenged offscreen and onscreen during this period, which led to significant transitions in masculinity and stardom in Malayalam cinema.

³⁶ This would be one of the reasons why there was a widespread rumour in Kerala that Mohanlal would join BJP, the ruling Hindu nationalistic party. See <https://www.ndtv.com/kerala-news/lok-sabha-elections-2019-actor-mohanlal-on-our-radar-says-kerala-bjp-leader-1986356>
<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/amid-bjps-public-offer-actor-mohanlal-says-no-to-politics-5568033/>

II

Understanding New Generation Malayalam Cinema: Contextualising the Changes in Representations of Masculinity

This section of the chapter discusses the developments in the Malayalam film industry in the 2010s that aided actors like Fahadh Faasil in employing new modes of masculinity in contemporary Malayalam cinema. It analyses the circumstances which led to the initiation of what is popularly called the “New Generation” films, wherein the representation of heteropatriarchal masculinity and stardom underwent a significant shift. This section of the chapter also examines the resentments within the film industry against male and star domination during the period and the events that led to the formation of the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) in 2017.

The beginning of the millennium has seen Malayalam cinema facing new challenges, with several movies failing at the box office, including those of the superstars. Besides is the set of other problems, including the issues within the industry. Jose K. Manuel (2012) points out several reasons for this crisis in Malayalam cinema. This includes the lack of good scripts, redundant narrative style, the industry’s failure in reaching out to talented young people in the diverse areas of movie making, hesitation of the filmmakers to use new media platforms, lack of effective marketing strategies and others. However, Manuel majorly attributes the crisis to the hegemony of the superstars in the diverse areas of filmmaking (Manuel, 2012, p. 16). This was also when many theatres were shut down, and certain Tamil and Hindi films gained more prominence than those from Malayalam. Amidst the failure of several of the films to make any significant

impact at the Malayalam box-office, film makers like Santhosh Pandit utilised the void in the industry to promote films like *Superstar Santhosh Pandit* (2012), *Krishnanum Radhayum* (2011) and others which further indicated serious problems in terms of the content of Malayalam cinema. The era also saw splits in major film organisations like the Malayalam Cine Technicians Association (MACTA), an umbrella association consisting of 19 unions of the Malayalam industry. This further deepened the problem as it is an industry that gives employment to many people in Kerala (Mini, 2020).

The late 2000s showed revival signs of Malayalam cinema. Vishal Johnson (2015), in his studies on films between 2000-2010, notes that even writers like Ranjith who wrote films set in feudal locations and with feudal heroes (especially with Mohanlal in the earlier decades like *Devasuram* [1993], *Narasimham* [2000], and others) came out with movies like *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha* (2009), *Pranchiyettan and the Saint* (2010), and others where the representation of masculinity and stardom have undergone a significant shift (p. 78). In an attempt to produce financially viable movies, the period also saw the rise of movies modelled on earlier hits (*Neelathamara* [2009], *Rathinirvedam* [2011], and others). On the other hand, directors like Shaji Kailas, who continued to employ the earlier models of heroism through films like *Drona* (2010), *Simhasanam* (2012), etc., saw failures at the box office. Another significant development in Malayalam cinema during this period was the rise of multi-star films. This was also a part of the larger project of producing financially viable movies using the popularity of different male stars. Interestingly, the trend of multi-starrer films was initiated by the Malayalam actors' association AMMA (Association of Malayalam Movie Artists) with the film *Twenty20* (2008), where almost all the major

actors including the leading male stars of Malayalam came together, a rare instance in the history of Malayalam cinema³⁷. Though the film was made to support the actors facing financial issues, it also helped immensely to revitalise the struggling industry. After *Twenty 20* (2008), several other films followed this trend including *Pokkiri Raja* (2010), *Happy Husbands* (2010), *Christian Brothers* (2011), *China Town* (2011), *Urumi* (2011) and others³⁸. However, this genre also could not make a significant impact on Malayalam cinema. During this time, when the industry adopted different means to produce financially viable movies, the film *Traffic* (2011, directed by the debutant Rajesh Pillai) was released. The film had no leading male stars and was made on a comparatively lower budget. A road action thriller, the film is narrated in a hyperlink format, with multiple narratives being told around a single incident. While the established directors and actors were struggling to make any significant impact in the industry, the film *Traffic* emerged as a major hit of the year. *Traffic* is widely considered to have begun the “New Generation” cinema wave in Malayalam. The “New Generation” redefined the concept of

³⁷ In an interview with The Indian Express, Rafi Mecartin the director of *China Town* adds that the superstars were not ready for combination roles before a decade. But now the situation has changed and the stars are ready to come together in one movie. See the interview in <https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/web/multistarrers-new-trend-in-malayalam-cinema/>

³⁸ This was the same time the film *Kerala Caffe* (2009) was released. This is much more than multi- starrer films like *Twenty:20* (2018). *Kerala Caffe* is a new experiment in Malayalam cinema as it comes in the category of anthology film, where several short films are included in a single film. This film is also a part of the experiments within the industry to revive from the crisis. The film, coordinated by the director Ranjith, has ten other prominent film directors, including Shaji Kailas, B Unnikrishnan, Lal Jose, Anwar Rasheed, and others. The film also has stars including Mammooty, Suresh Gopi, Dileep, Prithvi Raj, and others and all these actors have minimal screen time within the cinema. *Kerala Caffe* (2009) is thus a multi-starrer as well as a multi-director film.

popular movies, and these films have set “a commercially viable but artistically uncompromising cinema” as their target (Kadavath, 2017). “New Generation”, which is reminiscent of the 1980s “New Wave” in Malayalam film history, is marked for its “simple, novel and socially relevant themes; the absence of any major film stars; the presence of young new actors, both on- and off-screen; and colloquial dialogue, including profane language” (S. Gopinath & Raj, 2015, p. 66). While inculcating various national and global trends into their films, the New Generation filmmakers have also placed the narrative firmly in the Malayali landscape.

Venkiteswaran (2021) notes that the peculiarity of Kerala as a region contributed considerably to the rise of this new type of film. He adds that this set of “films are not a flash in the pan, but something that emerges out of that Malayali DNA” (p. 44). A significant population of Muslims and Christians living mixed with the majority Hindu community “with a significant middle class among all groups” (Venkiteswaran, 2021, p. 44) is a major factor distinguishing Kerala from other Indian states. Moreover, higher literacy rate with “a long and rich cosmopolitan history through maritime trade and colonial incursions—and now a sizable diaspora across the world” also played a significant role in the evolution of the “Malayali mindset” (Venkiteswaran, 2021, p. 44). This is manifested in Kerala’s tradition of “literary translations, the spread of film society and library movements, and the huge popularity of events such as Kochi Muziris Biennale, international film and theatre festivals” (Venkiteswaran, 2021, p. 44) wherein the people of Kerala are exposed to diverse national and global trends.

The films of this genre became very popular in Kerala after 2010, initiating the emergence of a new visual culture in Malayalam cinema. For instance, movies like *Salt N Pepper* (Ashiq Abu, 2011), *Chappa Kurish* (Sameer Thahir, 2011), *Beautiful* (V. K. Prakash, 2011), *Friday* (Lijin Jose, 2012), *22 Female Kottayam* (Ashiq Abu, 2012), *Usthad Hotel* (Anwar Rasheed, 2012), *Da Thadiya* (Ashiq Abu, 2012), *Amen* (Lijo Jose Pellisery, 2013), *Maheshinte Prathikaram* (Dileesh Pothan, 2016), and others garnered much critical acclaim besides making much profit. Vipin K. Kadavath (2017) notes that “New Generation” films redefined the idea of popular films in Malayalam,

...not only the content of cinema, but its form of social diffusion and effects as well. Even when it drew heavily from the cinema of the 1970s and 80s (especially the middlebrow), it rendered the strict division of “art” and “commercial” cinemas redundant, and in contrast to the superstar hero films of the 1990s, focused more on the possibilities of the narrative (p. 1).

This rise in popularity of this set of films is also aided by several developments post-liberalisation, including the rapid leap in film technology in Malayalam after the millennium (Matusitz & Payano, 2012). These newer technologies blended regional and global tastes, and besides developing a new mode of viewing practises, they resulted in Malayalam films becoming popular across transnational spaces.

Many established film actors like Sreenivasan, Lal, Nedumudi Venu and others also started to collaborate with “New Generation” filmmakers, bringing significant shifts to their characterisation and career. Such actors who remained submissive to the

hegemonic hero played by the male stars in the 1990s started to play more active roles in the New Generation films, and certain actors who were earlier stereotyped or body-shamed for “comedy” went through transformations in their roles and careers. Actors like Suraj Venjaramoodu and Indrans, who were comedians in the early phase of their careers, have emerged as leading actors in Malayalam and have won Best Actor awards at state and national levels. Their films are notable for breaking away from the established patterns of the male hero, and their characters’ bodies, origins, and physical and intellectual abilities reject the hegemonic masculine norms associated with the hero in Malayalam cinema. The era is also noted for the rise of Dalit actors like Vinayakan and the incorporation of marginalised identities and their life experiences into cinema (*Kammattippadam* [2016], *Ozhivu Divasathe Kali* [2015]). The superstars of the industry, Mohanlal and Mammooty, also came up with occasional hits like *Spirit* (2012), *Drishyam* (2013), *Oppam* (2016), *Abrahaminte Santhathikal* (2018), *Madhuraraja* (2019) and others, but the themes they dealt with also underwent a considerable shift in comparison to their films in the 1990s. Moving away from the “feudal nostalgia” (Pillai, 2013, p. 109) which marked their films of previous decades, their films started dealing with a series of other themes. Malayalam film continues to be fueled by the wave of the New Generation. Even when other regional film industries struggled to make a mark during the time of Covid-19, Malayalam films led by these new filmmakers used the new media opportunities (including OTT) reached newer audiences across the globe.

Attack on the Actress and the Formation of Women in Cinema Collective (WCC)

Besides those shifts on-screen, Malayalam cinema has also seen resentment against the star dominance and patriarchal structure of film organisations. Calling as a “decade of decay” (p. 14), Tara Nair (2017) notes that the mid-2000s are noted for “sanctions, overt and covert, issued by associations and unions to punish artists and technicians who “defy” their diktats in speech or action” (p. 15). A notable case would be that of Vinayan, a prominent director in Malayalam cinema. He was also the president of MACTA (Malayalam Cine Technicians Association), an organisation of 19 unions, which later split and formed FEFKA (Film Employees Federation of Kerala), an act believed to be done with the support of the dominant film actors’ organisation AMMA [Association of Malayalam Movie Artists] (P. Sreekumar, 2017). The conflict between these organisations and the loss of significance of MACTA also led to an unofficial ban on Vinayan in the Malayalam film industry (“Malayalam Film Organisations Face the Heat for Unofficial Ban on Director Vinayan,” 2017). Several actors and technicians who worked with Vinayan were also sidelined. Even a veteran actor like Thilakan was allegedly removed from several movies for acting in Vinayan’s films. Following this, Thilakan vehemently criticised the dominant film organisations, including AMMA and FEFKA, accusing them of working like a “mafia” (“Film Organisations Have Turned into ‘Mafia Gangs’: Thilakan,” 2010). Vinayan took legal action against these organisations, which led the Competition Commission of India to impose a heavy fine on AMMA and FEFKA officials (“Film Bodies Slapped Rs 11.25-Lakh Fine for Ban on Director Vinayan,” 2017). This “mafiaisation’ of Malayalam filmmaking” (Nair, 2017, p. 15) and

the legal interventions further revealed the inherent problems in the Malayalam movie industry. However, one of the most notorious cases that changed the course of the history of Malayalam cinema was the attack on a prominent actress in Malayalam in the city of Kochi. This further aggravated the situation leading to more extensive scrutiny of the practices in the Malayalam cinema industry. The arrest of Dileep (a major star in Malayalam who had a considerable influence across all the areas of filmmaking) in this case further revealed the gravity of the whole issue. The attack on the actress and the subsequent inaction from the mainstream film organisations led to the formation of the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC), an organisation of women artists in Malayalam cinema. WCC is significant for becoming the first women's collective formed in the history of Malayalam and even Indian cinema.

Formed as a collective by eighteen women in the industry, WCC later registered as a society that aims to bring “equal spaces and equal opportunities for women in cinema” (*About / Women in Cinema Collective*, 2017). The formation of WCC considerably influenced the contemporary history of Malayalam cinema in several ways. Besides closely aligning with “the feminist imaginaries advanced by various women collectives since the 1980s” (Mannil, 2020, p. 195), it has been playing a major role in ensuring a professional work space for women in contemporary Malayalam cinema. By challenging the existing practices of several active film organisations, WCC is also critical of the male and star dominance and the industry itself which is “illiberal, antiwomen, and collusive...guided by highly informal, personalised, and arbitrary arrangements that are intricately intertwined with dubious channels of capital mobilisation and deployment” (Nair, 2017, p. 15). I argue that besides highlighting the

issues within the organisations, WCC also provides an alternative by disrupting the hierarchical structure of the Malayalam film organisations. WCC works in a “lateral structure” (*About / Women in Cinema Collective*, 2017) and the members are divided into different teams. Each team is assigned specific responsibilities including managing independent projects, communication, legal affairs, and so on. Every member contributes to the organisation’s cause “voluntarily” and as per their “time and talent” (*About / Women in Cinema Collective*, 2017). WCC also engages in research that aids in ensuring the equality and rights of women within the industry. It runs several projects in this regard, including the one which is done in collaboration with Sakhi Women Resource to bring out a report for laying “guidelines for building gender-balanced professional spaces in the film industry” (*About / Women in Cinema Collective*, 2017). WCC also conducts workshops periodically to raise awareness on PoSH (The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace [Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal] Act, 2013) and it also collaborates with a series of councillors to aid the women who face “negative experiences in the industry” (*About / Women in Cinema Collective*, 2017).

Besides the innovative organisational structure, WCC has also made several interventions for women’s cause in Malayalam cinema. It effectively uses online platforms to reach a larger audience. WCC was instrumental in the formation of the Justice Hema Commission by the Government of Kerala to study the status of women in Malayalam cinema as well as to recommend best practices to mitigate the problems women face in Malayalam cinema. WCC also spearheaded the “Me Too” movement in Malayalam cinema and initiated an online campaign against cyber abuse called “Refuse the Abuse”. It also openly reacted against the misogynist content in Malayalam, including

in the superstars'³⁹ films and took many steps to promote women film makers. WCC started a film society in the name of P.K. Rosi, a Dalit woman considered to be the first female actor in Malayalam cinema. A queer festival named Q-Loid (2019), was also organised in collaboration with Queerala, a prominent queer organisation in Kerala. Though primarily a film organisation, WCC actively supports other sexual and social minorities aligning with their demand for justice and equality. This includes their support towards the wrestler's protest (2023), Nun's Protest (2019) and others. The formation of WCC is a major landmark in Indian cinema, forcing several mainstream film organisations across India to form women's wings. Moreover, certain regional film industries also saw the rise of women's organisations, including the recently formed Voice of Women (VOW) in Telugu cinema.

New Wave: New Spaces, New Bodies?

A significant feature of the "New Generation" films is the representation of the multitude of spaces within the narrative. From the preoccupation of feudal spaces in Malayalam films in the earlier decades, "New Generation" movies started exploring a range of new spaces from metropolitan cities to remote locations in Kerala. This representation of diverse spaces also reoriented Malayalam cinema in significantly new ways. The spaces as they are represented in "New Generation" Malayalam films are not ideal, and several issues affect people inhabiting those spaces. In such representations, films draw more

³⁹One such notable instance is the criticism raised by WCC members against some dialogues used by superstar Mammooty in the film *Kasaba* (2016).

complex characters who cannot be limited in the binaries of good/bad as in the earlier generation films of the superstars. Besides, it is not only women but men also face several problems. Along with metropolitan and global cities like Dubai or Singapore, the audience also sees more subaltern spaces within the film narrative which were not explored adequately in Malayalam cinema before. This includes Kumbalangi (in *Kumbalangi Nights*), Idukki (in films like *Idukki Gold* or *Maheshinte Prathikaram*), Kasargodu (in *Thondimuthalum Driksakshiyum*) and so on. These new spaces also provide varied experiences of gender, and many of these films reveal that it is not just women but subaltern men too are vulnerable due to their marginalised identities. About these varied experiences of gender in different spaces, Doreen Massey (1994) notes,

From the symbolic meaning of spaces/places and the clearly gendered messages which they transmit, to straightforward exclusion by violence, spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood (p. 179)

Venkiteswaran (2021a), argues that such representations bring “a certain kind of grave lightness to the themes and their treatment”. Moreover, such “narratives had an undercurrent of dark humour and a tragic vision of life, a certain casualness in the demeanour of the characters, with their effortless and easy-going acting styles and rustic dialogues” (Venkiteswaran, 2021a). With such representations, these films present a more realistic representation of characters unlike the always ready to fight superstar heroes. Often such characters struggle to live in the contemporary, resorting to different

means for survival, and they are shown restrained by several factors including caste, religion, location and others. The filmic representation can also be reflective of the turbulent times in Kerala, especially for the marginalised groups in the last decade wherein they faced challenges in all walks of life. This includes social, political, and economic crises and natural disasters like floods or epidemic outbreaks, including Nipah and Covid.

While a multitude of spaces is explored in “New Generation”, Venkiteswaran (2021a) also elaborates on the concept of time in these films. He notes that time is compressed within the narrative. While the time is compressed, there is an expansion of space within the film narrative (Venkiteswaran, 2021a). For example, chain snatching forms the plot in *Thondimuthalum Driksakshiyum* (2017). In *Ishq* (2019), it is a small leisure ride of two lovers that forms the narrative, while in *Jallikkattu* (2019), a buffalo escaped from a butcher forms the plot. The characters run out of time in many of these films, opening up new landscapes within the narrative. Venkiteswaran (2021b) notes that this “turn towards spatiality (in ‘New Generation’ Malayalam movies) opened up localities, social contexts, diverse lingos and lifestyles at the margins: the stories dealt with spongers, losers, butchers, thieves, birders, small-town photographers, migrant workers” (p. 45). Space-Time debate always exists within academia and is quintessential in understanding contemporary Malayalam cinema. Massey elaborates on this in her famous book *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994):

Space is not static, nor time spaceless. Of course spatiality and temporality are different from each other but neither can be

conceptualised as the absence of the other... we need to conceptualise space as constructed out of interrelations, as the simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations and interactions at all spatial scales, from the most local level to the most global (p. 264-268).

Though Massey (1994) discusses the aspect of temporality, she primarily defends her proposition of “space” here. For her, understanding space is cardinal in understanding social relations or the interplay of power. In that way, it constitutes an essential factor in understanding gender, especially masculinities. She emphasises that gender relations vary with spaces and have undergone a significant shift with the expansion of capitalism (p. 264). She also notes that capitalism sometimes has opposite effects on gender relations with “the contrasting forms of economic development” (p. 201). This leads to “distinct conditions for the maintenance of male dominance” and “that both postmodernism and modernism remain so frequently, so unimaginatively, patriarchal” (Massey, 1994, p. 178-212). On the other hand, Ernesto Laclau stresses the element of temporality and disputes Massey’s claims of space in his famous *New Reflections on the Politics of Space and Time* (1990). He remarks, “temporality must be conceived as the exact opposite of space...the ‘spatialisation’ of an event consists of eliminating its temporality” (Laclau, 1990, p. 41). Understanding these debates around space and time, David Howarth (1996) calls for an alternative conceptualisation of space. He calls it the “cosmopolitan space” (Howarth, 1996, p. 54). On the other hand, Homi Bhabha (1990) calls for a “third

space”,⁴⁰ while Frederic Jameson (1984) notes the “disorientation of saturated space” in modern times (p. 53-92). Despite differences, they all infer the changes globalisation has brought into gender relations in societies. At the same time, many of them also caution against its problems since globalisation leads to many compromises in gender relations and reinstates patriarchy in thoroughly new forms.

I also attempt to explore these films’ engagement with urban spaces, and a major concern here is the representation of masculinities in cities. In many of these movies, the city spaces act as a medium to regulate masculinities. With regard to city space, Steve Pile (1999) makes an interesting observation. Calling as the “heterogeneity” (p. 45) of city spaces, he observes that social stratification becomes difficult in cities as people continually cross social hierarchies. This diversity of experiences in cities, Pile observes,

Because urban identities are exposed as social fictions, individuals are freed to identify, affiliate and associate with divergent groups. Urban spaces, like urban social hierarchies, are liable to be fluid, unstable and contain people with allegiances and affiliations to multiple groups. It would, therefore, be a mistake to characterise the city as having a stable pattern of differences (p. 46).

It is clear from the above observation that cities provide a peculiar space for an interplay of different genders, and this leads to a specific kind of gender relations emerging within

⁴⁰ The idea of “Third Space” is formulated by the influential post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha. He discusses this in collaboration with his idea of “hybridity”. He notes that “the process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Jonathan Rutherford, 1990, p, 211).

such spaces as represented in several of the New Generation Malayalam movies. However, some scholars also contest the city spaces on different fronts, especially in the context of India. In her study of the representation of Indian Cities in cinema, Brinda Bose (2011) notes this,

The urban space – newly freed up and as yet un-proscribed – assumes, particularly for women, the metonymic equivalence of available sexual freedoms – both their powers and their dangers. For men, the metropolitan promise of potential, and heady, sexual freedom is undercut by various threats to their maleness – sexual, sociological, intellectual and economic. The cinema as a text is especially well suited to play with the dynamics of this fraught space of urbanity and sexuality within the impulse of modernity [and post-modernity] (p. 45).

The representation of cities in “New Generation” Malayalam movies also has to be understood within these debates. The cities in my study are not homogeneous and such spaces impact not only women but also men.

III

Undoing the Masculine Hero: Fahadh Faasil’s Stardom in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema

In this larger backdrop of such shifts in the last decade, I study the heroism, stardom and masculinity in the New Generation Malayalam cinema. For the convenience of

discussion, I consider one of the most popular actors in this category of films, Fahadh Faasil. I argue that Faasil signifies a shift in the notions of heroism, masculinity and stardom in contemporary Malayalam cinema. In contrast to the hypermasculine upper caste characters popularised by Mammooty and Mohanlal in the 1990s, Faasil reconstitutes gender relations within Malayalam films by disrupting the patterns of patriarchal-heteronormative codes.

Situating Fahadh Faasil

It would not be wrong to call Fahadh Malayalam cinema's first metrosexual actor, a contrast to the moustache-twirling, sexist alpha male heroes who had been dominating the screens for long. This is evident in the way he picks his films—they never fall under the easy labels of celluloid heroism (N. Menon, 2019).

The above statement that appeared in an article in Huffpost, a US-based news website, points to a major shift in Malayalam cinema that occurred with the arrival of Fahadh Faasil, who has emerged as one of the leading stars in the Malayalam film industry in the last decade. While the Covid-19 outbreak created crises in film industries worldwide, the Malayalam film industry garnered national and global attention through a set of filmmakers and actors who had initiated what is known as the New Generation Malayalam cinema in the early 2010s. Faasil has become the “main protagonist” of the New Generation Malayalam Cinema “by choosing unorthodox, experimental subjects instead of embracing mainstream narratives and aesthetics” (Joshi, 2021). I study how he

and his film characters attempt to break away from the good/bad binary in representing the star/hero and the stereotypical portrayal of the hero as an ultimately triumphant, muscular, alpha male who hegemonically exercises control over all other characters within the film narrative. The association of the hero with hegemonic masculinity in the previous decades, spearheaded by superstars such as Mammooty and Mohanlal, is constantly questioned, and the all-pervasive patriarchy within their films, especially during the 1990s is disputed and problematised in his films. While looking at the lineage of the relationship between masculinity, heroism, and stardom in Malayalam films, Faasil presents an interesting case as his characters add vulnerable masculine traits to the hero figure and thereby offer a new way of presenting masculinity in Malayalam cinema.

Faasil's rise to stardom coincides with a period in which Kerala underwent a series of crises: uncertainties in the economy due to the global recession of 2008, return of expatriates owing to indigenisation in many gulf countries, geographical as well as biological disasters like the flood of 2018, Nipah (2018) and later Covid-19 (2019), and many of his characters represent the uncertainties of this time. Furthermore, the era also witnessed a rapid leap in film technology in the Malayalam industry besides the influence of national and global film trends. Multiplex theatres became more common, providing the audience with new modes of cinema viewing (Mukherjee, 2021, p. 63). Mobile phones became a prominent medium for film viewing, further enhanced by the emergence of OTT platforms such as Amazon Prime, Netflix and other small-scale regional film platforms like Neestream. These newer technologies blended regional and global tastes, and Malayalam films are now popular across transnational spaces. Faasil is

one of the stars who actively utilised the potential of such platforms, and he is often called the “first OTT superstar” (V. Menon, 2021).

The uncertainties of the time and the democratisation of viewing practices, as mentioned above, shaped actors like Faasil. It is necessary to explore further changes in the film industry and other regional as well as global developments that coincided with Faasil’s rise to stardom. A critical concern here is his rejection of the established masculine representations, especially those propounded by Mohanlal and Mammooty, who have been the two “superstars” of Malayalam cinema for more than two decades. Their model of hegemonic masculine heroism and stardom is no longer desirable in contemporary Malayalam cinema. The change in masculine representation is visible in many male stars in contemporary Malayalam cinema. But Faasil and his films can be studied as an emblematic model of the change in masculinity, heroism, and stardom in Malayalam cinema now. An aspect that makes this evident is Faasil’s representation of vulnerable and weak masculinities. This change in the representation of masculinity by the actor has a crucial interconnection with the troubled patriarchal order in Kerala and is intricately intertwined with and constantly in negotiation with the contemporary. The urbane, cosmopolitan masculinity of Faasil continuously interacts with Kerala’s straining patriarchal familial structures. Faasil can be deemed as a symbolic actor who embodies and depicts that change. I argue that Faasil overhauled the existing notion of a film hero by transgressing good/bad binaries within the film. Unlike the hyper-masculine heroes played by the superstars in earlier decades, Faasil achieved fame and stardom even by portraying contemptible and powerless characters. This shift in the representation of stardom is significant while studying the history of stars in Malayalam cinema.

Fahadh Faasil, the Person and the Star

Faasil has emerged as one of the leading stars in Malayalam cinema in the last decade. It is significant to note that his career did not commence well though he is from an established film family in Kerala. His debut as the hero in *Kayyethum Doorath* (2002), directed by his father Fazil (a renowned director in Malayalam), was a box-office failure and received largely negative reviews. Consequently, he left for the USA for his higher studies and later returned to Malayalam cinema after seven years through the film *Kerala Cafe* (2009). He then acted in minor roles in movies like *Pramani* (2010), *Tournament* (2010), *Best of Luck* (2010) and *Cocktail* (2010). Faasil rose to fame with *Chappa Kurish* (2011) and *Akam* (2011), for which he received the Kerala State Award for the Second-Best Actor in 2011. I argue that Faasil's re-entry through "New Generation" films aided him in generating alternative modes of masculine presence in Malayalam cinema. Another notable aspect of Faasil's career is that his rise to popularity coincides with several other socio-political changes in Kerala. This includes the insecurities followed by the economic recession of 2008, the large-scale return of Gulf expatriates due to the indigenisation in the Gulf countries and increasing unemployment. Gulf migration, liberalisation and globalisation are crucial in understanding contemporary Kerala (Hapke, 2013). All these factors gave rise to new consumption practices in the state while drawing distinct gendered patterns (Lukose, 2005) and new definitions of masculinity (Hapke, 2013). Though the modern "breadwinner" ideal remains the dominant mode of masculinity in Kerala, globalised consumption regimes and the increased participation of women in the workforce have intensified men's anxieties (C. Osella & Osella, 2006). Some feminist scholars discuss the idea of "neo-patriarchy" that

has been evolving with society's changing economic and political patterns (Sharabi, 1988). Sylvia Walby (1990) notes about "public patriarchy" (p. 24) wherein even though domesticity remains a major mode of subordination of women, they are collectively subjugated within the employment or state structure. These are crucial when we consider the persistent problems women and other marginalised groups face in Kerala even though the state is recognised globally for the advancement in women's condition and better performance in terms of several other human development indicators (Drèze & Sen, 1997; Jeffrey, 1987). Along with the rising criticism against the Kerala Model (Rowena & Carmel Christy, 2006; S. Sreekumar, 2009), women, sexual minorities and Dalits continue to face numerous challenges in contemporary Kerala. However, there has been an increased unity among such marginalised groups in the 1990s (Devika & Sukumar, 2006). This, in turn, has unsettled masculinity, especially the upper caste masculinity, by challenging its power structure within domestic and public spaces. The visibility of Malayali women and their achievements in terms of literacy and health and the rise of feminist movements produced a narrative of victimhood among men in Kerala (Radhakrishnan, 2005). Further, the era also has seen the emergence of movements/protests against the heteropatriarchal control on women's sexuality including the Kiss of Love (2014), Catholic Nun's Protest (2018), Sabarimala women's entry protest (2018), *Arpo Arthavam* (Hail Menstruation, 2019) and others that have had a significant impact on the genderscape of Kerala (Sooraj et al., 2023a). The period also saw several legal interventions, including decriminalising homosexuality and adultery, banning Triple Talaq and others. This changed genderscape along with the shifts within the film industry following the "New Generation" film wave, enabled Faasil's characters

to mark themselves even when they challenged the existing filmic representations of masculinity and heroism in Malayalam cinema.

One of the significant features of Faasil's career is his active employment of the male body within the films through which he marks its infirmity and a rupture from the "traditional" masculine ethos. In the earlier decade of superstar films, the male body was a major site for building stardom (Chandrasekhar & Balakrishnan, 2012). For Mammooty, the physical appeal of his body has been crucial, and this is celebrated with much fervour in Kerala. Popular magazines and channels often choose him as the "most desirable man" or the man with the "highest sex appeal" (D. Kumar, 2005). For Mohanlal, the limitations of not having a muscular body have been surpassed through the historical construction of his star persona and by the celebration of his feudal characters (Y. Thomas, 2011a). For Mammooty and Mohanlal, the body symbolises their hegemonic masculinity and stardom. Faasil, on the other hand, has employed his body as an object for contempt and castration within the film narrative. In this way, he deconstructs the notion of masculinity to which stardom in Malayalam cinema is inseparably linked.

A star is studied by taking "everything publicly available" (Dyer, 1986, p. 2) about them, including films, public appearances, interviews, commercials, etc. All such analyses reveal that Faasil contradicts the notion of a star in the conventional sense of the term in Malayalam cinema. On-screen and off-screen, Faasil is an ordinary man, slightly bald and without six-pack abs or a muscular body. A young hero appearing bald without using wigs was new to the Malayalam film spectators. Faasil's contest with hegemonic

masculine notions marks his star persona since the beginning of his career, which is revealed not only through the films but also through his conception of men. In one of his interviews, he adds that he is a representative of ordinary men who are bald, lean or shabby. He is also not reluctant to admit his failures—as an actor in his first film or later as an engineering student in America (*Meesayeyum Thalamudiyeyum Kurich Chodichappol Fahadinte Mass Marupadi* [Interview by Annapoorna Lekha Pillai], 2021). This off-screen cosmopolitan persona of Faasil continues to blend with his on-screen masculinity, which draws newer patterns of gender relations within his films that question the centrality of the male hero in Malayalam cinema.

My analysis of major film magazines in Malayalam, such as *Nana* and *Vellinakshatram*, reveals that Faasil maintains a low profile, and minimal discussion can be found about his personal life, marriage, etc. The available coverage in these magazines promotes his movies more than Faasil as a star (“Thara Imagillathe,” 2018). He also appears in fewer interviews, both on television channels and in magazines, compared to other celebrities, for which he says that the audience may only watch his films and forget about him as a person (*Won’t Stop Acting in the Name of Failure of Movies Says Fahad Fazil* [Interview by Johny Lukose], 2016). He is also the only leading star in Malayalam cinema who does not have a fan club. He has openly objected to creating fan clubs for him (*Fahadh Faasil on Fans Associations* [Interview by Santhosh George Jacob], 2016). It is particularly important as fan clubs are central in promoting stardom in Malayalam and other South Indian Cinemas (Prasad, 1999). Faasil also appears sparsely in advertisements. Furthermore, the videos/interviews produced as part of his film promotions are also markedly different in terms of the collective engagements of other

important figures (including the director, scriptwriter, etc.) involved in the filmmaking than focusing merely on his stardom. Thus, in multiple ways, Faasil becomes a star without becoming one (Shibu, 2019).

Fahadh Faasil: Undoing Masculinity, Heroism, and Stardom

Venkiteswaran (2013) highlights a significant shift in the representation of heroes in Malayalam cinema with the commencement of the New Generation film wave in Kerala. Set in localised Malayali landscapes, the films of this genre reoriented the notions of femininity and masculinity in diverse ways. Emerging after the era of hypermasculine heroes, these films depict men who find it difficult to cope with the changed time and space (Venkiteswaran, 2013). In many films of the “New Generation”, male characters also fail or reform or deteriorate into insanity. This “erosion of masculinity and obsession with castration” in these films is in tandem with the instabilities in the political economy stirred up by the speculative global economy, and it questions the centrality of man within a family and in society (Venkiteswaran, 2013). There is also a “reimagining of the role of women” (Ray & Mochish, 2022) in these films, wherein several female characters are portrayed as breaking out of the patriarchal order to assert freedom and agency. I place Faasil’s characters as representative of these changes in Malayalam cinema and the changing gender sensibility of Kerala society. The following section does a thematic reading of select Faasil films to discern how they deconstruct the notions of masculinity, heroism and stardom in Malayalam.

Feudal Hero to Unexceptional Man

Though one of the leading male stars in Malayalam, Faasil's characters are constantly marked for their resemblance to the stereotypical image of an anti-hero. His characters lack the typical features associated with the filmic hero in Malayalam, including courage, physical strength, idealism and others (Sajeesh, 2017). However, I argue that they cannot easily be reduced to the singular categorisation of an anti-hero and each of his characters is complex in the way they undo masculinity and heroism in Malayalam cinema. In this regard, one of the movies that turned out to be a trendsetter in the "New Generation" cinematic wave was *Maheshinte Prathikaram* (Mahesh's Revenge, 2016), directed by the debutant Dileesh Pothan. The film won several accolades at the national and state levels besides contributing significantly to Faasil's career, elevating him as a notable star in the Malayalam film industry. Set in Prakash, a mountainous village near Kattappana in the Idukki district of Kerala, the movie visualises the ordinariness of the everyday life of Mahesh Bhavana (played by Faasil), a small-time photographer, and his resolve to take revenge, despite his physical and mental ineptitude to achieve it. Though Mahesh/Faasil is the protagonist in the movie, he is presented as an unexceptional man within the film narrative in contrast to the superstar hero of the earlier decade Malayalam films. Besides, the film also draws allusions from the superstar movies in several instances to reiterate this difference in the representation of heroic masculinity.

In the introductory scene of *Maheshinte Prathikaram*, Mahesh is shown taking bath in a stream and washing his rubber slippers (the pair of rubber slippers, which stands as a marker of the character's ordinariness, is a major symbol employed throughout the

movie). With a focus on his soft male body in the larger canvas of the mountainous terrain of Idukki, the scene further captures Mahesh/Faasil emerging from the stream humming the heroic introductory song (*Dhyanam Dheyam Narasimham*) of the Mohanlal starrer *Narasimham* (2000). *Narasimham* (directed by Shaji Kailas) is one of the most popular movies of Mohanlal which helped him emerge as a major symbol of neoliberal Hindutva masculinity in Kerala (S. Gopinath, 2021). “Narasimha” in Hindu mythology signifies the ferocious avatar of God Vishnu. This attribution of divinity to Induchoodan/Mohanlal is further evident in the hero’s introduction scene, where he emerges from the depths of the holy river Nila, which is augmented by camera, music, and editing techniques (Sajeesh, 2007). The introductory sequence in *Narasimham* and Mohanlal’s dialogues have acquired a cult status among men in Kerala. I argue that *Maheshinte Prathikaram* in a way sarcastically juxtaposes the introduction of Induchoodan/Mohanlal in *Narasimham* to the effect of establishing the contradiction between an ordinary man in Kerala and a superstar hero. The film’s title song, effectively employed to introduce the superstar hero in Malayalam, is also deconstructed in *Maheshinte Prathikaram*. The title song in *Maheshinte Prathikaram* describes and celebrates the locale of Idukki and instead of focusing on the male protagonist, the camera captures the idyllic life of the people in the hilly village and shows Mahesh/Faasil as an ordinary man, one among many. In the song, he is also shown as engaging in his household chores including cleaning, cooking, etc., which are usually presented as “feminine” within film narratives (Maji, 2019).



Figure 2: These images are from the introductory song in the film *Maheshinte Prathikaram* (2016). In the first image, Faasil's character is shown bathing in a small stream singing the heroic introductory song of Mohanlal in *Narasimham* (2000). The second image presents him against the background of the mountainous terrain of Idukki (the image of rubber slippers, a recurring symbol in the film, is noted). The third image shows him doing kitchen chores, and the fourth image shows him working as a professional photographer (Courtesy of OPM Dream Mill Cinemas)

Similar to the characterisation of Mahesh, many Faasil's characters have replaced the feudal hypermasculine heroes of the previous era with unexceptional male protagonists. I argue that this troubles the centrality of the male star on and off-screen in Malayalam cinema post 2010. In *Thondimuthalum Driksakshiyum* (2017), Faasil plays the role of a thief. Set in Kasargodu (a backward district of Kerala), the film narrative revolves around

an incident where Faasil's character steals the gold chain of Sreeja (Nimisha Sajayan), a co-passenger in a bus that he is travelling in. The narrative also shows Faasil's character taking Sreeja's husband Prasad's (Suraj Venjaramoodu) name. The actual name of Faasil's character is not revealed throughout the movie and he is portrayed as tricky and corrupt. Faasil received the National Award for Best Supporting Actor (2018) for his performance in the film. Marked as one of the major hits in Faasil's career, the film also won the National Awards for the "Best Feature Film" and the "Best Screenplay". In *Amen* (2013), Faasil plays the role of a clarinet player Solomon. Set in a Kuttanadan village named Kumarankiri, Solomon is shown to be a failed member of his band, for which he is constantly humiliated.

Another intriguing factor in many of Faasil's films is their frequent references to the characters and the lives of Mohanlal and Mammooty, the two superstars of Malayalam. For instance, besides the opening scene of Faasil in *Maheshinte Prathikaram*, which includes an allusion to the feudal stardom of Mohanlal, the character Crispin (played by Soubin Shahir) refers to Mohanlal and Mammooty in several parts of the film. In one scene, by identifying himself as a "Lalettan (Mohanlal) fan", Crispin remarks, "Mammookka accepts any character role like coconut climber, tea shop owner, fool or eccentric. But my Lalettan only does roles like Varma, Nair and Menon. Top class only!" The masculine aspirations of a Mohanlal fan like Crispin (an ordinary Christian man) are realised through the feudal hypermasculine Hindu characters of Mohanlal. This also reveals how certain caste masculinities are hegemonised through Mohanlal's films that mark the hero as a site of extreme devotion and desire. In *Natholi Oru Cheriya Meenalla* (2012), the character Preman (Faasil) is born on the 100th day of

the superhit film *Manjil Virinja Pookkal* (directed by Fazil), which is also the debutant film of Mohanlal. However, the film narrative shows Preman, an aspiring film writer, struggling as a caretaker of a flat in Kochi. He in turn creates his fictional alter-ego Narendran (played by Faasil himself), who does heroic deeds and takes revenge against the occupants of the flat for mistreating Preman. This subtext within the film provides an interesting contrast to the actual life of Preman, which also suggests the impossibility of exercising heroic masculinity in real life.

Through frequent references to the heroic masculinity of a superstar like Mohanlal through characters like Crispin in *Maheshinte Prathikaram* and Preman in *Natholi Oru Cheriya Meenalla*, the New Generation films mock the heroic masculinity which has long been valorised in Malayalam cinema through Mohanlal and Mammooty. The move from feudal hypermasculine characters of the late 1990s and early 2000s to the unexceptional male characters in New Generation films marks the decadal shift in the representation of the hero in Malayalam cinema. Faasil embodies this shift in the representation of masculinity, heroism, and stardom.

Un (Muscular) Hero: Undoing the Trope of Revenge

The trope of revenge was central to the superstar movies of the 1990s⁴¹. Glorification of the male body and performing extraordinary or dangerous stunts were the major markers

⁴¹ The trope of revenge is widely used in superstar movies to establish the hero's pre-eminence, as evident in the films like *Dhruvam* (1993), *Narasimham* (2000), *Ravanaprabhu* (2001) and others.

of these films (A. M. George, 2017). The hero was also portrayed as the one who succeeds in the attainment of his love by overcoming many adversities. *Maheshinte Prathikaram* (2016), as I argue, breaks all these conventions associated with the hero and presents a vulnerable man as the protagonist. In the film, Mahesh/Faasil who becomes devastated after his lover Soumya (Anusree) breaks up with him, is represented as crying profusely, a rare act for a Mollywood film hero. This act of crying, coupled with long shots and close-ups of Faasil's vulnerable-soft body, becomes a unique representation of male tears in Malayalam cinema. *Maheshinte Pratikaram/Mahesh's Revenge*, centred on the trope of revenge, shows the protagonist's ineptitude, both physical and psychological, in undertaking it. Through such a representation of heroic masculinity, I argue, the film makes a satirical allusion to the trope of revenge and its association with heroism and stardom in Malayalam film. It has a scene where Mahesh gets into an altercation with the antagonist Jimson (Sujith Shankar) to end a fight between Crispin (Soubin Shahir) and Jimson⁴². This scene of confrontation between Jimson and Mahesh in *Maheshinte Prathikaram* alludes to typical action films, especially of the superstars. Mahesh is shown as rising from the ground after being kicked down by Jimson and folding up his *mundu* (traditional wear and a symbol of feudal virile masculinity in Malayalam cinema), accompanied by an intensifying background score. Unlike the star heroes, Mahesh fails in his attempt to hit Jimson, and his *mundu* gets untied and falls down. This public humiliation forces Mahesh to make a seemingly whimsical vow of revenge against

⁴² Crispin foolishly starts an unnecessary and avoidable fight in an attempt to showcase his masculinity and terribly fails. Crispin is also shown to be a Mohanlal fan who enjoys and takes pride in the feudal characters played by the star.

Jimson, and he pledges not to wear his footwear—the rubber slippers— till he fulfils his vow. Mahesh’s revenge is presented with a touch of humour throughout the film. Unlike the combative male hero of Malayalam films (Shibu, 2020), Mahesh is shown as a vulnerable ordinary man starting to learn Kungfu (a martial art) to deal with the physically powerful Jimson. Moreover, the film presents the issue between Mahesh and Jimson only as a problem between two individuals without any familial, religious or political undertones and without othering of any community or group which has been a characteristic feature of Malayalam films (Johny, 2019b).

Towards the climax, Mahesh triumphs in his fight with Jimson. However, I argue that these action sequences in the film are unique for deconstructing the heroic masculinity in Malayalam. Besides lacking the usual singular focus on the male star, these scenes also lack background score or any significant editing/visual interventions to magnify the hero. Moreover, following the confrontation, Mahesh/Faasil is shown patting Jimson on the shoulder in a friendly manner to show that he has no enmity towards Jimson even though he fought and won to salvage his self-esteem. Mahesh even pays a friendly visit to Jimson at the hospital and reveals his wish to marry Jimson’s sister Jimsy (Aparna Balamurali). The film here reconfigures the existing pattern of climax in Malayalam films by showing the hero acknowledging the futility of the physical fight and attempting to reconcile with his opponent rather than celebrating his triumph. His character is a hetero-patriarchal hero who wins the fight and the heroine’s love, but not in a traditionally masculine/heroic style employed in Malayalam movies until then. In the reconciliation with the antagonist, in the exhibition of vulnerability and in the portrayal of the meaninglessness of revenge, there is an embodiment of change in

terms of the historic representation of heroic masculinity and the trope of revenge, as here it is reconstituted with compassion and empathy⁴³. There are similar Faasil's characters who undermine the trope of revenge. In *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019), Faasil plays the character Shammi. Represented as a "responsible" male householder initially, the narrative shows Shammi attempting to exercise his patriarchal authority over women in his house. However, they do not oblige with his commands and Shammi attempts to take revenge against them. But Bobby (Shane Nigam) and his brothers thwart this plan and Shammi is shown as a failed figure by the movie's end. The character of Shammi and his dialogues became immensely popular in Kerala, widely spread as trolls and memes to ridicule heteropatriarchy. In *Natholi Oru Cheriya Meenalla* (2013), Faasil's character Preman is an often-humiliated caretaker of a flat whom the residents call "natholi" (Indian anchovy, a small-sized sea fish) for his weak stature. A writer during his free time, Preman further creates a fictional alter ego Narendran (played by Faasil himself), to take revenge against the occupants of the flat for mistreating him. Through Narendran, Preman fulfils his masculine revenge that is impossible to undertake in real life.

Hero Becoming Villain: Deconstructing Patriarchal Family and Masculinity

Faasil's role as a patriarchal householder in *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019) can be employed to decode toxic masculinity and power structures of a hitherto valorised and normalised

⁴³ A similar argument is made about the films of Shahrukh Khan in (P. Gopinath, 2018)

heterosexual family/family man in Malayalam cinema. The film has several atypical male characters representing masculinity differently. Faasil plays Shammy, who stays in his wife's house after marriage. The family comprises of three women— his wife Simmy (Grace Antony), her mother (Ambika Rao) and younger sister Baby Mol (Anna Ben) and is devoid of a father figure. The film shows Shammy desperately trying to establish himself as the patriarch of the house, akin to the heroes in several star movies of the 1990s (P. Mathew, 2023). He attempts to control women of the family, displays emotional restraint and shows an aversion to cooking as he considers it a feminine task. He appears with a perfectly chiselled moustache, well-dressed and groomed. While these actions usually aid the central male figures in attaining heroic status in Malayalam cinema, *Kumbalangi Nights*, on the other hand, unsettles such representations (Sooraj & Krishna, 2022). I argue that the characterisation of Shammy is a satiric caricature of the hegemonic male protagonists of Malayalam cinema of the earlier decades, especially that of Mohanlal and Mammooty (like their characters in *Pavithram* [1994], *Hitler* [1996], *Valliettan* [2000] and so on). To emphasise this further, there is a scene where Shammy/Faasil looks at himself in the mirror, grooms his moustache and calls himself “a complete man”. In a violent altercation scene during the climax, he even utters, “*Shammy hero aada hero*” (Shammy is a hero). The film shows that Shammy's inability to become the hero/patriarch of the family turns him into a mentally unstable figure at the end of the movie.

The other subaltern male characters— Saji, Bony, Bobby and Franky (played by Soubin Shahir, Sreenath Bhasi, Shane Nigam and Mathew Thomas, respectively)— get almost equal screen time in the movie. This itself derails the construct of films having a

singular hero played by the male star. The other male characters, whom Shammy considers not belonging to a “cultured family” and not masculine, are depicted as more sensible and compassionate. The idea of a “proper” middle-class family, which is usually bolstered in films for being the space of domestic contentment, is disputed in *Kumbalangi Nights*. The film recognises the problematic power relations within a heterosexual family and shows the middle-class household as a place of power play, where women most often live in constant fear; it is the space of the most violent attacks— physical and emotional— against women and children (U. A. Segal, 1999). *Kumbalangi Nights* remains a notable example of Faasil’s filmography manifesting the transition of the hero to a villain, thereby deconstructing masculinity and patriarchal family. There are many other movies of Faasil where a similar pattern in varying degrees is visible.

In the film *Joji* (2021, based on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* [1623]) Faasil, though a major star, plays the role of the youngest son Joji in a traditional wealthy Christian family, instead of the masculine and all-powerful patriarch Kuttappan Panachal (played by Spadikam Sunny) or the two elder brothers— Jomon Panachel (Baburaj) and Jaison Panachel (Joji Mundakkayam). Joji is a meek young man who is closer to his teenager nephew Poppy (Alister Alex) and distances himself from the family’s elder male members. The narrative traces how the persisting patriarchy in the family leads Joji to plot the murder of his father and elder brother. The film shows the patriarchal power play within a seemingly ordinary family and how the less dominant men, women and children experience the space. Joji can be called a victim of patriarchy, and to liberate himself from its entanglement, he goes to the extent of patricide and fratricide. The film is named after the main character Joji who becomes a murderer by the end. By not accepting his

crime and not feeling remorse for his action, the character's fate is left without closure in the film. Faasil gained international acclaim for his performance as Joji.⁴⁴

Along with the deconstruction of patriarchy in Faasil's films, it is essential to note the role female characters play within the narrative. Female characters in Faasil's films are strong, articulative and have agency. They are instrumental in the positive transformations of male characters, including the hero. This is exemplified by characters like Baby Mol in *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019), Shoshanna in *Amen* (2013), Jincy in *Maheshinte Prathikaram* (2016) and Isha in *Haram* (2015). This reformative aspect of masculinity manifested by the central male hero is an important feature that characterises Faasil's films. Moreover, the idea of a patriarchal family is deconstructed and portrayed sarcastically in his films (Ram, 2019). The patriarch, in many instances, fails to exercise his power (as in the case of Shammy in *Kumbalangi Nights* [2019]), and the father figure is mostly absent or is killed (*Iyobinte Pusthakam* [2014], *Joji* [2021]). Many of Faasil's films, in a way, open up alternative ways of thinking about patriarchal families, disrupting the existing patterns centred on hegemonic masculinity.

Castrated Hero: Male Body and Psyche as a Site of Contest

An analysis of Faasil's career reveals the multiple and often unusual ways his films employ the male body. In *22 Female Kottayam* (2012), his character gets castrated and

⁴⁴ For more details visit <https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/fahadh-faasils-joji-wins-best-international-film-award-at-swedish-fest/article36643794.ece>

symbolically, the trope of castration continues in his later films in various manifestations of physical or mental infirmity. In *22 Female Kottayam* (2012), Cyril (played by Faasil) is a travel agency manager who traps women into doing sexual favours in lieu of helping them to migrate to foreign countries. It is by such a means that Cyril traps Tessa (Rima Kallingal), a nurse from Kottayam. Cyril also helps his boss Hegde (Prathap Pothen) to take advantage of Tessa, which leads to her being brutally raped by Hegde twice. To avenge herself, Tessa tricks Cyril and surgically removes his genitals. Though the movie has its limitations, including representing women as continuing victims of patriarchy (S. Gopinath & Raj, 2015), castration emerged as a major theme in Malayalam cinema through this film. More than the act, castration is highly symbolic as “penis or phallus is a synonym for masculinity and power...and in everyday thinking, the loss of power, leadership, authority, or ability is frequently interpreted as a symbolic castration” (Brandes, 2004). In this film, castration symbolises a blow on toxic masculinity, and as an actor by employing his body to represent such an act, Faasil deconstructs the existing notions of a hero in a film.

In *Akam* (meaning “Inside”, 2012), based on Malayattoor Ramakrishnan’s classic psychological-thriller novel *Yakshi* (1967), Sreenivas’s (played by Faasil) face is disfigured in an accident. This causes him much mental turmoil, and he starts hallucinating that his wife Ragini (played by Anumol) is a *yakshi* (a blood-sucking female demon). He is “probably more prone to an erectile dysfunction in the face of the monstrous feminine” and “the linkages between vagina dentata and semen loss anxiety syndrome haunt both the visual and libidinal economies of *Akam*” (Pillai, 2020b, p, 48). The films *22 Female Kottayam* (2012) and *Akam* (2012) place the male body as the

centre of contest and castration. This marks a major digression from the mainstream masculine representations in Malayalam films which glorify the star body, especially the upper caste feudal male body, as a site of desire and celebration. A pattern of mutilated or disabled male characters continues in Faasil's films, including *Artist* (2013) and *Olipporu* (2013). In the former, he plays Michel Agnelo, an eccentric artist who loses his eyesight in an accident, and in the latter, he plays Ajayan, who is on his deathbed throughout the film, while his alter ego narrates the story.

Along with constant experimentation with the politics of the male body, many of his films also place the male psyche at its centre. Such representations, I argue, also deal with the complexities and problems of becoming a man in the current times. This is seen in the films like *Natholi Oru Cheriya Meenalla* (2013), *North 24 Kaatham* (2013), *I by Two* (2014), *Ayal Njanalla* (2015), *Athiran* (2019), *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019), *Irul* (2021), and so on. In *Natholi Oru Cheriya Meenalla* (2013), directed by V. K. Prakash, Preman (played by Faasil) is a caretaker of a flat in Kochi whom the residents call "natholi" (Indian anchovy, a small-sized sea fish) for his weak stature. A writer during his free time, Preman creates a fictional alter ego Narendran (played by Faasil), through whom he fulfils his masculine desires that are not possible in his real life. In *North 24 Kaatham*, he plays the role of Hari, an intelligent software professional who has Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD), and the film shows Hari's transformation into an empathetic person with the arrival of Narayani (Swathi Reddy). In *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019), Shammi (Faasil), who appears initially as a caring husband and brother-in-law, turns out to be a psychopath when the women in his house do not

obey his patriarchal commands. Shammi's "madness", I argue, has more of a social dimension than the personal one.

Fahadh Faasil Becoming the Metrosexual Hero

A metrosexual man is defined as one (straight or gay) who lives in an urban, capitalist culture with a high disposable income, is very careful about his appearance and spends a lot of money and time on grooming (Simpson, 2002). He is a consumerist, often a narcissist, a sensitive man, and has a feminine side that he does not conceal. He is considered a product of consumer capitalism. These market-driven masculinities are affected by the "gender-neutral language of 'market', 'individual,' and 'choice'" (Connell, 2004, p, 76). Globalisation's impact on the locales shapes these masculinities, and they have to confront diverse challenges as never before. Faasil has been called Malayalam's first metrosexual actor by popular journals (N. Menon, 2019). Many of Faasil's movies show him as a metrosexual man living within the city space. The city as the setting of the films has contributed significantly to shaping the characters in many New Generation films (Abhijith, 2021). The fast urbanisation of Kerala and the migration of Malayali youth to the nearby metro cities such as Bangalore and Chennai to work in multinational companies and the consumer-capital culture they promote create a constant exchange between their rural homes and urban dwellings and lifestyles. Faasil's metrosexual characters represent this tension between the urban and the rural value systems. The rural in his films is not an ideal space or one which invokes nostalgia (as usually seen in Malayalam movies), but a space which upholds gender norms, hierarchies

and value systems which the urban man (and woman) find difficult to cope with. *Diamond Necklace* (2012), *Varathan* (2018) and *Carbon* (2018) can be cited as examples here. In these films, the male lead has to constantly refashion himself and undergo crises because of the conflict between the urban and the rural.

The desire for capital and consumption, which are features of the metrosexual man, can be seen in Faasil's characters such as Dr Arun in *Diamond Necklace* (2012), Sibi in *Carbon* (2018) and Prakashan in *Njan Prakashan* (2018). Arun in *Diamond Necklace* (2012) is a well-earning oncologist based in Dubai who leads a luxurious life and lives on credit cards. He is in debt but maintains his luxurious lifestyle, hiding his debts. The film shows his encounters with multiple women/lovers, each leaving a mark on his character. In a way, Sibi in *Carbon* (2018) and Prakashan in *Njan Prakashan* (2018) personify the yearning to become rich and the attempts to make money through any means. In *Carbon* (2018), Sibi engages in many fraudulent schemes in the pursuit of making money quickly. From peddling a gem to selling an elephant, he also goes to the extent of attempting to find a treasure in a dense forest. However, the narrative shows that all such efforts go in vain. *Njan Prakashan* (2018), another film of the same genre, shows Prakashan (played by Faasil) trying by all means to become rich and famous. He even changes his name to P. R. Akash as he thinks his original name "Prakashan" is old-fashioned. He does not practice his profession as a nurse as he thinks the nursing job does not have "dignity." But the narrative shows Prakashan falling in love with a nurse Salomi (Nikhila Vimal), for the mere purpose of migrating to Germany. But Salomi is more crooked than Prakashan, and she marries a man from Germany after reaching there for her job.

Varathan (2018) is a remarkable example of a new kind of metrosexual masculinity, which emerges out of the changed gender equations promoted by a neoliberal city space (Sender, 2006) but found the same in conflict with the masculine ideals of the village. Faasil, as Abin in *Varathan* (2018), comes back from Dubai to rural Kerala along with his wife. He is the one who makes tea for the guests who come home while his wife talks to them. Such a scene was uncommon in Malayalam cinema until recently, as receiving the guest was always depicted as the woman's task. The scene shows his changed gender sensitivity and masculine ideals. But in the village, he has to confront traditional masculinity when hooligans ogle at and, later on, sexually assault his wife. This leads to a crisis in his masculinity, and he is shown changing himself into a hypermasculine figure who violently and eccentrically attacks the villains. It is also interesting to note that after subjugating the attackers with the help of his wife who wields a gun, Abin asks his friend to inform the police. This final act of relying on legal means undercuts the possible heroic aura that can come along with the fight scenes in the film. It is also to be noted that even his retaliation was an act of self-defence while being surrounded by the attackers, and his awareness of himself as a subject to law is in direct contrast to the heroes of superstar films who impulsively incite violence when their male egos are bruised and project their disregard for the law as a marker of heroic masculinity. Faasil's metrosexual characters, I argue, can be considered to depict post-liberalised masculine concerns where consumerism and capitalism affect men differently, including challenging their centrality in family and society.

IV

Conclusion

This chapter studied the masculinity in contemporary Malayalam cinema against the backdrop of major developments in the 2010s. I argued that the resentments within the industry against male domination, especially following the attack on a noted actress and the eventual formation of the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC), is a significant event marking the contemporary Malayalam cinema. By placing the stardom and heroic masculinity of Fahadh Faasil against Mammooty and Mohanlal, the two superstars of Malayalam, I also noted the major transitions in the stardom and masculinity in the present Malayalam cinema. I have argued that Faasil's characters reconstitute gender relations within Malayalam films by considerably reorienting masculinity. I have also argued that Faasil's portrayals represent the different crises of men in post-liberalised Kerala. His films, in a way, showcase gender fluidity which Malayalam cinema recently began to explore as a major theme (Thampi, 2019). Even though Faasil is indicative of this shift in the portrayal of masculinity, heroism, and stardom in Malayalam cinema, I am not arguing that he singularly achieved it. It is also not that Faasil's characters overthrow heteronormative patriarchy and masculinity, but rather, they succeed in creating ruptures to existing models of masculinity and heroism in cinema by opening up spaces for alternative masculine expressions which are more inclusive. The changed genderscape of Kerala and the emergence of "New Generation" cinema has played a significant role in this regard. While Faasil and his characters are specimens of the

rupture, it is also evident in select films of other “New Generation” male actors of Malayalam as well, including Tovino Thomas (*Kala* [Weed, 2021] and *Oru Kuprasidha Payyan* [A notorious youngster, 2018]); Nivin Pauly (*Hey Jude* [2018] and *Kanakam Kaamini Kalaham* [Gold, Lover, Quarrel, 2021]); Asif Ali (*Uyare* [Up above, 2019] and *Kettiyolanu Ente Malakha* [My wife is my angel, 2019]), among others. The characters they played in these films demonstrate the problems of becoming all-powerful patriarchal heroes in contemporary times within certain narratives. Faasil can be considered as an icon who exemplifies the shifts associated with becoming a hero and a star in contemporary Malayalam Cinema. Bordering on queerness and metrosexuality, Faasil’s characters embody new ways of performing masculinity in Malayalam cinema, by shifting the focus from anger and revenge to vulnerability and reform.