

## Abstract

The thesis attempts to study men and masculinities in contemporary Kerala, especially from 2010 to the present. It is centred on the debates and discourses around three select events, which are argued to reveal fractures in the existing heteropatriarchal consensus regarding gender regimes in contemporary Kerala, South India. These three events— 1) The Supreme Court of India verdict in 2018 allowing women of all ages to enter the Sabarimala Temple in Kerala, 2) the publication of the first gay autobiography in Malayalam by Kishor Kumar titled *Randu Purushanmar Chumbikkumbol: Malayali Gayude Athmakathayum Ezhuthukalum* (When Two Men Kiss: An Autobiography and Writings of a Malayali Gay) in 2017, and 3) the emergence of “New Generation” cinema in Malayalam –provide the axis and open up the context for the study. The thesis argues that the hegemonic/normative ideals regarding men and masculinities are undergoing changes/tensions in both the public domain and representative realms in contemporary Kerala. The events selected thus serve as discursive sites that help to discern the tensions in normative conceptions of masculinity and what it means to be a desirable man in the present. The study considers masculinities (whether it is hegemonic/dominant or subordinate or marginal) not as static, an already available category on which certain factors act and create tension but as fluid, an ever-evolving category that can be understood only within a larger gender order. The attempt of the thesis, in this respect, is to reveal the tensions in what it means to be a man in contemporary Kerala discursively.

The study considers the 2010s as a significant period, notable for events that challenged hegemonic heteropatriarchal masculinities in the region in multiple ways. This includes the first “Queer Pride March” in Kerala (2010), protests like “Kiss of Love” (2014), “Happy to Bleed” (2015), the attack on a notable actress in Kochi, Kerala, and the subsequent formation of Women in Cinema Collective (WCC, 2017) in Malayalam film industry, Sabarimala women’s entry protests (2018), the nuns’ protest (2018), legal recognition of the case of “honour killing” of a young man (Kevin) in Kerala based on his religion/caste (2018), and others. These events challenged the heteropatriarchal control over women, marginal and subordinate masculinities and sexual/gender minorities within different social

institutions in the region. The period also saw increasing visibility of queer communities in the public sphere and representative realms. The legal and state interventions in this regard, including the decriminalisation of homosexuality by the Supreme Court of India (2018) and the “State Policy for Transgenders” (2015), further disturbed the heteropatriarchal structure of the domestic and the public spheres of Kerala. In this context, the thesis attempts to study men and masculinities in contemporary Kerala through select events, which it expects can contribute to the existing feminist scholarship on gender in the region.

## **Theoretical Framework and Research Questions**

The thesis is largely a project in Cultural Studies and is specifically located in the field of Masculinity Studies, a subfield within Gender Studies. The theoretical and methodological assumptions of Cultural Studies and Gender Studies provide the larger framework of the thesis. While attempting to study changes/tensions in masculinities and heteropatriarchy within a region during a particular historical period, the study observed multiple power structures that influence the gender regime. It was also noticed that these occur at the intersection of the questions of law, religion, caste, sexuality, family, and representation, among others. This intersectionality necessitated the study of diverse primary materials ranging from literary and film texts to court orders, archival materials, and new media contents. The research questions raised by the project focus on how cultural practices help to understand the operations of power in gender configurations at a historical conjuncture in a specific region. In this context, the interdisciplinary framework of Cultural Studies is particularly suited for studying diverse texts/materials. It is informed by the post-structural understanding of gender, especially as explicated in the works of Judith Butler and the formulations on masculinity by R.W. Connell. The thesis attempts to answer the following research questions: Is there a fracture in the heteropatriarchal consensus regarding gender regimes in contemporary Kerala? If so, what are the socio-cultural factors that necessitated this change? What are the tensions in heteropatriarchy and heteropatriarchal families in contemporary Kerala as revealed by the select events? Do the select events reveal challenges to the hegemonic masculine order in the region? How does the increased

representational visibility of marginalised and subordinate masculinities question the existing gender order in the region?

## **Chapterisation**

The first chapter provides an introduction to the thesis, elaborating on the theoretical and methodological approaches that informed this study. It also provides a detailed literature review of works on masculinities from both Western and Indian contexts and specifically reviews works in Gender Studies in the context of Kerala. This serves to locate the study within its regional specificity and to identify the research gap. The first chapter ends with a brief summary of the chapterisation of the thesis.

The second chapter of the thesis, titled “Male Householder, Caste Patriarchy and Family: Locating Masculinities in the Sabarimala Women’s Entry Protests (2018)”, is centred on the Supreme Court of India verdict (2018) allowing women of menstruating age to enter the Sabarimala Temple in Kerala. The chapter argues that the entry of menstruating age women into a male homosocial pilgrimage space like Sabarimala, which is also studied as a symbol of heteropatriarchal welfare in Kerala, has created a moment of crisis in the ostensible heteropatriarchal consensus regarding the existing gender order of the state. Positing the apex court verdict as a significant event that reconfigured the understanding of gender regimes in contemporary Kerala, it tracks the multiple discourses on masculinities after the verdict and their stance concerning patriarchal structures and institutions in Kerala. The first section of the chapter extends existing research works, specifically of Caroline and Filippo Osella (2006), which argue that the Sabarimala pilgrimage is a cultural/religious practice undertaken by men in relation to their role as patriarchal male householder for the welfare of the family. This existing argument is integrated into the study by historically tracing the Malayalam films centred on the Sabarimala pilgrimage to establish how this patriarchal role of men in Kerala changes during different historical periods. While it tracks films from 1960s to the contemporary period, it marks the film *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), released after the Supreme Court verdict, as making a rupture in the role of the male householder in relation to the Sabarimala pilgrimage. The second section (through a review of existing works) further links this

relationship between male householder/heteropatriarchal family welfare and homosocial male pilgrimage to Sabarimala to the question of the formation of the modern engendered caste based conjugal families in the backdrop of social reform movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Kerala. The first two sections connect the male householder, the heteropatriarchal family and the concerns of masculinity and its relation to the pilgrimage to provide a base for the third section, which examines the formation of multiple masculine positions regarding women's entry that emerged after the apex court verdict and the gender concerns that inform each position. It traces conservative, liberal, and Dalit masculine positions regarding the issue and argues how Dalit masculinities' support of women's entry at the intersection of the questions of caste and gender is significant in the study of masculinities in Kerala. It establishes the necessity of a framework of intersectionality to understand gender configurations/tensions in contemporary Kerala/India.

The third chapter, "Undoing the Masculine Hero: 'New Generation' Films and Fahadh Faasil's Stardom in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema", studies Malayalam cinema, one of the most popular and influential sites of representations of masculinity. The chapter is premised on the emergence of the "New Generation" cinema in Malayalam in the 2010s, which the thesis argues featured the representation of alternative masculine expressions. Centring on Fahadh Faasil, his films, characters and stardom, the chapter traces the changes in representation and notions of masculinity, heroism and stardom with the coming in of "New Generation" cinema in Malayalam. Here, the study places Faasil as a significant representative of such transitions, who complicated the centrality of the male star in the film narrative, disrupting the earlier hegemonic models of heroic masculinity popularised mainly by the two superstars in Malayalam cinema –Mammootty and Mohanlal. These changes in the representation of masculinities in contemporary Malayalam cinema are also studied against the backdrop of other major developments in the Malayalam film industry in the 2010s, especially the resentments within the industry against male domination following the attack on a noted actress in Kochi and the eventual formation of Women in Cinema Collective (WCC), an organisation for women film workers.

The fourth chapter, “*When Two Men Kiss (2017): Representations of Gay Masculinity in Contemporary Malayalam Literature and Cinema*”, studies the increasing visibility of gay masculinity in the Malayali public sphere, especially in literature and films, against the backdrop of gender and sexuality-based activism, the formation of queer organisations to support the marginalised LGBTQI+ identities and new media. It is centred around the publication of the text titled *Randu Purushanmar Chumbikkumbol: Malayali Gayude Athmakathayum Ezhuthukalum* (When Two Men Kiss: An Autobiography and Writings of a Malayali Gay, 2017) by Kishor Kumar, which is the first autobiography by an openly gay man in Malayalam. The very structure of the text, which is divided into two parts—the first section comprising of the life narrative and coming out story of the author, and the second section mapping the queer activism and cultural representations of gay men in Kerala/Malayalam—is read in this chapter as marking the beginning of visibility for gay masculinity in Kerala public sphere and also informs the selection of texts for this chapter. The second section on literary representations of gay masculinities in Malayalam discusses how short stories emerged as a major genre that deals actively with gay characters. The politics of representation of gay masculinity in short stories is historically traced in this section, and they are read against contemporary Malayalam short stories, many of which are noted for their considerate representation of gay masculinity. The last section of the chapter traces the representation of gay characters in Malayalam cinema to understand the changes in the representation in post-2000 films, the latest being the widely discussed film *Kathal-The Core* (2023, directed by Jeo Baby). At the centre of the section on films is *Ka Bodyscapes* (2016, directed by Jayan K. Cheriyan), which, for the first time, portrayed the visual dynamics of gay relationships and bodies on screen in Malayalam cinema.

The fifth chapter is the “Conclusion”, which sums up the major arguments of this dissertation. It engages with the research questions raised by the project and provides insights into the limitations of the work and the future research possibilities this study opens up.

By studying the hegemonic heteropatriarchal masculinity at the site of its challenges, the thesis discusses the significant transitions in the public and representative realms in Kerala

with regard to masculinities. With such a study, this project also reveals that masculinities in Kerala are not monolithic and static but an evolving category shaped by the changes in the overall gender order. Highlighting the importance of inculcating the studies on men and masculinities in Gender Studies, it elaborates that the question of masculinities is critical in understanding the problems of women and other marginalised groups in any given context.