# Masculinities and Disabilities: Reconfiguring the 'Normal Body' in Malayalam Cinema

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***Abstract:*** *Michael S. Kimmel (2004) in "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity," argues that manhood is demonstrated for other men's approval and it is other men who evaluate the performance. Hence, masculinity is a homosocial enactment and men test themselves, perform heroic feats, and take enormous risks so that other men would grant them manhood.*

*It is in this context that this paper attempts to analyze the visual icons of the so called 'abnormal' heroes performed by Dileep one of the South Indian actors, and demonstrate how these roles of the hero as disabled (such as hunchbacked, mentally and physically challenged, with cleft lip and speech impediments) and cross dresser, representing a non-hegemonic section of the society displace the mainstream dominant notions of masculinity in Malayalam cinema. The study would be structured in such a way, giving a short introduction on the kinds of roles performed by Dileep that involve a series of disabled/deformed/abnormal male heroes that do not confirm to the dominant perception of the hero figure in the backdrop of the theories on masculinities. All of these movies- Kunjikoonan, 2002 (directed by Sasi Shanker), Chanthupottu, 2005 ( directed by Lal Jose), Pachakuthira, 2006 (directed by Kamal), Sound Thoma,2013 (directed by Vyshak) that had Dileep performing the disabled, cross dressing, deformed hero figures went on to become box office success and introduced new figures of manliness. However, in order to demonstrate that these movies reconfigure the representation of masculinities in Malayalam cinema, the paper would place these texts (movies) in the light of the hero image in Malayalam cinema down the ages, and take into account the agency of the heroine figures in these movies and furthermore examine the consequences of this shift that challenged the normalcy and existing masculine identities.*

*Keywords: Masculinities, Malayalam cinema, Disability, Hero figure.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Masculinity like gender is a social construct, a social definition given to men by various societies which have to do with qualities and traits that are conventionally associated with men. However, masculinity is not monolithic but is protean and plural which could be manifested in multiple ways with respect to community, time, class, race etc. Therefore, a study of the multiplicities of masculinities allows to examine the ways in which different models of masculinities form a hierarchy of what is acceptable and unacceptable for men. Therefore, masculinity which is not static and is socio-cultural is subject to change, depending on to economic factors, cultures, era etc. Hence, masculinities like femininities are social constructions and drawing attention to the representations of men and masculinities help to explore the variety of ways through which masculinities are manifested. Thus according to Connell, "(t)he terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' point beyond categorical sex difference to the ways men differ among themselves, and women differ among themselves, in matters of gender" (Connell, 2005:69), therefore, "masculinities are the patterns of social practice associated with the position of men in any society's set of gender relations". According to Connell, normative definitions of masculinity offer a standard of what men ought to be, this however, create paradoxes since only few men actually match the 'blueprint'.

However, masculinity does not lie segregated from femininity but are contradictory to each other, in Kimmel's words "anti-femininity lies at the heart of contemporary and historical conceptions of manhood, so that masculinity is defined more by what one is not rather than who one is" (Kimmel, 2004:185). According to Connell, "'Masculinity' does not exist except in contrast with 'femininity', a culture which does not treat women and men as bearers of polarized character types, at least in principle, does not have a concept of masculinity in the sense of modern European/American culture" (Connell, 2005:68). Thus masculinity is perceived by contrasting it with what it is not, femininity. However, such a definition according to Connell is limited in scope as it is based on the assumption that discourse is all we can talk about in social analysis. Therefore, Connell emphasizes on the principle of connection,

that one symbol can only be understood within a connected system of symbol applies equally well in other spheres. Connell therefore emphasizes on the need to focus on the processes and relationships through which men and women conduct gendered lives. Thus masculinity according to Connell, is "simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture" (Connell, 2005: 71).

Although there have been a plurality of masculinities, there have been images of masculinities that are all encompassing, overpowering and also the images that are looked down and marginalized. R.W. Connell using Antonio Gramsci's analysis on class relations uses the term 'hegemonic masculinity' to signify "the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life". Hegemonic masculinity is defined by Connell as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell, 2005:77).  According to Connel and Messerschmidt in "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept", hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice, (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue. Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense, only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men." (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005:832)

Hegemonic masculinity therefore asserts power over others and demands submission and is the standard or ideal image of the 'real man' against which all men are judged. However, with respect to culture and era, one type of masculinity becomes hegemonic demanding submission not only from women but other subordinated masculinities in terms of race, cultures etc.  Having said that, hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed, trans historical model, but constituted with respect to the society and era. According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), an idealized definition of masculinity is constituted in social process and such models may be glorified by the state, churches and media which may distort everyday realities of social practice (838). Connell describes it as the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable (Connell, 2005:76). Even though such models of masculinity are displayed by mythical figures, film characters etc.  and the individual holders of power and wealth may be diverse from the hegemonic pattern, "hegemony is likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual. So the top levels of business, the military and government provide a fairly convincing corporate display of masculinity, still very little shaken by feminist women or dissenting men" (Connell, 2005:77).  However, researchers make a distinction between hegemonic masculinity and male roles. While male role "relates to social ideals to which male behavior is expected to aspire, if not actually encompass", hegemonic masculinity continues to be seen as "a name for a particular variety of masculinity to which women, and among others, homosexual or effeminate men were subordinated" (MacKinnon, 2003:9). This ideal image against which all other men are judged may be shaped through myths, media, advertising, sports and may be quite different from the masculinities practiced in a society at a particular time, however, "(t)his does not, though, lessen its credibility as a standard of masculinity to which men are supposed to aspire" (MacKinnon, 2003: 115).  Even though not all men practice it, "black and Asian masculinities, lower class and anti-sexist masculinities, effeminate, gay, elderly and pacifist masculinities may all be said to command less political power, wealth or prestige than the hegemonic male, very large number of men are complicit in sustaining this hierarchical model" (Feasey, 2008: 3).

 In the context of European/American societies, homosexual men are subordinated to heterosexual men and places homosexual masculinity at the bottom of a gender hierarchy.  However it is not the only subordinated masculinity and according to Connell, "some heterosexual men and boys too are expelled from the circle of legitimacy. The process is marked by a rich vocabulary of abuse: wimp, milksop, nerd, turkey, sissy, lily liver, jellyfish, yellowbelly, candy ass, ladyfinger, pushover, cookie pusher, cream puff, motherfucker, pantywaist, mother's boy, four-eyes, ear-'ole, dweeb, geek, Milquetoast, Cedric, and so on" (Connell, 2003:79) which as Connell points out are easily assimilated to femininity. Moreover, the relationship of gender with other factors such as race and class generates more interplay among masculinities, for instance, Robert staples, in *Black Masculinity: The Black Male's Role in American Society,* discusses the role of class and race in the shaping of black masculinity. Likewise, there have been studies that focus on the power structures involved in subordinated masculinities in terms of race for instance; McCune examines the significance of media, space and ideals of black masculinity in understanding bisexual African-American men through an analysis of TV. series, novels etc. Ferguson in *Bad Boys,* examines how the educators' beliefs such as

"natural difference" and "criminal inclination" influence their decision regarding the failure and punishment of African American boys in schools and how it influences their sense of self. Similarly, Richard Majors and Janet Billson (1992) in *Cool Pose*: *The Dilemma of Black Manhood in America* examine how "coolness" is a mechanism for Black men in dealing with racism, make sense out of their lives and how the "coolness" help in invigorating a life which would otherwise be empty and mundane.   There have been a series of studies by researchers that examine masculinities and its representation in media for instance, Ulla Hakala in *Adam in Ads* examines the mediated masculinities in advertising in Finland and U.S. Darla Schumm and Jennifer L. Koosed (2009) in *From Superman to Super Jesus* examine the construction of Jesus as an ideal of masculinity that prevents the exploration of alternate theologies of disability. Jenny Rowena (2002) in *Reading Laughter: The Popular Malayalam "Comedy-Films" of the Late 80s and Early 90s* examine the representation of non-hegemonic men from the backward castes and minority communities in Malayalam laughter-films and how it helped to "remasculinize" Malayalam cinema and culture by reasserting hegemonic masculinities.

However, there is little account on the dynamics of disabled masculinities in films that focus on the presentation of masculinities that can be seen to adhere to, negotiate or challenge the hegemonic hierarchy. Meena T. Pillai (2013) in "Matriliny to Masculinity" discusses the social and psychological crisis of masculinity in Kerala society that shaped the performances of hegemonic masculinity in Malayalam cinema taking into account its history and how 'patrifocal' ideologies were reinforced. T.S. Pillai in *Chemeen* examines the role of the text in shaping the hegemonic masculinity in Malayalam cinema which according to Pillai became the 'hallmark' of popular Malayalam cinema. Ratheesh Radhakrishnan (2003) in "PE Usha, hegemonic masculinities and the public domain in Kerala" examining an incident of sexual harassment that happened in Kerala, discusses the notions of masculinity that would help to better understand Kerala's modernity and how it influences in constructing the contemporary using myths and historical legacies. Caroline and Filippo Osella (2002) in "Malayali Young Men and their Cinema Heroes" examine how masculinities and popular culture are configured in Malayalam cinema by focusing on two male heroes and their relationship with their young male fans.

## 2. Reconfiguring the 'Normal' Body:

The paper attempts to examine the visual icons of the disabled heroes (such as hunchbacked, mentally and physically challenged, with cleft lip and speech impediments) in the following movies *Kunjikoonan* (2002), *Pachakuthira* (2006), *Sound Thoma* (2013) representing a non-hegemonic section of the society performed by Dileep one of the prominent actors of Malayalam cinema  and take into account the agency of the heroine figures in these movies and furthermore examine how it challenged or adhered to the existing masculine identities.

Dileep who started his career as a mimicry artist is known for doing comedy roles along with the action hero roles in Malayalam cinema, the movie *Kunjikoonan* released in 2002, directed by Sasi Shanker had Dileep playing dual roles one as Kunjan a hunchback and the other as Karthik a violent college student, *Pachakuthira* too had Dileep playing dual roles one as a Anandakuttan a junior artist in movies and the other as Akash Menon, his long lost German brother who is mentally unstable, released in 2006, directed by Kamal. *Sound Thoma* released in 2013 directed by Vyshak featured Dileep playing the role of Thoma a character with cleft lip and defective voice. All of these movies went on to become box office success and had Dileep playing the role of a person with a physical disability as the main character.

In *Kunjikoonan*, the main character Kunjan is a hunchback who runs a telephone booth often mocked for his looks, but does service to his villagers, and introduces himself as Vimal Kumar who right from the beginning goes around looking for a bride with the help of his friend. In spite of rejections he continues his search and eventually falls in love a blind girl, Chembagam. While Kunjan adds humor to the movie, the contrasting character performed by Dileep as Karthik is a violent college student who is in love with his classmate Priya Lakshmi. Eventually she is killed by a gangster and her eyes due to the efforts made by Kunjan are transplanted to Chembagam. However, when Karthik pursues Chembagam the film reaches at such a juncture where the 'cured' Chembagam has to choose between Karthik and Kunjan and the movie ends with Kunjan uniting with Chembagam who has gained her vision. The movie revolves around Kunjan's search for a bride in spite of his disability and finally 'finding' one. The dual roles performed by Dileep involve one as a "macho college guy" and the other as a "funny hunchback".

The dual role of Dileep as Prasad runs parallel to the character of Kunjan throughout the film. Prasad is a young college student with blue eyes and golden hair, who is in love with Lakshmi (played by Manya) daughter of a police officer. Unlike the timid Kunjan, Prasad is an impulsive and violent basketball player who handles a group of rogues

single-handedly. Since Lakshmi's father does not approve of the marriage, they decide to elope, however, she is killed by a rogue Vasu (played by Saikumar). Kunjan witnesses this murder and eventually Vasu is arrested. When Prasad comes to know that Lakshmi's eyes are transplanted to Chembagam he starts stalking her. Chembagam mistakes Prasad for Kunjan and hugs him, however, Kunjan happens to see this; he is heartbroken and leaves the village. Prasad develops in interest in Chembagam, however she rejects him and waits for Kunjan, finally when she sees him dispelling his doubts she chooses to be with Kunjan. Prasad on the other hand is taken to custody for killing Vasu who tried to molest Chembagam, the movie ends with Prasad who is happy to see Kunjan united with Chembagam.

*Pachakuthira* (2006) directed by Kamal, promoted as a comedy-entertainer, narrates the story of Anandakuttan a junior artist who grew up as an orphan since the age of seven when his mother left for Germany. He lives a life of distress; sharing a romantic connection with Nimmy (played by Gopika) who has her own share of problems. In this context, he comes to know that his brother Akash Menon is coming from Germany after the death of his mother, and Anandakuttan is happy to welcome him expecting monetary support from his brother. Akash Menon the dual role played by Dileep turns out to be a mentally challenged person who puts Anandakuttan through a series of troubles and eventually Anandakuttan and gang discovers that Akash Menon has arrived without a penny and searches for ways to send him back. Later, an industrialist approaches them who is ready to pay any amount in exchange of Akash Menon. However, Anandakuttan develops affection and love for his brother and is obliged to give him up. At the end of the movie, Anandakuttan and friends realizes the reasons for the interest of the industrialist in Akash Menon when they come to know that he is close to a girl with similar disabilities whom is the daughter of the industrialist. The movie ends with Akash Menon uniting with the girl and her family and flying back to Germany.

*Sound Thoma* (2013) directed by Vysak narrates the story of Thoma (played by Dileep) who is the youngest of Paulo's (played by Saikumar) three sons, with a cleft lip and vocal cord deformity. Paulo who is the richest man in the village but known for his greediness and stinginess refused to spend money for the corrective surgery for Thoma which gave rise to the lisp. Paulo disowns his elder sons for marrying women of their choice and disappointing his expectations of huge dowry, and hopes to reclaim it through Thoma. However, Thoma falls in love with Aswathy (played by Namitha Pramod) an RJ in an FM channel and the daughter of a singer who despises him in spite of his efforts to woo her. Thoma funds a local NGO to build roads and hospitals in the village and helps Aswathy's family from a financial crisis. Nonetheless she is engaged to the sub inspector Rakesh, a tough police officer who thrashes Thoma, for wooing his fiancé; however Aswathy is repelled by his viciousness and the movie ends with Aswathy choosing Thoma.

## 3. CONCLUSION:

### The Nonhegemonic Men and the Invisibility of the Nonhegemonic Woman

In *Kunjikoonan* and *Pachakuthira* as the disabilities become more apparent, the need to introduce a dual role performed by Dileep becomes mandatory as a mechanism to shield the image of stardom associated with Dileep. Moreover as the visibility of the disability increases it induces the presence of a 'normative' dual character for the viewers. However, as the demeanor of the characters with disability become akin to the hegemonic hero of Malayalam cinema, the necessity of a dual character ceases to exist. According to Jenny Rowena (2002), "(t)he heroic self or the hegemonic masculinity of every period in Malayalam cinema has been constructed around the figure of "others" that involve (comedians, villians) who were most often drawn from non-hegemonic castes and religions". However, these movies not only avoided dominant caste markers such as surnames for the hero in *Kunjikoonan* and in *Sound Thoma* but placed the villains as upper caste/upper class figures quiet contrary to the practice followed in Malayalam cinema in the late 80s and 90s where the villain was attributed with lower caste/lower class markers. This is not to say that movies did not exist with heroes from lower class/caste backgrounds, but they placed them in contexts that evoke a sense of pity and not laughter from the audience. Moreover, these movies that represented heroes from the minority communities when appeared in disabled bodies reconfigured the existing types of masculine identities. According to Martin Norden, physical disabilities in the movies is not simply a reflection of societal values but also a politically charged commodity that movie makers are asking audiences to "buy" (Norden, 1994:x). While the disabled heroes assert their own masculinities, the parallel presence of the normative hero as a dual character exists to articulate the hegemonic masculinity exerted by the stardom associated with the 'star' who like the power elite in Alberoni's (2007) words, is an object of reference for the community and who in order to perform such a function, must be observable to people of all degrees. Depending on the kind of disability, its severity, its visibility, bodily and intellectual regulate the need for a parallel dual role, for instance when the disability is highly visual (in the case of hunchback and mentally unstable characters), the able-bodied dual character runs parallel to the disabled body

whereas when the condition is not immediately apparent, (in the case of cleft lip and the associated lisp) does not elicit the need for a parallel able bodied dual character.

However, the disabled characters are not represented as asexual or uninterested, and go further than the medical model contention that disabled men cannot do it. These disabled men who felt rejected because of their inability to meet hegemonic masculine expectations and to sufficiently symbolize masculinity, extended their masculine ranges of ideals in their personified relational practices and were comfortable in using their bodies in alternative ways that gathered them some success in establishing sexual intimacy with others. This is when the humor comes into play and emphasizing alternative ideals that diverge from those associated with strict hegemonic masculinity play as the sexual assets for these disabled men and the hyper masculine figures exhibited by the villains create aversion.

These non-hegemonic men in the discussed movies take other means to claim masculine powers, in terms of conquest of women who display 'emphasized femininity', as an attempt to assert their own manliness. *Kunjikoonan* opens with a dream sequence, in which Kunjan is getting married to a nondisabled woman who confirms to the societal standards of beauty who woes her through alternative ways. *Pachakuthira*, ends with Akash Menon, finally reuniting with a girl whom he referred as 'butterfly' throughout the movie and *Sound Thoma*, in spite of the initial scorns expressed by the girl, succeeds in winning her that fulfilled the end of the masculine achievement, using humor as the sexual assets of these men in order to establish their intimacy with the women.  While, these characters are not reduced to their biological 'lack of functioning disabled bodies', and stood in par with the hegemonic man, these nonhegemonic masculinities are represented as erotically attracted to the 'emphasized femininity', making it the most 'desired' and entirely nullifying the nonhegemonic woman who is unquestionably invisible, and who is at the most marginal place in patriarchy.

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