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Decoding Hegemonic Masculinity and Patriarchal Family: A Reading of the Malayalam Film *Kumbalangi Nights*

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Abstract: The Malayalam film *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019) received wide appreciation as a mainstream/popular movie which decoded masculinity. This article attempts a close reading of the film to see how the film unsettles the usual representation of ‘the hero’ in Malayalam/Indian films. It argues that *Kumbalangi Nights* can actually be read as a satire of the filmic hero usually seen in the earlier decades’ Superstar films in Malayalam. It argues that what *Kumbalangi Nights* does is to show that the ‘hegemonic masculinity’ which hero centric popular Malayalam/Indian films celebrate is actually ‘toxic masculinity’. The institution of family is quite central in keeping the gender divisions intact. The article also tries to point out that our set understanding about the ‘proper’ middle class family as the space of ideal domestic contentment, as usually depicted in popular movies, is shattered in *Kumbalangi Nights*. It also tries to delineate how the agency of women is central to the narrative of the film in the unravelling of toxic masculinity and in problematising power relations within the family. The article argues that the film shows the inside of the ideal middle class household as a place of power play, where women are most often living in constant fear; it is the space of the most violent attacks— physical and emotional— against women and children. It reads that *Kumbalangi Nights* offers an alternate model of family based on love, empathy, kindness and virtue rather than relation through body fluids. The article is divided into five sections: the first section gives the theoretical framework of the article, the second section introduces the plot and setting of the movie, the third section - Men of Kumbalangi and Masculinity - is further divided into two parts which look at the film’s undoing of the concept of hero and hegemonic masculinity and its portrayal of other masculinities. The fourth section presents a critique of the normative middle class family in the film. The fifth section analyses the characterization of women in the film and its importance in the undoing of the hegemonic masculinity and power play in the normative family. The final section concludes the article by briefly placing *Kumbalangi Nights* against the Malayalam Superstar films of the 1990s and 2000s to bring out the contrast and ends by opening up further possibilities of research on the film.

Keywords: *Hegemonic Masculinity Malayalam New Generation Film, Patriarchy, Family, Hero*

I

Theoretical Framework

This article pertains to the field of Masculinity Studies. Masculinity/Masculinities Studies is an interdisciplinary area of enquiry broadly concerned with the social construction of what it means 'to be a man' in a given society at a given time. It is a feminist-inspired field of study developed in the last few decades of twentieth century. Its scholars study the social role and meanings of different masculinities. Masculinity and its performance vary according to other facets of identity like class, caste, sexuality, age, ethnicity, religion, nation etc. Masculinity, like femininity, has to be understood in plural rather than singular (Kimmel 124-126). R W Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity is central to the framework of this article. Inspired from Antonio Gramsci's idea of 'hegemony,' she proposes that hegemonic masculinity is the most acceptable way of being a man and this is constructed "in relation to various subordinated masculinities and women " (Connell 183). Hegemonic masculinity is also heterosexual in nature and marginalizes the non-normative gender/sexual relations. Connell's concept is widely used to understand the power dynamics in gender relations. The social effect of hegemonic masculinity is presently studied with great importance, especially with reference to gender-based violence. As an after effect, the contemporary period has seen the emergence of many movies and academic works which try to unravel 'toxic masculinity'. Toxic masculinity is "a loosely interrelated collection of norms, beliefs, and behaviours associated with masculinity, which are harmful to women, men, children, and society" (Sculos 3). Unravelling the toxic masculinity is essential in understanding the effects of masculinity in the public milieu, primarily on account of the masculine control of the public spheres. The article uses the concept of hegemonic masculinity as its larger theoretical framework.

II

***Kumbalangi Nights*: The Storyline**

The Malayalam film *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019) directed by Madhu C. Narayanan from Kerala, South India is being celebrated by cinephiles, film reviewers and media across the country for its

successful decoding of the toxic nature of masculinity which is usually considered as normative in popular films in Malayalam and other Indian languages. ¹*Kumbalangi Nights* (KN hereafter) at surface level tells the story of two families living in the small island village of Kumbalangi, in the outskirts of the city of Kochi in Kerala. One family consists of four half brothers--Saji, Bonny, Bobby and Franky, played by the actors Soubin Shahir, Sreenath Bhasi, Shane Nigam and Mathew Thomas respectively. They live in a house that is half constructed, messy and cluttered without doors. Saji's father (a widower) married Bonny's mother (a widow) and Bobby and Franky are born of the marriage. The film in a sense progresses through the eyes of the younger brother Franky who has come home on vacation. He is a school-going teenager who studies in a boarding school away from home on a sports scholarship. Saji and Bobby while away their time doing nothing productive. But when at home, they get into childish scuffle with each other. Bonny, who is speech impaired, is disinterested in the elder brothers and spends most of his time in the music club with his friends. The brothers except Franky lead an aimless life in a house devoid of parents or a head of the family. Their father figure is no more and the mother has left home and joined a religious congregation.

The second family consists of three women and a man-- a mother, her two daughters Simi (played by Grace Antony) and Baby Mol (played by Anna Ben) and the recently added family member, the elder daughter's husband, Shammy (played by Fahad Fasil). Baby Mol falls in love with Bobby. It leads to the interesting exchanges between the two families through which the questions of masculinity, agency of women and ideals of patriarchal family get revealed. Even though the narrative of the film does not discuss it in length, what the audience can understand from the narrative and the setting is that the family of the brothers belongs to Christian fishermen community and lower class. The second family is Hindu-middle class and the man of the family is a barber by profession or by caste.

III

The Men of Kumbalangi and Masculinity

Undoing the Film Hero /Decoding Hegemonic Masculinity

The character Shammy can be called a caricature of the hero figure usually seen on celluloid and of hegemonic masculinity we encounter in our everyday lives. Let us look at some of the scenes in the film which define Shammy's character. He is a barber by profession. Whether it is his profession by choice or his caste occupation is not revealed by the narrative of the movie. In one of the introductory scenes, he is shown as looking into the mirror in a narcissistic manner and grooming his moustache to perfection while pronouncing to himself, 'Raymond, the complete man', a line taken from the Raymond apparel's advertisement. He removes the *bindi* pasted on the mirror and thereby eliminates even a tinge of feminine embellishment from his image. Shammy in a sense tries to emulate hegemonic masculinity which seems to be impossible in the present times. In another scene, he asks his wife and her younger sister to avoid small talk in the kitchen and to share whatever they are talking about with him. He does not want anything to happen in the house without his knowledge. He tries to create a typical middle-class household and asks everyone to sit and have food together and in the continuation of the same scene he is seen to be manipulatively moving himself to the central chair of the dining table where the patriarch of the family usually sits. In another notable scene he, his wife and sister-in-law go for dinner at a relative's place. When the host/uncle draws comparison between himself and Shammy as men who chose to live in wife's house, Shammy humiliates him for living on the income of his wife who is working abroad and for taking care of cooking and other house chores in her absence. He clarifies that he does not like the comparison as he has a job and is not living off his wife's income. Also, he does not approve of men being in the kitchen. He, through his strange behavior which seems to be incomprehensible for his wife, her mother and the sister-in-law, creates a kind of fear in their mind and also in the minds of the boys in the neighborhood who usually play outside the house. He is also shown as doing moral policing (which usually the hero centric movies show as part of the heroism of the star) when he barges into the Home Stay attached to their house because his African American female guest took her boyfriend Bonny to

her room. He yells that it is “against our culture, this is not America” and that he “will not let prostitution happen”. In the climax scene of the movie, he is shown as physically overpowering and torturing the women of the family when he comes to know about the sister in law’s plan to elope with Bobby. In the violent altercation at midnight with the four brothers who come to check on Baby Mol, Shammy, who acts almost as if he is psychotic, pronounces that ‘Shammy is a hero’. Even at midnight he is well groomed and wears a formal outfit inside his house. When the brothers see him, they point this out and it invokes laughter in the audience. But the fact that usually heroes in the movies are well groomed even at midnight for fight scenes invokes satire. It is possible to read that it is his obsession to be a hegemonic masculine figure and hero in a cinematic sense that makes him psychotic. There can be a criticism of the film for making hegemonic masculinity which barges into toxicity as a psychiatric disorder of the character at an individual level. But if we place the characterization of Shammy at a larger level of the society it represents, another reading that hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy itself are disorders of the society which need treatment too, is possible.

Shammy’s failed attempts to exercise hegemonic masculinity is what makes his character a caricature of movie hero and through his characterization *KN* makes a satire of the alpha male heroes in Malayalam movies of the earlier decades. When Shammy performs the usual deeds of the heroes of popular movies like being the authoritative patriarch of the house, keeping the women of the family under control and thus safeguarding the status of the family, fighting with enemies, demanding fear and respect, sporting perfectly chiselled moustache and costume even at odd times and situations, emotional restraint, aversion towards cooking etc. which projected them as proper ‘hegemonic masculine’ figures who command the appreciation of the audience, it brings a thoughtful smile to the faces of the audience while watching *Kumbalangi Nights*.

The Other Masculinities

The four half-brothers Saji, Bonny, Bobby and Franky are characterized in contrast to Shammy in terms of hegemonic masculine ideals. Except the school going Franky, all the other brothers are in a sense aimless and without a plan about their lives. They do not have an income generating job, they are not well groomed and dressed, they do not exercise control or command

respect from anybody, they do not engage in any stereotypical ‘manly’ activities like fighting with enemies, doing physically hard labour etc. Let us look at a few scenes from the movie which highlight the follies of hegemonic masculinity and the need to accept human fragility beyond gender performances of masculinity or femininity prescribed by society.

Saji, the elder brother, survives on the income of a Tamilian friend, Murugan, who makes a living by ironing clothes. The former tries to commit suicide when his brother and Murugan mention that he is surviving by exploiting the labour of his friend. However, while trying to save Saji from suicide attempt, Murugan meets with tragic death. The death of his friend caused by himself, even though unintentionally, shatters Saji (and in a sense becomes a turning point of his life). In one of the most important scenes of the movie, Saji says that he wants to cry but not being able to do so, feels emotionally sick; he asks his youngest brother Franky whether he has any scholarship money left with him and also requests him to take Saji to a psychologist. He opens up with the psychologist and cries inconsolably. It was one of its kind of scene for Malayalam cinema as it showed the necessity to seek medical help when troubled with psychological issues and for showing men too as emotional, human and thus vulnerable and in need of support. Saji’s characterization breaks the hierarchical relation between siblings and also the unnecessary burden of emotional restraint the need to perform almost impossible hegemonic masculinity puts on men.

In the characterization of Bobby, we can see a potential Shammy who wishes to perform hegemonic masculinity. But within the narrative of the movie, he is made to realize that it is something undesirable and unwanted; it is terminated at the stage of its germination itself, using the female character Baby Mol, his lover. Bobby shouts at his lover, ‘I am a man, remember that’, when she slaps him for trying to kiss her without her consent at a movie theater. In a sense it is his desire to be a hegemonic masculine figure that she slaps into its place. Later on, we see Bobby’s character evolving into accepting the reality of his own weaknesses as a person and the uniqueness and beauty of the imperfections of his family. The growth of the character is shown as happening through his relationship with Baby Mol, who is shown to be empathetic and understanding him, with all his frailty. Bobby who was reluctant to take up his community occupation (something that he is good at and seems to be enjoying as opposed to a repetitive

factory job from which he runs away) due to status consciousness, understands his passion and skill in fishing through his conversation with Baby Mol and becomes ready to do it as a means of livelihood. Bobby, who initially tried to perform stereotypical masculinity, is later on seen as emotionally more matured and being able to shed tears beside his lover when she asks the most pertinent question about his family (which affects all the four brothers); ‘how many fathers and mothers do you have?’, a question which points to the fact that they have different parents (a point to which the article will look into later in the section on family).

Bonny seems to be enjoying the company of his African American girl friend and his friends claim that he started playing mouth organ beautifully like never before after being with her. He starts visiting his house, which he hesitated to do earlier due to the scuffle between his brothers and the uncordial situation in his house. Franky seems to be the boy who is coming of age understanding the transformations in his brothers’ lives. It is notable that a positive transformation happens in the lives of the brothers after their encounters with the women. Saji brings home his deceased friend’s wife and her newborn baby for post-delivery and neonatal care. Bonny brings home his girlfriend and Bobby marries Baby Mol at the end of the film narrative. The four brothers are characterized as humane and thus vulnerable in contrast to the characterization of Shammy, who tries hard to perform hegemonic masculinity.

IV

Critique of the concept of Normative Patriarchal Family

‘How many mummies and daddies do you have?’ is the question which emotionally affects all the four brothers in the movie. It is also the central question around which the movie makes the audience think about the power structures and constructed nature of the celebrated patriarchal family. The question is posed by Baby Mol to Bobby in the most playful manner during one of their romantic meetings while lying beside him. But the scene cuts into Saji, the elder brother opening up to the psychologist about the same issue: he confesses, ‘it gets into all of us when people say that we are born out of different fathers’. Telling this Saji cries his eyes out in an equally emotional and funny scene. (After the emotional outpouring Saji seems to regain himself, accepting the realities of his life.)

Franky, the younger brother, calls his house ‘the worst house in the panchayath’. The half built house without doors is literally and metaphorically incomplete. As Shammy points out to Saji when he meets him to ask for Baby Mol’s hand in marriage for Bobby, it is not a respectable family as per social standards. All the brothers are not born of a single marriage; they are half-brothers. The four brothers became a family as Saji’s father (who was a widower) married Bonny’s mother (who was a widow). They then gave birth to Bobby and Franky. When the father passed away, the mother left the house and joined a religious congregation. Thus the brothers and the house became devoid of a patriarch or a matriarch or a head of the family. The brothers’ attempt to bring the mother back to home, even if for a few days as the presence of the mother could make it a ‘proper’ family in the eyes of Shammy and the society, fails as the mother disagrees to come back to family life.

As opposed to the family of the brothers, Shammy has a ‘respectable’ and ‘proper’ middle class Hindu family. The only thing which disturbs Shammy is the fact that he is living in his wife’s house. He tries to overcome that shame which a patriarchal society puts on a man who lives in his wife’s house by assuming the position of the breadwinner and by trying to act as the protector and master of the three women in the house. He tries to be the patriarch of the house both symbolically and literally in the scene where he shrewdly shifts into the chair at the head of the dining table. Shammy’s dialogue, “*nalla kudumbagnalkku oru samskaram und* (good families have a culture)” is ridiculed in the movie. The inside of the ‘*nalla kudumbam*’, or good family as Shammy calls it, is not as good as it seems from the outside. In a sense, decoding the idea of ‘good/respectable middle class family’ is one of the major themes the movie puts forth. Our set understanding about ‘proper’ middle class families as the space of ideal domestic contentment, as usually represented in popular movies, is shattered in KN. The interior of the house is the site of powerplay: women are most often living in constant fear; it is the space of the most violent attacks, physical and emotional, against women and children. Many a time, it is through violence that the ‘good’ family is kept intact. Reflecting the contemporary times when ‘honour killings’ are committed to prevent girls from marrying outside the caste, the final violent attack on the women of the family by Shammy, to prevent Baby Mol from eloping with Bobby, can be read as an act of violence for safeguarding the honour of the ‘good’ family by the hegemonic masculine figure who assumes himself as the patriarch and the hero.

Meanwhile, ‘the worst house in the panchayath’ of the four brothers changes into another/alternate model of family. The change becomes possible for the house and the men, interestingly with the coming in of or through the relationship with unconventional women characters. Saji brings in his deceased Tamil friend's wife and the newborn baby to the house for post delivery and newborn care. Bonny brings in his African American girlfriend and Bobby marries Baby Mol. The women who are inside are not the stereotypical submissive women. A recently widowed Tamil woman with her newborn baby, the African American tourist, the Hindu girl who decided to marry a Christian boy, are all questioning prevalent ideas about endogamy, ethnicity, caste, religion, race etc. which are so central to the concept of ‘proper family’. Saji and Bonny, who are not related by blood, are the people who share the ‘thickest connection’ as the movie says.

As one of the reviewers of the film puts it, *Kumbalangi Nights* builds on two contradictory families and depicts how the virtuous ‘normal’ patriarchal household could reveal itself to be extremely poisonous and destructive while the apparently immoral/ ‘abnormal’ house could be an abode of love and empathy (John 2019). KN can be read as a movie which makes us think about the institution of family. As Lipin Ram in his reading of the film puts it, “.....KN has the question of family at its heart. This tale of four brothers—Saji, Bonny, Bobby and Franky, who turn out in the end to be each other’s true ‘keepers’ despite their individual travails and mutual conflicts—is remarkable for many reasons” (Ram 2019). He notes that what makes a family was a question the social sciences tried to answer for long. A shared acknowledgement of genealogy and shared ‘primary’ substances, i.e., blood, bone and semen was given as an answer. In the contemporary times, when the idea of kinship has come up against its limits with same-sex marriage, adoption and surrogate parenthood challenging the existing normative and structural understandings around the institution of family, *KN* offers an alternate model of family based on love, empathy and virtue.

V

The Assertive and Agential Women of Kumbalangi

The female characters in the film, even the characters that appear for a short while, are portrayed as having agency and being determined about the course of their lives. For instance, Sumeesha, who is Baby Mol's colleague and Bobby's friend's lover, retorts to Bobby's comment regarding her lover not being good looking in strong words. She says that in her eyes he is handsome and he looks like Vinayakan, a Malayalam film star. It is notable that Vinayakan himself is an actor from Dalit community who does not fit into the conventional social standards of male beauty. The mother of the four half-brothers stands strong in her decision not to go back to family life even if for a few days, despite the sons' pleas. She stands firm in her decision to be with the religious congregation and to do her responsibilities there which she finds more important at that point of her life. In a usual popular film narrative, the mother who willfully decides to leave the family, leaving her sons alone might have been portrayed as a 'bad' woman. But in *KN* the narrative of the film makes the viewers understand and respect the decision of the woman/mother as an individual's will. Shammy's wife Simi who initially seems to be a meek housewife raises her voice when her husband shouts at her sister Baby Mol. She directly asks him to speak politely to her sister even if he considers himself as brother-in-law or brother and it is one of the most celebrated scenes from the movie. She asks for respectful behavior within relationships. She demands respect for her younger sister and her opinions as an individual and sternly reminds him not to misuse the hierarchical power of being the brother. Sathi, the pregnant wife of Saji's TAMILIAN friend Murugan, behaves in a composed manner and decides not to name Saji in her husband's death with the understanding that he did not harm her husband willfully. Her decision transforms Saji's life— he becomes a responsible individual and also decides to take care of her and the newborn baby. Nylah, the African American girlfriend of Bonny, is not affected by the moral policing of Shammy who throws her out of the home stay for bringing in her boyfriend to her room. She instead kisses her boyfriend publicly in front of him as an act of retaliation. Baby Mol is a confident and self reflexive girl who is very well aware of herself and the people she comes into contact with. She has complete control over her life; she takes initiative in proposing to Bobby. She is aware that Bobby is not very smart, does not have a proper job and is a

Christian. Yet she is confident about his innate goodness and their love. She is empathetic in understanding Bobby's non-normative family history and his inability to be in a repetitive industrial job. It is her love and empathy that helps Bobby to accept his passion for fishing as a profession and eliminate his sense of shame regarding his job as a fisherman due to status consciousness. She literally slaps away his tendency to be another potential Shammy or a hegemonic masculine figure when he tries to kiss her without her consent. The coming of age of Bobby to adulthood happens through the intervention of Baby Mol. When Shammy says that Bobby is 'not born to a single father', she replies by saying that 'it is technically not possible for anybody to have multiple fathers'. It is a sentence which implies her biological sexual knowledge which girls are not supposed to express in a middle-class family. The answer provokes Shammy's male ego. Baby Mol decides to elope with her lover when Shammy rejects her desire to marry Bobby. She is the female character who gets maximum screen time and she is one of the bold female characters which the Malayalam film industry has produced recently. In a sense her strong decisions have an effect on everybody else's life within the film narrative. The female characters in the film are assertive and ask themselves to be accepted as equals in relationships. They are not passive spectators or adjuncts to male characters; they take decisions and direct their destiny. And as already mentioned in the earlier section, it is the presence of these strong women that transforms the men and the families.

VI

Towards a conclusion

KN belongs to the category of 'New Generation' films in Malayalam. The films after the first decade of the twenty first century are generally considered as belonging to this category. *Traffic* (2011) is considered as one of the initial films which inaugurated the New Generation trend in Malayalam. The New Generation movies "promised an end to the long standing crisis of the industry marked according to some commentators by an irrational dependence on superstar system and the subsequent compromise of the quality of the story among many others" (Kadavath 2017). We can also see that these films are, many a time, low budget movies and directed by newcomers. They are most often realist films, which hold a mirror against the shallowness of middle class life and assumptions, whether it is questions of family, gender, caste

or religion. The coming in of what is generally termed as ‘New Generation’ films in Malayalam actually opened up the possibility to look back at the toxicity of the super star/ hero centric movies in terms of gender and caste. The hegemonic masculine characters placed in upper caste feudal backgrounds played by Mohanlal and Mammotty which actually made them the superstars of Malayalam film industry are satirized in *KN* (Pillai 2017). *KN* can be used as a representative New Generation movie or a pivot to historically understand the making of the hero in Malayalam films especially from the 1990s to the early 2000s as it is the period which saw the emergence of larger than life hero centric films. It is also the time during which as Jenney Rowena argues the remasculinization of the Malayalam cinema and culture happened (Rowena 2002). New Generation films reveal that it was through the subordination of subaltern men and women (of all class/caste), the stardom of the superstars was built up and celebrated in the narrative of the superstar films. A detailed comparative analysis is beyond the scope of this article and is deferred for another time.

Note

¹It is the advent of online platforms like Amazon Prime, Netflix etc with subtitled versions of regional language films which made it accessible across the country. *Kumbalangi Nights* is listed by many movie reviewers outside Kerala as one among the must watch Indian films of 2019.

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