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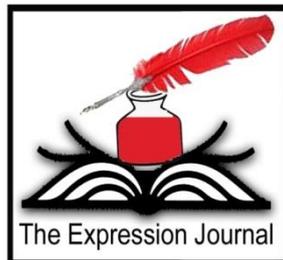
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**CUSTOMISED CAST(E)S: INDRANS AND SUBORDINATE MASCULINITY  
IN MALAYALAM CINEMA**

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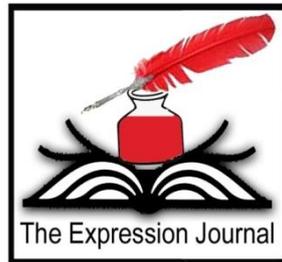
**Abstract**

The paper entitled “Customised Cast(e)s: Indrans and Subordinate Masculinity in Malayalam Cinema” is an analysis of the dynamics of subordinate masculinity in Malayalam cinema with reference to Indrans, a Keralite actor, and his characters. His oeuvre has been categorised into Early, Later and Contemporary films for convenience of analysis and marking the noticeable progress or change. Bringing in the theoretical approach of animalization in comedy, this paper looks into how the subordination of the characters underwent a fixture in the initial comedies. In the later serious roles, he ‘lacks’ the ideal masculine features, and is maintained subordinate. In *Home*, both these elements are integrated to balance the lead role with the historically evolved visual patterns of a casteist patriarchy to keep it as a specimen of subordinate masculinity. The paper further argues that he is cast into the mould of the subordinate masculinity envisioned by the Malayalam cinema as a foil to the idealized hegemonic masculinity, normally, the hero. Movies such as *CID Unnikrishnan BA*, *BEd*, *Vadhu Doctor Aanu*, *Kadhavaseshan*, *Oru Pennum Randanum*, *Udalaazham*, *Kinar*, *Budhanum Chaplinum Chirikkunnu*, *Aalorukkam*, *Apothecary*, *Veyil Marangal* and *Home* have been used as the texts for juxtaposition and comparison for the study.

**Keywords**

Malayalam Cinema, Hegemonic Masculinity, Caste, Subordinate Masculinity, Idealized Masculinity, Animalization, Lack.

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## **CUSTOMISED CAST(E)S: INDRANS AND SUBORDINATE MASCULINITY IN MALAYALAM CINEMA**

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Malayalam moviedom has been an unwavering domain of hegemonic masculinity. As Masculinity studies began to explore questions of masculine hierarchies and gendered power appropriations, the link between hegemony and “cultural dominance in the society as a whole” with “the specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men” (Connell 78) also began to be analysed. Any cultural discourse on masculinity should locate films as its unambiguous primary locus, and should not misconstrue that “the most visible bearers of hegemonic masculinity are always the most powerful people. They may be exemplars, such as film actors, or even fantasy figures, such as film characters” (Connell 77). Along with the social history of Kerala, the 80 years of Malayalam cinema history, as A C Sreehari observes, is *his* story, “The films, made by the Malayalee men”, in their turn, serving their purpose “by reconstructing them.” (Proceedings I. H. C1242)

The dynamics of hegemonic masculinity in Kerala society and the corresponding representations on the screen have been further intrigued by the role of caste in shaping the Kerala modernity. “Caste has played a key role in firming up and shaping modernity in Kerala. Its unique form of *jati* (caste) was radically distinct from other states in India” (Pillai 103). A new patriarchy was drafted as the cornerstone of heteronormative patriarchal paradigm in the modernised social set up.

A new patriarchy was created in Kerala through the community movements that sought to reform caste, but the process of which was essentially worked out through reform of the family and marriage systems. This gendering of social reform brought the women of Kerala under a paternal patriarchal hierarchy fuelled and strengthened by caste. The caste associations legitimized themselves

by modernizing the sexual and conjugal under the sign of the patriarchal. (Pillai 106)

Jati, derived from the Sanskrit *jāta*, means “born” or “brought into existence,” and indicates a form of existence determined by birth (britannica.com). As caste is deeply integrated into all social realms, “within the given hegemonic gender ideology,” the sort of “caste” stigma that the nonhegemonic marginalised undergo in the Indian context is almost similar to the cultural subordination that the homosexuals face in the “contemporary European/American society.” Such heteronormative hegemonic ideals are found manifesting themselves in the “casteist patriarchy” (Rowena 10) in Kerala society. Transmitted and inherited through cultural memory, they lie deeply and inherently embedded in the social/cultural domains.

This is duly reflected in the representations and hierarchizations of masculinity on the Malayalam screen. As a part of crisis in masculinity, the concept of “the singular ‘moral’ hero was abandoned for a bunch of incompetent men, many of them from nonhegemonic locations” (Rowena 16) in the Malayalam “laughter films” in and around 1980s and 90s. Any other representation, feminine or non-hegemonic, often became the source of fun there. Comedy, which was not an independent element of Malayalam cinema until 1980s, began to break in at this juncture. On the other hand, “the comedian represented the hero’s other” (Venkiteswaran 31) also.

Employing the subaltern body of Indrans as a part of “othering” in Malayalam movies, in an awkward looking diegetic situation with off-key dialogues and bizarre body language, definitely, offers a comic visual treat to the audience. His characters undergo double marginalization as his body as well as figure is placed as a specimen of a cast(e) out and the representation of the subordinate masculinity. As subordinate masculinity is largely counter to hegemonic heteronormative masculinity in the Indian/Keralite context of “the historically constituted visual sensibility” (Parayil 91), it almost assumes a status of queerness in the undercurrents of caste.

Though the subaltern body features of Krisnankutty Nair, N.L. Balakrishnan and some other actors were treated as “comic” in Malayalam cinema, Indrans’s stand out with incongruous nonhegemonic features embedded in it. What Parayil concludes about the body of Kalabhavan Mani is equally applicable and true to many other comedians on Indian screen, and in particular to Indrans:

The historically rooted caste markedness on his body and its difference, and submissive comedy gestures function as objects of laughter. In other words, within the domain of caste binaries, the subaltern presence, their inabilities, inhibitions, spontaneous acts, ignorance, language, tastes and behaviors always prompt humour and laughter. (Parayil 79-80) A closer look into the career trajectory of Indrans would bring this out. The attempt here is to look into the way his screen persona was envisaged, engineered or appropriated, and how it underwent an evolution of type roles and screen positions in his career so far. It also enquires how his body was used as a specimen of Keralite subordinate masculinity consistently by Malayalam cinema imaginary.

Very broadly, the roles he has performed so far can be classified into three: the early side-kick comic roles, the later serious submissive characters, and the contemporary pseudo-serious ones. Most of the roles earmarked for him during the first two decades were that of the satellites who used to fill the gaps on the screen/ plot, presenting him always as a butt of the

fun. These were made all the more notable with the names his characters bore, or the tasks they were assigned in these films. Indrans — the actor and his characters — had only the capital of the traits of subalternity: the resource of “an unusually thin physique” (Sen) during the early-phase-movies. It was simply unimpressive and outlandish with impulsive facial expressions and a voice verging on the bounds of female pitch. His sharp timings of dialogue delivery clubbed together with the flashes of obvious submissive-comic-withdrawal-gestures made “the audience laugh riotously whenever they saw his figure on the screen.” (Sen) Gradually, he grew to become an “everlasting laughing butt on the Mollywood screen” (Jyothish). In his four-decade experience on and off the screen, he always keeps a low profile, neither making any tall claims about his achievements, nor trying to reiterate his presence anywhere in Malayalam moviedom. “That I am a film persona is the eighth world wonder”, says Indrans. (Jyothish)

He appeared on the scenario of Malayalam cinema as an assistant costume designer, and stayed there for a while. Though he had made his appearance in *Choothattam* directed by K. Sukumaran Nair in 1981, his entry into it still took time. It was his role as Unnikrishnan’s friend Kunju in *CID Unnikrishnan BA, BEd* by Rajasenan in 1994 that gave him a slot of his own in Malayalam moviedom. Following this, he began to be cast in noteworthy sidekick roles with some marks of character identity. His stereotype roles were initially limited either as a *Karyasthan* (steward), a servant, a shopkeeper, a ‘marriage broker’ (professional match maker), an auto driver, an assistant of the protagonist, or some comedic other.

Even a cursory glance on to the nature of ‘Indrans characters’ in Malayalam cinema would make certain patterns clear. In the initial years, the marginal role mainly given to him dallied with body shaming, insinuating the incongruity of a male body with its attendant meek, “comic” features. Dr. C.S. Venkiteswaran quotes Umberto Eco to postulate the factors that contribute to the comic element in movies, where “our pleasure is a mixed one because we enjoy not only the breaking of the rule, but also the disgrace of an animal-like individual.” (Venkiteswaran 7). He adds that “This animalisation of the comedian is something that so often happens in Indian cinema” (Venkiteswaran 7).

This animalization factor is very much conspicuous in the early films of Indrans where the strategy is of blatant animalization or merciless expressions of body shaming. “Earthworm”, “water-snake”, “umbrella crook”, “*elumban*” (skinny), “soda-bottle”, etc. were quite popular attributes of him during this time. Kunju in *CID Unnikrishnan* is called an “earthworm” by CID Prem Shankar (Maniyanpilla Raju). In *Darling Darling*, Vattaparambil Unnithan (Janardanan) details his (Indrans’s) feature as “the shape of a water-snake and the gluttony of a python”; in *Gandhian*, his character Udumbanchola Narayanan has an “*elumbubody*” (skinny body); in *James Bond*, his prospective condition after sharing a night with the heroine is compared to that of “a frog pounded by a heavy truck”; in *Kalyana Saugandhikam*, Mampully (Jagathy Sreekumar) taunts Krishnankutty (Indrans) asking if he is the *karinkurangu* (macaque) brought from abroad for preparing the ayurvedic *rasayana* (potion). His name Natheli in *Vadhu Doctor Aanu* suggests names of two creatures blended into one: *nath* (owl) and *eli* (mouse), further hinting at *natholi*, the name of a small fish used to indicate something puny in Malayalam. Overt as well as covert examples of animalizing strategy can be seen applied ‘casually’ and invariably to the characters of Indrans in this phase. This animalisation process has been internalised by the actor himself as he says, “I was not sad when I got nicknames like ‘umbrella crook’ and ‘soda bottle’” (Sen), and he liked people

watching him as a monkey, while doing a comic scene. (Jyothish). Even in *Kadhavaseshan*, the animalisation tag is maintained in his name Thorappan Vasu, where “thorappan” means a bandicoot. Thus, it was a commonplace and explicit practice on the part of Malayalam cinema to animalize him during the early phase of his career.

Thorappan Vasu in *Kadhavaseshan*, directed by T.V. Chandran in 2004, placed him in the shoe of a remarkable character. The easily definable and unmistakable motely role handmade for him by Malayalam cinema was disrupted here. The second phase of his career begins here as he was gradually thrown into the costumes of serious roles. The award-winning character, Joseph, father of Subin, in *Apothecary* directed by Madhav Ramdas in 2014 and Indraguptan in *Buddhanum Chaplinum Chirikkunnu* by R. Sarath in the same year paved a totally new path for him along with the roles of grandfathers, (aged) Gandhian, desolate men in old age, and so on. Majority of these later-phase characters put him in the garb of an old man- helpless, submissive and marginal in many respects. This pattern was kept up in a large number of movies of this phase.

These second-phase films set another typecast for him: that of a serious, reticent, helpless and submissive man of some responsible familial positions. Ultimately, they all end up as failures. Mukri Ermullan in *Raamanam* is a character worth mentioning as the actor has succeeded in bringing out the submissive male character on to the screen close to perfection. In *Apothecary*, he won the special mention of the state award jury for the character of Joseph, father of Subin Joseph (Jayasurya), as this character bore histrionic elements close to real life. In *Munroe Thuruth*, Grandfather Achu is another face of masculinity, compliant, yet prone to wielding power. Likewise, Gandhi Moidu in *God Say* gives us an exact replica of an outmoded and reserved character in our age: outdated, yet adhering to the core of convictions he holds. Khadar Uppappa in *Kinar* is a resigned, but solid character. In 2018, the open-air crematorium keeper Moorthy Chettan in *Udalaazham*, directed by Unnikrishnan Aavala, presents another stoic and apathetic character integrated to the thematic core of the film. Father of Abhimanyu from Vattavada in *Padmavyuhathile Abhimanyu* by Vineesh Aaradhya in 2019 impresses the viewer by the artless rusticity of a character of similar hues. All these movies place him in a slot of masculinity which is nonhegemonic, submissive and entangled in the maze of gender constructs. He is unlike the self-asserting idealisedhero who usually surmounts all these with his superlative masculine traits.

During this phase, Malayalam cinema cast him into crucial serious character roles. It definitely draws upon his subordinate position and submissive nature. Movies like, *God Say*, *Aami*, *Kinar*, *Oolu* followed this pattern. In all these texts, his characters were marginal, though appropriated with due screen space and respect. *Aalorukkam*, *Mohabathin Kunjabdulla*, *Veyil Marangal*, *Velukakka Oppu Kaa* and *Home* pitched him as the central characters.

An analytical look into the way in which the protagonists are set in the selected films will be helpful to explore the dynamics of subordinate masculinity in these movies. In *Apothecary*, he is a father left vulnerable with the terminal malady of his son, caught up in the mire of paternal trials and tribulations. As he could not afford the medical expenditure, he would lack the filial support that an aged father expects in the Keralite culture. In *Munroe Thuruth*, again, he is old and stranded in an island with his grandson to whose whims and fancies he reschedules his responses. In *God Say*, the image of an antiquated ghost of a Gandhian who has to carry the burden of an ideology in a merciless milieu has been effectively

portrayed. This character is a foil to the younger generation Gandhian, Harichandran, played by Vinay Forrt.

When Rajesh James deliberates on the issues of queerdom in Malayalam cinema, with reference to some of the mainstream movies (*Chandupottu*, in particular), he engages on the representation of Radhakrishnan,

Radha is represented as a male who is lacking in masculinity. This 'lack' is what sets the narrative in motion and captures the audience's attention. Radha's presence becomes a form of spectacle, which is squeaky way of talking and his effeminate mannerisms. (Drummond 385)

Similarly, in a closer analysis of the stereotyping of the Indrans characters in the aforementioned films, one can observe the presence of a male 'lacking' in some of the masculine features. This 'lack' of agency or limited agency apportioned to his characters by the gendered Malayalam cinematic imaginary prepares the ground for the submissiveness integrated into them. Muraleedharan observes, "Within the discursive logic of patriarchy, masculine represents phallic power, i.e., the power of domination/penetration." (Narrain and Gautam 143). This masculine domination is exactly what is lacking here.

In the following major films of the latter half, *Aalorukkam*, *Kinar*, *Mohabbathin Kunjabdulla*, *Velukkakka Oppu Kaa*, his is the role of a father/man searching for his son/beloved to fill the vacuum of the 'lack'. *Aalorukkam* won him the Kerala State Film Award for the Best Actor, for donning the aged character Pappu Pisharadi, an *Ottan Thullal* artiste. During the first half of the movie, Pappu Pisharadi is very active, verbal as well as physical. He is in town in search of his only son Sajeev who had left his house around 16 years ago. He meets with an accident there, and is taken to a hospital from where he is taken to the flat of his trans-son who has undergone a gender fixing surgery and adopted the name Priyanka. Pappu Pisharody is adamant and unwilling to take this new trans-person as his son/daughter. At the end, totally disappointed and psychically turbulent in realizing his son as a "Shikhandin", he comes out of the flat and gets trapped in the heavy traffic of the city. His marked silence in the second part of the film underlines his hopelessness about his agency.

*Kinar* posits him as an aged Muslim father trapped in the schematic pitfalls of the system, with a son put behind the bars, and the added guardianship of his daughter-in-law. That he entrusted his daughter-in-law into the safe hands of Indiramma (Jaya Bachan) portrays his absolute lack of agency.

Kunjabdulla in *Mohabbathin Kunjabdulla* shows some traits of agency while he is travelling back home from Mumbai after a long gap of four and half decades. But, factors like his old age, being a Muslim in the contemporary Indian context, very long term of expatriate life in Mumbai, a pricking conscience, etc. add to his compliance. When he ultimately meets his old heart-throb, it is with a shock that he realises the existence of a son of his own. Conclusively, he is stabbed by the same son, and this ends his search for the atonement of a past, putting him at the nadir of a manly life.

In 2021 movie *Velu Kakka Oppu Kaa*, Velu resembles many striking features of the other characters mentioned earlier. Velu also is a subaltern by nature as he is a Dalit labourer living with his wife and working in a customary rustic workspace. His juxtaposition with his son, working and living with his family in the city space introduces another level of his second-class citizenship. In the concluding half of the film, it is like a surreal vision that Velu pays a visit to

his son's house in the city with his wife. In the comparatively long sequences of the movie which make him a part of his son's households, keeping up the stark contrasts in their social strata and status, nowhere we come across his son. Later, it is after their return to the village that his son goes there in search of his parents and comes to know of their recent passing. The image of a vulnerable old man in search of filial support in his dotage, as in *Aalorukkam*, is drawn quite neatly to bring in his helplessness. The reticent father in this movie lacks all the agency and disappears from the earth at its zenith. Thus, in all these films, the actor is given character roles of marginal/submissive nature so that his identity and subjectivity are cast aside, and, in turn, is projected subordinate.

Indraguptan, the protagonist in *Budhanum Chaplinum Chirikkunnu* (2014), stands out as a square peg in the round hole of his comic characters. Occurring almost at the mid part of the second phase, it stands out with many a parallel between the actor's own comedic-life and that of the character. The last monologue of the protagonist in the movie, "Was this character made for the actor in me, or did the director detect this character in me?" problematizes his career and self on the seesaw of comic characterization and deep-rooted existential angst. No other film has ever made such a genuinely tailor-made role for the actor, blending both his strain of humour and the inbuilt submissive comic gestures of his anguished self.

*Home*, a contemporary mainstream Malayalam movie demarcates itself from the other movies, inaugurating the third phase in his career launching him as the central character for the first time in the mainstream. Differing from the other ongoing Indrans characters that bear the brunt of age, the vivacity of the character creates the impression of youthfulness in him. He keeps his hair black, dyeing, and sustains his zealous approach towards life and contemporary technology. He wants to be tech savvy, and tries to catch up with the youngsters. The focus given to the character is definitely prominent and fundamentally different from his earlier characters.

The name of the character Oliver Twist is indicative of an unprotected childhood, suggesting the prospects of his vulnerability. Deviating from the customary titling patterns of mainstream Malayalam cinema where normally the hero's name turns into the title, the movie tactically substitutes it with 'Home'. It insinuates the "lack" of his name to generate any ripple in the patriarchal grid of Malayalam cinema so as to place it as the title of the movie. Oliver Twist in the movie is meek like an orphan in a "hospital" on many situations in the house. All the other three males in the house, his father Appachan, elder son Antony and the younger one Charles, have a cleanly established masculine identity. Oliver has always to be at their beck and call on many contexts inside the home and outside. Thus, the title perhaps indicates that Malayalam cinema is taking/placing "home" the issues of submissive masculinity from its margins to the centre of domesticity. It also ingeniously suggests its reluctance to acknowledge the same openly before the world through the title while keeping up the subordinate position of the lead character intact.

The repeated opening shots of Mickey, the fish caught up in a tumbledown aquarium, are juxtaposed to that of Oliver visually equating to his status in the house. That Antony keeps a chiding look and grave attitude towards him throughout the film, and Charles is bothered by his father's clumsy childish mode of attempting to master the nuances of smart phone technology show the neglected existence of this character. Oliver is busily trying to define his own masculine agency to catch up with a generation that has already commenced it on the wings of technological gadgets. He is presented as a total oddball through the use of "What

soap” instead of “What’s app”, and “clay max” for “climax”, resulting in his incongruity in the home circle. Priya’s father Joseph Lopez, “a writer and quite an inspiring personality”, is also a “Daddy” to Antony. Comparing himself to Joseph, Oliver feels his 60 years’ life futile, as there is nothing “extraordinary” in it. When he voluntarily washes Antony’s car, Charles prods him to wash his bike also. Similarly, in the clothes shop as Joseph asks Oliver to take his photo, he bungles it as he does not know the nuances of his new smartphone. Antony shouts at Oliver for upsetting his sit-together with actor Vishal (Anoop Menon) for a script discussion. Back at home after this event, when an infuriated Antony swears at Vishal and the producer, it was given an accidental, unintentional FB live by Oliver, further exposing his “lack” of the mastery of technical devices. This further makes the career prospects of Antony topsy-turvy. Oliver goes to a psychologist, one Dr. Franklin, quite casually, maintaining his composure, and Suryan, his friend, likens him to the comic character *Luttappi* [a cute, innocent imp noted for his cheekiness and cowardice.] to fill the gap of the old hag *Dakini* there. This is a clear example of animalisation in this movie. He turns into a muted presence everywhere. He tells Suryan, “I, too, am a comedy now”. *Home* tries to compensate the character for the package of ridicule he undergoes with a childhood act of heroic trait, bringing in a clear tone of balancing. Thus, the much glorified and sympathised Indrans (lead) character in *Home* incurs both the questions of “lack” in the first half and comedic animalisation in the second part of the film. In other terms, the cycle of both halves of his screen life gets completed here in this mainstream movie, simultaneously trying to cover it up slyly under the narrative carpet of balancing hegemonies with pseudo seriousness.

While drawing a comparison with Kalabhavan Mani’s “typecast(e)ing” (Parayil 91), and the “mismatch between signs of modernity and selfhood” (Venkiteswaran 66) in the case of Srinivasan, Indrans “characteristically” maintains a subordinate position of masculinity and readily exudes his submissive disposition both on and off the screen. Concluding his observations on the Srinivasan persona in Malayalam cinema where “the imagination of a subaltern character as a ‘secular, modern, democratic’ subject is inconceivable,” C. S. Venkiteswaran observes, “In a way, Srinivasan represents the stubbornness of the margins – something that refuses to dissolve in the past or History, or to disappear beyond the pale of our vision” (Venkiteswaran 66). Similarly, while reviewing the typecast(e)ing of Kalabhavan Mani, Sujith Parayil concludes:

When Mani started acting as a hero, he had to satisfy the dominant form of the historically constituted visual sensibility within which his appearance is nothing but a subaltern or a Dalit body, to support the spectator’s scopophilia, involving social fantasies and an idealized but historically constructed notion of ethnic communities. (Parayil 91)

From the trajectory of Indrans films, it may be concluded that the two approaches held towards him and his characters by Malayalam cinema imaginary are that of comedic animalisation with naturalised body shaming in the early part, and submissive silencing resulting from the “lack” of masculine agency in the latter half. Moreover, he/his characters are *not* like the Srinivasan characters.

Working its way through the system and its representational diversity, Srinivasan films/characters struggle with many hegemonic, reductive notions by subverting and inverting its centres from within. In a way, Srinivasan represents

the stubbornness of the margins - something that refuses to dissolve in the past or History, or to disappear beyond the pale of our vision. (Venkiteswaran 66)

Malayalam cinema imaginary quite “naturally” tried to design the garb of submissiveness for Indrans to keep him subordinated through and through. Consequently, he/his character was kept “an everlasting laughing stock” of Malayalam casteist mindset in the first part, and a target of cathartic sympathy towards his serious characters in the hierarchy of maledom.

Thus, the four-decade old career of Indrans highlights the patriarchal bias kept by the Malayalam cinema imaginary towards nonhegemonic bodies/masculinities. To conclude, “the remasculinisation in Malayalam films inaugurated by the comic films of 1980s and 90s” (Rowena 147) is coming to a full circle when the subordinate masculinity begins to conspicuously replace the hegemonic masculinities in the domestic domains there. Through these three phases of Indrans’s cinematic career, he/his character was treated subordinate in the hierarchies of caste and masculinity with roles designed for him accordingly. Patriarchal elements in Malayalam cinema still keep keen vigilance on the cast(e) prepared for Indrans and his characters, so that the discourses of masculinity can be given a false sense of mobility and seriousness. The historically formed hierarchical mindset and the visual sensibility lets Indrans- the actor- accept this “naturally”.

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