

Christina Romeo

Guest Faculty, Department of English

St. Stephens College

Uzhavoor, Kerala, India

christinaromeo1@gmail.com

Bindu Cherian

HOD, Department of English

St. Stephens College

Uzhavoor, Kerala, India

### *Varathan: An Outsider among Toxic Masculinities*

#### Abstract

The loud posturing of macho heroes from 1970s-80s cinema survived the much-touted return of romance in the 1990s. Today, Indian cinema offers heroes who unabashedly shed tears before their girlfriends and wives, who are not the benevolent bosses of the women in their lives, who are open about their vulnerability or at least do not compensate for displays of such emotion by letting their fists fly or by bullying women into falling for them. With *Varathan*, Mollywood witnesses the deconstruction of the masculine patriarch and its toxic traits. The paper is an attempt to register the change in notions of masculinity. The aim is not to argue that one notion or one kind of gender is better than the other rather that both masculinity and femininity is always in a state of transformation.

Keywords: *Varathan*, Toxic Masculinities, Gender Crisis, New-Man.

## Introduction

A film heavily influences and cyclically impacts society's culture. When distinct patterns are constantly being presented, the audience's perspective towards the world is altered. Films have always offered a window through which audiences could observe human nature at a distance. A theatre is where many a boy learned how to make things right, the way the actors did in countless iconic films, with either their fists or a gun. Men and women are often portrayed in stereotypical ways in media, reflecting their 'ideal image' for society. Men are typically portrayed in media as strong, assertive, powerful, and strong and usually shown as being unemotional and unattached. Gender roles assigned to women results in their portrayal as the exact opposite. They are shown as the backbone of the household, the caretakers who are weak, dependent, and passive personalities. Media portrayal of men does not allow them to be caring / emotional, while women are not allowed to be strong and demanding. This can all be misleading to a growing child or teenager because while they are still trying to socially construct their identities and genders, they are surrounded by influences that lean towards one side of the story.

Masculinity is portrayed in films as describing the 'traditional' man to objectify women, to be driven by sex, emotionally repressed, self-reliant, as well as avoid all facets pertaining to femininity. Rather than seeing a man cry in a film one desires them to turn violent or display an extremely stoic exterior. Men have occupied the centre-stage in media with the female counterparts usually playing the support staff of their lives. While men were marked out by their ability and desire to be the sole breadwinner, protector, and head of the household, a majority of heroines were and are stay-at-home wives and single women holding down ill-defined jobs or working in what are traditionally deemed 'women's

professions while they wait to fulfil the primary purpose of their existence, which is to be won over by the hero.

Some films, however, have decided to take a more mature and perceptive approach to what is slowly becoming a more widely discussed subject matter. In an era in which toxic masculinity has been so overwhelmingly present in politics and society, it's hard to overstate just how important it is that actors like Dulqar Salman, Nivin Pauly, Fahad Fazil etc. have strived to portray a male lead who defies expectations and in doing so are themselves helping to redefine what it means to be a 'man'. They have ditched the masculine 'lungi' wearing man and played bold unapologetic yet sensitive men. Films like *Traffic*, *22 Female Kottayam*, *Ohm Shanti Oshana*, *Neram*, *Bangalore Days* have all managed to be successful in the box office and gain critical acclaim, in spite of their ditching of the stereotype man. With filmmakers increasingly turning their lenses towards the role of the modern man, one look at the films and their deconstruction of society's fragile, outdated concept of masculinity.

The movie *Varathan* can be interpreted as marking a new definition of gender roles. Director Amal Neerad's *Varathan* revolves around a couple Aby (Fahadh Faasil) and Priya (Aishwarya Lekshmi). After Aby has a setback at his job and his wife Priya suffers a miscarriage, the couple decide to take a break from their life in Dubai. As things are not really good for them in Dubai, they have come to stay at Priya's remote ancestral property in a high range town in Idukki, where she had spent her childhood

Things take a bad turn when Priya is constantly harassed by the local youth, led by Josee (Sharafudeen). From the moment they land in the village, their presence is resented by the residents, truly making them the outsiders. From lecherous stares and moral policing glares to malevolent intentions and bullying, the couple have to confront several real world troubles as they reside in their house. All of which seem new to the city-bred and non-confrontational Aby. As the uninvited hassles – both mental and physical keep mounting and

Priya faces danger, he is forced to take a stand in his house. How the non-confrontational and soft-spoken Aby deals with the brash thugs makes up the rest of the movie.

The paper is an attempt to register the change in notions of masculinity and femininity. The aim is not to argue that one notion or one kind of gender is better than the other, but that both masculinity and femininity is always in a state of transformation. The representation of gender images is in no way straightforward. When an individual performs their gender role in the standards set by societal norms, the argument of gender essentialism is strengthened. Historically, men have assumed a dominant gender role, and women have been prescribed a role submissive to men. In order for subordination to go unquestioned, the structure must not appear as a cultural product – it must seem natural. In the current social climate, men are statistically more likely to perpetrate violence. As young boys grow up into men, stereotyped beliefs about gender are relentlessly reinforced at home, and through media such as film and television. The current moment of activism around film industry is as much about this inflated male, as it is about women speaking out. In this context, Amal Neerad's Malayalam movie, *Varathan* (the outsider), is a rightly timed one. It is about various dichotomies that we deal unknowingly within ourselves. It is also about shattering the myths of these age old expectations

A hero, who cries, not just by the inability to act, but by the pressure of expectations to rise up to the situation, is a rare substance in a popular movie. Masculinity and patriarchy, their origin and reign are discussed in contrast with each other in the movie *Varathan*. The male protagonist featured by Fahadh Fasil with ease have transcended into the 'layman'; an embodiment of all natural fears and incapacities buried deep within the subconscious, finally evolving into the epic man.

The movie opens with a shift from Dubai, the commercial capital of the new-world, after the failure of the hero, Aby (Fahadh Faasil), in impressing his interviewers. Subsequently

he is assured by his IT professional wife, Priya ( Aishwarya Lakshmy), to take his time in being successful, experimenting a little.

The movie kicks off by jilting the comfort zone of the couple Aby and Priya and urging them to take a break in a plantation bungalow where the wife spent her childhood. The property belongs to her father, who becomes an alter ego to the character Aby. The couple is thrown into a whirlwind of perils the moment they start their awaited holiday. The victimisation of the couple owing to the moral policing of the villagers is the central concept of the movie. The journey of Aby through the events that follow is prototypical of the journeys of all men who traversed against giant odds to protect their family.

#### Aby as an Outsider

Aby in *Varathan* is suave and restrained. Coming from a strong background, Priya is an educated and independent woman who is the epitome of immense inner strength, a true champion of femininity and the driving force behind her better half. There is a scene in *Varathan* where Aby and Priya are travelling in a taxi. She tenderly places her head on Aby's shoulder. The driver finds it absolutely appropriate to ogle at the couple through the car's rear-view mirror. Our leading man Aby is simply reticent or unassuming to observe it or to deal firmly with what could lead to an uneasy situation. It is Priya who acts instantly and wedges the voyeur off in seconds. One sees Priya repeat the same gesture of affection with Aby in a few more occasions. This act possibly signals that she subconsciously desires him to display the protective side that is expected normally from a husband. At the same time, Priya, the modern woman refuses to be the mute witness in the face of oppressive patriarchal system.

Here, both the characters show deviations from the stereotyped qualities of male and female. In order to maintain its comfort zone, society accepts the display of stereotyped sex

roles alone, which for the male becomes the toxic masculine persona, while for the female it is the submissive, damsel-in-distress one. But, the movie *Varathan* is filled with digressions from such type roles. Aby is romantic and feminine while Priya leads Aby. The film has a scene where Aby asks, and not demands as stereotypical males, not to kill a cockroach while Priya kills it anyway. It is Priya who demands her privacy here with the dialogue “Angane eppo ente vetil keru jeevikanda”. Priya takes a stand while Aby is moved by emotions, which one expects only from the female.

In almost every frame expect the climax, the director places Priya ahead of Aby in order to show who is in charge. In Jungian terms, a persona is the outer or social self that faces the world. For a male, it generally is hypermasculinity. It is the exaggeration of stereotyped masculine behaviour, that is, the males are supposed to compete with other men and dominate females by being aggressive, worldly, sexually experienced, insensitive, physically imposing, ambitious and demanding. These are rightly embodied by Josse and friends in the film. The Pappalil house reeks of toxic masculinity. The first frame of the house shows a man drinking alcohol and another man exercising, a visual frame with no females but with males in their toxic gender roles. In the whole scene, Aby comes as an outsider, a varathan, both literally and figuratively which is enhanced as Pappalil contractor calls him a varathan.

Aby's attitude and personality are in stark contrast to the other men in the village. The movie provides many snippets where it becomes established that Aby is truly a varathan in terms of standardised male roles. The scene where Priya complains about her missing clothes, Aby acts in a cold way, which is unacceptable for Priya. This calm behaviour escalates to a disgusting level during the mobile incident. It is Priya, who smashes the mobile while Aby is trying to stop her from doing so. Here, what one sees is a kind of role reversal where Priya takes charge of the situation. Aby opts for a peaceful discussion while Priya takes a more

violent and decisive step by cancelling the contract with Pappalil contractor, but nothing happens as Aby was pushed over by the contractor. So Aby becomes an outsider in the eyes of the patriarchal male society which is again pointed out by the director in the church scene. Aby is shown standing next to Priya and not with the other males signalling his non-belongingness to the category.

Josse and his pervert friends who consider themselves to be the embodiment of masculinity consider Aby to be a useless 'penn konthan' who helps his wife around the house, takes time to go out with her and has no hesitation to hold her hands even in public. He irritates them all the more because he happens to be a husband who would even contemplate cancelling the estate contract with the Pappali's on the sole reason that his wife is uncomfortable with the behaviour of Josse and the others while on the estate and thus would not like to continue the contract. Thus the main reason why they are not able to appreciate Aby is because he does not meet the definitions of 'masculinity' or the real 'man' as per their entrenched patriarchal notions. There is enough evidence to establish the fact that both male and female roles are socially constructed and the process of construction begins soon after birth. Inevitably, differences in the manner of bringing up a girl and a boy become evident to the small child who begins to imbibe these subtle indications. Starting from small things and simple do's and don'ts.

People in the village cling on to their narrow patriarchal attitude that the boy/man of the house can entertain himself with pervert activities even sexual assault and that there is nothing wrong in it. In such a case only the woman is to be blamed for inviting attention on herself. When Aby approaches Josse's father with complaints of Jossee trying to record Priya's bathroom scenes using his cell phone, the father typical of patriarchy sides up and supports his son with a statement that Jossee's phone was given for repair & that Aby and Priya were getting hyper for no reason at all. We are given an insight into the reality that

Jossee would not have grown up to be the pervert he is, if his background had not been so patriarchal. Thus the movie becomes a classic example of how social constructivism works in the society. Also, with the presence of Josse and others, the non-conformity of Aby to sex roles become more pronounced.

### Aby as a New-Man

The movie shows the steady decline of the traditional would be deemed toxic masculinities, along with the dawning of the new-man-as-nurturer, with his anti-sexist, caring and sharing characteristics was seen as an upholder of individualism and a bright new future for a more diverse masculinity (Deakin, 36).

Aby becomes the New-Man and the symbol of progressive gender politics. He is not toxic, aggressive and feels free to express his emotions and fears in front of his wife. The usual way in which men/women are seen to react to sexual assault is shattered in the movie, and the idea that a sexual assault does not tarnish the sanctity of a woman is upheld through the action of Abin and Priya, but the society never accepts such a deviation in gender roles which is shown through the conflicts within the central characters. It reflects the tension between the myth and the reality (deviation), between conforming and being different. The heroine, who constantly reminds her husband that he can take his time to be successful and earn, is torn between popular expectations and her personality. That discomfort comes out when she faces her mother's jibes about her jobless husband. At the same time, the final blurring out on the image of the lost father underlines this dichotomy. There is always that father (and even the grandfather) who is present in the house, as the symbol of the protective masculine patriarch whom she invokes at a crucial moment through the statement "had my father been here, things would not have ended up this way." As one sees Priya swaying

between the two poles of the dichotomy, we clearly understand that the pressure to give in to this patriarchal order is the constant conflict in the movie.

In the final 20 minutes of the movie, one may think that Abin has conformed to the designated sex-gender role, but that is not the case. The maker has intentionally choreographed the fight, not as a conventional hyper-real fantasy, but as a real fantasy, as realistic as possible. Here the hero does not fly up to breath-taking heights or fight in the air, instead he turns the mere household objects into tools and weapons for their survival. The right intervention of Priya at a point where Aby was losing his grounds, demands special mention because it reflects how the 'feminine counterpart' acts as the inevitable complement in a relationship, rather than a dependent or the one 'to be looked after'.

Aby and Priya's relationship is complementary rather than political. The rise of Aby as a masculine figure serves to uplift Priya. When she resorts to a solace that the perverts would not have dared a sexual assault on her if only her father had been alive, Aby cannot accept the degradation that she tries to bring upon herself. He cries lamenting the change in Priya because she was unconsciously echoing the patriarchal words of Manu (supposed to have lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC): "Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in her youth and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence."

Patriarchy links masculinity with power, independence, self-assertion, domination and activity while femininity is linked with weakness, dependence, helplessness, docility, passivity and subservience. Aby's masculinity reveals itself in raising Priya's confidence in herself and arousing in her the need to be powerfully active, independent and self-assertive. He becomes instrumental in the psychological growth of Priya as the new woman who resists dominance of patriarchy and its norms. Their relationship is complementary. *Varathan* thus vocalises Aby apparent emotional qualities and his willingness to undertake certain domestic

responsibilities. The movie pioneers a change that encourages the audiences to consider a man as sensitive and nurturing partners rather than as unemotional, work-obsessed breadwinners or hyper masculine warriors.

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