MAPPING COMEDIC DISRUPTIONS AND CONTINUITIES: A STUDY OF HUMOUR IN POST-MILLENNIAL MALAYALAM CINEMA

Thesis submitted to the
University of Calicut for the award of
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By

MOHAMMED SHAFEEQ M.

Under the supervision of

Dr. Zeenath Mohamed Kunhi
Assistant Professor,
PG and Research Department of English,
Farook College (Autonomous), Calicut

**Centre for Advanced Studies and Research
in English Language and Literature
Farook College (Autonomous), Calicut**

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Declaration

I, **Mohammed Shafeeq M.**, hereby declare that the thesis titled **Mapping Comedic Disruptions and Continuities: A Study of Humour in Post-millennial Malayalam Cinema** submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English is an original record of observations and bona fide research carried out by me under the guidance of **Dr Zeenath Mohamed Kunhi**, Assistant Professor of English, Farook College and that it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree or diploma or similar titles.

Calicut University

Mohammed Shafeeq M

Dr Zeenath Mohamed Kunhi
Assistant Professor
PG & Research Department of English
Farook College (Autonomous), Calicut

Certificate

I, Dr Zeenath Mohamed Kunhi, Research Supervisor, Department of English, Farook

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in this text the suggestions from the adjudicators of his thesis on **"Mapping Comedic**

Disruptions and Continuities: A Study of Humour in Post-millennial Malayalam Cinema"

and that the content of the thesis in both hard copy and soft copy are one and the same.

Farook College

14.08.2024

Dr Zeenath Mohamed Kunhi

Research Supervisor

Dr. ZEENATH MOHAMED KUNHI
Assistant Professor & Research Supervisor
Centre for Advanced Studies &
Research In English
Farook College, Calicut- 673632

Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis titled **Mapping Comedic Disruptions and Continuities: A Study of Humour in Post-millennial Malayalam Cinema** submitted by **Mohammed Shafeeq M.** to the University of Calicut for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English is an original record of observations and bona fide research carried out by him under my supervision and that it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree or diploma or similar titles.

Calicut University

Dr. Zeenath Mohamed Kunhi
Assistant Professor
PG & Research Department of English
Farook College (Autonomous), Calicut

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Abstract

Comedy and humour, widely recognized as sources of amusement, play a vital role in shaping cultural narratives. Among the diverse forms of comedic expression, motion pictures stand out as the most accessible and widely embraced medium for the widespread appeal of humour. This thesis conducts a thorough examination of Malayalam comedy films spanning from the pre-millennial era (1980s) to the 2020s. It examines the evolutionary changes in genre, thematic elements, and spatial diegetic, tracing their development across eras to reveal the progressive alterations and implicit politics of humour in the post-millennial period, especially within the context of New Generation cinema. In addition to using various theories of humour, the study employs a broader cultural studies framework, integrating concepts from various disciplines including genre studies, disability studies, gender studies, and ethnic studies. By adopting this approach, the research aims to provide a nuanced sociological analysis of humour in Malayalam films. The methodology for film selection considers factors such as explicit categorization, actor influence, and audience reception during different temporal phases.

In exploring the historical transformations that paved the way for New Generation Cinema, the research scrutinises not only the emergence of new genres but also the factors that facilitated the integration of this cinematic movement into Kerala's cultural landscape. The analysis of comedy films from different eras, including the 1990s and the 2000s, is underpinned by an investigation into the shifting dynamics of humour, genre conventions, and audience reception.

An essential aspect of the research involves analysing the politics of humour in shaping and perpetuating stereotypes in films from the first decade of the 2000s. The portrayal of masculinity, particularly through the lead actor Dileep, is examined, highlighting the establishment and revision of hegemonic masculinity through humour. The analysis extends to the politics of representation surrounding the characters of the sidekick and the spatial diegesis employed in comedy films of this period.

The exploration of New Generation films reveals the disruptions as well as continuities of the conventional practice of using humour in film narratives. The research identifies a departure from the traditional practice of assigning specific actors to comedy roles along with a trans-generic tendency, and with nearly every character in these films exhibiting the potential for humour at various points in their journey. The study observes the emergence of new genres, including stoner and sex comedies, reflecting societal anxieties of the period. However, despite the departure from established norms and attempts at politically correct comedy, the research observes that humour in these films remains entwined with prevailing ideologies and societal norms. While reshaping masculinity and gender dynamics, New Generation cinema ultimately adheres to hegemonic masculinity, underscoring the influence of cultural and spatial ideologies.

In essence, this research contributes to the understanding of humour in Malayalam cinema by providing a comprehensive and multifaceted analysis that encompasses the nature of humour, genres, and comic tropes for laughter in each era, while also focusing on the role of gender, family, spatiality, and related

elements that politicise humour. Through an interdisciplinary lens, the study sheds light on the hitherto unexplored realm of scholarly inquiry: the transformative trends and unconventional approaches in humour that characterise the cinematic movement of New Generation Malayalam cinema.

Keywords: Humour, Malayalam Cinema, Comedy, New Generation Films

സംഗ്രഹം

ഹാസ്യവും നർമ്മവും പ്രധാനമായും വിനോദത്തിന്റെ രൂപങ്ങളായി കണക്കാക്കിപെടുന്നുണ്ടെങ്കിലും, ഹാസ്യം സാംസ്കാരിക നേരറ്റീവുകൾ രൂപപ്പെടുത്തുന്നതിൽ ഒരു പ്രധാന പങ്ക് വഹിക്കുന്നു. ഹാസ്യ ആവിഷ്കാരത്തിന്റെ വിവിധ രൂപങ്ങളിൽ ഏറ്റവും എളുപ്പത്തിൽ ലഭ്യമാകുന്നതും വിശാലമായി ഉൾക്കൊള്ളുന്നതുമായ മാധ്യമമായി ചലചിത്രങ്ങൾ പ്രവർത്തിക്കുന്നുവെന്ന് വ്യക്തമാണ്. 1980 മുതൽ 2020 വരെ നീളുന്ന മലയാള ഹാസ്യ സിനിമകളുടെ സമഗ്രമായ പരിശോധനയാണ് ഈ ഗവേഷണത്തിലൂടെ ശ്രമിച്ചിട്ടുള്ളത്. മാറിക്കൊണ്ടിരിക്കുന്ന ജാനർ, തീമാറ്റിക് ഘടകങ്ങൾ, സ്പേഷ്യൽ ഡൈജസിസ് എന്നിവ വിശകലനം ചെയ്യുകയും, കാലക്രമേണ അവയുടെ പരിണാമം പരിശോധിച്, സമകാലിക സിനിമയിലെ പരിവർത്തനങ്ങളും അടിസ്ഥാന നർമ്മ രാഷ്ട്രീയവും അനാവരണം ചെയ്യുന്നതോടൊപ്പം, ഇതുവരെ പര്യവേക്ഷണം ചെയ്യപ്പെടാത്ത ന്യൂ ജനറേഷൻ മലയാള സിനിമയുടെ നർമവും നർമ്മത്തിലെ പരിവർത്തന പ്രവണതകളും പാരമ്പര്യേതര സമീപനങ്ങളും വിശകലനം ചെയ്യുകയുമാണ് ഗവേഷണ ലക്ഷ്യം. ഓരോ കാലഘട്ടത്തിലും ചിരി ഉണർത്തുന്ന നർമ്മം, വിഭാഗങ്ങൾ, ഹാസ്യ ഘടകങ്ങൾ എന്നിവയുടെ സ്വഭാവം വിശകലനം ചെയ്യുന്നതോടൊപ്പം ജൻഡർ , കുടുംബം, സ്പേഷ്യലിറ്റി,നർമത്തിന്റെ രാഷ്ട്രീയം എന്നിവ ഉൾപ്പെടുന്ന മറ്റ് ഘടകങ്ങളും സൂക്ഷ്മമായി പരിശോധിക്കുന്നു.

ഹ്യൂമർ തിയറികൾക്ക പുറമെ, ഡിസബിലിറ്റി സ്റ്റഡീസ്, മാസ്കലിനിറ്റി തിയറി, ജെൻഡർ സ്റ്റഡീസ്, ജാനർ തിയറി, എതിക് സ്റ്റഡീസ്, എന്നിങ്ങനെ വിവിധ മേഖലകളിൽ നിന്നുള്ള ആശയങ്ങൾ സംയോജിപ്പിച്ച് വിപുലമായ കൾച്ചറൽ സ്റ്റഡീസ് സമീപനമാണ് ഗവേഷണം ഉപയോഗിക്കുന്നത്. ഇതിലൂടെ മലയാള സിനിമകളിലെ നർമ്മത്തെ സാമൂഹ്യശാസ്ത്രപരമായ വീക്ഷണകോണിൽ നിന്ന് സൂക്ഷ്മമായി വിശകലനം ചെയ്യുന്നു. കോമഡി സിനിമകൾ എന്ന വർഗ്ഗീകരണം, അഭിനേതാവിന്റെ സ്വാധീനം, പ്രേക്ഷക പ്രതികരണം , തുടങ്ങിയ കാര്യങ്ങൾ കണക്കിലെടുത്താണ് സിനിമകൾ തിരഞ്ഞെടുത്തിട്ടുള്ളത്.

2000-കളുടെ ആദ്യ ദശകം മുതൽ സിനിമകളിലെ സ്റ്റീരിയോടൈപ്പുകൾ

രൂപപ്പെടുത്തുന്നതിലും ശാശ്വതമാക്കുന്നതിലും നർമ്മത്തിന്റെ രാഷ്ട്രീയം വിശകലനം ചെയ്യുന്നത് ഗവേഷണത്തിന്റെ ഒരു പ്രധാന ഉള്ളടക്കമാണ്. ദ്വിതീയ കോമഡി കഥാപാത്രങ്ങളുടെ പ്രാതിനിധ്യത്തിന്റെ രാഷ്ട്രീയത്തിലേക്കും ഈ കാലഘട്ടത്തിലെ കോമഡി സിനിമകളിൽ ഉപയോഗിച്ചിരുന്ന സ്പേഷ്യൽ ഡൈജെസിസിലേക്കും വിശകലനം വ്യാപിക്കുന്നു.

ന്യൂ ജനറേഷൻ സിനിമകളുടെ വിശകലനത്തിൽ സിനിമാ ആഖ്യാനങ്ങളിൽ നർമ്മം ഉപയോഗിക്കുന്ന പരമ്പരാഗത സമ്പ്രദായത്തിന്റെ വ്യതിയാനങ്ങളും തുടർച്ചകളും വെളിപ്പെടുന്നതോടൊപ്പം പ്രത്യേക അഭിനേതാക്കളെ കോമഡി വേഷങ്ങളിലേക്ക് നിയോഗിക്കുന്ന പരമ്പരാഗത സമ്പ്രദായത്തിൽ നിന്നുള്ള വ്യതിചലനത്തെ ഗവേഷണം തിരിച്ചറിയുന്നു, കൂടാതെ ഈ സിനിമകളിലെ മിക്കവാറും എല്ലാ കഥാപാത്രങ്ങളും വിവിധ ഘട്ടങ്ങളിൽ നർമ്മത്തിനുള്ള സാധ്യതകൾ പ്രകടിപ്പിക്കുന്നു.

കാലഘട്ടത്തിലെ സാമൂഹിക ഉത്കണ്ഠകളെ പ്രതിഫലിപ്പിക്കുന്ന, സ്റ്റോണർ, സെക്സ് കോമഡികൾ എന്നിവയുൾപ്പെടെ പുതിയ വിഭാഗങ്ങളുടെ ഉദയം പഠനം നിരീക്ഷിക്കുന്നു. എന്നിരുന്നാലും, സ്ഥാപിത മാനദണ്ഡങ്ങളിൽ നിന്ന് വ്യതിചലിക്കുകയും പൊളിറ്റിക്കളി കറക്ട് കോമഡിക്ക് ശ്രമിക്കുകയും ചെയ്തിട്ടും, ഈ സിനിമകളിലെ നർമ്മം നിലവിലുള്ള പ്രത്യയശാസ്ത്രങ്ങളോടും സാമൂഹിക മാനദണ്ഡങ്ങളോട്ടും കൂടി ബന്ധപ്പെട്ടിരിക്കുന്നുവെന്ന് ഗവേഷണം നിരീക്ഷിക്കുന്നു

Contents

Chapter 1
Introduction

The critical analysis of comedy as a genre has long been undervalued on a worldwide level, and this perception remains prevalent even today. Many view comedy and humour as a less esteemed genre of artistic expression, primarily intended for amusement. Among the various forms of comedic expressions, motion pictures serve as the most easily accessible and broadly embraced medium responsible for humour's widespread appeal. Movies classified as comedies are intentionally made with the aim of causing the audience to laugh. However, behind the apparent simplicity, and seeming innocuousness of comedic films, lies complexities that warrant scholarly attention and analysis.

The thesis undertakes an extensive survey of Malayalam comedy films from the pre-millennial era (1980s) to the 2020s, examining the evolutionary shifts in genre, thematic elements, and spatial diegetic, tracing the development of these elements across eras, to unravel the progressive alterations and implicit politics of humour in the post-millennial period, particularly within the context of New Generation cinema. It attempts to map the terrain of comedy and humour in contemporary Malayalam cinema. Tracing the trajectory of comedy in Malayalam cinema will facilitate a ground to critically analyse the nature of humour in the Malayalam films of the post-2010 era popularly designated as New Generation Cinema. It will also assess the nature of humour, the genres, as well as the comic tropes for laughter in each era in addition to focussing attention on the role of gender, family, spatiality, and related elements that politicise humour.

The existing body of research in the realm of Malayalam cinema has predominantly concentrated on subjects such as caste, gender dynamics, and the broader socio-cultural implications within the State, all of which influenced the representation and development of Malayalam cinema. However, there is a conspicuous scarcity of scholarly attention dedicated to the examination of humour as portrayed in Malayalam cinema. The few attempts made by scholars in this direction have tended to confine their theoretical investigations to specific periods, genres, or socio-cultural representations. To date, no comprehensive study has been made to undertake an exhaustive survey of Malayalam comedy films and/or of the nature of humour spanning the history of Malayalam cinema. Most importantly, there is a notable absence of scholarly inquiry into the nature of humour within New Generation Malayalam cinema and the underlying transformations and socio-political dimensions associated with it. It is precisely these research gaps that the present thesis endeavours to address and bridge.

Over the ages, a prevailing argument against the critical analysis of humour has been the notion that comedy's primary purpose is to entertain and evoke a lighthearted, joyous atmosphere—a form of amusement meant to be taken lightly and relished; one that is most often understood to be "relatively 'safe' and unthreatening" (King 2). Paradoxically, this very perspective amplifies the potential dangers of passivity towards humour. The recipients of humour, presupposing and anticipating mere levity, often dismiss any possible attempt at engaging in critical reasoning to uncover the many ideologies embedded in the comic presentation. When coated with humour, these ideologies and stereotypes are

assimilated without much reflection. But the incessant passive exposure to these ideas, utilised to create laughter, results in their entrenchment in the psyche of the viewers. Examining film theory, Alison Wilde remarks that, "principles of 'normalcy' are embedded within the narrative and visual/audio aspects of the film" and that "politics is always present in cinema" (*Film, Comedy* 5). In this manner, humour becomes a vital tool for normalisation. Numerous enduring stereotypes within society have been subtly reinforced through the seemingly harmless guise of comedy and humour. Given the broad appeal of comedy in popular films, it necessitates a more profound analysis. While the critical study of film comedy and humour is relatively recent, humour itself has been a subject of discussion since classical times.

The term 'humour' has a medical origin. It was used to define basic human temperaments and the composition of the four bodily fluids namely, blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm (Carroll, *Humour* 5). It was believed that one's emotions and behaviour were determined by the variations in these fluids. The present day meaning of the term referring to 'something funny' or 'amusing' was used only towards the end of the 17th century. Referring to a 'humorist' as a person who possesses an extreme nature made up of one humour rather than a balance of the other humours, Michael Billig observes that the late 17th century theatre form of comedy is based on this notion of the character:

> The late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries saw the development of
> a popular type of theatrical comedy that featured farcical characters with
> extreme temperaments. Audiences would laugh at the stock figures…These

characters spoke words that were not in themselves witty sayings but which
revealed the absurdity of their temperaments. Thus, fun was to be had at the
expense of the 'humorists'. (62)

Even though discussions on humour have been around for over 2000 years (Caroll,
Humour 1), the theoretical approach to humour is generally catalogued into three
(even though there exists more categories including 'play theory', 'disposition
theory' etc.). These are the Hobbesian theory of superiority, the theory of
incongruity, and the relief theory. Each of the theories can be considered as distinct
ideas on humour rather than providing alternatives for the other. John Morreall
exhaustively presents the various traditional theories associated with humour in his
1987 book *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*.

Plato and his disciple Aristotle have had their share of contributions
regarding their ideas on humour. Plato in his *Philebus* shuns laughter that is a result
of humour, his claim being that the objective of humour is vice, "an amusement
that contains an element of malice" (Carroll, *Humour* 6). The same distrust of
humour is exhibited in his *Republic* as Plato was "suspicious of anything that
contributed to a lack of rational self-control" (Carroll, *Humour* 6) and that the
"comic techniques of malicious ridicule as well as simple clowning are said to
harm citizens by lowering their status and value. Against political threats of
censorship, Aristotle argues that some kinds of comic and tragic are valuable"
(Willett and Willett 109). Even though Aristotle, agrees with his mentor in many
aspects regarding the evils of excessive laughter, and considers humour as a form
of abuse, does allow theatrical comedy a space. However, he cautions against

laughter going out of hand in the form of buffoonery. For him "the laughter of the virtuous person must be tactful and moderate" (Carroll, *Humour* 7). In short, when it comes to humour, Plato completely kept it at bay while Aristotle allowed it in moderation.

The traces of the underlying ideas of Aristotle and Plato can be carried over to the popular theory on humour that emerged later, the superiority theory of humour, popularised by Thomas Hobbes. This theory perceives laughter as a result of the "sudden glory" (*Leviathan* 32) or the momentary sense of "superiority" that one feels towards others or one's own former self, most often with a feeling of contempt. This "comic amusement" (Carroll, *Humour* 10) that one feels is aggressive according to Hobbesian superiority theory. According to the theory, upon watching someone trip and fall over a banana peel we find it humorous due to the pleasure of unconsciously finding ourselves in a superior state to the person who experiences the suffering. In general, this pleasure emerges either as a validation of the other person's inferior social standing or as a method to confirm and elevate one's own social position (Lintott 347). The French Philosopher Rene Descartes furnishes a physiological elucidation of laughter while examining its significance in the context of ridicule.

By stating that the one drawback of the superiority theory is that it "overlooks the difference between laughing at someone's jokes and laughing at them," (*Humour* 62) Eagleton observes that the resistance to humour in Hobbes might be due to the sociopolitical climate of the period: "The background to the Hobessian hypothesis is the violence, antagonism and the partisanship of civil war,

along with the emergence in the seventeenth century of the doctrine of possessive individualism" (99).

In the 18th century, the prominence of the superiority theory began to diminish as Francis Hutcheson, in 1750, penned a critical assessment of Hobbes' interpretation of laughter. This new theory of laughter, the incongruity theory, criticised Hobbesian superiority theory based on the conclusion that comedy is a result of two different ideas connected in incongruity (Telfer 360). This "sudden perception of the incongruity" (Schopenhauer 103) between the idea and the reality that it describes generates the humour. This theory, based on the concepts of universal psychology, asserts that where there is incongruity being perceived, laughter ought to follow. Schopenhauer and Kant also connect laughter with incongruity. Apart from Kant and Schopenhauer, numerous subsequent philosophers and psychologists adopted this approach, including James Beattie and Soren Kierkegaard (Carroll, *Humour* 7). However, authors like Alexander Bain hold that not all incongruities are humorous or amusing. Eagleton is of the opinion that the problem with incongruity theory of humour is that it is descriptive rather than explanatory. "It tells us what we laugh at, but not why we do so" (Eagleton 89). That is, the theory does not talk about the effect of humour. He proposes splicing the ideas of incongruity theory with that of the release theory for a better explanation of humour. As Carroll observes: "However appealing the incongruity theory may appear, it does have at least one problem that cannot be overlooked: it is the very notion of incongruity. For we do not have an absolutely clear definition of it" (*Humour* 37).

The third theory of humour on the traditional lines of discussing humour is the relief theory (or the release theory) of the nineteenth century that came about as a result of a debate between Alexander Bain and Herbert Spencer. Focusing on the homeostatic mechanism of the human body, the theory holds that laughter is a result of the release of nervous energy. Spencer considered laughter as a release of "nervous energy" which "occurs in the mind, taken unawares, is led from the consciousness of something large (grave or at least serious) to something small (silly or trivial)" (Carroll, *Humour* 38). By this process, the pent up nervous energy is discharged in the form of laughter. The relief theory was further developed by Freud, who in his *Jokes and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) demarcates three kinds of situations for laughter (wit, comic and humour) and argues that joking "serves as a safety valve for forbidden feelings and thoughts, and when we express what is usually inhibited, the energy of repression is released in laughter" (Morreall 111). Immanuel Kant's idea of laughter as "an affect arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing" (*Critique of Judgement* 161) combines the incongruity theory with concepts of the relief theory.

Twentieth century was a time when theories of humour gained more currency. The eighteenth-century philosophers, even though they knew that laughter was something socially shared, did not elaborate upon the social context of it. Even though his focus was on the psychological aspect of the functioning of laughter, Henri Bergson hits upon the social connection of laughter and humour in his *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1911). Bergson's famous observation was regarding the role of emotion in humour. According to Bergson,

this idea of finding pleasure in others' misfortunes happens because we can suspend our emotions at the time of experiencing humour. We do not think about the casualty the individual suffers in the context, rather we experience a "momentary anesthesia of the heart" (3). In other words, Bergson argues that laughter is incompatible with emotion. For him, laughter is a group activity that remains within a circle. Asserting the social function of laughter, he writes: "To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its function, which is a social one"(4) and that "laughter appears to stand in need of an echo" (3) denoting that laughter is always socially shared.

Thus, at this point the discussion on humour takes a turn from cause to effect; from a psychological to a sociological one with Bergson's *Laughter* becoming the first social theory of laughter in place of a psychological analysis of humour. The concept of laughter being the outcome of the release of "psychic energy" was elaborated on later by Sigmund Frued, as previously mentioned, in his *Jokes and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. As he considered laughter to be a result of hidden desires, his ideas on humour and laughter also suggest the nature of these desires as well as the cause for them being hidden. In this manner, Freud's theory on laughter is more elaborate in comparison to the theories prevalent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. His insights combined with that of Bergson's give us tools for a critical analysis of laughter and comedy. Theories of Bain, Hobbes, etc., could not situate laughter, or more precisely the concept of ridicule, within social contexts.

Bakhtin talks about the subversive nature of humour through the "carnivalesque". In Bergson's view, laughter, even when providing this sort of social flexibility, ends in policing the subjects in a society, making sure that they abide by the customs and belief system of the society. Billig asserts that laughter serves a conservative function by discouraging the kind of social innovation that invariably challenges established norms (*Laughter and Ridicule* 132). In order to pass on the codes of human behaviour in a society to the next generation, humour was the tool successfully used. As Billig observes, "laughter has its primary function in discouraging infractions of such codes and customs" (132). In this regard, he perceives humour as having a dual nature, acting both as a social bonding mechanism, bringing people together "in a bond of enjoyment," (176) and as a means of exclusion through mockery. This is most often done using ridicule. Participating in laughter when an individual is being ridiculed allows us to liberate ourselves from the conventional constraints of social empathy, "as the target of our mirth momentarily becomes an object, not a fellow human being" (Billig 120).

Thus, the 'commonsensical' notion that laughter and humour are innocent and 'unproblematic' gets open for debate. The theorists who claim that laughter in itself has no hidden intent are also talking about laughter which is a biological concept. This is where the connection between laughter and humour has to be dissected. Humour is bound to social factors and customs even when one claims that humour and laughter are universal phenomena. This can be elaborated by the example of the human capacity to eat, put forward by Billig:

Humans may have inherited the capacity to eat…However, this does not

mean that food customs are biologically inherited or that there is a gene to ensure that eating and drinking carry complex social meanings. At some point, culture takes over from biology. The demand of social living, rather than the imperatives of biology, might ensure that food has cultural meaning. (*Laughter and Ridicule* 181)

The same holds for humour and laughter. We are all social actors and humour can function to influence our behaviour and perspectives.

The *Nāṭya Śāstra*, attributed to Bharata around 500 A.D., stands as a pivotal reference in the realm of comedy within Indian tradition. As one of the earliest treatises on the performing arts in India, this text, believed to have been written in the second century B.C unfolds across 36 chapters, delving into the theoretical intricacies of drama and theatrical spaces. It serves as a comprehensive guide for dramatists and actors, offering insights into the art of presenting drama (Pandey 3).

Within the framework of the *Nāṭya Śāstra*, the essence of *hāsya*, or the comic sentiment, is discussed, with laughter (*hāsa*) identified as its fundamental emotion. The text not only acknowledges laughter as a core component but also provides a systematic prescription for evoking it. The methodology involves a meticulous balance of *vibhāvas* (determinants), *anubhāvas* (consequents), and *vyabhicāribhāvas* (transitory mental states). In essence, the *Nāṭya Śāstra* unfolds as a manual (Venkat and Balakrishnan 442), guiding practitioners on the precise techniques to stimulate laughter—the dominant emotion—in the pursuit of generating the comic sentiment (*rasa*). This process is intricately woven with a combination of determinants such as comic characters and situations, consequents

in the form of verbal and physio-psychological gesticulations, and transitory emotions that seamlessly complement the overall comedic narrative.

Venkat and Balakrishnan observe that for Bergson, laughter is contingent upon the comic, positioning the comic as a cause that elicits laughter but in contrast, Bharata proposes an inverted model, wherein laughter is considered a dominant emotion (*sthāyi-bhāva*) that serves as the trigger for the comic (*rasa*) (450).In Bharata's framework, the comic is an effect generated by the evocation of laughter, signifying a distinct approach where laughter validates the impact of the comic. Unlike Bergson, whose exploration unfolds from the comic to laughter, Bharata's inquiry revolves around how laughter substantiates the effect of the comic, emphasising an individual perspective offering a nuanced understanding of the components contributing to the experience of laughter whereas Bergson focuses on the group (Venkat and Balakrishnan 446, 450, 458). For Bharata, *hāsya rasa* goes beyond societal dynamics, aiming at the transcendence of the self and ultimately seeking redemption (Woodruff 321).

Abhinavagupta's *Abhinavabhāratī*, dating from the span of 1000 to 1030 A.D. (Unni 75), assumes prominence as "the most preferred commentary" (Venkat and Balakrishnan 443) following Bharata's influential contributions. Bharata's examination, in turn, involves the categorization of laughter into superior, mediocre, and inferior types. Abhinavagupta, in his exploration, goes beyond acknowledging the inherent incongruities in *hāsya*. Notably, he characterises laughter as the "sound of gloating", a characterization that echoes Hobbes' concept of "sudden glory" (Venkat and Balakrishnan 444). This resonance with Bharata's

framework reinforces the idea that, according to Abhinavagupta, laughter functions as a symbol of superiority.

All the above-mentioned theories give us an insight into the nature of the development of critically approaching laughter and humour. Most often, social theorists have highlighted the subversive and rebellious nature of humour rather than the conservative and disciplinary side of it (Billig 2). It is this demand for a 'social signification' that underscores the necessity for the analysis of comedy and humour.

Humour and comedy have been a 'univorsal' presence (King 168, 169) since the very beginning of cinema as a medium, as demonstrated by *L'Arroseur Arrose* (*The Waterer Watered* [1895]) from the Lumiere Brothers' collection. This remains true even as cinema transitioned from Lumirre's actuality films to fantastical works such as Georges Méliès' *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) among others. The scenarios depicted in Méliès' films provided amusement, captivating audiences not only with their novelty but also with the comic delight they evoked.

From the very inception of cinema, filmmakers worldwide were dedicated to the mission of eliciting laughter from their audiences. This genre gained universal recognition through the use of gags and slapstick comedy, famously popularised by Charlie Chaplin in England and Buster Keaton in the United States during the Silent era of film history. *Laurel and Hardy*, alongside the comedy ensemble *The Three Stooges*, played a significant role in the development of comedy within the American film industry during the 1920s and the 30s. However, their comedy often revolved around physical clowning and slapstick to provoke

laughter. In the early days, recurring gags and comedic conventions served as the primary source of humour, as exemplified by scenes such as "the ill-prepared pancake that is so hard it breaks a plate" (Balducci 7). This 'universal' nature of humour stemmed from the absence of dialogue, enabling people from diverse linguistic backgrounds to understand the conveyed idea. The universality of these comedies was so profound that even after the introduction of sound in cinema, Charlie Chaplin persisted in making silent films (Flom 59, 60). This was because the humour in his films surrounded physical comedy. Moreover, silent cinema transcended language barriers and continued to communicate humour effectively.

The intricacies of verbal humour were notably absent in the early years of cinema due to the absence of sound in films. The advent of sound in films marked a significant revolution in the realm of film comedy. However, alongside the entertainment it brought, it also gave rise to the formation of stereotypes, many of which persist to this day. The ideological power of humour and comedy is frequently underestimated for a variety of reasons. Since the introduction of sound in cinema, humour has undergone a transformation, placing more emphasis on verbal comedy, and incorporating puns and sexual innuendos to elicit laughter from the audience.

Undoubtedly, comedies are a source of great entertainment. In cinematic comedy, an atmosphere is crafted where the audience can relax and savour the experience. The humour skillfully woven into the tapestry of these films appears unobtrusive, eliciting a passive yet wholehearted response from the viewers. But the reflection of the socio-political and cultural trends, and the effect thereof are

often overlooked, rather neglected, by the consumers of the genre. However, recent critics and social scientists have located the radical potential of the comedy genre:

> It has been argued that all genres can be conceived in terms of dialectic between cultural and counter-cultural drives where, in the end, the cultural drives must triumph. But between the inevitable ''fade in'' and ''fade out,'' screen comedy has been free to work its complex and often subversive purpose, revealing and commenting on the preoccupations, prejudices, and dreams of the societies that produce it. (Horton and Joanna 1-2)

The assertion that humour possesses the capacity to subvert and critique, a claim commonly associated with parody and burlesque as proposed in *Rabelais and His World* (1984), can equally be extended to the genre of comedy films. It is arguments of this nature that have contributed to the genre of comedy being regarded with earnest consideration:

> Comic films raise questions that have no easy answers and explore social and personal problems that have no easy resolution. In short, they expose folly and present no cure, for folly is an incurable human disease for which, as Beckett wrote in Waiting for Godot, there is ''nothing to be done.'' (Horton and Joanna 2)

Even with a sometimes nihilistic approach to the genre, film comedy has played a pivotal role in shaping viewpoints, challenging established norms, and effectively subverting conventions. Simultaneously, it possesses the remarkable ability to establish and, at times, reinforce stereotypes with even greater influence.

Mikhail Bakhtin, in his writings about the carnival, describes it as "not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (*Rabelais* 7). When we apply the concept of the carnivalesque to film comedy, we recognize that people indeed live in it, and everyone actively participates. However, this active participation can make it more perilous because the idea of 'embracing all the people' does not necessarily entail neutral acceptance. Instead, it often involves embracing stereotypes and preconceived notions about certain beliefs and categories of people. Indeed, comedy serves as a powerful means to critique those in positions of power, playing a vital role in holding them accountable and highlighting their faults. This practice has been in existence for centuries, shedding light on what has gone wrong. However, when this very tool is employed to marginalise certain social classes and categories, shaping perspectives that encourage conformity, it takes on a different and contentious purpose.

In contrast to the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, which occurs ceremoniously at specific times, contemporary social actors actively participate in the ongoing 'carnivalesque of the present'. This takes the form of comedy films and satirical romantic comedies, and it is a constant presence. Consequently, the examination of humour in cinema becomes increasingly relevant, as these texts are now among the most widely consumed by the masses. This consumption is not limited to watching the entire film but also extends to the circulation of clips from these films on social media, further reinforcing their significance. Above all, comedy films have helped shape a consciousness that has become the generally accepted perspective of the

masses and in turn of the society. This dependency on social signification bestows authority upon humour, as it rests upon the assumptions and convictions held by society. Consequently, humour not only fortifies preconceived notions associated with specific categories, but also engenders fresh stereotypes. According to Carroll, humour and comedic amusement hold a pivotal function in the establishment of communities. It can serve as "a disseminator as well as an enforcer of norms" (*Humour* 2).

Even though comedy has been an integral part of Indian cinema since the beginning, the genre was established and reached its maturity only later. It can be said that the evolution of comedy films in Bollywood dates back to the black-and-white era. As it was the case with Hollywood, comedy inaugurated its presence in Indian films in the form of slapstick and horseplay, paving the way for other genres like sitcoms and satires. Renowned actors such as Raj Kapoor, Johnny Walker, and Mehmood played pivotal roles, displaying flawless comedic timing. *Bilet Pherat* was the first full-length satirical comedy film from India to come out in 1921 from Bengal. The film was made by Dhirendra Nath Ganguly. Similarly comedy made its way into other regional cinemas in India. Of these Tamil comedy films had considerable influence on Malayalam comedy films during the initial phase.

Unlike in the silent films, comedy did not flourish immediately along with the coming of the 'talkies'. These films dealt with serious and methodological themes and comedy was used only as a form of comic relief rather than a full-length genre. One of the universal reasons for this is that comedy was not typically viewed as a highly esteemed art form. It was more commonly linked with everyday

or 'popular culture', often perceived as less sophisticated compared to other
cultural manifestations (Kuipers 359). It was also often categorised under the
umbrella of 'mass culture' (Irwin & Gracia). Thus, the concept of highbrow and
lowbrow culture generated a binary between the "trivial baseness of comedy and
the important /significant, cultured, and respectable world/sophisticated sphere of
formal knowledge and the approved 'gravity' of 'high' topics and discourses"
(Wilde 26).

It was in the post-independent media landscape that comedy gained
impetus. A new form of comedy, situational comedy or sitcoms started gaining
currency. Films like *Guddi* (1971) and *Bawarchi* (1972) inaugurated this trend in
Indian Cinema and with films like *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron (1983)* and *Pushpaka
Vimana (1987)*, comedy got a firm footing in Indian cinema. Verbal humour,
however, flourished post-liberalisation era in India through the films of the 1990s.
Films like *Aanken* (1993), *Raja Babu* (1994), *Coolie No.1* (1995), *Judwaa* (1997)
were some of the many films that invited demand for comedy films. The
liberalisation policies of the 1990s along with the arrival of cable TV led to comedy
films being produced at levels like never before because it was "non serious and
relaxed entertainment" (Ganjoo 10). It was also at this time that Indian film
expanded globally leading to widespread distribution of Bollywood films.

Ashis Nandy remarks that "popular films depend on the middle classes for
legitimacy and critical acclaim" (*The Savage Freud* 202). The Indian middle class
during the times were the deciding factor in popularising these genres. Films for the
new middle class were so inseparable from their lives that Dwyer observes that

movies shape the thoughts, aspirations, and outlook of the burgeoning middle class
in the nation, as they perceive their historical narrative primarily through the lens of
cinema, rather than relying on historical accounts penned by scholars
("Bollywood's India").

The post-millennial media landscape of Bollywood witnessed a plethora of
remakes from the South, especially Malayalam comedies of the 1990s.
Priyadarshan, the Malayalam filmmaker played a vital role in setting this trend with
films such as *Hera Pheri* (2000) and *Bhul Bhulayya* (2007). The decade witnessed
a trend of comedy film franchises that brought out a series of films, popular ones,
apart from the *Hera Pheri* franchise, being the *Golmaal* series, the *Welcome*
franchise, *Fukrey* franchise, *Housefull* franchise, and the *Munna Bhai* franchise. In
other words, while Bollywood initially exerted influence over Malayalam comedy
films, the post-millennial era demonstrates Malayalam films industry's influence
on Hindi comedy films.

The string of comedy films that came out in Bollywood was most of the
time without logic or rationale. The popular reaction to this criticism was that
"comedy is for entertainment and not to look for deeper meaning" (Ganjoo 12).
This corresponds with the primary motivation behind the audience's choice to
watch comedy films: to seek entertainment without the burden of intricate
intellectual contemplation. It is this approach to comedies in general by the masses
that comedy's role in cultural formations is downplayed even by film scholars and
academicians till lately (Gooptu). Here in fact lies the very reason for
problematizing comedy–the notion of triviality underplays the power of

normalisations and cultural formations that humour is passively capable of. The

preference for comedy films have led to the consumption of ideologies passively,

leading to further exercising of these perspectives in social practices that result in

reinforcing stereotypes. As Ashis Nandy remarks about popular films, it "reaffirms

the values that are being increasingly marginalised in public life" (202).

In Malayalam cinema, the development of comedy as a distinct genre is

relatively recent when compared to the overall history of cinema in the State.

Taking into account the socio-political and cultural context in which Malayalam

cinema originated, comedy was not something synchronous with the demands of

the time. Full-length laughter films in Malayalam emerged only in the late 80s and

were "caught up with tearjerkers until then" (Rowena, *Reading* 1). This, however,

does not mean that humour and comedic elements were entirely absent during the

early stages of Malayalam cinema. They were restricted to short scenes or ran a

parallel plot that was insignificant to the main plot. For instance, the first colour

film in Malayalam *Kandam Becha Kottu* (1961) as well as the 1964 film

Kuttikuppayam has the characters played by the actor Bahadur, used mostly to

evoke laughter in the audience, offering a kind of comic relief.

In the 1940s and 50s, the overwhelming influence of Tamil cinema on

Malayalam Cinema was visible, encompassing technical, artistic, and financial

aspects. In terms of humour, it was actors like S. P. Pilla and Bahadur who gained

popularity for their ability to elicit laughter from the audience, often through their

distinctive mannerisms. In other words, comedic scenes and characters during that

period primarily functioned as comic interludes characterised by buffoonery or

slapstick humour, akin to the character Launcelot Gobbo in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice.* A major technique that was employed for the creation of humour was the use of background music, indicating that the scene was comic.

The film *Nalla Thanka* (1950), which introduced the actor S. P. Pilla, highlighted his Chaplinesque style of character portrayals that caused laughter among the audience. This too, however, was characteristic of the Tamil films of the time. Baburaj identifies many film magazines of the early period that hurled staunch criticisms against comedy in the form of buffoonery in the films of the 1950s and the 60s, considering it to be of inferior quality and unfit for the Malayalam 'heritage' and springing out of the gutters.

The late 1960s perceived comedy with a more serious lens. The decade also witnessed the entry of Adoor Bhasi into the comic sphere through the film *Mudiyanaya Puthran* (1961). Adoor Bhasi was for Malayalam Cinema of the period that the actor Jagathy Sreekumar was for the post-80s era. The employment of a combination of actors was a feature that got popular with the incorporation of humour into the narratives. The Naseer-Bhasi-Bahadur trio was the success mantra for a long time in Malayalam Cinema. This formula has been followed by Malayalam Romantic comedies ever since.

Comedy, thus, was initially restricted and typecast by characters like Adoor Bhasi, Bahadur, et al. The popularity that humour gained during the 1960s led to the introduction of new actors like Kuthiravattam Pappu (*Moodupadam* [1963]) and Sankaradi (*Kadalamma* [1963]). The induction of women into this realm of humour in Malayalam movies was further delayed in comparison with their male

counterparts. Even though actor Sukumari had made her entry into Malayalam

cinema as early as 1957 (*Thaskaraveeran*), her comic potential had to wait till

Malayalam Cinema underwent a complete transformation in terms of humour

during the 1980s. The same was the case with actor Philomina, who made her

debut in Malayalam Cinema in *Kuttikuppayam* in 1964. The reasons for the women

comic actors being restrained were manifold. Anindita Menon remarks that "it is

the reaction of the 'straight man' to the actions of the eccentric that renders a scene

comical. In Malayalam films the women are often the ones reacting to the comic

excesses of male comedians" ("Miss Funny Bones").

The aesthetics of Malayalam Cinema changed during the 1970s with its

detachment from the Tamil influence. Regarding the socio-cultural and economic

landscape of Kerala during this period, significant transformations were evident. A

notable shift that occurred in the 1970s and early 1980s was the substantial

migration of Malayali men to Gulf countries in search of employment resulting in

the inflow of Gulf money into the society, paving the way for Kerala to be a more

consumer-oriented society (B. A. Prakash 3213). This initiated the growth of a

stable middle class which in turn restructured the then prevalent 'Kerala Model' of

development based on social democracy. Ratheesh Radhakrishnan's extensive

studies on the influence of the Gulf boom on Malayalam cinema show that Gulf has

been "a significant point of reference for the imagining of a cultural identity for

Kerala…In the period between 1975 and 1987, there was a sudden rise in the

number of films being produced per year in Malayalam" (*The Gulf* 218-9).

Experimentation in cinema was a notable feature during this period. The

70s witnessed the arrival of the new wave or 'parallel cinema' (also known as art house cinema) movement with Adoor Gopalakrishnan, G. Aravindan, Pavithran, and P. N. Menon as the lead directors of the movement, giving way to realism from the melodramatic renderings that had dominated Malayalam cinema. This was followed by the Middlebrow Cinema in Malayalam in the 1980s which changed Malayalam cinema landscape forever with directors such as Pathmarajan, K. G. George, and Bharathan. In both these categories of films, comedy had little space. Baburaj observes that the decline in the quality of the representation of humour in the 70s was not due to bad acting but due to the lack of interest shown towards comedy by the directors and the scripts of the period (87). Thus, by the 1980s, the cinematic terrain and language were set for the arrival of a more defined mode of comedy into Malayalam cinema. During this period, movies had evolved a captivating cinematic approach that effectively connected with the collective social and aesthetic sensibilities of the audience.

While a substantial body of research has been dedicated to examining Malayalam cinema, it is noteworthy that in contemporary discourse, studies specifically focused on humour and comedy within cinema remain rather scarce. Very few scholars have explored the politics involving humour in Malayalam cinema. Jenny Rowena's thesis *Reading Laughter: The Popular Malayalam Comedy Films of the Late 80s and Early 90s* (2002) underscores the cultural significance of comedy films in Kerala, particularly in response to the changing sociopolitical dynamics of the post-80s era. She draws attention to the peculiar omission of comedy films in critical discussions concerning Malayalam cinema,

often depicting them as a symptom of the perceived decline in the aesthetic superiority of this regional cinema.

Vipin Kumar's paper titled "Politics of Laughter: An Introduction to the 1990s Malayalam Popular Comic Film" (2008) further challenges conventional paradigms applied to comic films, specifically the reliance on categories such as 'star' and 'fan club'. Kumar contends that these categories inadequately capture the unique nature of Malayalam comic films, and he emphasises their inability to comprehensively represent the existing social milieu. He explores the complex historical factors contributing to the 'representational shortcomings' in Kerala's context and examines how melodrama arises as a result of the failure of adequate representation, an aspect viewed as positive in the context of a bourgeois socio-symbolic order.

In the 2011 Malayalam thesis, *Representation of Malayali in Popular Films: An Analysis Based on the Works of Sreenivasan*, Rajeev U. examines the films featuring Sreenivasan, a prominent figure in the Malayalam cinema industry. Rajeev U's analysis focuses on how Sreenivasan's cinematic works contribute to the representation of the Malayali identity within popular films. By scrutinising Sreenivasan's roles and the narratives in which he is involved, the thesis explores how the actor and the films he is a part of influence the construction of the Malayali identity in the realm of popular cinema. Preeti Kumar's paper, "Hegemonic Masculinities in Two Comic Films in Malayalam: *Meesa Madhavan & Rajamanikyam* " in 2015 analyses the two comedy films from a feminist perspective to reveal how the films use notions of masculinity in order to valorise male ideals

Baburajan K's 2019 Malayalam thesis, *Humor as a Political Discourse: A Study Based on Popular Culture*, dedicates a section to humour within Malayalam cinema. It primarily comprises a compilation of instances featuring comic dialogues and scenes from well-known Malayalam films, aiming to provide a comprehensive overview of humour's prevalence and significance in popular culture. This approach illuminates the various ways in which humour conveys messages and contributes to the broader discourse on politics and society in the context of Malayalam cinema.

Mohamed Shafeeq Karinkurayil's paper "The Dangerous Supplement: A Revaluation of Sreenivasan and the Malayalam Comic Film" (2021) calls for a re-evaluation of the actor Sreenivasan's role in the realm of representation within full-length comedy films of the 1980s and 1990s. Through a thematic examination of select successful films from the latter part of the 1980s and the early 1990s, where Sreenivasan or his characters prominently commanded the screen and narrative perspective, the paper contends that Sreenivasan, drawing from his repertoire of diverse character portrayals during that period, and his pre-existing associations due to prior film appearances, assumed a supplementary function in delineating the essence of Kerala and its populace.

In his article "Laughter and Abjection: the Politics of Comedy in Malayalam Cinema" (2022), Tony Sebastian examines the inscriptions of misogyny in public culture through mimicry and popular cinema, underscoring their interconnectedness. Sebastian contends that mimicry and popular cinema collaboratively construct and reinforce the hegemonic identity of the 'Malayali'

through male stardom and cultification. This identity, he argues, epitomises a cis-normative, upper-caste, masculine figure and is instrumental in scripting abjection and perpetuating violence against marginalised identities through sexist humorous discourse.

In summary, while these scholars have made notable efforts to analyse aspects of humour within Malayalam cinema, their endeavours have predominantly focused on specific facets rather than offering a comprehensive mapping of humour's overall nature throughout the history of Malayalam cinema. To date, there has been a notable absence of extensive studies that have undertaken a diachronic examination of Malayalam cinema across time to discern the characteristics and evolution of humour and comedy within it.

Relying solely on traditional Indian or Western theories of humour is insufficient for analysing and understanding humour in the context of cinema. As Davis observes:

> it is fruitful to apply Hobbes' superiority theory to aggressive jokes, Bergson's mechanization theory to farce, Freud's sexual theory to dirty jokes, and Northrop Frye's anthropological theory to Aristophanic Old Comedy. . .But humor is too complicated to be comprehended by such single-factor theories, no matter how well they explain one of its aspects. (*What's so Funny* 7)

The methodology employed in this thesis draws from a broad cultural studies framework apart from the Western theories of humour, integrating ideas

from various disciplines, including genre studies, disability studies, gender theory, and ethnic studies. One of the primary aims of this study is to conduct a sociological analysis of humour in Malayalam films by studying the tropes and genres of humour employed in the films themselves.

As the thesis revolves around the nature of humour in cinema, particularly in New Generation cinema, the film selection for this study follows a methodical approach that is dependent on the particular period under consideration. For instance, film selection from the 1980s and 1990s are based on their explicit categorization as comedy films. Alternatively, the films of the 2000s are examined with a focus on the films of the actor Dileep, who played a significant role in popularising the humour quotient during this period, with his name having become synonymous with the comedy genre of the era. Within the realm of New Generation cinema, it is hypothesised that a distinct comedy genre does not exist. Therefore, The film texts involving humour selected for analysis during the period are based on the critical acclaim the films received during this wave, especially drawing on factors like online reviews, reports and social media responses. Popularity based on box office success is not taken to be an essential component for text selection from the New Generation period, because many films, *Aadu* (2015) for instance, were not commercial hits or box office successes but gained significance among audiences later, mainly due to their accessibility on OTT platforms and the internet in general. This approach involves an extensive and multidimensional examination of humour in Malayalam cinema, taking into consideration cultural and societal aspects, genre conventions, and audience

reception during the period.

Chapter one of the thesis, apart from introducing the study, outlines the thesis statement along with the research objectives and the significance of the study. It further presents the existing studies on humour in Malayalam cinema. The methodology employed for the present study is also outlined in the chapter along with the structure of the thesis in terms of chapter divisions. Furthermore, the chapter provides a brief overview of the various theories of humour as well as the origin of the comedy genre in Indian cinema, particularly in Malayalam cinema.

The second chapter, titled "Mapping Cinema Spaces and New Generation Malayalam Cinema, " attempts to explore the evolutionary transitions in the exhibition venues and audience choices that led to the arrival of New Generation Cinema in Malayalam. The chapter also engages in detailing the features of the New Generation wave in Malayalam cinema while analysing the factors that aided the assimilation of this movement into the cinematic landscape of Kerala. The third chapter of the thesis titled "Malayalam Comedy Films of the 80s: The Beginnings," traces the evolutionary phases of the comedy film in Malayalam and its establishment as a distinct genre in the Malayalam cinematic corpus. The chapter also deals with the analysis of various sub-genres, tropes, and political overtones of humour that mark the comedic films of the eighties.

Chapter four , titled "Comedy of the 90s: from Imitation to Normalisation," takes up the analysis of the transformation that occurred in Malayalam comedy films during the 90s. The chapter also looks into the reasons for this change, while examining the characteristics and influences of the period.

Chapter five takes into reading the comedy films of the post-millennial period and is titled "Comedy Films of the 2000s: Configuring, Reconfiguring Masculinity". The primary focus is on the contemporary comedy films that featured the actor Dileep in the lead role. The chapter explores the concept of hegemonic masculinity in relation to humour in the comedy films of the period. It further analyses the representation of the sidekicks and the politics surrounding their portrayals in the films. The chapter also examines the spatial diegesis of the films of the 2000s and how it negotiates and transforms the comedic landscape of the period.

The sixth chapter, titled "Generic and Trans-generic Tendencies: Exploring Departures and Disruptions in New Generation Film Humour," is a comprehensive analysis of the nature of humour in New Generation Malayalam cinema. The chapter explores the arrival of new sub-genres of humour into the Malayalam cinematic oeuvre, zeroing in on the potential deviations and/or continuities in employing humour within the narratives of these films, thereby providing insights into the unconventional approaches and trends that define the movement.

Chapter seven sums up the ideas and findings of the study and chapter eight, titled 'Recommendations', offers suggestions for further research in the area.

Chapter 2

Mapping Cinema Spaces and New Generation Malayalam Cinema

A comprehensive exploration of the evolving forms of humour, their elements, underlying meanings, and portrayal in post-millennial Malayalam cinema necessitates a deep comprehension of the historical changes in exhibition spaces and preferences that laid the foundation for the emergence of New Generation Cinema in Malayalam. The chapter attempts to define the New Generation wave in Malayalam cinema and to briefly survey the factors that led to the arrival of this movement into the Malayalam cinematic landscape. Such an investigation is a prerequisite for analysing the generic experimentations and the utilisation of humour in New Generation films. It will further serve as a foundation to identify the space of humour as well as to explore the various tropes and the political ideology of comedy in the New Generation films, thereby contributing to understanding the changes in cinematic humour during the period.

Malayalam Cinema has always stood apart from other Indian films in terms of subject matter and thematic representation. While the early films of the country were predominantly focused on portraying mythological and spiritual characters and stories on screen, the Malayalam film industry charted a distinct course. Right from its days of inception, it chose to showcase films with significant social themes on the silver screen and the films of the 1950s attempted the creation of a 'Malayali' identity (Radhakrishnan, "Thiruvithamkoor" 128).

The end of the first decade of the twenty first century witnessed a burgeoning of filmmakers hitherto unknown to the industry, who were ready to explore themes and narratives that their predecessors in the previous decades hesitated to attempt. This wave of films, later labelled as the 'New Generation Cinema' in Malayalam arrived towards the end of 2010 into a scene when Malayalam actors ruled the industry by the might of their stardom and fan base. To get a better insight into contemporary Malayalam cinema, an understanding of the evolution of New Generation Malayalam cinema (hereafter also mentioned as 'New Gen' cinema) is imperative.

While some may view it as a "renaissance" in Malayalam cinema (M. Kumar, "New Wave"), the task of codifying and defining New Gen cinema proves challenging precisely because there is no single defining feature that neatly categorises it. As Martin Esslin says about the theatre of the absurd, these movies too have features that are common, yet diverse and different in terms of certain techniques and character portrayals (12). Rather than a finite definition of the category, it is beneficial to grasp the cinematic subculture of New Gen cinema through the common characteristics and general trends that these films display. However, it is essential to have a brief understanding of Malayalam cinema's nature and the shifts in viewing spaces that have occurred over the years. This knowledge will help one comprehend the factors that led to the emergence of New Gen cinema.

2.1.   Stronghold of the superstars and crisis in Malayalam cinema

As observed in the previous chapter, the first decade of the century in Malayalam films basked in the light of movies made for superstars, which in itself

led to the crisis in the Malayalam film industry. The icons Mammootty and

Mohanlal continued to adorn the roles of the moustache-twirling alpha males that

they had taken up towards the late 90s, establishing notions of hypermasculinity. By

the year 2000, scripts were tailored to fit and maintain the stardom of these icons so

as to appease the audience which comprised, in majority, of the fans of these

superstars. The Films that featured these superstars together often encountered

challenges in balancing their individual star power. This is evident in *Harikrishnans*

(1998), directed by Fazil in which Mammootty and Mohanlal were convinced to

play the lead roles. "The harder bit is making sure neither of them feels

shortchanged, and more importantly, that their vocal fans are pleased…The struggle

shows: in the movie, if Mammootty's Hari began a sentence, Mohanlal's Krishnan

would finish it" (N. Menon, " Can Mohanlal"). Notably, Fazil found it necessary to

create two different endings for the film *Harikrishnans*, taking into account the

geographical distribution of fans and the varying levels of acceptance among the

superstars' audiences. In the film *Twenty:20* (2008), the manner in which these two

superstar figures were introduced, the dialogues they exchanged, and confrontations

were all intricately orchestrated to cater exclusively to the fans of each superstar.

It is arguably true that the blind fan following and hero worship of

Malayalam actors, male heroes to be specific, was not a trend in the past among the

Malayali audience when compared to the other states of South India. The filmmaker

Bejoy Nambiar is reported to have said:

I used to take pride in the fact that we loved our actors, but never idolized

them like in other states. But the late 1990s and early 2000s were a confused

and complex phase of trial-and-error in Malayalam cinema, where nobody

knew what was working and a lot of people were aping what was happening

in the Tamil, Telugu and Hindi industries. (Jha, "Substance over Style")

So, by the turn of the century, the trend of worshipping and idolising film stars

found a way into Kerala, even though not to the extremes that were prevalent in

other States of the South. One could attribute the proliferation of fans in Kerala to

the Malayali audience's exposure to films from other South Indian states during the

period.

The industry was in crisis in the early 2000s and the situation accelerated

with the reception of other South Indian movies in Kerala, some of them dubbed into

the regional language. The Malayali audiences' exposure to the films of other States

of South India could be taken as one of the reasons for the kind of fan proliferation.

Hence, Telugu, Kannada, and Tamil movies started making profits out of the crisis

experienced by the Malayalam film industry during the period. "In the last decades,

Malayalam cinema was in a sort of limbo, with the local market being increasingly

dominated by Tamil and Hindi films; go to any town in the State, and you will find

films from these languages outnumbering Malayalam in 'Today's Cinema'

column" (Venkiteswaran, "Goodbye"). Very few Malayalam films went on to

become box office hits and the only hope for other films to get through were satellite

rights. Any new attempts at the plot, narrative, or script were limited due to the

domination of the superstars and this, "complemented by the autocratic control of

industry organisations over all areas of the industry that led to the ban of talented

actors like Thilakan and certain directors, was pushing the industry to the wall"
("Goodbye"). As a result, Malayalam cinema was in dire need of transformation.

2.2.   Viewership and exhibition practices

The changes in exhibition practices and how viewers consume cinema laid
the ground for the emergence of New Gen cinema in Kerala. The following sections
attempt at a brief exploration of this transition in audience engagement and
exhibition methods from the early days of cinema theatres..

2.2.1. Transformation of the theatre

Indian Cinema halls, during their inception, were started for Europeans in the
country and were called 'picture palaces' (Athique, "From Cinema Hall" 148). It
was not until the 1910s that the Indian film industry began to rise, and it was during
this period that these theatres transformed into venues that not only catered to the
interests of the nation's native elite and the Europeans but also got adapted to
audiences from a broader range of social backgrounds. During the 1920s, local films
outnumbered the ones of foreign imports ("From Cinema Hall" 148). By the 1930s,
with the coming of sound in cinema, the film industry of the country advanced.
Along with it, the regional cinema started to gain popularity, and "film production
in India evolved into half a dozen industries serving the major linguistic markets"
("From Cinema Hall" 148).

While there is debate surrounding the claim that the first Malayalam
film was produced in 1928, it was not until the 1950s that the Malayalam
film industry truly marked its presence. Prior to this period, film exhibitions

primarily relied on travelling and temporary cinemas (J. Joseph, *Industry Aesthetics* 31). Despite the widespread popularity of Tamil films in the regions of Kerala during the 1930s, particularly notable for their emphasis on mythological narratives (J. Joseph, *Industry Aesthetics* 40), Malayalam cinema exhibited a distinct thematic departure from the films originating in other southern regions of India. This deviation in subject matter coincided with a movement towards the cultivation of Malayali nationalism, which gained momentum with the establishment of the State of Kerala in 1956. As Venkiteswaran observes: "In the 1950s, Malayalam cinema, like the theatre movement, was actually creating a new, secular Kerala where caste and class and other erstwhile identities were irrelevant" ("Local Narratives").

In a country ridden by caste hierarchies, the cinema hall was one of the first spaces that disrupted segregation by its nature of exhibition. This was because the cinema was screened for the masses enclosed in a large space. Analysing the cinema theatres of the South, Sivathamby remarks:

> The Cinema Hall was the first performance centre in which all Tamils sat under the same roof. The basis of the seating is not on the hierarchic position of the patron but essentially on his purchasing power. If he cannot afford paying the higher rate, he has either to keep away from the performance or be with 'all and sundry'. (18)

Thus it enabled the participation of the public in coming together spatially by reordering the social space. Despite this being the claim, debates continue regarding the existence of segregation in cinema halls in covert ways. As

Srinivas suggests that "[t]here is now a growing body of evidence indicating that although members of lower castes were allowed to enter cinema halls, theatre managements ensured that caste and class hierarchies were reinforced within them … [therefore] It is important to note that the cinema hall was one of the sites for the struggle of *political* rights as far as the lower caste-class viewers were concerned" ("Is There a Public"). It is interesting to note that, unlike in the later decades, there were female viewers of the upper class present in the theatre spaces during this period:

> In a context where 'respectable' women may not have appeared in public at all, and where temples, residential areas and water sources were often subject to exclusive access by certain caste, faith and class groups, the gathering together of a diverse public within a single social space appears to have represented a radical departure from existing social norms. (Athique, "Cinema" 402)

The 1970s, however, witnessed a dwindling of the upper-class members as well as the so-called respectable middle-class people from the theatre spaces, partially due to the popularity of television and the coming of the video playback technologies of the age, with which they could enjoy the pleasures of the screen in the domestic and private space of their homes. The effects of the National Emergency during the period also were a reason for the gross decrease in the aforementioned section of the audience. "The already extent anxieties of middle-class cinema-goers, along with the zeitgeist of the Emergency, encouraged them to stay away from the

cinema" (Athique and Hill 111). This absence of the affluent class in the theatres dragged down the cinema halls in terms of maintenance as a result of the fall in income.

The shift in the audience demographic led to a transformation in the themes and genres of the films being created, consequently altering the content screened. In summary, theatres ceased to appeal to families and female viewers, predominantly catering to a male audience. This marked the onset of the decline of traditional cinema halls, which culminated in the late 1980s. Ticket prices had to be brought down to accommodate the lower-class audience and to sustain income. Seatings were also changed for this purpose and thus the interest in maintenance of the cinema halls fell short. "[T]hese lower ticket prices also diminished the profits of exhibitors which led to decreasing interest in the maintenance of the cinemas, with the physical deterioration of many urban cinemas highly apparent by the end of the 1980s" ("From Cinema Hall" 152)

As television ownership became more widespread and VCRs started getting popular in the 1980s, the middle class increasingly preferred the safety and comfort of their homes, while public spaces were left to the urban underclass (Mukherjee 15). As Madhu Jain writes: "Much of the gentile class had retreated to the comfort of television and video. Left in the cinema halls were the children of the mean streets"("Hegemony of Films").

2.2.2. Video and television

The 1980s saw the emergence of a new mode of viewership and in India, at the time, the new revolution was second only to Coca-Cola in importance (Ninan). This was the unprecedented rise of the Video. Although television had been present since the 1960s, it was the introduction of the Video Cassette Player/Recorder (popularly referred to as the VCR) that resulted in a change in middle-class viewers' watching habits as well as their way of life. It became a reason for relatives and friends to get together to watch movie cassettes that showcased their favourite Bollywood films, a luxury that was previously reserved only for the upper class. Even though the manufacturing of VCRs was few in number at the beginning of the 1980s, the video revolution had taken the country by storm. The price of a VCR and colour TV was as high as a middle-class man's annual salary (Ninan) but that did not stop the boom. Ninan observes about the time that a "video revolution has already taken the country by storm, caught the popular imagination with a speed that outshines every other popular medium before it, and set itself up as the mass entertainer of the future" ("Video Revolution").

The VCR was no longer limited to just the wealthy urban areas and metros but had also started to become a significant presence in smaller towns. This gave rise to video rental shops and video libraries that rented cassettes for a very low price in the villages as well. When the urban middle class could afford their own devices, the small towns had to rely on the TVs and VCRs rented out by such video libraries for up to 150 to 200 rupees per day (Ninan). This played a key role in influencing the

viewership tendencies of the period. Soon videos were being played in homes, hotels, offices, restaurants, hospitals, and even on long-distance luxury buses. In reference to this, *India Today* reported in 1983 that when the buses came to a halt, people outside would peer in through the windows to catch a glimpse of the films being screened inside. "And when the bus started moving, they would run alongside, catching the last few frames of the action before the bus sped away" (Ninan).

Consequently, the social habits of the middle class during the time witnessed a change. People would get together at relatives' houses or places where they could watch a movie on the VCR. This kind of involvement with the medium of cinema was unheard of in the past. Another joint involvement during the period was video parties where people would screen videos in a darkened room in the evening with food. The VCR in a house had become a symbol of one's status as well as one that led to socialising. This unprecedented involvement with the TV and VCR in the towns is explained partly by the absence of entertainment in most towns and villages of the time. The video thus offered the young and the old with a solution to boredom.

> Generally, video viewing is a collective activity with children, friends and neighbours forming the group. Consequently there is greater socialisation among peer group members due to video, though in the rural areas servants seem to have equal access to viewing video along with family members...among the four southern states...Kerala had the maximum number of VCR owners. (Rao 17-18)

The affordability of the device and the consequent impact of it on the socio-cultural

habits of the people was a result of the change in Government policies of the 1980s.

During the Asian Games of 1982, the Government allowed the import of Color TV

kits that could be assembled in the country (Ninan) and then made available through

the companies in the country. It was also the year in which colour TV arrived in the

country. Along with this, the Government also lowered the import duty for people

who sent VCRs from abroad. Consequently, the nature of the viewership changed.

The impact that TV had on cinema-goers was limited when compared to that of the

VCR. As Rao states, the impact of video was stronger in rural areas where cinema

theatres were few and often inaccessible. In bigger towns and cities, the regular

clientele of a cinema theatre was generally drawn from the poorer or middle-class

families who did not generally own VCR/VCP but did have access to video viewing.

There was thus a blurring of the distinction between those who saw films only on

video or only at the theatres. Often, it was a mixture (Rao 18).

Thus, access to videos using a VCR was not easy for the ordinary class of

people. It was only towards the end of the 90s that the majority of the population of

Kerala had the luxury of occasionally renting a TV or VCR. Sreesanth and

Balasaravanan observe that "even though VCR and other modes of domestic

entertainment diffused rapidly throughout the 1980s, they were not easily accessible

to the common people. Thus, cinema theatres were active and people still gathered

in huge numbers to watch films" (3).

Eventually, the film industry had to suffer the blow from the repercussions of

the video and TV revolution. Families did not frequent the theatres and, as a result,

the films produced gradually became more and more inclined towards the tastes of the male viewers by the end of the 90s along with other factors, film production in Kerala (which was an average of 113.7 films per annum in the 1980s) "began to plummet to 78.6 films [per annum], a trend that continued through the next decades and to the present" ("Local Narratives"). As further commented by Venkiteswaran:

> The visual culture industry witnessed two major shifts during the last decades – first, the coming of television and second, the advent of digital technology that radically transformed the film industry – production, distribution, exhibition and reception. Films began to be available in easily replicable and exchangeable formats which created new audiences for cinema, but affected the audience presence in the theatres and so, box office collections. ("Local Narratives")

2.2.3. Cable TV, digital TV channels, CDs, etc.

Cable TV rose to prominence in America in the 1970s (Mullen 1). However, in India, the surge in popularity only transpired in the wake of the 1990s, coinciding with the arrival of private broadcasters on the scene. Options for entertainment grew as video became popular in the 1980s with the video cassette being the primary device for leisure and socialising. It was not until the Gulf War and the beginning of the 1990s that cable became prevalent. The demand for viewing the news was growing when CNN started broadcasting it. But only the rich could afford the satellite dishes and so the demand for cable TV grew, paving the way for the industry to expand. The only television channel that was transmitted was Doordarshan up till the start of 1991. "Sensing a golden opportunity, Star TV

Network in December 1991 introduced five television channels into the Indian

broadcasting space that had so long been monopolised by the state-owned

Doordarshan" ("Coming of Satellite").

With the arrival and popularity of Cable TV, Doordarshan faced difficulties

in competing with a private network of high-quality entertainment channels. This

new mode of exhibition sparked a revolution in home entertainment. The entry of

private channels took place due to the economic liberalisation policies of the time

and the growth of cable TV in the country was rapid. It immensely affected the

viewing habits of the general populace. Unlike the 1980s, many households could

afford a TV set by the turn of the century:

> The launch of Star TV and Zee TV further fuelled the spread of cable TV. In
>
> the first half of 1992, almost 4,500 households were being cabled up daily.
>
> That figure increased to 9,450 homes daily in the second half of the year...
>
> This is estimated to have gone up to 7.3 million by January 1994, according
>
> to one estimate. Frank Small once again surveyed the market in end-1994
>
> and the firm placed the number of cable & satellite homes at 11.8 million out
>
> of a total of 32.4 million TV owning homes. (Anil H. D.)

By 2005, India had more than 200 digital channels and in Kerala, Asianet laid the

foundation in private broadcasting with its first Malayalam channel broadcast in

1993 (R. Lal). The practice of viewership changed again along the way. TV became

more and more of a private affair rather than one where families, relatives and

friends gathered around to socialise. With the growth in computer technology, the

VCRs were replaced with VCD and DVD players at the turn of the century. This offered the viewers the technology to watch more than one film from a single disk.

2.2.4. Multiplexes

Along with the surge in cable TV networks during the 1990s, another significant development occurred in the realm of spectatorship, courtesy of government liberalisation policies. It marked the entry of industrial giants into the exhibition sector, investing in what we now recognize as the multiplex. This innovation not only transformed exhibition practices but also had a profound impact on the lifestyles of the audience.

The first multiplex started in India in 1997 in Delhi by PVR and was a tie-up between Priya Exhibitors and the Australian-based Village Roadshow Limited (Hill and Athique 604). This was followed by Adlabs in Mumbai and INOX in Kolkata in 2000 and 2002 respectively. Sreesanth and Balasaravanan analyse that during this period the number of theatres in Kerala "reduced from around 1600 to 515,7 of which a clear majority fell in C-class category" (6). Subsequently, multiplex theatres began to emerge in the city centres of the State.

Venkiteswaran in 2012 remarked that " even while theatres are closing down at an alarming rate, only a few multiplex or small theatres have come up, that too, in urban centres" ("Local Narratives"). A decade since this observation, the landscape has transformed significantly. Nowadays, multiplex theatres can be found in nearly every major town and city throughout the State. Numerous traditional single-screen cinema halls have undergone renovations and many have transformed into multiplex

theatres, signifying both the growing consumer class and the evolution of traditional viewership. C-class theatres are now very rare even in small towns.

> The reasons for this could be varying from place to place, but in Kerala, one of the prime reasons is the disparity in the releasing of films. By the time a new film reaches the C class theatre in Kerala, the same film will be available on the Internet through torrent websites and other online video streaming websites. (Sreesanth and Balasaravanan 12)

The emergence of multiplexes resulted in the creation of a new public space, one in which the class extremities were polarised when compared with the theatre spaces of the traditional cinema hall. If the traditional theatres were the primary spaces for dismantling caste hierarchies to a certain limit, the multiplexes had an underlying proposition for class segregation well in place. Initially, these structures were strictly targeted at upper and upper-middle-class people. The rise of the new consumerist middle class during the 1990s however cemented the agenda of "corporatisation" (Athique and Hill 113) of the exhibition sector.

The rise of the multiplex is thus closely associated with the restructuring of the working practices and the arrival of capital investment in the film industry. It was only in 1998 that the Government of India gave official industry status to the film industry (Rajadhyaksha 31), making it accessible and in demand for investment capital. The relaxation of taxation policies played a pivotal role in driving the multiplex industry's expansion. Consequently, the influx of new investments into the film sector paved the way for the emergence of new structures of exhibition known as the multiplex. Athique comments that "if the guiding hands of state

governments have encouraged the multiplex boom to date through friendly tax policies, they have undoubtedly done so with an awareness of their own long-term advantage arising from the corporatisation of film exhibition" ("Leisure Capital" 136).

Apart from this, the increase in disposable income among the middle class and the emerging trend towards consumption led to an increase in the target audience from the IT and retail sectors. Another reason pointed out by Athique and Hill is the "exuberant property market" (114). The advent of multiplexes introduced a fresh arena for leisure and consumer activity: the shopping mall. Mall culture proliferated as a direct consequence of multiplexes, with a significant number of them strategically positioned within mall complexes. The emergence of shopping malls and residential villas underscored the influence of cinema halls, catalysing investments in multiplexes. Multiplex cinemas were said to be "anchor tenants that increase footfalls in a shopping mall by 40-50 percent" (KPMG 65).

Prior to 2000, the cinema business was disorganised, with the traditional theatres being solely owned and operated by families, and passed down to subsequent generations. The traditional cinema halls were single-screened and accommodated a very large group when compared to the multiplex. The multiplex brought about a "counter to the unitary propensity of the single screen hall, founded on exclusion, perpetuating homogeneity and cultivating committed audience segments" (Sharma). This shift indicated a transformation in viewers' preferences, as they moved from aligning themselves with traditionally tailored films to theatres becoming spaces that attracted diverse audiences. Athique and Hill point out the

necessity of examining the politics of multiplex spaces: "As such, it may be pertinent in the light of the multiplex for film scholars to revisit and even reconsider the claims made upon the cinema hall and its occupants as the site of a nascent democratic principle" (116).

The arrival of the multiplex theatre created a division in the exhibition sector (Mukherjee 11), fragmenting the previously unified and diverse audience of single-screen theatres, effectively creating a division between multiplex and single-screen audiences as two separate social entities. This restructuring of the audience "re-routed the entire production-distribution-exhibition network" (Mukherjee 207) that had been established earlier and introduced a variety of new narrative genres on multiplex screens.

The traditional cinema halls were situated in areas where there was a chance of having bigger crowds, as in public areas like bus stops, close to railway stations, and in areas with access to public transportation. However, the ideology of the multiplex was "oriented towards centrally planned consumerism" (Athique and Hill 109). Its structural, geographical, and administrative aspects favoured the "elite class" and kept the "cheap crowd" away. The locations were around wealthy suburbs, away from the crowded spaces, places that demanded access by private vehicle rather than by public transport through which a "ground for spatial segregation has long been laid" (Athique and Hill 116). The access to these locations, the ticket rates, the rate of the food inside the theatres, and everything associated with the multiplex were consciously designed with the middle class and above in mind. From 2000 onwards, the decisions taken by a number of Indian states

to allow multiplexes to operate with dynamic ticket prices outside of the tariffs set for regular theatres paved the way for admission prices up to ten times the average cost of a ticket to a regular theatre (KPMG 65). Thus, a new category of viewers arose: a "creamy layer of a politically assertive middle class" (Athique and Hill 117).

Accordingly, the multiplex was selective in the nature of the audience. It was a "domain of a "selectively privatised public, " those who had "moved up the income scale seek to barricade themselves from [poverty's] pervasive presence" (Varma 203). Before the beginning of the multiplexes, the theatres were frequented by predominantly male viewers who hooted and howled and who mostly sought 'masala movies' and blockbusters that catered to the fancies of the male viewers. The Multiplex owners clearly wanted to provide a space devoid of what they termed as the "cheap crowd", "a prerequisite for attracting the kind of patrons they desire." ("From Cinema Hall" 154).

Sangita Gopal categorises multiplex films into two generations. The first generation, which she roughly places between 1995 and 2004 which mirrors the experiential qualities of the multiplex through its inventive formal techniques and diverse genre offerings. The second generation emerged in the latter half of the 2010s, coincided with the expansion of multiplex theatres all over the nation and is distinguished by the innovative narrative approach known as the "multiplot" (138).

Consequently, the evolution of theatre exhibition practices had a substantial influence on the exploration of urban themes and the innovative shifts in subject matter and narratives in Malayalam cinema as well after 2010.

2.2.5. Popularity of the internet and social media

C. S. Venkiteswaran in his book *Cinema Talkies* (2012) views TV as the predominant reason for the change in the viewing attitudes of the average Malayalee post-1990. He states that the middle-class Malayali's constant access to global visual products not just increased the possibilities of entertainment but also made them reconsider the concept of entertainment altogether (111). During this era, television exerted significant influence on the realm of entertainment to the extent that even the creative processes behind cinematic productions were tailored to cater to television viewers. Numerous Malayalam films were crafted with the intention of appealing to the television audience, thereby establishing television as a prominent determinant of viewership. As a consequence of the consumerist inclination prevailing among the average Malayalee, viewers became increasingly discerning in their viewership choices, a demand that the cinema of that period struggled to meet. Consequently, in retrospect, Malayalee viewers developed homogeneous preferences, affinities, and aversions, subscribing to a binary framework of evaluating visual content in terms of right and wrong. The domain of cinema during this period witnessed a dearth of room for experimentation and deviation, primarily due to the dominion of television. However, the responsibility of embracing innovation and deviation in the realm of visual content creation was soon bestowed upon another emerging technology—the internet.

The gap between the cinema and TV audience was wider still in the initial stages of the Smartphone era. Smartphones were acknowledged as the fourth screen for viewers, following cinema, television, and computer screens. While conventional

filmmakers perceived this new medium as a threat, the filmmakers of the post-2010 era embraced this shift and effectively employed it as a tool to catalyse the transformation of Malayalam Cinema. This change is precisely what resulted later in innovative projects like *C U Soon* (2020), which was shot entirely using smartphones, and was released on OTT (over-the-top) platform rather than in the theatre during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Subsequently, there was a significant increase in subscription-based streaming platforms in the State.

The emergence of the internet enabled Malayali viewers to access high-quality visual media from around the world, surpassing the calibre of domestic cinema. In contrast to Western film industries, the Malayalam film industry was unable to satisfy this audience demand due to economic limitations that constrained the production of movies. The initial decade of the millennium proved to be a challenging period for the Malayalam film industry. Movies from other languages, especially Tamil and dubbed Telugu films, gained popularity among Malayalam audiences. During this period, families were not a major demographic among theatre-goers; instead, they relied primarily on VCDs and televised films. Families predominantly visited theatres during festive seasons like Onam, Vishu, Eid, and Christmas, when special releases were often associated with these occasions.

The emergence of social media and the ubiquity of the internet has had a profound impact on the consumption of movies, transforming it in unprecedented ways. In the year 2010, social networking sites like Facebook made significant inroads into the country (Sircar) and became popular among the youth. However, the emergence of the messaging app WhatsApp triggered a surge in social networking.

In the year 2014, the social media company Facebook, had acquired WhatsApp, the messaging app, and "appeared to be an unstoppable force in India" (Sircar). Twitter and Instagram also gained significant traction in the State. Initially, streaming activities were cumbersome, primarily due to slow internet speeds, and the audience had to endure the buffering time. However, with the introduction of 3G and subsequently 4G networks, network speeds improved drastically, creating a positive impact on the streaming experience.

Consequently, the increase in online viewership shot up in India in 2016 as a result of the introduction of the Jio 4G sim by Reliance India Ltd, initially offering free 4G internet data and this "changed the consumption habits for hundreds of millions of consumers" (Gosh). The change that drastically affected and influenced viewing habits was the popularity of social media and content repository sites on the internet, especially YouTube. YouTube became a source for watching videos and films which soon became part of the everyday life of the masses. This was a revolutionary step that later led to the online streaming boom, paving the way to the entry of OTT platforms including Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney Hotstar among others. OTT platforms revolutionised the manner in which audiences accessed cinema. While television, DVD and films downloaded from Torrent sites had previously shifted viewership from a social activity to a more private one (Venkiteswaran ["Local Narratives"] observes the phenomenon as the losing of the "publicness" of cinema), the internet and OTT platforms took this privacy to another level, focusing on individual viewers and offering personalised content recommendations.

The surge in social media's popularity had a direct influence on the film industry, offering a platform for viewers to voice their opinions and critiques of newly released movies. Online reviews and film analyses started to gain prominence. Films that were considered politically incorrect or controversial often encountered backlash on social media, leading filmmakers to reconsider their creative decisions. Additionally, social media platforms helped filmmakers gauge the prevailing trends and understand the preferences of the majority audience. Filmmakers also started utilising social media as a tool for promoting their films, leveraging their reach and engagement to generate buzz and awareness.

The number of new viewers who depend on reading reviews from online platforms before watching a film, and actively engage in rating it afterward began to surpass that of traditional filmgoers. This shift in viewer behaviour has made the new audience more discerning and selective in their choice of films, thanks to the availability of technology. Consequently, while there was an increased demand for a larger quantity of movies, only a few managed to perform well at the box office. One reason for this is attributed to the fact that in contrast to the time when VHS (Video Home System) and VCR (Video Cassette Recorder) were introduced, the contemporary period did not suffer from a scarcity of alternative modes of entertainment.

In the past, the middle-class population had limited choices for family entertainment since there were no malls or restaurants to frequent. Movie theatres frequently served as the sole outing where families could enjoy time together. During that time, the variety in the movies released was relatively smaller compared

to later periods, leaving the audience with limited choices. Consequently, they were compelled to watch whatever films were available to them. Furthermore, there was a lack of platforms for expressing or viewing opinions about movies, apart from small circles of friends and social gatherings. This passive reception of films had a significant impact on traditional viewers, as they internalised the ideologies consciously or unconsciously propagated by the movies. These ideologies often perpetuated stereotypes related to beauty, gender, caste, community, and heroism, which had long dominated social realms and which the members of society absorbed indiscreetly. The tastes of the new viewers underwent a significant transformation, making them more analytical and critical in their approach towards films. With access to movies from all around the globe, they are able to make comparisons in terms of narrative quality, techniques and subject matter.

Social media plays a crucial role in cultivating a group of viewers who develop a refined taste for embracing change and experimentation in cinema. It can be argued that social media successfully created a platform that nurtured a viewer base that appreciated and sought out innovative and experimental cinematic experiences. Additionally, these new viewers also advocated for films that were deemed politically correct. A notable example of this is the widespread criticism that emerged on social media against the Mammootty starrer movie *Kasaba* (2016) directed by Nithin Renji Panicker for its derogatory portrayal of female characters. It was reported that the Kerala Women's Commission (KWC) intervened "by deciding to send a notice in this connection to the film's writer-director Nithin Renji Panicker, producer Alice George and the actor himself" ("Kasaba in Soup") after the

social media outrage. Consequently, social media platforms have become powerful tools for expressing concerns and holding filmmakers accountable for their portrayals and representations in movies.

Hence, despite the consumerist approach linked with the corporatization of the film industry, the new generation of viewers have cultivated a more critical outlook toward movies, even if the effects are not always immediately apparent. This does not imply that every viewer has undergone a complete transformation. The enduring popularity of movies centred on masculine heroes in contemporary times serves as evidence that only a portion of the audience approaches films with a critical perspective. However, this segment represents a considerably higher number compared to viewers of the past. Their presence and influence have played a crucial role in initiating the significant changes witnessed in the Malayalam film industry after 2010. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) became an important factor with the popularity and ease of access to social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.

> One of the major influencers of a movie's success are the consumers who
> share their experiences through electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)
> influencing their peers' decision to watch or avoid a movie...Social media
> also provides rich platforms to share the experience of consumers through
> electronic means and spread the eWOM. (Nanda et al. 233)

Recently filmmakers have started using social media as a vital tool to engage potential viewers through various promotional campaigns that might help their films achieve box office success. As a result, "social media platforms should not be

treated independent of each other and all social media platforms have a collective presence in engaging the consumer," (Nanda et al. 234) that is, the viewer. Furthermore, Shruti et al. conclude that "social media influences the performance of movies significantly" ("Influence of Social Media"). This is particularly significant for Malayalam New Generation films that are produced on low budgets. Online reviews, microblogs, and online communities have played a pivotal role in determining the success of these films. The influence and opinions shared through these platforms have had a direct impact on the reception and popularity of New Generation films, providing them with a platform to reach and resonate with their target audience. Shyam Gopinath et al. observed that the release day performance is "impacted most by pre-release blog volume and advertising, whereas post-release performance is influenced by blog valence, user rating valence and advertising" ("Blogs, Advertising" 2652).

It is interesting to note that due to the change in viewing inclinations as well as the way movies were made, the line of distinction between Art House And commercial cinema started to blur even more, making the audience accept both. An example of this trend can be seen in movies such as *Ee. Maa. Yau.* (2018) directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery and *Moothon* (2019) directed by Geethu Mohandas, both of which have made into film festivals around the world and have been accepted by the general mass.

2.3. Revolution in technical aspects

The way the audience consumes cinema has undergone a significant transformation since the beginning of the 21st century. This factor should be duly

acknowledged when considering the differences in the production and making of New Generation films. The viewers developed an increased aesthetic consciousness regarding the filmmaking process, exhibiting a heightened appreciation for and expectation of the execution of each individual shot. Specifically, they became cognizant of the significance of camera movements in enhancing the visual appeal of a scene. As a result, they began placing greater emphasis on the overall mise-en-scene in addition to the narrative itself. Moreover, advancements in technology, such as the introduction of Helicams/drones, advanced cameras, and editing technologies, provided directors and cinematographers with the means to imbue shots with both symbolic and aesthetic qualities, further augmenting the overall cinematic experience. This stark contrast becomes evident when compared with the approach to shot composition in films before the year 2000.

During the earlier era, more specifically in the 90s and early 2000s, a significant portion of the shots consisted of medium shots and close-ups of characters, primarily emphasising the delivery of dialogues and the portrayal of emotions (as in the films *The King* [1995] or *Narasimham* [2000]). This choice of shot composition was largely influenced by the prevalent themes in these films, which often revolved around exhibiting the masculinity of superhero figures or exploring the emotional struggles faced by female characters (as in the film *Manichitrathazhu* [1993]).

In contrast to earlier films that heavily emphasised the masculinity of the hero, the New Generation films have shifted their focus towards a more plot-driven approach. As a result, the frame widens, and the mise-en-scene incorporates a

broader range of elements. Many of the New Gen films also place significant importance on the region as a central category in the narrative, necessitating the use of wide-angle shots, long shots, and photographic frames that were previously less explored in Malayalam cinema. This change in cinematic style allows for a more expansive visual storytelling approach, enabling filmmakers to capture the essence of the region and create a more immersive viewing experience.

Thus, of the many factors that contributed to the advent of the New Gen cinema in Kerala, the change in exhibition practices and viewer consumption, the superstar era and the subsequent crisis in the Malayalam film industry, access to social media spaces as well the innovation in technical aspects in Malayalam cinema are a few of the factors that have been analysed prior to examining the phenomenon of New Generation in Malayalam cinema.

2.4.   Arrival of New Gen Cinema

With the advent of the New Generation cinema in the post-2010 era, along with the improvements in the conditions of theatres, there has been a gradual resurgence in the number of theatre-going audiences, and "these films brought the audience back to the theatres and spread a new sense of confidence in the industry" (Venkiteswaran, "Goodbye"). The emergence of young filmmakers brought about a noticeable shift in the Malayalam film industry, as they fearlessly experimented with new forms, formulas and formats. Although their unconventional approach initially faced some resistance from the audience, the novelty and uniqueness of their films left a lasting impression, leaving the Malayali viewers craving for more. These young filmmakers revitalised an industry that was on the verge of stagnation, by

reimagining traditional concepts of heroes/heroines, cinematography, and mise-en-scene. They no longer relied on the binaries of the hero/villain, good/bad or right/wrong. Their bold and innovative ideas injected fresh energy into Malayalam cinema, heralding a transformative phase. How a story was told became as significant as what was being told. Numerous films experimented with non-linear narratives, which many of the spectators initially had trouble breaking into. Venkiteswaran in 2013 commented that "as an industry and as an art form, it [New Gen cinema] has to negotiate its way through this complex maze that is crisscrossed with issues and concerns of social, economic, ideological, and political dimensions" ("New Trails"). However, over time, the audience gradually adjusted to the change and became actively involved in it, becoming integral participants in the evolving cinematic landscape.

The term 'New Generation films and filmmakers' does not specifically encompass a singular feature or trait pertaining to the changes that occurred in the film industry after 2010. However, it serves as a flexible descriptor that encompasses a multitude of prevalent features and practices observed in these films. These filmmakers exhibit a remarkable degree of creativity across various aspects. They consciously eschew conventional narratives, opting instead to incorporate new faces, scenarios, and linguistic variations that had been relatively under-explored within the domain of Malayalam Cinema along with novel storytelling practices. In other words, they bring about a rupture and disruption in Malayalam film production. In contrast to the high-budget mass action films in the industry during the period, the New Gen films were produced on a relatively modest budget.

Furthermore, a significant number of the directors and actors involved are newcomers and these "post-globalisation generation of film-makers" ("New Trails") embark on their debut ventures in Malayalam cinema. Notably, these films bear a discernible influence of global cinema, evident in their narrative style, cinematographic techniques, and thematic exploration. Consequently, one trait of New Generation cinema is that it resulted in bridging the gap between art-house and commercial cinema. In this sense, the New Generation Malayalam films of the 21st century bear resemblance to the *'Madhyavarthi'* cinema ('middle brow' cinema that emerged in the late 1970s and gained popularity in the 80s) in terms of characterisation, aesthetic innovation and experimentation in cinematic themes and narratives. Analysing the characteristics of the middle brow cinema, Hari A. S. remarks:

> debut films like *Swapnadanam* (1976), *Prayanam* (1975) and *Peruvazhiyambalam* (1979) which were directed by K.G George, Bharathan and Padmarajan respectively, followed the characteristic features of the new wave [the art-house film movement of the 70s], but also served as a point of departure towards their lifelong engagement with the 'popular-commercial' that constituted the 'middle brow' in Malayalam cinema. ("Cinema and its Fragments" 14)

In New Generation cinema, the representation of youth culture, alcohol and/or drug abuse surpass the extent to which these subjects were previously portrayed in Malayalam cinema. This trend is discernible in films such as *Honey Bee* (2013), *Idukki gold* (2013), *Kili Poyi* (2013), *Ni Ko Na Cha* (2013), *Premam* (2015),

Kunjiramayanam (2015)*, Double Barrel* (2015), etc. Each of these films depicts drug abuse in one way or the other. Historically in Malayalam cinema, the use of drugs was portrayed as being a distinguishing trait of the villain or the antagonist in the narrative. Analysing the portrayal of drugs and alcohol in New Gen cinema, Krishna and Sreehari observe that the characters "involved in the use of alcohol and other drugs are shown openly in these films and women have acquired a new role which is more equal with their male counterparts' and concludes that it has "a noticeable influence on the formation of lifestyle and culture among the audience" (740).

The New Gen cinema also exhibits an affiliation or influence from the Middle-brow cinema of the 80s in terms of character representation. Thus, the subjects portrayed in these films are for the most part autonomous and liberal in their outlook towards life. Several male protagonists in New Generation Malayalam Cinema, reminiscent of the 1980s film era, portray a fragility that challenges traditional notions of heroism. Notably, protagonists in *Maheshinte Prathikaram* (2016), *Mayaanadhi* (2017), *Thondimuthalum Driksakshiyum* (2017), *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019), *Unda* (2019), etc. are all vulnerable. New Generation films also provide more nuanced and progressive portrayals of women characters who often exhibit a sense of challenging the gender stereotypes and traditional norms by exploring notions of femininity as exemplified in films like *22 Female Kottayam* (2012), *How Old Are You?* (2014), *Rani Padmini* (2015), *Take Off* (2017), *Uyare* (2019), *Ishq* (2019), etc. These women characters are presented as the ones with agency; challenging patriarchal conventions and exhibiting the ability to defy

societal norms. "With the influence of neoliberal hegemonies and slacktivism, the last decades saw filmmakers breaking the popular women stereotypes and taboos celebrated by Malayalam cinema. Women in cinema are not 'housewives' anymore but independent and free," (George 2021) hence questioning longstanding notions about masculinity. The decade also witnessed the founding of organisations such as the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) in 2017 with a vision to provide "equal spaces and equal opportunities for women in cinema" ("Vision & Mission").

This apparent revolutionary portrayal of female characters in the early phase of this cinematic wave is, however, challenged by many, including Gopinath and Raj who, in 2015, observe:

> Changes are visible in the characterization of female roles, whose presence is obvious and given prominence in the film's marketing, yet with only a few superficial variations: they are clothed in modern attire and seem comfortable Indian women. They celebrate their financial freedom, as evidenced by their freedom to travel by night and to consume alcohol (70).

They also opine that New Generation femininity is, in fact, "Old wine in a new bottle" and that "these films perpetuate and reinforce a double standard – women as independent, but continuing to be victims of patriarchy" (71). This observation holds true when analysing films that achieved success after 2015. With a few exceptions, the majority of these films primarily centre the narrative around the journey of the male protagonists or their encounters with other characters, most of them male as well. This underscores another traceable pattern in New Gen cinema – mobility or movement.

The concept of mobility serves as the cohesive element that threads the entire narrative together in the Malayalam road thriller film *Traffic* directed by Rajesh Pillai, which is claimed to have initiated the New Gen movement in 2011 (Venkatesan and James 52). The film employs an experimental hyperlink format of storytelling characterised by a multilinear narrative. In addition, the film diverges from the archetype of a singular hero that was followed in Malayalam cinema in the previous decade and instead features five lead protagonists, whose individual stories gradually unravel as the plot advances. Another film, *Chappa Kurish* (2011), directed by Samir Thahir, is the film that paved the way for representing urban transformation, digital expansion, and its effect on the subject in Malayalam cinema. The film gained attention for its departure from conventions and its portrayal of intimate scenes on screen, which was not common during the previous decade within the realm of Malayalam cinema. The plot revolves around two protagonists Arjun (Fahad Fasil) and Ansari (Vineeth Sreenivasan) and the story of a lost smartphone. Arjun represents everything that is urban and modern while Ansari is in direct contrast to him when it comes to class and stature. Apart from the obvious disparity in the social class that they belong to, both the characters are placed in spaces that are farther away from their family and are shown to exhibit movement through the urban space in what feels like a game of hide-n-seek.

Thus, the motif of mobility, either of the protagonists or the ensembles in the films is a discernable characteristic observable in many of the New Gen films of the period. The characters are consistently depicted in a state of perpetual motion, which serves as a symbolic reflection of the emerging autonomous subject. Apart from

Traffic and *Chappa Kurish*, films such as *Bachelor Party* (2012), *Neram* (2013), *ABCD* (2013), *Neelakasham Pachakadal Chuvanna Bhoomi* (2013), *North 24 Kaatham* (2013), *Idukki Gold* (2013), *Double Barrel* (2015), *Aadu* (2015), *Rani Padmini* (2015), *Charlie* (2015), *Kali* (2016), *CIA* (2017) *Mayaanadhi* (2017), *Role Models* (2017), *Jallikattu* (2019), etc., are some of the popular films of the New Gen that exemplify this characteristic. They are, thus, for the most part, located outside the traditional family spaces.

In Malayalam cinema of the 1950s, the characters' movement from a rural village into an urban city space was predominantly to escape the caste hierarchy and discrimination. "One of the easily noticeable features about the social realist films is the importance of "public spaces", like tea shops, streets etc" (J. Joseph, "'Regional' Cinema" 43). The tea shops and bus stands were represented as secular spaces. The movement of the characters in New Generation cinema, however, is for a different reason. This was mainly to liberate the individual from the conventional self. Put differently, while films from the 1950s utilised mobility to emphasise nationalistic issues, those from the 2010s employ 'mobile characters' to underscore the evolution of autonomous individuals and their experiences of alienation, along with their frustration regarding societal conventions. A significant number of these films were created with a modest budget and placed a greater emphasis on their artistic impact and societal commentary in an experimental way, rather than focusing solely on profit.

The directors of the New Gen trend are mostly youngsters who are part of a transnational global era. Films made by these filmmakers do not accommodate

protagonists who conform to the traditional family spaces. Neither are families represented traditionally in the New Gen films. Family is either not represented or is invisible in many of these films and the audience has limited knowledge about the origin of the characters. Intergenerational practices, unlike the movies of the past, hold different meanings in the New Gen cinematic world. As a result, the grandmother or the grandfather are characters that very rarely find space in the family diegetic of the New Gen cinema. This restructuring of the conventional family space in cinema is a noticeable feature of the New Gen. For instance, even when *Bangalore Days* (2014) has family as its core theme, the narrative portrays family roles and relations unconventionally. This again is attained by the spatial relocations that the characters are made to make. Every major character in the film is presented as moving into a new space away from the traditional family space.

Rural and urban settings and characters gain equal value in New Gen cinema, which is marked by a seamless integration of reality and fantasy like never before. Even though the space of the diegetic was predominantly urban in the beginning, rural spaces and identities began gaining importance over the decade. Regional representations in Malayalam New Gen cinema gained momentum in the second half of the decade with films like *KL 10 Pathu* (2015). Regional characters and authentic regional dialects flourished in Malayalam cinema as exemplified in the film *Maheshinte Prathikaram* (2016) directed by Dileesh Pothan, which utilised the rural landscape and mindscape of the inhabitants of the Idukki region of Kerala to weave a story based on a simple incident. This trait of regionalism in cinema continues in films like *Kammattippadam* (2016), *Kunjiramayanam (*2015),

Angamaly Diaries (2017), *Thondimuthalum Driksakshiyum* (2017), *Parava* (2017), *Sudani from Nigeria* (2018), *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019), etc. In the earlier decades of Malayalam cinema, the primary diegetic settings were typically centred around the districts of Trivandrum, Ernakulam, or Palakkad. However, in the New Generation films, these narrative spaces undergo a shift, with characters being placed in localised settings throughout various regions, spanning districts across the state. The Malabar and Kasargod regions, in particular, have gained more popularity in this regard. Several filmmakers, owing to their origins in these locales and regions, are able to effectively portray genuine depictions of the regional environment and characters in their films. Due to the diverse backgrounds of the filmmakers, New Generation films set in specific regions are able to incorporate authentic vernacular dialects from those areas, as well as draw on the experiences unique to those regions.

Linguistic patterns, thus, are another important element noticeable across New Gen films. Most of the characters that were portrayed in the initial years of the wave, situated in the urban spaces, used vernacular dialects with a mix of the English language (code mixing) and this in turn influenced the way language was used by youngsters of the period, incorporating terms such as 'dude', 'buddy', 'bro', etc. in their everyday conversations. Even the titles of the films exhibit a pattern. They are either in English (*Traffic* [2011]*, Salt N' Pepper* [2011]*, Bachelor Party* [2012]*, Usthad Hotel* [2012]*, Diamond Necklace* [2012]*, 22 Female Kottayam* [2012], *Trivandrum Lodge* [2012], *Shutter* [2012], *Honey Bee* [2013], *ABCD* [2013]*, Idukki Gold* [2013]*, Bangalore Days* [2014]*, Charlie* [2015]*, Double barrel* [2015]*,

Action Hero Biju [2017]*, Sudani from Nigeria* [2018]*, Kumbalangi Nights*

[2019],etc.) or signify rusticity by employing Malayalam terms *(Aadu* [2015]*,*

Kunjiramayanam [2015]*, Maheshinte Prathikaram* [2016]*, Thondimuthalum*

Drisaakshiyum [2017]*, Parava* [2017]*, Varathan* [2018]*, Thamaasha* [2019]*, Unda*

[2019]*, Thanneer Mathan Dinangal* [2019]*, Vikruthi* [2019], etc.)

The New Generation films also attempts to portray and question normalised

stereotypes in a new light, as in the films *Da Thadiya* (2012) and *Thamaasha*

(2019), and also make efforts to represent caste and class realities, as in the film

Kammattipadam (2016*)* and *Unda* (2019). They subvert the traditional portrayal of

romance, as seen in *Amen* (2013) and *Ishq* (2019), and engage in discussions about

sexuality like never before, as evident in films like *Mumbai Police* (2013) and

Moothon (2019). As the decade following 2010 drew to a close, Malayalam films

adhering to traditional formulas gradually took a backseat. In Parallel, New Gen

cinema exhibited an erasure of stock characters such as the hero, villain, or the

heroine who typically succumbs to the hero's charm. There was also a tendency to

cast actors from the marginalised sections of the State. Moreover, a number of New

Generation film plots are presented through multiple perspectives or with a

secondary actor taking up the narration instead of a sole protagonist taking centre

stage. Protagonists with negative traits began to emerge right from the inception of

this cinematic wave, with notable characters like Arjun (Fahadh Faasil) and Ansari

(Vineeth Sreenivasan) in *Chappa Kurish* (2011), Shammi (Fahadh Faasil) in

Kumbalangi Nights (2019), and the titular roles portrayed by Biju Menon and

Prithviraj Sukumaran in *Ayyappanum Koshiyum* (2020).

The films made during this era exhibit not only novelty in their content and aesthetics but also witness significant alterations in the dissemination of such material among the audience. The expansion of new media and technology as well as the knowledge to utilise the technology affected the production and distribution of the films since 2010. This, combined with the instant feedback on social media platforms revolutionised cinema during the decade. The impact brought about by these emerging films was not solely attributed to the emergence of experimental directors. Instead, every facet of filmmaking, including cinematography, editing, and sound recording/music direction, underwent experimentation and transformation. Prior to this period, Malayalam films were primarily associated with the fame of the protagonist or director, while aspects such as cinematography and background music were often overlooked or taken for granted. Currently, the names Amal Neerad and Rasool Pookutty have become household names for their cinematography and sound engineering respectively.

The emergence of New Generation films swiftly led to a successful mobilisation of funds for film production, a development crucial to the proliferation of experimental cinema which again contributed to independent filmmaking as well as maintaining experimental aesthetics. This era witnesses a collaborative effort among filmmakers in bringing their creative visions to the screen. In addition to pioneering production houses that championed innovation, such as Friday Film House owned by Vijay Babu, which released its inaugural film in 2012, many filmmakers and actors began investing in film production and established their own production companies. Notable examples include Fahadh Faasil & Friends, Working

Class Hero, August Cinema, Anwar Rasheed Entertainments, and OPM Cinemas, among others. These production companies also readily engaged in collaborative ventures with other production houses. For instance, the film *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019) is a joint venture by the production company Fahadh Faasil & Friends owned by the actor Fahadh Faasil and the production company Working Class Hero owned by the director/actor Dileesh Pothan. Furthermore, New Gen cinema is characterised by a sense of collective collaboration among filmmakers. This has led to directors occasionally taking on acting roles in each other's films, as well as overseeing technical aspects of films made by other directors. A case in point can be found in the 2020 film *Trance* directed by Anwar Rasheed. Here, the cinematography is executed by Amal Neerad, who is not only a cinematographer but also a filmmaker in his own right. Additionally, Dileesh Pothan, another accomplished filmmaker, plays the role of a significant character in the film. Thus, the New Generation filmmakers have the chance to maintain independence while also engaging in collaborative efforts.

In short, it is imperative to view the phenomenon of New Generation Malayalam cinema as extending beyond a mere label for a particular film category. Rather, the term, within the contemporary context, represents a broader movement that propelled a continuous shift in societal values and conventions. This movement has contributed to the evolving landscape of Malayalam cinema, embracing fresh perspectives and challenging traditional norms. By transcending the boundaries of mere categorization, the New Generation has sparked a dynamic transformation in the industry, paving the way for innovation and exploration of diverse narratives and

genres. While debates about the outcome of the New Generation wave persist, it is safe to affirm that this movement has indeed succeeded in reshaping the ecosystem of Malayalam cinema.

Before delving into the examination of how humour is depicted in post-millennial Malayalam comedy films, particularly in New Generation cinema, it is imperative to understand the essence of humour in Malayalam cinema. This can be achieved by conducting a brief survey of the evolution of Malayalam comedy films over the years, tracing their origins from the 1980s. The subsequent two chapters aim to fulfil this objective.

Chapter 3

Malayalam Comedy Films of the 80s: The Beginnings

The chapter maps the trajectory of the 1980s Malayalam cinema for the arrival of full-length comedy films into the industry. It indulges in an elaborate examination of the themes and recurring elements that characterises these comedy films up until 1990. Moreover, it sheds light on how the prevailing societal stereotypes of the era influence the themes explored in these films, and reciprocally, how the films contribute to shaping societal perspectives. Such an analysis is crucial for understanding the nature of comedies in Malayalam cinema post-2010, as it serves as both a benchmark and the foundational framework for the genre within the industry.

As noted in the introductory chapter, full-length laughter films in Malayalam emerged only in the late 80s (Rowena, *Reading Laughter* 1). The subsequent sections of this chapter explore the rise of full-length comedy films in Malayalam Cinema during the early 1980s. These films are examined in terms of their thematic, narrative, and diegetic parallels, as well as their tendencies towards stereotyping. This examination sheds light on how they paved the way for the prevalence of formulaic romantic comedies that have since dominated the Malayalam film industry. Furthermore, it posits that directors such as Sathyan Anthikkad and Priyadarshan, who rose to prominence during the 1980s, played pivotal roles in shaping this cinematic evolution.

Categorising Malayalam films into distinct comic genres proves challenging because comic genres were not yet clearly defined in Malayalam cinema during the period. Even though there certainly are categories of comedy films that can be identified, such as political and social satires like *Panchavadi Palam* (1984), *Thalayanamanthram* (1990), and *Sandesham* (1991), as well as slapstick comedies like *Aram+Aram=Kinnaram* (1985) and *Mazha Peyyunnu Maddalam Kottunnu* (1986), and ensemble comedies such as *Dheem Tharikida Thom* (1986) and *In Harihar Nagar* (1990), Malayalam comedy often exhibits an eclectic nature, encompassing a wide range of comedic styles and elements. This is because the comedy films popular in Malayalam cinema have a richness of humour in the plot but are a mix of romance, action, dance and drama rather than a comic genre in itself. During the early 1980s, full-length comedies were relatively scarce. They were not ones that actually can be labelled as full-length comedies (such as *Poocha Sanyasi* [1981]) due to their themes, and the ones that did emerge often fell into the categories of social satires and slapstick humour. A notable characteristic of the latter films was the prevalence of duos or trios of actors who played pivotal roles in delivering the comedic content

The late 1980s proved to be a challenging period for cinema in Kerala due to various factors, including budget constraints, a decline in star power, and a shrinking audience base. Consequently, this era witnessed the emergence of 'soft porn' films, which primarily appealed to male audiences rather than families, and this trend had an adverse impact on the industry. However, by the end of the 1980s, the Malayalam film industry saw a resurgence in full-length comedy films with

movies like *Nadodikkattu* (1987) and *Ramji Rao Speaking* (1989), marking a revitalization of the genre and attracting audiences back to theatres. Rowena proposes the reason for the emergence of laughter-films or *'chirippadangal'* in the late 80s and argues that it is the point where cinema as a genre took up the project of making the audience laugh. According to her, "the comedy films served a specific cultural purpose in Kerala: the remasculinization of Malayalam Cinema in response to the socio-political scenarios of the post 80s" (*Reading Laughter* 2). When social realism was the major theme up until the 1980s, the *'chirippadangal'* dealt with unemployed middle class heroes. "Most of these films have no "star value", no big budgets and no grand designs. They gave us highly fragmented forms--each constructed to produce laughter. Laughter thus became the "superstar" of the desolate times" (*Reading Laughter* 5).

3.1.   Arrival of the comic genres

An exploration of the diverse genres and tropes that entered the Malayalam cinema landscape in the early 1980s reveals a significant turning point. This decade introduced two influential directors, Sathyan Anthikad and Priyadarshan, whose films established a precedent for comedy to become the dominant element in Malayalam cinema, delighting audiences and maintaining its prominence ever since. With these directors came the introduction of several major comic subgenres within Malayalam Cinema. Even though Malayalam comedy films were fairly undefined when it came to comic genres, the following sections of the chapter attempt at the task of a generic categorisation of Malayalam comedy films during the 1980s as well as an exploration of their thematic tropes and tendencies.

3.1.1. Sathyan Anthikad and the buddy comedy

The first half of the 1980s witnessed comedy slowly becoming an important genre in Malayalam cinema. The films that came out during the period featured Jagathy Sreekumar, Bahadur, Sankaradi, Nedumudi Venu, and Sukumari, whose on-screen presence guaranteed entertainment through humour. Even though Balachandra Menon had a pivotal role in the introduction of humour into the narrative of Malayalam cinema, his films were centred mainly around family relations and the 'ideal woman' concepts than on full-length comedy. *Chiriyo Chiri* (1982), *Karyam Nissaram* (1983)*, Prasnam Gurutharam* (1983)*, Sesham Kazhchayil* (1983)*, Arante Mulla Kochu Mulla* (1984) are testimony to this.

Sathyan Anthikad, with his directorial debut in 1982 through the film *Kurukkante Kalyanam*, set a new trend in integrating comedy into Malayalam cinema. This paved the way for a demand for films that prioritised eliciting hearty laughter from the audience. The story revolves around the shy and introverted Brahmin Shivasubramaniyan Hari Ramachandran (Sukumaran) who comes to the city of Madras from his village in order to escape his overbearing and pious father. The ensuing humour arises out of the naivety and innocence of the village born Shivasubrahmania when he falls in love with Saritha (Madhavi), who is 14 years his junior. Jagathy Sreekumar who plays the role of the protagonist's friend Kumar, actor Bahadur who represents the stereotypical character of Soopi Hajiyar and actor Shankaradi who plays the role of an ex-army man are all instrumental in ensuring audience laughter through dialogues as well as comic incongruities. This marked one of the early instances where the protagonist consistently played a humorous

role throughout a Malayalam film. The movies that followed showcased the buddy genre gaining popularity.

These films were preoccupied with male friendships and bonding between two men who had their differences but got along with each other:

> Buddy films is a subgenre of films popularly called the "buddy salvation" pictures and involves narratives that focus on male companionship (initially). The term can be traced back to the American movies of 1960s and early 1970s such as, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *The Sting* (1973) etc. (Beaver and Lang 31)

Thus, Sathyan Anthikad's *Kinnaram* (1983) deals with the characters Unni and Sethu played by Sukumaran and Nedumudi Venu respectively, who share a living space in an urbanised setting. Both the characters end up falling for Radha (Poornima Bhagyaraj), who arrives in Madras to take up a job in a company. The film deals with the humorous instances that arise consequently. "Many of the best buddy films spring into high gear when the filmmaker introduces a dramatic irritant, usually in the form of a beautiful, free-spirited woman who sparks the flame of romantic conflicts" (Goldstein).

Much like *Kurukkante Kalyanam*, the film *Kinnaram* also features characters who reside in the city due to the demands of their jobs. These storylines typically unfold in settings removed from their familial surroundings. This grants the director and the script more freedom to inject humour that might be deemed inappropriate in a traditional family setting. Additionally, the presence of a friend

or group of friends becomes a significant factor in the dynamics of such films. Such a tendency to develop the plot, blend it with humour and execute it through characters who are buddies of opposing nature is a possibility that the filmmaker exploited in most of his films that followed. With the success of these films, the Malayalee filmgoer demanded more films in the buddy comedy genre as is evident in the 1980s.

Buddy films won the audience's attention and appreciation and continued with its popularity through the decade and beyond, with director Anthikkad being the lead player in this genre. He captured the theatre audiences with super hit films that starred Mohanlal as the protagonist, paired alongside the actor Sreenivasan, both of whom played characters that were a blend of humour and pathos. *T P Balagopalan MA*, *Gandhinagar 2nd Street* and *Sanmanassullavarkku Samadhanam* are three of the films that came out in 1986 which gained immediate success by employing this formula of humour.

The distinctive humour inherent in these films emanates from the actions and interactions among the characters, with particular emphasis placed on verbal humour within the realm of Malayalam cinema. These dialogues would go on to become a source of amusement for internet trolls in the later millennial era. The potential of success using the buddy comedy genre was utilised by Anthikad to its fullest in his 1987 film *Nadodikkattu.* The movie presents the predicament of two unemployed youths, Dasan (Mohanlal) and Vijayan (Sreenivasan) who, driven by financial obligations to seek jobs abroad are consequently deceived, landing on the shores of Madras, assuming it to be Dubai. Reminiscent of the Laurel and Hardy

duo, the adventures of Dasan and Vijayan are the ensuing hilarity of the movie, guaranteeing entertainment with their sequels in the later years. Notably, Anthikkad exploits the Gulf Boom of the 1970s and its continuance in the 1980s, a period when the middle-class Malayali populace in general believed that the Gulf money was an answer to all their economic problems. Again, following the Chaplinesque tradition, the humour in *Nadodikkattu* stems from the characters' unfortunate predicaments. Director Priyadarshan is next in line when it comes to buddy comedies with films like *Boeing Boeing* (1985) and *Mukunthetta Sumitra Vilikunnu* (1988). But these films can be better classified under other subgenres of comedy of which Priyadarshan was a pioneer.

3.1.2. Screwballs, slapsticks and Priyadarshan

Priyadarshan played a pivotal role in introducing Malayalam cinema to the screwball comedy with his film, *Poochakkoru Mookkuthi*, in 1984. This film marked the beginning of a unique brand of humour, effectively parodying the Romantic Comedy genre by blending slapstick, buffoonery, and unpredictable antics with central romantic narratives. When categorising Priyadarshan's career on the types of films he crafted from 1984 onwards, the initial phase (1984-86) firmly establishes him as a prominent creator of slapstick and screwball comedies in the Malayalam film industry. Screwball Comedy is a genre of comic film that originated in the 1930s in the West, "characterized by a zany, fast-paced and, often irreverent view of domestic or romantic conflicts which ultimately are happily resolved. Witty repartee and unlikely situations were also elements of the screwball comedy" (Beaver and Lang 211). Film scholars hold varying perspectives on the

criteria for classifying a film as a screwball comedy (Marshall 10). Nevertheless, for the purpose of this thesis, the term will adhere to the definition of screwballs as "light hearted frothy, often sophisticated, romantic stories, commonly focusing on a battle of the sexes in which both co-protagonists try to outwit or outmaneuver each other" ("Screwball Comedy").

Priyadarshan's *Boeing Boeing* (1985) is a classic example of this comedic genre. Screwball is often accompanied by elements of visual comedy that include slapstick, and deadpan.

> Slapstick is a type of comedy film that does not need sound. It is a term taken from the analogy of clowns slapping each other to make audience applauding and laughing. Slapstick is primitive and universal comedy packed with the style of aggressive and physical acts including violent scenes, crude play and joke with vulgar vision (for example, throwing a cake to face, crumbling house, falling into the sea, missing pants, slapping each other) (Briandana and Dwityas 109)

The films like *Onnanam Kunnil Oradi Kunnil (1985)*, *Boeing Boeing (1985)* and *Aram+Aram=Kinnaram* (1985) captured the interest of the audience and it helped establish Priyadarshan's line of movie making, even though the film magazines of the period considered him as a mediocre filmmaker who should not be taken seriously (Rowena, *Reading Laughter* 70). Priyadarshan continued to make the audience laugh with the three films that were released in 1986, namely, *Mazha Peyyunnu Maddalam Kottunnu*, *Ayalvasi Oru Daridravasi* and *Dheem Tharikida Dhom*, all centring on an overlap of slapstick and ensemble comedies. The fight

scenes between Sardar Krishna Kurup (Jagathy Sreekumar) and Sardar Koma Kurup (Kuthiravattam Pappu) and the climactic fight scene in the comedy caper *Mazha Peyyunnu Maddalam Kottunnu* are a blend of slapstick and buffoonery with the accompaniment of comic background music that contributes to the overall comedic effect, eliciting laughter from the audience. The trend of incorporating slapstick humour became more prominent in films during the post-90s era and continued into the 2000s. Notably, this style of comedy was frequently featured in movies starring Dileep in the lead role, examples being *Ee Parakkum Thalika* (2001) and *CID Moosa* (2003).

During the latter half of the decade, the comedic potential of protagonists portrayed by actors such as Mohanlal, Sreenivasan, and Mukesh was prominently showcased. However, it is noteworthy that actors like Jagathy Sreekumar, Mala Aravindan, and Kuthiravattam Pappu played a pivotal role in effectively delivering slapstick and deadpan comedy during that period. In addition to their physical comedic abilities, the dialect and the conversational styles of actors like Jagathy Sreekumar, Mala Aravindan, and Kuthiravattam Pappu were distinctive and influential in crafting humorous scenes and memorable characters in films of the 80s and 90s. The idiosyncrasies of these actors impacted the scenes and the characters that they played, later contributing to pop cultural references and becoming iconic in their own way.

3.1.3. The ensembles

A subgenre of comedy films that can be categorised in the 1980s is the 'ensemble comedy'. In this genre, more than one prominent actor occupied the

narrative, getting roughly equal screen time. Examining the project of masculinity involved in the comedy films of the period, Rowena comments that "when such gags of male incompetence and powerlessness took over the representation of the hero, the heroic space could no more sustain itself with a singular presence. Thus, in most of the laughter films the singular 'moral' hero was abandoned for a bunch of incompetent men played by comedians" (*Women in Malayalam* ch. 8).

Even though Priyadarshan initiated the trend with the Sreenivasan scripted movie *Odaruthammava Aalariyam* (1984), this subgenre is seen gaining currency in the second half of the decade. The films *Dheem Tharikida Thom* and *Mazha Peyyunnu Maddalam Kottunnu* in 1986, *Kurukkan Rajavayi* and *PC 369* in 1987 can be classified under this label. Gaining immediate popularity with the audience, the ensemble comedy reached its heyday as Malayalam Cinema entered the 90s with films that starred Jagatheesh, Siddiq, Mukesh, et al. *In Harihar Nagar* (1990)*, Thoovalsparsham* (1990), *Cheriya Lokavum Valiya Manushyaru* (1990), *Mimics Parade* (1991), *Mookilla Rajyathu* (1991), etc. are examples of ensemble romantic comedies that were popular during this period.

3.1.4. Social criticism, political satire, and black humour

The 1980s marked a period when social criticism found acceptance through the medium of comedy in Malayalam Cinema. It is important to recognize that the groundwork for this transformation had been laid in the 1970s, with Malayalam Cinema already embracing social criticism as a central theme, contributing to the industry's growth and evolution. But rather than resorting to melodrama as in the 1950s or to social realism and political propaganda as in the 1970s, the 1980s

Malayalam Cinema used humour as a tool for social criticism. These films, firmly anchored in satire, can be categorised as romantic comedies in which the initial half of the storyline is predominantly comedic in nature. It's noteworthy that this particular genre of films began to gain prominence during the latter part of the 1980s.

This genre of comedy was fully utilised in films like *Akkare Ninnoru Maran* and *Mutharamkunnu P O* in 1985. The acceptance of this different take on social issues led to the popular hits of Mohanlal in 1986 with films like *T P Balagopalan MA, Gandhinagar 2nd Street, Sanmanassullavarkku Samadhanam* and *Doore Doore Oru Koodu Koottam.* The trend continued throughout the decade with films like *Nadodikkattu (1988), Mukunthetta Sumithra Vilikunnu (1988)* and reached its culmination point by the end of the 80s by becoming an enduring genre in Malayalam Cinema in the hands of Sreenivasan with *Ponmuttayidunna Tharavu* in 1988 and *Vadakkunokkiyanthram* in 1989.

Social satires of the period drew from various factors like unemployment, corruption and relationships. It is evident in *TP Balagopalan MA, Sanmanassullavarkku Samadhanam , Varavelppu* (1989) and even in *Vellanakalude Naadu* (1988). It is noticeable that humour is used in all these films to drive home the point. A category of social satire that focuses on the corrupt political system and social life in the State is generally termed political satire. While the primary purpose of political satire is to generate humour, a truly effective political satire has the potential to influence societal perspectives, shedding light on and sensitising viewers to the inherent shortcomings of the prevailing political

system. Numerous Malayalam films that have pursued this subversive agenda through humour appear to have aimed at such an impact on their audiences.

Even though *Sthanarthi Saramma* (1966) is considered one of the first political satires in Malayalam cinema, the first of its kind that incorporated humour in its true sense is the film *Panchavadi Palam* in 1984 by K. G. George. The film, based on the book titled *Palam Apakadathil*, written by Veloor Krishnankutty in 1981, went on to become the touchstone for all political satires that emerged later in Malayalam cinema. The film, which also has an ensemble cast consisting of Bharat Gopi, Nedumudi Venu, Sukumari, Jagathy Sreekumar, Sreenivasan and Thilakan, attempts at a caricature of the society of Kerala during the period with its corrupt politicians in a setting of the microcosm of a village.

Later films that drew influence from *Panchavadi Palam* include the 1987 fantasy comedy *Naradhan Keralathil* and the much celebrated *Vellanakalude Naadu* in 1988 as well as *Varavelppu* (1989). In this regard, Neelima Menon observes: "Though historically KG George can be credited with introducing one of the best satires (*Panchavadi Palam*) in Malayalam cinema, it reached the mainstream only with the collaborative effort of Sathyan Anthikad and Sreenivasan, with Mohanlal giving a face to it" ("Evolution of Comedy"). Even though these films hit upon the political scenario of Kerala during the period, a film that gained as much acceptance as *Panchavadi Palam* in Malayalam cinema in terms of being a political satire is the 1991 film *Sandesham*, directed by Sathyan Anthikkad, with many of its humorous dialogues becoming part of pop culture

references and social media memes. The film, conversely, has come under criticism for its perceived promotion of an apolitical perspective.

The satires of the period often weave black humour into the fabric of the narrative. For instance, *Pappan Priyappetta Pappan* (1986) deals with the accidental death of the protagonist and the resultant humour that arises. A memorable comic scene in the film is when Pappan's (Rahman) soul is sent down by Yama (the God of death) into the body of Valyamangalathu Padmanabhan (Bahadur) while the latter is on his deathbed. The humour ensues when the relatives who were eagerly waiting for his death realise that they need to wait even longer for the man to die in order to divide his property among themselves. Similarly, *Vellanakalude Naadu* (1988) and *Varavelppu* (1989) border on black humour to portray the helpless conditions of the protagonists. The scenes of the bedridden father in *Ponmuttayidunna Tharavu* (1988) are designed exclusively for the production of laughter.

Consequently, the films of the 1980s played a pivotal role in solidifying comedy as a significant genre in Malayalam cinema, setting the stage for the emergence of the *'chirippadangal'* [laughter-films].

3.2.   Themes and tropes

Until the late 70s, the bearing of literary works on the themes of Malayalam cinema was very pronounced. However, the emergence of Middle-brow cinema in the 80s transformed the thematic tendencies and the nature of Malayalam cinema. Along with this change, the entry of Sathyan Anthikad and Priyadarshan into the industry contributed to the changes in the cinematic landscape of Kerala. As a result, films that provided a more relaxed and enjoyable viewing experience, often punctuated with moments of hearty laughter, were in demand. Cinema as a means of entertainment through laughter was in the making and has never ceased since.

Priyadarshan succeeded in presenting various themes inspired by Hollywood and world comedies in Malayalam cinema. Neelima Menon observes about Priyadarshan's films that they were "predictive of the kind of fun, refreshing themes that were soon going to take over the rather grim, literature-heavy, overbearing family chronicles in Malayalam cinema. The Charlie Chaplin-esque humour was here" ("Evolution of Comedy"). Though comic in their representations, these movies cater to the sensibilities of the majority of filmgoers because of their potential for stress alleviation.

Upon closer examination of early 1980s Malayalam films that use comedy, one can discern a similarity in both the narrative structure and the character portrayals. Undoubtedly, the distinct trademarks of the filmmakers are evident in these films. For instance, Sathyan Anthikad's comedies exhibit different characteristics compared to those of Priyadarshan. However, beyond the unique

signatures of each filmmaker, there is a common thread in terms of themes and characterizations that can be identified, some of which are analysed below.

3.2.1. The theme of fraud, impersonation and comedy of errors

Fraud and trickery with a mix of mistaken identities were the themes of the majority of the comedy films that got released in the decade—a trend that got carried over to the next decade as well. The beginnings of Malayalam comedy cinema are rooted in the hero who is an impersonator and a trickster, something reminiscent of Shakespearean comedies and Comedy of Manners. But the audience finds these characters likeable primarily due to the presumed innocence of the comedy genre. Humour serves as a vital element that prevents these protagonists from being perceived as malevolent or morally objectionable, allowing the audience to embrace and enjoy their antics. The scenarios in which the hero finds himself often elicit sympathy or forgiveness from the audience for the misdeeds he commits. More often than not, the hero resorts to deceit in his quest to win the affection of the heroine, assuming a false identity until the film's climax. However, when the heroine discovers the hero's true identity, she readily forgives him, leading to a joyous and harmonious conclusion for all.

This formulaic approach is the foundation of all comedy films of the 1980s. Raghu (Sukumaran) in *Mandanmar Londonil* (1983) pretends to be a wealthy man living in London until it is revealed towards the end that he is a servant of the house. Ammini (Jalaja) readily forgives and falls for him. The film that set a landmark in the Malayalam comedy genre is the 1984 screwball comedy *Poochakkoru Mookkuthi*. It is a Comedy of Errors, featuring a handful of characters

and dealing with mistaken identities, impersonation and trickery as elements that generate humour. Revathi (Menaka) and Shyam (Shankar) pretend to be a married couple in order to get a rented house. Gopalakrishnan (Mohanlal) mistakes Revathi for the daughter of the wealthy Ravunni Menon (Nedumudy Venu) and courts her. Ravunni Menon's wife (Sukumari), whose name is Revathi too, suspects her husband of having an affair. Hari (M G Soman) bribes Chellappan (Jagathy Sreekumar), Ravunni Menon's servant, and impersonates a wealthy man to marry his girlfriend. The novelty in humour and narrative that the audience experienced led to the formula being implemented in the movies that ensued.

Odaruthammava Alariyam (1984) has four college students attempting to woo the daughter of Major Nair (Nedumudy Venu) by taking up different identities. Minu (Lissy), Nair's daughter, mistakes Preman (Shankar) to be handicapped and falls in love with him as she has taken a vow to marry only a person with disability. Upon learning that it was an act, she readily forgives him and decides to continue the relationship. Bhakthavalsalan (Sreenivasan) takes up the identity of a Hindi Scholar and becomes the tuition master of Minu. Gopan (Mukesh), on the other hand, pretends to be a servant, while Kora (Jagatheesh) becomes a self-proclaimed disciple of Mr. Nair's Brother-in-law (Poojappura Ravi), the wrestler. The humour that arises as a result of the impersonations becomes a recipe for the film's success.

Aram+Aram=Kinnaram, *Boeing Boeing, Akkare Ninnoru Maran,* and *Mutharamkunnu PO* are comedy films released in 1985 and all of them have the hero playing fraud in order to win the hand of the girl. The formula is again

discernible in Priyadarshan's 1986 comedy film *Mazha Peyyunnu Maddalam Kottunnu,* a narrative that revolves around the transposed identities of a driver and his master. The subplot, in which Damu (Maniyanpilla Raju) impersonates a lawyer and Shivan (Mukesh) pretends to be Damu's imaginary brother, also utilises the technique. Similarly, Priyadarshan's *Dheem Tharikida Thom* (1986) has Shiva Subramanyan (Maniyan Pilla Raju) lying to Rohini (Lissy) about his house so as to win Rohini's love. The troupe members of the ballet in which Rohini works as the lead actress mistakes her to be in a relationship with the wealthy Suresh Menon (Shankar) when she happens to get a lift in his car one day. This situation is similar to the one in *Poochakkoru Mookkuthi* and *Aram+Aram=Kinnaram.*

Even in narratives that do not build on manipulations to win the girl, it is notable that fraud and trickery were common tropes in comedy films of the era. *Doore Doore Oru Koodu Koottam* (1986) satirises the education system of the period and creates laughter through the character of Divakaran (Mohanlal) who attains a fake certificate and becomes a Primary School teacher in a school which is run by a corrupt manager. *Gandhi Nagar 2nd Street* (Anthikad 1986) presents the unemployed Madhavan (Mohanlal) who poses as Ram Singh, a Nepali security guard or 'Ghorka'.

A decline in the use of the formula is discernible towards the latter half of the decade when social criticism and political satires become prominent forms of narratives. However, the elements of mistaken identity and impersonation prevail in these comedies. The success of *Mukunthetta Sumithra Vilikunnu* (1988) is again attributed to the theme of fraud that Viswanath (Sreenivasan) plays on other

characters. The film *Vandanam* (1989) is another such film in which Unnikrishnan (Mohanlal) poses as a telephone technician, albeit for a short period. The major part of the humour in *Nadodikattu* (1987), as well as its sequels *Pattanapravesham* (1988) and *Akkare Akkare Akkare* (1990), is built on mistaken identities and the incongruencies resulting from them. In the case of the film *P. C. 369* (1987), it is life's struggles that prompt the unemployed graduate John Varghese (Mukesh) to take up the fake identity of the Police Constable.

Rowena (*Reading Laughter* 82) observes that laughter films in Malayalam gained popularity towards the end of the 1980s with the film *Ramji Rao Speaking* (1989). Vipin Kumar observes that "Ramji Rao decisively transformed the prevailing conventions in filmmaking and the presuppositions about viewers' tastes and response. With its low budget and remarkable theatre success, *RamjiRao* eventually prompted filmmakers to bring down the huge expenditure generally associated with film production" (17). Thus, *Ramji Rao* is considered to be the turning point and the trendsetter of a new genre in Malayalam cinema. Interestingly, in terms of the thematic aspect of the film, mistaken identities become an essential trope in this film when the villain Ramji Rao (Vijayaraghavan), upon ringing up Balakrishnan (Sai Kumar), mistakes him for Urumees Thamban.

This trope of fraudulence escalates in the 1990s, However, the way in which the comic hero engages in fraud undergoes a transformative shift during this period, impacting not only the narratives but also the very nature of Malayalam comedy films as a genre. The Kerala society is known for its high literacy rate and

the increased number of its educated youth. The social norms of the 80s and 90s still demanded male members to be the breadwinners though the number of working women was relatively higher compared to the previous decades, and a great stigma was attached to any youth who was unemployed. Moreover, education entailed them to attain white collar jobs in public sectors which was not always possible because of the discordance between the demand and supply ratio in the job market of the times. Through the comedic mode, these movies also throw light on the crisis of the educated unemployed because of the State's limitations in realising the full potential of its workforce. Positions in the public sector are/were in demand owing to the job security and social status that they ensure, irrespective of the pay scale. Jobs abroad were also deemed prestigious during the eighties and early nineties.

If the majority of the comedy films of the 80s dealt with the hero playing fraud to win the girl, the 90s comic hero does it, in the words of Vipin Kumar, so as to "make up for their economic and cultural disabilities" (23). These heroes are educated youths who are unemployed and are prey to the humiliations of their village folks and relatives. The necessity to deceive the social environment in which the heroes reside compels them to fabricate a false identity and engage in fraudulent activities. This constructed identity aligns with their aspirations for social respect and conforms to societal conventions, reflecting the underlying motivations of the characters. The resultant product is laughter, the detailed analysis of which is taken up in the subsequent chapter.

3.2.2. The trope of feudal nostalgia and stereotyping

Accompanied by this transformation in social perspective during the 80s was the revivalist tendencies that Malayalam cinema exhibited during the era. The notion that a traditional 'past glory' was necessary to justify and alleviate the contemporary condition that consisted of unemployability and poverty was a recurring idea of many films. Caste, class and traditional lineage were overused in the representation of lead characters even in narratives that did not demand such markers. As Gopinathan observes:

> Both in the selection of themes and narrative techniques, the Malayalam mainstream cinema exhibits an overindulgence towards caste and class elites. An unprecedented but active presence of upper caste elements and a reactionary orientation to it has become the staple component in the saleability of mainstream films. Even if the storyline of a film doesn't demand an upper caste Hindu backdrop for the effective realisation, the equations of contemporary Malayalam film industry make a beeline for it. Poverty, unemployment, and female insecurity are 'real' problems, only of the victims of these are middle class caste Hindus. ("Revivalism" 59)

The same nostalgia for a feudal past is propagated using humour during the period. Anthikad's *Kurukante Kalyanam,* as mentioned above, has the lead character scripted on humour. This feature of structuring the narrative on humour and the comic hero, which reached its apex in the latter half of the 1980s, foregrounds a dominant characteristic that pervaded the majority of the films of the period and the decade that followed: the tendency to create and preserve the aura around a feudal

hero, indicative of the feudal nostalgia that can be traced back to a caste-ridden society.

The lead role or the hero of the comedies was most of the time presented as being from a high caste with surnames pointing to this fact. *Kurukante Kalyanam* has the actor Sukumaran playing the role of Sivasubrahmania Hariramachandrana, a naive Brahmin. Balachandra Menon's 1983 film *Prashnam Gurutharam* portrays another naive Brahmin, Ramamurthy, played by the actor Prem Nazeer. Most of the time, instances of humour arise out of the play with the character's name or his caste/ancestral surname. *Odaruthammava Aalariyam* (1984) showcases Nedumudi Venu as the titular 'Ammavan' [uncle] and he is addressed as 'Mr Nair'. The dwindling prospects of the ancestral home or the *'tharavadu'* [ancestral Nair home] becomes fodder for comedy in Priyadarshan's 1986 ensemble comedy *Dheem Tharikida Dhom* with Shiva Subramanyan, the innocent Bank employee being one of the lead characters, whose naivety makes him join the ballet. The obsession with the family surname is seen in the 1987 film *Kurukkan Rajavayi* directed by P. Chandrakumar, which is an ensemble played by Mukesh, Jagatheesh and Maniyanpilla Raju. The lead characters are Rajendra Nair and Prathapan Nair. Even the decisions made by the characters are based on how it will affect their honoured family name and their ancestral home 'Kalluparambil tharavadu'. In the 1987 film *P C 369,* the lead character is Damodaran Pilla, played by Maniyanpilla Raju. In all these instances, one can perceive that the feudal past and its proclaimed heritage are utilised for laughter, at the same time inviting empathy for these characters and the bygone era from the audience.

With the later half of the decade, Malayalam cinema used comedy as one of the major tools in establishing the trope of caste markers, up until the 90s, after which the 'Super Star' era cemented it through the aristocratic and high caste characters like 'Mangalsheri Neelakhandan' and 'Narasimha Mannadiyar'.

Two of the actors in whose films this trope pervades in the later half of the 80s are the irresistible Mohanlal-Sreenivasan duo. Rowena ("Karutha Sreeniyum"), Radhakrishnan ("Gulf in the Imagination"), and Venkiteswaran ("How to Laugh") have analysed the dynamics of the combination roles of these actors and observed how the references to skin tone, appearance, and family rank has been used constantly in their films to depict Sreenivasan's characters as belonging to a lower caste. Rowena reads Sreenivasan's characters as "the inner anxieties of the non-hegemonic masculine position" (*Women in Malayalam* ch. 8). Karinkurayil argues that "the figure of Sreenivasan is to be read as a supplement to the figure of the Malayali hero" (86).

Dasan and Vijayan in *Nadodikkattu* (1987) and its sequels are prime examples of this thought. The films of the era demanded a hero-sidekick combination and this demand led to the normalising of many of the stereotypes that were already woven into the fabric of the society. The hero was always contrasted with the sidekick and belonged to the upper caste. Thus even when the hero is scripted for humour, the sidekick is presented to be more clownish and of lower IQ so as to establish the superiority of the hero. This contrast is made manifest through the name, educational qualification, profession, stature, and skin tone, or even by the level of ignorance/intelligence that the two characters exhibit. The fact that

necessitated this trope has to do with the themes and characterisation of many of the popular comedy films of the era. Radhakrishnan examining the many protagonists presented in the films during the period observes that "'the common man' character played by Mohanlal was that of a Nair, unhappy because of his inability to integrate into modern economic structures" ("Gulf in the Imagination" 235). In *Nadodikkattu*, the duo sees the Gulf as the sole destination offering the promise of a better life as "it was as though the cultural-economic inside of Kerala seemed to have become uninhabitable for the upper-caste man" ("Gulf in the Imagination" 236).

The nostalgia for the feudal past and its superiority necessitated and encouraged these makers, making the audience enjoy a laugh at the unconscious contrast between the hero and the sidekick. Regarding this marginalisation of the sidekick in romantic comedies, C S Venkiteswaran observes that "if the narrative is centred around the family, the sidekick was the cook, servant or butler in the house, and outside, the less intelligent classmate in the college, someone eternally playing second fiddle to the hero" ("How to Laugh").

3.2.3. The family/female trope

During the late 70s and the 80s, a large number of films were funded by Gulf money (Radhakrishnan, "Gulf in the Imagination"). Along with this, the immigrant Malayali male workers in the gulf formed a large part of the audience in the form of VHS tapes. The diegetic spaces in the comedy films of the 80s where humour dominates during the era are no doubt gendered public spaces or private spaces dominated by men. All the films discussed previously, which include

Kinnaram, Boeing Boeing, Kurukante Kalyanam, Akkare Ninnoru maran, Dheem Tharikida Thom, Mazha Peyyunnu Maddalam Kottunnu, Ramji Rao Speaking, and *Vandanam* are narratives located on private spaces dominated by male characters. Similarly, *Odaruthammava Alariyam, Panchavadi Palam, Nadodikkattu, Mandanmar Londonil, Aram+Aram=Kinnaram, Kurukkan Rajavayi*, etc. are all examples of humour generated in gendered public spaces or office spaces.

Observing the New Generation cinema of the twenty-first century, Gopinath and Raj remark that:

> Family as a sacred space, functions in most societies as a location where gender constructs are faithfully nourished and passed on to the next generation...the focus is on the individual far away from the institution of family, giving the film maker more freedom to create characters without upsetting his own sense of morality. (71)

Interestingly, this observation can be applied to the analysis of full-length comedy films of the 1980s as well. Upon analysis, it is evident that most of these comedy films have the characters located in a space away from traditional family spaces. They are either bachelors living together or people who go out to locations outside the familial space in search of a job.

Family, even though not foregrounded in the films set in urban settings, is nonetheless always present in the background of these films. This link to the sacred space of the family is signified through the medium of a letter, the telephone, or in the form of a visitor from the village/hometown. The transformation of the State

into a consumerist society and a consumption economy due to the socio-economic

and political situation, (the gulf boom being one of them) led to the representation

of the characters in this light. This happened towards the end of the 1970s and the

effect of it is seen in the films of the 1980s when there is a visible "diminishing of

boundaries between civil society and the market" (Pillai, "Matriliny to

Masculinity" 110). Influenced by the Gulf migration, Malayalam cinema now bore

the indelible mark of city life, embodying the essence of this visual medium within

an urban framework (Venkiteswaran, *Cinema Talkies*).

The prevailing power dynamics within society during the 1980s extended

their influence to the realm of Malayalam cinema production, where patriarchal

dominance was evident, manifesting its presence in various aspects of life. Kerala

was a matrilineal society until "modernity heralded itself with the clarion call of

family reform resulting in the systematic effacement of matriliny in the early part

of the twentieth century in favor of more respectable practices of monogamy,

patriliny, and patrilocality, all consolidated under a reformulated patriarchy."

("Matriliny to Masculinity" 104). The comedy films of the 1980s were also

primarily aimed at male viewers, produced with the intention of providing visual

pleasure and entertainment for this target audience. Regarding the portrayal of

female characters, Pillai observes: "They sought to emphasise the iconic images,

stereotypes, and roles that a woman is expected to play; and the films thus become

a part of a larger political structure with its clear cut agenda." (qtd. in Gopinath and

Raj 69)

Pillai, however, argues that "unlike in the larger Indian context, these representations of women were never as icons of the nation or signifiers of the land, but as tropes of modernity" ("Matriliny to Masculinity" 108). This observation holds true in the case of the female characters of the 80s comedy films, often portrayed as transitioning into urban spaces, symbolising shifts in women's roles concerning work and education. They served as emblems of modernity and consumerist society, exemplified by the characters played by Sukumari in *Poochakkoru Mookkuthi* (1984) and *Kaliyil Alpam Karyam* (1984).

The Art House and Middle-brow films of the late 70s led to a realignment of gender ("Matriliny to Masculinity") and also a rejection of the paternal masculinity of the decades before the era. This new realigned masculinity led to more passive, emasculated male characters. It is into this all-male terrain that comedy films arrived in the 80s.

> The transformation of 'the offending caste" body' into 'the offending gendered body' is what most discourses of Malayalam cinema effects, either through the trope of the 'negative mother' who stands for all the crass aspects of a de-spiritualized matriliny or the consumerist, materialist 'Western'-identified woman—both of whom have to be punished and disciplined. ("Matriliny to Masculinity" 107)

Thus, humour can be seen as a tool in retaining or realigning the gendered structures and patriarchal hegemonies. The romantic comedies of Balachandra Menon and the female characters of most of the comedy films of the 80s were scripted to carry out this project of remasculinization.

Within the context of the family or household, the dominance of female characters frequently served as a comic tool. As in the examples cited above (*Poochakkoru Mookkuthi* and *Kinnaram*), Sukumari's characters often embody the stereotype of the domineering wife who keeps her husband under her thumb, resulting in laughter from the audience, regardless of gender. This comedic portrayal contributes to the normalisation of the cliched character of 'the henpecked husband' within the comedy genre. Pillai makes the following observation: "Movie after movie in Kerala had projected the 'wisdom' that only in households where men rule are the right decisions taken and implemented. Strong, authoritative women are belittled and their logic is made a laughing stock" ("Matriliny to Masculinity" 112). This perspective aligns with the analysis made earlier and is particularly pronounced in the romantic comedies of Balachandra Menon, whose films could easily pass as a guidebook for the 'ideal woman' during the period.

In short, the family, even though not in the foreground, plays a subtle yet evident role in generating humour within 1980s comedy films. Simultaneously, it can be argued that the representation of the trope of female archetype, whether in or away from the family spaces, helps unconsciously reinforce the hegemonic patriarchal stereotypes to a greater extent when compared to the themes and representations in the non-comedy Malayalam films of the 1980s. The viewers focus solely on the comedic aspect in these films, and as a result, with repeated exposure to these character portrayals, they tend to absorb the films in a lighthearted manner, often without being fully aware of the normalising effects

these comic representations can have. The political incorrectness of such representations goes unobserved as the audience gets carried away by the entertainment quotient at the expense of reinforcing certain stereotypical elements. Indeed, they laugh because the films are undoubtedly entertaining. However, it is important to note that this laughter often extends beyond the confines of the theatre, permeating domestic and social interactions, ultimately shaping perspectives surrounding it. The stereotypical remarks that follow take the anticipatory bail of being 'just for fun' or the accusations of 'can't you even take a joke?'.

3.3.   Space of the comic: the rural to urban relocation

In post-1950s Malayalam narratives, settings such as tea shops, bus stops, and streets were often used to depict secular spaces. However, in the 1980s films, roadside spaces and tea shops emerged as significant settings for comedy. The films *Odaruthammava Aalariyam*, *Mandanmar Londonil, Mutharamkunnu P O, Peruvannapurathe Visheshangal,* and *Ponmuttayidunna Tharavu* are a few popular examples where these spaces play a key role in generating humour.

Even though urban spaces dominated in the films of the 80s, the village was one of the popular spaces featured in a number of the comedy films of the period. *Panchavadi Palam*, *Mutharamkunnu P O*, *Dhim Tharikida Thom*, *Doore Doore Oru Koodu Koottam, Vellanakalude Naadu*, *Ponmuttayidunna Tharavu*, and *Peruvannpurathe Visheshangal* are well-known for their rural settings and the humorous situations that arise from the lives of the characters associated with these places. Another categorization in terms of the spatial context of humour in films of the period involves those that begin in a rural setting and later transition to an urban

environment. Locating the characters initially in the village space helped these films in establishing the naivety of the characters and thereby validating the humour that follows. This movement from the rural to a promising urban space is seen in *Mandanmar Londonil* (1983), *Nadodikkattu* (1987) and even in *Mazhavil Kavadi* (1989).

The place and the people may vary in the villages, but the stock characters remain the same: the Panchayat President, the tea shop owner, the barber, the postman (the only link for the villagers to the outside world), etc. Into this male-dominated public space is introduced an outsider – a character who is from an urban space or someone who has returned after a prolonged stay in an urban space. Any change that alters the narrative of the film, to the mundane innocent lives of the villagers, is mostly the outcome of the entry of this outsider into this space–a trope recurrent in many of the comedy films of the decade and which drives the narrative, providing opportunities for laughter. *Akkare Ninnoru Maran* (1985), *Mutharamkunnu PO*, *Doore Doore Oru Koodu Koottam*, *Kurukkan Rajavayi*, *Ponmuttayidunna Tharavu*, and *Mazhavilkavadi* all have these outsiders from an urban space who exploits the innocence of the villagers.

Mandanmar Londonil, *Akkare Ninnoru Maran*, *Mutharamkunnu P O*, *Doore Doore Oru Koodu Koottam*, *Kurukkan Rajavayi*, *Naradhan Keralathil*, *Mukunthetta Sumithra Vilikunnu*, *Ponmuttayidunna Tharavu*, *Peruvannapurathe Visgeshangal*, and *Mazhavilkavadi* are some other examples of films that feature an outsider who enters the internal space occupied by the narrative and which leads to a strong contrast in the eccentricities of the occupants of the space, which most of

the time is rural. It is worth noting that while many of these narratives are rural, there are films that use the same formula but are located in urban environments such as *Gandhinagar 2nd Street*, *Mazha Peyyunnu Maddalam Kottunnu*, *Boeing Boeing*, *Poochakkoru Mookkuthi*, etc.

An observable characteristic of the rural characters depicted in these films is their consistent portrayal as innocent, ignorant, and naive individuals, devoid of any inclination toward serious violence. Humour is, in this sense, used to normalise the village space as an embodiment of rural virtues and this notion of village life being simple and natural is "a myth functioning as a memory" (Williams 43).

A parallel trope is observed when rural characters are placed within urban diegetic spaces in the narrative, spaces that are already inhabited by the protagonists. In these cases, the outsider is typically a woman, often entering the urban space in search of employment (as seen in *Boeing Boeing*), to commence work in the city (as in *Kinnaram*), or to visit her fiance alongside her family (as depicted in the films *Aram+Aram=Kinnaram*, *Poochakkoru Mookuthi*, and *Boeing Boeing*). The contrast and incongruity that arises upon pitting the ignorance/innocence of the villager against the trickery/experience of the city dweller become the cause for humour in these films.

The aspect of diegetic space frequently explored in 1980s comedy films, as a reflection of the societal changes brought about by urbanisation and the resulting employment opportunities, is the urban city space. Most of the heroes in the Malayalam comedies of the 1980s are seen as being employed or seeking employment in towns outside the village or even the state. With the flourishing job

opportunities abroad during the 80s, characters that come from the Gulf or attempt to leave for the Gulf become a major feature in these films. The naivety of the villagers regarding cities and foreign lands became fodder for comedy during the period. Thus we have the wanna-be-son-in-law character of Maniyanpilla Raju pretending to leave for the gulf in order to trick his uncle into believing that he has landed a prosperous job abroad after saving the life of an Arab in *Akkare Ninnoru Maran*. The classical scene where Sreenivasan's character visits the uncle by impersonating an Arab is one of the best examples of linguistic humour in Malayalam cinema, the dialogues having attained a cult status in the later millennia. The desperate attempt of the hero to attain a visa to leave the country and the subsequent fraudulence that he gets involved in when he is unable to, becomes the butt of ridicule in many later films. It reflects the Gulf Boom of the period. *Gandhi Nagar Second Street* and *Nadodikkaattu* are examples of such attempts at leaving the native space for an outside space in the hope of a better future.

In both scenarios, whether the narrative unfolds in rural or urban settings, characters scripted solely to generate humour can be identified, regardless of their location within the storyline. These characters heighten the effect of comedy through their eccentric behaviour or verbal humour to the already comic situation that marks the narrative schema of the films. The characters frequently portrayed by actors like Jagathy Sreekumar, Bahadur, Kuthiravattam Pappu, Innocent, Sukumari, Sreenivasan, Mala Aravindan, and Philomina, among others,

consistently serve this comedic purpose, regardless of whether they are situated in domestic, public, office, rural, or urban settings.

3.4.   Turn of the decade and of laughter

In the post-1980s era, a notable transformation occurred in Malayalam cinema, marking the emergence of comedy as a serious subject matter for films and a significant form of entertainment. These *'chirippadangal'* resulted in popularising the buddy film genre and ensemble comedies that revolved around love, relationships, and family dynamics. Consequently, the period between 1980 and 1990 witnessed a paradigm shift as comedy transitioned from its earlier subordinate position to assume a central role within the cinematic landscape, a trend that persisted until the arrival of the superstar cinema. By the 1990s, comedy as a genre firmly established its roots in Malayalam cinema. The trend was all the more fortified by the coming of new actors like Dileep, Harisri Ashokan, Kalabhavan Mani, Saleem Kumar, Kochin Haneefa, et al. who became the faces of humour even within a family drama genre.

The influx of comedies and the coming of cable/satellite TV networks made it possible for these comedy films to be repeated on TV. Audiences also exhibited a keen interest in films featuring lighter subject matter that provided a relaxing, humorous, and entertaining experience all in one. This helped the genre to thrive. The demand for comedy was so substantial that the turn of the millennium saw the emergence of television channels (such as the channel Surya Comedy in 2017) exclusively dedicated to showcasing comic scenes from popular films. This demand remained steadfast and even paved the way for the ascent of comedy

reality shows in the post-2000 era, which assumed a prominent position among television programs.

The repeated telecasts of the comedy films were so influential among the audience that the dialogues from these films became part of the everyday conversations, in and out of contexts. This, later, became the foundation for the emergence of Malayalam trolls and memes with the coming of the new media. The memes were made up of images and dialogues from humorous scenes of Malayalam comedy films and due to their popularity, every Malayalee could effortlessly interpret them within the appropriate context.

The proliferation of comedy in Kerala in the form of Malayalam cinema, comedy TV channels, reality shows and trolls is not without its demerits. The depth of normalisations and stereotypes that get established through these 'innocent' jokes is most of the time tacit and their effect far-reaching. The majority of the films showcase a hero who is accompanied by a sidekick who becomes the butt of ridicule for his physical appearance, inferiority in his position on the social ladder as well as his inferior educational background. The verbal comedy used by the majority of these films was sexist and targeted at the marginalised. This includes body shaming, slut shaming, and sexual innuendos. The trend of outrightly stereotyping gender, body and sexuality flourished in the post-millennial films of Dileep which supposedly were made for family audiences. These movies lacked logic and the audience therefore accepted them under the pretext of being just for entertainment purposes alone.

However, the frequent and pervasive use of dialogues, mannerisms, and attitudes borrowed from these films in daily life and conversations has undeniably contributed to the shaping of societal perspectives, especially regarding specific groups. The viewpoints propagated by these films often gain significant traction and become the prevailing consensus. In some instances, even the individuals being ridiculed may, at times, internalise these perspectives, considering them as reflective of reality. This influence highlights the power of media, including comedy films, in shaping and reinforcing societal attitudes and beliefs. The major consumers of these comedies are not the 'enlightened' group of cinephiles who critique cinema as an art form; rather, it is the common people—the masses and their families, including children and teenagers—who constitute the core audience. This demographic grows up embracing an altered reality meticulously constructed by these films, with humour serving as a potent mechanism for reinforcement. The design of the narrative, whether by conscious intent or inadvertently, functions subliminally, with humour serving as the tool for the process of normalisation. It raises concerns when the general audience in Kerala predominantly favours Malayalam popular comedy films, yet there has been a notable dearth of scholarly analysis and criticism of this genre within the academic realm. The subsequent chapters intend to take up and problematise these aspects related to comedy films.

Chapter 4

Comedy of the 90s: from Imitation to Normalisation

To understand the development and dynamics of humour and its tropes in Malayalam film history, it is vital to read into the domain of 1990s films known as family entertainers. The period stands out as a pivotal juncture, signifying a notable shift in the comedic cinescape. The resurgence of the comedic aide or 'sidekick' gains enhanced prominence, exemplified by the works of Dileep and other artists in the latter half of the 1990s and continuing into the 2000s. Therefore, by examining this transitional phase, it becomes possible to discern the evolution of comedy and its enduring impact on Malayalam cinema, which forms the central focus of this chapter.

4.1. Popular comedy genres of the 90s

The 1990s marked a continuation of the comedy genres that originated in the preceding decade. Nevertheless, when juxtaposed with its predecessor, this era displays a distinctly hybrid nature within the realm of comedies. This transformative shift, intertwined with socio-economic changes, can be attributed to the emergence of new directors and actors who introduced their unique perspectives to the portrayal of humour. In the 1990s, the comedic genres gained popularity, displacing numerous other genres that had thrived in the earlier period of Malayalam cinema. Vipin Kumar observes that "the comic films dominated the scene while production seemed to have some crisis. In 1992, of the 78 films released in Malayalam, as many as 31

were definitely comic films…in 1998, more than half of the films were comic ones–roughly 32 out of 61" (57).

As previously noted, many genres that emerged in the 1980s continued to shape Malayalam films in the early 1990s. While the first half of the 1990s appears to be predominantly influenced by the ensemble comedy genre, the narrative and thematic complexities of these films underscore the difficulty in categorising Malayalam comedy films as distinct and standalone genres, despite the era witnessing the ascent of comedy as a widely popular category. This complexity arises from the fact that laughter was not limited to films that centred solely around comedic plots. In addition to films explicitly created for comedic purposes, a substantial portion of humour during this period originates from popular films that were subsequently classified as 'family entertainers'.

Sathyan Anthikkad and Priyadarshan continue to captivate and engage audiences during this period. Anthikkad's distinctive storytelling style, which gained prominence in the latter half of the 1980s, persists in incorporating humour within his films throughout the 1990s. Examples of Anthikkad's comedic incorporation are observable in films such as *Thalayanamanthram* (1990), and *Sandesam* (1991). His works further evolve towards a progressively melodramatic tone towards the end of the era with works like *Irattakuttikalude Achan* (1997) and *Veendum Chila Veettukaryangal* (1999). In Parallel, Priyadarshan enters into the second phase of his film career during the decade and screwballs, along with slapsticks, leave the scene altogether towards the beginning of the 1990s. Even though *Akkare Akkare Akkare* (1990) is known for its use of slapsticks, his other popular films during this period

include political and social satires such as *Mukunthetta Sumithra Vilikunnu* (1988) and *Mithunam* (1993) as well as romantic comedies like *Vandanam* (1989) and *Kilukkam* (1991).

The advent of new directors and actors brought about a shift in the nature of Malayalam comedy films, leading to a departure from 'buddy comedies' and a greater integration of humour and melodrama. These new directors and actors introduced a prevailing pattern of integrating and delivering humour that resonated strongly with the audience of that era. Notably, the actors Jagathy Sreekumar and Innocent became synonymous with comedy during the 1990s, while in films specifically dedicated to full-length comedic narratives, actors such as Mukesh, Siddik, Jagatheesh, and Jayaram attained widespread recognition as household names for humour in the movies released during the initial half of the decade.

In the latter phase of this period, a noticeable transformation took place with the rise of fresh comedic talents, particularly notable in actors such as Dileep, Kalabhavan Mani, and Harisree Ashokan. This shift is characterised by the transition of actors like Janardanan and Kochin Haneefa, who had previously portrayed villainous roles, into comedic characters. Now, the villain, "face-to-face with the incapability of the hero figure, melted down to a weak and comic character" (*Women in Malayalam* ch.8).

Of the new directors who were introduced into the industry, the Siddik-Lal duo is seminal. They were instrumental in initiating the '*chirippadangal*' [laughter films] trend by the close of the 1980s with their debutant film *Ramji Rao Speaking* (1989).

Ramji Rao decisively transformed the prevailing conventions in
filmmaking and the presuppositions about viewers' tastes and
responses. With its low budget and remarkable theatre success, *Ramji
Rao* eventually prompted the filmmakers to bring down the huge
expenditure generally associated with film production. Despite a very
small number of release centres, it created a new confidence in new-
comers as "hero" and "heroine", in familiar regional settings, and in
fresh team of directors. (V. Kumar 17).

The films *In Harihar Nagar* (1990) and *Godfather* (1991) serve as notable
examples of Siddique-Lal's utilisation of the ensemble genre to construct compelling
narratives that combine humour with melodramatic storylines. Director Rajasenan has
also played a significant role in popularising this formula of fusing comedic and
melodramatic elements within the context of family space. His films *Ayalathe
Adheham* (1992), *Meleparambil Aanveedu* (1993), *CID Unnikrishnan B.A., B.Ed.*
(1994), *Aniyan Bava Chetan Bava (1995), Aadyathe Kanmani* (1995), *Swapna
Lokathe Balabhaskaran* (1996), *The Car* (1997), *Nangal Sandushttaranu* (1999), etc.,
casting Jayaram in the lead, deals with narratives surrounding family and family
relations and helped establish Jayaram as the 'family star'. The director duo Rafi-
Mecartin also experimented with the methodology of integrating comedy into their
films with notable success, as evidenced in *Puthukkottayile Puthumanavalan* (1996),
Superman (1997) and *Punjabi House* (1998).

Hence, the Malayalam films that attained popularity during the 1990s can be
characterised as 'blend comedies' or 'comedy hybrids'. These films intertwine

elements of comedy, tragedy, action, suspense, and romance, resulting in a distinctive amalgamation. The popularity of slapstick comedies waned, leading to their disappearance from the scene during this period, with a resurgence only happening in the decade that followed.

However, it is worth noting that the impetus for Malayalam comedy films in the first two years of the decade stems primarily from the domain of political and social satires. This includes *Dr Pashupathy* (1990), *Apoorvam Chilar (1991),* *Thalayanamanthram* (1990), and the political satire *Sandesham* (1991) which in the later decades became a source for many of the verbal jokes that found their way into everyday conversations. Accompanying this trend were numerous ensemble films, with notable ones in 1990 including *Paavam Paavam Rajakumaran ,* *Thoovalsparsham , Cheriyalokavum Valiya Manushyarum, In Harihar Nagar* and the 1992 films *Mookilla Rajyathu* and *Godfather*. *Cheriyalokavum* can be recognized as the pioneering film in the caper comedy genre within Malayalam cinema that successfully captivated the audience. The caper comedy genre is one that is characterised by a focus on elaborate schemes, heists, and humorous hijinks. These films, however, did not cater to the preferences of audiences inclined towards 'serious' cinema. Consequently, alongside the comedy genre, a distinct genre of revivalist films began gaining popularity. As Rowena observes:

> ..soon the trend of laughter suffered a temporary setback with the
> growing success of a few revivalist films such as *Sargam* ('Creativity'
> Jayaraj 1992*) Paithrukam* ('Paternal inheritance' Jayaraj 1993) *Druvam*
> ('The pole' Jayaraj 1993) and *Devasuram* ('The play of Deva and

Asura' I.V. Sasi 1993). These were all high-strung melodramas,

situated within upper-caste feudal families. In contrast to the English

titles that marked most of the comedy-films, these revivalist dramas,

with Sanskritized titles, definite story line and serious characterization,

competed with the trend of laughter. (*Reading Laughter* 6)

Vipin Kumar acknowledges the emergence of these revivalist films and the inclination

of scholars to concentrate their attention on this particular subset of 1990s films. He

remarks that these scholars "failed to recognize the increasing number of comic films

in the 1990s, and their radical potential in bringing forth effective social criticism; or

what could be a formidable alternative current in the Malayalam cinema" (15).

Nevertheless, the proliferation of Hindu revivalist films did not entirely

diminish the demand for comedy films in Malayalam cinema.The latter half of the

1990s saw a surge in ensemble films centred around humour. However, in contrast to

the political and social satires prevalent in the first half of the decade, the majority of

these films are melodramatic romances or narratives portraying the struggles of male

characters, interwoven with elements of humour. The observation is that the comic

film has distanced itself from the gravity of extensive social initiatives and instead

opted to address its issues on a personal level within the lives of its characters,

following the "humour-traditions of mimesis and mockery" (V. Kumar 19).

Despite the prevalence of feudal nostalgia in popular Malayalam films of the

90s, comedy largely minimised its impact. This can be attributed to the significant

influence of the art of mimicry during that time. The division depicted in 90s

comedy films primarily revolved around social class rather than caste. However, it is

important to acknowledge that certain films did employ a backdrop of longing for the feudal past as a setting for humour, thereby acknowledging its existence in comedic narratives. Scenes in *Kilukkam* (1991), *Yodha* (1992), *Aniyan Bava Chettan Bava* (1995), *Aalancheri Thambrakkal* (1995), *Adhyathe Kanmani* (1995), *Puthukkottayile Puthumanavalan* (1995), *Mannadiar Penninu Chenkotta Checkan* (1997), *Udayapuram Sulthan* (1999) and *Pattabhishekam* (1999) are a few of the examples. Rowena remarks that even though most films used upper caste names, they were "so removed from the upper caste milieu that the name appears to be almost a paradox, or a cinematic/cultural compulsion" (*Women in Malayalam* ch.8).

The fusion of comedy and romance, infused with elements of action, established the groundwork for subsequent family entertainers. These movies seamlessly incorporate humour, employing either the main character or a comic aide (popularly known as 'the sidekick') as a comedic catalyst. The plot of these films revolves around humour, propelling it towards a melodramatic climax.

In the 1990s, the actor Mammooty showcased his comedic talent in films like *Kottayam Kunjachan* (1990) and *Azhakiya Ravanan* (1996), highlighting his versatility as an actor. However, the demand for films featuring him as the dominant alpha male led to a curtailment of his comedic roles in romantic comedies. Meanwhile, Mohanlal's character portrayals experienced a dynamic evolution throughout the 80s and into the 90s. Starting with villainous roles, he gradually shifted towards portraying humorous characters in the latter half of the 1980s. This trend continued in the early 90s, until Mohanlal gained widespread acclaim for his portrayal of hyper-masculine figures such as Mangalasheri Neelakandan (*Devasuram* [1993])

and Aadu Thoma (*Spadikam* [1995]), further solidifying his status as a 'superstar'. Parallel to this, the actors that played humorous roles (Jagathy, Harisree Ashokan, Kochin Haneefa, Innocent, etc.) got established as comedy stars who were cast alongside the hero in the action films to invoke laughter among the audience as a means to provide comic relief. As Rowena observes, "the laughter films created a paradigmatic shift in the representation of masculinities in Kerala, in response to the cultural situation of the post-1980s" (*Women in Malayalam* ch.8).

4.2.   The emergence of the art of imitation: mimics parade and verbal comedy

The imitation form called 'mimicry' has played a large role in establishing laughter films as a sought after genre among the audience. The trend which began in the 90s continues till date and has directly and indirectly influenced Malayalam Cinema. The actors who emerged as fresh talents in 1990s comedy films predominantly hailed from mimicry troupes renowned for their public performances across the State. These included the actors Jayaram, Dileep, Kalabavan Mani, Harisree Ashokan, among others. Consequently, verbal humour emerged as the predominant form, largely displacing slapstick and buffoonery. In the context of 1990s films, verbal humour attained such dominance that the jokes embedded within the narratives became commonplace in everyday conversations and for online trolls in the post-millennial era.

During the 90s, a trend emerged with the release of films that were structured around the lives of characters belonging to mimicry troupes, signifying the inaugural occurrence of such cinematic ventures exemplified by Thulasidas' directorial work, *Mimics Parade* (1991). The trend was followed in its sequel *Kasargod Kadar Bhai*

(1992) as well as in *Mimics Action 500* (1995) and *Mimics Super 1000* (1996). In addition to the aforementioned films, these actors also elicited laughter from the audience through their performances in the ensemble comedy films of 1995 which included *Aalancheri Thambrakkal* directed by Sunil, *Three Men Army* directed by Nisar, *Kidilol Kidilam* directed by Paulson, *Kokkarakko* directed by K. K. Haridas, and *Ezharakoottam* directed by Kareem. A noteworthy characteristic of these films is the inclusion of certain characters who, due to their background in mimicry, would skillfully imitate the voices of renowned actors or reproduce dialogues from popular films. This form of 'meta comedy' included referencing dialogues that the audience was acquainted with, either those they were already familiar with or those they might have encountered through mimicry artists in rural areas during various festivals. In the subsequent chapter, the influence of mimicry in the transformation of humour within Malayalam cinema is examined, focusing on mimicry's contribution to the formation of hypermasculinity and the perpetuation of stereotypes, as well as its associated politics of humour.

4.3.   Themes and tropes

During the 1990s, the proliferation of cable television granted increased access to a broader audience, and the films of the decade mainly catered to the male audience. Notably, the comedic formula of the 90s marked a departure from the one employed in the preceding decade, encompassing notable deviations in characters, contexts, and narratives. In contrast to the 80s, where comedic plots often revolved around men winning the affection of a woman, the 90s introduced a more stabilised plot structure, aligning itself with the conventions of romantic melodramas.

The comedic narratives of the period shifted their focus towards addressing the personal struggles of the character(s) rather than serving as advocates for broader social justice issues. While political and social satires did express concerns, the primary emphasis remained on depicting the challenges encountered by the protagonists. A discernible pattern in the narrative tropes employed during this era is evident across numerous comedy films, and this section will exemplify some of these commonalities.

4.3.1. The theme of fraud

The emerging diegetic space in the 1990s favoured ensemble casts, featuring characters distinct from traditional heroic archetypes. Consequently, a recurring theme within these films is that of fraudulence. While this theme was also prevalent in comedies of the 80s, a discernible difference becomes apparent. In earlier narratives, the themes of fraud and trickery were employed as tropes to win the affection of the girl, "in order to gain an undeserved advantage" (V. Kumar 22). However, in the 1990s, characters turned to fraudulent activities driven by socio-cultural and economic considerations. As Vipin Kumar remarks, "the prevailing notions of social respect, (which the Bonapartist stars command in the other films) and the failure to gain it are factors that force the character to assume a fraudulent behaviour" (V. Kumar 22). In this sense, fraud and foul play are employed as a reason to "higher the standards" and as a desire for social acceptance of the characters. "It tutored non-hegemonic men to enter the consumerist world, to be ambitious and successful. This strategy of change, arriving in the post-Gulf 1980s, negotiated both with its affluence and the challenges posed to masculinities in this

period" (*Women in Malayalam* ch. 8). In contrast to the films of the 80s, where fraud

was occasionally used (e.g. *In Harihar Nagar*) as a means to impress the girl, the

90s films predominantly focused on sequences depicting characters "attempting the

most desperate means to employment, chasing disinterested women, trying to escape

debtors, being humiliated by family members" (*Women in Malayalam* ch. 8). The

film *Dr Pashupathy* (1990), directed by Shaji Kailas, stands out among the films of

the decade for its treatment of fraud, as it does not express sympathy toward the

character engaging in fraudulent activities. Bhairavan, portrayed by the actor

Innocent, is a small-time con man adopting the guise of a veterinary doctor under the

alias Dr. Pashupathy. Exploiting the villagers' excitement over the arrival of a vet in

their community, Dr. Pashupathy deceives them for personal gain. While he

embodies a villainous persona, it is crafted in a manner that prevents the audience

from harbouring intense hatred toward him. Dr. Pashupathy is presented as a

likeable character, yet the director refrains from portraying him in an emotionally

sympathetic light throughout the film, despite his titular role. In the concluding

scenes, upon the revelation of his deceit, the villagers apprehend him and hand him

over to the police.

The portrayal of characters impersonating doctors is a prevalent trope in 90s

comedy films. However, in contrast to *Dr. Pashupathy*, these films often provide the

quacks with a melodramatic backstory that serves to justify their actions, eliciting

sympathy from the audience. An illustration of this is evident in the movie *Mr.*

Clean (1996), directed by Vinayan, where Mukesh takes on the role of Rajagopal, a

character who comically assumes the persona of a doctor, leading to a series of

humorous incidents. As the narrative unfolds, the film undergoes a shift towards a more melodramatic tone in its conclusion, a recurring characteristic in many comedy films of the era. Ultimately, the characters within the story opt for forgiveness, resulting in a harmonious resolution and a happy ending. Humour is constructed in a similar way in the romantic comedy *Kinnaripuzhayoram* (1994) in which actor Sreenivasan plays Kunjikrishnan, the prodigal son who later dons the role of a village healer and holy man who practises Ayurvedic medicine. He along with his fraud assistant Chako (Jagathy Sreekumar) fools the villagers, making them believe that the 'swami' is capable of magic and medicine. The climax exposes Kunjikrishnan's fraudulent actions, yet he is not portrayed as a villainous character. Instead, the more malevolent character, Chako, serves as a contrasting figure to Kunjikrishnan's deceit, thereby rendering the latter's deeds justifiable in comparison.

In both the films discussed above, unlike the 1990 film *Dr Pashupathy*, the characters' reasons for playing fraud on the people are justified by indirectly depicting the way the society deprived opportunity or acceptance of the characters. Rajagopal, for instance, had been denied the opportunity to pursue a legitimate career as a doctor. Similarly, Kunjikrishnan faced rejection from both his family and society, which doubted his ability to succeed either as an Ayurvedic practitioner like his father or as a medical doctor like his brother. The roles these characters adopt within the narratives contribute to the comedic atmosphere of the films. The underlying reasons for their fraudulent actions and the ensuing laughter from the

situations prevent them from being perceived as inherently evil characters by the audience.

The motif of deception observed in romantic comedies during the 1990s diverges from its manifestation in the preceding decade, specifically in terms of character portrayal and the underlying motivations driving the act of fraud. Notably, unemployment and societal marginalisation emerge as the primary catalysts compelling the characters to adopt alternative identities. As Vipin Kumar observes about fraudsters of the 90s comic films, "the hero is burdened with an obligation to dramatise the identity of a socially higher character" (22). Thus, in the 1992 film *Ootty Pattanam,* directed by Haridas, we are presented with three friends Pavithran (Jayaram), Jimmy (Siddique) and Basheer (Jagathy Sreekumar), living in economic and social backwardness. They utilise the opportunity to become heir to a prince in Ooty by pretending to be of the higher 'Kshathriya' caste and of royal lineage. Likewise, a significant portion of comedic content from the 1990s capitalises on the theme of fraud, employing it as a vehicle for humour. According to Vipin Kumar, without the fraud there is no content and structure to the comic film: "Once we take out the fraud from these films, the situation is unthinkable. In the same way, without the same fraud there is no comedy and laughter in them" (24).

Compared to the 1990s, the nature of fraud in 1980s films differed in that the scale of the fraudulent activities undertaken by characters was relatively minor. In the 80s, it was limited to fooling an individual or a small group of individuals (*Odaruthammava Aalariyam*, *Mazha Peyyunnu Maddalam Kottunnu*, *Boeing Boeing*, *Kakkakkum Poochakkum Kalyanam,* etc.) whereas in the 90s, the fraud

committed is on a larger scale. Either the entire society, encompassing the village inhabitants, or the entire family falls victim to the artifice of trickery. Thus, we have Dr Pashupathy fooling the entire village into believing that he is a veterinary doctor. Similarly, in the film *Kavadiyattam* (1993), we witness Unni (Jayaram) successfully deceiving both the army and the inhabitants of his town, convincing them of his alleged mental instability. Likewise, in *Cheppu Kilukkana Changathi* (1991) and *Sipayi Lahala* (1995), Nandakumaran Thampi and Rajendran respectively (both portrayed by Mukesh), skillfully hoodwink their families and fellow villagers, creating an illusion of prosperity and influential positions in the city. *Kinnaripuzhayoram* (1994)*, Malappuram Haji Mahanaya Joji* (1994) and *Mr Clean* (1996) incorporate fraud as an element into the diegetic of the films in which the protagonists are shown to be impersonating a swami practising ayurvedic medicine, a school teacher and a doctor respectively, deceiving everyone around.

In addition to films that depict characters assuming secondary identities to deceive society, there are also films wherein the characters engage in fraudulent activities targeting their entire family members. Swaminathan, portrayed by Innocent in the film *Godfather* (1991), assumes a clandestine double life as Ramanathan. Under this assumed identity, he leads a married life and raises children in a different town, occasionally visiting them under the guise of embarking on a pilgrimage. Swaminathan adopts the persona of Ramanathan to conceal his marriage from his family members, as he had made a solemn vow, along with his brothers, to never marry. The subsequent scenes that unfold after his brother Ramabhadhran,

played by Mukesh, uncovers this deception, offer a delightful blend of humour and gradually transition into moments of intense melodrama.

Similarly, in the film *Meleparambil Aanveedu* (1993), Harikrishnan (Jayaram) and Pavizham (Shobhana) engage in deception confined within the space of the family. Harikrishnan conceals his marital relationship with Pavizham, presenting her as a housemaid and allowing her to reside in his home. This comedic plot twist contributes significantly to the film's success. The same formula of fraud limiting to family space is replicated in various other films as well. It is seen in the portrayal of the character Major K. K. Menon (Thilakan) in *My Dear Muthachan* (1992), the couples Balachandran Unnithan (Jayaram) and Ambika (Sudha Rani) in *Aadyathe Kanmani* (1995)*,* Unni (Dileep) in *Punjabi House* (1998) and Sulaiman (Dileep) in *Udayapuram Sulthan* (1999)*.*

When it comes to fraud in the 90s Malayalam comedy cinema, the characters played by Jagathy Sreekumar have become iconic. The first half of the decade established Jagathy as the most sought after comedy actor along with Innocent and Mamukkoya. However, the nature of the deceit portrayed by Jagathy's characters differs in terms of character development and audience response compared to other films with a similar theme. This distinction arises because, unlike other films centred around fraud, Jagathy's characters typically do not assume the role of the protagonists. Consequently, these characters are consistently portrayed with a sinister undertone, despite their likeability to the audience. They often lack a detailed backstory and serve as sidekicks to contrast and diminish the wickedness of the fraud committed by the main characters. Consequently, the audience finds

amusement in their actions without evoking significant emotional responses, unlike the range of emotions experienced towards the protagonists who also engage in the act of fraud. The characters played by Jagathy Sreekumar in the films *Cheriya Lokavum Valiya Manushyarum* (1990), *Yodha* (1992), *Kavadiyattam* (1993), *Kinnaripuzhayoram* (1994), *Alibabayum Arara Kallanmarum* (1998), and *Parassala Pachan Payyannur Paramu* (1999) are examples of this claim.

4.3.2. The quest

Apart from the prevalent theme of fraud, the romantic comedies of the 90s share another common element that contributes to their comedic foundation. This is the utilisation of a trope involving the search for something or someone, often resulting in a mix-up or the encounter of the wrong person at the wrong place. This narrative device added to the humorous aspects of these films and found its way into Malayalam comedy by the end of the 80s with *Ramji Rao Speaking* (1989)*,* where a misplaced telephone call initiates the rising action in the film.

The thematic trope wherein the character(s) come across something or someone by accident, which then leads to all the suspense and horseplay in the narrative is observable across multiple films. For instance, the plot of *Thooval Sparsham* (1990) presents a misplaced baby in the doorsteps of an apartment shared by three bachelors. The ensuing humour arises from their comical attempts to care for the unexpected infant. Similarly, *Mimics Parade* (1991) incorporates tension into the narrative of humour when the characters stumble upon a stuffed toy in which they find some diamonds. Likewise, Gopinath (Jagatheesh) and Samson (Siddique) in *Nagarathil Samsara Vishayam* (1991) accidentally discover a film box that

contains a substantial amount of money which subsequently gets them in trouble. In *Junior Mandrake* (1997), the comedic essence stems from the characters' pursuit of a bronze bust, initially attempting to dispose of it but later desperately seeking to retrieve it.

4.3.3. The family trope

Undoubtedly, the trope of the family prominently figures in the comedy films released towards the latter part of the first half of the 1990s. Family becomes an inevitable presence because the themes of these films are blended with melodramatic narratives. Unlike the films of the 80s, where the action was set away from family settings, the 90s bring the family into the construction of humour. Thus, these films deal with problems at the personal level using humour as a vehicle. The settings of these films are in urban locales but family is neither invisible nor absent here. Even in films where the characters are positioned away from their homes, the family members appear and become an integral part of the development of the narrative.

The initial box office hits of the decade may seemingly lack a central role for family, yet the humour invariably hinges on the concept of familial dynamics. Kunjoottan's (Sreenivasan) desire to escape the conventional family and his overprotective father to city life with his friend Ramachandran (Jayaram) is the foundation for the humour that follows in the 1990 film *Nagarangalil Chennu Raparkam*. The humour escalates when Kunjoottan's father, along with the two ex-mahouts hired to look after Kunjoottan, sets out in search of Kunjoottan. Similarly, although *In Harihar Nagar* (1990) deals with the escapades of a group of bachelors,

the humour works out only in connection with the family members of Maya (Geetha Vijayan). This family circle encompasses her grandparents and her deceased brother, with whom the four main characters claim they share a close relationship. *Ootty Pattanam* (1992) creates laughter at the attempts of the characters to get a spot among the family members of the Palace. The initial half of *Kilukkam* (1991) may give the impression that the narrative doesn't revolve around family dynamics. However, this assumption is dispelled as the film progresses. Some of the iconic comic dialogues and scenes in the film take place when Nandini (Revathy) moves into Justice Pilla's (Thilakan) house, whom she believes to be her father. Kittunni's (Innocent) lottery scene and the shaving off of Pilla's moustache are notable instances.

While the beginning of the decade only hinted at the potential of the trope of family as a source of humour, the subsequent years saw the emergence of comedy films that were entirely constructed around the framework of the family. While the film *Sandesham* (1991) viewed party politics and the hilarious clash of opposites positioned within a family, *Godfather* (1991) dealt with the feud between two families. Both these films were huge hits in the box office. The use of the element of the family as a source of laughter became firmly established with the release of these two films. Subsequently, several comedy films emerged, focusing predominantly on humour rooted in familial relationships. *Oru Kochu Bhoomikulukkam* (1992)*, Midhunam* (1993)*, Uppukandam Brothers* (1993)*, Meleparambil Aanveedu* (1993)*, Kinnaripuzhayoram* (1994) and *Minnaram* (1994)*, were films that got released

within a span of two years. This suggests the relevance attributed to the trope of the family in comedy films.

The trend of family and humour continues through the decade with films such as *Aniyan Bava Chettan Bava* (1995), *Aalancheri Thambrakkal* (1995), *Adhyathe Kanmani* (1995), *Aramana Veedum Anjoorekkarum* (1996), *Mannadiar Penninu Chenkotta Checkan* (1997), etc., and reaches its culmination in the last two years of the decade. *Sreekrishnapurathe Naksathrathilakkam* (1998) presents a joint family with naive sisters-in-law who try to impress their new neighbour who is a film actress. *Punjabi House* (1998), where most of the action takes place in the household of the Sikh Malayalee family, set a benchmark for family entertainers with verbal comedy without precedence. *Chinthavisttayaya Shyamala* and *Meenathil Thalikettu,* films that were released in 1998, again exhibit patterns of humour resulting from the power dynamics within the family. *Udayapuram Sulthan* and *Friends,* released in 1999, use humour in the movement of the characters across family spaces.

4.3.4. Gender trope and stereotyping

In comparison to the comedy films of the 80s, the presence of female characters and their significance in the 90s films is notable. However, even though these films include more female characters than the 80s, these characters lack agency. Even in a film such as *Kilukkam*, where the female character initially appears to have chosen to feign insanity, her subsequent decisions are ultimately controlled by the protagonist. The gender binary in 90s comedy narratives is often

utilised as a source of humour, with the concept of female stereotypes being employed extensively to elicit laughter from the audience.

In his paper, Vipin Kumar examines the comedy films of the 90s through a 'socialist perspective', interpreting them as a form of cinema that reflects the resistance of the popular classes. However, this resistance is depicted primarily through male protagonists. The issue of the 'masses' or the 'popular class' does not seem to encompass women. Although these films do include female characters, they are often used as a means to emphasise the mental and emotional state of the male characters within society. The presence of female characters in these films, coupled with their lack of agency, can be attributed to various factors. The filmmakers of these films are all men, which influences the portrayal of female characters. Additionally, theatres had increasingly become male-dominated spaces over the previous decade. Moreover, non-comedic popular films of the period were inclined towards the creation of the alpha male hero, a concept that reached its zenith by the end of the 90s. Above all, mimicry had become a popular art form, and films featuring stories associated with mimicry artists and narratives were predominantly centred around male characters.

Simultaneously, during the 90s, Cable TV and VHS cassettes were gaining widespread popularity in the region. The rise in popularity of Malayalam magazines, commonly known as the 'Ma' publications which included *Manorama, Mangalam*, etc., also influenced many filmmakers to focus on family-centric narratives. Consequently, the presence of female characters in the 90s films provided filmmakers with a comedic resource to reinforce traditional gender roles. In the film

Kilukkam, the female protagonist temporarily breaks away from the conventional notions of femininity by pretending to be insane, resulting in hilarious moments. However, once she returns to "normalcy", her actions and decisions are controlled by the male protagonist. To put it differently, if she does not conform to the "ideal", she becomes the source of comedy. This pattern holds true for many films that were released during the decade.

Regarding women doing comedy, Wagner observes:

> Women who engage in comic performances have the potential to subvert the social structures that keep them oppressed; by poking fun at those in power, especially men, women have the ability to expose their weaknesses and challenge their authority (Walker 1988; Gray 1994; Rowe 1995). It's not surprising that ''the fairer sex'' would be considered too delicate to engage in such behavior. (40)

But this argument falls flat when applied to the Malayalam comedy films of the 90s. Laughter, no doubt, is a result of the women actors' performances. However, the humour happens because the women are either insane, vicious, arrogant or naive, characteristics which are markers of the women's abnormalcy. The laughter arises from the hero's (who is already weighed by the societal and familial responsibilities) attempts to bring the woman back to 'normalcy'. In *Thalayanamanthram* (1990), we encounter a portrayal of the 'vicious' wife Kanchana (Urvasi) who strays towards a life driven by materialistic desires and a longing for social status. As a consequence, the burden of her actions falls upon her husband. However, as the story unfolds, she transforms into an all-accepting "good" woman, devoid of any materialistic desires.

A similar nature of humour is represented in *Midhunam* (1993), where the possessiveness of the lover-turned-wife Sulochana (again played by Urvasi) leads to the troubles experienced by the husband Sethu Madhavan (Mohanlal), a man who is already burdened with the attempts to run a local business. The naivety of the wives in the film *Sreekrishnapurathe Nakshathrathilakkam* (1998) and the subsequent troubles that the husbands face are the source of humour in the film.

In all these films, humour is a result of the melodramatic plight of the male characters which is heightened with respect to the troubles that they undergo because of the women who are naive or impractical. In these films, the audience's sympathy always rests with the male characters as they are presented to be suffering more than necessary and, thus, a 'comic catharsis' takes place. As such, the concept of the vicious female is a recurring pattern in the 90s comedy.

The 1995 film *Puthukkottayile Puthumanavalan* directed by Rafi-Mecartin showcases a female lead Geethu (Annie) who manipulates the emotions of the protagonist Ganabhooshanam Girish Cochin (Jayaram), providing a rationale for the hero's subsequent treatment of the heroine. As the plots unfold, the narrative reaches a point where the heroine has no choice but to seek refuge in the hero. Similarly, the film *Mannadiar Penninu Chenkotta Checkan* (1997) directed by Anil and Babu Narayanan revolves around Aarcha (Kanaka), a haughty woman who skillfully manipulates her brothers to exert control over every aspect of their lives. This behaviour portrays her as an unfavourable woman who lacks respect for family relationships and married life. However, the story takes a twist with the entrance of

Sethuraman (Mukesh), a lawyer, who cleverly utilises his wit and masculinity to transform Aarcha into the ideal woman desired by everyone around her.

In *Ayal Kadha Ezhuthukayanu* (1998), Priyadarshani (Nandini) is portrayed as rude, hysterical, and despised by colleagues and friends alike. Eventually, she succumbs to Sagar (Mohanlal), who 'heals' her, and they fall in love towards the end. The humour encompassing the film revolves around incidents that highlight Priyadarshini's arrogance and non-docile character, and how Sagar and his friend Ramakrishnan (Sreenivasan) deal with her.

Friends directed by Siddique and *Njangal Sandushttaranu* directed by Rajasenan, are films released in 1999. They present two female characters, Padmini (Meena) and Geethu (Abhirami) respectively, who have similar objectives. The former wants to separate her husband from his friends while the latter wants to separate her husband from his father and sisters. Both these characters are portrayed as being jealous of the affection that the husband shows towards other members. This self-centeredness of the female leads (who are ready to go to any inhumane extent to stop her husband from sharing his emotions with others) contrasting with the selflessness of the hero is the foundation of humour in these films.

In all the aforementioned examples, the female characters undergo a process of being tamed and brought under the control of the hero, resulting in their transformation into the societal idea of an 'ideal' wife, daughter, or woman in general. Humour serves as the means to depict this transformation as peaceful and justifiable. The accompanying humour is subtly laced with stereotypes, which are tacitly accepted by the audience. The collective laughter that ensues reinforces these

female stereotypes and also serves as a disciplinary tool through the power of laughter. This laughter "exists to discourage the sort of non-adapted behaviour that threatens all social development" (Billig 128).

These romantic comedies employ plots that rely on mockery, ridicule, and sarcasm to keep female behaviour in check. The deprivation of agency from women characters is a fundamental element in generating humour within these narratives. Even in films where both the hero and heroine engage in playful tricks, the hero tends to receive sympathy and approval from the audience, while the heroine is often portrayed in a negative light, as exemplified by the characters in the film *Godfather* (1991). In this film, both Malu (Kanaka) and Anappara Achamma (Philomena) are presented as unsympathetic characters compared to Ramachandran (Mukesh) and Anjooran (N. N. Pillai), despite all of them exhibiting similar attitudes. Thus, the presence of various female characters, especially the centrally positioned heroine figure, consistently complemented the "hegemonic construction of the hero" (*Women in Malayalam* ch. 8).

The comedy genre of the 90s exhibits a noticeable shift where the portrayal of henpecked husbands diminishes, and the dominant wife is replaced by a naive woman who primarily resides within the household. Rather than deriving humour from bossy wives who have limited screen time, the films of the 90s focus on female characters who share equal screen time with the hero. In instances where the wife is arrogant and unruly, they are depicted as requiring control and tempering by the male protagonists. These narrative choices serve as the foundation for generating humorous situations in these films.

4.3.5   The mixup

In addition to the humorous situations arising from accidental discoveries,
instances of mix-ups also serve as a prevalent trope in many narratives. The humour
in the Dasan-Vijayan trilogy, comprising of *Nadodikkattu* (1987),
Pattanapravesham (1988) and *Akkare Akkare Akkare* (1990), has its foundation in
mix-ups and misunderstandings involving the main characters, Dasan (Mohanlal)
and Vijayan (Sreenivasan).

Minor Instances of this narrative trope can be found abundantly in other
films of the period. For example, in *Mookilla Rajyathu* (1991) the protagonists enter
an apartment room mistaking it to be one of the character's uncle's house and the
ensuing humorous scene that unfolds has become quite popular among audiences.
Aanaval Mothiram (1991) is a film featuring Sreenivasan which explores a change
in perspective in the protagonist when he mistakenly believes that he has a life-
threatening illness due to a mix-up with his blood test sample. *The Car* (1997)
starring Jayaram and Janardhanan in the lead comic roles revolves around the
comedic tale of a mix-up between two cars that look alike, leading to a series of
mishaps and amusing situations. *Punjabi House* (1998), one of the most popular
comedy films of Malayalam cinema, initially sets a serious tone but quickly turns
hilarious when Ramanan (Harisree Ashokan) and his Master (Kochin Haneefa), the
boat owner, stumble upon what they believe to be a lifeless body, but is later
revealed to be alive.

Hence, in all the aforementioned examples, the prevalent pattern of humour
in the films of the period revolves around the discovery of an object or the

unexpected encounter with a person. This comedic theme can manifest in various forms, such as the discovery of a valuable object (like the film box in *Nagarathil Samsara Vishayam* or the stuffed toy in *Mimics Parade*) or an object that significantly impacts the fate of the characters (such as the car, the bronze bust, the blood sample, etc.). Additionally, the humour can arise from the introduction of a person whom the characters have no prior connection with, as seen in films like *Thooval Sparsham*, *Cheppu Kilukkana Changathi*, and *Punjabi House* among others.

4.3.6. The baby trope

Alternatively, a recurring element in many of the films of the era involves the introduction of a baby or of a daughter whose existence was initially unknown to the father. The baby that the bachelor trio ends up with in *Thoovalsparsham* is the foundation for all the humour in the film. The comedy of errors resulting from the dispute over the parentage of the baby girl gives rise to the classic comedy scenes of Maniyan Pilla Raju and Jagadeesh in *Minnaram* (1994). The attempts at keeping up the secret of the swapped baby boy in fear of losing the love and wealth of the child's grandmother leads to hilarity in the Rajasenan-film *Aadyathe Kanmani* (1995). The film *James Bond* (1999), a remake of the Hollywood film *Baby's Day Out* (1994) deals with a lost baby and the ensuing humour.

The inclusion of a baby as a common theme across these films signifies a notable shift towards a more family-oriented approach to comedy in the 90s when compared to those of the 80s. This shift highlights the filmmakers' intention to craft

narratives that revolve around family dynamics, presenting relatable situations that generate laughter and resonate with the audience.

4.4.   The space of the comic

The late 80s witnessed a tremendous economic decline in the state of Kerala, which also reflected in the film industry. A notable transformation in the theme and the space of diegesis in the comedy films of the second half of the 90s is a result of the effect of the hit taken by the production costs in the early 90s. When Malayalam cinema was experiencing a plummet in production of films due to budget constraints, comedy films started to gain prominence and helped revive the industry on a large scale, and "in the vacuum created by the unavailability of huge budgets and stars, low-budget films that aimed at laughter now rushed in" (*Reading Laughter* 3).

One approach used to address the budget constraints in these films was to confine the diegetic space to households and their immediate surroundings, unlike the big-budget superstar films that required foreign locations and expansive settings. With the exception of *Akkare Akkare Akkare* (1990) and *Yodha* (1992) during the early years of the decade, no other comedy film of the same genre opted for a foreign location as the setting for humour. In contrast, comedy narratives of the 90s often relied on familiar regional settings.

During the first half of the decade, in line with the formula of the 80s, Malayalam comedy films were produced with settings that provided the characters with greater mobility within the social spaces depicted in the narratives. *Dr*

Pashupathy, Cheriya Lokavum Valiya Manushyarun, In Harihar Nagar,

Nagarangalil Chennu Raparkam, Mookilla Rajyathu, Yodha, Kavadiyattam,

Sandesham, Malappuram Haji Mahanaya Joji, Kinnaripuzhayoram are films that

validate this observation.

In the majority of the 90s films that explore humour, the primary setting

revolves around the city. Unlike the pre-80s Malayalam cinema that focused on the

countryside and the village as a source of nostalgic longing, the diegetic spaces of

the 80s incorporate both the village and the city, emphasising their contrast.

However, the comedy films of the 90s diverge from these nostalgic yearnings and

instead place most of the action and humour within urban spaces. "In the 1990s, the

comic film showed us that such seemingly imperishable contrasts are in effect

meaningless. The new focus on the city in the comic film probably results from the

crisis in migration and the prevailing culture of seeking regular employment" (V.

Kumar 21). Titles such as *Nagarangalil Chennu Raparkkam* and *Nagarathil*

Samsara Vishayam foreground how the city becomes a crucial element in these

narratives.

The diegetic of the 90s films showcases the protagonists' movement between

urban and rural spaces, which serves to highlight their double or altered identity. In

films like *Cheppu Kilukkana Changathi* (1991) and *Sipayi Lahala* (1995), the

protagonists relocate to urban areas in search of employment and to improve their

social status. These spaces provide an escape from the humiliation within the social

spaces they inhabit in the village. Humour follows as the protagonist struggles to

maintain the urban identity they have constructed in the imaginations of the

villagers. Rowena argues that "the laughter-films provided us with the most truthful representations of many non-hegemonic male spaces in Kerala" (*Women in Malayalam* ch. 8).

Films set in rural settings frequently depict characters who originate from non-rural environments, a recurring trope that was also evident in films from the 1980s. However, there is a difference in the 90s as the influence of the urban space on these characters is not portrayed as positive. In *Kinnaripuzhayoram* (1994), the character Kunhikrishnan (Sreenivasan) deceives the villagers and his relatives by posing as a 'swami' with miraculous healing abilities. This deception is a result of his departure from the rural space he initially inhabits and his exposure to the outside world. Similarly, in *Kavadiyattam* (1993), Unni (Jayaram) returns to his village from the army and deliberately makes the villagers believe that he is mentally unstable.

Cities, thus, dominated the diegetic spaces in the decade. Even though they are essentially male spaces, unlike in the 80s, the majority of the humour happens not in the public or social space but in close familial spaces. This transformation became more pronounced in the second half of the decade. Although there is a noticeable divide between village and city settings in 90s films, these spaces are not clearly defined. The lack of specificity in the settings becomes more evident in the laughter films released from 1995 onwards. Social spaces do not hold a crucial role in these narratives. Instead, the humour relies on interactions that occur in non-public spaces.

Even when the title suggests a village (*Sreekrishnapurathe Nakshathrathilakkam,* 1998), the *mise-en-scene* does not specifically bring in the identification of the space to be categorised as being set in a village or town. Most of the action is limited inside the house and its surroundings. Unlike the rural spaces of the 80s comedy films, (such as *Mandanmar Londonil, Mutharamkunnu PO, Peruvannapurathe Visheshangal,* etc.), the social public space is rarely visible in these films. In *Aniyan Bava Chettan Bava* (1995)*, Aadhyathe Kanmani* (1995)*, Mannar Mathai Speaking* (1995) *, Mannadiar Penninu Chenkotta Checkan* (1997)*, Sreekrishnapurathe Nakshathrathilakkam* (1998)*, Punjabi house* (1998) and *Udayapuram Sultan* (1999)*,* the space of action and humour is such that no significance is given to whether the story takes place in a countryside or a city. Due to the confined diegetic spaces, the scope for slapstick and physical humour is limited. As a result, along with the popularity of the mimicry art form, verbal humour dominated these spaces.

4.5.   The hero/comedian divide

In the comedy films of the 90s, a clear distinction between the protagonist and the character responsible for delivering the majority of the humour becomes apparent towards the conclusion of the era. Even when the hero himself takes on a humorous role, the inclusion of a sidekick in Malayalam cinema became inevitable. Initially introduced as a comedic duo in the films of the 80s such as *Kinnaram* and *Nadodikkattu*, the hero-comedian divide gradually widens within the narratives. In the early years of the 90s, comedy films were structured around "the singular 'moral' hero was abandoned for a bunch of incompetent men played by comedians" (*Women in*

Malayalam ch. 8). Consequently, as the years progressed, a visible hierarchy emerged, influencing the roles and appearances of the characters playing friends, ultimately solidifying the binary dynamic between the hero and the sidekick.

This pivotal moment signifies the rise of the masculine hero archetype in Malayalam comedy narratives. In mainstream cinema, where humour was not the central theme (such as *Dhruvam* 1993, *Devasuram* 1993, etc.), this trend had already been firmly established. "From a parallel ''hero'' of an independent comedy track, we see the comedian becoming a sidekick, a friend who is nevertheless marked as subordinate, and in the moment of the star's apotheosis, as in a film like *Namnaadu* (1969) the comedian has become indistinguishable from a fan (110)" (V. Kumar 15).

These secondary characters in the 90s films are stripped of any possibility of being accepted by the audience as refined individuals equal to the hero. The sidekick serves as a contrasting element, accentuating the hero's qualities, whether it be in appearance, intelligence or social position. This approach had a significant impact, emphasising the prominence of the male hero even within the realm of comedy. The sidekicks' idiosyncrasies and physical appearances are often portrayed in a manner that invites laughter, reinforcing potential stereotypes associated with lower social caste and class. Rowena observes the emergence of the '*chirippadangal*' [laughter films] towards the end of the 80s, which prominently featured non-superstar actors and focused on delivering full-length comedy (*Women in Malayalam* ch. 8). However, as the 90s progressed, and as the '*chirippadangal*' attained the nature of comedy hybrids, incorporating more of melodramatic humour, the comedy actor became a separate designation towards the end of the decade. These actors were

entitled to play alongside the hero for the purpose of generating laughter. Jagathy, Kalabhavan Mani, Innocent, Kochin Haneefa, Salim Kumar and Harisree Ashokan are a few examples of comedians who excelled in the area. By the turn of the century, films began to completely separate the comic character entirely from the space of the hero and are treated as distinct categories within the narrative, a separation more evident in films featuring the actor Dileep, where the hero is the initiator of the humour while the badge of the comedy actor goes to the sidekick, a phenomenon examined in detail later in this thesis. Notably, many actors with a background in mimicry gradually transition into the status of the hero, leaving opportunities for new actors to fill the vacant comedic positions

It can also be posited that the rise of mimicry in the entertainment industry contributed to the popularisation of using appearance and body as sources of laughter. This influence has had a lasting impact in later decades, leading to the ridiculing of physical appearances and body attributes for comedic purposes. For instance, In *Ezharakoottam* (1995), the title signifies a gang of seven and a half men, the half being the character with a limb, and in *My Dear Muthachan* (1992), the description of the character Baburaj (Sreenivasan) as black and short qualifies him unfit to be a lover. Characters with visual or auditory impairments, along with others facing physical or mental disabilities, are frequently subjected to ridicule in comedy films. While these humorous portrayals entertained audiences, the subsequent popularity of such films can be attributed to the nature of the humour employed, which predominantly relied on ridicule. As Billig observes about ridicule, "It is easy to praise humour for bringing people together in moments of pure, creative

enjoyment. But it is not those sorts of moments that constitute the social core of humour, but instead, it is the darker, less easily admired practice of ridicule" (2). Malayalam films, using ridicule, gradually normalised the stereotyping of physical appearances and disabilities. This is a trope that dominates many of the films played by the actor Dileep in the later decade, which is the major focus of analysis in the subsequent chapter.

Chapter 5

Comedy Films of the 2000s:
Configuring, Reconfiguring Masculinity

The early millennial era witnessed comedy films primarily dominated by actor Dileep, known for his impeccable comic timing and his ability to connect with the audience. These movies were marketed under the banner of 'family entertainers' and targeted people of all age groups earning Dileep the title '*janapriya nayakan*' [people's favourite actor]. The movies mostly revolve around ordinary situations and avoided complicated storylines. An exploration of the comedy films from 2000 onwards, leading up to the advent of New Generation cinema, allows for the analysis of the recurring patterns and formulaic elements present in these comedies that mark the era, specifically, those films that feature Dileep in the lead role.

While mapping and examining the tropes and techniques along with the evolutionary indicators of comedy films of the era, it is equally imperative to critically analyse the subtexts and undercurrents that operate beneath the surface of 'innocent' humour. Malayalam cinema during the 2000s differed from its predecessors in terms of plot, characters, and the overt importance attributed to the actors. Even though the idolization of the iconic superstars Mammootty and Mohanlal began in the 80s with films such as *Rajavinte Makan* (1986) and *New Delhi* (1987), the label reached its heyday in the early 2000s. Up until the 2000s, many of the films that portrayed themes associated with middle-class life were gradually substituted by the image of the alpha male superhero figure.

5.1.   Comic genres of the early 2000s

Mimicry and the entry of artists from the field of mimicry into cinema drastically influenced the nature of humour in the narratives of Malayalam films. While the popular films of the early 2000s that starred actors Mohanlal and Mammootty were scripted with their star value in mind, resulting in tailored characters and narratives for the actors, the comedy films of the period became an inevitable mode of family entertainment, witnessing the rise of the actor Dileep to stardom. The essence of humour in the films of the early 2000s, particularly within the comedy genre featuring Dileep, underwent a transformation reflective of the evolving cultural and cinematic landscape.

The popular comedy genre of the period was the family comedy-drama, generally known as the romantic comedy. These comedy films feature the comedic hero, who, due to some social injustice, is seen as leading an unconventional, non-privileged life, resulting in a series of humorous situations that delight the audience. The plot as well as the humour revolves around this one character. This tendency to focus the narrative on one character is what differentiates the comedy films of the 2000s from the comedy films of the 80s and the 90s, which were mostly ensembles. The comedic hero's emergence as the focal point in these films reciprocates the prevailing trend seen in the non-comedic mainstream films of the era, where the focus predominantly rests on singular, larger-than-life titular heroes as seen in the films *Valyettan* (2000)*, Narasimham* (2000)*, Dada Sahib* (2000)*, Ravanaprabhu* (2001)*, Rakshasa Rajavu* (2001)*, Phantom* (2002) etc., who exhibit hyper masculine tendencies. Upon close examination of the titles featuring Dileep in the lead role, it

is apparent that, from the early years of the decade, the films predominantly revolved around the male protagonists. This trend is evident in titles like *Joker* (2000), *Mister Butler* (2000), *Kalyanaraman* (2002), *Kuberan* (2002), *Kunjikoonan* (2002), and *Meesa Madhavan* (2002) at the beginning of the decade and in the films *Crazy Gopalan* (2008), *Mayamohini* (2012) and *Mr Marumakan* (2012) towards the end of the decade and beyond. While retaining the male bastion in the nomenclature of these films that take off from the popular films, it is interesting to note the comic departure seen in the disenchanting of titles in Dileep films.

It is worth noting that during this period, Malayalam comedy films were intentionally scripted with the actor Dileep in mind, each character tailored to suit his experiences of performing characters on the mimicry stage. *CID Moosa* (2003), *Pattanathil Sundaran* (2003), *Sadananthante Samayam* (2003), *Rasikan* (2004), *Kochi Rajavu* (2005), *Chandupottu* (2005), *Pachakuthira* (2006), *Chakkara Muthu* (2006), *Inspector Garud* (2007) and *Crazy Gopalan* (2008) are all examples of this trend.

5.1.1. Comedy for comedy's sake

Dileep's comedies sustained the success he had garnered towards the end of the 90s with films like *Punjabi House* (1998) and *Meenathil Thalikettu* (1998) well into the 2000s. However, there were films by others, even though not very successful at the box office, often crafted for comedy's sake, relying excessively on buffoonery and verbal innuendoes to elicit laughter. This was a result of the extreme popularity gained by certain comedy shows that were aired on satellite TV on weekends, which had a substantial viewership among all age groups. One such

series was the weekend comedy programme on Kairali TV Channel called
Jagapoga, in which mimicry artists imitated deceased or living actors of South India
in one-of-a-kind caricature portrayals which resulted in laughter riots among the
audience. The portrayal of the actor Jayan by the mimicry artist Thirumala Chandran
was a trendsetter leading to the actor being 'resurrected' through comedy by many
others. The success of the TV show encouraged the artists to create full-length films
based on these characters. However, these films, which were released in 2001,
include *Aparanmar Nagarathil* and *Dupe Dupe Dupe* directed by Nissar and the film
Jagapoga (a filmic version of the TV show) directed by Dhanawanthari failed to
bring the audience into theatres as they had nothing new to offer other than the
caricatures of the film actors. Reviewing the film *Jagapoga*, Unni R. Nair dismisses
it as a "worthless effort," and comments that "mimicry on the stage is alright, but
when mimicry, and that too of a senseless type becomes stuff for a cinema, things go
to an almost unbearable level" (*Screen)*. The trend was short-lived, possibly due to
the absence of a compelling narrative that often delved into the repetitiveness of
portraying caricatures.

Similar films that attempted to continue comic representations straight out of
the mimicry stage can be seen in films like *Korappan the Great* (2001) directed by
Sunil and *Bamboo Boys* (2002) directed by Ramasimhan. These movies sought to
engender humour through crude and slapstick comedy, often exploiting cliched lines
and perpetuating stereotypes of marginalised groups, including the Tribal
communities. These characters were intended to be sources of laughter, serving as

stark contrasts to the mainstream films featuring superstars. Mimicry, thus played a pivotal role in shaping the humour of the era in Malayalam cinema.

5.1.2. Mimicry: foundation of filmic humour of the era

As previously mentioned, the humour in Malayalam comedy films of the 2000s heavily relies on the laughter formula established in the mimicry performances of the preceding decade. Among these, the comedic narratives referred to as 'skits' gained such immense popularity that, as the new century began, stage shows hosted overseas by film stars prominently featured these narratives, with the stars taking on the lead roles. These skits gained popularity not only for their witty dialogues but also for eliciting laughter through physical gestures and humour that stemmed from portraying characters with variations in terms of race, social class, gender, community, and even sexuality. Sebastian analyses the stereotyping and misogyny that the influence of mimicry-humour had on the popular films in Malayalam and in turn on the public spaces of Kerala in his article titled "Laughter and Abjection: The Politics of Comedy in Malayalam Cinema" (2002). Commenting on Sebastian's article, Pushpesh Kumar remarks that "the hegemonic identity of the 'Malayali' articulated through male stardom and cultification represent a cis-normative, upper caste, masculine figure which eventually becomes an instrument of scripting abjection and perpetrating violence upon marginalized identities through a sexist humorous discourse" (*Sexuality, Abjection* 24).

Sebastian's claim can be extended to analyse the nature of the narrative humour of the comedy films that emerged during the 2000s in Malayalam cinema. In contrast to the comedy films of the prior decade, which primarily relied on the

theme of fraud as a central source of humour, the films of the 2000s sought to elicit

laughter by embracing forms of political incorrectness. This approach included

portraying characters with disabilities or impairments, a trend that can be directly

attributed to the influence of stage mimicry, where it was commonplace to create

sketches featuring characters with physical limitations.

It is worth noting that the comedy genre in the relevant era encompassed a

diverse array of actors, including prominent figures such as Jayaram, Jayasurya,

among others and was not restricted to the actor Dileep. However, it is imperative to

underscore that films featuring Dileep in the lead occupied a paramount position

within the comedy genre during this period, rendering his films a focal point of

analysis in this chapter. The rationale behind this approach lies in the fact that it

helps explore the prevalent traits and characteristics of humour during the period.

5.2. Themes and tropes

5.2.1. Disability *vis-a-vis* hypermasculinity

Cinema plays a pivotal role in shaping societal norms and cultural

perspectives that are practised by society. Comedy films are no exception. The

patterns of what constitutes desirable sexuality, gender roles, and other entrenched

norms become particularly evident when closely examining the so-called humorous

films from the 2000s. The endeavour to define the idealised masculine body image

in mainstream films of that era can be observed both in alignment with and in

contrast to the portrayals of the body in comedy films, notably those featuring

Dileep as the lead character. The heterosexual gaze works its way to keep a check on

the generation of humour. The alpha male protagonists of the era stand in stark contrast to the aesthetically, sexually, and physically disadvantaged heroes depicted in the comedies, provoking laughter and delight among the audience. Consequently, these films played a dominant role in reinforcing gender stereotypes and shaping perceptions of the human body during the early 2000s.

As such, the romantic comedy *Kunjikoonan* (2002), which can be labelled as "disability comedy," (Wilde 35) features the character Kunjan or Vimal Kumar (Dileep), known for his selfless service to others. He is sympathised by the other characters and the viewers on account of his physical disability and unique physical features. He is divested of all traits of 'manliness' or desirability of the traditional male. He is the epitome of the Other– short with a hunchback, bow legs, dark skin, protruded teeth, etc. His appearance is constantly made fun of not only by the others but also by Kunjan himself. In fact, his self-deprecating humour forms the cause of much laughter. This self-mockery on the screen licences the audience to laugh at the person with a disability, for otherwise, culturally, it is "forbidden" (Stronach and Allan 37) to laugh at disabled people. The first half of the film shows Kunjan trying to overcome his shortcomings through humour and going around in search of a suitable bride. Parallel to Kunjan is the character Prasad (also played by Dileep), an angry college student with blue eyes and brown hair. The narrative concludes with Kunjan eventually winning the once visually challenged Chembakam's (Navya Nair) hand in marriage.

The source of humour in the film is the self-deprecating remarks about the physique and social status of the hero Kunjan, where, as Carol Thomas states, "any

humour is contingent on the disabled person's impairment, and/or impairment effects" (qtd. in Wilde 37). By this process, Kunjan is stripped of all qualities of the 'desirable' male. This non-desirability of Kunjan is in direct contrast with the character of Prasad who embodies the essence of masculinity as accepted by the social psyche. It can be claimed, as is the case with all other films in the genre, that the film lets the physically challenged hero win at the end and hence is a better artistic creation than the films that exhibit 'ideal' heroes and masculine toxicity. This argument, however, falls short of the ideology that operates in these films. The laugh that the audience enjoys is at the expense of Kunjan's bodily anomalies and it is not an innocent one. The viewers laugh because what is presented on the screen does not fit into the assumed homogeneity of the desirable male, one that is not only exemplified by the character Prasad in the film but also by numerous other "able-bodied" (Wilde) heroes that were portrayed in Malayalam cinema during the period, which include characters such as Induchoodan (*Narasimham* [2000]) and Arakkal Madhavanunni (*Valyettan* [2000]) played by Mohanlal and Mammootty respectively. In *Kunjikoonan*, an example of a direct reference to these 'desirable' men is when Kunjan and Thoma (Kochin Haneefa) visit a family with a marriage proposal and the father of the bride mistakes Kunjan for a beggar. Here Kunjan tells Thoma,

"Dusting off the face powder is what created the issue," to which Thoma retorts:

"Otherwise, you'd be Mammootty!" (00:17:25-29)

The variable that determines the joke here is this constant comparison with the normalised body type that generates humour at the cost of 'othering' of characters, which demands being laughed at.

Kunjan is not the only one being laughed at for their physical disability in the film. The prospective bride that Kunjan and Thoma visit during the marriage proposal is Suhasini, who is played by the actor Ajay Kumar, popularly known as Guinness Pakru. Pakru is a Malayalee actor with a stunted growth. It is the subsequent mockery of the appearance and the diminutive stature of this character in the film that generates laughter in this scene too. The mother calls out the name of the daughter and Kunjan says,

"Suhasini...that's the name of a film actress" (00:18:11-12)

This is an example of another instance of normalising traditionally accepted beauty standards. Kunjan's expectation of how the girl would be is in alignment with the desirable body type of the society. It is the incongruity between this expected appearance and the reality that results in the humour in this scene, albeit at the expense of denigrating the physical appearances of the characters. The same happens with Suhasini who creates a ruckus upon realising that the proposed groom is a hunchback and one who does not satiate her expectations. At this point, Thoma brings in another comparison and says,

"Look at the devil's arrogance! She thinks she is Manju Warrier!" (00:20:04-10)

Although this dialogue is meant to generate humour based on the fact that the actor Dileep was married to the actress Manju Warrier at the time, the humour springs

from the incongruity in the appearance of the character of Suhasini and the desirable

body, aligned with the appearance of the actress Manju Warrier. Consequently,

laughter and disgust, both, contribute to the maintenance of a social order that

projects certain images as the standard for the 'desirable' human body and deems

others inferior. This process is carried out by representing stereotypes using humour.

Such stereotypes will carry "important truths about societal discourses on disability,

often related to significant cultural narratives of impairment and disability" (Wilde

19). Humour in these situations arises when something or someone we experience or

consider normal deviates from our standard mental patterns and expectations.

Examples of such body shaming and denigration of disability are seen

excessively in many parts of the film. Every attempt is made to exploit such

deviations from conventional body models to bring in verbal humour. In the film,

Chandran (Saleem Kumar), after a telephone conversation with his lover, confesses

to Kunjan,

"She tells me that I look like Kamal Hassan," and the frustrated Kunjan replies:

"She might have said Kamala's ass and not Kamal Hassan!" (00:34:50-59)

In this context, the comparison is drawn with the Tamil actor Kamal Hassan. The

character Chandran is played by the actor Saleem Kumar, renowned for his comedic

prowess. He possesses a darker skin tone and also deviates from conventional

standards of attractiveness. Such portrayals carry the danger of promoting and

normalising body shaming, upholding specific body ideals instead of advocating

inclusivity, diversity, and challenging stereotypes. Even when it is argued that

"comedy may have the greatest power in shifting viewers to reconsider these collective images" (Wilde 60) regarding stereotypes, it is important to recognize the potential harm of reinforcing narrow beauty standards and masculine ideals. These unattainable standards set by society are set to condition both men and women. So often, an individual's perception of self-worth is contingent upon the external evaluations made by others.

Sebastian comments that "Dileep's stardom also rests on his stereotypical de-humanizing caricatures of a gender non-conforming person as in *Chandupottu* (2005) or a differently abled character as in *Kunjikoonan* (2002) – in short anyone who is outside the hegemonic category of 'Malayali'" (128). To establish hegemonic masculinity, the technique of double role is employed by a number of films starring Dileep.

> 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. (Angita 31)

In *Pachakuthira* (2006), Dileep plays the dual role of Ananthakuttan and Akash Menon, the former with a handsome body, parallel to the latter, who is a mentally disabled character and whose bodily appearance is deliberately fashioned

to engender laughter. This juxtaposition of the body and intellect of the characters with the able-bodied characters is what leads to the audience's acceptance of the hero. They are aware that the actor who plays the not-so-good-looking, mentally inferior character is in real life the representative of the accepted norms of masculinity. Thus, in the process of viewing, the audience sees the disabled protagonist through a "non-disabled gaze" (Wilde 79). Moreover, the titles of these films focus on the marginalised characters and not the parallel superior ones because that is where the humour resides.

5.2.2. Stereotypes of gender and sexuality

In the films of the 2000s, we witness a deviance from the nature of humour and the tropes of comedy of the 80s and the 90s. While *Kunjikoonan* (2002), *Pachakuthira* (2006), *Chakkaramuthu* (2006) and *Sound Thoma* (2013) employed physical and mental attributes for comedic effect, *Chandupottu* (2005) and *Marykkundoru Kunjaadu* (2010) take a different approach, using gender and sexuality as sources of humour. These films establish notions about gender and sexuality, particularly the idealised form of masculinity expected from men, by focusing on the individual character of the protagonist for comedic material. This approach allows for a comparison between the comic hero and the heroes in superstar films, shaping perspectives on what is deemed desirable and acceptable in terms of physical attributes, sexuality, and other masculine qualities.

Chandupottu, the 2005 film directed by Lal Jose, is lauded for the film's attempt at subverting the popular masculine concepts during the period when hyper-masculine heroes were hailed. Radhakrishnan's (Dileep) grandmother (Sukumari)

desired for a girl grandchild. Upon Radhakrishnan's birth, his grandmother, concealing her disappointment, raises him as a girl. Instead of using his full name, Radhakrishnan, he is referred to by the feminine attribute Radha, and he grows up embracing his femininity. Unlike the other males in his vicinity, he abstains from engaging in traditional masculine activities such as fishing in the sea. Instead, he takes an interest in dancing, enjoys applying makeup and nail polish, and prefers the company of girls. The film received critical acclaim for presenting its male protagonist in a challenging avatar and for undermining the machismo image of the male hero that the popular films of the period propagated. *Indiaglit* reviewed the film as fighting "the stigma and prejudices attached to such (effeminate) people" ("Chaandupottu").

However, this portrayal is far from the truth, as the effeminate hero in the film is primarily utilised to generate laughter (and sympathy) among the audience, rather than to convey a message about the acceptance of femininity in males. Throughout the film, he is consistently depicted in contrast with the macho characters of Freddy (Biju Menon) and Komban Kumaran (Indrajith). As the story progresses, Radhakrishnan, the effeminate hero, undergoes a transformation towards the end of the film, conforming to the masculine ideals that society values and desires, thus "reasserting gender binary and heterosexuality" (Sebastian 124).

Thus, in the scenes meant to generate humour, the audience is fed with subtle doses of the patriarchal agenda. The mannerisms and transvestism manifest and the incongruity involved during the prawn peeling scene do not fail to elicit laughter, but at the same time, Radha's comments to Rosie (Bhavana) reinforce

gender roles. When Radha says that he will be a good 'housewife' and sweep the front yard, do the laundry and wash the dishes, Rosie demands him to engage in the chores that men normally do. Such detrimental comments parade themselves in the guise of humour and can be found operating subtly in many scenes in the movie.

In this context, humour plays a vital role in perpetuating stereotypes and alienating the effeminate character to the point that, following the film's release, the term 'chandupottu' evolved into a humorous insult and derogatory label for individuals displaying feminine traits and deviating from conventional standards of masculinity. Ironically, this anti-effeminacy bias is exhibited more by the men in the movie who deem themselves masculine and are just another manifestation of the patriarchal underpinnings. "It is especially other men who show negative bias against gender nonconforming men"(qtd. in Gul and Uskul). The director of the film, Lal Jose had also drawn severe criticism from LGBTQIA rights activists for "making a misleading film which confused concepts of gender and sexuality, but also justifying why he made it." (Joseph and Jayarajan). It was further reported that Lal Jose was condemned for being unapologetic about such a representation, which the activists described as a "skewed take on gender and sexuality." The film's message that the hero can be 'corrected' with a few beatings and a heterosexual relationship has led many trans men and trans women to be subjected to sexual harassment and physical assault within their families, according to the queer activist Shalin Varghese (Joseph and Jayarajan). The fight scenes or the "beatings," as Shalin Varghese puts it, in which Radha is involved, literally stratify his phases of transformation, undoing his 'emasculated self'. In the first fight sequence, he is not

able to defend himself. But in the subsequent ones, there is a change. He manages to fight off his assailants using his dance moves in the ensuing fight and he is finally shorn of all the so-called attributes of femininity by the end of the final fight scene. The fact that the protagonist gives up dance to join the fishermen folk to assert his masculinity leaves one again with the argument that the film was meant to evoke laughter at the expense of the character's effeminacy and not to normalise it.

In another one of Dileep's films, *Marykkundoru Kunjaadu* (2010), directed by Shafi, humour serves a similar function in portraying the notions of masculinity and cowardice. The initial scenes of the film introduce the character Solomon played by Dileep as a '*pedithondan makan*' [a scary-cat son]. Throughout the movie, humour is strategically utilised to communicate the idea that masculinity is closely associated with the capacity for physical confrontations and the demonstration of toughness. Intriguingly, the initial humour arises from the contrast wherein the female protagonist, Mary, played by Bhavana, displays greater boldness and courage than the male hero.

"A male should be courageous!" (00:12:53-55), says Solomon's lover Mary to Solomon.

Solomon endures consistent mistreatment and exploitation at the hands of everyone in his village. An example is the scene where Solomon fails to defend his mother when she is subjected to insults from a vendor. In a subsequent scene, his mother Mary (Vinaya Prasad) expresses her disappointment, labelling Solomon as "a good-for-nothing fellow" (00:17:38-40). Throughout the movie, humour predominantly hinges on Solomon's cowardice and his perceived lack of masculinity. The later part

of the film focuses on the arrival of a mysterious stranger who becomes a part of the family, and whose roughness in character plays a key role in reshaping the villagers' attitudes towards Solomon and his family.

The film not only finds humour in the male protagonist's perceived demasculation but also does so by denigrating women who display boldness or deviate from conventional beauty standards, particularly those who are not docile. One such character is the maid Chanda Maria (Ponnamma Babu), whose name is intended to evoke laughter due to the stereotyping of such female names. She is an overweight lady who is illiterate and who evokes humour by being loud, mispronouncing English words such as 'bridge' for 'fridge', 'saikilchautist' for 'psychologist' etc. Another instance of body shaming using humour is when Solomon sees Chanda Maria's hand and remarks: "Is this a trunk?!" (1:51:02-04). A nod to the conventional notion of female beauty is subtly suggested in the scene where Lonappan, played by the actor Saleem Kumar, while showing Solomon potential matches, comments:

"Nice! The Teeth are slightly protruding, but that is the latest fashion" (1:53:27-34).

When women's names in the Malayali cultural milieu are linked with place names, it often carries a questionable connotation, suggesting a promiscuous or unruly lifestyle, and is commonly attributed to sex workers on the street. Paradoxically, when such combinations involve a man's name, they tend to signify recognition and social acceptance. The character played by the actor Innocent, while sarcastically referring to the 'potential' women whom Solomon could marry, lists out their names in this manner:

"Anappara Anne, Pookkalam Janaki, and there is another girl who walks with a little

contortion, what is her name?," (1:50:55-63)

 The following laughter reinforces the notion that girls who are less docile or girls

with disabilities, are not 'ideal' to be married in a respectable society.

        Furthermore, in the film, Lonappan's dialogue, following his suspicion of

Mary being raped by Jose (Biju Menon), humorously follows the notion that a girl

who has lost her virginity or experienced rape may not be accepted by her lover. In

the Indian socio-cultural context, rape implies both dishonour and power dynamics.

The survivor struggles with the dual ordeal of the actual traumatising experience and

the subsequent sense of marginalisation and stigmatisation, thereby undergoing

excessive psychological distress and humiliation. The use of disarming modes of

presentation as humour is more dangerous than the narratives that explicitly deal

with such representations. Such rape myths propagated through humour engender a

complex array of societal responses, including the propensity to assign blame and

shame to the survivor.

 In another instance, Lonappan comments,

 "It's a woman's mind; it may change at any time!" (1:21:20-24).

Through the use of humour in these instances, traditional societal views on virginity

and women are frequently normalised and reinforced. The sexist remarks that get

subsumed under the garb of humour, get rationalised in statements like 'it was just a

joke'. Bemiller and Schneider define sexist humour as "humour that is offensive and

prejudicial, and causes damage to a person on both an individual and social level"

(459). Moreover, jokes "exaggerate stereotypes" to evoke laughter and such instances of humour that rely on stereotypes augment the beliefs of differences between males and females (Crawford 1415-16).

Analysing the trend of hegemonic masculinity in Malayalam films of the 2000s, Preeti Kumar comments:

> The heroes in the comic films of the 2000s are representative of large sections of the populace unable to take advantage of the benefits of globalization, and witnessing the dominant role of men in public and private places being eroded. The reaction against the loss of potency and fear of failure in the lived experience of the 21st century male resulted in the reaffirmation of the normative 'generic man' (42).

In order to achieve this, either the hero is portrayed as effeminate and compared to the masculine other, resulting in subordinate masculinities, or, as in the case of the later films of Dileep, the 'manly' and bold woman who is modern in outlook is ridiculed and objectified. In other words, gender hierarchies are interpellated using humour in these films of the era.

According to Connell, men's place in a society's system of gender relations is reflected in the patterns of social behaviour labelled as "masculinities". He defines "hegemonic masculinity" 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 77). It is observable that the hegemonic

masculinity that pervades the cinematic space of Malayalam cinema uses the tool of humour to institute a change as seen towards the second half of the decade.

If the first half of the 2000s characterised heroes with subordinate masculinities, the second half witnessed a shift in the nature of the hegemonic masculinity from an alpha male machismo to the divergent hero who is more comic than tough. In both the halves, humour becomes either a differentiating tool or an affirming one. The protagonists of the early 2000s Malayalam comedy cinema established their masculinity through a contrast with the hyper-masculine protagonists that featured in the blockbuster films of the era. This contrast allowed for a reaffirmation of traditional notions of masculinity. However, in the later part of the 2000s, these heroes of the comedy films began to exhibit masculinity more explicitly by being cast in dominant roles that were juxtaposed against the female characters in these films.

The comedic hero's transformation from an all-humorous hero to a hero who is simultaneously humorous and 'manly' is observable during and after 2005. Apart from the film *Meesa Madhavan* (2002), Dileep's *Kochi Rajavu* (2005) is testimony to this change. *Kochi Rajavu* revolves around Unni or Surya Narayana Varma, a man born into a royal family but drives an auto named 'Kochi Rajavu'. The narrative delineates two distinct phases in Unni's life. In his earlier years, Unni is depicted as a lighthearted and comical character, while later, he exhibits a much more serious demeanour, refraining from engaging in confrontations with others. There are two female leads in the film: Aswathy (Kavya Madhavan), who has all the traits of the conventional Malayali female in appearance and Meenakshi (Rambha),

the modern 'non Malayali' female who is arrogant and one who finally falls in love with the hero. The character portrayed by Dileep exhibits two contrasting personalities, with the one who refrains from physical reactions, being ridiculed by other characters as a '*mannoonny*' [wimp]. Eventually, he demonstrates his 'manliness' by defeating the villain with physical force. Within the context of the same character in the film, it is noteworthy how he seamlessly transitions between both comedic and hyper masculine traits. This underscores the role of violence as a defining characteristic within such expressions of masculinity.

5.2.3. Superstars and comedy: reconfiguring hegemonic masculinity

The foundation for infusing humour into the character of the hero, suffused with the violent traits of the alpha male, was established with Dileep's *Meesha Madhavan* (2002). Apart from the sexual innuendos, the film primarily entertains the audience with the story of Madhavan who is:

> the embodiment of traditional sex role behaviour…He is forced into thieving to support his family, abandon his studies so that his brother could continue his education. His elder brother, under the control of his spouse and never having borne the responsibility of his parental home, exemplifies subordinate masculinity - effete and ineffective. (P. Kumar 40)

It is important to note that humour became the primary tool in the narrative of the films of the Malayalam superstars in the post-2005 era. This means that humour was no longer reserved for comedy films. The integration of humour into the 'star' films foregrounds a shift that was taking place in terms of dominant masculinity.

Masculinities are not monolithic or static and they shift with the socio-cultural change. "Masculinities are the patterns of social practice associated with the position of men in any society's set of gender relations"(Connell 69).

This argument can be read into the Malayalam films of the 2000s to decipher how dominant masculinity is subject to change. By the year 2005, the films starring superstars Mammootty and Mohanlal, renowned for their portrayal of hyper-masculine alpha male roles during the 90s and the early 2000s, started introducing characters with comedic elements, both in their speech and idiosyncrasies.

Anwar Rasheed's directorial film *Rajamanikkyam* (2005) portrayed superstar Mammootty playing the titular character Rajamanikkyam or 'Bellari Raja', the illiterate and unrefined hero who makes the audience laugh through his use of a regional Trivandrum dialect. He is comic, but unlike the other comic heroes of the period, humour does not make him less masculine. Rather it contributes to accentuating the dominating and masculine nature of his character that is portrayed throughout the film. In terms of genre, it popularised what is called the action comedy film. *Rajamanikkyam* illustrates how the hero dominates other characters, including women, establishing gender roles using humour:

> Those who "wash women's underskirts" (Rajamanikyam) are expelled from
> the privileged circle of dominant males. Rajaratnam Pillai remarries only
> because he requires a mother for his son…the woman is required to serve a
> domestic purpose, not to be a companion or lover. Muthulakshmi serves
> Rajaratnam Pillai while he lies back in his easy chair – a seat which the son,
> not a daughter claims, "*Achan muthalai irunne kaserayil, eneem makan*

modalali irikkum" (The father-owner sat on this chair, now the son-owner is entitled to sit). The more women stormed the male bastions of employment post-liberalization, the more allocation of tasks and roles to 'those that are naturally suited to execute them' becomes the normative in the cinema. (P. Kumar 40)

The remarkable box office success achieved by this particular brand of humour and the hypermasculine hero archetype paved the way for the production of similar films starring the superstar in lead roles. *Thuruppu Gulan* (2006), *Mayavi* (2007), *Love in Singapore* (2009), *Pattanathil Bhootham* (2009) and *Pokkiri Raja* (2010) are films that are made on similar lines in this subliminal space that culminate with *Pranchiyettan and the Saint* (2010). In these films, the characters played by Mammooty are ones who are shorn of the earlier notions of hegemonic masculinity rooted in macho heroism, replacing it with a new form that is made up of humour alone.

On the contrary, Mohanlal's films had already ventured into reintroducing humour into both character portrayal and narrative much earlier through productions like *Kakkakuyil* (2001), *Kilichundan Mampazham* (2003), and *Mister Brahmachari* (2003). However, these films did not do well at the box office as, along with disappointing scripts, the societal hierarchy of accepting different forms of masculinity had not yet undergone a significant shift and the audience was not free from the clutches of the on-screen alpha male heroes. This trend changes with the film *Chotta Mumbai*, directed by Anwar Rasheed and released in 2007, where Mohanlal plays the character of Vasco, who heads a gang of petty thieves. Unlike

Mister Brahmachari (2003) or *Balettan* (*2003*), the film *Chotta Mumbai* "gives
Mohanlal an out and out comic-action role where he does not have to be the all-
sacrificing big brother or younger brother for that matter" (Palicha, "Chotta
Mumbai").

In this context, in the second half of the 2000s, there occurs a fusion of the
subordinate hegemonic traits of the comedy films of the early 2000s with that of the
dominant masculinities of the characters that the superstars played in the same
period. This resulted in a reconfiguration of the hegemonic masculinities. It also is
evident that humour and comedy becomes an important political tool in this
reconfiguration. This is similar to the observation that Jenny Rowena makes about
films of the 80s and 90s when "re-masculinising"(*Women in Malayalam* ch. 8)
happens in Malayalam films. Rowena observes that laughter films were a response
to the emerging feminist and legal discourse of the 1980s and 1990s that empowered
middle-class, upper-caste women and led to a social transformation that threatened
men. The same happens with many women of the post-millennial era, as they
become more liberated and independent in thought and action. This demands the
restructuring of masculinity as the ideal masculinity is "the hegemonic position in a
given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable" (Connell 76).

5.2.4. Transformation of the comic hero and ridicule of the female gender

The newly configured masculinities used humour to establish hierarchies and
subordination. As Connell remarks, "'Masculinity' does not exist except in contrast
with 'femininity'" (68). In contrast to the comedy films of the early 2000s, those of
the latter half, especially those featuring Dileep, tend to focus on generating laughter

by targeting "progressive female" characters, often resorting to ridicule and denigration. These films portray female characters as lacking agency, emphasising their cultural 'Malayali' identity. Essentially, the hero assumes the role of the cultural representative, inviting the audience to relate to him. The accepted 'hegemonic Malayali woman' is someone who is "docile, is not world wise, and is bound by her duties and her presence to the private space of the home" (Sebastian 117).

Hence, the female characters subjected to mockery in films after 2005 (with the trend reaching its peak in Dileep's films from 2010 onwards), represent the 'deviant other' requiring correction by the hero through the medium of humour. Thus, she is ridiculed and laughed at for her proficiency in the English language and for the manner in which she presents herself before men and other 'ideal' Malayali women. The audience readily engages in this discourse and "in participating in the laughter as a 'Malayali', the audience participates in this Othering" (Sebastian 117).

By 2005, the comedy films slid into this formulaic palette which catered to the likings of the 'fans' of the lead actors. Double-meaning jokes including double entendre, adult humour, and slapstick became the stock formula, catering to the laughter of the fans but carrying the badge of family movies. By the end of the decade, the popular comic in Malayalam cinema had reached a saturation point as it mostly revolved around the predictable characters and plots of the films of Dileep. At this point, the plot of these comedy films mainly involved 'correcting' the women characters and keeping them in place, apart from the hero being merely

funny. This kind of amelioration often resorted to rancid jokes and sexist remarks to achieve the desired effect.

Dileep's characters in the later half of the decade are misogynistic and exhibit domination over the female character/characters along with shunning any kind of associations that might subvert 'tradition' and in turn the patriarchal hegemony. *Mr Marumakan* (2012), directed by Sandhya Mohan, features Dileep's character Ashok Chakravarthy in the lead role. The plot revolves around three arrogant and rich women – Raja Kokila (Sheela), her daughter Raja Mallika (Khushboo) and her granddaughter Raja Lakshmi (Sanusha). The recipe for humour is in Chakravarthy's attempts to transform these arrogant women into 'normal' Malayali women. To underscore the disparity between the bad 'modern' and the good 'traditional', the character of Bhavani Amma, played by Kaviyoor Ponnamma, is introduced. She is portrayed as upholding the *'malayali thanima'* [malayali distinctiveness], as remarked by Ashok in the film. After incessant ridiculing and a series of slappings, the women are made to finally give in to the demands of the male hero and eventually accept defeat. They are also made to realise by the hero that women cannot be successful without the help of a man. The humour here operates from a position of power. Alternatively, it is the social function of humour to discipline the social subject that these films utilise. The superiority humour theorist Thomas Hobbes considers humour as a form of supremacy over others. He contends that laughter often involves "glorification" (45) of the self at the expense of others. It is the same theory of humour that underlies the power politics in the movies discussed earlier, such as *Kunjikoonan, Chandupottu,* etc.

Concerning the themes in Dileep's cinematic oeuvre, Pillai identifies their origins in the escalating crises of masculinities during that period. She remarks that Dileep's heroes:

> alleviate the anxieties evoked by the practices of hegemonic masculinities by making available alternative spaces of identification. Within this complicated dynamics, his screen personae also echo a growing crisis of masculinity in Kerala in the wake of women's movements and their assertions to selfhood, human rights, and the economic independence of women. ("Many Misogynies" 56)

Humour used in this formulaic manner operates in Dileep's *My Boss* (2012), *Mayamohini* (2012), *Ring Master* (2014), *Two Countries* (2015) and *King Liar* (2016) which "echo the anxiety of not-so-successful, not-so powerful, diffident men who struggle to make a living in a world of successful women" ("Many Misogynies" 56). Reviewing *Mr Marumakan* and its overt sexist formula of humour, Paresh Palicha writes: "Here he [Dileep's character] has the additional responsibility of taking on three generations of ladies; Sheela, Khushboo and Sanusha, which he does with crude and sexist jokes" ("Review: Mr. Marumakan").

Interestingly, the female characters of these Dileep films in the post-2010 era are all characters that occupy public spaces. These were predominantly male spaces in the past and which were not considered apt for the respectable 'malayali' woman. The hero's job in the films is to 'educate' and 'reform' these women, who have gone astray, and revert them to the role of the traditional Malayali *'veettamma'*(housewife) who subsists to heteronormative roles:

Female self fashioning in films has overwhelmingly centered around
valorising a normative femininity…a femininity that privileges motherhood
and the moral upbringing of the Malayalee nation through a moral
submission to patriarchy. Agential roles for female protagonists are rare; the
convention is to 'punish' within the narrative female refusal of narrative
femininity. (Rajendran 61)

In *My Boss* (2012), which is an adaptation of the 2009 Hollywood film *The
Proposal*, the plot revolves around a female boss and a male employee. Initially, the
male employee harbours a strong dislike for his female superior. However, they
eventually come to an agreement to feign a romantic marriage in order to secure a
job promotion. The humorous scenes in the narrative involve Manu Varma (Dileep)
seeking vengeance against his boss Priya Nair (Mamta) by forcing her to engage in
all the traditional roles of a Malayali woman including domestic chores and proving
that she is a 'wife material' to his parents as soon as she moves into his home, the
private space, from the public space of the office.

As Rajendran observes, "the public sphere has been presented as the rightful
space of the man, and feminine incursions into that space are devalued or challenged
through rather ugly kinds of misogyny in much Malayalam cinema" ("You are
Woman" 63). The hero's attempt to 'reform' the educated, city-bred heroine can be
interpreted as a form of exorcising her of the perceived 'monstrosity'. Ironically, it is
humour that renders her sophistication and 'bossiness' abject. The idea of a female
boss is not palatable to the ordinary Malayali masculine ego. One of the
characteristic features of 'masculinity' is "showing leadership" as opposed to

'femininity' which is about "following leadership" (*Self-Learning Booklet* 11). This narrative dynamic can be seen as an attempt to mitigate or expel all that is repulsive to the masculine psyche and is something similar to what Barbara Creed refers to as the "monstrous feminine". Again, it is humour that attenuates the danger of such representations, further fortifying the patriarchal apparatus. As Brigette Bill and Peter Naus state in their article, the transference of sexism through humour introduces a level of interpretive ambiguity, posing a distinct challenge compared to instances of non-humorous sexism (648).

The comedy film *Two Countries* (2012) features the duo Dileep and Mamta again in lead roles with the female lead playing the character of Laya, an alcohol addict and smoker who is born and brought up in Canada and who clearly does not affirm to the femininity that the cultural Malayali society accepts. This indeed is what generates much of the humour in the film. The women in both the films do not conform to "normative femininities" (Rajendran) and are more westernised English speaking women, who are ridiculed by the Malayali hero who is, as the narrator in the opening scenes in *Spanish Masala* (2013) describes the protagonist Charlie as: '*oru sadharana Malayaliyude prathinidhi*' [one who represents an average Malayali] (00:08:59-09:01). The heroines know little Malayalam and the heroes know very little English and this deliberate characterisation effectively fosters a connection between the ordinary family viewer and the Malayali hero, as opposed to the heroine. As the character of Mukesh remarks in *Two Countries*, "Didn't I tell you earlier not to underestimate the men from Kerala?" (2:12:30-33), the male

protagonist, again, attempts to 'cure' the arrogant heroines of their 'conceit' and 'haughtiness' with the ideal 'Malayali' man's love and kindness.

Such representations, masquerading under the guise of humour, perpetuate the notion that women need to be 'corrected' or 'tamed' by men. At a time when more women were being educated and coming to the forefront to assert their presence in sociocultural spheres as individuals with agency, complexity, and autonomy, such films engage the audience negatively by reinforcing regressive ideas about gender dynamics. It is noteworthy that this trend originated in the comedy films of the 1980s, where female characters first started to enter workspaces. However, as the 1980s progressed, male heroes and their homosocial spaces began to take centre stage, resulting in the marginalisation of female characters. In the context of the 2000s comedy films, there is a resurgence of female characters, primarily serving to reaffirm masculinity. The overt assertion of authority has become less feasible, leading to an increasing reliance on humour as a more subtle means to achieve this end. Compared to the 1980s, the comedy films of the 2000s display less tolerance towards female protagonists who occupy workspaces.

The danger lies more in the fact that humour makes the hero more likeable to the audience and they even sympathise with him. The hero, who, through his performance prevents the heroine from deviating from normalcy or rather restores her to 'normalcy,' wins the hearts of the viewer. "Performative masculinity is the key instrument that legitimizes the agency and morals of the hegemonic man, and the Malayali woman is the muted other against whom the Malayali man defines and differentiates himself" (Sebastian 117). Consequently, fan worship, a phenomenon

associated with and enjoyed by the superstars at the beginning of the decade soon spread to the popular actors of these comedy films as well.

The films produced during the 2000s employed a diverse set of comedic tools to entertain their audiences. As previously mentioned, the utilisation of the comic hero stands out as one such element, contributing to the continuation of gender-based 'othering'. Nevertheless, this was not the solitary method through which humour was harnessed in these films. In addition, they demonstrated a nuanced ability to utilise humour as a means of conveying various forms of stereotyping, which are further analysed in the chapter.

5.2.5. Body and beauty

Similar to the concept of masculinity, the comedy films of the period provide homogenous standards to the audience when it comes to notions of beauty and physical traits. Characters who are not "able-bodied" and those who do not fall under the accepted standards of beauty and the social code of morality are objects of laughter. The audience experiences a heightened perception of their own superiority when exposed to such characters, leading them to indulge in the 'innocent' laughter that they enjoy at the character's expense on screen. Some examples of such representations have already been taken up in the chapter earlier in connection with the films *Kunjikoonan* and *Chandupottu.*

Among the various body types that elicit laughter from the audience, the 'fat' body stands out as the archetype of 'the funny dim-witted' character that films have consistently employed for generating humour. Fatness has often been a target for

humour due to negative stereotypes like laziness, overeating, and being unintelligent, which comedies commonly use as sources of humour. This connection between humour and fatness comes from the idea that the body's lack of control and discipline can be funny to audiences. A scene in Dileep's *Mister Butler* (2000) deals with one of the inmates of the apartment, who is excessively overweight, and who slips and falls from the couch while trying to clean the fan. The subsequent scenes show the neighbours' struggle to lift her heavy body using iron rods and their attempts to get her body down the apartment building. The scene is solely scripted for the purpose of evoking laughter and has no connection to the narrative of the main plot. Films wield significant influence over people's attitudes, and the portrayal of overweight individuals for the sake of humour can unquestionably contribute to harmful stereotypes and perceptions within society.

Colour and tone of the skin form the basis of comedy in *Parakkum Thalika* (2001). In the first half of the film, the character played by Nithya Das is depicted as the dark and unattractive Basanti, leading to numerous instances of verbal humour. However, this dynamic shifts after the interval when she cleans herself in the water, revealing her true 'fair' beauty. It changes the attitude of everyone around her, especially the male protagonist Unni (Dileep), and she becomes more 'acceptable' and desirable. Even though the film is centred on slapstick, verbal humour is what adds icing to the comic scenes. An instance of verbal humour at the expense of colour in the film is when Saleem Kumar's character, who plays the role of cook Koshi, comes to meet the duo Unni and Sundaran (Harisree Ashokan), and Unni says:

"These blackies turn up when one is broke!" (01:13:33-35).

This generates laughter among the audience. Most of the time, the secondary characters themselves reiterate notions about their appearance for humour. In *Meesa Madhavan*, Advocate Mukunthan Unni's (Saleem Kumar) self-deprecating remark "*oru look illa enne ollu, bhayankara budhiya!*" [I may not be handsome, but I'm very intelligent!] (01:34:54-57) has not only generated waves of laughter in the theatres across Kerala at the expense of the looks of the person but has also found its way into everyday conversations and trolls.

Similar to *Parakkum Thalika* is Dileep's *CID Moosa* (2003) in which slapstick dominates when it comes to humour. The story revolves around Moolakuzhiyil Sahadevan, also known as Moosa (Dileep), who establishes a private detective agency and, like the character Shikari Shambu from the Indian comics, ends up solving a crime through a series of chance happenings. Many of the scenes, like many of the scenes in *Parakkum Thalika,* are reminiscent of the *Tom & Jerry* animated cartoon franchise. The makers of the film claim that these films are not meant to be logically analysed. They are intended for pure laughter and entertainment and target people of all ages, especially children. This, indeed, is one of the reasons why Dileep ended up a household name as the '*janapriya nadan*'. True, these films are not to be critiqued for their lack of logic. But the claim that these films are for pure entertainment and fun is what makes them problematic. The assumption that these are intended for 'fun', leads to the ideologies that these films express being readily accepted by the viewers and thus beyond critical analysis.

This bail that these films enjoy helps them normalise stereotypes and form perspectives. Ideological conditioning through humour becomes the key factor here again. Portraying minorities, characters with disabilities, overweight individuals, people of colour, and females through ridicule contributes to the normalisation of stereotypes associated with these groups. This portrayal intends to convey a message to viewers of all age groups that these representations should not be regarded seriously; instead, they are purely for amusement and entertainment. In this sense, these seemingly 'harmless' and innocent comedy films of Dileep wield more power when it comes to the 'othering' of the different sections of society, as the conditioning happens in a very subtle but sardonic way. The very casualness of such discourses propagates negative stereotypes, even among young children, given that these movies are primarily intended as family entertainers. These representations permeate viewer's thoughts and foster unconscious biases that have a harmful impact on how people interact with one another. It is crucial to acknowledge that individuals of colour, those from non-privileged castes and communities, women, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with body image concerns, and individuals with disabilities have not been accurately represented in Malayalam cinema in general. Instead, they have often been used as sources of humour. These misrepresentations take on an objectionable dimension in the comedy films of this era. Researchers acknowledge that sexist humour promotes stereotypical attitudes towards a particular group (Woodzicka and Ford 179). The trend, however, is seen to change in the new wave of Malayalam films that emerged after 2010.

5.2.6. The doubly marginalised sidekick

In majority of the films in the early years of the 2000s, with exceptions such as the ensembles *Korappan the Great* (2001)*, Jagapoga* (2001), *Bamboo Boys* (2002)*,* etc, the accomplice or the sidekick to the hero was an inevitable element in amplifying the humour in the narrative. Even when the hero himself is the one who is the source of humour in the film, the sidekick is often less privileged in all matters in comparison to the comic hero. He is inferior to the hero in aspects of his looks, physique, intelligence, educational qualifications, common sense and even in terms of social status or caste/ancestral heritage. This can be perceived as a slightly altered extension of the earlier discourse concerning comedic films from the 1990s.

Alison Wilde remarks that the term 'stereotype' indicates "a fixed, one dimensional, cliched characterisation, with recognisable traits. Significantly, such stereotypes are more likely to be found in supporting roles and are frequently used to further the more nuanced, fluid, and comparatively complex roles of the central protagonist" (19-20). Apart from this primary function of positioning the comic hero of the films in a better position, the stereotypical sidekick serves many other purposes. Featuring mostly a male character, more often than not, the sidekick becomes a subject for the hero to vent his frustrations.He is consistently subjected to mockery, ridicule, libel, and name-calling by the hero, which is a common narrative technique used to establish the hero's superior status in the minds of the viewers. Ironically, it is the hero who is presented as the one who is prey to the injustices of society.

The physical attributes of the sidekicks of the 2000s, as opposed to those in comedy films from the 1990s, become the raw material for comedy. The mainstream movies have already done the damage of attributing certain physical characteristics to members of specific castes, religions and classes. The comedy films of this period only exploit these established stereotypes and thus, the body and other physical characteristics are directly and subconsciously connected to the less privileged caste/class from which these characters are assumed to belong. As a result, even in the absence of explicit markers or references to the caste to which these characters belong, they are immediately positioned by the narrative as well as the audience into a less privileged caste or category based on the way they are portrayed and the way they appear. This occurs, more often so, through the comparison that these films demand from the audience when the so-called sidekicks are pitted against the hero of the comedy film. It is also to be noted that the corporeal humour that operates when played by actors like Jagadeesh, Jagathy, or Mukesh is different from the kind of humour associated with the bodily attributes of characters played by the actors Sreenivasan, Indrans, Harisree Ashokan or Saleem Kumar. In the case of the latter, the characters are often seen as being ridiculed for either their lack of intelligence, darker skin tone, or socio-economic class, or at times all combined together. Studying the nature of tendentious humour, Zillman and Bryant have observed that "the magnitude of enjoyment deriving from witnessing the debasement of a particular entity is a simple function of negative sentiment toward that entity…great joy can be liberated only if this negative disposition is very strong or extreme" (147).

This constant reminder of the marginal status of the sidekick by the hero, or other characters is what keeps the humour in motion and one that eventually stereotypes such representations. The laughter is a collective laughter and one devoid of any feeling of guilt. In participating in this collective laughter,

> they would be collectively forgetting the nature of the joke, not as a matter of conscious intent but as a reaction that resembles a habit. These routines of noticing and not noticing are patterns of ideology. By such differentials of attention, ideology can collectively reproduce a form of repression, in which the positives are stressed and the negatives are eliminated from awareness. (Billig 27)

In other words, collective laughter, which is abstracted from the social contexts, conveniently and unconsciously represses the 'evil' associated with such laughter. As Horton et.al. notes, "whether it's appearing in disparaging roles or not appearing at all, minorities are the victim of an industry that relies on old ideas to appeal to the "majority" at the expense of the insignificant minority" ("Portrayal of Minorities"). The same can be said about the cliched representations of the marginalised and the interpellation of the same.

In contrast to the argument above, another observation related to the comedy films of this period is that the villains in many of these films belong to the privileged castes/classes in the society as opposed to the heroes. Analysing the comedy films of the period, Angita Ram observes:

…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 (sic) 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...Moreover, these movies that represented heroes from the minority communities when appeared in disabled bodies reconfigured the existing types of masculine identities. (31)

It can be agreed upon that these films did away with caste markers to a great extent. However, that does not remove the tacit existence of caste dominance of the hero in comparison to the sidekick. Being covert makes it even more prone to normalisation of stereotypes. Based on physical appearances and constant reference to the social class of the sidekick, the caste sensibility unconsciously plays out in these films. The viewer reads a film based on the past experiences and stereotypes that were generated on caste lines, for "the jokes are abstracted from the social context in which they might be told" (Billig 66) and that stereotypes have to be read within their social and political contexts (Mallett 13).

Consequently, these characters, even in the absence of overt references to their caste through surnames, become automatically associated with specific caste categories. This process, similar to cases with unmistakable caste markers, is equally objectionable because the seemingly 'innocent' representations under the guise of humour contribute to the shaping and solidifying of stereotypes. This, in turn, results in the marginalisation of various segments of society through the process of 'othering'.

In *Kunjikoonan*, when the telephone rings, Chandran (Saleem Kumar) asks Kunjan if the call is for him and Kunjan replies:

'Alla, ith tharavaattil perannavarkullatha' [no, this is for people who are high-born] (00:46:53-56).

This remark is solely intended to generate laughter but the laughter rests upon the very positioning of Chandran and Kunjan in a lower social order and caste hierarchy as both have no affiliation to the '*tharavad'*, the Nair ancestral homes in Kerala. Similarly, Sugunan (Harisree Ashokan) in *Meesa Madhavan* is socially subservient to the hero Madhavan Nair in every sense. In *Parakkum Thalika,* the viewer unconsciously places Sundaran (Harisree Ashokan) below Unnikrishnan (who is the son of Thamarakshan Pilla, another privileged caste marker) in terms of his social class/caste, intellectual prowess, and physical appearance, even when Sundaran claims to be a distant relative of Unnikrishnan's father.

The comic hero also possesses additional traits of masculinity which the sidekick lacks. He demonstrates the ability to confront the villains solo, whereas the sidekick frequently lacks this attribute and rarely displays such physical prowess. The hero possesses the necessary qualities that make him appealing to the female character(s), and as the narrative progresses into its second part, he undergoes a transformation from being a primarily comedic hero to a more masculine one. In contrast, the sidekick retains his comedic role throughout the entirety of the narrative. Thus even when the hero exhibits traits of hegemonic masculinity, his aide is eternally bound by subordinate masculinity and continues to be a non-hegemonic member.

The sense of the hero being a high class/caste member is generally implied in the narratives. It is such leveraging, despite being just an ordinary comic/humorous character lacking in any high seriousness, that validates his status as the hero and differentiates his comic character from the comic character of the marginalised accomplice. He always has the privilege and potential to rise back to the accepted social status but this never is possible in the case of the comic aide. Sidekicks are often willing to engage in humour that might be considered culturally or morally unacceptable, a luxury that the comic hero may not enjoy. This willingness stems from the influence of societal stigmas that have shaped the audience's perceptions. In many instances, sidekicks are subjected to physical violence, a form of humour that is tolerated by the audience because it falls within the realm of comedy. Sundaran in *Parakkum Thalika,* Chandran in *Pachakuthira,* Pyari in *Kalyana Raman*, Ramanujan in *Kuberan* are all sidekicks who get slapped by the hero and other characters because these acts are deemed 'funny'.

The deliberate attempt to categorise these sidekicks based on their physical markers aligning them with a low class/caste identity, cannot be ignored. This becomes problematic when at least certain sections of the audience normalise these tendencies without realising that these characters embody a specific minority in terms of their caste, class, gender, body type, sexuality, disability etc. As Patrizia Ciuta comments regarding Hollywood sidekicks, "this character trope goes against prevalent discourses of desirable behavior, careers, exterior presentation, and social integration. They are weird, different, not part of our club of "normal" people and therefore hilarious, not to be taken seriously, and 'other'" ("Hollywood's Comedy").

The danger also lies in the fact that the stakeholders on whom the so called comic characters are modelled and exaggerated, are unconsciously coerced into believing in their own disadvantaged status quo. Again, unlike mainstream movies with 'serious' misrepresentations of such issues, the political incorrectness in these movies goes unnoticed or is dismissed as mere levity.

In addition to this, when it comes to laughter, it is indeed the verbal comedy that dominates in these films, especially those of Saleem Kumar, Innocent, Harisree Askokan, Cochin Haneefa, and other actors who play the role of the sidekicks. Even the verbal humour resulting in laughter is indicative of their position in the social order. They are indicative of the lack of education and 'decency' in the characters. Their limited educational background and lack of finesse are what generate most of the verbal humour. Pyari (Saleem Kumar) in *Kalyanaraman* says,

"Is it *'kindi'* [a traditional water vessel] that you mentioned? What I heard was *'kundi'* [buttocks]" (00:21:45-49).

Unlike Pyari, the hero Thekkedath Ramankutty (Dileep) cannot devalue himself as he is a '*tharavadi*' even while being a comic hero without caste markers. Thambi (Lalu Alex) tells his daughter about Ramankutty:

"Do not see them as mere cooks. Thekkedath people are from a prestigious *tharavad*" (00:12:19-22). The dialogues that are deemed 'indecent' for the elites and the so-called well-bred or the *'tharavadi'* are often put into the mouths of the sidekick, whose socio-cultural status validates such 'indecencies' and make the viewer laugh without being offended.

5.3.   Space of humour

5.3.1. Malayali *vis-a-vis* the Tamilian

Distinguishing between urban and rural diegetic spaces in Malayalam comedy films of the 2000s can be challenging. This difficulty arises because, even in cases where certain films (such as *Kochi Rajavu* and *Thenkasipattanam* [2000]) allude to specific locations, the central focus of these films remains on the hero and the events revolving around him, rather than emphasising the significance of the physical space itself.

However, upon a closer analysis of the diegetic spaces, it becomes evident that a recurring spatial trope in these films is the placement of the hero in a setting that is distinct from or in opposition to the traditional 'Malayali' or Kerala environment. Thus we have Shathru (Dileep) moving in to live and work in the cultural atmosphere of Thenkasi in *Thenkasipattanam* (2000) in order to win the girl that he is in love with. *Malayali Mamanu Vanakkam* (2002) tells the story of Anandakuttan (Jayaram) who, in search of his sister and her husband Muniyandi, undertakes a trip to Tamil Nadu. Space and border become the main plot and source of humour in the film *Kerala House Udan Vilpanakku* (2004)*,* which deals with Dineshan Kondody (Jayasurya) and his struggles to sell off a property that is situated in the Kerala-TamilNadu border of Walayar. Bhuvanendran (Dileep) in *Pandipada* (2005) moves in to live with Pandi Durai, observing the Tamilian cultural practices. Unni (Dileep) in *Parakkum Thalika* (2001) has to face Santhanam, the Puducherry minister in order to win his love Gayathri. In *Kochi Rajavu* (2005), Surya (Dileep) moves to Chennai to continue his studies where his identity is concealed. Thomman

(Rajan P Dev) and his sons, Shivan (Mammootty) and Sathyan (Lal) end up in

Udumalpet where their encounter with the Thevar is fodder for humour in the action

comedy film *Thommanum Makkalum* (2005). Similarly, the village in the diegetic of

the action comedy *Rajamanikyam* (2005) is located in the southern part of the State,

bordering Tamil Nadu. In *Pandipada,* The film's setting may not provide an exact

geographical location, but it suggests a narrative unfolding in a southern district of

Tamil Nadu, a place dominated by relatives, powerful landowners and their

henchmen. Bhuvana Chandran's (Dileep) purchase of 30 acres of property in the

area places him squarely in the midst of a fierce conflict between two influential

feudal lords in Tamil Nadu. One is Karuppu Swami (Rajan P. Dev), originally from

Kerala but now residing in Tamil Nadu, and the other is Pandi Durai (Prakash Raj),

his brother-in-law and a native Tamilian. This clash sets the stage for the film's

dramatic events.

The film derives its humour from the concept of the 'other', drawing from

situations that emphasise the cultural, sartorial, linguistic, and topographical

differences associated with Tamil culture. Hilarious moments, such as the hero's

helplessness during the rituals, stem from the underlying theme of the perceived

superiority of the Malayali identity contrasted with the stereotype of the Tamil

identity as being characterised as barbaric, loud, and entrenched in feudal values.

The title of the film, *Pandipada,* itself serves to demarcate this identity. Shareef

considers the title to be suggestive of Malayali's (hegemonic) commonsense of

understanding the Tamil populace as being an unruly mass: "*Pandi* is a commonly

used racial slur to refer to Tamilians…while *pada* refers to a battalion, invoking the

Malayali imagination of Tamilians as unruly rowdies and marauders. It should be noted that this reading of the Tamil subject is popular in Kerala where a large portion of the workforce for manual labour is constituted by migrant labourers from Tamil Nadu" (*Language Territory* 131).

The stereotype of the Tamil subject/identity already had been established in the minds of the Malayalis as a result of the xenophobia from the migrant workers of Tamil Nadu to Kerala. In fact, while reading the early films of Malayalam, Jenson Joseph observes that the cultural elite's disdain for Tamil cinema evolved into a strategic marketing approach for early Malayalam filmmakers when at the centre of production shifted from Madras to Kerala. They sought to capitalise on the prevailing cultural pride associated with the Malayalam language and the native region ("'Regional' Cinema" 40). In this sense, The Malayalam film industry primarily found its footing by 'othering' the Tamilian and their cinema, and in turn, presenting their culture as less sophisticated compared to that of the Malayali. Sreebitha remarks that by "othering Tamil and minority/marginalized communities, a homogenous elite Malayalee identity was also constructed in the beginning phase" ("Linguistic Identity" 56).

Locating the narratives of the comedy films within spaces bordering Tamil Nadu, thus, provides opportunities for these films to reinforce and utilise this stereotype of the Tamilian for the purpose of humour, as the non-Malayali region will serve as "the pre-modern space which the classless, casteless Malayali can identify, occupy, contest and even win" (Shareef 132). With the turn of the decade, this identity of the Tamilian, which was used as a means of 'othering', gets replaced

by that of the migrant workers from the Northern parts of India, labelled collectively as the 'Bengali'. In such situations, laughter functions socially as "the community of laughter itself is an ethnicizing phenomenon, as we develop a sense of we-ness in laughing with others" (Gillota 6).

5.3.2. Family spaces: the father-brother trope

A significant number of films from the 2000s centre around the theme of family dynamics, mainly focusing on relationships between brothers or the father-son duo. These portrayals often highlight male bonding, which plays a role in the broader theme of remasculinization. The brothers Kannan (Suresh Gopi) and Dasan (Lal) in *Thenkasipattanam* (2000) are an example. So is the bond between Ramankutty (Dileep) and Achuthan Kutty (Lal) in *Kalyana Raman* (2002). *Pulival Kalyanam* (2003) is no exception with Karunan (Lal) and his adopted brother Harikrishnan (Jayasurya) sharing the same bond.

The Mammootty-starring film *Thommanum Makkalum* (2005) features the characters Shivan (Mammootty) and Sathyan (Lal) who are brothers and who share an unconventional bond with their father Thomman (Rajan P Dev). Rajamanikyam (Mammootty) and his adopted brother Raju (Rahman) in *Rajamanikyam* (2005), Ananthakuttan and Akash Menon (Both played by Dileep) in *Pachakuthira* (2006), Raja (Mammootty) and Surya (Prithviraj) in *Pokkiri Raja* (2010), as well as Raja Raja Kammath (Mammootty) and Deva Raja Kammath (Dileep) in *Proprietors: Kammath and Kammath* (2013) are examples of films that utilise this formula of 'brotherhood' in the comedy genre. Solomon and Jose in *Marykkundoru Kunjaadu* also highlight the argument that the trope of brothers and their bond is a prominent

one in the comedies of the 2000s. Two other films that exemplify this claim are the father-son combinations in the films *Ishttam* (2001) and *Pappi Appacha* (2010).

5.4. New genre: horror comedy

Apart from the popular action comedy genre of the era, experiments with horror are also observable during the period. Humour was one of the many reasons that made *Manichitrathazhu* (1993) a box office hit. It was also a major ingredient in the first part of the film *Aayushkalam* (1992) as well as *Aakasha Ganga* (1999). A reason for this is because, compared to Hollywood genres, Malayalam film genres are not well defined as the audience demand a whole package when it comes to being entertained by cinema. Aiyappan and Stephen comments that the difference between horror and horror comedy,

> varies according to the intensity and not in terms of the absence of comedy. The nomenclatures work based on the predominant mood, emotion, and intent to which the individual film caters and is accordingly typified as horror or horror-comedy. Therefore, inevitably, room exists for comedy, music, and dance in a horror film. ("Yakshi at the Crossroads" 2)

Thus, during the 90s, the task of making the audience laugh in an otherwise tense atmosphere of the narrative was a responsibility given to the comedy actors. In the 2000s this started to take a turn. While *Vellinakshatram* (2004), directed by Vinayan, includes a significant amount of humour purely for comedic purposes within its narrative, *Pakalpooram* (2002), featuring Mukesh in the lead role and directed by Anil Babu, offers a narrative in which humour and horror are intricately

intertwined. In these films, the protagonists themselves are crafted as comedic characters. These same storytelling elements and techniques were utilised in the creation of *Ee Pattanathil Bhootham* (2009) and *Manthrikan* (2012), where Mammootty and Jayaram play the lead roles respectively.

The horror comedy genre reaches its full potential with the sequels of the 1990 superhit comedy ensemble *In Harihar Nagar.* The first sequel, *2 Harihar Nagar* directed by Lal released in 2009, deals with the reunion of the friends in Harihar Nagar to attend the wedding of Thomas Kutty (Ashokan). Even though this film cannot be categorically labelled as a horror comedy, the second sequel, titled *In Ghost House Inn* (2010), fully embraces the horror-comedy genre, as implied by its title. This transition to a horror-comedy was a fresh and innovative experience for the audience, who had grown accustomed to the industry's formulaic horror films featuring stock characters like the '*yakshi*', typically depicted as a vengeful female ghost clad in a white saree and known for her macabre and menacing laughter, often seeking retribution for wrongs done to her by men.

The horror-comedy genre was further experimented in the narrative space of the campus comedy *Adi Kapyare Kootamani* (2015) directed by John Varghese with the hostel experiencing the presence of the supernatural and leading to suspense and laughter. The acceptance of the new horror genre led to the successful ensemble horror comedy *Pretham* in 2016 and its sequel *Pretham 2* in 2018, both directed by Ranjith Shankar.

The decision to evoke fear or laughter hinges on the horror genre narrative's inherent characteristics. The humour in the horror comedy genre can be interpreted

through the incongruity theory of humour, wherein laughter often arises from the juxtaposition of elements that contrast with the anticipated fear in a horror narrative. Whether to be scared or to laugh depends on the nature of the narrative. According to Caroll, "fear is the metier of the horror fiction. In order to transform horror into laughter, the fearsomeness of the monster–its threat to human life–must be sublated or hidden from our attention. Then we will laugh where we would otherwise scream" ("Horror and Humor" 158).

5.5.   2000s comedy sequels: a recipe for failure

In the 2000s, it was not just the film *In Harihar Nagar* that saw the release of its sequels. However, the sequels of some other beloved comedy films from the 90s, which were also released in the 2000s, could not replicate the success that *Harihar Nagar* achieved at the box office.The fact that *Harihar Nagar* retained its main cast (Mukesh, Siddique, Jagadish, and Ashokan) with the chemistry between the characters intact, but in tune with the changing times, attracted audiences of all ages. The lack of success for other film sequels can be attributed to their reliance on the comedic tropes and styles prevalent in the 90s, which failed to align with the evolving comedic sensibilities of the contemporary audience. Moreover, the predictability of both plots and character development in these sequels failed to captivate the audience, as it compromised the element of suspense and novelty.

The first sequel to come in the decade was that of the superhit comedy film *Kilukkam* (1991) in the year 2006 with the title *Kilikkam Kilukilukkam* directed by Sandhya Mohan, starring Kunchako Boban, Kavya Madhavan and Jayasurya in the lead and Mohanlal doing a cameo. The film was poorly received by the audience and

failed to make them laugh. It was in the later half of the 2000s that the sequels of other hit films of the 90s got released in Kerala. *Senior Mandrake* (2010), the sequel to *Junior Mandrake* (1997) also failed due to its poor technical quality as well as its flat humour and the repetitive idea of the previous film. *Again Kasargod Khader Bhai* (2010) is another sequel (the previous ones being *Mimics Parade* in 1991 and *Kasarkod Khader Bhai* in 1992) with too many sexual innuendos and base jokes along with slapstick similar to the ones on the mimicry stage. The film too did not resonate well with the audience, mostly due to lack of originality. The unfavourable reception of these sequels signifies a transformation in the humour sensibilities of Malayali filmgoers. The traditional comedic techniques were no longer effective in eliciting laughter. The accessibility to many comedy reality shows on TV can arguably be taken as one another important reason for this. In short, Mimicry had left the scene. There was nothing novel in the films to entertain them. The success of the *Harihar Nagar* franchise can be attributed to the novelty employed in the genre used to play out the comedy.

It is undeniably evident that while mainstream Malayalam cinema of the 2000s still embraced the traditional macho figure of the hero, movies featuring Dileep in the lead role overwhelmingly took the lead when it came to humour-centric films during that decade. These films, however, were influential in establishing the hegemonic stereotyping of the 'other' in society with a double force. The othering of marginalised groups, like people with disabilities or different body types, women, and those from less privileged castes and classes through humour in films, is a complex and deeply entrenched issue in cinematic representation. This

phenomenon reflects broader societal attitudes and biases that have been perpetuated and normalised through media narratives. The shifting shades of masculinities and the humour engendered, form the basis of stereotyping in many of the films discussed. The films also exhibit a clear contrast when compared with their predecessors. By this juncture, the audience had gained access to a plethora of TV content, thus affording them increased autonomy in selecting their viewing preferences. Furthermore, around the year 2010, a groundbreaking wave of experimental filmmaking began to take shape, heralding the advent of New Generation Cinema in Malayalam—a transformative movement that would forever reshape the sensibilities of a substantial portion of the filmgoing public.

Chapter 6

Generic and Trans-generic Tendencies: Exploring Departures and Disruptions in New Generation Film Humour

The objective of this chapter is to understand the diverse shifts in humour within post-2010 Malayalam cinema, often referred to as the New Generation Cinema. The exploration of comedic elements within the context of Malayalam New Generation cinema diverges into a distinct trajectory and dimension. It is posited that films of the New Generation lack clear categorization as comedy genres; instead, they exist in a more generic flux compared to earlier films. The heroes of the films that come under this category are shorn of any superhuman quality; often vulnerable but complex, which makes them more identifiable with the audience. The films, in other words, are mostly a mix of genres. Comedy is not codified, nor attributed to a specific comic character solely meant for the purpose, rather, every character exhibits potential for humour along with varied other character traits. The emphasis lies on both the innovative aspects of genres and the recurring tropes and structures of humour depicted in these films. Furthermore, the chapter examines whether humour employed in New Gen Cinema continues to fulfil a social function by perpetuating normalised viewpoints regarding gender and other stereotypes.

The cinematic landscape of the post-2010 era witnessed a fascinating departure from conventional norms, leading to a remarkable surge in generic experimentation. The distinct category of comedy films as a standalone entity becomes increasingly elusive, as the era embraces a blend of different genres. While

the classification of New Generation cinema, as analysed in the earlier chapter, may not be entirely rigid, a discernible trend emerges, wherein films maintain a comedic tone and tenor throughout their narratives. To comprehend this paradigm shift, an analysis of humour's essence and patterns during the era becomes necessary, offering a plausible avenue for understanding the disruption occurring within this cinematic era. Examining and categorising the subgenres present during this period will also prove instrumental in understanding the intricacies and widespread appeal of these films.

6.1. Generic tendencies

A genre is defined by both the audience and the industry, and when they fail to recognize it, the very existence of that genre is challenged. "Film genres are by definition not just scientifically derived or theoretically constructed categories, but are always industrially certified and publicly shared" (Altman 16). Notably, when it comes to experimentation with genres, the New Gen era surpasses all previous kinds of comedy films in terms of their range and reach, revealing a 'trans-generic' tendency in Malayalam Cinema. For example, Romantic comedies (popularly known as 'Rom coms') and screwballs were rare in the era, giving way to subgenres that were not common in the industry. Of these, some of the widely manifest subgenres during the period include spoofs and parodies, sex comedies, road comedies, and black comedy, apart from ensembles and fantasy comedies. Coming of Age comedies, too, stand out as a popular genre with films such as *Om Shanti Oshana* in 2014 and *Premam* in 2015

Despite allowing categorical distinctions based on comedy subgenres, certain films defy easy classification. Some movies align with the New Gen experimental group, as in the case of *Aadu* (2015), while others originate from filmmakers of the preceding era, exemplified by *Amar Akbar Antony* (2015). However, there is a discernible shift in the mode and nature of humour within the post-2010 films in both categories. This change is evident in various films, except for those that adhere to the filmmaking traditions of the preceding decades, particularly movies featuring actors such as Dileep, Mukesh, and Jayaram. The following sections attempt to explore the generic landscape of humour in Malayalam New Generation cinema where conventional comedy films make way for a fusion of different genres, paving the way for the emergence of subgenres previously unexplored in the industry, resulting in a disruption in the patterns of humour during the period.

6.1.1. Spoofs and parodies

Parody emerged as a highly favoured mode of humour among Malayalam audiences during the 1990s in the context of stage mimicry and the influence of Kalabhavan. "Kalabhavan, formed in 1969…trained young people in music, folk and comic performances. By the 1990s, it had grown to be a popular presence, disseminating audio cassettes of mimicry, performed by newly trained artists" (Mathew 8) and "with the constant supply of actors and filmmakers from the mimicry stages, the production of comedy films skyrocketed through the 1990s" (Sebastian 112). Similarly, Vipin Kumar observes that for this reason, in the 90s, the comic films "dominated the scene while production seemed to have some crisis" (17).

Parody and mimicry continued to maintain their popularity in the post-millennial era through their presence on reality television. "The 'comedy skit' in Kalabhavan's format has since become a staple format of mimicry and comedy programs and is routinely revived in the comedy shows that air during prime time in Malayalam television channels" (Sebastian 127). These stage performances, known as "comedy shows," showcased spoofs of popular films infused with innuendos and comic mannerisms, delighting audiences with their humour. At some point or the other, all mimicry troupes employed this style of humour based on parody. To cite an example, the artists parodied the popular 1989 Hariharan film *Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha* to such an extent on the mimicry stage that "Chandu's (Mammootty) dialogues are today more articulated in mimicry shows than in the repeat screenings of *Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha* on television. Similarly, the contemporary youth has its knowledge of Jayan's 'might' through mimicry performances" (V. Kumar 25). Despite the society's familiarity with parody and spoof in other forms, it is observable that they did not make their way into Malayalam cinema as a distinct genre until the latter part of the 2000s. Surprisingly, the reception of this genre in films did not yield positive results.

The film in Malayalam to initially experiment with the spoof comedy genre is *Chirakodinja Kinavukal*, released in 2015 and directed by debutant Santosh Viswanath. The film brings to life a character from the 1996 Malayalam romantic comedy-drama film *Azhakiya Ravanan* directed by Kamal and written by Sreenivasan. In Kamal's film, the character Ambujakshan (Sreenivasan) is a tailor and an aspiring scriptwriter. *Azhakiya Ravanan* has a popular comic scene where

Ambujakshan is shown narrating the story of a poor tailor who falls in love with the daughter of a rich woodcutter–the story that Ambhujakshan wishes to make into a film. *Chirakodinja Kinavukal* uses the character of Ambujakshan and comes up with a spin-off story on his attempts at making his wish come true. Employing a non-conventional method of narration, the film adopts a "story within a story" template to satirise the clichés of conventional cinema.

Chirakodinja Kinavukal failed to achieve box office success. Despite the film's poor reception by the audience, as reflected in its low 2 out of 5 rating on *Filmibeat* (Akhila Menon), and *Onlookers Media* calling it "only an average affair," ("Chirakodinja Kinavukal") it received applause from critics for its experimental approach and departure from the conventional storytelling methods often found in Malayalam cinema. The film was also praised for its humorous mockery of pre-existing clichés within the Malayalam film industry. For example, the *Times of India* reviewed *Chirakodinja Kinavukal* stating that "the film is enjoyed best only if audiences are familiar with the many movie sequences and clichés being spoofed…you have to take your brains to the theatre, both to appreciate the effort and to get fully entertained" (Soman).

The arrival of the parody/spoof genre in South Indian cinema marked a significant milestone with the release of the Tamil films *Goa* (2010) directed by Venkat Prabhu and *Tamizh Padam* (2010) directed by C. S. Amudhan, the latter proving to be a resounding success in Tamil Nadu. "With a much smaller budget and much higher returns, *Thamizh Padam* was declared the first "super-hit" of 2010" (Nakassis 4). Following suit, in 2014, *Hrudaya Kaleyam* directed by Sai Rajesh

Neelam achieved success in Telugu film industry, becoming one of the low-budget movies of the year that "opened to a thundering response" ("Hrudaya Kaleyam") from the audience. Similar to *Tamizh Padam* in intent, *Hrudaya Kaleyam* laughed at the cliché of larger-than-life heroes of the Telugu films. As the director remarks: "I decided to make a film where the hero is doing it seriously, but people get entertainment out of it" ("Interview with Sai"). These films demonstrated the audience's growing acceptance and appreciation for this innovative form of humour in the regional cinema landscape.

However, in Kerala, *Chirakodinja Kinavukal*, despite sharing the same intention of exposing film clichés prevalent in conventional cinema, failed to elicit the same impact or laughter as did the spoofs in Tamil and Telugu cinema during the period. A plausible rationale could be the audience's saturation with the lampooning content from reality TV and comedy programs during the period, exemplified by shows like *Lunar Comedy Express* (2012-2014) on the Asianet TV channel. This inundation may have led to the audience's reluctance to engage with a genre that bordered on "skits". Moreover, they were accustomed to finding humour in films that satirised specific superstars or directors, such as *Udayananu Tharam* (2005) and *Padmasree Bharat Dr. Saroj Kumar* (2012), and films that imitated superstars, parodying their mannerisms and characters as in *Aparanmar Nagarathil* (2001) and *JagaPoga* (2002). The audience, however, was not accustomed to films that humorously parodied entire genres or clichés of Malayalam cinema as a whole. According to Hutcheon, "Parody, then in its ironic 'trans-contextualization' and inversion is repetition with a difference" (*Theory of Parody* 32). To understand this

difference, spoof and parody demand the engagement of the viewer. If the audience

fails to comprehend the genre or the situations parodied in a spoof, the humour falls

flat and the text fails to communicate the objective to its fullest. Consequently, the

audience will be unable to enjoy the humour as it "frequently is peppered with

eclectic references to other structures or texts" (Gehring 13).

It is the ignorance of the source material of the parody and the inability of the

conventional audience to break away from their long-conditioned viewing habit that

left the general audience dissatisfied with another spoof comedy that was released in

the same year in Malayalam. Lijo Jose Pellissery's *Double Barrel* (2015) was

conceived as a spoof of the gangster movie genre. The film attempted to bring fresh

humour before the Malayalam audience along with its poster tagline '*Adi Illa Vedi

Mathram*' [No fights, only fireworks]. The film, with stunning visuals and quirky

characters who were perpetually high, was shot in a comic book format with a non-

linear narrative style. As its narrative unfolds, *Double Barrel* revolves around the

quest of the film's characters for two precious stones named 'Laila' and 'Majnu'.

Employing hyperlink narration and innovative camera angles, the film takes on a

non-conventional plot structure.

Drawing inspiration from British comedy films like *Lock, Stock and Two

Smoking Barrels* (1998) and *Snatch* (2000), *Double Barrel* relies on a comic book-

style characterization to deliver its comedic elements. The story, replete with black

humour, takes place in a parallel world where Russians and African American

gangsters speak Malayalam. The Malayalam they speak, however, parodies the

dubbed Hollywood film dialogues that were translated into Malayalam. Alongside

this approach, the film employs pastiche to portray Chemban Vinod and other characters as 'mass hero' types in a cinematic manner. This creative blend of elements serves as one of the many experiments the film undertakes to provoke laughter among the audience. Furthermore, the names of the characters in the film, such as Diesel (Chemban Vinod), Pancho (Prithviraj), Shaolin Sweety (Isha Sharvani), Gabbar (Steev Thekkanath), Don (Thomas Berly), Tarkov (Sherrin Varghese), Lady Tarkov (Parvathy Menon), Blacky (John), and Uncle Django (Sunny), cleverly parody the stereotypical gangster names often seen in Hollywood and Bollywood films. This adds another layer of humour and wit to the film, showcasing its keen sense of satire and playful subversion of established gangster film conventions. In *Double Barrel*, along with the trope of the popular mass hero, the villain too becomes the object of parody.

Thus, rather than imitating and parodying a genre from Malayalam, *Double Barrel* parodies tropes mostly found in Hollywood cinema. This approach could be one of the reasons why the average film-going public in Kerala struggled to connect with the jokes and humour presented in the film during the time of its release, ultimately resulting in its box office failure. The audience, conditioned to expect a mass action gangster film with actor Prithviraj in the lead, entered the theatres with certain expectations. However, the film shattered these expectations, leading to a poor reception. The *Times of India* gave it a rating of 2.5 out of 5, asserting that "it fails to entertain and leaves the average viewer dumbstruck" (A. Prakash). The novelty and unfamiliarity of the cinematic genre presented in *Double Barrel* were not easily digestible for the Malayali audience at the time. Prithviraj, who plays

Pancho in the film, said later in an interview that it was a "new genre" and a "failed experiment" ("Prithviraj Speaks").

Characters in a parody film have the freedom to say or do anything that would seem nonsensical. Once unleashed, the characters exhibit actions that might not otherwise make sense in a conventional film setting. The end is laughter. At the same time, the act of spoofing is "more than a comic replication of close-up scenes from a given genre" (Gehring 4). The objective of spoofs is that:

> Spoofs are not simply parodies of particular texts, pastiches of particular genres, or satires of particular persons; rather, through a combination of each of these textual strategies and more, they travesty and caricature, and thus constitute an explicit politics of reforming, a particular "ontology" of the cinematic image. (Nakassis 3)

Building upon Nakassis' observation regarding Tamil cinema, it would indeed be accurate to state that until recently spoofs as a genre were non-existent in Malayalam Cinema. There were either 'comedy tracks' or popular romantic/action comedy films that followed a conventional plot, characters, and archetypes. *Double Barrel*, in this regard, becomes experimental. The chronotope in the narrative of *Double Barrel* is not one of familiarity. The anachronisms, attires and cinematic movements, all happen in a space detached from the one the audience has experienced in films before. The only relatable subplot is that of team Billy (Vijay Babu), which also appears nonsensical as the narrative moves forward. According to the director Lijo Jose Pellisserry, the comedy in the film failed to resonate with the audience as it deviated significantly from what they were accustomed to seeing as humour. In an

interview, he states that it is precisely this "age-old viewing tradition" that they were attempting to change by such experimental cinema in Malayalam ("Meet the Editors").

Double Barrel stands in stark contrast when compared to the realistic tendencies seen in the New Gen Malayalam cinema. This demonstrates that post-2010, the Malayalam film industry was undergoing experimentation at various levels, with realism being just one aspect of this evolution. Once more, this complicates the task of defining the nature of humour and comedy during this period when compared with the humour prevalent in earlier eras. Humour takes on a new dimension, encompassing not only the ability to evoke laughter and mirth but also the capacity to leave us unsettled and uneasy. It mirrors the approach found in postmodern literature, where dark humour and absurdities were used to shock the audience into laughter while challenging conventional norms and expectations. Years later, *Double Barrel* is being revisited by many and is lauded now for its experimentation and magnificence.

6.1.2. The stoner and sex comedies

Until recently, stoner comedies were not a common genre in Malayalam cinema, despite the presence of drug and weed-related themes in many films from the 80s and 90s such as *Season* (1989), *Johnnie Walker* (1992) and *Ekalavyan* (1993). These films are not categorised as stoner comedies; instead, most of them fall under the crime thriller genre, focusing on the perils of the drug trade and drug abuse. Neither is humour a major element of these films. According to Edrian Slattery, "the argument for the Stoner film in popular discussion differs slightly in

each instance, depending on the importance of marijuana's influence throughout the text – ranging from being foreground throughout an entire film to featuring in a scene or two" (Slattery). But Meltzer argues that "the proper stoner movie is by, for, and about pot smokers. These are not movies where a lone joint is passed around in a party scene. Instead, the stoner film shows serious commitment to smoking and acquiring marijuana as a lifestyle choice" ("Leisure and Innocence"). Thus, Stoner films constitute a distinct subgenre of comedy, centering on cannabis and drug use as its principal thematic focus, influencing the development of the plot within these cinematic works. "As their name indicates, stoner films feature drug use and/or drinking; they may also include 'trippy' imagery" (Klinger 16).

When it comes to Malayalam cinema, it is in 2013 that we have "the first film that was recognized as one belonging to the stoner genre" ("Malayalam Movies That Dealt"). This was the film *Kili Poyi* (2013) directed by Vinay Govind. The film, touted to be India's first stoner film, humorously tells the story of the ad professionals Chako (Asif Ali) and Hari (Aju Varghese), and their adventures upon coming across a bag full of drugs. Even when its director claims that "marijuana or its use has not been glorified in the movie," (Kurian) the Central Board of Film Certification has given it an 'A' certificate as the characters in the film are shown to be lavishly indulging in Marijuana and the film "has been receiving mixed reviews ever since its release" (Kurian). Nevertheless, the film has played a role in fostering audience receptivity to experimental works and genres previously unexplored in the language.

In the year 2013, Ashiq Abu's directorial venture, *Idukki Gold*, emerged as another noteworthy film that exhibited features of the stoner genre by adhering to its characteristic templates and incorporating a non-linear narrative structure along with a psychedelic song sequence. This film, the screenplay of which is an adaptation of the short story written by Santosh Echikkanam, tells the story of the reunion of five friends and their travel down memory lane. In the original story, unlike the film, Marijuana and drug use was not the primary focus. Echikkanam himself has criticised the film indicating that "the movie glorified drug use. My story doesn't do that" (Anand). The film revolves around themes centred on friendship, memory, and the inexorable march of time. This narrative is artfully conveyed through a sequence of flashbacks in the form of chapters, skillfully wielding the structure as a tool to elucidate how memories shape the characters' sense of friendship, particularly in response to the ever-changing tides of time. These films are not full-length comedy films but the humour usually surrounding the recreational use of cannabis/marijuana makes them stand apart from the films that the Malayali audience is/was accustomed to.

In his film *Double Barrel*, Lijo Jose Pallisserry also incorporates elements of the stoner culture into the narrative, resulting in an experimental approach to storytelling. However, unlike *Kili Poyi*, drugs are not the primary focus of the film. Nevertheless, it introduces a red crystal drug called 'Kulsumbi' that Majnu is always high on throughout the film, which makes him hallucinate. This creates a bizarre atmosphere in the narrative of the film. Laila on the other hand is seen mixing mango juice with alcohol apart from the joint that she smokes.

In 2020, debutant director Jenith Kachappilly's *Mariyam Vannu Vilakkoothi* notably ventures into the realm of the Stoner genre in Malayalam cinema. The film centres around a group of childhood friends, Balu, Oomen and Addu, who now work together in a corporate setting where they do not meet the office's performance standards. The storyline unfolds as another childhood friend, Rony, joins their company, and together, they spend a night at the rented home of their gullible colleague, Unnikrishnan Namboothiri, to celebrate Unnikrishnan's birthday. Rony introduces them to a unique strain of marijuana, and everyone decides to give it a try. The resulting humour that unfolds within the confines of this enclosed space upon consuming the drug, which ranges from a debate between the cricketers Dhoni and Sachin to characters from *Mahabharata,* becomes the focal point of the film. Among all the films previously classified under the stoner genre, this film stands out as a complete embodiment of the stoner theme in its narrative, plot, structure, and the type of humour it employs. For these reasons, the film was "lauded by many for staying true to its genre" ("Malayalam Movies That Dealt"). The film utilises comic book captions as a stylistic technique to enrich dialogues and portray the state of being high. This approach is a notable trend in films from the same period that exhibit the stoner genre characteristics, as seen in the films *Idukki Gold* and *Double Barrel*.

In parallel with the reception of spoofs, the stoner genre encountered apprehension among the Malayali audience, with a notable reluctance to openly embrace this cinematic category. Palicha reviewed the film *Idukki Gold* as "an average entertainer," ("Review: Idukki") and Sharika opined that the film "failed to

strike gold" ("Idukki Outing"). *The News Minute* reported that *Mariyam Vannu*

Vilakkoothi could have heralded a new kind of comedy in Malayalam cinema "if

only the comedy had worked and the writing didn't make the lines sound like forced

humour," ("Mariyam Vannu") and *Times of India* gave it only a 2.5 out of 5 rating

(Antony).

Surpassing the stoner genre in terms of public response during that period,

the sex comedy genre proved to be even more explosive. The label 'sex comedy' in

Hollywood retrospectively refers to the comedy films produced from the mid-1950s

to the mid-1960s (McDonald 39), although this term was not employed

contemporaneously to define these productions. Concerning Hollywood films,

"while by the mid-1960s changing sexual mores made the sex comedy seem old

fashioned and inappropriate to the new 'swinging' times, its visual and thematic

elements were not abandoned along with the narratives, but incorporated into the

mainstream romantic comedy" (McDonald 38). In general, sex comedy denotes a

subgenre of comedy that predominantly features sexual themes and innuendos, often

portrayed in a lighthearted and humorous manner. As Glitre remarks: "The sex

comedy plot repeatedly centres on the twin themes of virginity and seduction" (34).

Despite not being initially categorised as a distinct genre, these films have

subsequently achieved acknowledgement and prominence in the field of cinema.

Although challenging to delineate when it comes to the contemporary period, the

genre predominantly revolves around the portrayal of sexual themes in the central

plot and unabashedly employs language and dialogues that are often considered

obscene or offensive by mainstream society. These films were mainly produced to

appeal to the male audience and typically showcased a male lead character(s) engaged in the pursuit of an alluring female counterpart, which gave rise to many humorous misunderstandings and unexpected escapades. At times, the term is employed to denote comedic films that feature eccentric characters and exhibits a propensity toward slapstick humour.

There were Malayalam films in the 80s and 90s that had the traits of sex comedies. An example of this can be found in the 1984 film *Sandarbham* directed by Joshy, where the characters played by Mammootty and Sukumaran are depicted as having sexual encounters at a ladies' hostel which are presented humorously. However, the overarching plot or theme of the film does not meet the criteria to be deemed a sex comedy. It is, on the other hand, a family tragedy drama classified among the formulaic '*Mammoootty, petti, kutty*' [Mammootty, suitcase and child] phase of the actor Mammootty's film career. The use of comedy in portraying implicit sex in this film serves a particular purpose, namely to provide a contrast between the lewd behaviour of the two main characters in their past and their current status as family men. The film utilises elements of sex comedy as a tool to highlight the transformation of the characters and the disparity between their past and present lives. Therefore, the sex comedy elements are not intended to serve as the primary focus of the film, but rather as a means to contextualise the characters' past experiences and behaviours within the film's larger narrative.

Boeing Boeing (1985) and *Kuttettan* (1990) on the other hand have more in common with the sex comedy genre than any other Malayalam films of the period. The protagonists of these films, Syam (Mohanlal) and Vishnu (Mammootty)

respectively, are portrayed as flirtatious individuals who attempt to have multiple romantic relationships. The films predominantly focus on the humorous situations arising from their flirtatious exploits. Despite the portrayal of such characters and themes, these films are classified as romantic comedies due to their handling of the subject matter. Apart from mild eroticism in these films, there is no explicit discussion of topics that are considered socially unacceptable, such as prostitution and other forms of immorality. Therefore, the primary function of these films was to entertain and amuse audiences through comedy rather than to explore societal attitudes related to sex and relationships.

In the New Generation period of Malayalam cinema post-2010, a shift towards more 'adult' cinema can be observed, which is distinct from soft-porn films of the past. Among the films produced during this period, *Trivandrum Lodge* (2012) and *Vedivazhipadu* (2013) can be identified as examples of Malayalam cinema that meet the criteria required for the sex comedy genre. While the narrative structure of these films may bear some resemblance to the films mentioned earlier, their overall function is different. Unlike their predecessors, these New Gen films seek to explore the nuances of sexuality and relationships with a greater degree of realism, while still retaining their comedic elements. These films served not only to entertain but also to challenge societal norms and conventions. "While genre variation may simply involve challenging the audience's expectations to offer new pleasures, it may also be a response to shifting cultural ideology…Even the dominant is not immune to this process" (Glitre 13).

Trivandrum Lodge (2012), directed by V K Prakash, tells the life of the sexually repressed inhabitants of Trivandrum Lodge. The characters lavishly talk about sex, libido, rape, prostitution, divorce, one-night stands, and *Kamasutra*. Both the male and female genders are freely involved in these discussions. In one of the introductory scenes, Dhwani (Honey Rose) tells Zarina (Devi Ajith) that the "age of prayers is over" and that all she's looking forward to is to "fornicate with abandon" and have "meaty encounters" (00:11:39-12:03). Kora (P. Balachandran), the retired clerk boasts about having sex with 999 women and his desire to have sex with a policewoman in uniform for his 1000th. He discusses with Shiby Vellayani (Shaiju Kurup) the kind of women suitable for good sex based on the categorisation in *Kamasutra*. The film is not one replete with humour that makes the audience roar with laughter, but rather a film built on dark humour, with instances that evoke laughter of the uneasy kind. When Dhwani asks Abdu (Jayasurya) what he likes the most about her, the conventional audience is in for laughter out of shock when Abdu, without hesitation, replies– "*kundi*" [buttocks]. The incongruity humour that plays out in the film is borne out of the morality codes prevalent in society. The dialogues galvanise the viewer and they resort to an insecure laughter.

The 2013 film *Vedivazhipadu,* directed by Shambu Purushothaman, has a caption in its poster that reads "Moralists, please forgive". It directly deals with the pseudo-morality of the Malayali society. This sex comedy film tells the story of three friends who hire a sex worker on the day of the 'Pongala' festival when their wives are away. The true nature of these characters unfolds as the plot moves forward. The happenings at the friend's apartment where they bring the sex worker

to are paralleled with the happenings at the apartment of Joseph (Indrajith Sukumaran) where Pradeep's (Sreejith Ravi) wife Vidya (Mythili) has decided to spend her day, because of her lack of interest in the 'Pongala' festival. The friends do not succeed in sleeping with the sex worker. On the other hand, Vidya and Joseph end up having an intimate moment after talking about relationships and love. "Going by the tag, *Vedi Vazhipadu* is meant for adults. However, no one gets disrobed in this film. No titillating sounds are heard. Except for some mild foreplay involving a few controlled caresses, the adults in the film don't even make love to each other" ("Vedi Vazhipadu"). This, in fact, is the characteristic of the majority of sex comedy films. "Although such films are called sex comedies,…[their] targeted general audience ensures there is going to be very little actual sex in them" (McDonald 43).

Expanding on the characteristics of the sex comedy genre, McDonald observes that "so much of the energy generated in sex comedies derives from the suspicion and fear of marriage, and the scheming and plotting to get sex outside of its confines" (47) and that there is "a recurrent visual reference, the setting of the bachelor's fantasy apartment" (50). *Vedivazhipadu* fulfils these characteristics in its narrative. The film uses humour to talk about sexual repression, adultery and misogyny, and social double standards. The three friends are different by profession and in their attitude towards women. Rahul (Murali Gopi) is a video game tester and is married to Radhika (Anjana Haridas) who is a homemaker. Sanjay (Shaiju Kurup) is a cashier at a bank and his wife Reshmi (Anusree) is an ex-model and a successful TV reporter. Pradeep (Sreejith Ravi) is an investor while his wife Vidya (Mythili) teaches French at an academy. Of these, Pradeep is a conventional

misogynist who is critical of the attitudes of every woman, especially his wife. The couple Sanjay and Reshmi are presented with much humour as Sanjay represents the traditional henpecked husband who gives in to everything that his professionally successful wife tells him to do. He is constantly criticised by his wife Reshmi and mocked by his friends for being a coward.

The Pongala festival creates a festive moment for the friends, giving them temporary relief from their insecurities. After hiring the sex worker Sumitra (Anumol), the friends indulge in drinking, watching porn, and engaging in lascivious conversations. As time passes, Sanjay and Pradeep try to assert their masculinity with the prostitute. Sanjay, who is usually dominated by his wife, attempts to display his manliness by expressing his anger towards Sumithra over trivial matters and even tries to force her to drink whisky. When his attempts fail, he breaks down and admits to his inability to be a "real man," and subsequently shaves off his signature moustache, which was a symbol of his masculinity.

The film does not offer any groundbreaking criticisms or observations. As *Times of India* reports, "all of these seem half-hearted, mostly aimless even while conjuring up scattered images of human souls breaking down under material pursuit or emotional weariness" ("Vedi Vazhipadu Movie"). It is a fact that the film was not well received. Paresh Palicha opined that "*Vedivazhipadu* makes an effort to add sparkle to the so-called 'new gen' formula, but ends up being a damp squib" ("Vedivazhipadu"). Meanwhile, it is also a fact that it served as a hotbed for discussions on morality in the public sphere. In doing so, the film has incorporated humour, one which is unsettling. As Aradhya Kurup reviews: "What are possibly

grave issues are dealt with a touch of wit. Maybe that was the intent – to entertain and not dwell deeply on anything. But long after the laughs, some of the scenes start playing on your mind. But this time, without the laughs" ("Adult Comedy").

The titles of both the films mentioned earlier have sexual connotations, especially the film *Vedivazhipadu.* 'Vedivazhipadu' is a ritual that involves fireworks. The title plays on the word 'vedi' which is also a slang in Malayalam used to refer to a prostitute. 'Vazhipadu' denotes 'ritual offering' in Malayalam. The collocation of 'vedi' in the colloquial sense with the spiritual term 'vazhipadu' again evokes humour due to the incongruous nature of the juxtaposition. Similarly, a lodge, unlike a hotel, evokes negative shades due to the shady activities that are generally associated in the space of lodges around the country. Thus the title *Trivandrum Lodge* also conjures up connections to sexual activity.

The transition to adult-oriented films occurred in a context where the general public was previously inclined towards content that emphasised family-oriented themes. Before that point, the Malayalam film industry predominantly featured movies starring Dileep and actors who employed innuendos to ridicule female stereotypes, as analysed in the previous chapters. The emergence of content openly addressing sexuality, utilising offensive language, and exploring taboo subjects coincided with the concurrent rise in popularity of various socio-cultural interactions taking place in the state during that period. An instance of this phenomenon was the introduction of prime-time reality TV programs with subjects involving public displays of intimacy and candid discussions about taboo topics. The reality TV program, *Malayalee House*, aired by Surya TV in 2013, faced public backlash for its

perceived 'inappropriate content'. The show, formulated on the template of the

reality show *Big Brother UK* and later *Big Boss* (in Hindi)*,* has sixteen participants

living in an isolated house with cameras watching their every move. The advent of

social media platforms provided the audience with accessibility to express their

opinions and engage in discussions about the show's content, creating an

unprecedented online digital public sphere. "Much online criticism directed at the

show relies on pointing a finger at the eroticism evidenced in these shows, and the

few comments in defence work at underplaying the eroticism by chalking up the

real-life achievements of the celebrities on the show" (Manayath). This platform

facilitated political participation from the audience, opening avenues for discourse

on societal issues. The newly established public sphere exhibited characteristics akin

to the rhetorical public sphere, fostering a culture of participatory viewership.

Darshana Sreedhar Mini observes that *Malayalee House* was "an attempt to push the

limits of tolerance that Malayali Society would have towards the open expression of

intimacy and sexuality" (55).

     Trivandrum Lodge and *Vedivazhipadu* emerge within the context of these

ongoing moral debates. What constitutes the "malayali" identity/ "malayaliness" and

pseudo moral ideals of society were topics of hot debates in the digital public

spheres. The pervasive surveillance and invasion of privacy that occurred within the

context of the "Malayalee House" program was not an isolated incident, but rather

served as a manifestation of a broader cultural phenomenon that was emerging at

that time. Even when promoted as a "family show", the content of the show "often

invited questions and representations of infidelity, obscenity and even pornography into the middle-class living room, creating a hotbed of moral debates" (Mini 54).

These shows and subsequent political movements, exemplified by the "Kiss of Love" movement in 2014, serve as noteworthy indicators of cultural anxieties and apprehensions prevalent during the era. These anxieties revolve around concerns of the younger generation succumbing to perceived moral decadence and the accompanying fear of a society lacking the traditional moral framework that delineated prescribed gender roles and societal expectations for men and women. It is this transition in cultural attitudes that is evident in the emergence of post-2010 Malayalam cinema featuring sex comedies and stoner films, which serve as reflections of this societal shift.

6.1.3. Post-2010 ensembles

In the domain of comedies, the prevalence of ensembles is a noticeable trend during the post-2010 era. This phenomenon is observable among directors from both the traditional school of filmmaking, adhering to established conventions, such as directors Lal (*In Ghost House Inn* [2010]), Thulasidas *(Again Kasargod Kaderbhai* [2010]), V. K. Prakash (*Three Kings* [2011]*, Poppins* [2012]) as well as those embracing the new wave approach. Irrespective of their stylistic orientation, both categories of directors have demonstrated a similar inclination towards employing several characters to effectively evoke humour within full-length comedies throughout this period. Ensemble comedies "differentiate themselves from other comedies due to their larger scope, more ambitious plot line and wider range of characters, increasing the possibilities of comedy as a genre" (Benbenek).

In these ensemble comedies, the conventional practice of assigning a dedicated comedy actor solely responsible for delivering humour gets replaced. Instead, each character within the ensemble is endowed with the potential to elicit humour in the narrative. This marks a departure from the past when a comic sidekick was commonly utilised to exclusively serve the purpose of comedy, often reinforcing stereotypes related to gender, caste, class, and racial superiority of the hero. In other words, the hierarchy based on the capacity of the hero to be above the dim-witted and naive comic sidekick is under erasure in the ensembles of the post-2010 Malayalam cinema.

In the beginning of the 2010's, films that dwell on the theme of friendship such as *Four Friends* (2010), *Happy Husbands* (2010), *Seniors* (2011), *3 Kings* (2011) and *Husbands in Goa* (2012) have the lead actors handling humour but comedy actors still played a part in the generation of humour. For instance, in *Happy Husbands,* directed by Saji Surendran, the comedy actors Suraj Venjarammood, Saleem Kumar and Maniyanpilla Raju reserve their roles for humour alone. Suraj again features in the film *Seniors* to heighten the humour that marks the first half of the psychological thriller. In *Malarvadi Arts Club* (2010) directed by Vineeth Sreenivasan, the actors Jagathy, Kottayam Naseer and Suraj Venjarammood along with Saleem Kumar are employed for the purpose of generating humour.

The tendency of reserving an actor solely to handle humour is seen to slowly wear off, leading to a disruption in the formulaic treatment of comedy. The responsibility of evoking humour is mostly seen to be distributed among the characters towards the second half of the 2010s, rather than being vested on one or

two actors, reserved for the purpose and the lead characters' folly for humour has equal weight and it drives the narrative ahead. *Honey Bee* (2013), in this context, becomes an unconventional film representative of these features, especially with respect to the nature of the characters' relationships with each other, and the conspicuous absence of a comedy actor. Directed by Jean Paul Lal, the film tells the story of Seban (Asif Ali), Abu (Sreenath Bhasi), Ambrose Perera (Balu Varghese), Ferno (Baburaj), Angel (Bhavana)and Sara (Archana Kavi) who are portrayed as close friends. Humour that is present in the film, mostly verbal and situational, is directly attributed to the lead characters. The prevailing comedic elements in the film predominantly rely on verbal humour and do not invoke uncontrollable bursts of laughter. Wordplays and double entendres generate the major part of the humour in the movie. The incongruities that manifest themselves in the punchlines and linguistic nuances of the actors contribute to eliciting humour. Hence, the humour portrayed in the film arises as inherent traits of the characters themselves, rather than being forced or played out by a comic character.

This holds true for the Alphonse Puthren directorial *Premam* (2015), an ensemble that paved the way for similar casts in the future. The film, despite being categorised as a romantic drama as signified by the title, "deviates from the typical love story formula of an initial meet-cute, development, heartbreak, and eventual reunion" (Sasi). Instead, it is renowned for its hilarity in the narrative, with friendship serving as the cornerstone of its humour. In addition to the main characters, there are several others who contribute significantly to the film's comedic elements. Notably, the characters Girirajan Kozhi (Sharafudheen), Jahangir

(Althaf Salim), Jojo (Siju Wilson), and the duo Vimal (Vinay Fort) and Sivan
(Soubin Shahir) play indispensable roles in the overall humour of the film.
Importantly, these characters are not mere comic sidekicks to the leads; rather, they
seamlessly integrate into the storyline as authentic portrayals. The trio comprising
Gearoge (Nivin Pauly), Shambu (Shabareesh Varma), and Koya (Krishna Shankar)
assumes the lead roles, and the humour revolving around them is on par with that of
the secondary characters in the film.

The same observation holds for *Kili Poyi* (2013), *Idukki Gold* (2013) and
Vedivazhipaadu (2013). These films primarily revolve around the theme of
friendship, where humour plays a prominent role in shaping the overall tone.
Notably, the absence of a dedicated comedy actor exclusively assigned to evoke
laughter from the audience is evident in these productions. Instead, the humour
seamlessly emerges from the dynamics and interactions of the characters
themselves. The tacit powerplay between the hero and the comic sidekick, thus, is
absent when it comes to characters in the comic ensembles of the new wave. The
sidekick is no longer the 'butt' of all jokes. The hierarchical constructs built around
humour, involving casting, attains a different dimension during this phase.

6.1.4. Humour on the move: popularity of the road comedy

Malayalam film narratives were conventionally confined to specific
locations, with only a limited number of films incorporating characters on the move.
However, the New Generation films witnessed a notable shift, wherein movies set
on the road or in outdoor spaces gained popularity, portraying characters in a
constant state of mobility throughout the film's narrative, the best example being the

film *Traffic* (2011) directed by Rajesh Pillai, which is considered as a seminal work from which "the so-called new generation trend had started" ("Last Film").

A significant characteristic associated with the characters in a road movie is their journey towards discovering their purpose, identity, and self-realisation. "Like all cinematic genres, the road movie did not just come inevitably into uncontested being, but operates as the culmination and manifestation of producer and audience interest over different time frames" (Archer 511). Consequently, this genre of film revolves around the thematic exploration of a profound and meaningful "search" for something integral to the characters' lives. Simultaneously, it offers a certain degree of escape from the haunting shadows of the past, while also embarking on a journey to discover their true identity and purpose as "…the 'search' itself plays out quite differently in each case" (Archer 152).

In this context, *Neelakasham Pachakadal Chuvanna Bhoomi* (2013) can be rightly regarded as the quintessential road movie under New Generation Malayalam cinema that exemplifies this designation. Directed by Sameer Thahir, the film revolves around the journey of two close friends, Kasi (Dulquer Salmaan) and Suni (Sunny Wayne), adeptly delving into themes of self-discovery and transformation. The film's central protagonist, Kasi, journeys with the intent of liberating himself from haunting memories while seeking to unravel his own identity and purpose. The narrative unfolds as they encounter an array of diverse characters and traverse through varied landscapes, each contributing to Kasi's personal evolution. Skillfully entwining political undertones and intimate personal dilemmas, the film thoughtfully

weaves these elements into its storyline as they set out to Nagaland in pursuit of Kasi's beloved, Assi (Surja Bala).

The films *Rani Padmini* (2015), *Charlie* (2015), and *CIA* (2017), are other examples of films in this genre, validating the fact that road movies in Malayalam cinema are not solely focused on travel and exploration. These films, in addition, revolve around the central notion of characters actively 'seeking' something/someone significant, contributing directly to the overarching theme and essence of the narrative. The journey embarked upon by the characters serves as a metaphorical vehicle for their inner growth, self-discovery, and quest for purpose which directly contributes to the major theme of the film.

Following this pattern of storylines with mobile characters, a number of films during the period were centred around the humour that occur on the road, which can aptly be tagged as road comedies, of which the most popular ones were released in and after the year 2015. These include *Oru Vadakkan Selfie* (2015), *Double Barrel* (2015), *Oru Muthassi Gadha* (2016), and the *Aadu* Franchise (2015, 2017). The road comedies predominantly employ external spaces as their primary backdrop, presenting characters in a state of continuous mobility, often situated within a vehicle whose selection carries particular significance in the context of the film. Throughout the course of their expedition, the narrative systematically heightens both tension and comedic elements. As typical of numerous road comedies, the central plot revolves primarily around a pursuit, wherein humour emanates from the many incongruities encountered by the characters in their endeavour to reach their ultimate objective.

The experimental road comedy *Aadu,* the 2015 slapstick comedy adapted from the British crime comedy *Snatch* (2000), embodies the features of the road comedy genre in Malayalam cinema of the period. The film deals with Shaji Pappan (Jayasurya) and his group of friends who travel in a minivan. The many incidents that happen during their journey that they embark on after winning a kabaddi tournament and a female goat as the prize, constitute the humour and tension in the film, accentuated by their encounter with an ungainly gangster named Dude (Vinayakan) who is in pursuit of an exotic herb called the 'neelakoduveli'. The film's humour is primarily derived from its quirky characters, which extend beyond Shaji Pappan, the middle-aged misogynist with a large moustache and betel nut-stained lips and mouth. It also includes eccentric characters like Captain Sachin Cleetus (Dharmajan Bolgatty), Arakkal Abu (Shaiju Kurup), Saathan Xavier (Sunny Wayne) and Dabangg Shameer (Vijay Babu), among others. One aspect of the film that generates humour is the use of background songs for each character. These introductory songs have lyrics that reflect the portrayal of heroes in action films highlighting their impressive qualities. However, the comedy arises from the incongruence between these lyrics and the actual nature of these characters. For example when Arakkal Abu makes his entrance the lyrics describe him as:

"He combs his hair with a sword! Chopping heads is his hobby!" (00:18:34-40).

It becomes apparent to the audience that Abu, who is portrayed by the lyrics as someone evil and terrifying, cannot even harm a goat. Similarly, Shaji Pappan's introduction includes lyrics proclaiming that:

"Even an atom bomb would diffuse on its own at the site of Shaji Pappan"

(00:09:57-10:44).

In contrast, consequent to this introduction, he is presented as getting beaten up or facing a series of troubles. These background songs attributed to each character make the film border on the spoof of the mass action hero films.

Aadu was a box office flop. The movie is speculated to be "the first major victim of mass negative social media criticism that went viral soon after the premier shows of the movie" (Ragesh). Interestingly, the film developed a cult fan base for its humour and characterisation after the DVD release of the film. Aadu created history in Malayalam cinema industry by becoming "the first time that a sequel is being made to a film that didn't do too well at the box office" (Suresh, "Success Story") with its sequel being released in 2017, titled Aadu 2. In road comedies, along with the central pursuit, the characters undergo a process of transformation and evolution along the journey. "The benefit of a road comedy is that the momentum for the plot is baked right into the physical journey of the characters — but it means nothing if our hero(es) don't change along with the scenery" (Vary). This change in the lead character is evident in Anil Radhakrishnan Menon's film, North 24 Kaatham (2013), in which the protagonist, Harikrishnan (Fahad Faasil), initially portrayed as a self-absorbed and easily agitated individual who suffers from obsessive-compulsive disorder, undergoes a significant transformation during his journey from Paravoor to Kozhikode on foot with two other passengers during the day of a 'harthal' [strike].

Similarly, after their trip to Idukki, the five friends in *Idukki Gold* come to understand that what they were truly seeking was the friendship they had cherished since their teenage years, not the drug they were pursuing. Such an inquiry into the film texts validates the observation that "the road has always functioned in movies as an alternative space where isolation from the mainstream permits various transformative experiences," (Cohan and Hark 5) and that integrating humour into the genre is a recent trend.

6.1.5. Other genres

The genre of fantasy is not new in Malayalam cinema. *My Dear Kuttichathan* (1984)*, Adharvam* (1989), *Njan Gandharvan* (1991), *Guru* (1997), *Devadoothan* (2000), *Nandanam* (2002), *Ananthabhadram* (2005), etc. are films that popularised the genre in Malayalam cinema. However, as a comedy subgenre, fantasy films were limited in quantity. In the 80s, fantasy was fused with humour in Sathyan Anthikkad's 1986 film *Pappan Priyappetta Pappan* starring Mohanlal and Rahman. The film's ensuing humour rests on the fantasy elements used to depict the story of Pappan (Rahman), a singer who gets killed in a bike accident, and Yamaraj (Lord of Death), upon realising that Pappan had more days left to live, allows Pappan to inhabit the bodies of different people including that of a police officer named Devan (Mohanlal). The same generic form was used by Crossbelt Mani in the film *Naradhan Keralathil* (1987) for satirising the political and social system of Kerala using the character of the divine sage Naradan (Nedumudi Venu) who is sent to Kerala from '*devalokam*' [Realm of the Deities] in order to learn about socialism and politics.

As a genre, it has been difficult to define the genre but one central aspect of fantasy stories is that "they each feature a fundamental break with our sense of reality" (Fowkes 2). In the post-2010 era, Malayalam cinema's fascination with innovation-led several filmmakers to once again venture into the realm of fantasy. Within the New Gen cinema domain, attempts to infuse surreal elements into narratives led to the experimentation with the genre of fantasy comedy. Among these films, one that stands out is Lijo Pallissery's *Amen* (2013). This film is set in the village of Kumarankari and centres around the lives of various individuals who live near an ancient Syrian church. It begins with a captivating historical tale concerning St. Geevarghese Kumaramkari and his remarkable encounter with Tipu Sultan and his forces during their attempt to seize control of the church. The film's narrative primarily focuses on the love story between Solomon (Fahad Faasil) and Shoshanna (Swathi Reddy) and the corruption surrounding the church.

Characterised as both a satire and a work that exemplifies the elements of magical realism, the film's widespread appeal and achievements unquestionably stem from its skillful incorporation of humour within the storyline, allowing it to be categorised as a fantasy comedy. The film utilises a blend of both verbal and situational comedy, ranging from the characters parcelling around a packet of faeces, a character who consistently perches atop a coconut tree, and individuals who bear striking resemblances to figures lifted directly from a comic book. The fantasy elements within the film work exceptionally well due to their comedic nature. Notable instances include scenes where Solomon's deceased father visits Solomon, accompanied by two angels, as well as a scene in which customers at the toddy shop

witness the owner, Therutha (Kulapulli Leela), undergoing a transformation into a goddess and deliver them a short sermon about flatulence. The filmmaker employs this genre as a means to depict a space that feels exceedingly familiar to the audience and at the same time one that is far from reality. Within this setting, the characters express themselves candidly and without censorship.

This method used by Pellissery in the film can be perceived as a precursor to the more extreme approach later employed by the director in his 2021 film *Churuli*. The scatological references comply with Michael Bakhtin's thoughts on the subversive power of humour and the bodily "lower stratum". Bakhtin states that the "unofficial speech of medieval clerics as well as the speech of the simple folk were deeply infused with images of the lower stratum—with obscenities and curses, profanities and swearing…everything that was absorbed by that speech was to submit to the degrading power of the mighty lower stratum" (87). The grotesque humour that these movies evoke rests on the carnivalistic nature of the narrative that attempts to challenge and destabilise conventions and power structures.

Ithihasa (2014), and *Iblis* (2018) directed by Binu Sadanandan and Rohith V. S. respectively are other examples of experiments in the genre of fantasy comedy. At its core, the film *Ithihasa* revolves around the body swapping that happens between Janaki (Anusree), a young software professional and Alvy (Shine Tom Chako), a carefree pickpocket. The incident of body swapping, a common trope in the fantasy genre, happens when the two characters stumble upon a pair of magical rings and this provides the narrative with possibilities of laughter. Janaki and Alvy find themselves in each other's shoes, leading to hilarious interactions with their friends

and family who are unaware of the switch. *Iblis* is a film that plays highly on the theme of life, death and the afterlife, with the action set in an anonymous fantasy space unfamiliar to the audience, unlike the one in *Amen*. Like *Amen*, this film too has a love story as its base, and it also invests in a narrative that sutures humour as exemplified in the way Vaisakhan (Asif Ali) narrates how Jabbar (Siddique) came to be possessed by a '*Djinn*' [a spirit].

The other subgenres that infused comedy into the films during the period include the horror comedy and the heist comedy genres. Horror comedy integrates humour into the otherwise tension-filled atmosphere of the films. John Varghese's *Adi Kapyare Koottamani* (2015) and Ranjith Sankar's *Pretham* (2016) are examples of this genre. Humour infused into a serious plot that deals with the planning, execution and the aftermath of a robbery is the heist comedy or the comedy caper, which also was experimented with success during the period. *Sapthamashree Thaskaraha* (2014) directed by Anil Radhakrishna Menon deals with seven characters who meet in prison and plan a robbery. The film's narrative is structured as a confession by the character Martin (Chemban Vinod) to a priest which itself is constructed over humour. Apart from maintaining the suspense of a heist movie, the success of the film rests on how effectively the verbal humour and the comic scenes are creatively interwoven.

Varnyathil Aashanka: Athu Thaanallayo Ithu (2017) is yet another film that follows the trail of *Sapthamasree* to qualify as a heist comedy film. Directed by Sidharth Bharathan, it tells the story of four small-time thieves who plan to rob a jewellery store on the day of a public strike. Constructed on the lines of satire, the

film uses humour successfully to keep the audience engaged. As it is with most contemporary films, *Varnyathil Aashanka* is "not a boisterous comedy that provides you a thorough laughter riot. But it lends you some occasions to cheer silently and heartily" (Padmakumar).

In addition to the generic experimentations mentioned earlier, the era frequently incorporated dark humour and satire as common stylistic elements. Films such as *ABCD* (2013)*, Maheshinte Prathikaram* (2016)*, Ee .Ma. Yau.* (2018), etc. use dark humour to its fullest. *Vellimoonga* (2014) and *Masala Republic* (2014) are political satires while *Amen* (2013) is a social satire. *Punyalan Argabathis* (2013) falls under both the categories.

6.2.   Comedy in New Gen Cinema: disruptions and continuities

The patterns of humour observed in New Generation films demonstrate a clear alignment with the transformative shifts that occurred in themes, genres, and characterizations during the period. Notably, there is a discernible departure from the nature of pre-existing comedy films, as evidenced by a decline in the production of films that can be solely classified as comedies. The inclination toward realistic storytelling among New Generation filmmakers significantly contributes to the script's nature. In the subsequent films of this era, a predominant emphasis was placed on portraying narratives that closely mirrored reality.

These films adeptly interweaved elements of both humour and seriousness within their plots, mirroring the inherent blend of comedic and grave aspects found in life itself. This approach allowed the filmmakers to capture the authentic essence

of human experiences, transcending conventional boundaries and even venturing into experimental fantasy genres to explore potential scenarios. Thus, by embracing realism, the New Generation films consciously eschew the solemnity associated with the heroic figures of earlier cinema. The once revered superheroes of the past, with their self-indulgent dialogues and actions, now serve as sources of amusement within the realm of New Gen films. In a striking reversal, the exaggerated behaviours and grandiose speeches of these erstwhile heroes are recycled as comedic material, further reinforcing the departure from traditional cinematic tropes. The notion of superiority is subverted in such a portrayal and the humour evolves from the incongruity of 'what was' and 'what is'. As observed by Venkiteswaran: "This erosion of masculinity and obsession with castration goes in tandem with other erosions happening in the lives and political economies in the post-liberalization era in Kerala, that is marked by an overwhelming sense of vacuity at the centre, lack of order and never-ending anxieties triggered by the vagaries of a speculating economy revolving around global finance capital, IT jobs, real estate and stock markets" ("Goodbye").

6.2.1. Fusion of humour and the disappearance of the sidekick

Prior to the 1980s, films featured distinct plotlines that encompassed humour, often remaining detached from the trajectory of the overarching serious plot. Subsequently, in the 1980s and 1990s, Malayalam comedy films evolved into a distinct category where humour predominantly revolved around the central character(s). As Vipin Kumar observes, "[t]he central character is a comedian here in the absence of the star hero" (15). The 2000s witnessed a pronounced emphasis

on the division between the hero and the comic aide popularly known as the 'sidekick', with their respective roles in handling humour within comedic films. As Madhava Prasad commented about the 'star' studded films of South India: "From a parallel hero of an independent comedy track, we see the comedian becoming a sidekick, a friend who is nevertheless marked as subordinate" (153).

The advent of the New Generation cinema in the post-2010 era, however, marks a transition in this convention. Notably, there is a shift from films dedicated solely to humour. Instead, contemporary films seamlessly blend elements of humour and seriousness, resulting in a dissolution of traditional genre boundaries and the emergence of trans-generic possibilities. The protagonist of the New Gen Cinema exhibits a dual capacity for humour and seriousness, effectively embodying the characteristics of an ordinary individual with their virtues, flaws, and idiosyncrasies. In essence, the protagonist represents the quintessential 'common man' who encapsulates a range of human traits, including the ability to engage in lightheartedness and gravitas interchangeably.

The romantic comedies of the 1990s and early 2000s followed a pattern where the humour in the film lasted only up until the interval of the film. The post-interval part was dedicated to the plot and characters turned serious, usually to solve a crisis in the character's life or for the character to find a solution to an impending problem. The New Gen differs in this pattern as there is no specific duration for the humour to play out in the film's narrative. It can manifest at any point if the narrative demands it. And because it is no longer the sidekick's responsibility to make the audience laugh, humour is neither foregrounded nor kept at bay. It may be

present throughout as in *Aadu* and *Kunjiramayanam* or operates subtly without being overtly loud as in *Double Barrel*, *North 24 Kaatham*, *Salt 'N Pepper*, *Maheshinte Prathikaram* and *Kumbalangi Nights*.

The humour that the audience typically experiences in New Gen films is not the kind that induces rib-tickling laughter unlike in the films of pre-millennial era such as *Thenkasipattanam* (2000) or *Punjabi House* (1998). The utilisation of slapstick comedy during the New Gen period is limited, with the humour frequently bordering on the realm of tragedy. Consequently, a predominant form of humour prevalent during this period as mentioned earlier, is black humour, which evokes a sense of restlessness within the audience while eliciting laughter and is at times similar to the menacing Pinteresque laughter. For instance, Laila (Swathi Reddy) in *Double Barrel* is dead for most of the film, but Majnu (Arya), who is high on a drug, imagines that she is alive and acts accordingly. Viewers often find themselves caught in an uncomfortable state of laughter while watching the toilet scene in the film *ABCD* and the one that involves faeces in the film *Am*en. Likewise, the sequence of events that take the narrative forward in Dileesh Pothan's 2016 film *Maheshinte Prathikaram* takes place within the context of a funeral.

Chirakodinja Kinavukal humorously mocks the tradition of the hero who is always accompanied by a sidekick, whose sole existence seems to be to receive slaps and kicks from the hero. In the previous decades, the sidekick was employed as a means of ridicule and as an outlet for the hero's frustrations as analysed in the previous chapters. This portrayal perpetuated the normalisation of superiority and reinforced stereotypes. As previously discussed, the significance of the sidekick

character underwent a gradual decline in New Generation films. Even in situations where a character fitting the sidekick role is necessitated by the plot, this individual no longer resorts to demeaning behaviour or actions to accentuate the hero's virtues. This shift can be attributed to the fact that the heroes within the New Gen wave are deprived of the conventional 'heroism' that was prevalent in films of the preceding decade. Venkiteswaran's observation regarding comedy in New Generation cinema is that "Contemporary humour draws more from the pressures, follies and foibles of immediate surroundings, the grind of everyday life, than personality quirks and slapstick" ("How to Laugh"). Thus, instead of being the comic aide, secondary characters in New Generation films take on the role of either the protagonist's friends (forming ensembles and even narrating the plot) or individuals who possess comparable intellectual and physical capabilities, standing on an equal footing with the protagonist in terms of prowess. Regarding the disappearance of the sidekick, Venkiteswaran opines that "with heroes cut to human size, the role of sidekick becomes more or less redundant" ("How to Laugh"). For example, Manu Raghav (Asif Ali) in *Salt 'N Pepper* has equal importance as Kalidasan (Lal). Crispin (Soubin Shahir) is not a character that is used to heighten the merits of the protagonist Mahesh (Fahadh Faasil) in *Maheshinte Prathikaram*. The humour in *Kumbalangi Nights* is not the result of one character or a comedian but is a contribution of every character. The concept of masculinity and heroism itself gets questioned in the film using the character of Shammi. Ironically positioned as the "complete man," Shammi is depicted in a manner that elicits neither sympathy nor favour from the audience. As the narrative unfolds, his ostensibly masculine demeanour is subsequently ascribed to a condition of mental instability.

Simultaneously, numerous subsequent New Gen films demonstrate an awareness of the political incorrectness associated with laughing at stereotypes, as is observable in the film *Thamaasha* (2019). The central narrative of this film rests on the experiences of Sreenivasan (Vinay Fort), a middle-aged individual grappling with diminished self-confidence stemming from his physical appearance, including a receding hairline. Despite possessing considerable skill as a lecturer, Sreenivasan endures a perpetual cycle of scrutiny and social exclusion due to society's superficial judgments. A turning point occurs when Sreenivasan encounters Babitha (Divya Prabha), who shares in the burden of societal pressures regarding her own physical appearance for being overweight. Through their mutual understanding, a deep connection forms between them, challenging the prevailing beauty standards and superficial assessments. In the film, the utilisation of understated humour serves as a means to subvert the humour of superiority of traditional comedy films that reinforces prejudicial assumptions about body types and appearances. As Viswanathan remarks: "Yet, in this age, comedy is our only refuge, because it's about survival and overcoming" and "it is the ability to look at self and the Other not as opposites but as an essential continuum" ("How to Laugh").

However, this absence of the sidekick in New Generation cinema does not eliminate stereotyping altogether. Despite the absence of a character solely dedicated to generating humour, certain characters in some New Gen films persist in normalising stereotypes for the sake of humour. These characters become subjects of laughter as they are targeted for their physical appearance, colour, sexuality,

community, etc. The Police station scenes in *Action Hero Biju* (2016) and the wedding scene in *1983* (2014) are examples.

6.2.2.   The quest

A dominant motif evident in the New Gen films is the quest motif. The central character is portrayed as engaged in an incessant pursuit, be it for a solution, an object, a resolution, or a sense of purpose. This motif unmistakably mirrors the prevailing sensibilities of the contemporary period, wherein a sense of purpose or an urge to fill a void permeates the lives of individuals. The pressures of the increasingly competitive post-globalised world in the backdrop of a highly dynamic technoscape, prompt or rather propel the youth towards a sense of accomplishment. This is accelerated by peer pressure and this general tendency is to be individualistic. In his 2007 article, Grant researches the possibility of a purpose-driven quest among the Millennial generation that is indicative of an emerging age of purpose in the United States, and concludes that "[i]t is possible that our peak individualistic culture between 1980 and 2000 has triggered such a crisis on a societal scale, and inside that journey people are searching for purpose" ("Exploring the Possibility" 9). To an extent, the same could be said of youth worldwide. The majority of the youth in the era, motivated by social media, also find themselves embarking on diverse searches and journeys, with some fervently seeking love, while others striving to unravel the elusive meaning of existence itself, and this features as one important theme found in many New Gen films, irrespective of the genre.

The narrative of *Double Barrel* revolves around a quest for two coveted gemstones, namely 'Laila' and 'Majnu'. Similarly, in *Idukki Gold*, the storyline follows a group of long-time friends on a mission to reunite with their former gang members, while also embarking on a search for the infamous strain of marijuana known as 'Idukki Gold', which they had indulged in during their teenage years. In *Da Thadiya* (2012), the film explores the journey of Luke John Prakash, an individual grappling with obesity, as he undertakes a search for self-esteem. Furthermore, *Kili Poyi* (2013) explores the ramifications of a misplaced bag of drugs, prompting a desperate quest to find a means of selling the illicit substances. Likewise, the majority of the fun involving the first part of *Kunjiramayanam* (2015) surrounds the search of the people of Desam to bring a 'Salsa' bottle, a popular alcoholic drink, into the village upon realising that the village has been cursed. In *Aadu,* a recurring theme can be observed, wherein the central plot revolves around the pursuit of a missing object, namely the enigmatic 'neelakoduveli', sought after by the antagonists, while the protagonists, led by Shaji Pappan (Jayasurya), embark on a quest to find ways to slaughter a goat. The plot of *Maheshinte Prathikaram* is woven around the quest of the protagonist Mahesh (Fahad Faasil) to seek revenge for being beaten up by Jimson (Sujith Shankar). Similarly, *Adventures of Omanakuttan* (2017) tells the humorous story of the protagonist played by Asif Ali, who upon losing his memory, searches for answers to unveil his true identity.

As previously noted, these films do not fall into pure comedy films. However, the humour interwoven into the very structure of these works serves as a source of comic relief, thereby fulfilling the function of providing amusement to the

audience. Hence, the tension experienced during Mahesh's quest to find his rival

Jimson in *Maheshinte Prathikaram* is alleviated through humour when Mahesh,

fully prepared for a fight, discovers that Jimson had already left for overseas for

employment, thereby necessitating a delay in his pursuit for revenge. Similarly,

Thondimuthalum Driksakshiyum (2017) employs humour as a complementary

element to the weighty theme of a missing or stolen necklace and the endeavours to

recover it. By incorporating humorous elements into the narrative, the movie creates

an atmosphere of comic relief, offering a refreshing break from the potentially

gloomy tone that could otherwise dominate.

6.2.3. Linguistic patterns and the space of humour

The New Gen cinema began spatially with an urban diegetic. The heroes are

shown caught up in the effects of a post-globalised world, located amidst the buzz of

city life dealing with issues that he/she had to deal with oneself. The space is one

that has liberal access to alcohol, drugs, and sex. It is one of the reasons why New

Gen films faced staunch criticism in the beginning. The narratives have the

protagonists experimenting with drugs and freely discussing sex. In other words,

these films openly subvert traditionally upheld moral values. *Chappa Kurish*, *22*

Female Kottayam, *Idukki Gold*, *Salt 'N Pepper*, *North 24 Kaatham*, *Trivandrum*

Lodge, *ABCD*, *City of God*, *Kili Poyi*, *Ni Ko Na Cha*, *Honey Bee*, etc., are films of

the first decade of the 2010s that exhibit these spatial characteristics. The urban

spatial dynamics subsequently transition towards a heightened representation of

rural realism, exemplified by films such as *Maheshinte Prathikaram*, culminating in

its zenith by the year 2020. Indeed, 2020 serves as a benchmark, delineating a

discernible divide between urban fast-paced New Generation cinema and rural realistic cinematic narratives, sometimes derogatorily tagged as '*prakrithi*' [nature] films.

The use of abusive and swear words is another marker of the New Gen films, as mentioned earlier, especially during the beginning phase of the wave. Considered as indecent, these words were censored in the previous era. The New Gen films in the beginning 'bleeped' out the portion where these words occurred, letting the audience guess what the words could be and thereby adding to the humour. Eventually, this category of films did away with the censoring, and such words and phrases figured alongside the regular dialogues uninhibited, and the audience is pushed into a zone of uneasy laughter where they are forced to hear the liberal use of terms such as '*vali*' (fart), '*theettam*' (faeces), '*mayir*' (genital hair) etc. For example, in the film *Amen*, the toddy shop owner Therutha replies to the fartings of her son Paily (Chemban Vinod). The customers mock the duo, saying:

" A son who farts and a mom who responds to the fart!" (01:46:50-53).

The scene then cuts to a Therutha now transformed into the figure of a goddess with a divine glow in the background, sermonising the baffled customers:

"Son, do not doubt the anus that farted! If wiped with sand, you can eat it with rice flakes!" (01:46:56-47:00).

Similar usages are seen in *Honey Bee, Trivandrum Lodge, etc.* Apart from such words and phrases, the narratives of the films of the wave included outright sexual references (as explained earlier in the films *Trivandrum Lodge*, *Vedivazhipadu* etc.).

When it comes to linguistic patterns in Malayalam cinema, past filmmakers such as Padmarajan and Bharathan employed regional dialects in their films like *Thoovanathumbikal* (1987) and *Amaram* (1991) respectively. The classical Malayalam film *Chemmeen* (1966) relies on the dialect of the Arayan community (fisherfolk) of the coastal regions. However, incorporation of the regional dialect was not a popular trait when it came to the typecast linguistic feature of Malayalam cinema. Except for a few films, only comic actors were portrayed using the vernacular in most of the Malayalam films. Even if the regional dialect was spoken by the protagonist, such as the titular character played by Mammootty in *Kottayam Kunjachan,* the rest of the characters would be speaking the 'standard' tongue. This was the 'Valluvanadan' dialect, one that was spoken by the upper caste Hindu community of Central Kerala. Even films that were region-specific in terms of the story and characters used this dialect which was normalised as being the standard dialect. Arunima in her 2006 article analyses how the emergence of print capitalism during contributed to the standardisation of Malayalam in the 19th and early 20th centuries, leading to the marginalisation of other dialects:

> By the nineteenth century this rich diversity of 'Malayalam' was steadily being streamlined across and within communities…By the early twentieth century there seems to be a much sharper distinction between what constituted a religious and a 'modern' spoken language. The Malayalam that emerged thereafter has been shorn of this rich cultural texture and has become standardized across communities. Significantly, it is this

standardization that attests to the 'coming of age' of 'Malayali.' ("Who is a

Malayali" 51-52)

The connection between cinema and literature further cemented the standardisation

of the Malayalam language in the 1960s. It has been observed by Shareef that,

> literature - produced and propagated through print - had a critical role in
>
> imagining the region and Malayali subjectivity. The significance of print
>
> medium is that it is intimately integrated with questions of modernity and
>
> modern subjecthood: literacy, rationality, social justice, questions of gender,
>
> masculinity, etc. By associating with literature, this pedagogic authority is
>
> transferred to cinema. (*Language, Territory* 89)

In the post-2010 era, there is a noticeable departure from the cinematic inclination to

favour a dominant dialect. This substantial transformation extends to comedic

expression, especially within the New Generation era of cinema. The contextual

landscape of humour experiences a notable shift within the narratives of New

Generation films, as these movies increasingly root themselves in localised

environments and prominently feature characters of regional backgrounds who

communicate in vernacular dialects.

In addition to the Kochi dialect that gained popularity in Malayalam cinema

during this period with such films as *Chappa Kurishu* (2011), *Honey Bee* (2013),

Annayum Rasoolum (2013), *Kammattipadam* (2016), *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (2014)

and *Angamaly Dairies* (2017), various vernacular dialects from across the State,

most popularly the Malabar dialects, were extensively utilised in a large number of

New Gen films and were well received by the Malayali audience. *Thattathin Marayathu* (2012), *Usthad Hotel* (2012), *KL 10 Pathu* (2015), *Maheshinte Prathikaram* (2016)*, Thodimuthalum Drisakshiyum* (2017)*, Sudani from Nigeria* (2018), *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019), among others, are all set within regional contexts and dialects. This shift aids in dismantling the standardisation that had come to dominate the Malayalam language through media. These films, along with the process of de-standardization of the language, endeavour to establish distinct identities by situating characters within regional landscapes and having them converse in vernacular dialects, regardless of their role as protagonists or secondary characters. The resultant laughter, unlike previous eras, is not one of mockery of the vernacular dialect.

The humour associated with these new films are linguistically rooted and are region or community-specific. For instance, In *Sudani from Nigeria,* the scene in which Majid (Soubin Shahir) visits Robinson, who is hospitalised from a fracture, is accompanied by a background narration that describes the African player's might:

"As strong as an iron rod, as fast as a cheetah, Here comes the African from the forests, crossing the ocean, with the rhythm of a bird, with the excitement of a galloping wild horse, with the vexation of a wounded tiger, with the beauty of the stream, with the flexibility of a deer, there sits the three black tigers, waiting for the enemy's arrival…" (00:21:33-65)

The humour in the scene, even though comprehensible to every viewer due to the incongruity of Robinson's present physical condition and how he is being described, is rooted in the knowledge about the announcements made during sevens football

matches that praises the physical prowess of the players, which is a common phenomenon in the Malabar regions. Similarly, when Majid compares himself to the football player Zidane, his team members mock him by singing the line of a Mappila devotional song that goes "*udane kazhuthente arukku bappa*" [O father, please sever my neck immediately] (01:17:36-4). The song alludes to the story of Ibrahim and Ismail and their sacrifice and the humour in the scene is thus community-specific. This tendency to situate the diegetic of Malayalam films in specific regions in the State gains momentum in the post-2020 era, and the humour accompanying these regional films predominantly stems from the linguistic aspects, as well as the authenticity with which the dialogues are conveyed, thus helping popularise regional humour.

6.2.4. Family and gender spaces

As observed earlier, the narratives of the New Generation films are woven around protagonists who are in a constant search. The innovative elements pertaining to both the diegetic and non-diegetic facets of the film's production were indicative of the evolving socio-cultural and technological norms of that era, aligning seamlessly with the expectations and preferences of the audience. But for the most part, the journey embarked upon primarily revolves around the experiences of the male protagonist. In the event that a female character does set out on her own journey, it often serves as a complement to the male narrative, ultimately becoming entangled within the confines of traditionally perpetuated notions of masculinity. Thus in *Charlie* (2015), Tessa's (Parvathy Thiruvothu) journey only helps foreground the obsession for the free man, unbound by traditional strings. The

screen space is for Tessa, but the story and the title are of Charlie. He is the *'Djinn'* [spirit] that the post-globalised male masculinity yearns for. As Gopinath and Raj observe about the early films of the New Gen era, "although women are conceptualised as part of a globalised culture in which 'she' has an identity, they are nevertheless subject to the familiar gender hierarchy and marginalised identity" (1). They locate New Gen cinema and the representation of women within the disposition of "the dominant hegemonic patriarchy"(1) and claim that there is only a "constrained liberation"(6) when it comes to the representation of women in New Gen cinema.

This observation can be further extended to the portrayal of gender tropes and their role in generating humour within these films. Due to the challenge of categorising these films within distinct comedy genres, as they depict social realities that surpass the confines of pure comedic storytelling, a comprehensive examination should be directed towards analysing how gender tropes are utilised to elicit laughter.

Malayalam films have always utilised traditional familial norms as the yardstick to measure virtue and morality. The colonial notion of the family and the father figure as the protector replaced the matrilineal structure of the State and this became a prominent theme in Malayalam cinema since its inception. As Pillai remarks, "the image of the woman who loves to cook and clean, wash and scrub, shine and polish for her man" (*Women in Malayalam*, ch. 1) was foregrounded in Malayalam films. A significant emphasis within Malayalam cinema revolved around the dissemination of patriarchal ideals within the context of modernity, and " family

is a state an ideological state apparatus" (Althusser 192) for the production of the hegemonic values. As evidenced in films from the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of family, whether overtly or covertly, consistently remained integral to the protagonists' narratives. Despite centering its narratives around three male characters who are living away from their respective homes, *Ram Ji Rao Speaking* (1989), which is widely regarded as the benchmark film that marks the emergence of '*chiripadangal*' [laughter films] in Malayalam cinema, prominently relies on the concept of family to drive the plot forward. Gopalakrishnan's (Mukesh) character has to look after his mother, Rani's (Rekha) brother needs an eye operation, Hamzakoya's (Mamukkoya) has to marry off his daughter, and Urumees Thamban (Devan) has to get his kidnapped daughter back. The comedy films of the 1980s consistently incorporated the arrival of relatives, parents, and fiancés from rural areas to the urban settings where the protagonists resided, thereby serving as a key catalyst for generating laughter. Similarly, the comedies of the early 2000s further emphasised this trope with heightened emphasis. In these instances, the notion of family stood as the primary justification for the protagonist's actions. *Thilakkam* (2003)*, Pachakuthira* (2006)*, Marykkundoru Kunjaadu* (2010) are films that exemplify how the plots were grounded on family relations. The central theme explored in all the three comedy films mentioned above revolved around the reunion of either a son or a brother with their family. As Gopinath and Raj observe, "Family, as a sacred space, functions in most societies as a location where gender constructs are faithfully nourished and passed on to the next generation" (7).

The films belonging to The New Generation seek to consciously or unconsciously challenge and subvert the conventional notion of familial dynamics. As previously indicated, these films predominantly diverge from featuring familial relationships, with family representations being notably absent in most instances.

> These films of the post-2010 era abrogate families situated in traditional spaces. They do not accommodate characters that are circumscribed by these spaces. The family spaces in New Generation movies, for the most part, are not a site for intergenerational practices or encounters. It is seldom that a grandfather or grandmother is featured in these films in the traditional way. Consequently, in these narratives, there is a movement of the characters away from the traditional familial spaces. (Shafeeq and Kunhi 323)

In the film *ABCD,* the presence of the protagonist's family is limited to the opening and closing segments, with their role being minimal throughout the narrative. *Trivandrum Lodge*, *Aadu*, and *Double Barrel* also exhibit a noticeable absence of familial influence, as the space of the family remains largely invisible within these films. However, in instances where the family does emerge as a defining theme, such as in *Kumbalangi Nights* and *Bangalore Days*, the humour within these films springs from the unconventional manner of foregrounding the family spaces.

Chapter two analysed the New Generation films as having undertaken a project of subverting conventional norms in various aspects including plot, character development, and filmmaking techniques. Likewise, the humour employed in these films predominantly relies on the subversion of established norms and values. The laughter generated within these films primarily stems from challenging and

subverting hegemonic masculinities that traditionally occupy conventional spaces.
Such a distinct form of humour sets these films apart from the comedy scenes
typically found in Malayalam cinema. Among the various aspects of humour
explored in this chapter, the strategic implementation of humour and the specific
spaces where humour is situated assume significant political significance in terms of
subversion through the use of humour.

In *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019), the siblings' dispute and quarrels within the
family space of the house is comic and realistic, and diverges significantly from the
ones that the Malayali audience is used to. These interactions which make the
audience laugh, stand in stark contrast to the confrontations between brothers in
films such as *Valsalyam* (1993), *Balettan* (2003), or *Vesham* (2004). The
conventional emotional drama centred around the notion of the elder brother bearing
responsibility for the entire family is subverted through the injection of humour,
thereby altering the tone and tenor of the narrative in *Kumbalangi Nights*. This
aligns with the social reality of contemporary Kerala society. New Generation
cinema with the absence of the 'ideal' family spaces "denies the space for patriarchs
to oversee the actions happening in the narrative. Even when a family is depicted,
the absence of a strong family patriarch denies it an active role of surveillance and
control" (Xavier 55). The character of the mother is also noticeably absent from the
familial space within the film, hence negating any possibility of the mother's lament
regarding the behaviour of her sons. Occupying and implementing the
heteronormative space of the family is what generates the uneasy laughter in scenes
where the character of Shammi (Fahadh Faasil) is presented. This borders on a kind

of Pinteresque humour springing from a lurking sense of menace. The character is intentionally portrayed in a manner that is not meant to be likeable, but rather to evoke a sense of uneasiness among the audience. Humour is employed as a tool to effectively convey the inherent toxicity of the character's nature.

Most of the humour found in *Bangalore Days* (2014) derives from the unconventional attitudes displayed by the family members, ultimately serving to challenge and subvert established norms regarding familial relationships. Malayalam cinema has traditionally portrayed motherhood and marital harmony in a positive light and has contributed to the notion that these values are sacred and should be preserved at all costs. The narrative of *Bangalore Days* humorously topples these long held notions by manipulating the characters played by Kalpana and Vijayaraghavan, the mother and father of Kuttan respectively. They are initially presented as the traditionally charged parents, country-bred and exhibiting all the conventional qualities of selfless love and care. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that the characters in the film actively pursue their desires to distance themselves from one another and seek individual fulfilment. However, It is the use of humour that serves as a crucial tool that prevents these actions from being perceived as grave or socially unacceptable. Instead of evoking strong emotions, although there may be a touch of sentimentality in the initial stages, the film primarily employs comedy to address this theme. The audience, often unaware, embraces this comedic approach, without fully realising that they have witnessed the subversion of conventional norms surrounding marital expectations.

The representation of the female lead Shoshanna in the film *Amen* (2013) is another instance of how humour is employed by New Gen cinema to incorporate nonconformity into the traditional space of the family. She is presented as bold and not hesitant to retort at the atrocities of the patriarchs in the family as exemplified by the scene in which she overturns a bowl of curry onto the head of the thug that was hired to beat up Solomon. Along with representing the heroes of the New Gen cinema as ordinary human beings possessing no superhuman qualities, the females in these films are shown to be capable of varied temperaments rather than succumbing to stereotypes.

New Generation cinema, as it moves from 2010 to 2020, exhibits positive attitudes towards change and dismantling of tendencies. However, closer attention to these films will reveal that the majority of them still exhibit tendencies to succumb to conventional ideologies and normalisations when it comes to incorporating humour in the narrative. That is to say, when the above-mentioned films challenge and subvert norms, they overlook the power of comedy to normalise. Humour is treated as something capable of innocent laughter and entertainment for the most part by many of the New Generation films.It is true that rather than a sidekick or comic actor, the hero along with all other characters, takes up the load of the comic, and unlike the full-length comedy films featuring Dileep in the lead, the humour does not rely on the physical shortcomings of the hero or the outright misogynistic remarks made about the female characters in the film. But the humour does not escape from its grounding on heteronormative conventions. These films do not let go

of humour that marginalises and reaffirms stereotypes even when they are lauded for their progressiveness and political correctness.

The humour in *Bangalore Days*, even when successfully subverting familial and marital conventions, consequently evokes two separate emotional responses from the audience. Both the mother and the father in the narrative, Kuttan's parents, are equally tired of their life with each other. The husband frequently suffers from breathing issues while the wife has lived a life suppressing her desire to be part of an urban life. Eventually, both partners get their way when the husband leaves the household, leaving behind a letter that indicates that he has left for good. After the initial lamentings, the wife compels her son, Kuttan, to take her away to live with him in Bangalore. Later in the film she is shown to be enjoying her newly won freedom from being bound to another person in terms of a traditional marriage. The narrative humorously shows us how she later persuades her daughter to take her to America, in which she succeeds. The city offers her more freedom and her transformation in terms of her attire and lifestyle offers scope for humour. In another humorous scene, the audience realises that the husband had not ventured on a spiritual journey as it was thought but had taken up, instead of an ascetic life, a life of pleasure, and that he is somewhere off in Goa, enjoying his life. As Billig remarks, "men and women are continually having to create and recreate their own selves, negotiating what in previous generations might have been taken for granted" (31). In the context of the movie, however, this change generates humour, especially because of other preconceived notions that the audience possesses and the incongruities that arise as a result of this conditioning. Though the matter presented

is serious, it takes a comic turn, especially because these characters represent an older generation and society expects them to be bound by societal norms.

In *Bangalore Days*, both the husband and the wife get what they wished for in life. But the argument about the character of Kuttan's mother that "she eventually liberates herself by moving out of the space in which she had to live for others and not herself" and that "her spatial choices mark her movement further away from the stifling spaces of patriarchal conventions," (Shafeeq and Kunhi 325) does not mean that the narrative of the film lets her occupy a diegetic space where patriarchal values have been eliminated. The subtleties that work in comically representing both the characters of the mother and the father foreground the inescapability of the effect of the patriarchal value system. The audience is made to perceive the actions undertaken by the two genders differently. In a humorous scene, Kuttan realises that the constant suffocation that his father suffered was a result of his mother and her presence in his life. She is indirectly presented as the bickering wife with whom his father had gotten fed up with. His mother, even when donning the rural traditional role of the wife to his father, is not someone she appears to be on the outside. In effect, even when both the husband and the wife successfully escape from continuing life with each other and get to live the way they desire, the result of the humour in both cases varies. The viewers perceive the husband's character with sympathy because of his suffering as a 'henpecked' husband while their attitude towards the wife is one of scorn and contempt.

Humor successfully presents her as possessing shades of evil because she has broken away from the traditional role of the rural wife and mother that she was

supposed to play throughout her life. This idea is catered constantly to the audience in the scenes that present the character of Kalpana, one instance being the time she spends with her son in Bangalore. She is shown to have become the 'society lady' (reminiscent of the characters played by Sukumari in the 80s comedy films), a caricature that has long been employed in Malayalam cinema to stereotype the middle-aged urban woman, who, instead of being confined to her home, is known for her sociability, spending time with like-minded women and engaging in activities that prioritise her own interests over family obligations. In the film, the character is seen playing cards with her newfound friends in the neighbourhood and ordering pizza for everyone, which is in stark contrast to who she was and how she acted when she was in the village. This contrast portrayed in the character's behaviour creates not only laughter within the narrative, but also a covert foregrounding and juxtapositioning of the concept of the traditional, rural, ideal wife/mother *vis-a-vis* the modern, urban, less-desirable one. To put it differently, the film reconfigures notions of family and marriage using comedy but at the same time uses the very tool of humour to maintain the notion of hegemonic masculinity by stereotyping the wife/mother.

The female leads who are defiant and non-confirmative and who occupy the male spaces in *Trivandrum Lodge* and *Amen* generate laughter due to their encounters with the self-proclaimed machismo figures. The curry dumping scene in *Amen* and the scene where Dhwani confronts Korah about his wish to have sex with the 1000th woman in *Trivandrum Lodge* are comic instances. Humour here arises out of the incongruity between the normalised notions that have conditioned the

patriarchal psyche and what is shown on the big screen. However, the humour does not serve to normalise the characteristics of these women. Rather, the audience is made to perceive these traits in a woman, the trait of getting an upper hand in the gender binary, as being instances of 'exoticity' or 'abnormality'. In other words, they are only perceived by the majority of the male audience as exotic, 'non-feminine' or in the case of *Trivandrum Lodge*, as lewd, which the traditional male would find difficult to accept as normal. Despite their portrayal as 'bold', the majority of the women characters in the New Gen films that primarily "celebrate patriarchal supremacy in the disguise of women empowerment" (Anjitha Kurup 64), ultimately become subjects of the male gaze, where "woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle" (Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* 19).

Humour in *Kumbalangi Nights*, too, does not entirely avoid the inclination to stereotype and normalise. The age-old humour centred on physical appearance also finds its way into the film. In a movie that critiques traditional masculinity and the outdated notion of the 'complete man', laughter at the expense of conventional beauty standards is exemplified in the scene where Bobby (Shane Nigam) jokes to his friend Prasanth's (Sooral Pops) fiancée Sumisha (Riya Saira) about Prasanth's appearance:

"Guess you are a 'true love' type, one who doesn't believe in external beauty," says Bobby, mocking Prasanth.

"Of course I do! Prasanth, just wear your shades," replies Sumisha and continues,

"Look at him, doesn't he look like Vinayakan [the actor]?" (00:21:52-22:14)

This scene is widely celebrated as a subversion of the conventional notion of 'good looks', offering alternative perspectives to prevailing norms because the actor Vinayakan is a person who does not possess traditional good looks. For example, John J. observes that the film is "deeply layered and breaks several stereotypes," and analyses that Sumeesha "is clear and determined in proposing to Bobby's friend despite comments by Bobby on her fiancé's appearance" ("Kumbalangi Nights"). However, the very fact that the scene is comical and that laughter is the objective helps only to reinforce normalcy rather than subvert it. Jokes such as this which are often categorised under 'teasing' are considered harmless and one which is considered as having positive traits. This is because the word 'teasing' is so much gentler than 'ridicule' or 'mockery' and this friendly tease seems to "deny hostility, callousness or negative feelings" (Billig 25). The audience laughs at the "tolerant subject" (Wilde 21) not because they accept the 'looks' of the character Prasanth. He is without doubt likeable. But the humour functions not only on the incongruity but also on the theory of superiority. The teasers not only aim to influence the recipients' behaviour but also shield themselves from criticism, including self-critique, by insisting that their actions be labelled as 'teasing' or 'joking' rather than 'bullying' or 'mocking'. In this regard, the discourse of 'teasing' is part of "the activity of control…In practice, it may convince its users more than its recipients" (Billig 161). These films utilise humour in attempts at toppling stereotypes about the marginalised and "the subaltern is given space, but the same 'othering' process continues and the same holds true for different aspects of the narrative" (Xavier 80).

In earlier years, Mamukoya was often cast as the quintessential Muslim character in Malayalam cinema, typically for comic effect, contributing to the perpetuation of stereotypical portrayals. This depiction was marked by the stereotypical Malabar dialect, which reinforced preconceived notions. Regrettably, this characterization frequently subjected Muslim characters to ridicule in Malayalam films, ultimately contributing to the normalisation of such stereotypes. In the film *Da Thadiya* (2012), an attempt is made to challenge stereotypes associated with Muslim characters, particularly regarding the perception of the Hajiyar. In the introductory scenes, Sunny (Sreenath Bhasi) initially assumes that the Hajiyar (Sreeraman) has ulterior motives, only to later realise that his suspicions were unfounded. The Hajiyar, through dialogue, explicitly asserts that not all Hajiyars from the Malabar region share inappropriate inclinations for young boys, thereby attempting to deviate from the prevailing stereotype. However, despite this effort to break away from stereotypes, the initial scenes are designed for comedic impact. This approach has the unintended consequence of potentially normalising the stereotype before the subsequent clarification is provided and, as mentioned earlier, laughter trivialises the intent. The use of comedy, while aiming to challenge stereotypes, paradoxically contributes to their reinforcement, making the process of undoing these stereotypes more challenging and, in some cases, irreversible. That is, the damage has already been done, and the laughter can be firmly associated with jokes that "reinforce demeaning stereotypes…and contribute to their vulnerability" (Billig 26).

Normalising stereotypes of gender, body, race, sexuality, and so on, with subtlety, is not always the case in some New Gen films, an argument that can be validated by analysing the 2016 film *Action Hero Biju* directed by Abrid Shine. Some of the highly popular comedic moments in the movie rely on verbal humour that explicitly reinforces conventional standards of beauty, body image, sexuality, and notions of gender hierarchies. In this context, body shaming plays a significant role in eliciting laughter. In one of the scenes at the police station, Inspector Biju (Nivin Pauly) becomes upset with the auto driver for being in love with a woman who is of a heavy build and is dark-skinned, someone who does not conform to traditional beauty standards.

"You should be beaten up for two reasons: One, for slapping that woman. And two, for falling in love with this 'thing'!," (00:45:55-65) says Inspector Biju, resulting in roars of laughter among the audience.

Another instance, which also aligns with traditional notions is when the two ladies named Baby and Mary come with a complaint regarding a man who is into exhibitionism. The inspector asks them to describe the man and the women say that he is short, dark, and looks like a toad, and that he is ugly looking, to which the inspector asks:

"So if he was good looking you wouldn't have a problem?," (00:39:29-34)

to which the women agree with laughter. This is a scene that did the rounds as a popular meme on social media. The line not only demeans the physical traits of the

man but also denigrates the women's moral stance, involving their participation in their own deprecation.

The scene portraying a vehicle inspection, during which Inspector Biju encounters an individual who is also named Biju, but with effeminate traits, serves as a derogatory portrayal of the transgender community, intended to provoke laughter. It bears semblance to the 'Radha' jokes that gained popularity following the success of the film *Chandupottu* (2005). Likewise, the scene involving the human rights activist at the police station incorporates humour that is blatantly sexist.

Ignorance, virginity, and betrayal are other stereotypical ideas around which the humour is centred in the comic of the New Generation films. The ignorance of Shalini (Srinda Arhaan) whom Rameshan (Nivin Pauly) marries is a celebrated humorous scene in the film *1983* (2014). The makeup she wears and the fact that she is unaware of the cricketer Sachin Tendulkar, are fodder for comedy in the narrative. Similarly, Mary (Srinda Arhaan), the wife who abandons Shaji Pappan (Jayasurya) and elopes with his driver Ponnappan (Aju Varghese) in *Aadu* is an important part of the narrative of the film and a comical one too. There is humour, even though not one that evokes bursts of laughter, in *Maheshinte Prathikaram*, when Mahesh's lover Soumya (Anumol) decides to end their relationship and agrees to marry another financially well-off man. Similarly, in the climax of *Kunjiramayanam*, the laughter looms around the revelation that Mallika (Arya Rohit) is not a virgin and that she has had several affairs in her past. The humour in all these situations

depends on traditional stereotypes and notions associated with the concept of womanhood and femininity.

Humour is utilised by the New Generation films to subvert conventions and to help factor in the progressiveness of the films of the post-2010 era. However, the 'newness' in humour of these films involves a reconfiguration of hegemonic masculinities and norms. It is accurate to say that the heroes or protagonists of the wave do not possess superhuman abilities and bear no resemblance to the larger-than-life heroes of the late 90s and early 2000s. Many of the protagonists are ordinary individuals, often restructured to be coy and effeminate while occupying ordinary spaces. Nonetheless, these diegetic spaces are predominantly occupied by men—men refashioned based on the patriarchal values that exist in contemporary society, making the films an androcentric exercise on contemporary norms. Put differently, as New Generation films progress from 2010 to 2020, despite their inclination to challenge political correctness and defy conventions (which they succeed in doing to a great extent), they are still reluctant to relinquish the humour that serves to marginalise. This phenomenon is attributed to the intrinsic reality that an individual's autonomy remains invariably bounded by the cultural and spatial ideologies within which they are located and where one remains invariably tethered to these ideologies and unconsciously internalises their tenets, despite conscious efforts to emancipate oneself.

New Generation cinema, characterised by its prominent portrayal of male characters dominating the majority of scenes, have employed humour as a tool to reassert contemporary forms of masculinity and hierarchical structures in a novel

manner. Analysis of the comedy films pre-2010 starring Dileep in the lead proved to be outright sexist and misogynist. On the other hand, New Generation humour is subtle, apparently more innocent, and capable of change, yet simultaneously possesses the potential to normalise. As Bergson remarks: "Laughter cannot be kind hearted, for its function is to intimidate by humiliating" (198), and "therein lies the function of laughter" (135). Thus, a survey of humour until 2020 validates New Gen cinema to be rebellious and subversive, yet it still adheres to conventions and falls short of being "the rebellion that challenges power seriously" (Billig 168). In other words, as the majority of these films revolve around male protagonists, New Generation cinema has endeavoured to establish a fresh paradigm for the Malayali man–a pursuit in which humour continues to function as a socially operative tool.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

"If one gets too serious about humour, then one can easily end up as a figure of ridicule"

-Michael Billig

This thesis has attempted to analyse the nature of humour in post-millennial Malayalam movies, particularly within the context of New Generation cinema. The study has also examined the evolution of comedy in Malayalam cinema over the years, tracing its origins and highlighting significant milestones. It has mapped the historical progression of comedy genres within Malayalam film narratives as well as the tropes and the nature of diegetic spaces, aiming to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how this evolution has unfolded over the years and how it is reflected in New Generation Malayalam cinema, while simultaneously focusing on the changing nature of humour in response to social, cultural, and technological shifts, as well as the impact of prominent comedians on the genre's development over the years. The methodology employed in this thesis engages in the analysis of popular comedic Malayalam cinema narratives spanning from 1980 to 2020, utilising concepts from cultural studies, humour theory, gender studies, disability studies, and genre theory.

The introductory chapter takes up an elaboration upon the various theories of humour serving the purpose of acknowledging the various debates and discussions surrounding this topic. This also substantiates the examination of the political and social dimensions of humour, as opposed to solely regarding it as a form of

entertainment. Apart from a brief discussion on the theory of humour in Indian aesthetics, the concepts of Bergson and Freud have been used to shed light on the workings of humour and on the notion of normalising and establishing stereotypes using ridicule. The thesis is fundamentally based on the premise that humour holds a social influence. It asserts that the inclination to laugh at others/oneself or a comic character is endorsed and rationalised by individuals who maintain that no harm was intended. These theories serve to dismantle the prevailing notion of humour and shift the focus from its cause to its social effect and the present thesis has attempted to substantiate this premise.

The emphasis of the introductory chapter, apart from providing an overview of the subsequent chapters, literature review, and the objective of the thesis, has been to engage the characteristics and politics of humour from the theories into the medium of cinema in general. The chapter recognizes the presence of humour in cinema, dating back to the silent era of film production. Such an effort highlights the inextricable bond between cinema and humour, necessitating a comprehensive analysis, considering that comedy films have played a crucial role in moulding a collective consciousness that is widely embraced as representative of societal viewpoints. Towards the conclusion, the chapter has engaged in a brief historical overview of comedy in Malayalam cinema from the beginning stages of the industry till the 1980s.

New Generation cinema has been lauded for the experimental innovations that it has attempted in Malayalam Cinema. Praised most often for the tendency to subvert conventions, New Generation narratives are excessively discussed in

contemporary times. The central focus of the thesis revolves around an examination of the humour that pervades New Generation cinema. Nevertheless, to establish a solid foundation for this analysis, Chapter 2 has undertaken the task of defining New Generation cinema and delineating its distinctive characteristics, as well as exploring the spectator spaces it entered. The chapter has initially traced the evolution of film-watching practices throughout history, up until the New Generation era, in order to comprehend the emergence of New Generation cinema and the transformative impact it has had on the cinematic landscape.

The third chapter has traced the trajectory of the 1980s Malayalam cinema to foreground the arrival of full-length comedy films in Malayalam. The chapter has further observed that generic variety was absent during the period and was limited to screwballs and ensemble comedies and the tropes were that of fraud and mistaken identities. Examination of the diegetic spaces of the period has revealed that even though the period included narratives set in the rural village, the urban space was frequently utilised in the majority of the films contrasting it with the village for comic purposes by highlighting the naivety associated with the latter. The chapter has also examined the politics of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinities that were perpetuated successfully using the mode of comedy by examining the familial and female tropes of the filmic texts. The female characters, it was noted, lacked agency or purpose other than to serve and to eventually fall in love with the fraudulent hero — a theme around which the humour was concentrated.

In explaining how laughter helps discourage inelasticity in the conventions to be followed in society, Bergson says that "rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its

corrective" (21). Thus the people who are being laughed at try to 'properly behave' because they dread being laughed at. This underscores why ridicule works so well. In the context of society, any change represents a challenge to its established structure, and humour, as a social practice, serves to mitigate this threat by using the tool of laughter The disciplinary humour in the films of Balachandra Menon, popular during the era exemplifies this theory of humour and its disciplinary function as put forward by Bergson.

The fourth chapter, the has attempted to map the landscape of comedy during the 90s . In analysing the trends of the period, the chapter has observed the arrival of cable TV and the access gained by the audience to Malayalam cinema, resulting in more popularity for comedy narratives. The period marks the infancy of the 'family entertainers' in Malayalam film, a genre that the chapter has attempted to critically study. The genres of comedy, the chapter observes, show more variety when compared to the previous decade with fraud still being the dominant trope, the reasons for which have been comprehensively assessed. The diegetic space and how it contributed to the change in the nature of humour in both the decades is recognized and the effect of it is attributed to social conditioning and stereotyping. Thus, the chapter also recognizes family being the foundation on which the comedy narratives of the 90s were built, rendering them appealing to a broader family audience. Additionally, the utilisation of gender stereotyping played a pivotal role in eliciting laughter from the viewers. Humour in these films can be seen as a result of the melodramatic plight of the male character who, most of the time, comes in contact with a 'vicious' female character, who contributes to his tragedy but who,

later, is 'disciplined' to be the 'ideal woman' by the male hero, with humour being one of the major tools used. The chapter also examines the divide between the hero and the comic sidekick while delving into the political dynamics that underlie their characterization, observing that the representations of these secondary characters reinforce the stereotypes associated.

The family entertainers got a firm grounding in the 2000s with the popularity gained by films of the actor Dileep in the lead role. In delineating this trend, Chapter 5 has looked into how the stage performance called mimics parade, or 'mimicry' as it is popularly known, influenced the nature of humour that was presented in the film narratives of the period and the ones that followed. The chapter has engaged in a critical analysis of the stereotypes and marginalisation that was a result of the engagement of humour grounded in the mimicry tradition. Ridiculing of characters with disabilities as well as the female gender has been identified as a major trope for generating laughter in the films of the period. Consequently, this approach in cinema during the period established an alternate project of hegemonic masculinity using the comedy genre. It also concludes that the project of the 90s comedy films to 'tame' the female characters using the tool of humour to be the 'ideal woman' is revisited in the post-2005 comedy films of Dileep. The chapter, by examining the transformations that the sidekick undergoes during the era, reaches a conclusion that the sidekick was doubly marginalised in these films in contrast to the protagonist. This, again, dwelled on stereotypes based on colour, social hierarchy, the body, and even the intelligence of the sidekick. The body markers clearly identify these characters as being from a lower caste/class and normalise the tendency to be

laughed at. They are often portrayed as being less 'masculine' and 'manly' than the hero who himself fits into the framework of subordinate masculinity. Yet another characteristic of comedy films analysed from the period is the representation of diegetic spaces. The comedy films locate the hero in a non Malayali environment, thus utilising the possibility of ethnic humour. It has been observed that the character of the Tamilian becomes an element of ridicule due to this spatial tendency in these films. Further examination of the diegetic spatiality of the films during the period revealed that in the majority of the narratives, the family space is woven around the relationships between brothers or the father-son(s) dynamic. The chapter also foregrounded the emergence of a new genre in the period – the horror comedy.

Chapter 6 of the thesis has engaged critically in the task of examining the nature of comedy in New Gen cinema by studying the films from the year 2010 to 2020, analysing the working of humour in the narratives of these contemporary films. Amidst the proliferation of genres during the decade, comedy as an exclusive genre could not be identified as being popular in this period. However, the chapter identified various sub-genres including spoof, road comedy and fantasy comedy. Put differently, the chapter observed a trans-generic tendency that disrupts the prevalent storytelling practices in Malayalam cinema. The study further observed a departure from the practice of exclusively assigning certain actors to comedy roles (the comedian) and instead identified that nearly every character in these narratives exhibited the potential for humour at some point in their journey within the storylines. The chapter identified the presence of both realistic and absurd forms of humour in New Generation cinema but noted the absence of slapstick humour. In examining the response to the societal anxieties of the age, the chapter emphasised the emergence of stoner and sex comedies as distinct genres. As such, the chapter

acknowledges a significant departure from the type of humour employed in cinematic narratives within Malayalam cinema.

While critically scrutinising the political dimensions of humour during this period, the chapter has noted the presence, albeit in subtle traces, of an attempt at political correctness in humorous portrayals as the period unfolds. The diegetic landscapes within the initial New Generation films were situated within the milieu of contemporary urbanity, while the subsequent films adopted a regionalist approach. As a result of this shift, authentic linguistic representations have been discerned within the cinematic wave, disrupting the standardisation that had dominated the Malayalam language in media. That is, the humour is linguistically and regionally situated but the dialect is not subject to mockery.

However, even though the humour in the New Gen films is rooted in the subversion of established norms and differs significantly from their predecessors, it ultimately remains tied to the societal ideologies of normalisation in the end in most films. The erasure of the sidekick or the traditional family spaces from the humour equation did not guarantee or eliminate stereotyping and normalisation. Bodily markers and sexuality are identified as elements that are still employed to provoke laughter. As individuals inherently internalise the prevailing ideologies within their respective communal and contextual spheres, the complete departure from established conventions becomes a formidable challenge. This phenomenon is equally applicable when considering the representation of humour in New Generation films and filmmakers. These films do not entirely evade the influence of prevailing political ideologies and societal norms. In elucidating this argument, the chapter has undertaken a reading of instances of humour employed in some of the popular films belonging to the New Gen category.

Therefore, despite the label of 'progressiveness' often associated with films categorised as New Generation Malayalam Cinema, the essence of humour ultimately continues the agenda of upholding hegemonic masculinity. While there is a discernible reshaping of masculinity and gender dynamics, it falls short of challenging the established gender hierarchy. In contrast to comedies from earlier decades, there is a clear and unquestionable bestowal of agency upon female characters in these narratives. However, it is evident that, ultimately, it is the male characters who retain their position at the pinnacle of the hierarchical structure within these storylines. In other words, in the utilisation of humour, these filmmakers are undeniably determined by the cultural and spatial ideologies in which they are located.

Through the mapping of the terrain of comedy in Malayalam cinema, this dissertation has provided a ground for future projects that take up the analysis of Malayalam cinema in general and comedy genre in particular. In this regard, very few studies are available and most of them have concentrated on an in-depth analysis of a specific era or category of films in discussing comedy. A historical survey of the genre of comedy and the nature of humour in Malayalam cinema was absent. In this context, the primary objective of this thesis is to spread out contours for deliberation on the political dimensions of humour in cinema in general and Malayalam cinema in particular, which most often is overlooked due to the apparently innocent form of the genre of comedy and the supposed commonsense associated with the approach towards humour.

Chapter 8

Recommendations

This dissertation serves as a foundational platform for forthcoming research endeavours, encompassing a broader analysis of Malayalam cinema as a whole and its specific comedic genre. While this study has undertaken the task of mapping the comedic landscape within Malayalam cinema, there remains significant potential for extensive investigations in this realm. Future research can examine specific historical eras, film categories, and thematic nuances within comedy, offering a more profound insight into the evolution of humour in Malayalam cinema.

A vertical in-depth exploration of the New Generation cinema would provide a more nuanced understanding of how humour is harnessed, interpreted, and contextualised within individual works. While the current study refrains from proposing novel theories or concepts in the domain of humour and comedy, it is evident that future research has the potential to advance theoretical frameworks in this field. Future projects could also adopt specific theoretical lenses tailored to interpret humour in Malayalam cinema. Comparative studies, juxtaposing the comedy genre in Malayalam cinema with other regional or global cinematic traditions, would illuminate the distinctiveness of humour within this particular context. Such comparative analyses offer valuable insights into the cultural and contextual dimensions of humour. Researchers can further explore new frameworks for comprehending the role of humour in cinema and its impact on the audience, especially in the contemporary landscape of highly personalised viewing experiences. Additionally, a study focusing on the nature of humour in films

released through OTT streaming platforms, discerning their distinctions from theatrically released films, presents an avenue for exploration.

The present thesis, notably, has not extensively addressed the emergence, evolution, and disappearance of female comedy actors in Malayalam cinema. A dedicated study that probes the underlying reasons and political dynamics surrounding this phenomenon would prove invaluable. Contemporary cinema has become increasingly regional, and hence, an investigation into how humour has transformed with the popularity of films that incorporate regional dialects, such as those from Malappuram, Kannur, Kozhikode, and Kasargod, can offer insights into the contemporary trends in verbal humour and how the regional nuances operate in generating humour. Moreover, there is scope for quantitative textual analysis within New Generation Malayalam cinema by engaging in closer textual and content analysis of the films. This approach could identify keywords, terms, and underlying messages, thereby unveiling trends in verbal humour. A separate line of research could explore the role of social media in examining the political correctness of humour in cinema. This domain presents itself as a promising area for investigation.

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