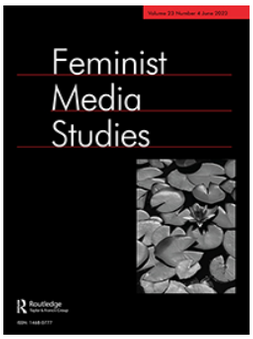

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Crisis of capitalist patriarchy: renegotiating masculinity and the heteronormative family in *Kumbalangi Nights*

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ABSTRACT

The Malayalam language film Kumbalangi Nights was released in 2019 and narrated the story of working-class people negotiating structures of capitalist patriarchy, encountered at moments of its crisis, which are also moments that indicate possibilities for social transformation. The trajectory of its narrative, the characters, and the tropes addressed in the film offer a new synthesis—both, of hegemonic masculinity and the kinship structure of the heteronormative family. Here, working-class lives are foregrounded in the contemporary crisis of patriarchy, accelerated by the crisis of social reproduction under neoliberal capitalism. Central to this crisis of masculinity and the bourgeois family form depicted in the film is the "crisis of care" that has been explained in recent scholarship on social reproduction. Nancy Fraser uses the expression to analyse the contradictory capitalist tendency to strain the conditions of social reproduction necessary for its own reproduction and stability. Through an analysis of the film, and the social realities of contemporary Kerala, this paper identifies the contours of this new synthesis. The film imagines a new mode of existence for subordinate masculinities, and challenges some of the ideologies of capitalist patriarchy, while continuing to valorise romantic love and its relationship to work.

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"The family contained within itself in embryo all the antagonisms that later develop on a wide scale within the society and the state"

– Shulamith Firestone (Dialectic of Sex, 1970)

Introduction

Kerala is a South Indian state that has achieved significant progress across various human development indicators. The labour movements that transformed property relations and class-relations in Kerala are a key factor in this progress. It still remains a developing region, with a large number of people seeking work in service sectors abroad, particularly in the care sector (as nurses, maids, etc.) or as blue-collar workers. Even though all these factors contribute to progress on the economic front, especially through remittances from

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abroad, contemporary realities speak to the disturbing persistence of misogyny and violence against women. *Kumbalangi Nights* was produced at a time in Kerala when more and more women were earning through informal work, representing the "feminization of poverty" (Diana Pearce 1978) and at the same time signifying a greater degree of financial autonomy within the household. This is noteworthy in a society where women's participation in the workforce is still far from a social norm, with official figures indicating Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) just above 30%. The nature of work that women are employed in is also noteworthy, with most of them earning in the informal sector. While female LFPR is seen to be declining in recent years, this is at least partly explained as a result of increased literacy and the inadequate employment[1] in jobs that match the qualifications of educated women (S S. Mathew 2015). In addition, Gender Statistics 2017–18, published by the Government of Kerala (2019), report that the percentage of women amongst main workers is 34.71%. While this is notably low, female work seekers are a significant 63.21% of all work seekers in Kerala. Put together, these two statistical indicators tell a story of the increasing pressure on women to be wage earners, within the family and outside. The social conflict this engendered can be observed in popular culture and the increased incidents of violence against women (domestic violence, acid attacks, etc.).[2] This trend is not distinct from the rest of the country, but considering Kerala's relatively high Human Development Index,[3] the disparity between compound development and women's development remains a contradiction that needs to be addressed.

As a matter of fact, feminist activists and scholars have argued that even left governments have repeatedly failed to address this, even when they seek to empower women through other economic programmes. In the recent decades, socialist[4] governments, that come to power periodically in Kerala, introduced decentralization measures that gave rise to the now celebrated *Kudumbashree* programme. *Kudumbashree* is the poverty eradication and women empowerment programme implemented by the State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM) of the Government of Kerala. However, as J Devika and Praveena Kodoth point out, "both sets of agencies [Kerala government and the IMF] increasingly seek to pin responsibility for the family and for 'poverty management' on women on the basis of shared assumptions that women (as against men) are efficient and flexible as workers; as well as dependable and hence credit worthy" (2001, 3174). Here it becomes curious that even when acknowledging the limited success of such programmes on the economic front, violence against women lingers on as a reality. How then do we understand the persistence and increase of gendered conflict?

The interlinkage between the oppression and exploitation of women has been theorized by socialist feminists who define patriarchy as integral to the reproduction of capitalism, and not a system of oppression that exists entirely separately—hence, capitalist patriarchy (Zillah R. Eisenstein 1979). In its neoliberal stage (particularly after 1970 in the west and 1990 in India), global institutions enforced policies that would require developing countries to espouse liberalization, privatization, deregulation, and decentralization (F J. Schuurman 1997; David Harvey 1992; David Harvey 2007). Meanwhile, wages decline, and cost of living rises, and capitalism drives the need for more earning members within a family, upsetting existing patriarchal structures. This occurs particularly through conditions that change the role of men and women within the monogamous, heteronormative family, that institution which is integral to the reproduction of capital.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels point to the family as the first site of class exploitation, where the bourgeois family is reduced to merely "money relation," a perspective that has since been significantly developed in Engels (Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State 1884) and later feminist scholarship (Mariarosa Dalla Costa 1975; Eisenstein 1979). Amongst several contemporary scholars building on this, recent work by Nancy Fraser, Tithi Bhattacharya, Susan Ferguson, and others (Tithi Bhattacharya 2017) has refocused attention on the sphere of social reproduction, particularly tracing the changes under neoliberal conditions. Nancy Fraser points out that "on the one hand, social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other, capitalism's orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies. This social-reproductive contradiction of capitalism lies at the root of the so-called crisis of care" (2017, 22). Framing Kerala within the social reproductive contradiction of neoliberalism offers up new insights, not only about the contemporary forms of exploitation and oppression, but retrospectively, into the past as well. Representations of the family and masculinity in Malayalam cinema are particularly yielding sites for such an analysis.

Masculinity and the family in malayalam cinema

The public culture of Kerala is a site that yields many insights into the relationship between masculinity, work, and family. Several scholars (Meena Pillai 2013; Navaneetha Mokkil 2020; Ratheesh Radhakrishnan 2005) have investigated intersections between masculinity and family in Kerala. Some of the threads from this scholarship provide the background to situate Kumbalangi Nights and Kerala in 2019. Radhakrishnan's observations on masculinity, as a mechanism to guard the family against the "threat" of female sexuality are useful to recall in this context. Another relevant thread may be drawn from the work of Navaneetha Mokkil, where she studies the framing of a subordinate masculinity in the film *Achanurangatha Veedu*. At the outset, the characters in Kumbalangi Nights can be seen as "dispossessed masculine subject(s)," however the narrative design and trajectory are entirely different in this case. In order to explain this, a brief mapping of the representation of masculinity and the family in Malayalam cinema is required.

The history of Malayali narratives of family and masculinity can be seen evolving through various contradictions and syntheses with roughly identifiable dominant tendencies in each decade. While these cultural sites are within the domain of creative and performative art, that need not be considered far from the material realities on the ground. Even in the moments when art is not a reflection of reality, Connell reminds us that "hegemonic masculinities can be constructed that do not correspond closely to the lives of any actual men … these models do, in various ways, express widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires" (2005, 838).

Already in the early decades of narrative cinema in Kerala, ideas of family and masculinity were sensitive to conflicts between the world of work and the familial sphere. According to Bindu Menon, "(r)epresentations of home in the Malayalam films of the 1950s and 1960s suggest that the identity of the housewife was under tremendous pressure from competing discourses that defined femininity in quite different ways" (Menon 2015, 115). Especially, along these lines, she notes "a tension between the

gendered identities of working woman and housewife" (115). As for the popular imagination of masculinity, "(t)he hero of the 60s and 70s in Malayalam was Prem Nazir, gentle and almost feminized, who constructed an image of the ideal conjugal. Men and women were corollaries but with separate spheres of influence" (Kumar 33).

Aneeta Rajendran observes that "with second-wave feminism . . . the privatised space of the home is itself problematised, and this tension begins to be produced in popular representations in various ways through the 1970s and 1980s" (Rajendran 2014, 62). Quite like the 1970s, the 1980s was a period that continued to be dominated by persistent unemployment. At the same time, this decade saw a noticeable uptick in remittances from the gulf regions. This economic power gradually alters the popular imagination of the middle class, incorporating a new class of heroes, whose privilege does not come from feudal or bureaucratic position. It is a period known for the laughter films and the crisis of the "singular 'moral' hero," who was replaced by a company of bumbling comic heroes (Rowena 2010, 132). Women from the middle-classes are represented as working women in these movies. As Preeti Kumar writes, "[the] patriarch and the image of the authoritarian hero transmogrified into the likeness of desperate, fumbling men attempting the most desperate means to find employment, chasing disinterested women, trying to escape debtors, being humiliated by family members; frantic and distressed, and totally unheroic. They were symbolic of male incompetence and powerlessness" (Kumar 2015, 131). Jenny Rowena describes the rise of this type of hero as a reaction "(d)irectly addressing the rising force of women in the post 1980s," where the "laughter-films manufactured collectives of masculine autonomy" (136). While this can be seen as a moment of crisis within which the men are still not sure of their place in the changing world, goofing around, sounding an alarm against the "arrogance" of independent women, their notion of masculinity is still far from a deep existential crisis. The male subjectivity that is central to these narratives resolves the crisis through a climactic resolution, where the heteronormative family reins in the sexuality and assertiveness of the working woman.

This moment is temporary because in comparison, the late 1980s and 1990s are a period for the resurgence of feudal masculinity, now realizing that an existential threat is present and unyielding. As Meena Pillai points out, in this period, "[t]he consumerism and materialism associated with stereotypes of the feminine in earlier cinema chart a significant deviation linking notions of self-indulgence and fetishistic consumption with the hegemonic masculine" (Pillai, "Matriliny to Masculinity"). Movies like *Rajavinte Makan (1986), Irupatham Noottandu (1987), Devasuram* (1993), *Commissioner* (1994), *The King (1995), Aaran Thampuran* (1997) etc. are examples for this trend. However, in this period as well, the crisis represented is mainly that of upper caste, emergent middle-class masculinity. Here too, the crisis of masculinity is resolved through narratives about "taming the shrew" or the "knight in shining armour," both culminating in the preservation of heteronormative family. An all too keen awareness of the precariousness of the heteronormative nuclear family structure has been pointed out by VC Harris as well, particularly through the figure of the absent mother in many films (Harris, 2010, 60–61). In the 2000s, the crisis of capitalist patriarchy remains visible in the cultural space, assuming a new degree of hyper-masculinist vigor, with films like *Narasimham (2000), Praja (2001), Valyettan (2000)* etc. However, simultaneously, there are emergent stories with elements of working-class

masculinity, evident in films like *Naran (2005), Rajamanikyam (2005), Meesa Madhavan* (2002) etc. This period is marked by rampant misogyny in Malayalam cinema, especially directed against women who do not fit the trope of the "sacrificial good mother."[5]

How masculinity adapts to the crisis of capitalist patriarchy till now is interesting in its own right. In the 1980s, the dominant trope is that of the unemployed male hero in Malayalam movies. He resorts to slapstick and physical humour as an adaptive mechanism. This can be seen in contrast to the *Mammootty-Kutty-Petty*[6] films where the middle-class salaried family man emerged as centre of the heteronormative family and the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. However, with liberalization in the 1990s, and the newfound wealth of the middle-classes, it seeks a nostalgic return to feudal masculinity. In this light, what we see in the 2000s is a new adaptive measure, with the abandonment of middle-class hyper masculinity for the large part. The working-class masculinity mentioned above, is a negotiation and adaptive response in order to preserve the legitimacy of patriarchy. This points to what Tim Carrigan refers to as "modernizing hegemonic masculinity" (1985, 577). Defined in the context of America, it is "concerned with finding ways in which the dominant group—the white, educated, heterosexual, affluent males we know and love so well—can adapt to new circumstances without breaking down the social-structural arrangements that actually give them their power" (Tim Carrigan 577).

In contemporary times, the formation of the Women in Cinema Collective[7] and the various struggles that followed are indicative of the intensification of social conflict mentioned earlier. This collective response to rampant misogyny, institutionalized sexism, and the exploitation of women in the film industry was met with considerable opposition from the old guard of the industry. Yet, in cultural discourse, recent popular films like *Ramante Edenthottam* (2017), *Varathan* (2018), *Uyare (2019), Prathi Poovankozhi* (2019) and *Ayyappanum Koshiyum* (2020) are demonstrably aware of this conflict erupting into various forms of violence—both against women and between men. Historically, this marks a period of new synthesis in the cultural struggle over the representation of family and masculinity, giving rise to new imaginations. *Kumbalangi Nights*, along with a few other films, broke new ground in this respect.

While situating this moment within the domain of capitalism, it is also crucial to be aware that not all patriarchies are alike, especially with the extreme inequality that characterizes the neoliberal stage of capitalism. Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne remind us that, "for all that men in general derive benefits from the patriarchal dividend, those embodying subordinated masculinities may suffer disproportionately the costs of existing gender regimes" (2016). Thus, in *Kumbalangi*, it is vital to distinguish between hegemonic masculinity and the subordinated masculinity represented by the working-class characters. The film responds to this contemporary reality, linking this crisis of patriarchy with the crisis of neoliberal capitalism. The protagonists of the film, while embodying some patriarchal attitudes, are also excluded from many of the structural privileges of capitalist patriarchy because of their class location. Under these contradictory conditions, their masculinities evolve, along with their struggle against alienating wage labour and the capitalist assault on

their traditional vocation, non-mechanized fishing. Through the following textual analysis, this paper identifies the possibilities and problems of struggle against capitalist patriarchy represented in *Kumbalangi Nights*.

The Kumbalangi moment

The larger trajectory of gendered conflict and resolution in Malayalam cinema, discussed above, reaches a period of radical new possibilities post 2010. Viewed from a socialist feminist standpoint, it is not an accident that these narratives are emerging in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, exacerbating the crisis of capitalism, which further fuels the social conflicts that are already underway (Tithi Bhattacharya 2013). Considering this, *Kumbalangi Nights* ought to be studied as the product of a social crisis where the conditions of radical new possibilities are present, and the usual narratives and tropes fail. They fail specifically because the usual resources of patriarchy do not obtain under these new circumstances. Women and men are both in the public sphere more; more women are either seeking work or earning through work; and the conditions for the reproduction of capital are such that it cannot allow these modified relations of production to lapse back into traditional modes. Central to the new form of the crisis is also the breakdown of existing structures of kinship and community that otherwise forge solidarities for men who are oppressed by the precarity of existence that defines contemporary capitalism.

This leads to the rise of individualism and social alienation that further exacerbates the crisis. Narratives of success and failure tied in with masculinity get mapped on to social class and the relative privilege of men in becoming successful. As Andrea Cornwall and Jennifer Edwards point out, "[t]here is another dimension to this individualization of success and failure. Men—and women—are dislocated from the webs of social relations and dependencies in which they live their everyday lives. 'Empowerment' has come to hold the promise of self-actualization rather than retaining any semblance of the older associations that the term had with collective action and struggle" (Cornwall 2016). In addition, the ideology of romantic love as a key ideological element of heteropatriarchy is integral to the interests of capital and the individualism that its neoliberal model encourages. This is where romantic love is increasingly tied in with neoliberal narratives of self-realization, dignity, success, and happiness as Kathi Weeks points out. She draws our attention to "how the modes of mental and manual labor once disaggregated across many industrial jobs are now often integrated, together with labors of the heart and soul, in postindustrial production. To the extent that the flexible, caring, emotional, cooperative, and communicative model of femininity has come to represent the ideal worker, women's work under Fordism has arguably become the template for, rather than merely ancillary to, post-Fordist capitalist economies" (Weeks 2017, 38).

Building on feminist critiques of romantic love (Laura Kipnis 2003; Shulamith Firestone 1972; Ti-Grace Atkinson 2001) she argues that "(t)he familiar cultural tropes of love and happiness are posed both as the way to tap into what is imagined as a vast reservoir of will and energy and as the handle that employers can use to leverage that energy into productive activity" (41). While Weeks guards against a "mechanical cause-and-effect model of instrumental power" that dismisses romantic love as ruling-class propaganda, she is aware of the ideological functions of romantic love (43). It serves the purpose of

"mystifying relations of inequality," hindering a clear-eyed view of reality. In words that could be borrowed to describe the centrality of love in *Kumbalangi Nights*, she notes that "the ideology of romantic love serves as a disguised mechanism of work-recruitment" (44). Finally, these are all material/immaterial conditions that pose challenges for any utopian or progressive imagination of the future. The following analysis studies the possibilities evoked in the film within the described framework of neoliberal capitalism and its contradictions.

The two families of Kumbalangi

The film tells the story of four brothers and two sisters, centred around the romantic relationship of Bobby and Babymol. While their relationship is opposed by her brother-in-law, who is the patriarch of the household, they insist on getting married. As the narrative evolves, the four warring brothers finally unite in their desire to come together as a "decent" family. Shammi, the brother-in-law, turns out to be violent and suffering from some form of mental illness. However, despite his violent outbursts and some traumatic events that follow, the lovers eventually unite.

The familial universe in Kumbalangi Nights is formed of two units. One of the families is lower middle-class, and its life revolves around Babymol, Simmi and their mother. Shammi is the new "head" of the family, having married into a household where the father had died long ago. In the absence of their father, both the younger women are now under the shadow of Shammi, who is trying to fill the traditional patriarchal role. With his cultivated unpredictability and air of seriousness, Shammi is portrayed in direct contrast to Simmi's uncle, who is a genial and proud stay-at-home husband, with a wife who evidently works abroad. Babymol, the younger sister, is employed in the informal hospitality sector, showing tourists around to earn an independent income. Meanwhile, Simmi is always seen engaged in domestic work within the film. It can be assumed that she and her mother are also the main caretakers for the rooms they rent out to tourists.

The second family is working-class, and the centre of the narrative, to which Saji, Bobby, Bonny and Franky belong. Within the first few minutes, the film foregrounds the fact that the brothers of Kumbalangi are not quite brothers. Later it is also revealed that they are born to different mothers, and different fathers, which is a constant source of tension amongst them. The very first fight between them is started over the portrait of their dead father, making the viewers even more aware of the absence of a patriarchal figure. In terms of their social life, it is made evident that they are dysfunctional in their own ways. Two of the adult brothers stay away from wage labour and their own traditional means of livelihood, fishing. Saji is found in the company of others, but only to drink. Bobby is almost always intoxicated and has one friend, whom he loses to work and soon marriage. Bonny, who is mute, finds expression and solace in the company of his dancing troupe, even though he too is disturbed by the familial crisis. Franky, the youngest and still in school, is ashamed of the poverty that they live in, which keeps him away from his friends. He carries out most of the domestic labour (like cooking and cleaning), taking on the social reproductive tasks relegated to him by the older brothers in his family. While it reveals his desire for them to be "normal" family, it also indicates how children, along with women, are often burdened with social reproductive tasks in the neoliberal

phase of capitalism. In addition, he is also shown to be the one performing immaterial labour, like keeping the peace between the brothers and planning to have dinner together on their father's name day. These two familial units are brought into contact within the narrative through Bobby's romantic relationship with Babymol.

"Raymond, the complete man": Shammi's masculinity and the cracked mirror

Shammi, within the history of Malayalam cinema, can be identified as belonging to a moment in the evolving crisis of capitalist patriarchy. He is the antihero, and functions as the source of the conflict between the families. At one level he represents the waning of a traditional family, and once-hegemonic masculinity. The film represents him as a relic of the past, with a comedic scorn in the way the camera and the sound follow him. Slowly, and with great relish, the narrative unravels the fact that he is violent and mentally ill. Early in the film, he represents a hegemonic masculinity that *appears* to have all but lost its legitimacy in the modern world, as least within the narrative of the film. It is reduced to an idea without a material basis, as reflected in Shammi's carefully cultivated persona and self-image. Enough commentary[8] has already pointed out his obsession with the moustache and a comical attempt to be the physical embodiment of "Raymond, the complete man"—a reference to an iconic advertisement for an elite, well-known Indian men's clothing brand. As he stares into the mirror admiring his own image, his face is clean-shaven without even the tiniest hint of facial hair. The only exception is his cleanly maintained and thick moustache, taking pride of place and enjoying his constant caress. In scenes where Shammi is disturbed or angered, he is constantly touching his moustache, as if to reassure himself of its immaculate presence. Shammi's desire for completeness is itself evidence of a lack, which he is constantly filling with his own self-image. This crisp and clean self-image of complete masculinity is a shrine where nothing feminine or childish is allowed. This is very clearly articulated in the film when he scratches and flushes away a *bindi*[9] stuck to the mirror in which he is admiring himself.

Shammi, more importantly, also represents the crisis of care and Malayali masculinity's failure to adapt[10] to the neoliberal stage of capitalism with its rapidly changing conditions of labour and social reproduction. His character is incompletely inserted into the neoliberal discourse of hard work, 'family values'[11] and community, defined in the narrow sense, with class and caste-specific markers that determine who, according to him, belongs to his community. When Bobby and Saji met him to propose a marriage between Babymol and Bobby, he belittles the family, arguing that the community has a very bad opinion of them. Mockingly, he declares that the "law of the land" is such that any an adult girl can marry any scoundrel if she so wishes. To conclude, he reiterates that they are a "modern family" and that he will consider approving the marriage when he is convinced that Bobby has a job and that they are in a better financial position. In his peculiar concoction of tradition and modernity, Shammi sees wage labour and money as redemptive. This notion is cemented at various moments in the film, but especially when he belittles his wife's uncle for being a man who takes pride in his cooking skills and a stay-at-home husband, taking on tasks linked to social reproductive roles traditionally assigned to women. While Shammi is engaged in work (as a barber) to earn his living and provide for his family, that does not prevent Babymol from earning her own income. The notion of the providing

man, tying together the family and the notion of masculinity tied to work[12] is unravelling at the seams already. The uncle, meanwhile, represents a successful adaptation to the crisis of care, having successfully learned to "love" the tasks of social reproduction that have now become his, while his wife is engaged in wage labour for capitalists, presumably in the middle east or the west.

Unlike antiheroes of the past, Shammi resembles in many ways the heroes of Malayalam cinema's past. Locating Shammi in the history of central characters in Malayalam cinema, it is hard to ignore the fact that not so long ago, Shammi would have been a hero akin to popular characters of Malayalam cinema, like Hitler Madhavankutty and Joseph Alex.[13] In fact, Shammi channels this quite emphatically at a later stage in the film, when his insanity is fully revealed. He yells, "*Shammi hero aada, hero"* [Shammi is a hero, a hero!]. There are various scenes where Shammi's constant dogged vigilance is stressed in the narrative. In one striking scene, he peers from behind a wall, his eyes creeping into the frame with an eerie expression of curiosity on his face. In another scene he is peeping into a rented room where Nyla and Bonny are asleep. Of the two hero tropes mentioned above, Shammi borrows elements of bourgeois sexual morality, vigilant masculinity, and surveillance as traits that represent his desire to guard patriarchy. Although mocked in the film, his efforts to arrive at a somewhat liberal conception of patriarchy are evident in his overtures to ensure that everyone eats together (with him sitting at the head of the table). His declaration that "we are a modern family that allows women some freedom," are all examples of this occasional attempt to modernize his masculinity (Just like with the use of the Raymond slogan). But these attempts to reconfigure and restore the edifice of traditional heteronormative family and patriarchy largely fail in the film's trajectory, especially when the women in the household refuse to recognize these efforts from within a discourse of paternalism. Shammi is also unable to construct a modernized masculinity in this effort particularly because he is unable to address the deep contradictions that have already fully developed in society.

It is this impossibility that he cannot countenance when his attempt to assert power with Babymol is immediately put down by Simmi's intervention. Opposition from this unexpected quarter leads to the first obvious display of insanity, when Shammi goes to the corner of the room and stands facing the wall for several minutes, shocking the family. While the film evokes laughter through Shammi, his larger function within the narrative is to represent the waning of narrative tropes that repeatedly returned to similar characters and ideas of heteronormative patriarchy and associated notions of masculinity. It is also through Shammi that the narrative builds its crisis and resolution. Shammi represents the global trend, where "the crisis of modern masculinity" has birthed a whole range of political and cultural patterns that tend towards authoritarianism and a nostalgia for traditional notions of manliness (Pankaj Mishra 2018). A whole range of emergent subcultures like *incels, volcels* and alt-right movement are struggling against a new terrain where their traditional power has waned and new vulnerabilities surface, particularly with finding dignified work. This has opened up ways for political entities to capitalize on the collective anger of gender or racial majorities. The consolidation of the Malayalam film industry into a boys' club represents a similar political reaction. However, in *Kumbalangi Nights*, the übermensch that seems to be rising in political currency across contemporary world is consigned to an ignoble retirement.

The island of the unwanted and the abandoned—Where new kinship structures arise

In contrast to Shammi, whose relative class position allows him to have access to some legitimacy within patriarchy and the realm of hegemonic masculinity, the four working-class men can be placed squarely within the category of "subordinate masculinities." Out of the four, three are the sons of Napoleon, with the exception of Bonny. Saji, Bobby, and Franky, all Napoleon's sons, are however born to two different mothers. This is a constant source of shame and delegitimizes them within a patriarchal society that only recognizes a bourgeois conception of the biological family. However, it is this utter lack of privilege, unlike Shammi, that makes this household a site for struggle and the rise of potentially new kinship structures. The brothers live at the margins of society, both literally and figuratively. Economically poor and belonging to the fish working community, they live on an island on the outskirts of the city.[14] This rise of new kinship structures within this family is made possible by two interwoven trajectories of crisis. First, the fact that they seek legitimacy in society through various means and are repeatedly refused. The second is their struggle with alienation in wage labour, unable to commit themselves to either traditional labour or wage work.

Throughout the film, motifs of Mary the mother of Jesus recur as a constant reminder of the absence of care and "maternal" love in their lives. This also indirectly points to the failure of society at large, in a neoliberal condition where all forms of socialized care are either constrained or absent. Young Franky is particularly represented as a boy who is seeking a maternal presence in the house. This must be read in conjunction with what has been earlier discussed regarding his social reproductive role in the household. The possibility of him regaining his childhood is presented in the film as something for which the condition of possibility is the arrival of a women as mother. At a crucial moment in the film, following Franky's suggestion, the brothers hope that bringing their mother (who had left them to find god) back home would retrieve the social legitimacy they have lost. But with her refusal, that attempt fails as well, and the narrative once again reinforces the idea that there is no easy refuge for the working-class within existing structures of capitalist patriarchy.

Saji occupies a comparable position to that of Bobby. Both spend their time either drunk or intoxicated, and Saji is often lounging around hoping to get lucky with a lottery ticket. One of the crucial moments in the story is the rupture of the exploitative relationship between Saji and the migrant labourer Murugan who subsists by ironing clothes for the people living in the suburbs of the city. After being called out as a parasite by Murugan, Saji is deeply offended. This is the moment in the story where Saji's last refuge for his self-worth and masculinity finds its limit. Saji attempts suicide and it a tragic effort to save his life, Murugan's accidentally dies. Deeply remorseful, Saji emerges a changed man, taking on more domestic duties, humbled and stripped of masculinist pride. He seeks help for his psychological trauma borne of shame and appears to be reconciled with his parentage, their mother's abandonment, and father's early death.

The tribe grows when Bonny brings Nyla, an American tourist, home after they are evicted from their homestay. Here again the catalyst is Shammi, who peeps into their room, and flies into a rage about the immorality of love outside patriarchal sanction. Shammi appears here as a protector of the bourgeois ideology of love—where it is only

acceptable in its socially sanctioned reproductive function. Nyla and Bonny had to retreat to the only available refuge, their home on the island of Kumbalangi. This is the first key moment in the film where the brothers move away from the constraints of biological family. Meanwhile, a repentant Saji brought Sathi (Murugan's wife) home, along with her new-born child. As they cross the backwaters, the motif of Mother Mary is evoked again. Later in the film, when Sathi offers to leave and claims to be the bringer of disaster, Bobby reiterates that this land is where unwanted things, animals, and people are abandoned. It is only fitting that they are all together in this. This represents the struggle of people living on the outskirts of the city, abandoned to their own means of survival, yet the reproduction of their life is integral to the accumulation that happens in the city.

Bobby, in a way, represents the struggle between the neoliberal city and the worker. He is portrayed as an urbanized young man with a taste for western music, marijuana, and a bohemian lifestyle. But unlike Shammi, who takes pride in his "work," Bobby cannot abide wage labour. Prashanth, Bobby's only friend, reminds Babymol—"don't let him get the feeling that you are hiring him for a job, he will never come." Eventually, he finds his crucial breakthrough from this rut while in love, which is depicted in the film as the source of his redemption and rediscovery of joy as a fish worker. The final encounter with Shammi is a symbolic culmination of this struggle between hegemonic and subordinate masculinities, between bourgeois and working-class heteronormative family.

When Shammi is caught and restrained with the fishing net, what ideology prevails? The climactic scenes where the three women (Baby Simmi and their mother) are rescued by working-class heroes—could it simply signify the rise of a working-class patriarchy? On the contrary, many of the toxic characteristics of masculinity and the patriarchal family are undone in this new synthesis. 1) The traditional division of labour between man and woman has been undone 2) Romantic love is no longer seen as an instrument for the creation of a reserve army of labour or a sinful affront to the legitimate biological family 3) The nuclear family as the centre of bourgeois life is challenged. All these three elements contribute to the imagining of a notion of "family" that cuts through barriers of biological parentage, caste, race, and language—the usual determinants of kinship structures.

Labour of love—Women and social reproduction

While the film makes new strides in conjuring a new community, questions remain about its representation of work and romantic love. While some patriarchal notions of masculinity and ideologies of the bourgeois family are undermined—some of the ways in which working-class masculinity and romantic love are framed in the film require attention. Throughout the film, the idea of love is accompanied by some of the "practical" concerns that are a regular feature of bourgeois love. This is evident in the concern expressed by Babymol and Prashanth who are both eager to work and to ensure that their partner is willing to work as well. Prashanth confides in Bobby about his plans to marry, while Bobby mocks him for making such a big commitment. Prashanth responds that he isn't looking for a fling and that he "wants to live." He claims here that Sumeesha "values" him, unlike Bobby and that he is going to start going to work from the next day onwards. Use of the Malayalam word *vila*, meaning value, is insightful here. Here we see that a relationship is defined as more than companionship and love, but as a contract of labour; specifically, wage labour in the case of Prashanth. Meanwhile, Babymol in two instances of the film

points to the importance of a job as a necessary condition to get "serious" about the relationship. She reassures her sister that she can convince Bobby to work. In another scene after his first attempt to enter wage labour, she jokes with Bobby that he has suddenly remembered his dad after having to work for two straight days. The implication here is that he is assuming his dad's place now, in a world where it is a dad's place in the family to work and earn.

How do we understand this peculiar response to social alienation, where the men and women are brought together not simply by love and companionship, but with work (often wage labour) as an additional condition for the reproduction of their paired daily life? More than a century old insight from Alexandra Kollontai is still relevant here;

"With the establishment of capitalist relations and of the bourgeois social system, the family, in order to remain stable, had to be based not only on economic considerations but also on the co-operation of all its members, who had a joint interest in the accumulation of wealth." (Kollontai 1977, 283)

She argues that "the new moral ideal of a love that embraced both the flesh and the soul" is a bourgeois coinage designed to secure the stability of family as an institution, which in turn is integral to capital and the stable extraction of surplus value" (283). This notion of stability is evidently still recognized by capital in the neoliberal age even as its own crises continue to disrupt such stability. In the film, the constant yearning for the mother figure and the fusion of love and wage labour are indicators that the narrative is not willing to entirely part with the existing framework of "stability" offered by capitalist patriarchy. As for romantic love, there are "four ways that feminists understood romantic love and happiness as an ideological phenomenon: as propaganda, as mystification, as depoliticization, and as subjectification" (Weeks 42). While the film politicizes and overtly criticizes aspects of the bourgeois family and procreative love, it mystifies some (not all) of the different ways in which an alternative form of society is already possible in their household. This aspect of the film represents an ideological struggle between capital and labour. In the stories of Babymol and Bobby, or Sumeesha and Prashanth, it imagines the working-class as community through romantic love, wage labour and the pairing family. However, the story of Bonny and Nyla remains open-ended and represents the possibilities of a radical future that can still materialize.

In this process of the struggle over the bourgeois family, women occupy an evidently central position. The women of Kumbalangi are active and essential agents in the narrative—facilitating the movement away from traditional patriarchy and the hegemonic masculinities associated with it. Their social reproductive and care labour are central to this process depicted in the film. Babymol and Sumeesha are working women, and they are both shown to be engaged in work within the informal hospitality sector. However, this depiction is also indicative of some of the shifting burdens of social reproduction in the neoliberal era. Andrea Cornwall observes that "in the neoliberal global economy, it is women rather than men who are cast as the 'agents of change' who can 'lift' economies once they are primed as a 'weapon against poverty', according to development agencies like the UK government's Department for International Development, the World Bank, IMF and the increasing array of corporates who have come to champion the empowerment of women and girls" (2016, 10). While this may be presented as empowering, within the neoliberal framework it is further adding to the burden of social reproduction on women. The tasks assigned for women are further increasing, asking them to "improve your

household's economic condition, participate in local community development (if you have the time), help build and run local (apolitical) institutions like the self-help group; by then, you should have no political or physical energy left to challenge this paradigm. These rules sustain a sort of depoliticised activism at the local level—one that inherently does not build upward momentum" (S. Batliwala and D.Dhanraj 2004). This in a way explains why Simmi and Babymol are assertive independent women to an extent—but not to the point of challenging the very foundations of the heteronormative family. The degree to which the village is dependent on foreign capital is evident in its existence as a fishing and ecotourism village. Along with Babymol and Sumeesha, Simmi too is at the centre of a household where they host tourists in a "homestay" that relies on foreign travellers.

Apart from the household work and the informal labour, the women are also engaged in the immaterial labour of pulling the men out of social alienation and self-destructive behaviour. Sumeesha convinces Prashanth to take up wage work. Similarly, Babymol convinces Bobby, after several failed attempts to enter the workforce, to embrace his inherited knowledge of fishing. Saji is redeemed through Sathi's forgiveness. It is a particularly curious absence in the film, that women are not seen to be struggling with this burden of social reproduction or with the notion of alienating wage labour.

Towards new horizons of the heteronormative family

What we see at the close of the film is the birth of possibilities, even as new notions of family and a negotiated masculinity emerges. New kinship structures are formed, the men find joy in their traditional means of livelihood, and certain traditional patriarchal attitudes are abandoned for a new synthesis. Within heteronormativity, romantic love, and the pairing structure is sustained along with the notion of marriage. In conclusion, while many of the solidified practices of heteronormative society are no longer hegemonic, some continue to hold sway in their lives. Saji has no romantic interests throughout the story. Bobby gets married. The relationship of Bonny and Nylah remains open-ended. Sathi, along with her child, is living with this motley crew without any romantic or familial relationship with any of them. In the final shot, the camera pans away to frame the island with these few people who are now left at the shores of Kumbalangi. The water ripples in the night light, reminding the viewers of transformations, rebirths, and the ceaseless fluidity of life.

Notes

1. NSSO data from 2011-12 is cited in the paper showing that unemployment rate for women (14.1%) is higher than that of men (6.7%).
2. News reports periodically recognize the fact that even in a state that has high rates of literacy and ranks high in the Human Development Index, violence against women remains high (Preetu Nair 2018; A.S. Shan 2019).
3. Kerala's HDI is 0.790, which is noticeable higher than the country's 0.645.
4. Various regions of Kerala have more than a century old history of communist mobilization and after the formation of the state in 1956, CPI(M) emerged as a prominent party engaged in electoral politics to achieve socialist goals.

5. A detailed account can be found in Meena Pillai's essay "The Many Misogynies of Malayalam Cinema" published in EPW (Pillai 2017).
6. An expression used to describe formulaic films that consistently had a combination of the popular actor Mammootty, presented as a happily married, well-employed man living with his wife and their young child in a nuclear family.
7. Women in Cinema collective is a group that emerged in 2017 in order to organize and represent the interests of women working in various fields of Malayalam cinema (Tara S. Nair 2017).
8. (Sowmya Sowmya Rajendran 2019; Bharadwaj Rangan 2019; G Pramod Kumar 2019).
9. Traditional Indian ornament worn by women on their forehead.
10. Similar patterns can be seen in *The Great Indian Kitchen* and *Ramante Edanthottam*, however, with some variations.
11. Shammi defines family values using a curious mix of patriarchal legitimacy, the legitimizing power of wage labour, and some 'freedom' which is not clearly defined but must be granted by him.
12. In her work on Colonization and Housewifization, Maria Mies charts out the rise of the bourgeois form of biological family. She points out the historical failure of socialist movements that sought to separate home and work, following a bourgeois conception of family (105-110).
13. The films are Hitler (1996) and The Truth (1998) – both deploy the protectionist discourse of patriarchy, embodied, and made heroic in the characters referenced above.
14. The city makes itself visible and central throughout the film. For instance, the waste accumulating on the island, the workplace (fish packaging unit) where Bobby briefly works, the tourists coming in from the city to take in the beauty of the backwaters.

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