

AT THE CROSSROADS OF GENDER AND
CINEMA: THE FILMS OF
SHYAMAPRASAD

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**AT THE CROSSROADS OF GENDER AND CINEMA: THE
FILMS OF SHYAMAPRASAD**

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Shyamaprasad's films challenge and reinforce the ways in which the intersections of gender with sexuality, diaspora, class, and caste are represented in Malayalam cinema. The thesis shows how Shyamaprasad's films offer a critique of normative and ideological practices as well as the constitution and negotiation of male and female subjectivities in Kerala society. Using narrative analysis, I argue that Shyamaprasad's films both contest and conform to hierarchical gender relations and upper-caste, middle-class, and diasporic values and practices and show how Malayali women become victims of sexual division of labour and dominant cultural ideologies.

The thesis employs a cultural studies methodology and proposes a context-centred approach to study films: situating the films within specific historical and cultural contexts rather than merely interpreting texts or examining how audiences receive them. I conclude that these films ascertain the patriarchal pressures imposed on Malayali women to be moral subjects, particularly in the intersections of gender with sexuality, diaspora, class and caste. The thesis also employs Michel Foucault's notions of disciplinary power, biopower, and pastoral power and Doreen Massey's idea of space being gendered, relational, and dynamic to determine how power shapes subjectivities and the ways in which subjects are disciplined and controlled in specific spatial conditions. I adopt intersectionality as a key theoretical framework and show how the analysis of the intersection of multiple social identities is crucial to understand the representational politics of gender in Malayalam cinema.

Attestation of authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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Publications and Presentations based on the thesis

Publications

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On June 21, 2021, 24-year-old medical student Vismaya Nair was found hanging at her husband's house in Kollam district of Kerala. Vismaya hailed from an upper-caste, middle-class background in urban Kerala. Reports suggest that she was constantly subjected to domestic violence by her husband Kiran Kumar, an assistant inspector at the Motor Vehicle Department. A case has been registered for dowry harassment and related death. Sources suggest that just days before her death, Vismaya had revealed to her cousin about the mental and physical torture she faced from her husband and his parents and had shared photos of her multiple injuries. Vismaya's death is one of the several dowry-related deaths reported in Kerala in a week's span. According to news reports, 21,026 dowry harassment cases have been reported in Kerala between 2016 and 2020, out of which there were only 251 cases where the accused were convicted (Express News Service, 2022). This is in addition to more than 7000 dowry deaths during that period¹. According to the Government of India's Ministry of Women and Child Development website, although the Dowry Prohibition Act has been in place since 1961 and prevents the "giving and taking of dowry", it allows any number or amount of "presents" to be given to the bridegroom's family. Recent news stories and reports suggest that several Malayali women are treated as a mere commodity in the marriage market and assigned them an exchange value in the form of dowry. Through the dowry system, the parents of young brides designate a certain amount of money or other priced possessions as compensation for 'accepting' and 'maintaining' their daughter. Its gendered ideology places women as inferior to men and assigns her a marginalised position in the conjugal family. This positionality of women needs to be envisioned in the "context of a deep-rooted patriarchal system that leads to an array of oppressions against women" (Bradley and Pallikadavath, 2013, p. 445). The surge in the dowry system was triggered by the economic liberalisation post 1990s and it became a

¹ See 'Why criminal justice system alone can't end dowry-related violence'. *The Quint*. (July 17, 2021).

significant means to attain caste and class mobility (Srinivasan, 2005).

The Vismaya incident symbolises the social pressure on middle-class families to participate in this dominant ‘exchange system’ and embrace its toxic consequences. The incident also highlights Malayali women’s pressure to conform to moral codes and the societal need to fit into the ‘ideal Malayali woman’ category, which I discuss in Chapter Two. The incidents such as the one mentioned here also reflect *her* lack of decisiveness to react to such atrocities, which can again be attributed to familial and societal pressures to conform to social and cultural norms. Cinema’s role in fostering social realities, such as the one discussed above, is immense. In Kerala (and in India, at large), cinema and society share a two-way relationship. Cinema mirrors society and presents its realities in such a way that we view the former as a metaphor for the latter. Cinematic representations are not just followed and worshipped in Kerala and the rest of India but become the base for evaluative and normative ideals (Pillai, 2017). Within this context, it would be relevant to examine how Shyamaprasad’s films articulate notions of gender, sexuality, diaspora, caste and the middle-class in contemporary Kerala society.

The thesis examines the films of Shyamaprasad, who has contributed to Malayalam cinema² in a significant way in terms of the themes he explores and the narrative style he adopts. Shyamaprasad has made thirteen full-length feature films and one short segment in an anthology of ten films directed by a few prominent Malayalam filmmakers. Before his entry to cinema, Shyamaprasad was actively involved in the production of television features. He wrote and directed eight television features for Doordarshan, an Indian Public Service Broadcaster, before he made his first film, *Kallu Kondoru Pennu* (A Woman Made of Stone, 1998). All his

² Malayalam cinema is one of the regional film industries in India based in Kerala, the southernmost state in the country. Several works in Malayalam Cinema have gained wide acclaim, popularity, and recognition in globally reputed cinematic platforms such as the Cannes Film Festival, Chicago International Film festival and the Academy Awards. Filmmakers like Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Shaji N Karun, Rajiv Anchal and Salim Ahamed have been bestowed with international honours on many occasions.

television features were literary adaptations of famous writers such as Vaikom Muhammad Basheer (*Viswavykathamaya Mookku*), Madhavikutty (*Venalinte Ozhivu*), Sarah Joseph (*Nilavariyunnu*), Albert Camus (*The Just*), Anton Chekov (*Vivahaloohana*), N. Mohanan (*Peruvazhiyile Kariyilakal*), K. Radhakrishnan (*Shamanthalam*), and N.P. Mohammad (*Ullurukkam*). Shyamaprasad received the Best Television Director Award for three years between 1993 and 1996 and won three National Awards and nine State Awards for his full-length feature films. Shyamaprasad's films have been screened at prestigious international conferences, including the Valladolid International Film Festival in Spain and the Stuttgart Film Festival in Germany. Despite all this, there has not been many significant and extensive critical works on his films. Scholarly works on Shyamaprasad's films, which are discussed below, focus on the formal elements of the films and do not engage in an in-depth examination of the social contexts in which they are made. These studies fail to capture the political relevance of the films and do not examine the moral ideologies the filmmaker critiques. Rajendran's (2016) 'Content Analysis of Shyamaprasad films', for example, merely provides a broad overview of what the films try to convey and makes brief and general observations about the plot and characters. The article identifies the presence of recurring themes in the films such as love, loss, betrayal, and guilt and highlights certain similarities in the character traits of the films' main characters. However, the analysis is limited to the personal views of the author, is not supported by other scholarly work, and lacks theoretical interpretation. Other scholars such as Smart (2018) and Devika (2016) have analysed Shyamaprasad's film *Akale*, especially in relation to the American play *The Glass Menagerie* from where the former's story was adapted. While Smart briefly looks at some of the formal elements of the film, Devika focuses on the plot and character analyses of the film. Nevertheless, these studies also lack relevant theoretical backing and critical engagement with key scholarship on either Malayalam cinema or the modalities that structure the identity and subjectivity of the characters in the film.

This thesis shows how director Shyamaprasad challenges normative ways of

representing gender, sexuality, diaspora, caste and the middle-class in Malayalam cinema and how he articulates these discourses within the context of Kerala society post liberalisation. The thesis also demonstrates how Shyamaprasad uses specific narrative styles and techniques to interrogate the discursive sites of difference and reinforce and challenge normative conceptions of male and female subjectivity. However, in the thesis, I also examine instances in the films where he reinforces “family as the primary trope to negotiate class, caste, community, and gender divisions” (Virdi, 2003, p. 7). Although Virdi’s claim is in reference to mainstream Hindi cinema, the same can be mentioned more generally about Malayalam cinema, which over the years has mainly dealt with tropes of family, marriage, and heterosexuality as key terrains on which Kerala society is structured. Pillai asserts that “the nuclear bourgeois family, which had been the linchpin of Kerala’s modernity, and into which reformed women of an earlier kinship system have been seduced to function under new regimes of social and cultural control, itself seems to have come under a new kind of siege” (2017, p. 56). The middle-class family and the ‘family man’ are significant tropes used in Malayalam cinema to attract family audiences (Pillai, 2017). The key themes I explore in Shyamaprasad’s films across the three analysis chapters include ‘gender, sexuality, and middle-class moralities’, ‘diaspora, belonging/displacement, and the diasporic subject’, and ‘the spatial and gendered politics of caste’.

Locating Shyamaprasad, his films, and his narrative approach

Shyamaprasad comes across as a filmmaker who is difficult to be placed into a specific category based on the type of films he makes. The typical mainstream Malayalam cinema includes elements such as the presence of stars, a conventional production-distribution system, and other commercial production elements such as song, dance, and action sequences (Muraleedharan, 2010).

While clarifying that his films do not fully belong to that category, Shyamaprasad

admits that there is a pressure for filmmakers to resort to some of these characteristics to thrive in the industry³. Some of his films feature popular stars in the Malayalam industry although he repeatedly suggests that they have been chosen primarily for their acting skills, owing to their experience and ability to master any kind of roles and not for their star value. In most of his interviews, Shyamaprasad has mentioned that his films are not targeted at a specific audience and not based on a specific formula. The filmmaker also does not identify himself with arthouse cinema, parallel cinema⁴, or the new generation cinema⁵. However, acclaimed scriptwriter and author John Paul, who passed away recently, was critical of the term ‘new generation’ and asked, “since when is it ‘new’, during an interview with a popular regional news channel in Kerala⁶. “It is a relative term. Malayalam films such as *Neelakuyil* (The Blue Cuckoo, 1954) and *Bhargavi Nilayam* (The House of Bhargavi, 1964) and filmmakers such as P.N. Menon, Vincent, Sethu Madhavan started the trend. Even if you are talking about films which introduced new trends and patterns and became popular in the process, it was filmmakers such as Bharathan, K.G. George, Padmarajan, and Mohan who deserve the credit for such experimentations”, he said in the interview.

During an interview with *Asianet News*, Shyamaprasad suggested that he does not wish to be bracketed into a particular category and wants to create ‘films that make a difference’.

There are a set of expectations that comes with mainstream films – the value of the star, the various masala elements (such as song and dance or action sequences), etc. It is difficult to find a linear space for films that deviate from this pattern. I am not indifferent to the mainstream market or its requirements but not ready to compromise on the things I want to convey to the audience (‘On Record’, *Asianet News*, 19 September 2012).

This urge to be different from the rest and “make a difference” led him to make *Bokshu the Myth* (2003), an adventure-drama with an Indo-American cast and crew. The film, released

³ Interview with Shyamaprasad in ‘On Record’ programme in *Asianet News* channel telecasted on September 19, 2012.

⁴ Parallel cinema originated in West Bengal as an Indian film movement in the 1950s. In Kerala, the film movement developed later in the 1970s and the early 1980s. The films were known for their serious content and symbolic elements and reflected the socio-political climates of that particular period. I will discuss this further in the next chapter.

⁵ New generation cinema is a common term used for films released post 2010, most of which introduced new narrative trends, themes, and techniques to Malayalam cinema (Gopinath and Raj, 2015)

⁶ Interview with John Paul Puthussery in ‘Nere Chovve’ in *Manorama News* channel on June 10, 2017.

only in film festivals, weaved around a captivating storyline and a unique narrative style with dark and experimental frames, which not many Malayalam filmmakers experimented with at that time⁷. In *Kerala Café* (2010), an anthology of ten films by various filmmakers from Kerala, Shyamaprasad directed an eleven-minute segment called *Off Season*. It tells the story of Kunjappai, a local unofficial tourist guide who meets a Portuguese couple in one of the popular beaches in Kerala. Kunjappai treats the couple well and offers them gifts and services with the hope of receiving a tip. However, he realises that they have come to Kerala to find a job and that they have hardly any money with them. In the film, Shyamaprasad uses frontal shots of Kunjappai, where he talks to the audience and ‘breaks the fourth wall’. Breaking the fourth wall, which evolved from classical theatre plays, is a technique used in certain Hollywood films and French New Wave cinema to address the audience directly and help them relate to the character’s mood, intentions, and feelings (Brown, 2022). Shyamaprasad uses the technique on a few occasions in *Off Season*, where Kunjappai’s dialogues and expressions are packed with humour and satire. With this specific use of the narrative technique, Shyamaprasad asks the audience to understand Kunjappai’s helplessness and at the same time urges them not to discriminate the lower-class subject as an opportunist. Thus, Shyamaprasad engages with alternative film practices such as ‘breaking the fourth wall’ and exhibits his affiliation towards counter cinema. However, these alternative film techniques or a counter cinema approach are not consistently seen across his oeuvre. As mentioned in the interview quote above, there are times he reproduces mainstream production values too, such as the employment of stars or the use of songs in his films.

⁷ According to IMDb, the film has not been officially released yet even though it featured in a few international film festivals across the globe. The film was neither released in theatres nor was its print made available in CD or DVD formats



One of the frontal shots of Kunjappai in the short segment *Off Season*, which shows a different dimension of Shyamaprasad's filmmaking style. The scene shows Kunjappai breaking the fourth wall and talking to the audience.

Another peculiar feature of Shyamaprasad's filmmaking style is the way he establishes the cultural tropes of characters and their communities through the articulation of aspects such as food, music, and the places they inhabit. In films such as *Akale* and *Hey Jude*, Shyamaprasad portrays the lives of Anglo-Indian men and women who once migrated from Goa to settle down in Kerala. In *Akale*, there are a few scenes which show the protagonist's family dining or inviting someone for dinner to mark an important event. In *Hey Jude*, the central female character Crystal owns a beachside café and is also the key member of a music band. It is by creating an interest in music and making him a part of the music band that Crystal helps the male protagonist Jude to recover from a medical condition called Asperger's syndrome. In the film, Shyamaprasad includes several scenes that highlight food, drink, and local travel to capture the cultural specificity of the Anglo-Indian community in Kerala. In his most recent film *Oru Njayarazcha* (A Sunday, 2019), he employs the Dutch angle shot (Dutch tilt), to show the uncertainty, anxiety, and trauma of a suicide victim just moments before she commits the act as it appears in the thoughts of another woman. The Dutch tilt is a camera technique extensively used in German expressionist films to create a sense of uneasiness and disorientation, which is not commonly employed in mainstream Malayalam cinema (Nielsen, 2015). It is difficult to identify consistent authorial characteristics related to film style and

techniques in Shyamaprasad's oeuvre; however, his films are marked by their distinctive narrative approaches and politics of representation. In this section, I engaged in a discussion of the different film genres and movements in Kerala to map Shyamaprasad's location as a filmmaker, focussing on his narrative styles, such as the use of dark and experimental frames, the articulation of cultural objects and places, and the employment of uncommon camera techniques to highlight his filmmaking approach. While other important Malayalam filmmakers in the past and present can be placed into a specific bracket owing to the kind of films they have made or their approach towards filmmaking, there is an ambivalence around locating Shyamaprasad because while he makes mainstream cinema he does not adhere to its codes and conventions. Unlike other mainstream filmmakers in Malayalam cinema, almost all Shyamaprasad's films were funded by individual producers who are not part of huge star-owned production houses or producer-distributor associations. Shyamaprasad has mentioned in interviews that he is not interested in being a part of any groups or associations within the industry. He says such organisations and associations can be restrictive and it's always best to work with individual producers who give you the space to do what you want (Manorama News, 2017). Despite being an ambivalent mainstream filmmaker, Shyamaprasad is critical of organisations such as the Kerala State Film Development Corporation (KSFDC), which was formed to promote the film market in Kerala, for not promoting independent films that have a social and cultural impact on the society (Manorama News, 2017). He admits that he does accede to the demands of the mainstream cinema market to cast popular mainstream stars including Mammotty, Prithviraj, Nivin Pauly, Fahad Fazil, Meera Jasmine, and Trisha among others in his films, although he says he "won't deviate from his vision just to please the producer or make money" (Manorama News, 2017). He is also critical of the Malayalam film industry being too focussed on TV rights and highlights the role of regional television in producing, distributing, and circulating 'good' films (Manorama News, 2017). "Television is interested only in purely commercial films, the ones that run successfully in theatres. Television

in Europe, for example, French TV, German TV, BBC, Channel 4, have a long history of promoting good films. We have a lot to learn from them,” he said in an interview with *Manorama News* channel. Shyamaprasad’s films such as *Bokshu the Myth* and *Elektra* were showcased only in international film festivals and not even telecasted on regional television. It is also interesting to note that most of Shyamaprasad’s films have not been released in digital streaming platforms or the multiplexes in Kerala.

Research Outcome and Contributions

The outcome from this research is as follows: the thesis will make a theoretical contribution that endorses an intersectional approach to studying gender in India. It will also demonstrate the effectiveness of narrative analysis as a key analytical approach to studying films. The thesis contributes to gender studies in the Indian context, where women are marginalised and subordinated on multiple levels. The most significant contribution this thesis makes is to the existing scholarship on Malayalam cinema, where the majority of studies on gender do not take up an intersectional approach, which means that gender is explored in isolation and not in relation to other modalities that structure subjectivities such as diaspora, caste and class. Some of the scholarly works on gender in Malayalam cinema do refer to caste and class but fail to engage in an in-depth examination of the intersecting identities and subjectivities. The thesis offers a nuanced understanding of the intersections between gender and other tropes that structure identity and how intersectionality can be a useful theoretical tool to analyse gender in Malayalam cinema. The thesis also investigates how existing scholarship on Malayalam cinema do not emphasise enough on the idea of space and its discursive nature, especially in relation to power relations. How does power play out/negotiate in different spaces or what meanings does it assume as it traverse spaces? In my research, I employ the concept of space and engage with scholars such as Doreen Massey and Michel Foucault, who have mobilised it in different ways to understand the role of spatial dimensions in the exercise of power. For

instance, how can we think about Foucault's idea of disciplinary spaces to analyse the middle-class or the way in which the Nampoothiri *illams* operate? Or what happens when characters in Shyamaprasad's films transgress these spaces? How are spaces related to the fluidity of identities or the specific ways in which subjectivities are constituted? In the next few paragraphs of this chapter, I discuss the gaps in scholarship on gender in Malayalam cinema in relation to the concepts of intersectionality and space and demonstrate how the thesis addresses them. I mainly do this to highlight the original contribution the thesis makes to existing scholarship on gender in Malayalam cinema.

Several scholarly works in Malayalam cinema highlight the issue of gender in isolation and not in relation to the other modalities that structure identity and subjectivity. In P. K. Nair's article 'Gender Equations in Malayalam Cinema', he discusses the representation of the female lead character in the film *Nadan Pennum Nattu Pramaniyum* (The Traditional Girl and the Nobleman, 2000) directed by Rajasenan. The male lead, as Nair argues, converses to the female protagonist in a language that borders on vulgarity and reinforces his masculine supremacy by shouting at her, "making a hole with his fingers", and saying "'you must remember woman is always under the man', obviously referring to the sex act" (p.38). The author, in this case, merely attributes this to a display of hegemonic masculinity and does not adopt an intersectional approach to understand the lack of agency in the female character. Here, the rich upper middle-class male lead, Govindan, is paired opposite Gayatri, a woman from a poor and rural background and a low-wages employee in his shop. Gayatri is also a Nampoothiri woman⁸ who is historically marginalised within the patriarchal and hierarchal caste system in Kerala. Hence, it is the intersection of multiple subjectivities that marginalises Gayatri and renders her voiceless in various scenes in the film. Only an intersectional approach would enable us to understand how the experiences of women would differ based on their multiple subject

⁸ I will discuss what it means to be a Nampoothiri woman in more detail in Chapter Six of the thesis.

positions. As I discuss later in Chapter Three, this is particularly significant in the Indian context, where all these tropes that structure identity and subjectivity are fluid, equally important, and mutually constitutive.

Similarly, in ‘Engendering Popular Cinema in Malayalam’, V. K. Harris explores the transformation of the female lead in director Kamal’s *Swapnakkoodu* (The Nest of Dreams, 2003), where she changes from a strong and stubborn young woman to one who reinforces “old stereotypes about a faithful wife and loving, all-suffering mother” (2010, p. 63). Here again, the author adopts a single-axis approach and ascribes the transformation to the disciplined subject only to her gender. I underscore the need to examine the multiple subject position of characters in the film to avoid the homogenisation of social categories (Yuval-Davis, 2006), about which I will discuss in further detail in Chapter Three. In the earlier half of the film, the female lead character in question here, Kamala, and her sister, Padma lived with their single mother and were economically independent. However, their mother passes away suddenly, and the two sisters become orphaned. They are asked to leave the rented house and are pressured to find another place to live. It is at this juncture that the orphaned and displaced Kamala starts to ponder about a long-term relationship with the privileged upper middle-class Syrian Christian, Kunjoonju. This, as Booth and Shope claim, also “reaffirms Kerala’s patriarchal values when calamity strikes and the heroines become dependent on the heroes” (2014, p. 86). Here, I claim that the dependency is not on ‘any’ hero but, quite problematically, on privileged upper middle-class, upper-caste heroes.

In the same article, Harris (2010) examines director Fazil’s film *Pappayude Swantham Appoos* (Pappas Own Appoos, 1992) to problematise the idea of the ‘absent mother’ in Malayalam cinema. He writes:

In *Pappayude Swantham Appoos* (1992), Mammooty plays father to a problem child. And what exactly is the problem? The boy has lost his mother and he spends hours watching the video images of a particular ‘seductive’ mother, played by Shobhana. Things take a turn for the better when a young *ayah* comes in and the boy immediately relates to her, apparently *substituting* her for his mother. But the problem is that his father finds the ayah a bit terrible and sends her packing.

This results in a crisis. The boy suddenly catches an unexplained illness and is on the verge of death, to be saved only after the ayah is brought back and all the three – father, son and the ayah – take a symbolic boat ride that reunites them with the memory of the lost mother. Towards the end of this ride, the father accepts the ayah, and this acceptance is also blessed by the absent mother. (2010, p. 60-61)

Instead of simplifying the discussion and limiting it to a discourse around the gender-based trope of the absent mother, I assert the need to focus on an intersectional approach and emphasise the need to complicate the equation by examining the *ayah*'s subject position. The *ayah*, Meenakshi, faces financial difficulties and is often subjected to her brother's domestic violence. It is this vulnerability and class position that enforces her to be dependent on privileged upper middle-class men such as Balachandran (played by Mammooty), like the case in *Swapnakoodu*. The film *No. 1 Snehatheeram Bangalore North* (No. 1 Love Shore Bangalore North, 1995) directed by the same filmmaker, has a similar storyline, where the poor, vulnerable, and unmarried female lead character eventually agrees to live with the upper middle-class hero (also played by Mammooty) and his adopted kids. Here, it is the intersectional perspective that enables me to point out that films such as these naturalise the vulnerability of weak and economically unstable women to accept proposals from rich, upper middle-class single fathers.

In Chapter Three, I mention films such as *Aniyathipravu* (The Younger Sister Dove, 1997) and *Veendum Chila Veettukaryangal* (A Few Other Family Affairs, 1999), to show how middle-class families distance themselves from the lower-class and the value they attach to matters such as prestige and honour. In Janaki Sreedharan's article 'Marriage and Family in Malayalam Cinema', the critique is focussed mostly on the stereotyping of the female character without much stress on the ideological hegemony of middle-class families. Sreedharan (2010) mentions the case of the film *Kochu Kochu Santhoshangal* (The Little Moments of Happiness, 2000) to suggest how the film "privileged male isolation and suffering in the context of the woman's steady growth in wealth, fame and status" (p. 84). She further adds, "the film breaks

the stereotyped demonisation of the artist-woman but takes care to let the family and the female accommodate each other. At the same time there is an honest attempt to strike a balance by accepting the artist-wife back into the folds of the family” (p. 84). Again, I urge the importance of an intersectional approach where the identity of the characters and the family needs to be critically examined. In the film, the central female character Asha’s suffering is intensified due to the ‘class-battle’ between her husband and her father. The demonisation of the artist-woman by the father and his efforts to see his daughter become a successful dancer is motivated by his upper middle-class, upper-caste, male ego and his detachment from her lower-class husband. For Asha’s father, the prestige, honour, and morality of the upper middle-class family are pivotal and are valuable tropes that need to be preserved at any cost.

In the article ‘Gender construct as a narrative and text: The female protagonist in new-generation Malayalam cinema’, Gopinath and Raj analyse Malayalam films such as *Salt N’ Pepper* (2011), *Chappa Kurishu* (Heads or Tails, 2011), *22 Female Kottayam* (2012), and *Diamond Necklace* (2012) to argue that although the portrayal of women characters in these films is unconventional, they “retain the conventions of femininity of more traditional Malayalam films” (2015, p. 65). *Diamond Necklace* has three female lead characters in addition to its male protagonist. In the article, the authors mention how the hero of the film, Arun, exploits all three women in one way or the other. However, to adopt an intersectional approach and account for multiple grounds of identity, it is important to locate Arun’s subject position as a young, middle-class, upper-caste doctor. Lakshmi, one of the three leading women in the film, is a lower-class Tamil nurse who works in Arun’s department. Lakshmi’s widowed mother is a low-waged rural labourer in her native village and is financially dependent on her daughter. On one occasion, Arun overhears Lakshmi’s conversation with her mother and understands that she is under financial constraints. Arun exploits her circumstances and offers her emotional support. He proposes to her and says he is serious about the relationship. Lakshmi

is initially doubtful due to the class difference between the two although Arun manages to convince her and sexually exploits her in the following scenes. Hence, it is Lakshmi's precarious social circumstances and her lower-caste subject position that enables Arun to exploit and marginalise her. Even in *Chappa Kurishu*, the upper-class male protagonist, Arjun, sexually exploits his vulnerable subordinate, Sonia, and decides to marry another woman from a wealthy upper-class family. Gopinath and Raj write, "In *Chappa Kurishu*, Sonia has power and control over Arjun, whereas Ann, his fiancée, does not. It is Sonia's sexual power that enables her to dictate Arjun's life with her" (2015, p.72). In the film, Arjun invites Sonia to his home, lures her into having sex with him, and records it on his phone. Contrary to what the authors suggest, I claim that it is Sonia's lack of power, owing to her identity as both a woman and a relatively lower-class employee who works as his subordinate, that leads to her exploitation.

In the article 'Women in Malayalam Cinema', Muraleedharan (2010) engages in an in-depth analysis of the popular film *Pranayavarnangal* (The Colours of Love, 1998), directed by prominent filmmaker Sibi Malayil. Muraleedharan's analysis primarily focuses on the relationship between the female protagonists, Maya, and Aarathi. Maya and Aarathi are close friends and stay together in the university hostel. On one occasion, Maya introduces Aarathi to her family friend, Vinay Chandran, a high-profile officer with the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). The film progresses with Maya's constant attempts to make sure Aarathi falls in love with Vinay Chandran, until Maya realises that her father has arranged her marriage with him. Aarathi has a nervous breakdown as she witnesses Maya's and Vinay Chandran's engagement ceremony. Maya attempts to call off the marriage due to her guiltiness but, as Muraleedharan notes, "Vinay Chandran intervenes and clears the misunderstanding between the girl friends. Telling them that they both are too immature for marriage or even a serious romance, he leaves them to enjoy their college life, promising to come back and marry Maya

when she is ready for it” (2010, p. 161). In this instance, the author classifies Vinay Chandran’s response merely as an expression of hegemonic masculinity and does not identify his subject position.

In the scene where the two families officially meet to fix the marriage, Vinay Chandran, an upper middle-class, upper-caste civil servant, tells Maya that she is the only woman he could think of when it comes to marriage, thus suggesting his preference for a rich, urban-cultured, upper-caste girl over someone like Aarathi who hails from a rural background. In the article, Muraleedharan describes Maya as an “archetype of the castrating woman... constantly shown making men uncomfortable with a sardonic display of female sexuality” (2010, p. 163). However, this unitary approach adopted by the author does not articulate the power dynamics between her or Aarathi and the men in the film (Hancock, 2007). In the article, Muraleedharan (2010) suggests that Maya returns to normative feminine behaviour after she accepts Vinay Chandran as her prospective groom although the author does not decode it further. The author also traces out Maya’s bold nature and the ways in which she challenges patriarchy in the film. However, it needs to be noted that her display of boldness, courage and physical strength in the film have all been against lower-class/caste men, including a classmate, the hostel security officer, and the local postman. Even Aarathi is often portrayed as someone who fears the presence of her upper-caste brother who disciplines and mistreats all the women in the Nair *tharavadu*⁹ in which they reside. The only male Aarathi talks to with some confidence and authority in the film is the lower-class/caste Victor, who aspires to marry her. Thus, more than the same-gender female relationship which the author focuses on, what eventually stands out in the film, as I claim, are the ways in which the social contexts, power, and agency of the characters get more traumatised and complicated by the politics of difference.

⁹ I discuss this term and its connotations in Chapters Four and Six.



In Sibi Malayil's *Pranayavarnangal*, the female protagonist Aarathi fears the presence of her upper-caste brother who attempts to discipline and control her during her visits to the *tharavadu*.

In the same article, Muraleedharan (2010) also briefly analyses another women-centric film titled *Notebook* (2006) to discuss female friendships in Malayalam cinema. The author classifies *Notebook* as a progressive film that works against patriarchal conventions. The film narrates the story of the close friendship shared by three teenaged girls, Sreedevi, Pooja and Sarah, who study in an international boarding school. During a class tour, Sreedevi has sexual intercourse with her boyfriend Suraj and gets pregnant. The three girls discuss the situation with each other and decide to opt for an abortion without anyone else's knowledge. Sreedevi dies from surgical complications and as a result, Pooja and Sarah faces trauma out of guilt and fear of punishment. The two of them and Suraj regroup years later and share each other's stories. Muraleedharan (2010) argues that the film refuses to celebrate normative heterosexuality by placing Sreedevi as the victim (instead of the other two girls) and implicitly attributing her downfall to the patriarchal family she hails from. Muraleedharan refers to Sreedevi as the "one who ends up in trouble... the climax clearly implies that her tragedy was the result of the male-centredness of such family formations which allow no space for expressions or discussions on (teenage) female sexualities" (2010, p. 175). Here again, I claim that the analysis does not consider the intersectional point of view and limits Sreedevi's identity

to her gender tropes alone. Sreedevi is a Brahmin woman in the film, and it is the intersection of her family's gendered and caste-based conventional mindset that eventually leads to her victimised subjectivity. Through this discussion, I establish that previous scholarship on gender in Malayalam cinema rarely engage in an intersectional analysis. Such an approach, as I show in my discussion of Shyamaprasad's films, is crucial to determine the multiple subject positions of characters and better understand the differential power relations between them.

Nevertheless, there is an emerging body of research that takes up an intersectional approach in the analysis of gender in Malayalam cinema. For instance, Geetha (2021), in her research on the idea of 'gendered colourism', examined the representation of dark-skinned men and women in selected Malayalam films using an intersectional framework. The study analysed films such as *Celluloid* (2013) and *Kammattipadam* (2016) to explore the intersection of gender and caste in the representation of darker bodies in Malayalam cinema. By examining the male and female lead characters in these films, the author critically highlights the stereotypical depiction of Dalit characters in the films and the unequal power relation between the upper and lower castes. Pillai (2020) adopts an intersectional lens to draw attention to the stereotypical representation of female protagonists in her analysis of women directors and the politics of gender in Malayalam cinema. The author highlights several female filmmakers and some of their important films to exemplify how these films adhere to the patriarchal and commercial functions of mainstream cinema culture and frame narratives that reinforce dominant gender codes and heteronormative ideals. Pillai also underscores that the attempt for gender equality in the narratives of female filmmakers in Malayalam cinema – apart from Vidhu Vincent's *Manhole* (2016) – does not fully break mainstream conventions and ideologies because they fail to address other intersectional factors such as class and caste. Sebastian (2021), in 'Laughter and abjection: The politics of comedy in Malayalam cinema', argues that the mode of humour in mainstream Malayalam cinema primarily caters to the

heterosexual, cis-gendered, upper-caste Malayali and turns into an instrument of abjection upon marginalised communities. The author argues that contemporary Malayalam cinema legitimises the heterosexual binary and essentialises gender by adopting a format of presentation that epitomizes hegemonic masculinity and the stereotyping of the non-hegemonic characters. Using an intersectional approach, Sebastian argues that contemporary Malayalam cinema produces a brand of comedy that endorses the hegemonic order of gender, caste, and heterosexuality. Mokkil (2020) in his article titled ‘Sleepless fathers in Malayalam cinema: Unravelling the dynamics of caste and masculinity’, analyses two Malayalam films such as *Achanurangatha Veedu* (The Home of the Sleepless Father, 2006) and *Drishyam* (The Sight, 2013) to discuss the intersection of gender, caste and class vis-à-vis the representation of the father character in these films. Mokkil finds that in both films, the main focus is on the father characters who are forced to act to protect their teenage daughters from sexual assault. Mokkil’s analysis shows that the lower-class, lower-caste father in *Achanurangatha Veedu* suffers humiliation and fails to get justice while the upper-caste, upper middle-class father in *Drishyam* overcomes every crisis he faces and secures the power to challenge the police and legal system to safeguard his family. Thus, the author highlights the differences in the representation of characters based on their social identities in the films.

Space as a conceptual tool

As I mentioned in the previous section of this chapter, and as I discuss in further detail in Chapter Three, one of the ideas that is significant to my discussion of Shyamaprasad’s films is spatial politics. Space is a useful conceptual tool to locate and situate the characters and scenes of films within specific contexts and examine how identity and power relations operate. In my literature review, I find that scholarly articles on gender in Malayalam cinema that employ a close reading of films rarely consider the role of space in the analysis of identity and power relations between characters. I suggest that Muraleedharan’s discussion of the films such as

Notebook and *Pranayavarnangal* in ‘Women in Malayalam Cinema’ should have included a spatial analysis to map the subjectivity of the characters. In *Notebook*, for instance, Sarah and Pooja are asked to meet the school principal in his room after Sreedevi’s death, where they are joined by a police officer, the doctor who conducted her surgery, her father, and their class teacher. As the two girls enter the room and stand there with a worried expression on their faces (along with the female class teacher who is also not offered a seat), the three male officials (all of them seated) stare viciously at them. Without any provocation or interrogation, the doctor and the police officer start accusing the girls and ridiculing them with sarcastic questions and gestures, as the camera pans across them.



A scene from the Malayalam film *Notebook*, in which a group of ‘powerful’ men confront two young girl students to address a disciplinary issue. A female staff member can also be seen standing.

The class teacher requests the principal to question the girls in front of their parents for emotional support, to which he does not react. The space of the principal’s office room and the way the male characters treat the class teacher and the girl students reinforce power hierarchies, which is reflective of how women subjects are positioned in Kerala society. The police officer tells the teacher that questioning the girls in his office can get even more aggressive and intimidating. Pooja, who did not want the incident to affect her studies and her future, convinces everyone that she was not aware of any of these unfortunate events. Shortly after, Sreedevi’s

father and the police officer take turns to abuse Sarah physically and emotionally for supposedly hiding some facts from them. As she tries to respond in a bold manner, the principal shouts at her and says, “Quiet! Don’t raise your voice in *my office* (his emphasis)”. Earlier in the film, the three girls were asked to kneel on the school ground by their physical instructor for talking to each other during their workout routine. Sarah’s actions or the lack of ‘discipline’ provokes the school principal to conduct a formal assembly and publicly announce that she would be dismissed from the school with immediate effect. By punishing the students, the principal, and the school authorities exercise, what Foucault calls disciplinary power to punish the subject, discipline them and in the process, warn the rest of the students about the potential consequences of transgressive spatial practices. The principal’s office and other school premises function as spaces in which disciplinary power is imposed, where the conduct of young girls is regulated by concrete spatial conditions and are punished by a hegemonic authority for any irregularity in their speech or actions. I will discuss disciplinary power and other forms of power, which Foucault proposes in his work, in further detail in Chapter Three. Foucault (1982) maps out how power relations constitute concerted, spatial, and regulated systems in such institutional spaces by asserting,

The disposal of its space, the meticulous regulations which govern its internal life, the different activities which are organized there, the diverse persons who live there or meet one another, each with his own function, his well-defined character - all these things constitute a block of capacity-communication-power. The activity which ensures apprenticeship, and the acquisition of aptitudes or types of behaviour is developed there by means of a whole ensemble of regulated communications (lessons, questions and answers, orders, exhortations, coded signs of obedience, differentiation marks of the “value” of each person and of the levels of knowledge) and by the means of a whole series of power processes (enclosure, surveillance, reward and punishment, the pyramidal hierarchy. (p. 787)

Such value-based systems, coded behavioural norms, and hierarchical structures are instrumental in the governance of subjects within familial and other institutional spaces in Kerala. Even in *Pranayavarnangal*, Aarathi’s identity is governed by the spatial dynamics of her traditional Nair *tharavadu* and the disciplinary spaces within it. She is more confident and

independent within the university, her hostel premises, and the other urban spaces she occupies. In her conservative village, she is often either terrified by the sight of the *velichappadu* (oracles who are mostly associated with local temples) or petrified by the presence of her authoritarian brother. Aarathi's freedom, sense of agency, desires, and uninhibited interpersonal relationships are expressions of her attempt to break free from the patriarchal spaces and governmental interventions she experiences at her village. The discussion of space and spatial practices is crucial to examine, articulate, and account for individual heterogeneity, particularly in relation to intersectional tropes such as gender, traditions, sense of place, caste, and class.

In the close reading of films such as *Chappa Kurishu*, *Diamond Necklace*, and *22 Female Kottayam* too, for instance, the authors do not articulate the role of specific spaces in the conceptualisation of male and female characters in the films. Almost all the locations in these films, in which the upper middle-class central male character (all played by popular actor Fahad Fazil) sexually exploits the female characters, are either his own domestic spaces or workplaces where he can exercise power in such a way that the question of consent does not arise at any point (Li, 2007). These spaces validate the repressive power that is inflicted directly on the female subject. In *Chappa Kurishu* too, the places in which Arjun sexually exploits and manipulates Sonia are his office and his home, which are spaces where she lacks power and agency. The construction and performance of both the masculine and feminine gender identities are dependent on the spaces men and women occupy (Day, 2001). The construction of Arjun's masculine gender identity in the film is in negotiation with Sonia's feminine gender identity. In the film, Arjun's performance of masculinity is built around his perceptions of Sonia as a vulnerable woman, especially in certain spaces. Space is a product of power relations and "power itself has a geography" (Massey, 2009, p.18). It is the space in which Arjun imposes the power of domination on Sonia to sexually exploit her in *Chappa Kurishu*, and the space in which the school principal enforces the power of authority on his girl students to punish them

in *Notebook* that shape the subjectivity of those characters. These hierarchical spaces transform women, such as Sonia and the girl students in this case, into self-regulating, self-disciplining subjects. In both these films, space is central to ways in which power is imposed on women and how they are subjugated in the process.

Methods

The thesis deployed a combination of research methods including: a cultural studies methodology to propose a context-centred approach to study films; intersectionality as a method of analysis to show how the examination of the intersection of multiple social identities is crucial to understand the representational politics of gender in Malayalam cinema; narrative analysis to examine various aspects such as plot, dialogues, narrative structure, characters, characterisation, and other formal and stylistic elements of Shyamaprasad's films. As I later elaborated in Chapter Three, the strength of cultural studies lies in its contextual analysis and adopting an intersectional analysis enables me to understand the hierarchies and inequities of gender, sexuality, class and caste within specific cultural and historical contexts. Combining these with narrative analysis method allows me to examine male and female subjectivities in Shyamaprasad's films and articulate how these hierarchies and inequities function within them.

My data for analysis are the films of Shyamaprasad and the primary method I used to categorise them into various themes/chapters is intersectionality. Intersectionality is a metaphor to understand the ways in which multiple forms of difference, inequality, and power shape the individuals' positionalities (Rice, Harrison, and Friedman, 2019). The adoption of intersectionality, which was also my theoretical framework, aided me in the process of identifying gender as the central axis around which the other modalities, such as sexuality, diaspora, caste, and the middle-class are organised. The films chosen for analysis are divided into three chapters. I identified four films - *Ore Kadal* (The Sea Within, 2007), *Artist* (2013), *Ritu* (Seasons, 2009), and *Elektra* (2005) - to be included in Chapter Four on gender, sexuality, and middle-class moralities. In Chapter Five, I analyse three films, out of which two films –

English: An Autumn in London (2013), and *Ivide* (Here, 2015) – are on the diaspora and diasporic subjects, and another film – *Kallu Kondoru Pennu* (A Woman Made of Stone, 1998) – is based on a diasporic migrant (I will return to this term in Chapter Five). The main film identified for discussion in Chapter Six, which centres around the intersection of gender and caste, is *Agnisakshi* (With Fire as Witness, 1999). I also examine a few scenes of the film *Arike* (So Close, 2012) and explore relevant aspects in relation to the central theme of the chapter.

Given that the focus of my research is on gender and intersectionality, the films that did not fit into the specific theme of a certain chapter(s) are not included for a detailed analysis. I use narrative analysis as the analytical tool in my close reading of all the films across the three film analysis chapters.

I address the following research questions in my study:

- How is the ideal Malayali woman conceived in Kerala society and mainstream Malayalam cinema?
- Why and how is an intersectional approach useful to discuss gender in Malayalam cinema?
- How do Shyamaprasad's films articulate notions of gender, sexuality, diaspora, caste, and middle-class in contemporary Kerala society?

I address the first research question in Chapter Two of the thesis. To analyse the representation of gender, especially in relation to other modalities such as sexuality, diaspora, caste, and class in Shyamaprasad's films, I provide a critical discussion of the ways in which gender is conceptualised in Kerala society and Malayalam cinema. For this purpose, I explore how women were historically marginalised in Kerala and the role culture plays in the constitution of her subject position. In the chapter, I also examine the period post liberalisation, which witnessed several changes not only in Kerala society (and India, at large) but also altered the way in which gender was represented in Malayalam cinema prior to it. I also discuss the representational politics of gender in Malayalam cinema later in the chapter. Here, I not only examine how gender is conceived in Malayalam cinema from its inception to the present but

also explicate the ways in which gender intersects with other modalities such as caste and class in several Malayalam films¹⁰.

This, the intersection of gender with other social identities, leads me to the next research question – when and how is an intersectional approach useful to discuss gender in Malayalam cinema. Because I adopt intersectionality as my theoretical framework and a method of analysis, I address this question in various chapters of the thesis. In Chapter One, I discussed the significance of an intersectional approach and claim that majority of studies on gender in Malayalam cinema do not take up an intersectional approach; in most of those scholarly works, gender is explored in isolation and not in relation to other modalities such as diaspora, caste, and class. I discussed existing literature on gender in Malayalam cinema later in the section to further exemplify how they lack an intersectional approach and what such an approach enables them to do. I also engage in a detailed literature review of intersectionality in Chapter Three, citing key relevant arguments, debates, and discussions from prominent scholars, from within India and globally, who theorise intersectionality or endorse an intersectional approach in the analysis of gender. I also adopt an intersectional approach in my analysis chapters where gender is discussed in relation to other modalities such as sexuality, middle-class, diaspora, and caste, which are core themes that emerge from the films discussed in Chapters Four, Five, and Six.

The third and final research question is mainly addressed in Chapters Four, Five and Six. In Chapter Four, I cite relevant literature to discuss the Indian middle-class, with more focus on the period post liberalisation, particularly to explore the ways in which the idea of morality

¹⁰ Throughout the thesis, I have cited a wide range of films to suggest the presence of specific trends where several films released during the same period conform to particular traits and representational patterns or at times to highlight a certain narrative or thematic pattern that stays in the industry for years. Additionally, I have utilised selected Malayalam films such as *Veendum Chila Veettukaryangal* (A Few Other Family Affairs, 1999), *Aniyathipravu* (The Younger Sister Dove, 1997), *Ezham Kadalinnakkare* (Beyond the Seventh Sea, 1979), and *Kanmadam* (Viscous Rock, 1998), among others to engage in a more detailed discussion related to gender, sexuality, diaspora, class and caste in various chapters of the thesis.

is conceived in Kerala/India¹¹, especially within the institutions of marriage, family, and employment. I also examine how gender intersects with class in the Indian/Kerala context and the role it plays in shaping and negotiating women's identities and subjectivities. After setting the context for analysis, I examine how Malayalam cinema and Shyamaprasad's films engage with the idea of middle-class moralities, especially in relation to gender and sexuality. Similarly, in Chapter Five, after theorising the idea of a diaspora, this thesis, more specifically, explores the Indian diaspora in relation to the key concepts and ideas relevant to my analysis of Shyamaprasad's films dealing with the diaspora and diasporic subjects. I utilise the section on diasporic films, which focus on Bollywood¹² and Malayalam cinema, as a framework to explore how Shyamaprasad's films reinforce or challenge stereotypical ways of representing the diaspora and the diasporic migrant subjects on screen. I address the third research question in Chapter Six as well. In Chapter Six, I provide an understanding of how caste operates in Kerala/India and give a sense of the Brahmin hegemony and the dominant upper-caste discourses prevailing in the state of Kerala. In the same chapter, I also seek to explore the gendered logic of caste in Kerala; I discuss how caste and gender intersect in contemporary Kerala and examine how upper-caste patriarchy disciplines and dominates women in the Brahmanical system. Also, the films I analyse in the chapters include characters and scenes that reflect real-world issues that occur within the Nampoothiri/Brahmin households in Kerala.

The main argument across the various chapters of the thesis is that Shyamaprasad's films highlight the patriarchal power structures that Malayali women are forced to adhere to and underscore the excessive pressure on these women to be moral subjects. It is here that a contextual approach¹³ to study the films is helpful to analyse the social, cultural, political, and

¹¹ In most instances in the chapter, I refer to the term 'Indian middle-class' rather than 'Kerala middle-class.' This is primarily because the nature and attributes of the middle-class does not vary from region to region in India. Also, specific scholarship that discusses the Kerala middle-class is sparse.

¹² I provide the rationale to why I discuss Bollywood in footnote 51 in Chapter Five of the thesis.

¹³ I discuss the contextual approach in Chapter Three of the thesis.

economic contexts linked to the formation of Malayali woman's subject position. In Chapter Two, the thesis problematises the conception of the 'ideal' Malayali woman and how the marginalisation of women is linked to the question of morality. In films such as *Ore Kadal*, *Artist*, *Ritu*, and *Elektra*, for instance, which I examine in Chapter Four, we see how there are a set of moral expectations on the leading women in the films at the outset. However, Shyamaprasad challenges the heteronormative conception of women's identities and disrupts the stereotypical ways in which women are represented in mainstream Malayalam cinema. In Shyamaprasad's diaspora films, which I analyse in Chapter Five, the filmmaker subverts the homogenised representation of diasporic identities in both Malayalam cinema and more broadly, in Indian cinema. These films, *Kallu Kondoru Penne*, *English: An Autumn in London*, and *Ivide*, show how diasporic Malayali women become subjects to patriarchal power structures in their respective hostlands. In *Agnisakshi* and *Arike*, which I use as case studies to discuss the articulation of gendered caste politics, the filmmaker critiques hegemonic upper-caste men who attempt to control women subjects in the name of moral duty and caste hierarchy.

Overview of Research

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. Each of my chapters includes a literature review to highlight the topics, debates, and discussions central to the chapter in order to position my own analysis within that context. In Chapter One, I do a literature review of gender in Malayalam cinema to draw attention to the lack of an intersectional approach and the application of the notion of space in existing scholarship. In my body chapters, I not only provide a literature review of the central topic(s) each of them addresses, which includes gender, middle-class, diaspora, and caste, but also examine previous scholarly works on the representation of these tropes in Malayalam cinema. I will provide an overview of all the chapters in the next few paragraphs of this section.

In Chapter One, I introduce Shyamaprasad, his films, and his approach to filmmaking. I discuss his narrative and technical styles and strategies, highlighting examples from some of his films. I also briefly discuss what this thesis seeks to do and discuss the potential outcomes of the research. Then, I outline my research questions and suggest how I address them in the chapters to follow. I situate the thesis in the broader methodological framework and signpost my theoretical approach, which are elaborated in Chapter Three. Further, I elucidate how the thesis addresses gaps in existing research on intersectionality and space, which are important theoretical ideas within cultural studies and illustrates with detailed examples on how I make an original contribution to the field. Before I provide a summary of the chapters in the thesis, I briefly discuss the research methods the thesis adopts. Within this section, I provide a rationale to my choice of films for analysis and the pattern of their distribution to various chapters.

In Chapter Two, I set the context for the analysis chapters by firstly tracing the history of women in Kerala and conceptualising the idea of the ‘ideal’ Malayali woman. I examine the state of women in contemporary Kerala society, especially in the intersection of gender with caste and class. I also trace the matrilineal past of Kerala society and discuss the status of women in more recent times. As all the films of Shyamaprasad were released post the 1990s, I specifically examine Kerala society post liberalisation, with focus on gender and its intersection with caste, class, and the diaspora. Then, I engage in a detailed examination of the representational politics of gender in Malayalam cinema, where I also critically review previous literature on the same. To situate his filmmaking style and politics within the wider cinematic practices in Kerala, this section also briefly examines some film movements and filmic formations in Kerala and India during Shyamaprasad’s filmmaking career. Citing several examples, I also discuss the way gender is represented, particularly from an intersectional perspective, in Malayalam cinema from its early days to the present.

Chapter Three examines Cultural Studies as a methodological tool and discusses some of the discipline’s key scholars and ideas. In the chapter, I explore what it means to do Cultural

Studies-influenced research and the importance of a context-centred approach. The chapter also explores the usefulness of intersectionality as a key theoretical framework based on previous research in the area and utilise it as the analytical tool to discuss Shyamaprasad's films. An important concept I use to analyse modalities such as gender, sexuality, diaspora, caste and the middle-class is 'space'. In the section of space and spatial politics, I mainly explore the ideas and concepts related to power, space, and subjectivity drawing from scholars such as Michel Foucault and Doreen Massey. I use intersectionality as an overarching framework to explore how gender intersects with other social identities of men and women in Shyamaprasad's films and the ways in which gender is shaped by space and social contexts. I also discuss how I would employ narrative analysis to engage in a close reading of the films.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six are the analysis chapters, where I examine Shyamaprasad's films. In Chapter Four, I divide the four Shyamaprasad films I analyse in this chapter into two sections. The first section focuses on films such *Ore Kadal* and *Artist* and delve into the characterisation¹⁴ of strong female characters who challenge hierarchical gender relations and heteronormative familial values and break the shackles of middle-class moralities. The section also explores the characterisation of men in the films, particularly the ways in which their masculinity is articulated. The second section examines films such as *Ritu* and *Elektra*, where I discuss the portrayal of women characters who do not conform to middle-class patriarchal hegemony and challenge the moral boundaries imposed upon them by social institutions. The chapter begins with a discussion of the idea of the Indian middle-class, particularly the ways in which middle-class women are constituted and conceptualised in the Indian society. My focus is mostly on Indian middle-class women because they become the bearers of tradition and honour within the institutions of family, religion, caste, and community. Citing relevant literature, I explore the core values of the Indian middle-class (of which the

¹⁴ Almost all Shyamaprasad films are character-driven and thus the role of characterisation is central to his narratives.

Kerala middle-class is a part of) adheres to and discuss how class and gender intersect in specific ways in the mediation of power relations. In the chapter, I also examine how middle-class men and women are represented in Malayalam cinema, especially post liberalisation.

Chapter Five discusses films such as *Kallu Kondoru Pennu*, *English: An Autumn in London*, and *Ivide*, to examine how diasporic notions of belonging, displacement, and spatiality are articulated in the films. In the chapter, I theorise diaspora and explore the ways in which the diaspora and the diasporic subject is conceptualized by several important diaspora scholars. I also contextualise the idea of diaspora based on a detailed literature review on the global and Indian diaspora, mainly to address the key concerns around notions of home, belonging, displacement, spatiality, and the constitution of identity and subjectivity in diasporic spaces. These issues are important as I discuss them later in the chapter, in relation to Shyamaprasad's films and their characters based on the diaspora. In the section on the representation of diaspora and the diasporic subject on screen, I discuss Bollywood and Malayalam cinema, the former due to its constant presence in scholarly discussions of the Indian diaspora and diaspora subjects in films, and the latter in order to evaluate the ways in which Shyamaprasad's films reinforce and challenge normative modes of representation of the Indian diaspora and diaspora subjects. To analyse Shyamaprasad's films on the diaspora, I divide the section into four sub-sections: The creation of an 'East-West binary', 'A sense of belonging/displacement', 'Women and domestic spaces', and 'The Gulf and the diasporic migrant woman'. Using an intersectional lens, I examine the multiple ways in which Shyamaprasad renders the diaspora and diasporic subjects and explores how he challenges and reinforces the stereotypical articulations of home, belonging, and displacement.

In Chapter Six, I engage in a detailed analysis of Shyamaprasad's film *Agnisakshi* where I examine how women are oppressed by the double marginalisation of caste and gender, specifically in the way they are surveilled and regulated by a disciplinary society. I also discuss how the Nampoothiri *illam* functions a disciplinary apparatus to control and correct women

subjects to preserve the purity and sanctity of the gender and caste-coded spaces within it. I also analyse relevant scenes of the film *Arike* to show how caste and gender intersect to create subjects of discipline and examine how women's sexuality is controlled to reproduce the hierarchical caste and gender order, in a way to preserve and protect the values and honour of upper-caste patriarchy. Like the previous chapters, I draw upon Foucault's notions of disciplinary power, pastoral power, and biopower and Massey's ideas of space being gendered, relational, and dynamic to elucidate how power relations are shaped by the politics of difference. The chapter also examines the notion of caste and how it is constituted and negotiated in Kerala and the Indian society at large. Based on the content of the films I analyse in the chapter, the key focus of my literature review and discussion is on Brahmin hegemony. Giving emphasis to an intersectional approach, as I did in the previous chapters too, I explore the gendered logic of caste in Kerala, with an emphasis on the hegemonic Brahmin community. In the chapter, I also discuss the representation of caste on screen with examples from Malayalam films that were made post liberalisation and how they glorified upper caste hegemony through their plot and the representation of some of the main characters.

In my Conclusion chapter, I provide a summary of the various chapters in the thesis. I also justify how and why I undertook certain conceptual, theoretical, and methodological approaches in the other chapters in the thesis. I highlight a summary of my key findings from the discussion in the main chapters. By doing this, I also manage to underscore some of the key claims I made in various chapters and revisit the analytical decisions that led to relevant findings in the chapters. I then emphasise the significance of the study and the original contributions the thesis makes. Here, I clearly outline the conceptual, theoretical, and analytical contributions I make to existing research. I conclude with the limits of my study and the scope for future research.

Chapter 2: Setting the Context: The ‘Ideal’ Malayali Woman and Gender in Malayalam Cinema

Introduction

In this chapter, I map the ways in which women were historically marginalised and dominated in Kerala society and explore the representational politics of gender in Malayalam cinema. Firstly, I unpack the matrilineal system that existed in Kerala, one of the few regions in the country where the individual is identified with their mother’s lineage. I do this for two reasons; firstly, to highlight how the Kerala society is highly patriarchal despite their matrilineal history and secondly, to underscore the prevalence and domination of strong caste groups that played a part in the abolition of matriliney. I also trace the discursive practices that led to the empowerment and disempowerment of men and women as a result of the hegemonic forces and structures that operated in the early and late twentieth century. This is important to provide a context to the thesis and to determine the extent to which history has shaped the present. In this section, I mainly draw upon the works of scholars such as Robin Jeffrey and J. Devika, who have made useful contributions to conceptualise the subject positions of men and women during the period mentioned earlier and the cultural ideologies that determine their positionality in Kerala society. This discussion sets up the base for the analysis of Shyamaprasad’s films in the later chapters, especially to understand the extent to which he reinforces and challenges the cultural hegemony and discursive practices that existed at the time.

In the next section of this chapter, I examine the nature of women’s subjectivity in the Kerala context and the role society plays in the formation of her subject position. Here, I mainly focus on the 1990s and the period after since then, which marked the emergence of economic liberalisation in the country. With the expansion of the market, film production and distribution in India also reached new heights and started exhibition on wider platforms (Deshpande, 2005).

As I discuss later in the chapter, the post-1990s, influenced by the materialistic and consumerist society and its policies, saw a remarkable transformation in the way women were portrayed on screen. All of Shyamaprasad's films were also made post the 1990s. I mainly focus on the works of scholars such as Hapke, Lukose, Devika, Sreekumar, and Pillai to discuss how women, especially from different class and caste backgrounds, are treated in both the public and private spheres from the previous century to the present. I also mention the case of non-residential Indians, particularly how the diasporic female fits into these neoliberalised spaces in Kerala society. By examining the issues constantly faced by women in private and public spaces in the past and present, I seek to answer two questions: In what ways do women get marginalised in Kerala society, and how are normative notions about Malayali womanhood responsible for this marginalisation.

The final section of this chapter examines the representational politics of gender in Malayalam cinema vis-a-vis the ways in which the multiple trajectories of social, cultural, and political realities are constructed and articulated in contemporary Kerala society. This is important to understand the ways in which Shyamaprasad's films reinforce or challenge these patterns of representations of gender and other modalities that structure identity and subjectivity in Kerala society. Malayalam cinema, which largely reflects Malayali's desires and tastes, plays a significant role in the way 'Malayaliness' (the idea of being a Malayali) is imagined and how it shapes the identity of objects and subjects in Kerala society (Pillai, 2010). In this regard, I analyse the representational politics of gender in Malayalam cinema with respect to its historical conjuncture and the specific social, political, and cultural terrains in which it operates. This is useful to situate and relate to the larger context within which Shyamaprasad's films need to be understood. The topics and issues I review and discuss in the sections on Kerala society and Malayalam cinema within this chapter are central to Shyamaprasad's films.

The state of women in contemporary Kerala society

Women in Kerala have been subjected to patriarchal and misogynist subordination and oppression and have always been on the receiving end of gender-based violence and other sexual crimes. Several studies have examined the Malayali woman's subjugation and her lack of agency in contemporary Kerala (Sen and Ahlin, 2020; Hapke, 2013; George, 2011; Devika and Thampi, 2011; Kodoth, 2008, Sreekumar, 2007, Devika and Sukumar, 2006; Devika, 2006; Chacko, 2003; Eapen and Kodoth, 2002). To understand the status of Malayali women and how they are treated in the present-day context, it is important to look at an incident which occurred on September 26, 2020, in Trivandrum, the capital of Kerala. A YouTuber named Vijay P Nair broadcasted a derogatory video titled 'Why do feminists in India, especially Kerala, not wear underwear' and defamed feminists and women activists. The twenty-minute-long video crossed the boundaries of verbal obscenity and invited significant media attention after a popular dubbing artist, Bhagyalakshmi (one of whom he insulted in the video), and two women activists Sreelakshmi Arackal and Diya Sena arrived at his house and assaulted him. Reportedly, this particular step was taken by the women due to the lack of action by the police and other authorities even after a formal complaint was filed. As feminist scholar and cultural critic Meena Pillai (2020) points out, "the language of the video, which went viral owing to the women taking the law into their hands when justice was denied to them, bordered on psycho-sexual depravity of the worst kind, where one individual instance became emblematic of the canker at the core of Kerala society". Strangely, when the women uploaded the same video, many people found fault with them for showing protest. Pillai (2020) questions the need to be politically correct under these circumstances and claims it to be the "bedrock on which larger edifices of misogyny are built."¹⁵ This expectancy to remain silent even during violent attacks and strictly follow normative modes of behaviour is gendered and reveals the discursive nature

¹⁵ The quotes are from the online version of a newspaper article authored by feminist critic Meena Pillai and hence do not have a page number attached to it.

of gender inequality in contemporary Kerala society.

A few other instances that occurred in the same year in Kerala's public sphere also signify the society's prejudiced attitude towards women. When Ramsi, a young Muslim girl from a low socio-economic background, committed suicide after her fiancé exploited her physically, emotionally, and financially and decided to marry another girl from a wealthy family, there were again two factions on social media platforms. While there were a few who empathised with the victim, many others blamed her for indulging in premarital sex, especially being a Muslim girl¹⁶. This sort of revictimization, citing women's need to conform to religious moral codes and maintain bodily purity, typifies the rigid and structured spaces she occupies; disciplinary spaces that undergird gender disparities and dictate patriarchal norms. There were similar social media responses when a Malayali Christian nurse, Merin, was murdered by her husband¹⁷. Merin's parents filed a police complaint citing that they received several abusive messages about their daughter on social media platforms. For the average middle-class Malayali, these online platforms are a site of evaluation where they judge the extent to which women perform their 'duty' as cultural custodians and conform to submissive ideas of womanhood. As Pillai mentions, in Kerala society, "a woman defiant of cultural expectations of femininity is unfeminine and undesirable" (2010, p. 23). In most of these online platforms, women also become objects of consumption and are expected to be passive while men remain aggressive and active.

The hierarchisation of gender and the idealisation of gender relations has thus become a crucial feature of Kerala's sociocultural settings. Considering that more than half of the Kerala population are Hindus¹⁸, these aspects are idealised as the 'values of Hindu life' and is central to the ways in which the notion of an 'ideal' Malayali woman is constructed (Kurien,

¹⁶ See 'Did Ramsi have to die?' *The Times of India* (September 21, 2020).

¹⁷ See 'Kerala nurse murdered by husband in USA insulted on social media; parents file complaint'. *Mathrubhumi* (August 1, 2020).

¹⁸ See 'The Continuing Decline of Hindus in Kerala'. *Swarajya* (April 16, 2016).

1999). The conception of the *pativrata* or the ideal devoted wife who worships her husband and fulfills his desires, and women as the embodiment of love, patience, and self-control are all virtues foregrounded by the Hindu way of living. This form of gender, class, and caste based religious hegemony is also relevant in the case of the recent Sabarimala temple entry case and is widely debated in scholarly platforms and mainstream media. The idea of purity is central to Hindu temples from decades ago, particularly in Kerala, where the lower castes were prohibited from entering the temples due to their occupation and dietary practices (Bijukumar, 2019). Even today, the lower castes are banned from performing rituals in most of the temples. Similarly, the Hindu temples deny the entry of women during the menstruation period citing bodily impurity, a traditional practice based on the principles of Hinduism where menstruating women are forbidden from entering even their own kitchens (Bijukumar, 2019). The Sabarimala temple's ban of women between the age of 10 and 50 was lifted by the Supreme Court of India on 28 September 2018. However, there were several protests and arguments against the historic verdict from different parts of the country. The stigma around women's bodies and its cultural construction as polluting objects denies their religiosity and democratic participation in the public sphere.

The matrilineal past of early modern Kerala

One of the most important attributes of Kerala, one that makes it different from the other states of India, was the prevalence of *marumakkathayam* or the matrilineal system among various social groups. The system became prominent by the 1500s, particularly among the Nair community in various parts of Kerala, although it seems to have first emerged during the eleventh century of the Common Era as a result of the war between Chera and Chola dynasties and their subordinates (Jeffrey, 2004-5). Since then, it has gained considerable attention among intellectual circles and has been a topic of interest to several scholars (Sen and Ahlin, 2020; Farook and Haskerali, 2017; Bonate, 2017; Jeffrey, 2016; Menon, 2012; Abraham, 2011;

Scariah, 2010; Arunima, 2003; Kodoth, 2002; Saradamoni, 1996; Issac and Tharakan, 1995; Arunima, 1995; Saradamoni, 1992; Jeffrey, 1990; Jeffrey, 1989; Jeffrey, 1978). In the matrilineal system, lineage and inheritance of titles and property are traced through women. The property of men would eventually go to his sisters and their children and not to his wife and her children¹⁹. Jeffrey stresses two main points about the system; almost all the social leaders of old Kerala were matrilineal, and matriliney gave women the power to speak to men and show their presence in the public sphere (2004-5). However, Jeffrey (2004-5) also points out that it was not prevalent among all social groups in Kerala, and that it was not a form of matriarchy, where although the *tharavadu* or the ancestral joint family home were organised by the female lineage, the control and decision-making power rests mostly with men.

The Nairs and the Thiyyas were the main caste groups that practiced matrilineality, until it was eventually ended in 1976 (Jeffrey, 2004-5). Apart from these Hindu groups, Muslims and Christians also prevailed at the time; the former had families which practiced matriliney whereas the latter strictly followed patriliney. Jeffrey (2004-5) notes that even the Christians adhered to aggressive patriarchy, especially among certain communities such as Syrian Christians. This, however, was not much different to other parts of the country at the time, especially where Christian missionaries were common (Jeffrey, 2004-5). Even as the Nairs, Thiyyas, and some Muslims were part of the matrilineal system, the Nampoothiri Brahmins, who occupied the highest position in the caste hierarchy, followed patrilineality. The younger sons from these Nampoothiri Brahmin households visit the women of Nair families, where the eldest male member would be the *karnavar*, the title given to the head (male) of the joint family system.

Matriliney allowed Brahmin men to have liaisons with Nair women who were part of the

¹⁹ According to the Malabar Marriage Act passed in 1896, the husband should provide for his wife and children during and after his lifetime in a legitimate marriage (Abraham, 2011). As per the Act, the wife and children could stake claim to half of the husband's self-acquired property. The Malabar Willis Act extended this provision to all matrilineal people, irrespective of whether the marriage was previously registered under the Malabar Marriage Act (Jeffrey, 1990). By 1933, the revised law entitled the wife and her children to all his wealth. However, in the absence of a will, the legal heir of the wealth or any property would be the matrilineal joint family. The claim for possession would be invalid even if she remarries (Chacko, 2003).

matrilineal system, whose families considered that association as a great honour (Jeffrey, 1990). By the mid-half of the nineteenth century, the size of the matrilineal joint families got bigger, and the government demanded cash payments for employment and other provisions. There was constant pressure from missionaries, caste-Hindus, and government servants from other parts of the country to abolish immoral customs and practices such as polygamy that were inherent in matrilineality (Devika, 2006; Jeffrey, 2004-5). As Devika (2006) highlights, the sexual excess and the lack of moral order and discipline in the domestic sphere gave way to widespread debate and criticism, particularly among the local intellectuals. The Nairs eventually changed the laws and customs into a patrilineal system, particularly in relation to marriage, inheritance of property, the right to ownership, and the guardianship of children. The hegemonic Nair societies played a crucial role in the abolition of matrilineality. Jeffrey (1990) claims that the Nair Service Society (NSS), one of India's 'most vigorous caste associations', led by powerful men such as Mannath Padmanabha Pillai, was prominent in the enactment of a legislation to abolish matrilineality in Kerala.

Although the decline of matrilineality led to a lack of sexual independence and the claim for a guaranteed permanent place in the *tharavadu*²⁰, as Jeffrey (1990) suggests, Malayali women secured a better position in public and private spheres as girls got the opportunity to go to schools and women attained salaried employment. What this also meant is that women brought prestige, a steady income, and a certain class position to the family. Educated women secured employment opportunities in several fields such as nursing, social work, and teaching²¹. However, women's entry into these fields led to other ideological debates and questions around her 'natural' capacities and 'womanly' qualities to do such jobs (Devika,

²⁰ The *tharavadu* is a traditional domestic space with a clear demarcation of inner and outer boundaries based on gender hierarchy (Markose, 2019).

²¹ Feminist historian Devika (2006), in her article, 'Negotiating women's social space: public debates on gender in early modern Kerala, India', argues that the very idea of female education was to "prepare women as capable overseers of the modern home, regulators of altruistic exchange between family members and agents of 'civilising' desire". This, she claims, was "crucial for equipping men adequately for the public domain" (p. 47).

2006). Renowned literary scholar and journalist Sanjayan suggested that the main qualities that even rulers need were feminine attributes such as patience, resourcefulness, tact, and gentle disposition (Devika, 2006). On another occasion, Sanjayan suggested that the female author Kochattil Kalyanikutty Amma's travelogue *Njan Kanda Europe* (The Europe I saw) should be changed to *Europe Kanda Kalyanikutty Amma* (Kalyanikutty Amma, who saw Europe). Devika (2006) claims that Sanjayan's argument reflected his "fear of female individuation and public presence" and suggests that it is one of several instances at the time where male intellectuals used their writings to spread misogyny against women writers, speakers, and activists (p. 4471). These men often attributed women's attainment of jobs and her entry into the public sphere to 'gentle power' and classified it as a form of power she requires to stay 'womanly'. It is essential to note that the validation of entry into these 'new' spaces and the brief disruption of the ideal domesticated female subject should be attributed to economic, social, and cultural pressures as well.

However, the Malayali women's entry into paid work and her instant upward cultural mobility was not an egalitarian process. There were debates about the (un)suitability of married women for certain employment positions on how they would manage to divide time between home and work. Arguments also arose on the 'unfeminine' nature of some jobs such as the sale of liquor or the entry to police force and the need to prevent women to enter spaces that were not 'womanly' (Devika and Thampi, 2011; Devika, 2006). The idea of the securement of an upward class mobility to her family, the hope of the realisation of her true potential, and the offer to be agents of 'gentle power' motivated women to be part of these male-dominated disciplinary spaces. Women also had the burden of sartorial expectations based on what the society classified as 'decent', particularly for the upper-caste, middle-class, educated working woman. Despite severely restricting the ease of physical movement, *saree* became the socially-accepted attire for working-class women. Devika and Thampi (2011) also point out that the women who belonged to the bottom levels of the caste hierarchy were mostly excluded from

educational institutions, and the anxiety over ‘loss of gender’ due to her movement from one form of labour to the other was of little significance. Moral judgements and evaluations on Malayali women and what constitute the ‘ideal femininity’ in Kerala continued to be the base for legal and moral regulatory frameworks through to the 1990s.

Kerala society post liberalisation and the question of gender

The 1990s were a crucial period in India, largely due to the adoption of economic liberalisation at the start of the decade. The move came as a result of the global economic crisis and the new policy opened up multiple possibilities for the country to encourage both massive foreign investment and a huge inflow of global products and media (Hapke, 2013). In Kerala, the rise of globalisation and liberalisation resulted in the emergence of new forms of consumption and private investment, greater generation of capital and wealth, more education and employment opportunities, and improved housing and standard of living (Hapke, 2013). One of the reasons for the state’s economic upliftment was the rise in Gulf migration and remittances, which peaked during the 1990s. The transnational migration of Gulf immigrants not only saw the movement of people from one country to another but also restructured the ways in which money, education, family structure, human relations, and mainly, the commodity market were negotiated until that point. As Hapke (2013) points out, the increased consumption levels and quality of life led to the expansion of the middle-class population, which soon became the dominant community in the region. Even the much-debated Kerala model showed the state’s growth in literacy, life expectancy, birth rates, and infant mortality during the period and highlighted the introduction and implementation of several developmental programmes and initiatives by the ruling governments (Sreekumar, 2007). According to the Kerala model, the ruling governments allocated considerable time and capital to class, caste, and gender-based issues in the effort to produce positive changes to the state’s development.

A few projects took shape to improve the living conditions of the people from a lower socio-economic background and to provide better opportunities for women. The land reform acts that abolished tenancy exploitation, pensions and other wage-based provisions for agricultural labourers, and subsidised food and employment to people from low-caste communities and low-income households, were some of the initiatives that emerged in that period (Sreekumar, 2007; Franke and Chasin, 1995). The 1990s also saw several Malayali women's intellectual presence in feminist research, social debates, and literary writing (Devika and Sukumar, 2006). There were successful efforts to implement a 33 per cent seat reservation and leadership for women in local self-governing bodies (Devika and Sukumar, 2006). Actions were also taken to mobilise and support women from lower socio-economic backgrounds and ease their entry into the political and public sphere. New community-based initiatives, such as the Kudumbashree project, were introduced by the state government in the late 1990s to eradicate poverty and provide economic advancement and work opportunities for women in rural areas and improve their social well-being (Nidheesh, 2009; Devika and Thampi, 2007). There were also increased employment opportunities with high salaries for urban men and women as liberalisation and globalisation opened new ways of production and consumption.

However, this new culture and forms of consumption was classist and gendered and placed women in a feminine habitus. The new consumer culture that emerged in the 1990s was constituted of discursive spaces that assigned women as subjects of commodification and largely privileged the upper-caste, middle-class women. Lukose (2005), in her discussion of youth and gender in Kerala in the post-liberalisation era, terms this consumer culture as a "complex site of female participation and constraint, enjoyment and objectification" (pp. 917). The Indian/Malayali consumer's central figure is the young, modern female or the highly affluent and accomplished Non-resident Indians (NRI) and the various sites of consumer agency are marked by the intersections of class, caste, age, region, community, and gender (Lukose, 2005). The idea of an egalitarian society was a distant thought with rising concerns

over the status of women and other marginalised sections in post-liberalisation Kerala. Lukose (2005) suggests that the highly problematic and homologous dichotomies produced by the emergent consumerist capitalist practices in the post-liberalisation period created a class and caste-specific, gendered habitus and notes that:

New spaces of consumption are structured by constructions of tradition/modernity and public/private in ways that mark them as new, middle-class spaces, gendered in particular ways. While the colonial and early nationalist construction of the woman in public was on who was educated, respectable, and modest, spaces of consumption marked by more contemporary forms of globalisation portray a more aggressive, confident, sexualised, and aggressively public figure. (p. 919)

The increased levels of production and consumption not only sets unfulfillable aspirations for the lower class and lower caste groups but further strengthens the social, economic, and cultural disparities and divisions between the elites and the working-class. These effects of economic liberalisation prove particularly fatal for women from the marginalised communities. It was also a period where women employed in labour intensive jobs and industries lost their jobs or were relocated to other states (Rajan, Sudha, and Mohanachandran, 2000). Poor pay and working conditions, lack of security, healthcare and other benefits, and gender discrimination and exploitation were common issues faced by the women from a lower class and caste background (Thresia and Mohindra, 2011). Also severe was the harassment and violence faced by women owing to the practice of dowry, which was demanded by the families of the grooms, a trend which intensified in the state post the economic liberalisation in Kerala (Hapke, 2013; Kodoth, 2008; Kodoth, 2006; Chacko, 2003). The patriarchal practice of giving *sthreedhanam* or dowry also led to a massive inflow of remittances from the Gulf expatriates and other NRIs especially during the 1990s, a share of which would also go to the religious organisations and the caste and community heads who organise the marriages. Paying a high amount of dowry is also seen as a matter of prestige and an opportunity to gain greater social mobility. Particularly, in the Kerala context, practices such as dowry not only emphasises the discursive dynamics of conjugal patronage but also highlights its significance in relation to the

formation of class identities and the reinforcement of social hierarchies. The expansion of the middle-class and the increased urge to be a part of it, as discussed earlier, is also a determinant factor on the amount of money and other possessions families agree to pay. However, lower caste girls from poor families are severely disadvantaged because they are neither able to keep possession of the required amount of money, property, or jewellery to protect them from marital discrimination and subordination nor completely unable to abandon the practice.

Research suggests that the Communist party in the state made attempts to provide financial aid and introduced marriage insurance schemes to support socially backward families although there have not been enough efforts to challenge the existing framework (Kodoth, 2008). There are similar claims made about the lack of intervention from the ruling Communist parties in relation to the lower castes' struggle for land, education, and employment in the state. The Dalits, who are in the lowest caste strata, struggled to get adequate support in basic education, healthcare, or salaried employment, even after the early 1990s. Not only were they denied sufficient opportunities in education and labour market, but also lacked the skills and resources to compete with the students and candidates from more privileged backgrounds (Devika, 2013). This inequality and marginality extend even to the present day, especially in the ways these socially marginalised and stigmatised groups are excluded from the bourgeois public sphere. Such was the extreme nature of patriarchy that even the upper-caste Brahmin women were denied public presence and exposure for several decades. The central female character in Shyamaprasad's film *Agnisakshi*, which I analyse in Chapter Five, is an *Antharjanam* (the Kerala Brahmin woman) who is subordinated and oppressed by patriarchal forces within the disciplinary spaces of the *illams* or Brahmin households. The pressure to confine themselves to the domestic domain and preserve the sanctity of the ideal womanly self severely restricted Brahmin women to gain upward social mobility and forced them to abide by dominant constructions of gender identities and normative womanhood.

The modern normative Kerala woman is expected to possess natural feminine qualities that would enable her to be a modest and disciplined daughter, a devoted and virtuous wife, a committed and self-sacrificing mother, and a dutiful and effective homemaker. Strangely, these broad parameters and moral expectations have not changed much in the past few decades. Referring to the characterisation of the female protagonist of two recent Malayalam films, *Koode* (2018) and *Bangalore Days* (2014), both directed by female director Anjali Menon, Pillai (2020) argues that the characters represent the ideal Malayali femininity or what she calls ‘neoliberal femininity’, confined by the clutches of patriarchal ideology, and consumed by dominant gender ideologies. Pillai (2020) further claims that the “unthreatening ordinary girl body” of Nazriya, who plays both characters,’ neither disrupts binary codes nor subverts the desiring body, and suggests:

This virginal body’ has been coded to measure virtues like purity, fidelity and loyalty along with apolitical posturing and a fair dose of fun and frolicking. This is the Malayali feminine ideal today, reflecting a cultural imaginary that seeks to peg down the anxieties engendered by the modern woman into a non-threatening uncomplicated site/sight where the feminine at once can be narrated through the semiotics of a liberal humanistic ideology while willingly subjugating itself to an overarching masculine logic and an overtly feminine ethic of care. (p. 8-9)

Thus, even the contemporary Malayali women are constantly warned to project ‘feminine’ values and norms, endorse bourgeois ideals of domesticity, and embrace socially acceptable moral codes of behaviour. This image of the ideal contemporary Malayali woman is also that of an upper-caste, middle-class Hindu, even though Kerala is diverse and has a significant Christian and Muslim population. Such forms of mobilisation and representation of privileged Hindu identities have been visible in the public sphere for a long time in Kerala. Sreekumar (2007) narrates the case of Kerala’s official tourism advertisements where one can find images of women wearing *kasavu mundu* (a traditional variety of cotton saree), *mullapoo* (a string of jasmine flowers) on her hair and performing classical dance forms of the state such as *Mohiniyattam* and *Kaikottikali*. The women, as Sreekumar (2007) observes, also wear gold jewellery and a bit of sandal-paste on their forehead as they arrange floral carpets on the floor.

This, she argues, marks these women as hailing from “a particular religion (Hindu), caste (dominating) and class (privileged)”, thus also excluding the Christian, Muslim, and lower-caste women from the tourism brochures and other promotional materials that display the richness, prosperity, and cultural diversity of the state (Sreekumar, 2007, p. 42). The Hindu mythological characters such as Parvathi and Sheelavathi were exemplary images of essential femininity and regarded as ‘ideal woman’ whose images circulate in media representations and popular culture. In the Hindu culture, women are not just meant to be models of patience, chaste and self-control but are also bearers of moral order and cultural purity. Men, on the other hand, are considered icons of physical and emotional strength and ‘naturally’ blessed with creative and intellectual abilities.

Scholars such as Devika and Pillai argue that the ‘Kerala Model’ has constructed a pseudo image on the agency and freedom of women in Kerala. Devika (2006) observes that better health care, high literacy rates and the rapid acceptance of smaller families have not ensured massive changes to women’s mobility or improved the range of opportunities they are provided with in everyday life. In ‘Becoming Women: Unwrapping Femininity in Malayalam Cinema’, Pillai uses the ‘Kerala Model’ of development as the analytical lens to examine Malayalam cinema (Pillai, 2010). The ‘Kerala Model’, according to McKibben²², highlights accelerated social and cultural development in the state since 1980, part of which was also triggered by political initiatives by the leftists and cites several positive outcomes with the exception of unemployment and underemployment (McKibben, 2007). However, Pillai (2010) argues that it has led to the creation of the ‘myth of Malayali women’ or what other scholars’ term as the ‘gender paradox’ of Kerala (Hapke, 2013; Sreekumar, 2007; Devika, 2006), especially with regard to the data on women relating to literacy, reservation of seats in

²² Bill McKibben is an author and environmentalist who has widely written about Kerala. One of the three themes in his book *Hope, Human and Wild: True Stories of Living Lightly on the Earth* (1995) illustrates the story of Kerala’s massive progress despite a low per capita income.

governance, sex ratio, and fertility rates. This is evident from the fact that issues such as female suicide, mental disorders, dowry violence and other domestic crimes against women are constantly on the rise. The high level of employment, female literacy, reservation in local governance bodies, low fertility rates and high sex ratio helped to attain political and social empowerment to a certain extent but there are still bigger issues to tackle such as the lack of social mobility or economic freedom. It is in this context that feminist scholars such as Pillai and Devika stress on the need to look beyond the Kerala model of development and explore new trajectories of women's opposition to patriarchal forces. As discussed earlier, previous research on the Kerala model suggests that the Malayali women's situation is paradoxical in nature. Although the Kerala model of development boasts of high literacy levels among women and the balanced sex ratio in the state, a majority of the female population suffer from a lack of economic independence, low participation in labour force and less participation and involvement in political activity and governance (Devika, 2006). Like in some of the other parts of the country, women also suffer from unemployment and wage gap, and are constantly subjected to subordination and harassment at both domestic and workspaces.

In this section of the chapter, I examined the ideological notion of the 'ideal' Malayali woman and the cultural construction of gender in Kerala society. The next section focuses on the representation of gender in Malayalam cinema and investigates how it replicates and reproduces these normative ideals and heteropatriarchal norms that are visible in the multilayered society it originates from. The objective of the discussion is to understand whether Shyamaprasad's films and the characters in them fit into these normative gender roles and to examine the ways in which he challenges or reinforces normative conceptions of gender.

The representational politics of gender in Malayalam cinema

The Malayalam film industry is among the most popular cinemas in India. Its popularity has grown significantly over the years and reached a point where other Indian film industries,

including Bollywood, remake a good number of Malayalam films into their own languages (Gopinath, 2021). This is a massive achievement considering that it is a small-scale industry run mostly by individual producers compared to the huge studio enterprises held by the Tamil or Hindi language industries (Joshi, 2021). The reach and fanbase of Malayalam cinema have soared immensely over the years and critics claim it as the “most forward thinking and rooted industry in the country” (Kumar, 2021, p. 1). Scholars and film critics also laud the range and quality of films the Malayalam film industry produces every year and suggest that it creates “gems of films and innovative filmmaking that offer a more engaging alternative to Hindi cinema” (Siddique, 2020, p. 1).

Malayalam cinema’s origin dates back to the late 1920s with the release of its first film *Vigathakumaran* (The Lost Child, 1928), which unlike the other language films at the time, had a socially relevant theme. Since its inception, Malayalam cinema sustains a distinct identity in several aspects such as the nature of plot and stories, narrative style and the range of social issues tackled (Nair, 2010). However, it has not drifted away much from the stereotyped ways of portraying women in Indian cinema. Early Malayalam cinema’s discourse on women often reflected the real situation prevalent in Kerala society at that time. J.C. Daniel, director of *Vigathakumaran*, struggled to find a woman who could perform the lead role in the first ever Malayalam film. Finally, P.K Rosy, a Dalit Christian woman, came forward to act despite the curb on untouchable communities entering public spaces. The film faced widespread protest from the upper-caste Nair community who could not tolerate the reality of a Dalit woman playing a Nair girl (Rowena, 2013). Later, a huge number of Nair men burnt her hut and forced her out of the village. Rosy’s denial of entry into the public sphere remains a harsh reality for several lower-caste women even in contemporary Kerala society (Rowena, 2013).

The period from those early days of Malayalam cinema until the end of 1970s were

marked by the inclusion of several women characters who were either not a significant presence in the narrative or were utilised for stereotypical representations. Several Malayalam films from 1928 to 1950 saw the stereotypic depiction of the wicked stepmother. As Sreedharan (2010) notes, films such as *Vigathakumaran* (1928), *Balan* (1938), and *Gnanambika* (Goddess of Knowledge, 1940), were not only key milestones in Malayalam cinema but were notable for how they showcased themes related to the mother's cruelty and betrayal. The representation of the mother figure in films such as *Thulabharam* (Weighing Scale, 1968), *Chattakkari* (Anglo-Indian Girl, 1974), and *Thaniyavarthanam* (The Repeating Rhythm, 1987) as violent, aggressive, or submissive conforms to patriarchal prejudice.



The mother figures from *Thaniyavarthanam* (1987) and *Thulabharam* (1968)

Sreedharan (2010) observes that the films of the 1960s and the 1970s saw new ways of portraying fatherhood and motherhood with the decline of the matrilineal joint family structure in Kerala. According to her, the films of the 1960s and the early 1970s were marked by a “subsequent atomisation of the individual, pressures and demands within a nuclear family, a deep suspicion/fear of transgressive feminine sexuality and an obsessive fear of the paramour” (2010, p. 72). As the matrilineal joint households completely transformed into patrilineal nuclear families, films during the late 1960s and 1970s showcased the need to preserve ideal womanhood and female virtues that held the family together. Kerala society at this point was also undergoing many shifts and changes including the rise of unemployment, the migration of youth, and the upsurge of modernism (Harilal and Joseph, 2003). Hierarchical relations and

gendered practices became central to film plots, and many of the characters in films during the 1970s centred around familial order and values.

The 1970s were also the period in which the informal division of Malayalam cinema into various categories such as art, commercial, or middle cinema took shape. The difference between art and commercial cinema was mainly decided based on the audience the films are catered to. As Bindu Menon affirms, art cinema tends to reflect the real living conditions of the viewers and gives more importance to the content, style, and form of the films (2010). Art cinema often presents itself as radical spaces which exhibit a realistic depiction of mass culture. According to Mukherjee (2020), art films also do not engage in mainstream cinema's commercial techniques such as song and dance. Alternative cinematic attempts such as parallel cinema emerged in the 1950s as a precursor to the Indian New Wave which took shape in the 1960s. Acclaimed Malayalam directors such as Adoor Gopalakrishnan, G. Aravindan, and Shaji N Karun were part of this movement, which originated in the Indian state of West Bengal. Parallel cinema significantly engaged with the social realities of the time and produced refined approaches in the films' style and form. It evolved as an alternative to mainstream commercial films and by the 1970s, more directors showed interest in making such films that portrayed social realities and were closer to human lives (Allemand, 2014). However, by the 1990s, with the onset of the economic liberalisation phase, the popularity of parallel cinema among filmmakers started to decline. Middle cinema emerged in the 1970s as a rejection of the pure and conventional approaches adopted by art and commercial cinema (Menon, 2010). Middle cinema retained some aspects of commercial cinema such as the use of music whereas on most occasions it rejected the presence of stereotypical scenes or portrayals of roles. Menon refers to middle cinema as something "based on a struggle between two poles – an attempt, on one hand, to make films that would appeal to the discursive construct of 'audience' and, on the other hand, the desire to create an art which would reflect the reality of its time and place and display its cinematographic specificities and conventions of language, to assert the authority of

art in its own sphere” (2010, p. 108). Malayalam filmmakers such as K.G. George, Padmarajan and I.V. Sasi were the early pioneers of middle cinema, who made commercial films that catered to a middle-class audience and reflected the experiences of Kerala society. As middle cinema flourished through the 1970s and 1980s, women became a crucial figure in Malayalam cinema and showcased aspects of her life in different settings. Many films of directors such as K. G. George and I.V. Sasi portrayed the lives of upper-caste, middle-class women, especially their struggles to find solace in neither the workplace nor the home. Most of these films had several dramatic moments in the plot and located the ‘home’ as the primary space women occupy in their everyday lives, some of which could be classified as gendered modes of representation.

The gendered cinematic representation of Malayali women, especially those who are less privileged and socially marginalised, and the institutionalised misogyny it champions has led the audience to embrace a strong patriarchal ethos. Critics such as Meena Pillai highlight the role Malayalam cinema plays in creating gendered ideologies in the way they represent women and how the films speak for the cultural identity of that region. Malayalam cinema, as observed by Pillai (2010), reinforces dominant ideologies and hegemonic social institutions. Pillai (2010) claims that Malayalam cinema limits the representation of women to certain stereotypical ‘types’ and often ‘packages’ them in ways that support the dominant ideologies and hegemonic structures. Throughout the thesis, I identify several Malayalam films which conform to such types and packages and examine how they reproduce and reinforce traits of misogyny, victimhood, and male supremacy.

One of the crucial aspects of gender representations in Malayalam cinema is its cultural politics which is deeply rooted in patriarchal conventions. Arunima (1995) refers to the representation of women in Malayalam cinema as an attempt to “secure their participation in constructing and disciplining their femininity and sexuality” and notes that the combination of

patriarchy and upper-caste Nair nostalgia²³ create a cultural memory and a sense of regional belonging (165). Quite a few Malayalam films released in the 1970s and 1980s show the deployment of stereotyped representations, most notably about lower-class and caste women playing roles of victims of violence and cabaret dancers. Such tendencies create adverse effects on the spectators because of their perception of film viewing being culturally and historically constituted (Parayil, 2014). The 1990s and 2000s saw the manifestation of cultural hegemony through stereotypical representations of women with consumeristic and materialistic principles driving the regional film industry. Arunima (1995) refers to films such as *Sukritam* (Good Deed, 1994), she notes how male anxieties and desires define the boundaries of female agency. The film, as she points out, fails to acknowledge female subjectivity, and only focusses on exploring aspects of masculinity.

Numerous roles portrayed by women in Malayalam cinema indicates a lack of individuality and assertiveness in characterisation. Although some films stereotyped men and children too during the early days of Malayalam cinema (Nair, 2010), there was constant recurrence of women's position as victims of violence. Clichéd depictions of cruel stepmothers, exploited subaltern girls, and submissive wives became the norm as women were provided with minimal screen space. Films which engaged in such narrative patterns envisaged women's contentment with roles where they merely played second fiddle to male actors. Most of the roles encourage women to 'cry' and let their emotions out while men display heroic traits of anger which, as Brownmiller (1975) notes, keeps women in a "state of fear" (p. 15). Much of it reflects societal terms of "valuing women" (Steinem, 1991, p. 49) based on the degree of acceptance by men. The frequency of Malayalam films in which female lead characters lacked

²³ The Nairs are a prominent upper caste community in Kerala. They had a matrilineal family structure, and the matriarch-led households were traditionally called *tharavadu*. For more wide-ranging discussions on Nair matriliney, See Saradmoni's *Matriliney Transformed: Family, Law and Ideology in Twentieth Century Travancore* (1999), Arunima's *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliney in Kerala, Malabar, c. 1850-1940* (2003) and Jeffrey's *Legacies of Matriliney: The Place of Women and the "Kerala Model"* (2004/05).

self-identity and merely bragged about their husband's social status clearly indicates the tenacity of filmmakers to preserve existing paradigms. Sizeable number of female characters in films display women's willingness to become what Gilbert and Webster (1991) terms the "emotional punching bag" and suppress their desires with a fear of rejection and going too far (p. 41-44). Such structures reduce women's presence to mere symbolic status and limit her to an object of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1973).

Another feature prominently visible in Malayalam cinema, especially in the films made post 1990s, is women's insecure position within the family. The films released in the next couple of decades after that period were mostly dominated by male superstars, and there were instances when women were shown in a bad light to highlight the former's image and visibility on screen. Harris (2010) in his essay 'Endangering popular cinema in Malayalam' critiques director Fazil's films²⁴ made in the 1990s noting that:

all these films are predicated on an imbalance within the family, an imbalance that destroy the very fabric of the family and throw the surviving members of the family to the dogs, so to speak. And the fundamental thrust of the plot-development is to find ways and means of restoring the balance and thus reasserting the power norms and values of the family (p. 61).

In all the instances, in the films that Harris refers to, it is the presence of an 'absent mother' element in the plot that causes the imbalance within the family. This imbalance within the family, as I showed in the case of films such as *Pappayude Swantham Appoos* and *No. 1 Snehatheeram Bangalore North* in the introduction chapter of the thesis, sets the platform for the 'victimisation' of another woman, who is under pressure to make up for the absence. These victimised women lack agency, and simply follow the advice and instructions of the upper-

²⁴ Fazil is a prominent Malayalam director who made several commercially successful films in the 1980s and 1990s. He has also won awards at the state and national level for both 'entertainment' and 'aesthetic' value (See category of 'best film with popular appeal and aesthetic value' in Kerala State Film Awards and National Film Awards). Almost all his films deal with family and social relationships in middle-class societies. However, some film scholars have criticised Fazil for his film *Manichitrathazhu* (1993), one of the most successful films in the history of Malayalam cinema, where he 'pits woman against woman' (Nair, 2010) and portrays 'unrestricted woman as a source of terror' (Menon, 2009). Fazil, therefore, is symptomatic of the larger trends through some of his films that celebrate patriarchy and power imbalance within middle-class Malayali families.

caste, middle-class men in the films.

Sreedharan (2010) questions the lack of mobility and autonomy among several women characters in Malayalam films of the 1990s. Numerous films in that period such as *Godfather* (1991), *Gandharvam* (The Gandharva Union, 1993) and *Kabooliwala* (The Man Who Plays Kabuli, 1993) dealt with conservative middle-class families who openly expressed their unwillingness to accept their sons' or daughters' romantic relationships.



In a scene from the film *Gandharvam* released in 1993, the female protagonist Sreedevi (second from right) pleads with her conservative upper middle-class father to accept her romantic relationship. In the background, Sreedevi's brother (third from right) looks angrily at his wife for trying to offer her support.

Several Malayalam films in the 1990s and 2000s features joint families with a patrilineal structure which drew clear lines that mark levels of acceptable behaviour. For example, in *Aniyathipravu* (The Younger Sister Dove, 1997), both families – belonging to middle-class communities – express strong resistance to the protagonists' relationship until they decide to find shelter in one of their friend's houses. The friend's family who belongs to the lower-class fishing community agrees to protect them and support the idea of a possible marriage. Here, the norms of 'acceptable behaviour' varies according to class and signifies that the concepts of prestige and honour gain an important position mostly among the middle-class communities (Saavala, 2010, Sreekumar, 2019, Devadas, 2021). Liechty (2003), for example, claims that social status' is related to systems of prestige and honour and that it is symptomatic of the

cultural politics and practices of the middle-class. In *Veendum Chila Veettu Karyangal* (A Few Other Family Affairs, 1999), the male protagonist's wish to marry a girl from a lower class does not go well with his middle-class parents and he is expelled from his home. This pattern of homogenous middle-class families' distancing from the lower class occupies a dominant space in several narratives across decades in Malayalam cinema. Sreedharan (2010) describes the existence of class divisions even in films of the 1950s by noting that:

inter-caste/class romances were imagined and depicted as threats to the traditional joint family structures where the law of the upper-caste patriarch ruled. Decadence of conventions is enshrined in the figure of the domineering father/uncle and the fire of revolutionary idealism in the figure of the son/nephew who decides to marry against the former's will. Thus, cinema becomes a crucial site where a new progressive citizenship is valorised as supportive of an egalitarian society in making. (p. 71)

Much of this inter-class distancing is triggered by the hegemonic politics played out by dominant fragments of the middle-class to create unity and coordination among themselves (Fernandes and Heller, 2006). According to Fernandes and Heller (2006), this hegemonic politics is carried out to manage the interests of dominant classes and to unite the highly diverse middle-class. Quite a few Malayalam films in the 1960s and 1970s, such as *Murapennu* (The Customary Bride, 1965), *Koottukudumbam* (Joint Family, 1969), *Mooladhanam* (Capital, 1969), and *Kuttyedathi* (1971) for example, discuss the wreckage of this unity in the matrilineal joint family structure among Nair communities (Sreedharan, 2010). Some of the plots that emerged during the period focus on issues of marital relationships and the fears and moral anxieties of middle-class Malayalis. These dominant cinematic narratives which articulated strong patriarchal practices outline the need to replace the matrilineal households with upper caste patrifocal joint families. A majority of the films in the 1980s and 1990s, such as *April 18* (1985), *Aaryan* (The Illustrious One, 1988), *Adhipan* (The Lord, 1989), *Kireedom* (Crown, 1989), *Chanakyan* (The Wise One, 1989), *Parampara* (Series, 1990), *Amaram* (The Stern, 1991), *Devasuram* (God-Demon, 1993), *Spadikam* (Crystal, 1995), *Meleparambil Aanveedu* (The Men's Villa of Meleparambu, 1993) and *Hitler* (1996) to name a few, plot men as decision

makers in the family and identify them as primary stakeholders in the evaluation of moral corruption in private and public spaces. This was also a time that saw the rise of popular male superstars of Malayalam film industry, Mohanlal and Mammooty, who played several masculine upper-caste roles that particularly appealed to the young male audiences (Osella and Osella, 2004). In most of the films made at the time, women's roles were limited to housewives in charge of the kids and cooking for the family. The family in this context becomes a repressive and hierarchical institution that limits the 'home' to an ideological site which reproduces and reinforces gender inequalities. Neither did women have a say in crucial decisions taken in the family nor did they have a strong voice in professional spaces. Some characters were limited to song and dance numbers with the central male characters and only appeared in certain scenes which were not very significant to the main plot. The presence of those characters is challengeable, not merely from the perspective of male consumption, but from a lack of depth in characterisation. Furthermore, the on-screen depiction of marriage as a mere cultural norm, status symbol or potential path to child bearing and rearing reaffirms normative assumptions of such institutions.

However, Malayalam cinema, as observed by Pillai, does not reflect realities but rather records and reiterates dominant ideologies and puts further thrust on Mulvey's inscription of women as spectacle and sight, resulting in a process she terms "crystallization of culture" (2010, p.8). The creation of these stereotyped images intensified due to the rise of neoliberal economy, particularly with the surge of satellite television channels and women-oriented shows and soap operas in the 1990s (Usha, 2004). Post 1990s and 2000s, cinema became one of the few ways in which Malayali women were forced to fit into the neoliberal feminine ideal and imagine themselves as disciplined heterosexual subjects whose bodies are intensely objectified and fetishized. Its plots and narrative patterns served the masculine logic and projected the middle-class and upper caste as central figures and centres of power. In most of these cases,

the intersections of gender, class and caste naturalise dominant ideologies and social hierarchies and project the upper caste middle-class Hindu as the ideal Malayali male. For instance, in *Gandharvam* (The Gandharva Union, 1993), *Mithunam* (1993), *Hitler* (1996), *Aaram Thampuran* (The Sixth Emperor, 1997), *Chandralekha* (1997), *Njangal Santhushtaranu* (We Are Happy, 1999), and several other films in the 1990s, we see upper caste Hindu male chauvinistic characters take complete patriarchal control over women's bodies and actions.



A scene from the Malayalam film *Hitler*, in which the upper caste, middle-class male protagonist protects his 'vulnerable' sisters from onlookers on the street.

Malayalam cinema post 2000s were not much different with films such as *Ravanaprabhu* (Ravana, The Prince, 2001), *Chathurangam* (Chess, 2002), *Balram vs Tharadas* (2006), *Chinthamani Kola Case* (The Murder Case of Chinthamani, 2006), *Christian Brothers* (2011), *Kasaba* (2016), and *Drishyam 2* (The Sight, 2021), where the patriarchal and misogynist upper caste Hindu or Syrian Christian characters dominated the screen space and time and also lacked strong female lead characters with a sense of agency and independence. Even independent women such as the central characters in *Salt N' Pepper* (2011) and *Diamond Necklace* (2012) eventually fall victims to patriarchy (Gopinath and Raj, 2015). Ironically, even recent Malayalam films made by women directors such as Anjali Menon, Sreebala K. Menon, and Roshni Dinaker such as *My Story* (2018), *Koode* (With You, 2018), *Love 24x7* (2015), and *Bangalore Days* (2014) conform to patriarchal modes of articulation with the inclusion of

characters and subthemes that revolve around gendered identities, conjugal heterosexuality, and petty stereotypes (Pillai, 2020).

Conclusion

The fight against injustice towards women in Kerala have been issue-based and feminist activism have failed to tackle the factors leading to their oppression (Pillai, 2010). Although Pillai does not cite anything specific, her point is exemplified if we recall issues that dates to the early 19th century (1813-1859) such as the Channar revolt (for the right to cover their breasts). Yet another movement took place in the 1980s, when female fish-workers in Kerala fought for their rights (for denying them public transportation). There have been several other more recent agitations led by Kerala women such as the Munnar agitation (by women workers in tea estate), the Kudumbashree movement (empowering women into male-dominated professions such as taxi and bus driving, construction work), the nurses' strike (for better wage-service conditions) and the Kiss of Love protests²⁵ (against moral policing). Pillai (2010) feels that feminism in Kerala is seen as a threat to the bourgeois²⁶ and force women to abstain from the label and adopt a conservative stance in gender reform issues²⁷. The 'liberal patriarchal

²⁵ It is important to note that there were several opposing protests the Kiss of Love movement by conservative religious organisations and political parties. These social groups made strong claims that the Kiss of Love protesters contaminated the moral values and sacred culture of India (Pillai, 2014).

²⁶ David Lockwood cites in his book, as he traces back to the days of India's freedom struggle, the emergence of a wealthy Indian industrialists, who benefitted under the British rule (see *The Indian Bourgeoisie: A Political History of the Indian Capitalist Class in the Early Twentieth Century*). When India gained independence, these men joined hands with the Indian National Congress and contributed to the development of a stable economy. These capitalists established strong relationships with the Jawaharlal Nehru-led government and supported the swadeshi movement that promoted Indian-made goods (Lockwood, 2012). In the current context, Indian MP Shashi Tharoor stresses on the voting preferences of India's middle-class in an article titled 'India's bourgeois revolution'. Tharoor uses the term 'bourgeoisie' to refer to the lower and upper middle-class (Tharoor, 2014). However, prominent feminist authors in Kerala, adopts the term to talk about gender paradoxes in the state. In the book *New Lamps for Old?: Gender Paradoxes of Political Decentralisation in Kerala*, the authors J. Devika and Binitha V Thampi discusses the anti-feminist proclamation by former Chief Minister EMS Nampoodiripad when he identified 'bourgeois and petty bourgeois feminism' as the main threats to women's emancipation. (Devika and Thampi, 2012). In a television interview with NDTV a few days ahead of the General Assembly elections in 2011, another former Chief Minister EK Nayanar, termed other political parties as 'bourgeois' as he explained how his government utilised public funds.

²⁷ Even strong responses and actions from female actors and feminists from within the Malayalam film industry evoked derogatory responses and reactions and the fight against injustice towards women have failed to tackle the factors leading to their oppression. In 2017, reputed Malayalam actress Parvathy Thiruvothu was verbally abused, trolled, and received several rape and death threats on social media when she expressed displeasure over a leading male actor's derogatory on-screen dialogues to a woman. Parvathy, along with a few other female actors who were part of WCC, protested the Association of Malayalam Movie Artists (AMMA) for its lack of action and double standards in the

pseudo-feminism'²⁸, as Pillai (2010) calls it, plays a role in providing support and raising consciousness on several rights guaranteed by the Constitution. However, there has not been much progress in educating women on their need for equality or developing their sense of agency, and the emphasis has been on teaching girls that they remain wives and daughters irrespective of other positions they may hold. The commodification culture in Kerala, which emerged in the early 1990s as a result of globalisation and the economic liberalisation in Kerala, established women as primary agents of consumption and the domestic spaces they inhabit as the main market for goods, services, and entertainment (Pillai, 2017). This hegemonic gendered and class-based culture influenced Malayalam cinema during that period and resulted in the formation of male-headed film associations, the emergence of star culture, the on-screen and off-screen monopoly of upper-caste actors, and most importantly, the misogynist and sexist bias in cinematic rhetoric.

The formation of WCC (Women in Cinema Collective, an organisation for female artists in Malayalam cinema) in 2017 has been a powerful step towards addressing some of the key issues that contemporary women in Malayalam cinema have been facing in the past. These include their security in film locations²⁹, equality of pay, maternity benefits, and general health

molestation case of a popular Malayalam actress. Most recently, she resigned from AMMA citing that its general secretary made bad remarks against the same actress involved in the molestation case. A song from Parvathy's 2018 film *My Story* released on YouTube have 176,000 dislikes till date and several abusive comments against her and other 'feminichis' (a derogatory connotation that Malayali men use in cyberspace to describe feminists in Kerala). Later, another Malayalam actress Rima Kallingal's speech at a TEDx event received similar reactions in social media websites. In her speech, Rima, a lower-caste woman, pointed out several instances of ongoing sexism, misogyny and gender inequality in Malayalam cinema and the Kerala society.

²⁸ Women's magazines started in India during the late 19th century and placed themselves in the midst of readers who were women looking for advice in "transforming herself in the shape of the ideal womanly self, ensconced in the modern domestic domain" (Devika and Sukumar, 2006). Even in the 1950's, feminist scholars continually engaged in writing about 'themselves' and other social issues that affected them. However, Devika and Sukumar feel they were not critical enough to question the hegemonic practices that existed during the time. Political conservatism and intense elitism were common attributes of the first-generation feminists in Kerala, and this prevented them from responding to changing political circumstances of the time. The authors, in their article 'Making Space for Feminist Social Critique in Contemporary Kerala', further argue that neither the attempted politicisation of women by these feminists nor the trade union's mobilisation of working-class women challenged the existing gender ideologies. However, it is noted that there was a considerable expansion in feminist non-literary social critique in the 1990s.

²⁹ The security of female actors has been under threat in the recent past. On 17 February 2017, a group of men forced a young and popular actress from the Malayalam film industry into their vehicle, recorded objectionable content, and sexually molested her. Later, Dileep, who is one of the most prominent stars of the Malayalam film industry was arrested for his involvement in the case.

care (Pillai, 2020). In future, the organisation should also take initiatives to politicise and revolutionise film narratives that are coded into the patriarchal culture of hegemonic heteronormativity. Some recent Malayalam films have shown glimpses of progressiveness in their approach and tried to force a change to the stereotypic male-centric narratives. However, critics and filmmakers feel that these attempts are only skin-deep and still support machoism in multiple ways³⁰. Powerful film narratives that subvert gendered, casteist, and classist, subject positions are a far and few in between.

This chapter primarily engaged in two main discussions to set the context for the film analysis chapters. It examined Malayali women's subjectivity and how they, despite their matrilineal lineage, were dominated and marginalised in the Kerala society during various periods in history such as the early and late twentieth century and post economic liberalisation. The chapter also discussed the representational politics of gender in Malayalam cinema from its early days to recent times. Both these detailed discussions are significant to assess how Shyamaprasad's films reinforce and challenge the ways in which gender is articulated on screen and in Kerala society.

³⁰ See 'Is skin-deep feminism the new shortcut to success in Bollywood?' *The Times of India* (January 7, 2019)

Chapter 3: Methodology - Cultural Studies, Space, and Intersectionality

Introduction

The previous chapter explored some of the ways in which gender is articulated in Malayalam cinema and the formation of gendered subjectivities in Kerala. By examining previous literature on the representation of gender in Malayalam cinema, it sets the basis for understanding the ways in which understand how Shyamaprasad's films reinforce or challenge some of those representational patterns.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the research methodology and methods central to the thesis. The chapter discusses what cultural studies 'is' and examines how some of its concepts would be used to address the main issues this thesis seeks to explore. It further investigates the aims of cultural studies and describes some of its distinctive characteristics. Space and spatial politics emerge as a key section in the chapter, where I discuss some of the key ideas of scholars such as Massey and Foucault among others, particularly around the governance of women's bodies and actions. In the next section of the chapter, I look at intersectionality as a theoretical framework for my thesis, review important scholarly works and ideas of some of its key thinkers and introspect how it could be useful as an analytical tool to study Shyamaprasad's films. Furthermore, I discuss briefly narrative analysis and the ways in which it becomes a helpful tool for me to analyse the films. To conclude, the chapter investigates and explains what it means to do cultural studies, especially in the context of my research.

Although my research aims to use cultural studies in the form of a methodological tool, it is too "heterogenous" and "diverse" to be limited to a single methodology (Rodman, 2017, p. 1). Cultural studies also does not fit into a specific discipline and draws theoretical tools and frameworks from a number of other disciplines. In that sense, cultural studies is radically

interdisciplinary (Rodman, 2017). This kind of an approach enables the cultural studies scholar to go beyond disciplinary boundaries and challenge some of the claims made in other prominent disciplines. Such an approach can sometimes involve what Hall (1990) claims as “the intellectual risk of saying to professional sociologists that what they say sociology is, is not what it is” (p.16). Additionally, even if a sociologist wants to adopt a cultural studies approach, he or she might have to develop a good grasp of theories and principles from other disciplines if the topic demands so.

Some scholars have also identified cultural studies to be post-disciplinary due to its emergence as a result of the lack of contentment with the scope of other disciplines and its efforts to identify the limitations of other established disciplines (Jameson, 1993). One could say that cultural studies as a project evolved from the dissatisfaction with the European or Euro-centric modes of knowledge production. Cultural studies, according to Bennett (1998), offers a more holistic approach to knowledge production and integrates several disciplines within humanities to produce better results. Cultural studies emerges as a response to the changes taking place in the media, the nation, and the world, and involves what Lawrence Grossberg calls “a different way of politicising theory and theorising politics” (1997, p. 7). It uses theoretical tools and resources to discuss political realities within specific contexts. Grossberg (1998) states how cultural studies attempts to interpret our everyday realities and informs us about lived realities of individuals and power relations that exist in our contemporary society:

It is not about interpreting or judging texts or people but about describing how people’s everyday lives are articulated by and with culture, how they are empowered and disempowered by the particular structures and forces that organise their lives, always in contradictory ways, and how their everyday lives are themselves articulated to and by the trajectories of economic and political power. It is about the historical possibilities of transforming people’s lived realities and the relations of power, and about the absolutely vital contribution of intellectual work to the imagination and realisation of such possibilities. (p. 67)

Hence, a cultural studies approach involves the constant and continuous redefining of the work in response to the changing conditions, be it historical, geographical, or political. It is this

sort of constant mapping, remapping, and articulation of discourses, power formations and everyday life that cultural studies is interested in (Grossberg, 1998). As a political project, cultural studies has the capacity to decode particular social and cultural practices in our everyday life and subvert existing power structures (Grossberg 1989). Cultural studies enables us to rethink our notions about political struggle and transformation and reimagine new ways of understanding the politics of ‘everyday’ discourses, or what Meaghan Morris (1988) conceives as the relation between the politics of culture and the politics of politics (Grossberg, 2018). Scholars such as Grossberg and Gilroy have always argued against the notion of a singular political agenda, or a predictable theoretical approach, suggesting that they tend to produce imperialistic discourses and foster power distinctions. In a cultural studies approach, one does not assume the possibility of a precise theory that can fit in perfectly or a single theoretical application that can provide all the answers in advance (Andrews, 2002; Slack, 1996; Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg, 1992). A cultural studies project can draw on multiple theoretical frameworks and research methods and does not have a fixed political agenda or object of study. What is, in fact, most important to cultural studies is context, and research is carried out through the contextually and historically specific analysis of the different ways in which power and sociocultural relationships are formed, maintained and structured. One of the central aspects I analyse in the thesis is the historical and culturally specific events that led to the marginalisation and exploitation of women in Kerala society and how they resulted in the conceptualisation of the ideal Malayali woman. By adopting a context-specific cultural studies methodology, I am able to explicate how Shyamaprasad’s films become ideological sites that reflect contemporary Kerala society and its socio-political formations. In the thesis, I also utilise a range of critical and theoretical approaches within cultural studies and interpret certain aspects of the films as a critique of dominant ideologies and hegemonic systems.

The Project of Cultural Studies

Cultural studies emerged in the 1950s and 1960s because of the tensions in England and other parts of Europe between the age-old working-class culture and the 'new' forms of mass culture (Kellner, 1997). The preliminary stages of the project focused on the mobilisation of progressive intellectual movements to fight capitalist structures and institutions and preserve the socialist working class and thus foster the development of a more egalitarian society. That process also involved a revolt against the new mass culture produced by the American culture industries and the constant attempts to preserve and protect the working-class culture. The current form of cultural studies we witness first developed as British cultural studies at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham by Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall. The Centre focussed on how the ideologies of gender, class, race, nationality, ethnicity and so on were represented in media and how they were articulated in cultural texts. They also examined how these cultural or media texts were perceived by specific audiences and the differences in the ways in which they interpret the same texts in varied contexts. Kellner (1997) argues that the British cultural studies, much like the Frankfurt School, which was critical of capitalism and capitalist culture, provided useful resources to critique current forms of culture and produce social theories to bring about political transformation and emancipation.

Most of the important cultural studies scholars adopted a Marxist approach to study culture and subcultures and critique dominant ideologies that produce hegemonic modes of consumerist and capitalist domination. The various discussions on the role of subcultural groups in resisting dominant ideologies and creating oppositional identities, as Kellner (1997) notes, also demonstrated cultural studies' unique ways of producing political changes and social transformation. In later years, cultural studies in North America, Britain and other parts of the world focussed more on the production, distribution, consumption, and reception of cultural texts.

To define cultural studies is not a straightforward task. Cultural studies is more of an academic project rather than a specific discipline or methodology and has no fixed object of study or a single political agenda (Rodman, 2017). It covers a wide range of theoretical, activist and other practices, and as Rodman (2017) suggests, it can be of a similar nature to Marxist, postcolonial and feminist projects rather than pure traditional disciplines such as anthropology, political science or sociology. Cultural studies, according to Nelson and Treichler, and Grossberg (1992), is an “interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes counter-disciplinary field that operates in the tension between its tendencies to embrace both a broad, anthropological and a narrowly humanistic conception of culture” (p. 4). Thus, the ways in which different forms of culture is experienced by various social groups is important to cultural studies scholars, especially to understand notions of power and subjectivity under specific conditions of time and space. Miller (2001) argues that cultural studies goes beyond the idea of viewing people as consumers – perhaps, from a pure political economy perspective – and rather examines the capacity of humans to potentially produce cultural languages and new social forms. To adopt this sort of an approach, cultural studies draws from a broad range of disciplines, theoretical models, policies and methods to fulfil its relentless commitment to progressive political and social transformation. Morris (1998) endorses this idea of a radical interdisciplinarity and marks that as one of cultural studies’ main traits but also comments on how it is different from certain other disciplinary practices:

Cultural studies may work as a space where disciplines talk to each other, question each other, trend on each other’s toes, with a view to redefining a shared, if not common, sense of purpose... A literary reading of a shopping mall that does not seriously engage with questions that arise in history, sociology and economics remains – however productive a transformation of the canon of English it may enable – a literary reading, not cultural studies. (p. 42)

This would also mean that cultural studies does not engage in the direct application of pre-existing theories as done in literary or other genres and rather indulges in the production of theories based on specific contexts. Scholars such as Morris and Grossberg have

emphasised the importance of formulating theories based on the context rather than expecting pre-existing theories to provide all the answers in advance. A cultural studies scholar would focus on the research questions in hand and determine the theoretical tools or methodological approach(es) that needs to be adopted. A cultural studies approach, therefore, would have to think beyond the theoretical possibilities and methodological limits within specific disciplines. Cultural studies tries to defy disciplinarity, universality or even total relativism. Neither does cultural studies endorse a one-theory-solves-everything approach, nor does it support complete empiricism. Cultural studies varies in its formations across time and space and produces what Grossberg terms as “discursive regimes” or “structured assemblage of practices” (2010, p. 25). This complex articulation of the everyday and the multiple discursive practices and formations constitutes a conjuncture. I will examine the importance of a context-centred approach after a discussion of the cultural studies’ pathway of analysing films.

The cultural studies approach to analysing film have largely focussed on the production, distribution, and reception practices (Kellner, 2011). There have been studies that examined film as a cultural commodity and the role it plays in the formation of social practices and identities (Tinkcom and Villarejo, 2001; Turner, 2008). Previous studies have also analysed the consumption practices of film texts by particular social groups or cultural communities (Huffer, 2017; Shugart, 2008; Kozinets, 2001). There is also scholarship on the representation of social identities and how film texts play a role in the construction and deconstruction of identities (Wohlwend, 2009). One of the ways to study such film texts and modes of representations is through textual analysis. Textual analysis is a method used to examine data from different mediums such as newspapers, websites, films, and documents, among others (Smith, 2017). The data from these sources become the ‘texts’ that are explored to assess the messages, values, and meanings they convey. The textual analysis method is

commonly used in disciplines, which include history, literature, political science, sociology, media studies, cultural studies, and so forth, which focus on “texts, or seeks to understand the inscription of culture in its artefacts” (Belsey, 2005, p. 160). Across different disciplines, textual analysis can vary in its approach and focus on specific methods, such as semiotic analysis, content analysis, and narrative analysis, for example (Smith, 2017). The narrative analysis method, as I elaborate later in this chapter, enables the researcher to deeply explore the main characters in films - their actions and motivations, and the way in which the story and the plot revolve around them. The method allows me to engage in a micro analysis of specific aspects of Shyamaprasad’s films such as the narrative structure, plot, dialogues, characters, and characterisation along with other formal and stylistic elements. Narrative analysis’s emphasis on characters and characterisation enables me to examine the articulation of male and female subjectivities in Shyamaprasad’s films and also understand the ways in which social institutions assert power and domination over individuals.

Dyer suggests that film analysis in the cultural studies approach must adapt a pathway where the aesthetic does not stand in opposition to the cultural and social particularity. Dyer stresses that studying film has “its own specificity, its own pleasures, its own way of doing things” and that it is important not to reduce it to “ideological formulation or what people (producers, audiences) think and feel about it” (1998, p. 9-10). Taranco (2012), in his case-study based article on Jason Reitman’s film *Juno* (2007), evaluates how the combination of cultural studies and film studies can function as an appropriate method for analysis. Taranco (2012) critiques existing academic practices of cultural studies scholars who “seem content with perpetually rediscovering what they already know” (pp. 444). This is a practice which even Grossberg (1994) has warned against. Scholars like Taranco and Grossberg express their dissatisfaction with approaches that abandon the narrative and aesthetic specificities of the film and focus only on the valuation of cultural practices. Taranco (2012) argues that aspects related

to form and style such as the film's mise-en-scene, narrative style and organisation, and the overall visual and aural rhetoric will reflect its social function. Like Dyer, these scholars strongly feel that the claims made in the name of a cultural studies-based film analysis should not ignore the stylistic devices that filmmakers adopt in storytelling. Film theorist Bordwell (2008) have also signified the importance of style and form in the creation of effects and meanings and emphasised the aesthetic functions of formal analysis. Considering these suggestions, I take up an analytical approach in which the socio-political critique embraces the narrative and aesthetic elements of cinema. I will discuss the importance of a context-centred approach in the next section.

The importance of context in cultural studies

It is important to look at cultural studies as a field of study that is not merely interested in everyday discourses but as a project that tries to understand the articulations between power and everyday formations in specific contexts. Such a context-centred approach, as Grossberg (1998) suggests, would help to look at cultural practices not from a one-dimensional or single-layered theoretical lens but from the various time/spaces in which they could operate. Grossberg (1998) posits that this context-centred approach would aim to determine the discursive nature of social realities rather than attempt to merely identify what texts mean or the ways in which people receive those meanings. Cultural studies offers theoretical resources to critically analyse specific social contexts, especially on the representation of the ideologies of gender, sexuality, class, and so on. One such theoretical resource I adopt in the thesis is intersectionality, which as I later discuss in the chapter, is a useful cultural studies approach to understand and address multiple forms of domination and oppression. This kind of work supports the cultural studies' practice of questioning the ideologies and discourses linked to hegemonic structures and institutions and the power hierarchies and inequities present in our everyday lives (Jones, Laine, and Sula, 2017). The

thesis also turns to cultural studies critic Michel Foucault and human geographer Doreen Massey in order to conceptualise and contextualise the notion of space and its relation to power and power-relations. Ang (1998), in the article *Doing cultural studies at the crossroads: Local/global negotiations*, asks “didn’t the strength of cultural studies lie precisely in its attention to context, in the rigorously anti-reductionist theoretical and methodologist assumption that relations between people, culture and power can only be grasped in their concrete, particular and specific contexts?” Here, Ang (1998) stresses the importance of specificity in cultural studies projects that appropriate abstractions on a diverse range of audiences. Ang’s claim of cultural studies approaches being “localised and historically specific” (p.18) is a key focus of my thesis. The research questions I seek to address in the thesis are specific to the modalities of gender, diaspora, caste and class within the Kerala or Indian context over particular periods of time in their history. These key concepts I analyse within the films frame my specific object of study within the ‘particular’ or ‘specific’ or ‘local’ Kerala context, which in some cases can be more broadly applied to or discussed in relation to the Indian context as well. For example, because it is difficult to provide a precise definition of the middle-class or make an accurate measurement of their number, we need to consider them as a heterogenous social layer spread across the country (Donner, 2012). In that case, with reference to Chapter Four, when we refer to the middle-class in Kerala, it could be a blanket term that can be applied to the whole of India. This way, the thesis also displaces the binary logic of ‘the local’ versus ‘the national’. As Ang suggests, “in the postmodern times and this globalised world it is no longer possible to highlight any ‘local’ that does not, in some way or other, depend on extra-local forces and influences for the construction of its identity” (p. 24). Ang highlights Massey’s conceptualisation of the idea of place as a “space where the boundaries between the inside and outside are blurred” (p. 24). By doing so, Ang exemplifies Massey’s attempt to deconstruct the binary opposition of the local and the global and to fit in the latter into the

former. Such an attempt, according to Massey, “allows a sense of place which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local”. Thus, in Chapter Five, my discussion links the global and local by examining and reviewing the global diasporic phenomenon, especially in relation to the notions of spatiality, displacement, and identity via-a-vis Shyamaprasad’s films centred around the Kerala/Indian diaspora.

The focus on framing the contexts as the base for analysis is maintained consistently in the thesis - for instance, parts of Chapter Two of the thesis traces the history of women in Kerala to contextualise the idea of the ‘ideal’ Malayali woman; the analysis of selected films and its central characters in Chapter Four involves the examination of relevant aspects of Kerala society post liberation and the neoliberal subject; Chapter Five briefly traces the history of global and Indian diaspora to contextualise the discussion of the diaspora and diasporic characters in the films; Chapter Six examines aspects of caste in pre-independent India as a prelude to the analysis of caste and gender, especially in the main film discussed in the chapter, *Agnisakshi*. Therefore, while it is important to consider the wider social formations for some projects, others might require us to look at the specific ways in which power relations are articulated. As Grossberg (1998) puts it,

We need to understand the specific forms in which domination is organised, how it is lived, mobilised, and empowered, without assuming that domination (or even hegemony) is always and everywhere the same. We cannot take for granted that the political effects of particular cultural practices are somehow guaranteed in advance, or even guaranteed across contexts. We need to ask how modes that empower or serve as tools of resistance in one place can disempower people in another place, and vice versa (p. 77).

To understand the specific forms of domination and how it varies across contexts which Grossberg refers to here, we need to look at the specific history of events and how they produce meanings or meaningful relationships. We also need to think about ways in which social structures and institutions shape or reshape meanings of specific events or concepts

(Rodman, 2017). It is important to understand the spatial contexts in which events occur in the past and present to recognise the multiplicity of spaces and the role they place in shaping identity and subjectivity. In the next section, I discuss the concept of space by mainly discussing the ideas of Massey and Foucault and show how the examination of spatial relations of power is crucial to understand the contexts in which identities and subjectivities are shaped.

Space, Spatial Politics and Context

Space and spatial politics are important ideas to understand the importance of context and the ways in which aspects such as identity and power are operated. Space, to de Certeau, is a practiced place. de Certeau provides the example of the street's transformation into a space by walkers. Here, pedestrians on the street transform the street from a place that is "geometrically defined by urban planning" into a space (p. 117). Although the street is a place made of several material objects, they have no influence on what pedestrians do on it. Similarly, a written text becomes a space by the act of reading it (de Certeau, 1984). However, Massey (2000) is critical about this engagement with structuralism and argues that the binary approach is problematic, politically and philosophically.

Hence, to position Massey's conceptualisation of space in de Certeau's example, some pedestrians might walk on the pathway for a long distance while certain others would take a turn to the left or right. As Massey (1994) explains, "people occupy different positions within any community" (p. 154). In the Indian context, a women's experience of/with space(s) are different from that of men. For example, Doron's and Raja's article on the political, economic, and cultural conditions which generate the sanitation crisis in India highlight how public toilets become a symbol of male privilege in India. The Haryana government launched the 'No Toilet, No Bride' campaign in 2005 (initiated by the central government) to bring an end to open

defaecation and to ensure greater male investment in private toilets³¹. However, Doron and Raja (2015) argue that the campaign further intensifies gender inequalities by shutting down women's already-limited access to public spaces, where they can socialise and make friends. The campaign also gives the false impression that the home is a safe space for women despite the increasing number of reported and unreported cases of domestic violence and abuse against women in rural and urban India (Doron and Raja, 2015). Also, in the Indian context, certain spaces are coded as masculine or feminine. The public sphere in India is also a highly gendered and sexualised space where women are always vulnerable to rape and sexual assaults (Chakraborty, 2021, Roy and Bailey, 2021, Behl, 2017, Durham, 2015, Bhattacharyya, 2015, Ramachandran, 2011, Abraham, 2010). Massey (1994) argues that the requirement for the security of boundaries and the need for a "defensive and counterpositional definition of identity is culturally masculine" (p. 7). The identities of subjects and the spaces they occupy are relational (Massey, 2005). Thus, space plays a crucial role in the way identities are shaped and the manner in which subjects are constituted in specific contexts. The gendering of space restricts and limits certain women's mobility and access to specific places within particular contexts (Bryant and Livholts, 2007). In Chapter Four of the thesis, I mention how Deepti, in *Ore Kadal*, lacks agency and mobility in her role as a middleclass housewife whereas Bela depicts a strong character who often handles unruly behaviour by male customers in her workplace. In Chapter Five, we see how the mobility and agency of Saraswathi, a Brahmin woman who belongs to the diasporic community in *English: An Autumn in London*, is limited by her feeling of being away from 'home'. In Chapter Six, Devaki, the central character of *Agnisakshi*, struggles to survive the strict gender and caste-based norms within the spaces of the hegemonic Nampoothiri *illams*. Thus, it is not only gender but also their other social

³¹ The 'No Toilet, No Bride' campaign supported the families of girls who are ready for marriage to demand the presence of a toilet in their prospective groom's home as one of the conditions for wedding. Studies show that Indian families that belong to a higher class and upper castes are more likely to own a toilet (see Augsburg and Lesmes, 2015). However, a greater number of lower class and lower caste families, especially homes with men of marriageable age, have acquired toilets after the introduction of the scheme (Augsburg and Lesmes, 2015).

identities, the spatial locations of characters, and the specific contexts that determine women's agency and mobility in Shyamaprasad's films.

A key aspect of spatiality and identity is the distinction between private and public spaces. Attempts to restrict women to the private sphere indicate the tendency to separate workplace and home and construct the latter as a woman's place. This way, "the identities' of women and of the home-place are intimately tied up with each other" (Massey, 1994, p. 180). Massey thereby underscores the case of a highly gendered geography, which eventually leads to the exclusion of women from several social activities. Spaces, according to Massey (1999), are not only gendered but "reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood" (p. 179). Space, thus, is multiple, dynamic, and characterised by the politics of difference. For Massey, spaces are about interrelations and relationality. The idea envisions space as something that is socially produced and always under construction (Massey, 2005). The thesis draws on some of the ideas of Massey and Foucault on the notions of space, power, and gender.

Foucault's conception of space is useful to locate and critique dominant discourses of gender, diaspora, class and caste within the context of contemporary Kerala society. Space, for Foucault (2007), is the most fundamental aspect in any exercise of power and in any form of communal life. In Foucault's analysis of the prison in *Panoptikon*, he shows how prisoners are made to discipline themselves through the architectural arrangement inside prisons. The same applies to classrooms and factories, all of which are disciplinary spaces and emphasises the role of spatial dimensions in the exercise of power (Foucault in Zieleniec, 2007). Using the example of Bentham's *Panoptikon*, where the prisoner is subjected to conscious and constant state of surveillance, Foucault interlinked disciplinary power, state and cultural institutions, and their methods of punishment (Nicholson, 2006). Disciplinary power is exercised when individuals regulate their own behaviour and control their body and actions to conform to the

conventional social norms and practices (Foucault, 1977). The enforcement of disciplinary power can potentially be more effective than other forms of regulatory mechanisms. Disciplinary power produces spaces that will separate and differentiate individuals and subject them to hierarchised surveillance. Discipline, according to Foucault, is the “specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise” (1977, p. 170). In disciplinary power, the subjects are compulsorily meant to be visible whereas the source or system which imposes it on them is invisible. “It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection” (p. 187). The notion of disciplinary power helps us to understand how individuals are regulated and controlled as docile bodies by institutions such as families, prisons, schools, and hospitals. In Chapter Four, I discuss how the middle-class family appears as a disciplinary space for certain women in the films examined. In the films on diaspora in Chapter Five, we see how the diaspora too becomes a disciplinary space for the female characters in the film. For the Nampoothiri and Nair women in ‘Agnisakshi’, which I discuss in Chapter Six, the *illam* and its surroundings appear as disciplinary spaces; these spaces enforce strict measures and surveillance for women and regulate their mobility and agency. All these spaces become governmental landscapes which women desire to break free from (Foucault, 1982).

In his discussion of disciplined bodies, Foucault (1977) talks about the objectification of bodies and enforcement of a well-disciplined body by institutions of power. To further illustrate this, he provides the examples of the rigorous investment on the body of students in schools to develop good handwriting, and the strict exercise regimes of soldiers at training centres. The imposition of disciplinary procedures to control and classify individuals demonstrates the requirement of these institutions to create docile bodies that function in specific ways. As is observed in Chapters Four, Five, and Six, one way in which control is imposed on individuals is in the process where they are ‘classified’ based on gender, sexuality,

class, or caste. We see how individuals are treated differently based on the differences in the modalities that structure their identity or the spaces they occupy in everyday lives. In that process, the institutional systems that impose disciplinary power on individual subjects “separates, analyses, differentiates ... ‘trains’ the moving, confused, useless multitude of bodies and as instruments of its exercise and forces into a multiplicity of individual elements” (p. 170). Therefore, the most important function of disciplinary power is to ‘train’ individuals, and in the process, impose on them and use them in specific ways (Foucault, 1977). It is a kind of power that creates specific types of subjects and “regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise” (p. 170). The disciplinary institutions focus on the conduct of individuals and function to create analytical divisions with men at the helm of control, surveillance, and ‘training’. Foucault describes the nature of this control and surveillance as follows:

The power in the hierarchized surveillance of the disciplines is not possessed as a thing, or transferred as a property; it functions like a piece of machinery. And, although it is true that its pyramidal organization gives it a 'head', it is the apparatus as a whole that produces 'power' and distributes individuals in this permanent and continuous field. This enables the disciplinary power to be both absolutely indiscreet, since it is everywhere and always alert, since by its very principle it leaves no zone of shade and constantly supervises the very individuals who are entrusted with the task of supervising and absolutely 'discreet', for it functions permanently and largely in silence (p. 177).

In the films across various chapters of the thesis, we come across characters who constantly impose such a disciplinary power over women. In Shyamaprasad’s films analysed in Chapter Four, Five and Six, we see individuals with institutional power and authority attempt to control, supervise, and discipline the central female characters at different stages in the films. The institutional spaces (particularly the familial spaces) that the women in these films occupy, are subject to what Foucault terms a “micro-penalty of time (latenesses, absences, interruptions of tasks), of activity (inattention, negligence, lack of zeal), of behaviour (impoliteness, disobedience), of speech (idle chatter, insolence), of the body ('incorrect' attitudes, irregular gestures, lack of cleanliness), of sexuality (impurity,

indecenty” (p. 178). The different kinds of disciplinary institutions that we come across in the films, such as the family, the workspace, the community, class and caste, and the society (Kerala) at large, constantly “compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes... in short, normalises” (p. 182-83). Later, Foucault developed the concept of biopower to accentuate how the elements of disciplinary power affect not only individual bodies but extends to populations. Discipline and regulation were the key elements of biopower, which societal institutions employed to ensure the mechanisation of bodies, the maintenance of social hierarchy, and the production of willing subjects (Cisney and Morar, 2015). Biopower enables us to understand how institutions structure, subordinate, and normalise individual forces to make them ‘productive’ and ‘able’ members of society. Biopower serves as a critical apparatus that warns us of the dangers of sovereignty and reminds us about the effects of the excess of power. (Cisney and Morar, 2015). The understanding of biopower also unmasks the perception that subjects of a state are free, self-governing, and therefore, sovereign themselves. In reality, “we do not recognise our own subjugation; or, put otherwise, we do not recognise the ways in which our desires and our very *choices* are constituted by the relations within the system itself” (Cisney and Morar, 2015, p. 14-15). In the analysis of Shyamaprasad’s films, I discuss instances in which individuals, particularly women, are subjugated by institutional forces such as the middle-class/upper-caste family. These individuals in the films represent the wider population in the society who consider themselves to be ‘free’ and ‘sovereign’ although, in reality, are constantly monitored and controlled by governmental institutions. These governmental institutions, such as the family, employ a form of power called pastoral power to offer ‘salvation’ to the subjects upon whom the disciplinary and regulatory mechanisms are imposed. This ‘salvation’ can take on any form, as Foucault proposes, which includes “health, well-being (that is, sufficient wealth, standard of living), security, protection against accidents” (1982, p. 784). Pastoral power, although historically associated with a specific

religion (Christianity), later assimilated into some of the modern state apparatuses such as the police and the prisons. All these forms of power play out in different forms and intensities contingent on the context. In some instances, as I demonstrate in the film analysis chapters, some forms of power operate within other forms, for example, the operation of pastoral power within biopower. Pastoral empowerment, as Parrenas (2021) calls it, is conditional and limited and works to aid the process of disciplining and regulating the subjects. The extension of care and support by institutional forces towards individuals ensures their ‘upliftment’ to self-governing and self-regulating subjects. I will return to these concepts in the analysis chapters, where I engage in a close reading of Shyamaprasad’s films.

Through a close reading of Shyamaprasad’s films, I discuss the Indian context where women’s mobility is regulated. Space is an important concept in cultural studies, as it provides an anti-essentialist view on the fluidity of identities and elucidates the importance of context in understanding power structures and cultural formations. Also significant within the films I analyse in the various chapters of the thesis is the idea of disciplinary spaces as transgressive. These films showcase strong female characters who challenge the disciplinary spaces – Deepti, Gayatri, Varsha and Elektra who transgress the institutional spaces marked by middle-class familial norms and normative gender ideologies, Devaki who transgresses the heteronormative patriarchy of Brahmanical hegemony, and Sita who transgresses the discursive regimes of alienated diasporic spaces. I will further discuss them in Chapters Four, Five, and Six. I will employ an intersectional approach to explore overlapping identities and multiple inequalities of these characters in the respective films.

Intersectionality as a method for analysis

Intersectionality is one of the key intellectual practices of cultural studies and has the potential to bring about political changes and transform people’s lives. Jones, Laine, and Sula (2017) argue that “...the best work in cultural studies has the capacity for or is already

engaging with intersectionality as method” (p. 4). Intersectionality as a theoretical framework replaces the single axis focus on gender, class, race, or caste and accounts for multiple and varied forms of oppression. In Sara Ahmed’s words, intersectionality is the “starting point, the point from which we must proceed if we are to offer an account of how power works” (2016, p. 5). It works against the hegemonic interests and ideologies of privileged and preferred positions such as the white, heterosexual, bourgeois citizens of the globalised world.

This section discusses the key works of prominent feminists and anti-racist scholars to review the concept of intersectionality. I particularly examine the various approaches and arguments raised by leading scholars of intersectionality such as Jennifer C. Nash (2008), Ange-Marie Hancock (2007), Nira Yuval-Davis (2006), Leslie McCall (2005), Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003, 1984), Patricia Hill Collins (1993), and Kimberle Crenshaw (1991, 1989). I also discuss the arguments and approaches of key intersectional scholars in the Indian context such as Nivedita Menon (2012, 2009), Praveena Kodoth (2008), Sharmila Sreekumar (2007), and J. Devika (2006). In the last part of the review, I underscore the lack of an intersectional approach – except for some scholars such as Meena Pillai and Jenny Rowena – in the analysis of gender and other modalities that structure identity and subjectivity within existing scholarship on Malayalam cinema. By adopting an intersectional analysis in my thesis, I examine subjects who are oppressed by more than a single modality that structure their identity and subjectivity.

The concept of intersectionality has gained significant attention and relevance since the term was first introduced by Crenshaw (1989). It has been portrayed as both essential to and contested within feminist scholarship (Skjeie and Langvasbraten, 2009). Intersectionality could be broadly referred to as the interactions between race, gender, and other categories of difference in cultural ideologies, social practices, institutional

arrangements, individual lives, and the outcomes of all these interactions in relation to power (Skeje and Langvasbraten, 2009; Davis, 2008). McCall (2005) positions intersectionality as the most significant theoretical contribution made by gender studies in combination with related fields so far.

Feminist activists and scholars have recognised the need for a collective voice in order to bring about radical changes and urgency to address matters such as rape or domestic violence as part of a “broader system of domination that affects women as a class” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1241). The narratives about bias and domination and the efforts to politicise violence against women would be incomplete without discussions of how their experiences are also shaped by other dimensions of their identities such as class and race (and caste in the context of my thesis). Crenshaw (1991) argues that although sexism and racism often intersect in people’s lives, they rarely do so in antiracist and feminist practices. It is, therefore, significant to examine the experiences of women of colour as they face multiple dimensions of violence because of their intersectional identity.

In the last few decades, intersectionality has replaced the single-axis analysis to become an approach to examine the multiple forms of women’s identity and oppression. However, since its inception and for a couple of decades since then, most discussions of intersectionality have centred around one particular intersection, that is the intersection of gender and race (Nash, 2008). Since then, intersectional studies have developed into an important field of feminist research and theory (Rodo-de-Zarate and Baylina, 2018). In the remaining chapters of this thesis, I explore how gender intersects with caste, diaspora, and the middle-class, especially in the context of the specific films I analyse in each of them. Indian women face multiple inequalities in their everyday lives at the intersections of gender and caste, gender and diaspora, and gender and class, or in some cases as I show in my thesis – the intersection of more than one of these social identities at the same time. In other words,

gender-based discrimination is much more complex and a multi-axis analysis will enable a nuanced and deeper understanding of how gender discrimination occurs in and through other social identities that structure subjectivity. This is why an intersectional analysis is important to discuss gender politics in India. The intersections of multiple identities and subjectivities of women in Malayalam cinema has to date not been fully explored. A lack of an intersectional approach in analysis of gender in most scholarly works on Malayalam cinema, as I examine in detail in chapter one, is a significant gap I seek to address through my research.

Intersectionality can play an important role in anti-racist and feminist scholarship and has several political and theoretical purposes (Nash, 2008). Firstly, according to Nash, it subverts race/gender binaries and thereby theorises identity in a more complex way. Intersectionality also deals with subjects who exist in the empty spaces between gender and race and within the overlapping margins of the two. Secondly, as Nash (2008) notes, intersectionality aims to validate the racial variations within gender and the gendered variations within race by focussing on subjects whose identities involve a contestation of gender or race categorisations. Lastly, an intersectional approach enables a closer examination into the exclusions of multiple marginalised subjects in previous and current antiracist and feminist works and adds to the gaps in literature brought about by the single-axis approach (Nash, 2008; Crenshaw, 1991). Even before Crenshaw mobilised the term intersectionality, several feminist scholars have debated the idea of a ‘universal’ woman and argued that the term ‘women’ itself is highly contested and that their experiences would differ based on their subject positions (Nash, 2008). What is important here is to refuse the homogenisation of social categories and not to assume that everyone who belongs to particular social categories would share attributes that are specific to them (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Hence, in my research, I do not merely examine women as ‘Brahmin woman’,

‘immigrant woman’, or ‘middle-class woman’, rather I discuss multiple subject positions and explore distinct experiences of women (and men, in the process) under different spatial locations. In my analysis chapters, I highlight how space and power are interconnected and show how the examination of specific spatial locations of characters in the films offers a more contextualised view of intersectional relations. As Nash (2008) points out, intersectionality has managed to leave activists struggling to maintain a balance between their work ‘as blacks’ or ‘as women’ while considering the diversity and variation within ‘blacks’ and ‘women’. Purkayastha (2012), in her essay titled ‘Intersectionality in a transnational world’, provides the example of two women of colour – a Ugandan black immigrant and a Ugandan Indian immigrant in the United States of America. She suggests that both women experience racial discrimination and marginalisation in different ways – the former as an African American and the latter as a Muslim or Muslim-looking Asian American. Purkayastha (2012) also notes that even if the two women return to Uganda, they would experience difference kinds of marginalisation or privileges. The black Ugandan would have certain privileges for being part of the dominant group although her exact social location will be determined by other intersecting factors. Similarly, the Indian Ugandan would be at an advantage when she visits India although she could be marginalised if she is a Muslim or a lower-caste Hindu woman. Purkayastha (2012) further argues that although many of the axes’ early intersectional scholars identified, such as gender, sexuality, class, race, nation, ability, and age, remain relevant, the generalised ‘women of colour’ construct is problematic. Such an approach enables me to deal with another criticism of intersectionality, as highlighted by McCall (2005), on the validity of these analytical categories such as gender and race for they fail to address what he calls ‘intracategorical complexity’. McCall (2005), in this instance, draws inspirations from the work of Crenshaw (1989) to deal with individual identities that cross the boundaries of particular social groups. This approach is required to understand and analyse the complexity of lived experiences

within such social groups. However, this could divert the focus from the larger social processes that cause these inequalities (Walby et. al, 2012). McCall (2005) also identifies the ‘anti-categorical’ approach that is “based on a method that deconstructs analytical categories” (p. 1773). This approach considers the idea of stabilising the categories to be problematic as they essentialise the particular social categories that analysts attempt to change and thus prioritises multiplicity and fluidity of categories over stability. McCall (2005), nevertheless, even finds this problematic because of its difficulty in practical analysis. He finds the ‘inter-categorical’ approach as the most suitable one as it “provisionally adopt[s] existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality among multiple and conflicting dimensions” (McCall, 2005, p. 1773). The inter-categorical approach thus focusses on the larger structures and institutions that bring about inequalities.

Hancock’s (2007) review of studies on intersectionality based on the categories of gender, race, class among others have enabled her to identify three approaches – unitary, multiple and intersectional. The unitary approach would mainly consider only one category, such as gender, race or class, which could be stable and primary. The multiple approach might address more than one category in a prominent way; here, the categories are likely to be stable although it evaluates the identity of the individual merely based on the sum of all the categories. The intersectional approach involves the examination of more than one category in which all the categories are equally significant, fluid and mutually constitute each other (Walby et. al, 2012). Bauer (2014), in her research on population health, provides the example of aboriginal women in Canada and their health status. Bauer (2014) asserts that by using the multiple approach, one would determine the health status of aboriginal women by tallying the health impact of all women who are aboriginal. However, an intersectional approach, as Bauer claims, would verify and assess individual experiences of

aboriginal women, unlike the multiple approach. Most scholarly works on gender in Malayalam cinema, including such as the ones I discussed in the previous chapter, have adopted a unitary approach, as I highlighted in chapter one, whereas I engage in an intersectional approach in my analysis of Shyamaprasad's films. Using the intersectional approach, the thesis rejects an approach in which men's and women's identities and subjectivities are universalised and instead analyses their individual experiences within specific spatial locations.

Prominent feminist and antiracist scholars, such as the ones I discuss below, underscore the importance of categories such as gender, class, and race to make sense of the structural bases of subordination and domination. Collins (1993) notes that we often make assumptions about people we meet outside or work with and tend to act in "prescribed ways because they belong to given race, social class or gender categories" (p. 3). She suggests that such judgements based on the particular categories people belong to must be replaced with human relationships that traverse beyond the difference created by these categories (Collins, 1993). This, however, fails to happen most of the time, especially within social contexts traumatised by the politics of difference. Brewer, Conrad and King (2002), in their discussion of the complexities and possibilities of an intersectional analysis, particularly highlight the discrimination based on the gendered nature of race in the United States of America. They cite two other scholars – Linus Yamane's study of Filipinos and Marlene Kim's study on black women – to demonstrate the level of discrimination in the labour markets. In this instance, Yamane draws on Said's observation of how the West views themselves as masculine and the East as feminine. As a result, the West perceive Asian women as more feminine than woman from the West and finds Asian men emasculated in relation to men from the West. Alternatively, Kim and Yamane struggle to determine whether the difference in the salaries of Filipinos men in comparison with men from the West is due

to gender discrimination or race/caste discrimination. This form of discriminatory treatment arises from the fact that individuals are often identified and treated based on the perceived characteristics of the group they belong to rather than their individual qualities (Ruwanpura, 2008). An intersectional analysis examines the ways in which such forms of subordination, domination and subjects are constructed in particular contexts and locations (Kantola and Nousiainen, 2009; Grabham, 2009).

Intersectionality in the Indian context

Within the Indian context, scholars have taken up an intersectional approach to examine the relationship between caste and gender, and class and gender. According to Krishnan (2005), caste creates social and cultural segregation and is linked to status, economic opportunities, and resources. Krishnan's ethnographic study of gender, caste, and economic inequalities among women in rural South India reveals that marital violence is hardly identified among upper-caste communities and was mostly raised by women from economically backward and lower-caste backgrounds. Belonging to a lower caste is most often a disadvantage as men from such families often consume alcohol daily, abuse their wives and force them to have sex (Krishnan, 2005). Here, we find that Krishnan's female respondents have a striking similarity to the women and their experiences in the field study Crenshaw (1991) conducted among minority communities in the United States of America during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Crenshaw (1991), in her seminal article 'Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color' notes:

Many women of colour, for example, are burdened by poverty, child care responsibilities, and the lack of job skills. These burdens only in part or not at all, such as class or sexuality, are often as critical in shaping the experiences of women of colour. The focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed. (p. 1245)

The works of feminist scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984, 2003) and Nivedita Menon (2012, 2009) also adopt an intersectional approach in their analysis of

gender in India. Mohanty's (2003) seminal essay 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses' provides a critique of 'western feminist scholarship' on women of the Third World and the "falsely universalising methodologies that serve the narrow self-interest of Western feminism" (p. 501). Through her work, Mohanty also locates feminist scholarship within the economic and political framework dominated by the First World. Mohanty's arguments in relation to western feminist scholarship highlight a lack of attention and recognition of the Third World, their historical complexities, and their struggles to overcome the oppressions they face. Mohanty (1984) problematises the western feminists' discursive construction of Third World women as a "homogenous 'powerless' group often located as implicit victims of particular socio-economic systems" (p. 338). Mohanty, therefore, rejects the homogenous categorisation of Third World women and the assumption that all these women are victims of male violence, familial systems or religious ideologies. Such a universalised and reductionist model of women fails to discuss their specific practices and differing positions within familial or societal systems. Mohanty (1984) emphasises the need for a 'context-specific differentiated' analysis in feminist theorising and practice, a form of analysis which considers the social and historical contexts and rejects all forms of cultural reductionism. Therefore, Mohanty's (1984) analysis signifies the need for an intersectional analysis, particularly in the case of Third World women, to prevent the homogenisation of race, class, social, religious, historical, and cultural specificities.

Another prominent feminist scholar Nivedita Menon, in her article titled 'Sexuality, caste, governmentality: Contests over gender in India', identifies the need to challenge the notion of women in public discourses. Menon (2009) specifies the case of the Indian Parliament where a blanket reservation exists for women, which means thirty-three percent seats in the Parliament and state assemblies are reserved for them. However, there are

no specific caste-based categorisations. This could mean, as Menon (2009) notes, the lower caste men in the Parliament would make way for the upper caste women. The Parliament reconstituted in such a way would not resemble the supreme legislative body of a few decades ago where it was mostly occupied by upper-caste and upper-class politicians. Menon (2009) argues that women belong to specific cultural, social and economic locations that disempower them and stresses that the ones who belong to the lower caste experiences this oppression in a different way from those of the upper caste. Thus, the idea of intersectionality becomes a key point in her analysis of gender within the Indian context.

The works of key feminist scholars in Kerala such as Praveena Kodoth (2008), Sharmila Sreekumar (2007) and J Devika (2006), whose works I have already discussed in the previous chapter, are significant in terms of their intersectional approach. These scholars point out the case of non-dominant women in Kerala - in terms of sexuality, class and caste - which appear to be missing in the much talked-about 'Kerala Model'. Their works play a crucial role in shifting the focus of discussions on gender in Kerala from a predominantly upper-caste and upper-class perspective.

However, there have been some critical claims made against the visibility, adaptability, and the lack of scholarly engagement of intersectionality outside the Global North. Nivedita Menon, in her article titled 'Is Feminism about women? A critical view on intersectionality from India', narrates how western concepts including intersectionality often dominate scholarly debates and the hegemonic ways in which they are blindly adopted into the postcolonial spaces (and never the other way around). Menon (2015) also argues that intersectionality does not address the issues of Dalit and queer communities in India. For instance, in the article, Menon refers to Dalit gay men, whose masculinity is not the same as other Dalit or non-Dalit men and suggests that intersectionality does not address such specific contexts where the identities of Dalit gay men are fundamentally unstable.

In her article, Menon also questioned the origin and ownership of the intersectional approach. It is, however, interesting to note that even before Menon published this article, scholars such as May (2014) and Bilge (2013) have pointed out the critical stand taken by some authors on Crenshaw and other early architects of intersectionality and how they misunderstood some of Crenshaw's ideas and reduced them to 'nothing new'. Davis (2020) makes a plea to stop the 'intersectionality wars', to borrow from Nash (2019), and abandon "proprietary notions that intersectionality belongs to one author or to a particular school of thought or a specific geographic location... in favour of understanding and thinking critically about how theories travel and in doing so take on different meanings and are used for different purposes" (p. 124). Other scholars are also critical of the fact that Menon has ignored the idea of class in her discussion, a significant trope in intersectionality-informed approaches to study gender (Dhawan and Varela, 2016; Gopal, 2015). The notion of class is crucial to my work, particularly the middle-class in the Indian/Malayali context, and is examined in relation to gender in the next chapter. Chapter Four of the thesis examines what it means to be a middle-class woman in India and how the family and Kerala society impose moral expectations on her. Furthermore, I locate the intersection of gender and middle-class in Shyamaprasad's films.

My approach does not limit the analysis of the films to an intersectional approach and universalise its western conceptualisations of space and time through a direct application or comparison to the Euro-American experience. Rather, I use it as one of the main theoretical tools that cultural studies offer to conduct the analysis of the specific problems addressed in my research. By locating it within cultural studies, this thesis brings a contextual approach to intersectionality, as Menon (2015) recommends, where it attempts to map power relations in specific social fields with a focus on the ways in which those relations are negotiated at a particular juncture (Gilbert, 2019). However, Menon's

description of the intersectional approach as a pre-existing and familiar perspective does not hold true for scholarly works on gender in Malayalam cinema, as I demonstrated in the first chapter of the thesis. Using intersectionality, I discuss differently located individuals in the films who are subjects of privilege or oppression and how structures of power relate to the modes of oppression. Like Menon's (2015) criticism of how intersectionality refrains from recognising multiple identities such as the Dalit gay or the Hijras (eunuchs), other critics have made claims about intersectionality's inability to accommodate a multiplicity of identities and subjectivities (Rice et al., 2019; Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013) or stabilises relations and identities in fixed positions (Garneau, 2017). However, scholars have recognised its versatility and flexibility in mapping identities and subjectivities and suggest that it underscores "multiple dimensions of identity/subjectivity related to structures of power and has potential to create liberatory change by demonstrating how interactions between social locations and power structures manifest in oppression and privilege" (Rice et al., 2019; p. 415). The intention of the pioneers of intersectionality such as Crenshaw and Collins were to eliminate the existing power dynamics and uplift women in disadvantaged and oppressed communities from 'margin to center' as bell hooks (1984) frames it.

Contrary to the approach adopted by these scholars and others who merely highlight multiple axes of oppression as the core principle of intersectionality, postcolonial feminist Mary John feels that the mere addition of the various structures that constitute them does not often alert us to the problem. John imagines the purpose of intersectionality is to identify and name a problem rather than to find a solution. John (2015) stresses on the importance of identifying different forms of privileges or disadvantages rather than just discussing the constitution of multiple identities. I discuss this further in Chapters Four and Six, especially in relation to the intersections of gender and middle-class and gender and caste, respectively.

More broadly, my review of key texts and debates on intersectionality clearly

indicates its political and theoretical purposes, most importantly to address the issue of subordination and marginalisation of women in multiple ways. The review has addressed the key role it plays in anti-racist, anti-casteist and feminist scholarship and has underscored its adaptability as a theoretical and conceptual tool to explore gender in relation to other modalities such as diaspora, caste and class. In the next section, I discuss narrative analysis as an analytical tool and how I would employ it to analyse the films in Chapters Four, Five and Six.

Narrative Analysis

In Chapters Four, Five, and Six, I use narrative analysis as an analytical method to examine Shyamaprasad's films. A narrative, according to Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith (2020) is a "chain of events linked by cause and effect and occurring in time and space (p. 73)". Narrative is the presentation and representation of the story in the way the audience experiences and is made possible when all the different narrative elements work together (Olagoke, 2010). Thus, the narrative connects different elements and events in the story spatially and temporarily. The characters, their dialogues, and the settings within which they appear become crucial elements in the organisation of the plot. The narrative is the strongest link that connects the verbal and visual language of cinema (Lothe, 2000). Scholarly studies on Indian cinema have rarely undertaken narrative analysis as a formal analytical method; however, most of the scholarship is based on the analysis of narratives and the reading of the film as text (Mukhopadhyay, 2006). More specifically, I employ narrative analysis to discuss how the stories are narrated and plots are structured, and in what ways the events are presented, and characters are developed. Narratives join the individual elements of a plot into a meaningful whole and ensure temporal and spatial continuity in the way visuals and dialogues are organised within the film (Poulaki, 2011). The characters are an important element in this process as they, through their characterisation, convey the narrative to the audience with the desired meaning

and effect.

The narrative analysis method focuses on the narrative aspects of the film such as the story, plot, visuals, dialogues, characters, characterisation, and some formal elements such as composition, shots, camera angles, editing, lighting, acting, setting, costumes, and props. Narrative analysis can be positioned in the interpretive paradigm, which has a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology (Levers, 2013). The interpretive paradigm supports narrative analysis approach to accept multiple meanings and subjective epistemology acknowledges that the knowledge of reality is impossible beyond our thoughts, interpretations, and individual reflections (Levers, 2013; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Unlike other approaches like content analysis, the narrative analysis approach provides a more specific and appropriate answer to why a story is narrated in a certain way (Bareiss, 2017). As a method to analyse films, it provides the scope to analyse how specific characters converse or behave in a certain way at specific moments and allows a systematic way to interpret those interpretations. The approach is, as Riessman (1993) claims, ideal for studies of subjectivity and identity.

Narrative analysis helps to understand how films use characterisation as a tool to help the audience decipher the thoughts, feelings, and actions of a particular character on screen. What does characterisation say about the filmmakers' intent to revolve the plot around one or more characters? How does a character's dialogue, motives, and actions become important to decipher the social, cultural, political, historical, and theoretical contexts linked to the film's narrative? What role does the narrative play to critique relevant issues around tropes of gender, sexuality, diaspora, class and caste? These are some of the questions I address through the narrative analysis of Shyamaprasad's films.

Other studies on films that adopted narrative analysis as their analytical method have utilised it for different purposes. Soberon, in his study on the action film genre during the 1980s and contemporary Hollywood cinema, shows how narrative analysis can be used to study the

cinematic spectacle in action films. Through his study, Soberon (2021) shows how the narrative analysis approach can be used to create a better articulation of action sequences. However, the application of the author's approach is specific to action films and may not be appropriate for studies for other genres of films. There are studies which utilised narrative analysis to study a set of films within a specific theme. For instance, Bareiss's article analyses the construction on non-suicidal self-injury among young adults and female adolescents in four Hollywood films. In various parts of the analysis of the films, Bareiss (2017) employs some of the key tools of narrative analysis such as the discussion of the plot, dialogues, characters, and sparsely utilises a few stylistic elements as well. In other scholarly works, narrative analysis has also been employed to study a few aspects within a particular theme. For instance, in one of the articles, the researchers used narrative analysis to study different aspects of mental health problems in the Hollywood film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Rutten et al., 2012). The study critically examines how the film frames medical discourses and discusses the plot, characters, and scenes from the film to propose a rhetorical perspective in disability studies. The authors hardly utilised any formal or stylistic elements to highlight particular aspects of the plot or the characters during their brief discussion of some of the scenes. There has also been research which employed only a specific aspect of narrative analysis for the study. For example, Petridis's (2020) narrative analysis of the contemporary TV Series, *The Haunting of Hill House*, analyses the plot structure of a Netflix series to argue that it's three-act-structure resembles that of a full-length feature film rather than a TV series.

My analysis of Shyamaprasad's films indulges in the exploration of various narrative analysis elements including narrative coherency, plot progression, character development, and thematic exploration (Soberon, 2021). In *English: An Autumn in London*, I show how Shyamaprasad uses parallelism to link the parallel stories of four different individuals and/or their families. None of these characters know each other or happen to meet almost throughout

the film but the use of parallelism urges the audience to compare their diasporic lives, decisions, experiences, identities, and subjectivities. Shyamaprasad's most recent film, *Ore Njazarazcha* (A Sunday, 2019), which I discuss briefly in Chapter One, also features two different middle-class couples involved in extra-marital affairs, whose lives are depicted as parallel stories.



Shyamaprasad's uses parallelism in the film *English: An Autumn in London* and narrates the stories of different individuals and families who are part of the Indian diaspora.

Films such as *Artist*, *Agnisakshi*, and *Ritu* utilise flashback or flashforward as a narrative tool for plot development or as part of characterisation. *Artist* and *Agnisakshi*, for instance, start with the present and use a flashback within the first few minutes of the films to narrate the past life and experiences of the characters. In *Ritu*, Shyamaprasad employs both flashback and flashforward in a non-linear narrative to show how identities change according to time and space. As I discuss in the analysis chapters, some of these films use point of view (POV) shots to emphasise a character's standpoint. For example, in Chapter Four, I examine how Shyamaprasad uses point of view shots of the female lead characters in the films to thread the plot together from women's perspective and subvert patriarchal structures. Similarly, in Chapter Six, I show how Shyamaprasad frames the narrative from the female protagonists' point of view to show their power struggle and resistance against the dominant Brahmin patriarchy. This narrative approach is what Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith (2020) call mental subjectivity, where the filmmaker goes deeper into the character's mind in such a way that the

audience perceives the character's thoughts, feelings, and inner images. This narrative approach increases our empathy for a character and helps us relate to the character's words and actions throughout the film.

Conclusion

The project of cultural studies has a strong commitment towards the fight against social inequalities and structural oppression and to critically investigate notions of identity and subjectivity produced by ideological manifestations of power and discursive constructions of difference. The defining features of my methodological approach are the commitment to contextuality and relationality and a desire for complexity, all of which are extremely crucial to cultural studies practice. Throughout the thesis, I grapple with the idea that it is difficult to reduce the analysis of gender to a single domain of knowledge or adopt a one-dimensional framework that fits all. Cultural studies allows that flexibility; it provides space for a more broader understanding of culture and cultural phenomenon and concurs the need to look at cultural relations within specific space-time locations. Its interdisciplinary approach validates that it is the context that determines specific meanings for spaces and decides the effects it will have on individual and collective identities. Contexts, as Grossberg affirms, "have complex relations to other contexts" (2010, p. 19). This forms the base for my research and the arguments I make in the thesis where the central context of neo-liberalisation and its effects are constantly linked to the sub-contexts that determine the articulation of discourses, regimes of power, and the negotiation of everyday spaces.

The cultural studies approach, as evident in my research, emphasises the complexity, inter-relationality and multiplicity of social inequalities of gender, diaspora, class and caste. This is where an intersectional framework is useful to determine and decode the consequences and implications of an interplay of various oppressions. As Guimaraes Correa (2020) asserts, "intersectional and decolonial approaches would value the standpoint of nonhegemonic

individuals and groups, and non-hegemonic places, and question the universality of theories, methodologies, concepts and frameworks” (p. 830). Intersectionality, therefore, is the most suitable framework within the larger paradigm of cultural studies to recognise, understand, and resist systems of marginalisation and oppression.

Chapter 4: Gender, Sexuality, and Middle-Class Moralities: Ore Kadal, Artist, Ritu, and Elektra

Introduction

The previous chapter examined the methodological approach undertaken to address the key issues that formulate the thesis's research questions outlined in the introduction chapter of the thesis. Chapter Two situated cultural studies as a method that contextualises the complex social, economic, political, cultural, and ideological trajectories that formulate the everyday and explores the relations of power and discursive formations of difference in specific contextual conditions. I turned to Cultural Studies to develop a theoretical framework and methodological approach that enables me to critically locate the films of Shyamaprasad within the wider socio-political milieu of Kerala society and discussed intersectionality as the key theoretical framework to investigate how gender intersects with modalities such as diaspora, caste and class in the films.

This chapter examines the notion of Indian middle-class³² and how their gendered ideals of moral values and social order construct and negotiate gender identities and subjectivities. The chapter primarily focuses on Shyamaprasad's four films: *Elektra* (2005), *Ore Kadal* (The Sea Within, 2007), *Ritu* (Seasons, 2009), and *Artist* (2013). The chapter argues that these films break the shackles of middle-class moralities and heteronormative practices, and challenge 'traditional' Indian values of arranged marriages and hierarchical gender relations. Through a narrative analysis of the four films, the chapter examines the conception of an alternative image of women, that is the transformation from silent endurance to sexual freedom and equality. In almost all these films, what is at stake is the notion of heteronormative families, where women

³² On most occasions in the chapter, I mention 'Indian middle-class and utilise scholarly material on the same. Scholars who have written on middle-classness in India, whom I have discussed in the chapter, have mostly referred to it as a homogenous category, i.e., the features of middle-classness, mentioned by all these scholars can be attributed to the respective citizens from throughout the country. From a detailed review of the scholarship on the middle-class, I have understood that the notion of middle-class does not change drastically from state to state. More specifically, scholarship on the middle-class in Kerala (Forsberg, 2017; Tharayil, 2014; Sancho, 2012; Lukose, 2009; Lukose, 2005) mostly discuss it as a homogenous category and commonly refer to the Indian middle-class, as I have done in this chapter.

go against the grain of the ways in which the idea of family is articulated in Indian society. Shyamaprasad's films offer a poignant critique of normative gender ideologies and idealised notions of domesticity.

In the next section of the chapter, I discuss the Indian middle-class and review its conceptualisation by scholars such as Devadas, Lukose, Saavala, and Donner and De Neve, particularly with a focus on gender and sexuality. Having a grasp of the broader contextual realities women in Kerala and India negotiate provides an insight into how Shyamaprasad's films traverse these issues and challenge their constitutions. I then examine the notion of middle-class moralities and explore the multiple ways in which it is conceived and negotiated in Indian society. In this section, I discuss the works of scholars such as Bernroider, Gilbertson, Saavala and Dhawan who examine how women's subjectivities are constituted in the society and the ways in which their sexuality is regulated by the moralising norms of cultural institutions such as the family, community, caste and class. Here, I also mention scholars such as Massey and Dickey to highlight the idea of gendered nature of spaces and how such spaces regulate middle-class women's behaviour and control their mobility. I further discuss how the Indian middle-class is depicted on screen based on relevant scholarship in the area. In this section, I analyse four Shyamaprasad films to interrogate how the director critiques gender, sexuality, and middle-class moralities and the way moral subjects are constructed within the institutionalised norms of family and society using a narrative analysis of the films and their central characters.

The Indian Middle-class

The middle-class is a complex and heterogenous social category that became a prominent site of scholarly debate and discussion post liberalisation in India. The Indian middle-class is a "powerful political and social actor" in the country, especially post economic liberalisation and significant in terms of the sheer number of people who identify themselves

as belonging to it (Dickey, 2012, p. 560-61). Discussions about the middle-class are also important because of the wide range of scholarly debates surrounding issues of gender, education, marriage, identity, hegemony, morality, class, and hierarchy within the category (Gupta, 2020; Bhandari, 2020; Beteille, 2012; Dhawan, 2010; Bhatt, Murty and Ramamurthy, 2010; Sen, 2008; Radhakrishnan, 2008; Nisbett, 2007; Ganguly-Scrase, 2003). Scholars such as Donner (2015) and Liechty (2003) highlight that most scholarly works on the middle-class focus purely on commodity consumption (Lukose, 2010; Munshi, 2008; Derne, 2008; Oza, 2006; Mazzarella, 2003; Rajagopal and Rajan, 1999; Mankekar, 1999; Nava 1992). Although certain distinctions exist between the different groups within the category – the upper middle-class, the middle middle-class and the lower middle-class – most of them tend to share a common sense of ‘middle-classness’. However, as Saavala (2010) identifies in her study of middle-class population in the state of Hyderabad in India, the social practices and political affiliations of the upper middle-classes could be considerably different to that of the lower middle-class³³. While the middle-class was mostly associated with upper-caste Hindu and elite Muslims prior to Indian’s independence, it has become much broader since then (Donner and De Neve, 2011). The Indian middle-class is also categorised as ‘old’ and ‘new’, mostly in terms of professional status, where the former comprised of shopkeepers and other businessmen and the latter constituted of men and women with highly qualified technical jobs and other salaried employment (Mathur, 2010). The ‘new’ middle-class consists mainly of highly educated people who hold respectable positions in office, share upward mobility, aspire privileged ways of living, and indulge in active consumption practices. (Mathur, 2010; Saavala, 2010, Conroy, 1998). The urge to gain upward mobility and secure higher social positions entices even the

³³ Certain aspects such as the importance the middle-class population attach to English language, the necessity to gain educational qualifications, the possession of material goods in one’s home as objects of display, anxieties about woman’s conduct, and the need to preserve family values are common to all the sub-categories within it (Donner and De Neve, 2011; Saavala, 2010). These tropes of social and cultural capital are tied to factors such as prestige, honour, and social status, which are distinct characteristics of the Indian middle-class. The middle-class, particularly the upper-middle category, distances itself from the lower castes and other marginalised sections of society.

lower castes to actively participate in the consumer culture (Mathur, 2010; Osella and Osella, 1999). As a result, shopping complexes and restaurant chains open at multiple venues to attract the expanding middle-class community.

The constant urge for social belonging and status enhancement prompted middle-class men and women to venture into new consumerist practises and lifestyles. From this ‘new’ and modern consumerist discourses emerged the ‘new middle-class woman’, a key figure in the post-liberalisation era in India. This image of the modern, emancipated middle-class woman and her entry into modernity was central to the liberalisation project and the nation’s vision to be a major economic force in the world although it clashed against the gendered nationalist ideal of preserving pure and traditional notions of cultural values and norms around women’s bodies. The rise of globalisation and economic liberalisation and the resultant consumer culture also saw the intensification of Hindu religious fundamentalism and the increasing fears surrounding the purity of women (McLachlin, 2013). Hindutva politics and their nationalist discourses work as a strong force to preserve and protect core moral values and cultural ethos³⁴ (Fernandes and Heller, 2006). Thus, the middle-class women become discursive subjects of nationalist ideology and patriarchal hegemony and are entrusted with the task of being the gatekeepers of morality. This chapter argues that the four films – *Ore Kadal*, *Ritu*, *Elektra*, and *Artist* break the shackles of middle-class moralities and heteronormative practices. It suggests that these films run counter to ‘traditional’ Indian values of arranged marriages and hierarchical social relations. Through its analysis, the chapter examines the conception of an alternative image of women, the transformation from silent endurance to sexual equality. In all these films, what is at stake is the notion of heteronormative families, where women go against the grain of the ways in which the idea of family is articulated in Indian society (Sreekumar,

³⁴ Saavala (2003), through her case study on the middle-class in Hyderabad, finds out that most members of the middle-class who are low caste emphasise their Hindu identity to project their moral superiority in front of the poor and other less economically privileged groups.

2019). By doing so, the chapter problematises the conception of woman as the bearer of middle-class moralities and argue that the positioning of women as the face of Indian middle-class reifies societal perspectives that women are responsible for maintaining moralities, therefore suggesting that men can transcend and indulge in ‘practices’ that are ‘immoral’.

The new Indian middle-class woman is expected to be an obedient and dutiful ‘housewife’ or mother and morally tamed to rise to the norms of a globalised and neoliberal world where she is constantly induced into the consumerist ways of everyday life. Her social position as a consumer in the liberalising economy is crucial to the growth of the market but equally important is her role within the family. She can be economically independent, yet her sexuality must be disciplined and adhere to the legal, moral, and institutional boundaries within the hegemonic discourse of marriage (Dhawan, 2010). A sense of dignity or *maanam* is tied with the middle-classes’ need to acquire social capital and it forces the women in the family to do less-preferred jobs outside the domestic sphere, in addition to her unpaid domestic labour. This, however, should be within the moral restrictions and boundaries of her religious and caste status.³⁵ Vijay Devadas, in his article on middle-class youth, gender and mobile phones in Chennai city, notes that *maanam* is gendered as it is the sole responsibility of women to maintain the family’s and community’s honour and prestige. *Maanam* is critical in the way it subjects women to surveillance, and it regulates and disciplines their lives (Devadas, 2022). *Maanam* is tied to middle-class women’s social environment, which includes the family, religion, caste, and community.

Making sense of middle-class moralities

One of the key distinguishing features of the Indian middle-class is the value it attaches to certain practices. People are often judged based on the ability to follow these practices and

³⁵ The recruitment of a domestic worker in middle-class houses in India involves the intersectionality of gender, class and caste. Such coded spaces are designed to benefit the hegemonic middle-class in the accumulation of symbolic capital.

the moral standards they are able to maintain to keep up with their peers (Saavala, 2010). As Saavala (2010) claims, such ideological moral values are linked to notions of prestige and honour and plays a key role in how middle-class people identify and separate themselves from those below them. Research suggests that the Indian middle-class should not be understood merely in terms of one's income or the monetary value of the things they possess (Bhandari, 2020; Saavala, 2010; Srivastava, 2009, Srivastava, 2007). Income or economic status may vary among different members of the middle-class, yet what unites them are the ways in which they uphold morality in their ways and practices. This chapter specifically focusses on this notion of middle-class morality, the ways in which it is conceived in Kerala society, and how director Shyamaprasad's films challenge some of those moral practices and norms. Although there are several studies on the middle-class phenomenon in India, not many focuses specifically on the idea of middle-class morality and the ways in which it could shape identity and subjectivity.

Family and marriage are two of the most significant tropes that constitute middle-class identity and become discursive sites of middle-class moralities. Gilbertson (2014) claims that there is a certain demand for 'homely girls' among the middle-class in India and that young middle-class men feel that the 'modern girls' are only good for dating and pre-marital pleasures. These middle-class men desire women to be fashionable and stylish in pre-marital relationships but expect them to be traditional and conservative once they are part of the patrilocal home (Gilbertson, 2014). Several rituals take place as part of the middle-class marriage and function to signify their moral superiority compared to the lower class. Most Hindu married women, during the time of their wedding or during other auspicious ceremonies such as the entry to a new house, get involved in a *haldi* bath or purification process with the application of turmeric powder on their hands and faces (Saavala, 2003)³⁶. The *haldi* is applied on the bride's body so

³⁶ The *haldi* function was traditionally not part of the Malayali culture but it is very popular in Hindu middle-class marriages in Kerala nowadays. Other marriage traditions in Kerala vary depending on the region, religion, and caste of the bride and the groom.

that it is heated up for sexual activity, thus marking women as active agents in the reproduction process (Chakravarti, 1995). Once the couple arrive at the groom's house, the thrust of several middle-class norms and expectations such as domestic duties, parental care, and the production of offspring fall on the newlywed couple, especially on the married women. As soon as she is part of the middle-class nuclear family, she is expected to fulfill the familial norms and values and sacrifice herself for the wellness of others and respectability of the home, as I highlighted in Chapter Two. In some instances, especially in rural India, middle-class women's mobility and exposure to public life would also be limited. This could be also accounted to their gendered habitus, which anchors the social fields they occupy (Bourdieu, 2001). The situation of young unmarried single women among the middle-class are not much different even in urban cities. Constant surveillance and other strict regulations ensure such women who live in independent apartments or hostels resort to religious and cultural values and are forced into disciplined subjects; her sexuality is regulated, and her desires controlled (Bernroider, 2018). Premarital relationships and heterosocial friendships are closely monitored as soon as young women reach a certain age. Thus, as Massey (1992) argues, society is spatially constructed; these regulated spaces govern women's movements and restrict their agency. Even when they get married and have children, most middle-class women tend to give more priority to domestic duties and childcare than their full-time employment (Bhattacharyya, 2019). These forms of patriarchal ideologies and gendered discourses moralise women's primary responsibility of domestic work and childcare, attained as a result of a sexual division of unpaid labour (Menon, 2012). Hindu religious texts such as *Manusmriti* endorse such patriarchal values and suggest the need for women to be morally bound to domesticity and worship her husband and other elderly men in the family. The Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) in India, which endorses a Hindu way of life, have protested beauty contests and sexualised local media content citing that they

are a threat to the purity of national culture and the sexuality of Indian women³⁷ (Fernandes, 2000). Also, in Hindu religious ceremonies, there is no place for menstruating women as they pollute the purity of the event (Saavala, 2001). The need to preserve the sanctity of women's sexuality and the moral expectations set on their behaviour in private and public spaces, particularly of that of married women, was normalised in the Indian society post liberalisation. The notion of purity around women's bodies and the moral values linked to marriages and choice of an 'ideal' partner is critical for middle-class families although women's consumerist practices help generate "a different kind of social value for their families" (Saavala, 2010, p. 59). The need to preserve or improve the family's social status through their negotiation of new spaces and the accumulation of symbolic capital is central to Indian middle-class consciousness.

However, even the independent women who seems 'free' to be an active consumer and enjoy the benefits of the liberalising economy is bound to stay within the moralising norms of sexuality and the legal, social, and cultural heteronormativity of marriage. Nevertheless, much like the men, these middle-class women distanced themselves from the working class and often savour a sense of moral superiority over the lower-class and lower-caste women (Dhawan, 2010). Dickey's ethnographic study on the middle-class located in the South Indian city of Madurai signals to the society's moralising attitude based on the way women articulate the nature of their consumption practices. Dickey (2012) asserts that her middle-class respondents feel they consume with deliberation and moderation and that the rich are greedy and extravagant in their choices (which also resonates closely with the upper-caste ideal); the poor, to them, are not able to even get some of the basic things they want. Thus, the middle-class envision themselves to be in the normative 'moral middle' and show their moral superiority through their refusal to deviate from their hegemonic behavioural codes. The distancing from

³⁷ Scholarly works linked to the Hindutva ideology and Hindu religious texts feature predominantly in discussions of the Indian middle-class. Research has also shown that the middle-class supports Hindu nationalism, especially in relation to their consumption practices and the moral discourses linked to it (Van Wessel, 2004).

the rich is achieved through moral and modest ways of conduct while avoiding the physical presence of the lower-class or lower caste is employed to dissociate them (Gilbertson, 2014). The process of “commodified genders”, as Lukose calls it, excludes the lower-class and lower-caste women from the commodity culture in particular ways (2010, p. 13). Clothing and fashion are equally important tropes to identify and ridicule women who cross the boundaries of traditional middle-class morality. Men have free choice, the luxury to be wear anything without judgement or external interference. As Gilbertson (2014) finds in her ethnographic study of middle-class femininity in Hyderabad, a ‘good’ middle-class woman is bound to have certain qualities and a sense of commitment to her community, to her home and to herself, and anything that deviates is deemed impure and dangerous. She further notes:

The intersection of class and gender creates a double bind, in which the approval of one group generally comes at the expense of disapproval from another group. Women are judged either for being arrogant, loose and dishonourable, or for being backward and lacking in a global cosmopolitanism described as ‘open-mindedness’ and ‘exposure’. This balance of respectability and fashion is particularly challenging for lower middle-class girls and women, who are excluded from lower-class public spaces by their gender and from elite public spaces by their class. (2014, p. 155)

Such exercise of manipulative power constructs a disciplined subject, where identities are tightly bound by the politics of exclusion. Thus, patriarchal power enforced on middle-class women works as an ideological tool to dominate them; a form of power that is executed and established by some form of consent but not by the manifestation of a consensus (Foucault, 1982). This kind of power is exercised by the middle-class families on women, particularly in the way men police their wives and daughters to dress modestly. These men suggest that too much fashion can give others an impression of the readiness to interact freely with the opposite sex. Such families deal with the moral dilemma of having to make a choice between money and reputation or between exposing the risk of vulnerable femininity/morality and the need to deal with the financial burden of raising up and ‘marrying off’ young women in the family (Saavala, 2010). This form of a gendered cultural politics is also visible during Valentine’s Day

celebrations in the country when members of Hindu nationalist parties publicly react to young couples who do not wear modest, traditional clothes and interact freely and closely with members of the opposite sex in public spaces (Lukose, 2010). This, to borrow Saavala's expression, is important to assert a "pan-Indian Hindu-ness" (2010, p. 44). Modesty in clothing is expected everywhere, particularly in religious places. Visits to religious sites are a matter of pride and symbol of prestige. Religious sites, especially temples, are places of sanctity and cleanliness where purity is maintained, and the lower class are significantly less in number. Religion, especially in the Kerala context, is thus a means to attain wealth, status, and higher social mobility (Osella and Osella, 2000). In several Malayalam films, one would see the privileged middle-class male 'heroes' and other main characters visit such religious sites on a frequent basis. The lower-class characters are rarely shown in such 'sacred' places, especially if they are not one of the central characters or if they are from a lower-caste background.

The middle-class on screen

A close inspection of Malayalam cinema's long history clearly indicates its potential to engage in socially progressive and aesthetically sophisticated depictions of ordinary life (Lukose, 2012). With its strong reliance on realistic portrayals of everyday lives of middle-class Malayalis, films are able to actively participate in discourses central to the region. Several themes such as gender, culture, class, caste, diaspora, subalternity – just to name a few – are represented on screen and generate social debates on progressive changes among the middle-class. Particularly noteworthy is the trend set in the 1980s and 1990s that produced middle-class youth-centred narratives that focussed on their issues outside familial spaces such as migration, employment, caste, class and shifting gender roles. (Lukose, 2010). The entry of slapstick comedies in the late 1980s and early 1990s was a massive shift from the melodramatic and romantic films centred on middle-class families (Rowena, 2002). It was also at a point when middle-class families, especially women were glued to television sets to watch 'mega

serials'³⁸ targeted at the female audience (Usha, 2004). This clearly indicates mainstream media's focus on middle-class women and the culture of domesticity in India.

A wide number of mainstream Malayalam films released over the past few decades widely showcased middle-class domesticity as a key part of their narratives. The gendered and hierarchical family and patrilocality is often central to popular Malayalam cinema's narratives and preserved traditional middle-class values and culture. The thread of 'familial values', as depicted in several Malayalam films, is crucial to middle-class heterosexual family and kinship and rarely are the disciplinary boundaries that sustain the moral order within them transgressed. Any attempt to enter such prohibited zones and embrace non-normative identities would be treated with contempt by the superior male head of the family to ensure moral order is restored. The representation of unconventional characters that deviate from the normative heterosexual masculinity or passive femininity are deemed not suitable for Malayali middle-class audiences (Gopinath, 2000). The identification with the middle-class and their moral sensibilities was significant to the assembly and construction of mainstream cinematic narratives.

The image of the middle-class housewife and her spatial confinement to the private sphere, which reflected female subjectivities post liberalisation Kerala society, was a common feature in Malayalam cinema narratives from the 1990s onwards. Most middle-class women accept that the violent acts and punishments on the grounds that it would be for their own good (Harris, 2010). Several films in the 1990s through to the 2000s, such as *Kanmadam* (Viscous Rock, 1998), *Chinthavishtayaya Shyamala* (The pensive Shyamala, 1998), *Dhosth* (Friend, 2001), *Swapnakoodu* (Dream House, 2002), *Cycle* (2008), *Oru Vadakkan Selfie* (A Selfie from the North, 2015), *Lucifer* (2019), and *Bro Daddy* (2022) for example, included central women characters who were independent and resilient, only to surrender to their male counterpart's

³⁸ Mega-serial is a terminology common in the Indian television world with reference to soap operas which have hundreds of episodes and targets women as their consumers. These mega-serials attempt to create a conceptual space for cultural politics and design a 'public culture' to contextualise real life events in a melodramatic way.

heroic and masculine display of courage and affection. The fear of transgressing feminine sexuality and the urge to stay within the boundaries of moral order is naturalised and depicted as normative conjugal behaviour in the cinematic narratives. Men, in these narratives, are shown as anxious to establish their masculine identities to counter a persistent feeling of powerlessness brought about by the ideology of masculinity (Rowena, 2010). The period between the early 1980s and late 1990s saw the rise of a category called ‘laughter films’, as Rowena (2010) reveals, which attempted to break the hegemonic presence of hyper-masculine representations of middle-class and upper-caste male characters in Malayalam cinema. However, it did not bring many changes to the stereotypic representation of female characters.

Before moving on to the analysis of Shyamaprasad’s films, I want to reiterate the notion of middle-class and its significance in the discussion of gender in Malayalam cinema, which I argue is not examined in existing scholarship on Malayalam films. Scholarly discussions on the Malayalam film *Kanmadam* (Viscous Rock, 1998) often mention the role played by popular actress Manju Warriar, where she is depicted as a strong and independent woman, Bhanu, who takes charge of an entire household and bravely protects her younger sisters from the hassles they face in life. However, later in the film, the central male character played by Mohanlal³⁹ overpowers her as she, according to Nair (2010), “starts crumbling like a thottavadi (touch me not) plant at a man’s embrace” (p. 32). Nair (2010) and Harris (2010) ascribe this to gender and the domination of male power over the female. However, I argue that the particular act and the resultant effect on the female character should be attributed to the interplay of gender and class. Patriarchal hegemony enacted through the domination of Bhanu occurs at the intersection of class and gender. In the film, Viswanathan, the character played by Mohanlal, is part of the middle-class whereas Bhanu, a precarious labourer, and her family are members of the lower-

³⁹ In the article titled ‘The feudal lord reincarnate: Mohanlal and the politics of Malayali masculinity’, Meena Pillai describes Mohanlal as “the ultimate icon of Malayali masculinity” (2020, p. 99). Pillai (2020) claims that Mohanlal’s films bring the notion of hegemonic masculinity to the forefront articulated through his superstar image.

class community. The weakness Bhanu displays following the act of affectionate aggression from Viswanathan comes from her status as a lower-class woman in the film. So, while Viswanathan is able to use both his gender and class privilege to express his feelings through an aggressive and non-consensual act, Bhanu is forced to be both a subject and object of the patriarchal middle-class masculine domination. This shows the need to recognize mutually constitutive and intersectional relations among particular social identities in order to understand the individual's social position. Class is thus a key identity marker that intersects with gender and is essential to their identity. To understand this intersection, we should recognise the dynamics of identity politics and disavow a universally shared conception of gender identity which emphasises sameness rather than embrace the differences among individuals. Butler's remarks on how identities are discursively constituted is relevant here. According to Butler,

If one is a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered *person* transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historic contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out *gender* from the political and cultural intersection in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (1990, p. 3)

Butler's point reifies the idea that gender should not be seen as stable and rather conceived as an identity constituted in time through a continuous repetition of gender performances. Thus, in Bhanu's case, it is her continuous repeated performance of class-gender roles that led the upper middle-class Viswanathan to overpower her and take full control of the situation. The next section engages in a narrative analysis of the films *Ore Kadal* and *Artist*, especially in relation to class-gender dynamics and how Shymaprasad narrative approach critiques patriarchal middle-class masculine characters and subverts discursive hegemonies of the middle-class.



A scene from *Kanmadam*, in which the middle-class, upper-caste male protagonist Viswanathan forcefully expresses his feelings towards the lower-class Bhanu.

Gender ideologies and characterisation of middle-class men and women

Both *Ore Kadal* and *Artist* deals with the complex nature of middle-class relationships in conservative spaces and challenges existing normative assumptions about gender in the Indian context. *Ore Kadal* tells the tale of an extramarital relationship between an upper-caste economics professor, Nathan and a middle-class married woman, Deepti. Nathan is an intellectual focussed on development issues while Deepti is uneducated and lacks economic independence. The film's opening scenes reveal the difficulties she faces, especially when her husband Jayakumar goes to another city to seek employment. When her son falls ill, she struggles to find the money or ways to take him to the hospital. It was at this juncture that Nathan meets her on the elevator of their apartment complex and offers help. Deepti is later forced by her unemployed husband to borrow money from Nathan. On another occasion, Jayakumar compels Deepti to request Nathan for a job recommendation. Deepti's frequent visits to Nathan's apartment led to an affair, which grows intense with every meeting. Deepti soon realises that Nathan's passion was drawn out of lust rather than love, which eventually pushes her towards a state of mental instability. Subsequently, she receives treatment and recovers in a few months' time. The return to normalcy only makes matters worse with thoughts about Nathan affecting the relationship with her husband and children. Meanwhile, Nathan

starts to feel guilty for his passive approach towards her and realises that he loves her deep within. In the end, Nathan and Deepti realise it is impossible to live without each other and decide to be together.

Artist, on the other hand, narrates the story of two college students who decide to live together against the will of their families. The central characters in *Artist*, Michael Agnelo and Gayatri, belong to different religious communities – the former a Christian and the latter a Hindu Brahmin – and enter a live-in relationship⁴⁰ in a conservative Kerala society. Michael is a temperamental painter who refuses to get involved in paid employment and spends most of his time painting at home. Gayatri has the double burden of bearing all the expenses of the house and dealing with Michael's frequent mood swings. She does small jobs to meet the needs of the family. Just as she feels frustrated to stay in the relationship, Michael meets with an accident and turns blind. Gayatri takes care of him and helps him overcome some of the physical difficulties he faces because of his condition. At one stage, owing to financial constraints, she is forced to borrow some paint from their mutual friend, Abhinav. However, Abhinav admits he only has a single colour with him. Michael, without knowing this, paints on different canvases and decides to showcase all his paintings in an exhibition. Although the paintings were well appreciated by the organisers and the rest of the crowd, Michael turned furious when he realised that all the shades used were of the same colour. He calls Gayatri a cheat and fails to forgive her. Both films attracted the attention of mainstream Kerala audience and won several regional, national, and international awards⁴¹.

In both *Ore Kadal* and *Artist*, the characterisation of the central characters occurs in the

⁴⁰ Live-in relationship is an arrangement in which couples cohabit for their own reasons. In some western countries, a couple may be treated as husband and wife even if they are not married. However, in India, it is not a widely accepted practice although the female partners are legally protected from domestic abuse and violence.

⁴¹ *Ore Kadal* was the 'best regional film' at the National Film Awards and the 'second best film' at the Kerala State Awards in 2007. It also received several other prestigious awards such as the Film Critics Award, John Abraham Award, NETPAC Award, FIPRESCI Award and the 'audience best film' Award at Stuttgart Film Festival. Shyamaprasad won the 'best director' Award for *Artist* at the Kerala State Film Awards and Filmfare Awards in 2013.

opening scenes of the films. In *Ore Kadal*'s opening title sequences, Shyamaprasad reveals Nathan's passion for women through superimposed shots of sexual activity with his close friend, Bela. The following scene shows his witnessing an accident on the street and his indifferent response to it. Rather than focusing on the injured person or the rescue efforts of the people rushing towards the casualty, the camera mostly centres around Nathan's facial expressions and body language. Nathan is annoyed that the accident has caused traffic congestion and is desperate to find his way through it. Shyamaprasad portrays Nathan as an upper-caste and upper middle-class man who is unemotional and disconnected from the world outside. The next scene shows Nathan's conversation with Bela about his dying aunt; the easiness with which he accepts her condition further establishes his dispassionate approach towards the people around him. Nathan's lack of social sensitivity is a feature of his intersectional middle-class masculine identity, who are self-obsessed and value personal profit and wellness over public good (Varma, 1998). Deepti's introduction scene clearly portrays her helplessness and the economic dependence on her middle-class husband. In her opening scene, we see close-up shots of her worried face and the empty medicine bottle, conveying to the audience that she does not have resources to treat her sick child. The point-of-view shots show Deepti making a phone call to her husband's mobile phone from the public telephone on the ground floor of her apartment complex.



A point-of-view shot of Deepti, which shows her worry and helplessness as she talks to her husband Jayakumar on public telephone.

Also noticeable is the fact that Deepti does not own a mobile phone and must rely on a public telephone. Devadas, in his article on young middle-class women in Chennai, frames the mobile phone as a gendered technology and highlights how it is engraved with gender-specific cultural and social meanings. In the Indian context, mobile phones reinforce gender roles and adversely impact young middle-class women, especially in the way they contaminate female subjectivity (Devadas, 2022). When Deepti mentions their unwell child to Jayakumar and the lack of money to pay the doctor, he suggests that she should ask someone else and that he would not be able to return home soon. Deepti is visibly upset as she puts the phone down and enters the lift to return to her apartment. The camera again focuses on her and captures her emotions as she is equally worried about her child's illness and her financial constraints. These scenes set up the mood of the film and the base for a narrative from Deepti's point of view. These scenes highlight the "intersectional crossroads" middle-class women like Deepti encounter to navigate multiple difficulties and expectations (Samuel, 2010, p. 108; Crenshaw, 2005). I want to argue, as I show in the analysis of the films, that director Shyamaprasad's attempt to subvert patriarchal structures is evident from his point-of-view narratives which predominantly focuses on the female protagonists of these two films. Within this context, it is crucial to note that most narratives in Malayalam cinema have been male-hero centric. Nathan's portrayal as a hypocrite adds strength to Deepti's position and opens the possibility for spectators to empathise with her. For example, on one occasion, Nathan tells Bela that he offers to support Deepti in times of need only because of her helplessness and his actions had nothing to do with her good looks. However, in a scene later in the film, he attempts to flatter Deepti with flirtatious undertones about her beauty and how he felt attracted to her; we see a performance of Nathan's masculinity. Nathan's character and behavioural traits closely resonates with a certain form of hegemonic masculinity, "rigid, domineering, sexist, 'macho' man... unemotional, independent, non-nurturing, aggressive, and dispassionate" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, and Collier, 1998; p. 840). Another instance where Nathan performs his

masculinity is when he treats destitute children with disgust despite constantly talking and writing about poverty. As Varma (2003) suggests, this indifference towards the poor is also an intersectional attribute of the new middle-class men, especially among the intelligentsia. Other scholars also stress upon the unsympathetic and indifferent attitude of the middle-class towards the less privileged (Sancho, 2012; Kumar and George, 2009). Varma's account of the Indian middle-class clearly identifies their insensitiveness towards the less privileged and the lack of interest in matters that are not related to their own material well-being. This particular attitude among the middle-class could also be identified in Deepti's husband. When Deepti lends a few onions to the unemployed couple in the neighbourhood, Jayakumar openly expresses his displeasure and says it is not her responsibility to help them. Further, he responds negatively when Deepti requests him to help the neighbour find a job. Here again, Shyamaprasad portrays Deepti as selfless and empathetic as against the male characters in the film who are insensitive and egoistic.

Thus, a crucial characterisation that strengthens Deepti's moral standpoint is that of her husband's. Jayakumar's role is also a reflection of one among several working middle-class husbands who expect their wives to be content with the restrictive roles of a 'typical Indian wife'⁴² and the daily rigours of domesticity. In a particular scene, Deepti tells her husband that she could look for work to support the family. He shrugs off the suggestion and asks, "Who will look after the kid if you go for a job?" As we find in this instance, the mobility of middle-class women in India are restricted (Saavala, 2010). There are several references in *Ore Kadal* which obliquely critique women's denial of freedom to move freely and make decisions in marital relationships. This position is strengthened with the characterisation of Bela as the unrestricted feminine who sleeps with men with 'no strings attached'.

⁴² Unlike in the past, there is a rising trend among young girls in urban Kerala to delay their marriage until they complete the desired levels of education. There is a constant urge in the modern Malayali women to be economically independent.



A scene from *Ore Kadal*, in which Jayakumar moves away from Deepthi as she tries to hug him and show physical intimacy.

In another scene, when Deepthi attempts to hug him and express sexual intimacy, Jayakumar moves away and says, “my concern at the moment is how to pay the rent”. The high angle shot shows Deepthi turning towards her son and lying down in disappointment. Jayakumar’s lack of interest in sexual intimacy or physical expression of love is a sign of diminished masculinity although his general approach and attitude towards Deepthi associate him more with complicit masculinity, which is signified by the absence of ‘strong’ masculine domination (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Jayakumar does not dominate women the way Nathan does, neither is he unemotional, rigid nor displays a high level of anger, pride, and independence in his general behaviour; all these characteristic traits lean more towards complicit masculinity. However, Shyamaprasad’s depiction of Jayakumar as an unemployed middle-class man who struggles to financially support his family, especially at the time of crisis, suggests that his masculinity is also marginalised due to his socioeconomic status. Here, the intersection of class with gender further complicates Jayakumar’s ambiguous subjectivity.

What is also crucial to this context is the characterisation of Bela as a strong and independent woman, in contrast to Deepthi. Bela’s characterisation is framed around her unmarried status, thus suggesting that the institution of marriage itself works to control women. The hardships Bela faced in life, which includes giving birth to an illegitimate child at the age

of 16 and watching him starve to death, gave her the courage and strength to handle difficult situations in life. She owns a restaurant in the city and on one occasion, she boldly deals a couple of drunk men creates nuisance to other customers and asks them to leave the premises. Nathan considers Bela as the go-to person and approaches her every time he needs emotional support or struggles to make decisions. Here again, her characterisation defies the 'sentiment allocation' that is often 'sex-based' – women playing the emotional role and men playing the rational role (Eichler, 1982), and goes against the discursive hegemonies of the middle-class male subject. Nevertheless, such women are often vilified as cheap and loose by the middle-class. As Lukose writes, "the disruptive figure of the modern, western-educated women in public was stabilised and rationalised through a construction of middle-class woman who could traverse the nationalist public if they carried their 'essential femininity' with them. The 'essential femininity', a gendered bodily habitus, variously identified as respectability and modesty, involved the creation of appropriate dress, activity, and a set of exclusions that constructed working-class/low-caste women as coarse, vulgar, and crude" (2005, p. 919). Through Bela's characterisation, Shyamaprasad breaks such essentialised and universalised articulations of middle-class women.

The film portrays Deepti as an ambitious woman. For example, she tells Nathan about her desire to study, gain knowledge and requests him to support her to join the college. On another occasion, she suggests the idea of working as a teacher in a local school. Deepti rejects the normative ideologies of family and community and tells Nathan "I want to see places. I'm ready to come with you. I could have left everything for you." Nathan's reply - "You could have. But not now. For a mother of two children, that's her world" - typifies heteronormative Indian middle-class familial ideologies. However, as the narrative progresses, Nathan realises that there is nothing more valuable than her love. Deepti's affair with Nathan breaks the sacrosanct promises one makes in a marriage, only to leave a strong statement on the

ramifications of denying emotional and sexual gratification in marital bonds. As Gott and Hinchliff (2003) point out, new relationships [such as the one between Nathan and Deepti] are formed in the lack of sexual and emotional intimacy in marriages. It justifies Deepti's closing lines to Nathan in the film, "Don't send me back. That's all I want." George's ethnographic study (1998) on married couples in India indicates middle-class women were forced to limit their sexual desire while men had the right to sex in marriages. Thus, Deepti's dialogue epitomises the Indian situation where women are oppressed in the expression of their desires even to their husbands. Rather than merely relating Deepti's experience to 'multiple axes of oppression' (Shields, 2008, p. 303; Samuel, 2010), my analysis 'identifies' different forms of disadvantages and privileges and alerts the readers to it, as per Mary John's proposal in the previous chapter. As mentioned in Chapter Three, the intersectional approach should be able to provide insights into the problem itself, which is an important part of analysing such social structures and identities. Previous scholarship on gender in Malayalam cinema have not 'identified' the intersection of gender and middle-class or provided insights into the disadvantages/privileges of middle-class women/men through their reading of the films, as I showed in Chapter One.

Deepti's decision to leave her husband and stay with Nathan challenges such cultural expectations on married middle-class women in the way they negotiate sexual demands and practices. Nathan gives her the assurance and then holds Deepti's son close to him and hugs him affectionately. One could argue that Nathan's meeting with Deepti re-establishes the family as the norm although the film ends at a point where it reveals nothing more than the union of two individuals. Nathan's expression of warmth and affection towards Deepti and his son at that moment in the film signifies Nathan's acceptance of the woman in Deepti and everything that belongs to her, a complete contrast to his 'unemotional', 'nonnurturing', and 'dispassionate' hegemonic masculine middle-class identity throughout the film.

As mentioned earlier, the characterisation of the two central characters in *Artist*, Michael and Gayatri, occurs in the first scene of the film. The narrative is non-linear and starts with the two of them already living together. Michael prefers not to engage in paid employment but paints at home for creative pleasure. In the opening shots of the scene, Gayatri takes the initiative to find him a platform to exhibit his paintings, but Michael shows no interest in public recognition. The rest of the plot advances through her thoughts and memories of their relationship as a ‘flashback’, clearly indicating the director’s intention to construct the narrative from a woman’s perspective. Gayatri’s portrayal as a practical, determined, and resilient middle-class woman who strives to make progress in life as against Michael’s irresponsible and irresolute nature suggests the film’s resolve to construct a more progressive representation of middle-class women. In another scene, Gayatri answers in the affirmative to Michael’s explanation of why she ‘likes’ him. Quite unlike the ‘traditional’ middle-class preferences, she likes him for being unconventional, for not living by the rules, and a feeling of “audacity” that his presence offers her – the inner strength to “challenge her professors and disobey her parents” (translation of Gayatri’s words from the film).

The characterisation of Gayatri’s parents as people from a ‘traditional’ Hindu Brahmin background is also crucial to the way the narrative is developed. Often, Gayatri’s mother perceives her bold statements against her father as a denial of patriarchal authority. “How dare you talk to your father like that,” she often asks Gayatri, suggesting that it is alright to do it to her but not to the patriarchal head of the family. On one occasion, her parents inquire about what gender and religion her friends belong to. The scene depicts the moral anxiety of Indian middle-class families about female identities and invokes a fear of rejection of the ‘ideal woman’ in their mind, about which I contextualised in Chapter Two. When Gayatri remarks she is “close” with a Christian guy, her father comments anxiously “Remember this, we are Brahmins. Don’t get too involved with these Muslims and Christians.” The camera alternates between shot-reverse-shots and wide shots to follow the facial expressions of the characters

and capture the intensity of the conversation. Furious at her parents' reaction, Gayatri reminds her father that he once told her that there is no fundamental difference between all religions, to which he replies "That works in theory. Besides, don't we have eligible boys in our Brahmin community?" He follows it up with another comment "See, I'm broad minded. I may excuse the caste. But as far as the religion is concerned..." Here again, as I highlighted earlier, it is important to 'identify' the intersection of gender, class and caste to understand and analyse the subject positions of the characters in the film, such as Gayatri and her parents in this case. Fuller and Narasimhan (2008) highlight the role of Indian families in reproducing social inequalities and the changing meanings of religion and caste among urban middle-class. They posit that attitudes of middle-class Indian families towards marriage are significantly conservative and inter-caste unions are a rarity. Beteille's findings (1991, 1996) clearly identifies middle-class Indian communities as conservative and suggests that their attitudes reproduce caste and class inequalities. Besides, as I mentioned in Chapter Three, the middle-class family becomes what Foucault calls 'disciplinary spaces', where it seeks to make individuals regulate their own behaviour and control their body and actions to conform to the conventional social norms and practices. Here, the middle-class family functions as a disciplinary tool, where it commands power and expects the subject to "sacrifice" to preserve the honour of the caste, community, and the familial institution (Foucault, 1982). In this particular scene, Gayatri's mother's enquiry about the former's 'close' friends and the latter's advice thereafter occurs at dinner time, when she serves food to the former. When she tells Gayatri, "Remember, I am your mother, and these are my words. You are given a lot of freedom. You need to take more care in these matters", she attempts to discipline her through the provision of care, thus exercising both biopower and pastoral power. In these contexts, morality works as a form of pastoral power which governs young people and educates them on how to discipline themselves within familial institutions. During this conversation over dinner, Gayatri's parents hint to her on the love, care, and concern they have for her and remind her of

the duty to keep the respectability of the middle-class family intact. As Gayatri decides not to eat the rest of her food and walks away from the conversation, her mother follows her and ask her, “Did you at least think about the kids you will have in future? What will be religion or caste if you marry a Christian?”. By instructing Gayatri about the importance of family and kids, her parents normalise particular middle-class dimensions. By rejecting the food and walking away from it, Gayatri offers a counter hegemonic resistance to the disciplinary gestures of her parents. The resistance to discipline in the Foucauldian approach, as Lilja and Vinthagen posits, is by “either openly refusing to participate in the construction of new subjectivity/capacities/skills/organisations, or the de facto transformation of such social construction into something else... the power of discipline is met by forms of resistance that challenge through avoiding, rearticulating discourses and by destabilising the institutional control of behaviour” (2014, p. 114).



In this scene from *Artist*, Gayatri’s mother follows her to the drawing room couch in order to convince her of the need to avoid close relationships with non-Brahmin men.

To offer further resistance to the power of discipline, Gayatri shifts to Michael’s apartment, and challenges her middle-class parents who treat such relationships as a defiance of familial and community norms and a display of “rampant female sexuality” (Lukose, 2010). Hailing from a conservative middle-class Brahmin family, Gayatri is faced with the challenge of overcoming the burden of a gender-class-caste intersection. Gayatri’s decision to challenge

her parents and thereby disrupt the disciplinary spaces to live with a non-Hindu man, driven by her sense of agency, goes against the common and acceptable practice of arranged middle-class marriages or sub-caste endogamy unions. The strict norms and lack of freedom inoculates Gayatri with the idea of home and family as a space of tradition and triggers the decision to live with Michael.

Throughout the film, Gayatri stands firm as Michael's pillar of physical and emotional support despite his eccentricities and occasional acts of violence. Shyamaprasad portrays Michael as a model of hegemonic masculinity; he is, to borrow from Connell and Messerschmidt, is "rigid", "domineering", "aggressive", and "dispassionate" (2005, p. 840). In the closing shots of the film, Gayatri walks away from Michael and challenges the patience and tolerance 'expectations' placed on middle-class women, especially in private spaces. The film ends with a strong-faced Gayatri's voice over, "In each of our lives, there is a point of no return. And when we get there, we have no choice. Hence, Goodbye Michael. Goodbye." In this scene, Shyamaprasad frames Gayatri in a wide-angled deep-focus mid-shot in a relatively darker setting with Michael in the background. The lighting is low-key as she starts walking towards the screen in slow motion and shifts to a moderately high-key lighting with a sharp-focus close-up of her face until the shot fades into black, thus signifying her life journey from darkness to brightness.



Shyamaprasad illustrates Gayatri's journey from darkness to brightness, as she bids goodbye to Michael, using a transition from a low-key to a moderately high-key lighting.

The concept of heteronormative middle-class families is key to the reading of the films *Ore Kadal* and *Artist*. In the process of critiquing gender ideologies that limits the autonomy of women, these narratives break middle-class familial codes by deconstructing moralities. Shyamaprasad's narrative style signifies the necessity to reject normative class-gender ideologies and idealised notions of domesticity.

Individualism and the subversion of middle-class moralities

The films *Ritu* (2009) and *Elektra* (2010) feature young central characters who disrupt middle-class familial values and ideologies of gender and sexuality. *Ritu* tells the story of three friends, Varsha, Sunny and Sharath⁴³. After sharing a close bond for several years since childhood, they decide to leave the city to pursue professional careers of their choice. Sharath finds a job in the US and joins his brother's family who have settled there while Varsha and Sunny join different software companies in Bangalore. A few years later, the three of them reunite in Trivandrum, where they spent much of their time together in the past and decide to work for the same organisation. The couple recall their old memories and team up to undertake a new project at the company they joined in. Although they all had moments of success in the new workplace, Sharath soon realises that Varsha's and Sunny's identities have remarkably transformed, much to his disappointment and frustration. Sharath wishes to have a long-term relationship with Varsha and expresses his desire to marry her. However, Varsha seems not ready for it yet. Sharath is also upset that Varsha is too close and intimate with some of her male friends. Sunny, who is highly competitive at the professional level, looks for illegal ways to deceive others and make money in the process. Towards the end of the film, Sharath fulfills his dream to be a full-time writer, Varsha starts her voluntary job as a computer instructor, and Sunny leaves for the US as part of a seven-month onsite assignment. The film attempts to capture how these three middle-class individuals survive in their new environment, especially

⁴³ The film's title *Ritu* means 'Seasons' and the names of the three central characters translates to different seasons – Varsha (monsoon), Sunny (possibly signifies summer), and Sharath (autumn).

in the developed and globalised spaces post liberalisation, which I discuss later in the chapter.

Shyamaprasad's *Elektra* is based on the Electra complex and depicts the central character Elektra's psychosexual battle with her biological mother, Diana, for her father's love and affection. The film, which adopts a non-linear narrative, opens with the death of Elektra's father Abraham as soon he returns to the traditional middle-class *tharavadu* from his plantation estate in Jaffna. Elektra claims that it is her mother and Abraham's wife Diana who killed him as he became aware of her extramarital relationship with his cousin, Issac. Diana, on the other hand, tells her son's fiancée Laura that it is Elektra who always pushed Abraham away from her. She tells Laura that Elektra also made sure her son (Elektra's younger brother) stays away from her. Elektra's intimacy for Abraham is portrayed in a scene where he enters his bedroom at night, hands over a jug of water, and says, "here is your favourite jug of water. See, I never forgot about this. I always kept it safe in my room. Mom might say something else, but do not believe her. You are the only one I love".



Elektra expresses her possessive love for her father

At one point, the narrative unveils how Abraham dies instantly from the combination of an overdose of drugs Diana forced him to consume and a panic attack when she reveals him about her extramarital affair with Issac. The police, led by Elektra's fiancé Peter, the church authorities, his personal doctor, and other friends and relatives arrive at the scene although none of them initially tagged it as an unnatural death. Elektra's brother Edwin returns from Jaffna

after being informed about his father's sudden death. Diana tries to convince Edwin that Elektra is responsible for his father's death. Elektra and Diana continue to accuse each other of Abraham's murder until eventually the former and Edwin find out about the latter's relationship with Issac. Elektra convinces Edwin, who is troubled by Oedipus complex, to kill Issac. This leads to Diana's suicide and Edwin's subsequent loss of sanity. The film ends when Edwin too dies in an accident and Elektra decides to live in isolation. It is also interesting to note how a film such as *Elektra* portrays a Christian/non-Hindu family as the site of middle-class moralities. This is symptomatic of the larger trend in Malayalam cinema where several films, such as *Adaminte Variyellu* (Adam's Rib, 1983), *Irakal* (Victims, 1985), *Aham* (I, 1992), *Kilichundan Mampazham* (Bird's Beak Mango, 2003), *Traffic* (2011), and *You Too Brutus* (2015), for example, had Christians or other non-Hindu women crossing moral boundaries and engaging in extra-marital affairs.⁴⁴

In both *Ritu* and *Elektra*, the narrative relies on strong female characters to position middle-class men as the enforcers of moral order. Here again, as in *Ore Kadal* and *Artist*, Shyamaprasad subverts patriarchal structures through his point-of-view narratives which largely focuses on the female protagonists of these films, as I demonstrate in my analysis of the films. *Ritu* is slightly different in that all three main characters gain equal prominence in the plot although there are several instances in the film that project Sharath's point of view. However, Varsha's is the only character who does not conform to stereotypical ways of gender representation whereas Sharath and Sunny are middle-class men who are bound by ideas of power and a sense of morality.

The first few scenes of the film introduce the central characters to the audience. Sunny and Sharath are extremely different in nature. Sunny, who is homosexual, drinks and hangs out

⁴⁴ However, Deepthi in *Ore Kadal* is a Hindu woman and hence it can be affirmed that Shyamaprasad does not attempt to place the burden of middle-class moralities on a particular religion or community.

with his friends in a local pub in the city. Sharath returns from the US and enjoys a conversation with the cab driver on his nostalgic memories of 'home' and how much he misses his childhood friends. Varsha, on the other hand, engages in a friendly conversation over the phone as her colleagues tease her and discuss among them a list of perspective males on the other end of the call. They stop their work temporarily only to make fun of her and interrupt the conversation. Varsha is fashionable; she wears stylish dresses and lipstick, eats chewing gum and drinks coffee from a mug that says 'Desolate Hearts'. These attributes and her body language in the telephonic conversation is enough for her colleagues to assume that the individual on the other end is male, heterosexual, and one of her possible love interests. These moments in the film, from its onset, give an indication of the ways in which middle-class Indians set normative expectations on women's behaviour, particularly in work and other public spaces. As a Hindu middle-class woman, Varsha is expected to be modest with her clothing preferences and any deviation from the normative standards would lead her to being judged and marked as loose or sexually available (Gilbertson, 2014). If she is too modest, simplistic, and naïve, she would be ridiculed and exempted from social groups for being non-normative in the cosmopolitan spaces she occupies. Through a point-of-view narrative that focuses on Varsha, Shyamaprasad shows moments in the film where Varsha is disadvantaged by her gender-class identity which overlap and intersect across multiplicity of different spaces (Massey, 1994, 2005, 2013). Through this specific narrative moment, Shyamaprasad captures the complexity of the gender-class intersection and further fosters the understanding of power and social relations between the characters.

Throughout the film, the characters' motivation to focus on their individual goals, dreams and desires is evident. This individualist approach marked by neoliberalism⁴⁵ (Harvey, 2005) might, however, appear masked to the audience, particularly due to the ways in which

⁴⁵ I discuss neoliberalism, especially the neoliberal female subject in the Kerala and Indian context, in Chapter Two of the thesis.

the characters present themselves at different junctures in the film. For example, in one scene, Varsha and Sharath sit by a river and indulge in a personal conversation. Sharath reminds Varsha about his dream profession and the plans they made before he left for the job in the US. He tells her that his ambition was to become a writer and publish several books and suggests, “let us rent a house at the lakeside where I can write peacefully. I have already talked to a few publishers. We can work from one place, right?”. In this scene, Sharath uses words such as “our dream” and “we can work from one place” to give a pseudo sense of the importance of collectivism. He follows up that statement by adding that it has always been “his” dream to be a writer and inviting Varsha to share space with him where “he” could lead a peaceful work life. The fact that all Sharath’s writings simply follow the trajectories of self-discovery and self-realisation validates his neo-liberal middle-class ‘self’. To Sharath’s surprise, Varsha asks him not to ponder over the past and live in the present, thereby rejecting his marriage proposal without further thought; by doing so, she does not comply to the pressure of fitting herself into the heteronormative middle-class family structure. On another occasion, Sharath tells Varsha that he is ready to marry her and that she should think about it at some point. In reply, Varsha asserts she needs more time to decide and shows no haste to surrender to the normative and gendered pressures of conjugality vis-a-vis the middle-class Indian context (Bhandari, 2020). Shyamaprasad portrays Varsha as the confident, assertive, cosmopolitan representative of the Malayali middle-class youth.

In several moments in the film, Sharath displays fear, anguish, and frustration every time he notices Varsha’s interactions with other men, particularly with those unknown to him. He also gets visibly upset at Varsha drinking or dancing with other men in pubs and parties. This sort of a moral anxiety about middle-class women’s conduct in public spaces is also part of a broader narrative which links to the history of Malayali women’s entry into the public domain during the 1920s, which I discussed in Chapter Two. As Lukose contends,

...the modern women in the public became an increasing source of anxiety. While Kerala's early engagements with colonial modernity generated anxieties about cultural alienation and the imitation of western ways, a largely male narrative articulated a relatively optimistic vision of a blending of traditional and modern elements in which the figure of the modern women ensconced in the modernizing home was crucial. (2010, p. 36)

Despite Sharath's neoliberal 'self', his thoughts and ideas are plagued by the moral order and dominant ideologies laid out by the 'collectives' of middle-class family and kinship. This is also evident towards the final few minutes of the film where Sharath resigns his job, packs his bags, and bids goodbye to his teammates. At that juncture, Varsha rushes towards his car and confronts him for one last time. She asks him why he never tried to understand her or think from her point of view rather than always being upset or suspicious of her and her motives. With a blank expression on her face, Varsha tells Sharath, "Bangalore was another world. I was alone there but I enjoyed that loneliness. Enjoyed, enjoyed! I convinced myself that everyone is eventually alone in life. And I thought you were also enjoying your life". Varsha's statements demonstrate how Shyamaprasad portrays her free and independent middle-class identity. Furthermore, Varsha offers Sharath a companionship, to sit with him when he writes. More than an attempt to help him realise his "lakeside dream", the offer is depicted as a strong woman's effort to be the support system for a fragile middle-class male subject to deal with his anxieties and uncertainties. Sharath's reply, "I came back for you and Sunny. And what did you give me? Is there anyone you have not dated in Bangalore? You had many male acquaintances even while you were here. What kind of people are you!", critically highlights the central male character's focus on the 'self' and the typical middle-class man's urge to control women's desires, regulate her sexuality and produce disciplined subjects in the process.

The other main character in the film, Sunny, often suffers from his father's acts of physical violence towards him and tells Varsha and Sharath that he is lonely and neglected by everyone. Sunny is also highly competitive in the professional spaces he inhabits, to the extent that he is envious of Sharath and wants to reach high positions through unfair means. This increased sense of competition and the lack of emotional connection with others is a key feature of

contemporary neoliberal Kerala society (Becker, Hartwich, and Haslam, 2021). A part of the reason for his frustration, the sense of alienation, and the familial violence he suffers from occurs as result of his homosexual identity in a conservative Kerala society, where homosexuality is condemned as sinful and deviant.⁴⁶ Shyamaprasad establishes this using a ‘dissolve’ to show Sunny’s state of mind when he goes through similar traumatic experiences. For example, in a flashback scene where Sunny reveals to Sharath and Varsha about his father’s abusive behaviour, he cries and jumps into the river. He cries loudly and walks deeper into the river, only for his friends to pull him back. In the film, Sunny’s subordinate masculinity – a form of masculinity in which an individual expresses several qualities opposite to hegemonic masculinity, such as being overly emotional or behaving in a feminine way (Connell, 2020) - is attributed to his homosexual identity and this exposes him to hegemonic masculine forms of discrimination.



There are a few instances in *Ritu*, where Sunny expresses frustration and faces humiliation due to this subordinate masculinity and homosexual identity.

In the scene where he reunites with Varsha and Sharath after the latter’s return from America, the two of them make fun of Sunny when he said he urgently wants to go to the toilet. As he points towards the toilet at the cafe, Sharath mocks him, “*Nee pazhaya kaavadi thanne*

⁴⁶ Religious institutions such as the Kerala Catholic Bishops Council (KCBC) adopt a conservative stand on same- sex relationships and marriage and maintain that they do not accept the civil union of homosexual partners as a marriage. Until, late 2018, homosexual activity was considered a criminal activity in Kerala and other parts of India as per Indian Penal Code (IPC) 377.

(you are still the same kaavadi)”⁴⁷. The subordination or marginalisation of other masculinities such as homosexuality, as in Sunny’s case in *Ritu*, is utilised to legitimise hegemonic masculinity (Roberts and Elliott, 2020; Connell, 1987).⁴⁸ Here, Shyamaprasad uses Sunny’s alternative masculinity to legitimise Sharath’s hegemonic masculinity. The feeling of loneliness and frustration is seen not only in Sunny but also in some of the other male characters in *Ritu*, such as Balu, the co-head of the software company where the three central characters work, Pranchi, the lower-class precarious worker in the company who is mistreated and abused after his house was demolished to set up these multinational companies, and Sharath’s elder brother, Hari Varma. The frustrated and lonely young middle-class man, who reflects the anxieties and uncertainties of the post liberalisation era, is a common feature in some of Shyamaprasad films. For instance, the central character in *Akale* (Far Away, 2004) played by actor Prithviraj, Neil is portrayed as a young unemployed man who constantly expresses anger and frustration, particularly when her mother advises him to abstain from his precarious lifestyle and engage in productive work. In *Akale*, Shyamaprasad portrays Neil as the typical neoliberal Malayali middle-class masculine subject who wanders about with no specific reason, made possible by his gendered privileges to move freely in public spaces. The masculine mode of mobility is entrenched in the idea of, what Lukose frames as, “wandering about or gallivanting (*karanguga*), a mode of restless, aimless, movement, in search of fun, romance, and friendship” (2005, p. 514). In contrast to this, the free movement of Indian women as neoliberal subjects is still severely restricted, embedded in power relations, and characterised by the inability to wander (Nichols, 2022).

⁴⁷ *Kaavadi* is a derogatory Malayalam term used to address homosexuals.

⁴⁸ Malayalam cinema has experimented with alternative sexualities in a few other films too such as *Moothon* (The Elder One) 2019), *Njan Mary kutty* (I am Mary kutty, 2018), *Mumbai Police* (2013), *Ardhanari* (Half Woman, 2012), *English: An Autumn in London* (2012), and *Chanthupottu* (2005). The film *Chanthupottu*, directed by popular filmmaker Lal Jose was a huge commercial hit although it has raised severe criticism on how the central character, Radhakrishnan, was depicted in the film. Radhakrishnan, played by Dileep, is a homosexual and transgender person, who gets mocked at and feels ashamed of his queer status in the film. There has been widespread criticism that members of the queer community have faced discrimination ever since the release of the film (Tharayil, 2014).

In *Ritu*, Balu often fits a superficial smile on his face whenever his wife introduces him to a colleague at work although he is deeply upset and frustrated with his life. In one scene, Zarina excitedly informs Balu about securing a 10-million-dollar project, the first for an India-based company in the region. He responds in a dull and passive manner. When she says, “this is our ultimate victory, don’t you realise that?”, he reacts, “OUR victory? How does it matter to a traditionalist like me?” With a despairing expression on her face, Zarina responds, “you don’t care about my happiness or dreams. Did I create this huge empire to sit at a home and engage in child bearing and rearing? Here, Shyamaprasad frames Zarina in a slightly low angle shot where she looks down at Balu, highlighting the sense of authority she has over him. Balu scornfully asks in response, “An empire! What is this empire for? What life is this!” On another occasion where she completes an online conversation with a foreign client, Balu looks at their new Premium Gold credit card and asks, “What is the meaning of our life”, to which she responds, “LIVE and die”. Here, Balu continuously attempts to regulate the spaces Zarina occupies and govern her movements through his discourses on the meaning of work and life. Hanson asserts that mobility shapes gender, especially in relation to identity, subjectivity, power, and agency (Hanson, 2010). The denial of female mobility, as Hanson (2010) claims, is an attempt to ensure the reinforcement of gender ideologies and hierarchical relations. Balu’s efforts are meant to convince Zarina to transform into the normative middle-class female subject in post liberalisation Kerala society whose primary responsibilities lie within the heterosexual nuclear family.⁴⁹ Pillai (2021) states that “under the constant pressure to conform, performing tirelessly within golden cages of ideal femininity within workspaces, familial spaces and public domains, deference to patriarchal hegemonic power structures become a habit and a custom that many women are terrified of breaking” (p. 50). However, in both the

⁴⁹ As I discuss in Chapter Two, the post-liberalisation era put added pressure and responsibility on women to work and contribute to the family income, there were concerns raised on how they would divide time between tasks at work and home, and their (un)suitability for certain kinds of employment positions. In Zarina’s case, in *Ritu*, her leadership role as the head of the company demands significant amount of time to be spent at her workspace.

scenes, Zarina rejects Balu's idea of the 'ideal Malayali woman', which I contextualised in Chapter Two. Foucault (2003, 2006) conceptualised the family as a site of sovereign relations of obligation, where disciplinary power is exercised to create moral subjects. Zarina challenges this conception of the family and the disciplinary interventions of her husband. Shyamaprasad portrays Zarina as an independent middle-class woman and a successful entrepreneur, who takes pride in her work and confidence in her ability to deal with any challenge that comes her way.



In *Ritu*, Shyamaprasad depicts Zarina as a strong and ambitious middle-class woman who achieved professional success through her hard work and dedication.

In *Elektra* too, Abraham questions Diana, one of the central female characters in the film, in a heated discussion about her affair with his cousin Issac. Abraham asks Diana, are you waiting for my death and planning to live with someone else? Ironically, Abraham had an extramarital affair in Jaffna not long before he returned home to be with his family. All of Diana's scenes with Abraham are shot with low-key lighting to make the audience understand Abraham's dull and mysterious nature and to highlight the tension between the two characters. Their costumes are less bright and appealing and the props in the room rarely visible; all elements of the mis-en-scene compliment the uneasy and unhappy nature of their relationship. By questioning Diana on the regulation of her body and sexuality, Abraham dictates the need to control her desires and restrict her within the boundaries of familial subject positions, where the middle-class family becomes a site of intervention, bodily discipline, and imaginings of

social order (Martin, 2012). However, with a bold and fierce expression on her face, she provides a strong response by saying, “yes, you want to hear it? I will tell you. You were merely using me as an instrument, treating me like a slave. You gave me two children, but you never wanted me.” Abraham’s reaction to her response implied shock and surprise as she gathered the strength and courage to raise voice against the interpellations of middle-class patriarchal hegemony. Diana adds, in more anger and pain, “I gave you so much love and affection. But you did not want me. You never cared for me. All you wanted was your Jaffna estate and your extramarital affairs. You made me like this. Don’t forget that! Finally, I found someone who loves me and cares for me. He made me realise what love and compassion is all about”. Much like Deepti in *Ore Kadal*, Diana shows unwillingness to conform to patriarchal hegemony and she subverts the rigid and ideological boundaries of middle-class moralities.⁵⁰ By doing so, these characters disrupt the idea of Indian middle-class homes as a discursive site of regulation and discipline and the hegemonic conception of women as bearers of culture and morality.



In this scene from *Elektra*, Diana boldly responds to Abraham’s questions and expresses her strong opposition to patriarchal hegemony.

However, in the film, Diana’s plans to live with Issac after the death of Abraham does not last for long. Edwin, triggered by his sister Elektra’s revelation that their father was killed,

⁵⁰ It is important to highlight that even though Deepti (in *Ore Kadal*) and Diana (in *Elektra*) decided to start a relationship once they separated themselves from the rigid middle-class family structure, they never officially enter a legal marriage or a civil union.

decided to murder Issac who was responsible for the crime. Edwin tells Diana how he murdered Issac and asks her, “why are you so upset about death of that bastard who spoiled the *maanam* of our *tharavadu*?” Apparently, Edwin’s concern here is not the loss of his father but his mother’s illicit relationship with another man and how it could spoil the moral values and respectability of the middle-class family. Edwin’s intense love and concern for his mother transformed into anger and hate when Diana deviated from the moral and familial norms and disrupted the image of the ‘ideal’ middle-class woman, which I contextualised in Chapters Two and Four. The reason for Elektra’s vengeance towards Diana, however, was the murder of her father, who she was madly in love with. Here again, Shyamaprasad is critical of the male characters in these films for being conservative and regulating women’s mobility and sexuality. Through the depiction of Elektra’s character, Shyamaprasad also goes against the normative ways in which middle-class women are represented in Malayalam cinema and challenges the institutional and hierarchical forces that manipulate her gender identity.

Conclusion

Films such as *Ore Kadal*, *Artist*, *Ritu*, and *Elektra* not only address societal crises through films but also locate the causes of this victimisation and provide alternate images of middle-class women’s intersectional lives. These films articulate concepts such as space and patriarchy, in which such victimisation takes place in the Indian context. As Massey explains, “people occupy different positions within any community” (1994, p. 154). A women’s sense of place will differ from place to place and will also be different from men. This also explains how the identity and agency of middle-class women become space-specific in the context of these films. In *Ore Kadal*, Deepti lacks agency whereas Bela is powerful and authoritative even in her male-dominated workspace. While Deepti is victimised by the patriarchal household that tethers her to a restrictive womanhood, Bela is the powerful feminine figure who has control over her thoughts and actions. Similarly, in *Artist*, Gayatri lacks the freedom to think and act

independently while at home and finds herself in a position where her mother constantly warns her about the need to listen to her father. Hence, the decision to move out of the house and live with Michael is triggered by the need to challenge the patriarchal stranglehold that is a feature of the Indian middle-class. Even in *Ore Kadal*, Deepti's decision to leave her husband and live with Nathan is born out of the desire to disentangle herself from the moral obligations inherent in arranged marriages and hierarchical gender relations. *Ritu* and *Elektra* show that strong, independent and resilient womanhood is born out of different kind of spaces, all of which are gendered or classist in some way or the other – the work spaces surrounded by colleagues who judge her based on what she wears and how she talks, the domestic spaces where her middle-class parents are too eager to marry her 'off' or where partners pressurise her to produce offspring and raise them, question her morality, or regulate her sexuality, and the public spaces where she is ridiculed for just being herself.

Through his portrayals of women's experiences in *Ore Kadal*, *Artist*, *Ritu*, and *Elektra*, Shyamaprasad opens up new spaces for progressive thinking through a detailed inspection of heteronormative societies that stresses on the need for compromise, commitment and adjustment even with violent, insensitive or unsupportive partners. These films disrupt 'expectations' of gender identity, which are constructed as a threat to familial and communal stability. The films also break the shackles of middle-class moralities and the expected conventional normative forms in which men and women are articulated in Malayalam cinema. However, I also drew attention to Shyamaprasad's problematic representation of homosexuality in *Ritu* by arguing that Sunny's masculinity was subordinated to legitimise Sharath's hegemonic masculinity.

The failure to acknowledge women's potential and go beyond trivial representations in cinema only conforms the non-participatory approach towards the identification and recognition of female worth. It is important to acknowledge the new globalised middle-class

woman's drive to liberate themselves from the confines of cultural hegemony and patriarchy and redefine existing notions on gender power relations. A careful and systematic disruption of stereotypic articulations of middle-class women in cinematic narratives, as in the case of these four films, would enable Malayalam cinema to create female characters with a strong sense of identity and belonging.

It needs to be noted that there is a spatial paradox that unfolds in Shyamaprasad's films, which offers poignant moments of resistance to hegemonic patriarchal geographies. In *Ore Kadal*, for example, the central character Deepti moves away from a heteronormative relationship with her husband, where she had limited mobility, to begin an extramarital affair. She transgresses the marriage-bound heteronormative spaces and enters a relationship with a highly ego-centric and misogynist Nathan. Although she transgresses martial spaces in this instance, the movement to another space does not ensure empowerment. Therefore, mobility in and of itself is not transgressive. However, in the final scene of the film, we see Nathan and Deepti sitting on the floor with Nathan saying, "You have defeated me. I can't live without you". At this point there is a balance of power as Deepti equally controls that space. Deepti taking control of the space works against the architectural arrangement in Nathan's home, in the Foucauldian sense, where women including Deepti were once made to discipline themselves.

In *Artist* too, we see Gayatri overcoming the burden of a gender-class-caste intersection to move in with Michael but it does not full ensure mobility or empowerment. But eventually she walks away from Michael too - I discuss shots, lighting, and composition to emphasise this transition. So, what we see here is that the movement to a different space does not guarantee mobility but highlights how the character's intervention in that space offers resistance to hegemonic power.

In the thesis, I emphasise Doreen Massey's idea of space as open, multiple, and

relational, unfinished. That space is liminal and, in that sense, always becoming. As I highlight in the discussion of space in Chapter Three, Massey goes beyond a structuralist approach and underscores the relationality, multiplicity, and contextuality of spaces. I also discussed the example of the 'No Toilet, No Bride' campaign to underscore how the movement works against fostering mobility and agency to women, which emphasises that the idea of space sometimes goes beyond the rigid binaries of public and private in Kerala and India at large. Therefore, subjectivity can reorganise space, it redefines space. Even with the *Illams* in *Agnisakshi*, which I examine in Chapter Six, we see those spaces being continuously constituted through segregation, hierarchy and power despite their rigid and structured constitution. This mobilisation of space can be a critique to the way Malayalam cinema articulates discourses of mobility on women by showing conservative binary approaches as highlighted throughout the thesis.

Chapter 5: Diaspora, Belonging/Displacement, and the Diasporic Subject: English: An Autumn in London, Ivide, and Kallu Kondoru Pennu

Introduction

The previous chapter of the thesis primarily examined how the Indian middle-class (of which Kerala is a part of and share similar values), especially post liberalisation, conceived the notion of morality, particularly within the institutions of family, marriage, and employment. In the chapter, I examine how gender and class intersect in the formulation and regulation of moral codes and values and the role they play in the discursive formations of Malayali women's identities and subjectivities. I further explored how Malayalam cinema conceived the idea of middle-class moralities through their plots and narratives and identified stereotypical ways in which middle-class men and women are represented in the films. I analysed Shyamaprasad's films, *Ore Kadal*, *Artist*, *Ritu*, and *Elektra*, and discussed how Shyamaprasad challenges how middle-class men and women are imagined in Kerala society and the ways in which they are represented in Malayalam cinema.

This chapter mainly examines Shyamaprasad's three films that focus on issues of migration and diaspora, *Kallu Kondoru Pennu* (A Woman Made of Stone, 1998), *English: An Autumn in London* (2013), and *Ivide* (Here, 2015), to understand how important diasporic notions such as spatiality, belonging, and displacement are articulated in the films. The chapter examines Shyamaprasad's cinematic portrayal of immigrant men and woman and explores the differences in their experiences of migration. These films tackle different modalities linked to immigrant life in the Arab Gulf, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. The analysis section of the chapter employs a narrative analysis and a close reading of the main characters in these films in relation to male identity and female agency in diaspora spaces and discusses

the articulation of the intersectional tropes of gender, class and caste in the formation of diasporic subjectivities.

In the first section of the chapter, I theorise the diaspora to unpack the concept and revisit some of the conceptualisations and assumptions on the diasporic condition and the rendition of the diasporic subject. This section will address the key theoretical concerns and scholarly debates on diaspora and diasporic subjects to conceptualise and contextualise the notion of diaspora with the objective of understanding its impact on identity and subjectivity. The section will also underscore how my research addresses some of those key concerns and debates on diaspora and diasporic subjectivity. I map the ways in which diaspora scholars have articulated the notion of displacement, how they have addressed the question of home and belonging and explored the formation of identity and subjectivity in diasporic spaces. This is done to set the context for the analysis section where I examine how Shyamaprasad's films on migration and diaspora reinforce and challenge some of the ways in which these modalities are conceptualised by scholars. In the following section of the chapter, I examine the theoretical deliberations on the Indian diaspora and elucidate how scholars conceptualise the diasporic imaginary to explore how they connect to the context of the films and the characters in them. For instance, several scholarly works, especially on the Indian diaspora, universalise or essentialise the diasporic experience and emphasise homogenous discourses linked to the idea of an 'original' homeland. Using that as context, I examine how Shyamaprasad conceives the diaspora spaces and diasporic subjects through his cinematic narratives and explore whether they reinforce existing notions about being at 'home' or 'away'. Using relevant scholarship, the next section of the chapter inspects the ways in which Indian cinema, primarily Bollywood⁵¹, engage with the concept of Indian diaspora. Here, I also refer to a few Malayalam

⁵¹ Most scholarly works on the representation of the Indian diaspora are based on Hindi films. Therefore, it is important to examine some of them to critique the dominant discourses around the notion of the diaspora and to understand the ways in which they are articulated in films. The number of scholarly materials on Malayalam films that deal with the diaspora is sparse. Other key scholars such as Ratheesh Radhakrishnan have also briefly discussed the case of Hindi films

films that deal with the notion of diaspora and briefly interrogate how they represent diasporic desires and values. Finally, in my analysis, I look at the multiple ways in which Shyamaprasad renders the pleasures and displeasures of diasporic lives using an intersectional lens and the ways in which he subverts the stereotypic and unproblematic articulation of displacement and the diaspora-homeland connection that are visible in other Malayalam films on the diaspora. I divide this section into four sub-sections: The creation of an ‘East-West binary’, ‘A sense of belonging/displacement’, and ‘Women and domestic spaces’ focus on the films *English: An Autumn in London*, and *Ivide*, while ‘The Gulf and the diasporic migrant woman’ centers around the film *Kallu Kondoru Pennu*.

Theorising Diaspora

The term ‘diaspora’ refers to the dispersal of people from their original homeland although its foundational notion suggests a forced displacement or dispersal. Most of the studies on migration and diaspora have explored the concept of ‘home’ with respect to the relationship with one’s own homeland and a sense of belonging, longing, or displacement to it (Fathi, 2020). Historically, the term has been linked to the dispersion of the Jewish people⁵², although extensive accounts have been written on the Greek, Armenian and African diaspora as well (Butler, 2001). As Khachig Tololyan (1991), one of the foundational scholars of diaspora studies, notes “the term that once described Jewish, Greek and Armenian dispersion now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community” (p. 4). Tololyan (1991) relates the concept of diaspora to a growing field of meanings which

in their examination of Malayalam films on the diaspora.

⁵² The Jewish diaspora refers to the geographic dispersion of the Jews from their ancestral homeland in Palestine to other parts of the world. Some of the main factors leading to this historic process were internal conflicts within the society, expulsion, religious persecution, and the rapid increase of population. For more on the Jewish diaspora, see *The Jewish people in the first century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions* (1974), *Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return* (1991), *Diaspora: Generation and the ground of Jewish identity* (1993), and *The Jewish diaspora in a comparative and theoretical perspective* (2005).

includes processes of cultural hybridity, transnationalism, and de-territorialisation. Several sociologists and social theorists have theorised the diaspora with reference to notion of displacement and dispersal from an original homeland. The most notable of them is William Safran (1991) who, influenced by the Jewish experience, related the idea of diaspora to historically dispersed communities which share a common desire to return to their original homeland. According to Safran (1991), these members of a diasporic community share common features:

1. they, or their ancestors have been dispersed from an original 'centre' to two or more foreign regions;
2. they retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland including its location, history and achievements;
3. they believe they are not – and perhaps can never be – fully accepted in their host societies and so remain partly separate;
4. their ancestral home is idealised and it is thought that, when conditions are favourable, either they, or their descendants should return;
5. they believe all members of the diaspora should be committed to the maintenance or restoration of the original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and
6. they continue in various ways to relate to that homeland and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are in an important way defined by the existence of such a relationship.

However, Safran's model of diaspora focuses on the cohesiveness of diasporic communities and does not address the differences in their experiences (Gabriel, 1999). Thus, Safran's analysis fails to fully explore the diversity and ambivalent nature of these diasporic communities. Apart from Safran, several scholars such as King and Melvin (1999), Green (1998), Cohen (1997, 1995), Said and Simmons (1996), and Chaliand and Rageau (1995) adopt

the Jewish diaspora experience to discuss the phenomenon. Other scholars such as Amitav Ghosh⁵³ and Vijay Mishra have also been critical of Safran and his early diasporic model, especially in the context of Indian diaspora. Ghosh (1989) posits that the Indian diaspora is not particularly inclined to a desire for a symbolic return to their homeland and often recreates a distinct culture in their respective hostlands. Mishra (1996), on the other hand, argues that Safran oversimplifies the nature and characteristics of the Indian diaspora in his seminal article in the first issue of *Diaspora* journal. According to diasporic theorist James Clifford, the Caribbean, British, or African American diasporas also does not fall into Safran's diaspora model. Clifford (1994) calls these 'quasi diasporas' that show only certain diasporic characteristics or features. I will revisit Mishra's and Ghosh's discussion on the Indian diaspora later in the chapter.

Cohen (2007), one of the leading theorists in diasporic theory, lays emphasis on the standpoint taken by several critics who argue that Safran and other pioneer diasporic scholars including him does not paint a complete picture of the concept. These social constructionists attempt to deconstruct concepts such as homeland and ethnic community, and affirm that identities, in the post-modern world, need to be assessed and evaluated with its context and complexity in view. Cohen's article "Solid, ductile and liquid: changing notions of home and homeland in diaspora studies" came as a response to postmodern diasporic scholars such as Soysal (2000) and Anthias (1998) who claimed that Cohen's arguments (1997, 1993), like some of his predecessors including Safran, privileges the classical notion that endorses a homogenous conception of the diaspora. Cohen (2007) also underscores the argument made by sociologist Avtar Brah (1996), who is critical of the 'fixed origin' discourses on the homeland and suggests that the desire for homeland has rather become a 'homing desire' which

⁵³ Although Amitav Ghosh is primarily known as an Indian fiction writer, all his writings deeply indulge in the themes of diaspora and transnationalism. Ghosh is also a prolific non-fiction writer and a critical essayist whose works are historically and politically significant. Ghosh's literary works discuss issues of dislocation, nostalgia and cultural identity and his essays are widely cited by scholars and researchers across the globe.

consequently makes the 'home' a placeless space. 'Home', for Brah, is a "mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination" which he conceives as a place of no return although it is possible to revisit the geographical place of 'origin' (1996, p. 192). Brah (1996) also envisions 'home' as the "lived experience of a locality, ... mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations" (p. 192). Brah, therefore, rejects the approaches that limit the concept of a diaspora to a historical experience and raises concerns on narratives that have a fixation on the maintenance of an imagined or concrete relationship with their original homelands. This is crucial in my discussion of Shyamaprasad's diasporic films where, as Brah theoretically postulates, certain characters maintain an imagined relationship with their original homelands while certain others adopt the respective hostlands as their new 'home', and thereby preserve the idea of 'home' being fluid and contextual.

Through these theoretical interventions, 'home' became interpreted as "the place of origin, or the place of settlement, or local, national or transnational place, or an imagined community (linked, for example, through the internet), or a matrix of known experiences and intimate social relations (thus conforming to the popular expression that 'home is where the heart is')." (Brah as cited in Cohen, 2007, p. no 3). Anthias (1998) is also critical of Cohen's approach for its homogenous conception of diaspora and argues that issues of gender and class are not addressed in his works. Anthias posits that both Stuart Hall's (1990) and Paul Gilroy's (1997, 1993) works on the diaspora are highly influential in the way they reject the idea of an essentialised black subject and focus on the unifying dynamics and culture across various black communities. However, Anthias claims that Hall does not adequately deal with the significance of gender, class and inter-ethnic differences and argues that Gilroy "fails to give women any agency within the black diaspora and is more interested in the male gaze" (1998, p.3). Clifford (1994) underscores the nature of diasporic experiences being always gendered and claims that theoretical articulations of diaspora conceal this angle which eventually leads to the normalisation of male experiences. Such a mode of representation could potentially

undermine women and their experiences in diasporic conditions. To quote Clifford (1994, p. 314) here, “Life for women in diasporic situations can be doubly painful – struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work, and with the claims of old and new patriarchies.” This is visible in Shyamaprasad’s diasporic women characters as I discuss in my analysis section later in the chapter. Most of the women in his diasporic films remain intensely attached to their homeland and are often empowered by the homeland’s culture and tradition. They preserve, as Clifford (1994) posits, the main fundamental values linked to their homeland in the aspects of religion, food, body, social patterns, and dress protocols. Some of the women characters in Shyamaprasad’s diaspora films follow such protocols in relation to their religion, class, caste, dress, and so on. I mark the position of these women as disciplined subjects as they are often forced to a patriarchal stranglehold and the ambiguity of an uncertain future in their hostlands. However, some of the women in these films are also ambiguous subjects as they radically oscillate between free and alienated subjects.

Based on the arguments made by the diaspora scholars discussed in the chapter so far, one would assume that there are certain patterns in the formation and formulation of diasporic subjects. However, Butler (2001) stresses that the definition and our understanding of diaspora cannot be universally and uniformly applied to all groups and types of diasporas. For instance, the experience of discrimination could be the defining characteristic of the Jewish and African diasporas, but such a subaltern status cannot be ascribed to other diasporic communities whose experiences in the hostlands could be different. However, Cohen (2007) argues that diaspora theorists have neither made any claims that they would decode the entire spectrum of immigrant experiences nor promised to bolster a progressive gender or anti-racist movement. Mishra (2005) makes a similar argument and stresses that the “the establishment of a Jewish homeland is the exception and not the rule” (p. 2). Clifford’s 1994 article “Diasporas”, which provides a detailed overview of diaspora theories, reconfirms this view that it is rather pointless

to define diasporic communities into 'pure' types and categories. Clifford (1994) points out that no diaspora societies or groups would qualify on all accounts throughout its past and present, and that the "discourse of diaspora will necessarily be modified as it is translated and adopted" (p. 306). This account provides a heterogeneous view of exile and separation from homelands and enable us to view them as a way to connect multiple communities from a dispersed population. Clifford's theorisation of diaspora signifies the idea of multiple homelands reimagines and refocuses the foundational model that centres around the notion of an 'original homeland'. For Clifford, the analysis of diasporic people should be centred on their multiple subjectivities rather than the articulation primarily through the ideology of a real or imagined homeland. Clifford's arguments suggest that diasporic cultural politics cannot be exclusively nationalist, and that the formation of diasporic subjectivity is initiated by the multiple positions occupied by diasporic subjects.

Thus, Clifford's subversion of the regressive elements of 'homeland' ideology rejects the essentialist and nationalist discourses associated with its conception. Gabriel (1999) discusses how Edward Said⁵⁴, in his essay "The Mind of Winter", problematises the notion of exile and the complex interdependency of homeland and exile. Although Said's opening of the essay describes exile in the same way as Safran's formulation of the diaspora, he ends it by highlighting its productive and positive tensions and thereby subverts the homeland-exile binary (Gabriel, 1999). In the essay, Said (2001) asks "How does one surmount the loneliness of exile without falling into the encompassing and thumping language of national pride, collective sentiments, group passions? What is there worth saving and holding on to between the extremes of exile on the one hand and the often bloody-minded affirmations of nationalism on the other?" (p. 51). In my analysis of several scholarly articles on Indian cinema based on

⁵⁴ Said's identity as a Palestinian exile plays a role in the way he stresses on the dialectics of loss in his narratives of the homeland. Although Said lays emphasis on certain traits that are experienced by exile such as a deep sense of loss and the separation from 'true' home, he views exile as a productive process because they involve crossing the borders and breaking the barriers of thought and experience.

diaspora and diasporic lives, which I discuss later in the chapter, I identify and address this sort of a binary division that Said refers to. In Said's formulation of a 'hyphenated identity', there exists the possibility of more than a single homeland and existence of a heterogeneous cultural identity. Crucially, in my analysis, Shyamaprasad's articulation of diasporic lives compels us to problematise the homogenous conception of the diaspora and diasporic subjects in diaspora theories as well as in Indian cinema. This sort of an articulation of diaspora and diasporic lives also falls in line with Hall's (2000), Gilroy's (1993), Spivak's (1993), Butler's (1993), Laclau's (1990), and Derrida's (1981) post-structuralist views of identities⁵⁵ being fluid, contextual, and constructed. Such an approach enables us to deconstruct the nationalist discourses embedded in the notions of 'home' and 'away' and critically examine diaspora and diasporic subjectivities as diverse, hybrid and heterogeneous.

Some of the recent scholarship on migration and diaspora stress on the idea of a multiplicity of homes in relation to original homelands (Fathi, 2020). Fathi recognises that the sense of being at 'home' is different from the other spaces, particularly in terms of the feeling of belonging and familiarity and the emotional attachment to objects and people who are part of it. Fathi (2020) claims that any form of 'leaving' the 'home' should be classified as displacement, be it forced or voluntary. Others such as Murcia suggest that home, to some, can be experienced as a tension between the place they left behind and their current place of settlement. There are people who live in such liminal spaces and ones who no longer experience or feel the place they abandoned as home (Murcia, 2019). The notions of home, belonging, and identity and the connection between can, thus, be complex and problematic. Home can be, as

⁵⁵ In Gilroy's book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), he projects a heterogeneous and hybrid Black diasporic culture that rejects essentialist, pure and singular articulation of the same. Also, in Spivak's interview with postcolonial critic Sneja Gunew in *The Cultural Studies Reader* (1993), she recalls an instance in which she was denied entry into Toronto from London but had no trouble to enter the same destination from New York a couple of days later. This exemplifies the idea that, as Gabriel (1999) notes, "the same individual, in different contexts or locations, acquires different identities" (p. 31). Hall (2000) too rejects fixed and essentialist conceptions of the home and identities and conceives cultural identity as dynamic and contested based on our day-to-day experiences and practices.

Murcia notes, “a place for inspiration and support but also a place of disappointment and unease... a place for oppression and alienation” (2019; p. 1515). In the next section, I examine the Indian diaspora and how key scholars have conceived it in relation to the notions of home, displacement and belonging.

The Indian diaspora

The Indian diaspora, with a long migration history which is thoroughly documented, started with the labour movement to the colonies during Britain’s imperial past. During this period, several Indian labourers were deported to sugar plantations in Guyana, Fiji, Trinidad, Mauritius, Surinam, and South Africa, while some of them were moved to tea, rubber, and railways plantations (Mishra, 1996). Mishra categorises the Indian diaspora into two phases – the old and the new – the former consisting of the ones who migrated to Dutch, British and French colonies during the nineteenth and early twentieth century as indentured labourers, and the latter comprising of the ones who moved out during the post-independent period to industrially advanced parts of the world such as North America and Europe primarily as professionals and skilled workers. Mishra (1996) terms the old diaspora ‘exclusive’ as they formed self-contained ‘little Indias’ in the colonies, who created imaginary homelands in their hostlands. The old diaspora shared most of the features listed by Safran in his discussion of the Jewish diaspora. The longing for home, for instance, is one of the dominant characteristics that could be attributed to both these diasporas. The indentured labourers, in large numbers, were transported in huge ships in journeys that would last several months, and the bonds constructed during this experience was very radical as for the first time these labourers faced the reality of losing caste as they crossed the black sea or *kala pani*⁵⁶. The new diasporas of the late capital, on the other hand, consists of the legitimate permanent residency visa holders and travellers

⁵⁶ In ‘Memory and Recall from Beyond the Troubled Back Waters’ (2011), Mishra discusses several meanings and references to the term *kala pani* invoked by scholars and authors. In the article, Mishra recalls the harsh and traumatic conditions faced by indentured Fiji Indians from 1879 to 1916.

who cross borders, or the ones in transit from one location the other, mostly in pursuit of education or employment. In Mishra's words, "the new diaspora must make meaning of the hyphenated subject within a nation-state that always privileges the citizen who is not hyphenated" (1996, pp. 432). Mishra (1996) argues that this classification as the hyphenated subject disempowers the members of the new diaspora and situates them in the 'problematic' position of belonging 'here' and 'there' at the same time. Vertovec's (2000) second meaning of 'diaspora' as a 'type of consciousness' is relevant here, where a 'dual' or 'paradoxical' nature of identities is emphasised to underscore the notion of belonging 'here' and 'there'. In Vertovec's conceptualisation, there is an identification with the homeland, with the hostland and with the locality at the same time. The locality plays a significant role in structuring the identity of Indian migrants (Oonk, 2007). The new or 'border' diaspora, to borrow Mishra's use of the term, is contaminated and gives rise to the multiple possibilities of exploring cross-cultural and hybrid relationships. Thus, Mishra's conception of the Indian diaspora proposes the diasporic imaginary as a condition of disaggregation and displacement and makes the claim that diasporas never lose essentialised narratives of homeland, exile and return. Shyamaprasad's films, as I demonstrate in the analysis later, do not universalise or essentialise the diasporic experience as visible in some of these theoretical underpinnings. By doing so, I want to argue that these films call for a pluralisation of the diasporic narrative, an approach that goes beyond some of the homogenous discourses linked to the idea of an 'original' homeland and the typology of a dominant Jewish paradigm. These cinematic narratives constantly thrive to unravel the identity specificities of diasporic subjects and reveal the multiplicity and heterogeneity of identities within such spaces and thereby challenge the hegemonic idea of a homogenous nation-state.

Mishra's conception of the Indian diaspora is closely related to the foundational notions on diasporic communities as highlighted by Safran. In the case of Jewish, Greek and some of

the other early diasporic communities, the relationship between the homeland and diasporic population were largely maintained through the reproduction of social and political institutions. However, India's relationship with the diaspora is direct and non-mediated and the extent to which they share institutions is based on their shared history of subjection to British rule (Ghosh, 1989). Mishra (1996) also relates the diasporic subject to Said's 'exile' to suggest that the borders and barriers which enclose the migrants within the safety of a familiar territory can also turn as prisons. Nevertheless, other scholars have argued that the experience of migration need not always be tragic or traumatic and could be for reasons such as higher studies or employment (Kasasa, 2001; Reis, 2004). Reis stresses the role of globalisation in the ways in which the diasporic experience is conceived in contemporary times. Reis (2004) notes,

Pursuit of work and the seizing of opportunities to study and travel abroad, facilitated by the globalising process, are sufficient reasons to stimulate the diasporic process in the contemporary context. It is imperative, therefore, that the distinction be made that these modern-day diasporas are formed not only through intense political conflict, but as a result of opportunity. (p. 49)

The characters in Shyamaprasad's films can be identified as the kind of diasporic subjects that Reis refers to here. Almost all the characters are first generation immigrants who have left the country post liberalisation in search of study or work opportunities and gradually settled down in foreign lands. These characters find themselves among other immigrants who are either compelled to move to a distant destination due to certain circumstances or shift base in search of something new and exciting and become part of what Appadurai (1996, 1990) calls *ethnoscapes*. The 'homeland' for 'new' diasporic subjects like them are easily within reach, especially with the advancement of media and latest technologies, and therefore suggests that the notion of the teleology of return needs further rethinking. The theoretical interpretations of diasporic lives and related literature show us that while the old diasporas suffer from a longing for 'home', modern-day diasporas have found new ways of 'return' that are never restricted by spatial or temporal boundaries. In the case of the Indian diaspora, Ghosh (1989) posits that "the links between India and her diaspora are lived within

the imagination”, a complete contrast to the Jewish experience where the ‘homeland’ is a lived reality (p. 76). The various media discourses and literary texts play an important part in the construction of these imagined homogenous diasporic communities and the creation of a homogenous sense of nationalism. Satchidanandan (2002) asserts that ‘home’ becomes unreal for second and third generation migrants in comparison with first generation immigrants⁵⁷. Home, for the second and third generation migrants, turns out to be “just a space of imagination rather than of nostalgic recollection” (Satchidanandan, 2002, p. 54). These immigrants reconstruct their idea of homeland from the information gathered from other people or media sources such as the internet. Ghosh attempts to suggest the same when he discusses the role of writers – whom he calls the specialists of imagination – in the creation of imaginary homelands⁵⁸. I will discuss how cinema fosters nationalist discourses and how diasporic cinema creates imaginary homelands for non-resident Indians in the next section of this chapter. It is quite significant, as Ang (2003) notes, to think beyond the limiting and constricting discourses of the nation-state and national identity. Shyamaprasad’s films conceptualises the diaspora and diasporic identities as hybrid and heterogenous which subverts, as Anderson (1998) postulates, a diasporic discourse that is often authorised in principle by problematic notions of closure and ethnic sameness. Within this context, Shyamaprasad’s diasporic narratives serve as a critique to cinematic approaches in mainstream Indian cinema and Malayalam cinema that often endorses

⁵⁷ However, Bretell’s article ‘Introduction: Global Spaces/Local Places: Transnationalism, Diaspora and the Meaning of Home’ (2006), which provides a comparative case study of two entirely different populations in New York City involving the Chinese and the Dominicans, reveals a different story. The ethnographic study suggests that the offspring of Chinese immigrants were disconnected from their parental homeland (both in reality and in imagination) whereas the Dominican immigrants’ offspring accepted their parental homeland.

⁵⁸ Ghosh (1989) claims that the link between the Indian diaspora and India are lived within the imagination. He writes, “It is therefore an epic relationship: an epic without a text, which is for all the better perhaps, for if that text were ever written it would be a shabby, bedraggled, melancholy kind of epic – but still formally, an epic it would have to be” (p.76). Quite contrary to Ghosh’s claim, Sura P. Rath, an Indian American, reveals in his article ‘Home(s) Abroad: Diasporic Identities in Third Spaces’ (2000), that his experiences in India were real and authentic and says that there was nothing imagined about his ‘imagined community’. He writes, “the soil, the sand, the cow dung all were real”. Rath also adds that the English poems he was later exposed to were alien to his real experience and says, “they did not speak to my history, nor to my dreams, my future”.

nationalist discourses and thereby enable us to situate diaspora and diasporic subjects in opposition to the nation-state and traverse beyond the homogenised and constricted boundaries of identity formations and power structures. At the same time, Shyamaprasad portrays some of the characters in these films as immigrants who are keen to preserve Indian values in their respective hostlands – this is crucial to subvert some of the theoretical and narrative approaches that universalise and essentialise the diasporic experience.

Cinema and the diaspora

Cinema in India underwent massive changes post-liberalisation, that is after 1991, with films able to combine traditional themes with modern technology and attract a wider range of audiences from across the globe. The economic liberalisation in India led to the deregulation of markets, reduction of taxes, reduction in import rates and increased foreign investment. This had a huge impact on film production in the country as foreign corporates and non-resident Indians started to invest in cinema (Jha, 2016). The early Indian films made on the diasporic subject such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (The Brave Heart Takes the Bride, 1995), *Dil To Pagal Hai* (Love is Crazy, 1997) and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (Something... Something Happens, 1998) featured Bollywood actor Shah Rukh Khan as the hero and embodied more Indian-ness than the Indians in India (Jha, 2016).

Several Indian films on the diaspora, which included Bollywood films such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) and Malayalam films such as *Ezham Kadalinnakkare* (Beyond the Seventh Sea, 1979) and *Dollar* (1994) stress on the need to sustain Indian values in a foreign land. I discuss these films in the next section, especially on how they stress on the preservation of Indian values, with reference to Shyamaprasad's films. Mishra (2002) suggests that the first-generation diasporic Indians attach a lot of value to tradition, family and arranged marriages. Punathambekar (2005) in his thematic reading of *Kabhi Kushi Kabhi Gham* (Sometimes There is Joy, Sometimes There is Sorrow, 2001) and ethnographic study based on its reception among

the Indian diaspora notes that the men and women he interviewed were very particular about the values that should be inherited by their children. Although these parents fear ‘western’ influences from their surroundings and the people they meet, they strongly feel these diaspora films perpetuate good moral values (Punathambekar, 2005). The transformation from a disciplined subject to a subject of excess under ‘western’ influence is a stereotype in several Indian films. Dwyer (2013) notes that several Bollywood films portray the dangerous consequences of Westernisation, especially for women and argues that they generate the idea of a spiritual East and a corrupt West. This is a relevant point in relation to Shyamaprasad’s film *English: An Autumn in London* (2013), in which diasporic Indian parents warn their children against ‘western’ influence and stress on the need to have good moral values. For middle-class Indians living in India or overseas, the West embodies selfishness and moral decadence compared to the value and commitment that the former offer in relationships (Saavala, 2010). Indian culture is often depicted in films on the diaspora as ‘Hindu’, family oriented and transnational (Therwath, 2010). Therwath argues that the nationalist discourses that such kind of cinema fosters is an aftermath of economic liberalisation and the rise of Hindu nationalism which saw the emergence of films that glorify consumerism and made “religion and feminine docility the core of the definition of Indianness” (2010, p. 4).

Post economic liberalisation in India, several reforms linked to the Non-Resident Indians (NRI) and privatisation of film industries took shape and encouraged filmmakers to focus on making films catered for diasporic audiences. Bhattacharjya (2009) notes that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the then ruling party in India, promoted cultural nationalism by adopting slogans from lyrics of Bollywood film songs such as “Phir bhi dil hai hindustani... (My heart is still Indian)” and “Yeh mera India (This is my India), I love my India...”. Several scholars also highlight a specific pattern in diasporic films made post economic liberalisation where the characters endorse traditional Indian values (Therwath, 2010; Bhattacharjya, 2009; Bandyopadhyay, 2008; Mohammad, 2007; Punathambekar, 2005; Rajadhyaksha, 2003; Ram,

2002; Uberoi, 1998). This recreation of a nationalistic ideology of tradition and cultural authenticity become a central part of diasporic narratives in mainstream cinema in India. The diasporic Indians as portrayed in the films are disciplined subjects who value religious rituals, cultural norms and national identity. Women in these films are expected to be symbols of purity and their sexuality is not meant to cross the boundaries of heterosexual marriages (Ram, 2002). Through the construction and representation of heterosexual, gendered and unified subjects, diasporic cinema created imaginary 'homelands' for Indians living in other parts of the world.

As I discussed earlier in this chapter, several scholars who examine diaspora and diasporic spaces raise significant questions on the notions of 'home' and 'identity'. Palmer (1999) suggests that individuals draw upon different identities that are on offer and construct their own sense of self and belonging. Quite a few scholars who comment on the diaspora have argued about its homogenous nature and suggest the prevalence of a sense of unhappiness and non-belonging. Prominent diasporic scholars such as Safran (1991) and Mishra (1996) affirm that diasporas retain a collective memory and vision about their original homeland and regard that as their ideal and true 'home'. However, cultural critics such as Devadas (2007) consider this notion on the diaspora to be problematic and argue that "there are diasporic communities that do not constitute themselves as diasporic" (p. 326). Thinking from this perspective, we can problematise the narratives of most diasporic films that merely show the commonality of experiences and the homogeneity of diaspora life. For instance, while films such as *Drama* (2018), *Two Countries* (2015), *Life of Josutty* (2015), *Escape from Uganda* (2013), *Varnapakittu* (Vibrant Colours, 1997), *Akkare, Akkare, Akkare* (Far, Far Away, 1990) which were made in the UK, Canada, New Zealand, Uganda, Singapore, and the US respectively, failed to articulate the specific attributes and identities of diasporic Indians settled there, films such as *Jacobinte Swargarajyam* (Jacob's Kingdom of Heaven, 2016), *Pathemari* (Dhow, 2015), *Diamond Necklace* (2012), *Gaddama* (Housemaid, 2011), *Arabikatha* (Arabian Tale,

2007), and *Dubai* (2001) showcased the diasporic struggles in the lives of Gulf Malayalis. Barring *Gaddama*, the narratives were all centred on the lives of male protagonists and the problems and anxieties they encounter away from their homeland. Through the analysis of Shyamaprasad's films such as *Ivide* (You are Here, 2015), *English: An Autumn in London* (2013), and *Kallu Kondoru Pennu* (A Woman Made of Stone, 1998), I examine the distinct experiences of diasporic characters and the feelings of home, belonging, and displacement that the main characters experience in these films.

The diaspora and diasporic subjects in *Kallu Kondoru Pennu*, *English: An Autumn in London*, and *Ivide* – Plot and characterisation

The film *English: An Autumn in London* mainly traces the life of six Indian immigrants in the UK, all of whom are from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. Sibin, a young IT professional and a second-generation immigrant; Gauri, who recently came to the country post marriage; Shankaran, a precarious labourer who entered illegally the country illegally in search of a job; Joy, a middle-aged storekeeper who is based in London for several years; Ram, a Tamil Brahmin doctor, and his homemaker wife Saraswathi. One of the main foci in the characterisation of all the main characters is their sense of belonging or displacement in the outskirts of London. This is highlighted in the introduction scene of each of these characters. Sibin is a womaniser and takes pride in his sexual encounters, especially with White women. The first few scenes in the film establish his nature and how much he feels at 'home' in the city. Shankaran, on the other hand, struggles with his life in the new city and often expresses how much he misses his homeland. Saraswathi also finds it difficult to adapt to life in the UK and wishes she could return to her original homeland someday. In Joy's introduction scene, where he attends a friend's funeral with his wife and mother, he complains about London's weather and the superficial nature of relationships in the UK. Ram is portrayed as someone who does not have too much time for family commitments and is always busy at work. The film progresses with these main characters

striving to add value and meaning to their lives as they meet new challenges and setbacks in their adopted homeland, which I discuss later in this section.

In *Ivide*, Varun Blake, one of the central characters in the film, is a second-generation immigrant whose American parents adopted him from India when he was a small child. Working with Atlanta Police, Varun already divorced his middle-class immigrant wife Roshni Mathew and lives with Kate, who is an American reporter at a local news channel. Roshni meets Krish Hebbar, who heads a global multinational Information Technology firm. A shared sense of displacement helps to create an instant bond between them. Varun, who is not happy about the relationship between Krish and Roshni, accuses the former as the main man behind a series of murders that happened in the city. Most of the characters in the film, including Varun, is envious of what Krish has achieved professionally as a first-generation immigrant. Varun later understands that Krish is innocent and not responsible for the crimes. Krish and Roshni return 'home' to India where they get married and settle down.

The film *Kallu Kondoru Pennu* (1998) narrates the story of a nurse, Sita, who works in Kuwait to sustain her family in India. Sita works overtime most days and transfers majority of her salary to her brother and family. When Sita's family fixed her younger sister's marriage, they demand Sita to provide them with the money and gold required to offer dowry to the groom's family. Sita's brother also tells her that one of the demands the groom's family made was a visa to Kuwait and a job for the groom, both of which would be Sita's responsibility. At one point, Sita's elder brother asks her to marry a middle-aged divorcee Manikandan, who is a relative of his wife, in exchange for money and property. She makes several sacrifices for her family but eventually earns hate and disgrace from them as she adopts a child whose parents are killed in the Gulf War. A few days before Sita return to India, her family members discover her photograph with the child in the local newspaper. Assuming the child is hers, they accuse her of bringing shame to the family and ask her to

leave the house. She moves to the abandoned family house where she lives with the child. Suresh, one of the doctors in the hospital she worked in and with whom she is in a relationship with, requests her to marry him and relocate to the United States of America. However, she declines to leave the child and go with him. Later, the child's grandparents decide to adopt him and eventually take him away from her. In the concluding scenes of the film, Manikandan forcefully enters her house and attempts to rape her; Sita kills him and goes to prison. In the rest of the chapter, I divide the analysis of Shyamaprasad's films on the diasporic and diasporic subjects into four sub-sections.

The creation of an East-West binary

In *English: An Autumn in London*, Shyamaprasad's portrays the diaspora as a threatening space of Western modernity. The film shows Sabin's desire to seduce every woman he meets as part and parcel of diaspora life. Sabin often tells his friends that being away from his original homeland gives him the opportunities to lure many women into his life. On one occasion, Sabin's friend's wife Gauri shows him several photographs of her friends in India and suggests him to marry one of them instead of dating British women. In another scene, Sabin tells Gauri that he only preferred one-night stands with British women and "never met a woman whom he wanted to see again when he wakes up the next morning" (dialogue from the film in quotes). I argue that this way of portraying the diaspora and the diasporic subject reinforces particular perceptions of the West among audiences in India and creates an east-west binary in terms of moral values. Gauri, who had an arranged marriage and arrived in the UK as a first-generation immigrant, feels lonely and as a result, often accepts Sabin's offer to go on outings. Mishra (2002) notes that first-generation non-resident India's cling to their values of homeland particularly in relation to tradition, family and arranged marriages. This is evident in Gauri's behaviour who implicitly suggests that for Sabin finding a girl from their 'homeland' is the ideal option for him. "The girls from our 'home' in Kerala don't expose their legs and belly

and yet they are beautiful,” she tells Sibin. The film also portrays both Saraswathi, a Brahmin woman and Joy, a Christian man, as first-generation migrants who embrace traditional and familial values. They are particular about how their daughters behave, who they hang out with, and their lifestyles. In a particular scene, Joy enters his daughter’s room and warns her that she should inform him where she goes and who accompanies her. On another occasion, when Joy finds her in a café with a young African American man, he takes her home and tells her, “Never go out of this house again without my permission. If you do, I will break your leg and send you to India”.



First-generation immigrant Joy scolds his teenage daughter for befriending an African American and fears a loss of moral values due to the influence of ‘western’ culture.

Joy fears that ‘western’ culture would influence his daughter and would lead to the loss of moral values and believes that their ‘return’ to India would ensure a revival of such values and culture. A return to India, for Joy, is a return to moral order and the revival of social values. Joy and Saraswathi, who belong to different diasporic families in the UK, speak in Malayalam in response to their daughters’ westernised accents and are anxious about the consequences of Westernisation (Dwyer, 2013).

Both in *English: An Autumn in London* and *Ivide*, male characters such as Sibin and Varun, who belong to the Indian diaspora, easily attract Western women, and are sexually involved with them. However, their choice of women to share an emotional or married

relationship with would always be the traditional ‘good’ girl from their own community. This is also a problematic construction of the Western women as ‘easily available’ and as an instrument of mere sexual pleasure. For example, during one of the early scenes in the film, a blond-haired blue-eyed half-naked British woman’s repeatedly attempts to wake Sibin up in the morning and tries to convince him that he is getting late for work. He, however, pulls her towards him and makes love. In his next scene, he flirts with a blonde colleague at his office and asks her whether she wants to join him for lunch later in the day. Following that, he tells his friend over the phone “I am a bachelor, unlike you. I must ‘work’ for what I need at dusk. These days, all I find are women in their thirties. Women in their thirties are like chewing gum on the streets. They would stick to something strong that comes their way.”



In this scene from *English; An Autumn in London*, Sibin is shown flirting with a White girl he met at a local pub.

On another occasion, Sibin goes to dine in a French restaurant with Gauri and her husband. After placing his order, he tries to talk to the waitress in French. As she leaves, Sibin remarks with an impish grin, “French women love guys who can speak their language”. On the other hand, Sibin’s encounters with Indian women in the film are on a different level and he treats them with respect and loyalty. This sort of an approach based on value systems is like a scene in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jaayenge*, where the lead actors, Raj and Simran, miss their

train and are forced to find shelter for a night at the same place. Simran is drunk and falls asleep in Raj's bed. As she wakes up with fear and a sense of concern about what could have possibly happened to her in a state of unconsciousness, Raj assures her, "Do you think I am beyond values? I'm a Hindustani, and I know what a Hindustani girl's honour is worth." Mishra (2002), with reference to Indian films on the diaspora, argues that these films speak to diasporic Indians in a desperate attempt to follow a value system and inculcate those values in their children too. Mishra stresses on the importance diasporic Indian families attach to tradition, continuity, family and arranged marriages. As the film progresses, Sabin not only gets attracted by Gauri's 'Indianness' but also gets convinced to settle down for an arranged marriage with a girl from India. Similarly, in *Ivide*, Krish gets attracted to Roshni due to her Indianness and the fact that she shares the culture and values that fit his identity. Here, Shyamaprasad's characterisation and narrative structure epitomises an essentialist and culturalist view of Indian identity.

Ivide's opening scene shows a married-with-kids Indian engineer's attempt to make flirtatious advances towards a woman from the West whom he met on a dating website. The woman, at first, is keen to have a conversation with him but leaves as soon as she finds him uninteresting. This approach by the filmmaker creates perceptions about how diasporic Indians could be morally corrupted by the West and tend to lose Indian values in the process. The depiction of a morally corrupt West is further reinforced by many other scenes in the film. For instance, during a group meeting in the office, Krish's colleague Michelle emails him some of her seductive photos to attract him. Michelle is portrayed in the film as a flirtatious and opportunistic woman. In another scene, Krish picks up a few western music CDs from Roshni's car and comments, "You have really changed and become an 'English' lady. You are into rock and heavy metal". Roshni is quick to react and responds with a pinch of grief, "Those were Varun's. I lost all my CDs because he couldn't understand Malayalam." Roshni reaffirms that her Indian culture and values are intact. On the other hand, Varun, who was brought up by English parents in the West, is often portrayed as rude, violent, and dominating, especially in

his relationships with women. Through this kind of characterisation and narrative style, Shyamaprasad once again reinforces a problematic construction of an East-West binary.

In *Ivide*, as is the case with *English: An Autumn in London*, there are characters and situations that potentially orient the audience towards an East versus West dichotomy. For instance, Varun's adoptive father tells him how upset and frustrated he is about the news about American software companies outsourcing their Information Technology department to India. He says in an angry tone, "We worked hard to make the company what it is today. 'Some' Indians come and go away with the goodies". Later, the Americans who lost their jobs go on strike and hold placards that read 'Return our jobs, Indians'. One of Krish's Indian employees watches the action and tells his colleagues with a wry grin, "I don't pity these Westerners. They ruled us and made money for so long. Right now, it's our turn - A sweet Indian revenge called 'outsourcing'". Here, Shyamaprasad incites the audience to revisit the colonial past and instil in them a sense of belonging and collective nationalist sentiment.

In her article "The diaspora comes home: Disciplining desire in DDLJ", Patricia Uberoi (1998) compares two Bollywood films, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) and *Pardes* (Foreign Land, 1997), in the way they articulate Indian culture and values through their narratives. She writes,

DDLJ proposes that Indian family values are portable assets, which may be replenished through periodic visits to the source. But *Pardes*'s answer is ambiguous. Reinstating the well-trying opposition of India and the West, it at one level endorses the hope that Indian culture can survive deterritorialisation, while at another level it suggests that westernisation/Americanisation can at best be delayed. (Oberoi, 1998, p. 333)

For Krish in *Ivide*, certain cultural and family values become 'portable assets' that Uberoi refers to here. Despite living in America for several years, Krish treasures Indian values and culture over western and lives his life as a traditional Brahmin who listens to Indian classical music, performs religious rituals, and relishes typical *desi* food. One evening, Krish invites Roshni to his home for dinner. The two of them eat traditional Kerala food and listen to

South Indian classical music. Such an experience creates a sense of belonging and a reminder of ‘home’ – a feeling of security with people and objects that fosters their connection with ‘home’. Moreover, as Pande posits, “the ‘continuity’ with Indian cultural trends or manifestation of ‘roots’ is an important component of the diasporic identity and – in the case of Indians – is very well pronounced and marked” (2017, p. 8). Even in one of the scenes in *English: An Autumn in London*, Sibin tells Gauri that the pleasant fragrance of her hair, which she hints is due to the presence of coconut oil that she brought from India, reminds him of his mother and ‘home’. Despite portraying him as a second-generation immigrant, Shyamaprasad tries to establish that Sibin’s taste and interests are influenced by the association with his original homeland and a sense of belonging to it.

A sense of belonging/displacement

As discussed earlier, a sense of displacement is visible in some of the key characters in *English: An Autumn in London*. At the start of the film, Shyamaprasad uses fast paced montage along with the casual labourer Shankaran’s voice-over and several long shots of the city of London, emphasising the fast-paced busy life of its residents. Sitting alone in his small room in the outskirts of the city, Shankaran writes letters for his girlfriend back ‘home’, where he reminds her (and the audience) that “the beauty of London that we see in postcards, is unknown to poor immigrants like me. We live in a cocoon of our own holding on to the memories of our homeland.” The camera pans and tilts to showcase the tall buildings and fast-moving vehicles as Shankaran describes the familiar sight of lovers’ hand in hand on cold winter nights. These images of urban spaces along with the voice-over signifies the sense of alienation and isolation that lower-class immigrants such as Shankaran experience in such diasporic spatial territories. For them, these diasporic urban spaces provide an overwhelming experience which “frustrates rather than invites” (Cai, 2018, p. 48). Shankaran, like other lower-class Indian immigrants, remain emotionally detached from these cosmopolitan/globalised spaces and marks the

diaspora as sites that reproduce memories and anxieties of displaced individuals. I emphasise the term lower-class because the kind of precarious work Shankaran is involved in includes disposal of waste, cleaning public places and washing cars at motor workshops, which in the context of the film are markers of his class status. In the film, Shankaran is often framed in open urban locations with long shots of highways and fast-moving vehicles or in dark corners of his workplaces, which signifies his sense of alienation, displacement, and disorientation. These urban spaces which Shankaran occupies (including his workplaces) could become, what Marc Auge (1995) terms 'non places', transitory spaces where human beings remain lonely and anonymous and are not significant enough. As the narrative progresses, the socially alienated lower-class illegal immigrant in Shankaran encounters a deep sense of non-belonging and loss of identity and retains memories about his original homeland as he meanders along these contemporary non places. In almost all his scenes, Shyamaprasad positions the camera in such a way that we feel Shankaran is being observed all the time; he is framed like being in a panopticon where his actions are invisibly monitored and disciplined by authorities of power (Foucault, 1995). The disciplinary power objectifies the individual as docile subjects yielding to the organising institutions. This reemphasizes his status as an illegal migrant who is constantly under surveillance and someone who is troubled by his own sense of non-belonging and detachment from his adopted homeland.

In one of the scenes where Shankaran is busily engaged at his workplace, an Indian restaurant in London city, he hears an approaching police car. He runs towards it and then tries to hide from the officer when the car stops briefly. The manager of the restaurant, who had earlier offered him the job and free accommodation, saw him and scolded him for behaving in a suspicious manner in the presence of the police officer. He also demanded him to engage in additional unpaid labour later that evening. Due to his illegal immigrant status, Shankaran would struggle to find a job or a place to stay. The provision of a job, free accommodation, and

the protection from getting caught by the police and being deported back to India force Shankaran to self-regulate and comply with the manager's disciplinary policies even in his absence. The manager exercises pastoral power by combining the subjectifying and disciplinary forms of power, and in the process, administers discipline and surveillance to cultivate a self-monitoring, self-governing and self-reflecting subject (Martin and Waring, 2018; Foucault, 2007). Like the prisoner in Foucault's panopticon, Shankaran is always in spatial confinement, where his mobility is severely restricted. Shankaran is not in physical confinement like the prisoner but is still in a "passive, constrained position" (Foucault, 1984, p. 11). The local places he traversed and the people he saw on the streets, about which I mentioned earlier in the chapter, only made him more insecure about his lower-class male immigrant status. Massey's claim about the identities of subjects and their spaces they occupy being relational is relevant in this case; Shankaran's identity is shaped by the spaces he occupies during his days in London.

Later, in another scene, the manager asks Shankaran to sing a song for the customers in his restaurant. As he recites a poem, everyone present there starts laughing and making fun of him. As he stood there being disrespected and offended, the manager asked him to perform *Kathakali*, a traditional Indian classical Indian dance, to welcome Santa Claus during Christmas later that year. Feeling insulted by the manager's invitation and the mocking faces of the customers, Shankaran replies, "Please don't expect me to do such acts. I toiled for eight years to learn the dance form. I didn't learn to dress up oddly and stand in front of a crowd such as this. If you can't acknowledge these art forms, kindly show the courtesy to at least not degrade it publicly". Angered by Shankaran's words, the manager fires him from the job and asks him to vacate his house as soon as possible. Here, the manager is part of the institutional system that attempts to discipline and control migrant domestic workers like Shankaran by exercising both pastoral power and biopower to create a docile and subservient migrant population

(Parrenas, 2021; Foucault, 2007). Biopower refers to the governmental techniques to create docile subjects and produce disciplinary spaces to maximise labour productivity. Foucault conceives it as a power that “endeavours to administer, optimise, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations” (1976, p. 137). Pastoral power, as Parrenas (2021) argues, operates within this biopower, in order to counter any claim or accusations about repressive mechanisms and indicate a care and concern for the subject’s well-being. In Shankaran’s case, the restaurant manager initially takes on pastoral functions as he offers him a job and free accommodation through which he exercises a certain power and domination over Shankaran, eventually disciplining him into a compliant and obedient worker. Shankaran’s masculinity is constantly subordinated and marginalised in relation to the upper- class manager’s hegemonic masculine traits. These encounters between Shankaran and the restaurant manager highlight how the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and social class shape diasporic subjectivities. A few weeks after Shankaran leaves the job, his former colleague and his manager’s main assistant Siju finds him and convinces him to return to the previous job, thus reclaiming his status as a docile subject. Shankaran’s disciplining into a docile subject limits the extent to which he is protected and supported by the manager and the restaurant authorities, and therefore establishing that pastoral power does not operate separately from biopower. The specific space of the restaurant, inside which almost all the interactions and deliberations between the restaurant manager and Shankaran take place in the film, is a key element in the negotiation of unequal power relations between the two; this is because space and social identities are interrelated (Massey, 1994). The social relations within any space - the restaurant in this case - are both experienced and interpreted differently by different people based on the individuals who are part of it. The manager, who owns the space (restaurant), holds the power to control and dominate Shankaran who is merely an inhabitant of the space.



In English: An Autumn in London, the restaurant manager employs both biopower and pastoral power to control and discipline the illegal migrant Shankaran.

In the scenes that follow, Shankaran connects with his homeland by narrating his memories about homeland in the letters he writes to his fiancée in Kerala and telling stories about his ‘home’ to colleagues at workplace. The walls of Shankaran’s room have several posters of popular Malayalam actors and traditional art forms of Kerala. Saraswathi, on the other hand, expresses her longing to return home by constantly requesting her husband to seek an employment transfer to India. She lights the entire house during *Diwali* (the Hindu festival of lights) although Ram is not very pleased with the idea. Joy, who runs an independent business, also embraces traditional values and moral conscience. These characters are not affected by ‘westernised values’ and have no interaction with men or women from the West at any point in the film. Ang (1993) refers to the immigrant’s “real or symbolic ties” to the homeland and notes that:

It is the myth of the (lost or idealized) homeland, the object of both collective memory and of desire and attachment, which is constitutive to diasporas, and which ultimately confines and constrains the nomadism of the diasporic subject (p. 5).

In the case of first-generation immigrants like Saraswathi and Shankaran, the desire and attachment to their homeland confines and constraints their subjectivity and the myth of a lost homeland is truly part of their diasporic experience. For instance, in Saraswathi’s case, she

constantly expresses her desire to return ‘home’, something which her husband is not too keen about. In Shankaran’s case, the return to ‘home’ is not possible until he finds a job good enough to impress his girlfriend’s parents. Saraswathi, Shankaran, and to a certain extent, Gauri, remain what Bradatan, Popan, and Melton (2010) call ‘diasporic migrants’, who not only identify themselves as a member of their original homeland but also remain strongly committed to their home community and its other members even as they survive as passive citizens in their host country. These diasporic migrants, as Bradatan, Popan, and Melton highlight, “live with their soul at home and their body abroad. Their emotional life is connected to their origin country – that is their ‘home’ and they are merely refugees in the new society. They have no interests in interacting with the social life of the new land, as they look forward to the moment of return” (2010, p. 174-5). Shyamaprasad depicts Saraswathi, in particular, as the diasporic migrant subject that these scholars refer to. For example, in one of her conversations with her husband Ram, Saraswathi tells him about her feeling of disconnect with the host country. She says, “I don’t want any education or employment from this country. I can’t live here anymore. This country is not good for our girls too”. It reveals Saraswathi’s gendered diasporic subjectivity as she expresses the migrant women’s function as preservers of honour, heritage, and tradition (Lahiri-Roy and Belford, 2021). Throughout the film, Shyamaprasad depicts Saraswathi’s isolation from the host society through his tight frames and medium shots of Saraswathi within the restricted spaces of her house. The only time Shyamaprasad frames Saraswathi in wider angle shots is when she goes to the city to enquire about Ram’s secret relationship. In those sequences, in which Saraswathi movements are tracked using wide angle shots, Shyamaprasad mostly frames her in isolation in the midst of a busy city to show her sense of displacement from the host country and its residents. Saraswathi’s sense of displacement and isolation involves the intersections of gender with class, ethnicity, nationhood, and family structure at her host country (Lahiri-Roy and Belford, 2021). Throughout the film, she experiences what Lahiri-Roy and Belford call “cultural bereavement

and the eroding of cultural capital”, especially in relation to social connections, supportive networks, and heritage languages (2021, p. 57). This kind of cultural bereavement can be identified with Gauri’s characterisation too, further suggesting the gendered nature of diasporic subjectivities. The only other character in the film who is severely affected by this kind of a cultural alienation is Shankaran whose subjectivity is shaped by the intersection of gender and class, in such a way that both categories are fluid and mutually constitute each other (Walby et.al, 2012; Hancock, 2007). Shankaran is the only main character in the film who belongs to the lower class; the intersection of class and his marginalised masculinity makes him feel insecure and isolated during his life away from ‘home’. Shankaran is in a constant state of displacement (Fathi, 2020) where the lack of emotional attachment to the people, objects, and spaces in the host country leaves him in a state of disappointment and depression.

However, the diasporic identification with the homeland, which Ang (1993) and Bradatan, Popan, and Melton (2010) signify, is not a common attribute among all characters in the film. Some of the other main characters in the film assume new identities in their ‘new homeland’ (Rajagopal, 2003). They embrace displacement, adopt ‘western values’, randomly speak in English to communicate even with family members, and mostly interact with colleagues from the West. None of these characters maintain ties with their original homeland and have progressed into a stage of assimilation. Shyamaprasad frames these characters as morally corrupt – Sibin flirts even with his best friend’s wife Gauri, Ram hides from his wife the sexual relationship he has with one of his male colleagues, and Joy’s brother Jimmy ignores his physically ill mother citing work-related concerns. In *Ivide* too, Shyamaprasad portrays Varun as highly temperamental, and physically aggressive and dominating in his relationships with women. Such characterisations of diasporic Indians are problematic and an “extrapolation of the conflicts between tradition and modernity” that is often played out in films as a contest between Western and Indian values (Gera Roy, 2012; p. 283). Shyamaprasad portrays Varun

as an ambiguous subject who is unsure about his sense of belonging. One of the early scenes of the film shows Varun trying to recollect memories of his childhood days, especially the time when his parents adopted him from an orphanage in India. The flashback scenes show visuals of the adoption, the arrival to his new home in the US, and his brief interaction with other kids of his school using his voiceover and soft background music. Varun suggests that he was fortunate to be adopted, especially on the day he turned seven, and calls it “birthday luck”. He claims that if he was not adopted by American citizens, he would have lived a life in India as a precarious labourer, a procurer, or a doctor. In the same voiceover, he also expresses his frustration of existing as a “strange creature” among his peers at school as he was “the dark-skinned child of white parents, the black sheep in the herd” (in his own words in the film). Shyamaprasad’s articulation of Varun’s diasporic masculine subjectivity is ambiguous in the sense that it is difficult to understand whether he feels a sense of belonging or displacement as a diasporic subject. This relates to Murcia’s ideas of ‘home’ and belonging and the connection between the two as complex and problematic, as I discussed earlier in the chapter. ‘Home’, according to Murcia (2019) can be a place of alienation and oppression. The idea of home evokes feelings of disappointment and uneasiness for Varun (Murcia, 2019). When his stepfather offers him tandoori chicken and asks him to taste it, he erupts with anger and says “I left India when I was six years old. My mom has been cooking for me for the past thirty years. I love my steaks and hotdogs. Doesn’t that make me American enough for you? And it if is my brown skin that still makes me an Indian, I can’t help that! Can I?” Later, when his mother questions his rude behaviour to his stepfather, he tells her, “You and your hippie boyfriend thought it would cool to adopt an exotic Indian boy and parade him on the street, like a loving, sympathetic thing to do. And when it all got too much for him, he walked away. He was stuck with me. Thank you for this wonderful life, but I am not a pet...”



In films such as *English: An Autumn in London*, and *Ivide*, Shyamaprasad portrays the characters who are detached from their original homeland as passive, aggressive, or morally corrupt. The above scene is from *Ivide*. The scenes from his childhood are juxtaposed with shots from the present with angry and frustrated expressions on his face, giving the indication that most aspects of his adult life are undesirable compared to the days prior to his adoption. Earlier in the chapter, I discussed Edward Said's formulation of a 'hyphenated identity', where he claims the possibility of more than a single homeland and existence of a heterogenous cultural identity for diasporic subjects. However, Shyamaprasad's portrayal of Varun might be closer to Mishra's conception of the hyphenated subject, as I previously examined, which involves belonging 'here' *and* 'there' at the same time.

Women and domestic spaces

Saraswathi, one of the central characters of *English: An Autumn in London* multitasks as she strives to prepare breakfast and get her kids ready for school. Ram, her husband, complains that she has not washed some of his socks. Saraswathi assures him that she has washed all of them, but Ram is unhappy and furious that he could not find them. At the breakfast table, he blames Saraswathi for the wrong choice of food and orders her to find his office identity card. Relevant here is Nivedita Menon's (2012) discussion of sexual division of labour linked to men and women in Indian households. Menon (2012) argues that women are solely responsible for the reproduction of labour power and that domestic work is her primary

responsibility irrespective of whether she performs labour outside or not. As Ram and kids leave for work and school, respectively, the saree-clad Saraswathi is framed behind the closed gates with her as the centre of the image. Here, the grilled gate of the house functions as a closed door that limits her ambitions and shuts her horizons of a world outside. Samuel (2010), in her ethnographic study on the construction of diasporic identities among South Asian immigrants, notes marriage has a huge impact on the choices migrant women are able to make and the way they construct their lives. Migrant women like Saraswathi, according to Samuel, “as the bearers of multiple social markers, are affected by cultural systems which are both enabling and constricting” (2010, p. 97). As Sharma notes (2017), although the western world is portrayed as spaces of freedom and liberation for Indian women, they are faced with several emotional, psychological, and practical everyday issues in their life as diasporic subjects. Migrant women like Saraswathi lack mobility and agency due to the intersection of structures of power such as cultural, religious, and familial (Samuel, 2010). As a South Asian woman, her diaspora life is defined by and limited to her familial roles of a wife and mother. We can thus situate Saraswathi’s position in the larger context of dominant gender ideology, the sexual division of labour prevalent in Indian society, and how diaspora reproduces the values of home culture.



A scene from *English: An Autumn in London*, in which Saraswathi is busy cleaning the dishes and serving dinner while her husband and kids are engaging in a casual conversation.

In the film, Saraswathi even lacks domestic agency and her participation in the conjugal family assumes the nature of contractual reciprocity rather than of free choice. Thus, the spaces Saraswathi occupies in the film become potential sites that determine the relationship between domestic/urban spaces, gender, and power, and plays an important role in the constitution of female subjectivity.

As the narrative of the film progresses, Ram tells Saraswathi that he could hire a “servant” who can help her with everyday household chores. In the Indian context, the appointment of domestic workers serves as a marker of class status (Dickey, 2000). Although not interested in the idea at first, Saraswathi eventually agrees. During her first meeting with the domestic worker - a lower-class Muslim lady from Bangladesh – the upper-caste Saraswathi tells her that she would only be allowed to undertake cleaning and washing tasks inside the house. By limiting the domestic worker’s job to ‘dirty’ tasks such as cleaning and washing, Saraswathi reproduces the caste-class dynamics that are culturally located. These domestic workers represent the rubbish, dirt, and disease of the ‘outside’ that employers associate with people from the lower-class (Dickey, 2000; Chakrabarty, 1991). The disdain towards domestic workers is a significant feature of the upper-caste Indian middle-class (Menon, 2012). Thus, this type of paid domestic work marks the space as one that mobilises inequality and hierarchical distinctions. The identity of the domestic worker in Saraswathi’s house remains largely anonymous and her work is mandated through control and surveillance.

Towards the end of the film, Ram decides to relocate to an apartment near the hospital he works for. In his absence, Saraswathi transforms into a confident woman as she ventures outside the domestic space. At that juncture, she tells her friend that she feels free and empowered. As Devika (2002) argues, in her account of the formation of modern gender identities in Kerala during the late 19th and early 20th century, which I discussed in Chapter Two, the notion of freedom and enlightenment in the case of Malayali women did not mean a

smooth passage between various social domains, rather just a self-means for survival. She suggests that “the ability to conform to ideal gendered subjectivities” was crucial in the freedom prescribed to women, particularly in the context of Indian domestic life (Devika, 2002, p. 10). Eventually, Saraswathi realises the need to subvert the ideals of bourgeois domesticity and traverse beyond socio-spatial boundaries and dominant ideologies. Unlike Shankaran, Saraswathi finds urban spaces as emancipatory. Shankaran remains displaced from the city and holds the nostalgia of the countryside in his original homeland. Gauri, who is an engineering graduate, is confined to domestic spaces after her marriage and arrival at London. Shyamaprasad shows Gauri as someone who is happy to roam around in the city with her husband and his friend Sibin, spend time to find an ideal spouse for the latter, and engage in domestic labour while her husband is away at work or is busy with his PlayStation. As Gauri dutifully manages household responsibilities and supports her husband’s professional aspirations, Shyamaprasad does not clearly outline her personal or professional ambitions. Even in *Ivide*, Shyamaprasad does not reveal any of Roshni’s professional achievements or ambitions. In the film, she is always keen to encourage Krish and support him to achieve his goals and dreams.

The Gulf and the diasporic migrant women

The film *Kallu Kondoru Pennu* constructs a different image of diasporic migrant women and portrays the life of underrepresented women employed on low-income jobs in developed nations (Kim, 2015). Research studies on diasporic migrant women is very few considering that they constitute half of the total number of migrants from around the world (Sharma, 2017). In *Kallu Kondoru Pennu*, Shyamaprasad depicts the Gulf as a land of opportunities and like many Malayalam films previously released such as *Varavelpu* (Welcome, 1989) and *Mampazhakkalam* (The Mango Season, 2004), the central character of the film bears the responsibility of the entire joint family. Several films in Malayalam cinema

depict the Gulf as ‘Malayali’s only refuge’ (Radhakrishnan, 2009) although it is usually the male characters who appear on screen as migrants. This could also be partly because most Gulf migrants from Kerala are men (Panicker, 2018). The Gulf Malayali, who is significantly different from Indian migrants in other parts of the world, is committed to the maintenance or restoration of their homeland and to its safety and prosperity. The Gulf Malayali, a majority of whom are lower middle-class male unskilled workers, spends his entire life working and saving money for his family and leading a faceless, spouseless, and vacationless life (Madampat, 2016). Vora (2013), in her book *Impossible Citizens – Dubai’s Indian Diaspora*, notes that middle-class Indians do not want to belong to the Gulf except for economic benefits. Several Malayalam films depict characters who admit that the only reason why they lead lives in the Gulf is to make money and manage their families back in their own homeland. The case of Sita in *Kallu Kondoru Pennu* is no different. In the film, she is pressured by her family to work in the Gulf to raise capital and improve the condition of their household. In this way, the director Shyamaprasad engages in a realistic representation of Gulf immigrants in Kerala society.

Existing scholarship on the diaspora suggest the presence of a sense of displacement and tension among most Gulf immigrants, especially among the marginalised ones. Radhakrishnan (2009) cites the example of the Malayalam film *Perumazhkkalam* (The Rainy Season, 2004) in which the protagonist’s husband accidentally kills his friend in the Gulf. To avoid the death penalty and get her husband released from the prison, the protagonist’s wife, who is a Muslim woman, needs to get the victim’s wife, who is a Hindu Brahmin, to write a letter to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to pardon him. In that instance, the Gulf turns out to be a “space that can potentially disturb the tranquil life in Kerala” (2004, p. 241). In *Kallu Kondoru Pennu*, we see a similar situation although here the protagonist is not at fault but is still accused by her family. In the film, the central female protagonist Sita’s family in Kerala falsely accuses her of having an illegitimate child. What is noteworthy here is how Sita’s

middle-class family conceive even a conservative region like the Gulf as a space where men and particularly, women transgress moral boundaries. Sita's family expects her to be responsible for maintaining and preserving her 'home' culture and tradition; this is a manifestation of biopower where the 'purity' of women's bodies is linked to her family's culture and any deviation from this is deemed undesirable (Sanders, 2017). The members of Sita's family also expect economic and other benefits from her, especially to open doors for other members of the family to gain a visa to the Gulf. As mentioned earlier in the plot of this film, when Sita's family fixed her younger sister's marriage, they asked her to provide them with the money and gold to offer dowry to the groom's family. The groom's family also demanded a visa to Kuwait and a job for the groom, both of which would be Sita's responsibility. The desire for many men and their families to marry Malayali nurses settled in the Gulf is sometimes motivated by the fact that it can provide them an entry to these overseas locations (Percot, 2006). It is relevant to further contextualise the conception of a female nurse in Kerala society, where caste is a powerful reality. Nursing is often considered a 'polluted' occupation for the Hindu community and is often picked up by Christian communities. In *Kallu Kondoru Pennu*, Shyamaprasad depicts the life of a Hindu nurse and how she defies cultural norms and gender expectations of her middle-class family. In the process, he challenges stereotypical representations of diasporic migrant women whose position as custodians of Indian culture restrict them to submissive roles within the family and the society. Consider the case of I.V. Sasi's *Ezham Kadalinnakkare* (Beyond the Seventh Sea, 1979), the first Malayalam film shot in North America. The film narrates the story of a Malayali nurse, Lakshmi, who struggles in a foreign land to take care of her middle-class family back home in Kerala. At one point, she takes her siblings with her to the United States of America. Her 'traditional' sister, Seetha, transforms into a bikini-clad woman who enjoys night parties and hangs out with men. Lakshmi's brother becomes friends with notorious gangsters and invests money in gambling.

In the end, he pays the price for becoming dangerously ‘modern’ in his ways and gets killed in one of the encounters. And Seetha returns to her old self, ‘true’ to Malayali culture and tradition. A similar pattern identified in Lukose’s discussion of two Malayalam films made in the 1990s, *Dollar* (1994) and *Pavithram* (Sacred, 1994) show how Malayalam cinema represents the ‘tradition’ and the ‘modern’. She notes how films such as these point to the “emergence of a potent mix of patriarchy and Nair nostalgia, which is repeatedly deployed to create notions of *Keraleeyatha* or Kerala’s cultural heritage are linked to Hindu revivalism in the state” (Lukose, 2010, p. 74). In both these films, the traditional female characters briefly enter the space of modernity only to realise later of the dire consequences of transgressing certain patriarchal boundaries. In the closing scenes of *Pavithram*, the lead female character Meenakshi returns to her ‘traditional’ Nair family and apologises to her brother for succumbing to the influence of alcohol and male friends.



In the diasporic film *Ezham Kadalinnakkare*, director I.V Sasi emphasises the need to preserve traditional values of femininity and womanhood through his narrative and characterisation.

Even in *Ezham Kadalinnakkare*, Seetha, who never changed her ways of living a reckless life even when questioned by her sister Lakshmi, converts into the ‘ideal’ Malayali girl as soon she starts a relationship with Soman, a middle-class immigrant from Kerala. In the film, Seetha represents the uncontrolled femininity that disrupts the idealised gender order.

However, Soman's arrival subdues her desire for freedom and instils in her a fear of bad femininity and improper womanhood. Films such as these show how patriarchal structures restrict female identities and force women into a position of domesticity in diasporic spaces. Similarly, in *Kallu Kondoru Pennu*, Sita is accused of improper womanhood by her patriarchal family. However, as I show later in this section, Shyamaprasad portrays Sita as a strong woman who provides a firm response to defy her family's attempt to accuse her of 'bad' femininity and criticise her for the transgression of moral codes and values.

In *Kallu Kondoru Pennu*, there are also mythological references that Shyamaprasad points to and it is important to examine how particular cultural meanings are produced. For example, the central character Sita, a migrant nurse in the Gulf, can be seen as representation of a Hindu goddess of the same name. In the cultural epic *Ramayana*, Sita was abducted by the evil King of Lanka, Ravana. Her husband Lord Rama fought against Ravana and won her back but later disowned her as her 'purity' was in question. In *Kallu Kondoru Pennu*, the protagonist Sita is abandoned by her parents on her return to India as they doubt her chastity. Such a characterisation and narrative approach reproduces and reinforces Hindu values and establishes the hegemony of Hindus – and its regressive view of women. Indian immigrant parents frame parenting practices around such traditional value systems and it is their daughters' who experience the effects of such practices to a greater extent (Samuel, 2010). Women become the bearers and architects of culture and such dominant ideologies and, as Samuel (2010) points out, reflects the underlying power differentials between men and women. Even in *English: An Autumn in London* too, Saraswathi lectures her daughters on the need to take bath and perform *pooja* (worship) and asks them to sit 'appropriately' at the breakfast table. Joy, as I noted earlier, is upset about his daughter's friendship with an African American and warns her against meeting him again. These experiences of young Indian diasporic women should be understood in the context of patriarchal ideologies and cultural paradigms in contemporary Indian society,

where daughters become the bearers of family honour and prestige. Recent research on Indian diasporic communities in several parts of the world exemplify the importance that even migrant families attach to notions of honour and reputation. In the Punjabi diaspora in Canada, for instance, second-generation women admit the severe consequences they face for engaging in relationships that are not sanctioned by their community or family members (Mucina, 2018). The transgression of boundaries of honour in their adopted homeland could lead the male heads of the family or community to take extreme measures such as honour killings to regulate women's bodies and reinforce heteropatriarchal ideologies. The discourses of honour, sacrifice, respect, pride, reputation, and shame are not very different even in the Indian diaspora in the United States (Abraham, 2017) or the United Kingdom (Vogt-William, 2019). The discourses of shame and honour are stressed by the families to judge and blame the subject for not living up to ideals and not meeting familial expectations. In *Kallu Kondoru Pennu*, Sita's family members who suspect the child to be from her illegitimate relationship, highlight the discourse of shame in their conversations with her. "You have brought shame to our family. Did you ever think about *our* honour and dignity when you indulged in shameful acts?", her elder brother Haridasan asks. On another occasion, her younger brother Venu asks her, "Weren't there more respectful ways to bear a child and become a mother? Instead of returning 'home' with this child, you should have remembered that *we* had a bit of *maanam*?" In this instance, Venu highlights the importance of *maanam* to Sita's middle-class family, a term I mobilised in the previous chapter, whereby he suggests that she should have regulated her sexuality and disciplined her conduct in the host country to preserve the family's honour and reputation in her homeland. The attitude of these middle-class Indian parents discussed in the films informs us about cultured practices at 'home' and the reductive ways of thinking about women even in diasporic spaces. Sita, who is an immigrant, woman, and middle-class, is at the intersections of multiple social identities, where she is forced to navigate a range of different expectations. It is the intersection of these multiple social identities that subjects Sita to exploitation and domination.

Shyamaprasad's representation of the gulf migrant in *Kallu Kondoru Pennu*, especially of the female diasporic migrant, is quite different from how they have been previously represented in Malayalam cinema. For instance, the film *Gaddama* (2011) narrates the experiences of its lead character Aswathi who is forced to migrate to Saudi Arabia and work there as a domestic maid, where she is treated like a slave. Aswathi faces physical, mental, and emotional torture in the hands of the native residents in the host country. Similarly, the central female characters in the film *Diamond Necklace* (2012) also experience difficult and challenging situations as female diasporic migrants in the Gulf (Dubai). Lakshmi, a lower-class Tamil nurse, and Maya, a young woman diagnosed with cancer, are both manipulated and physically exploited by the upper-caste Arun, who plays the male lead in the film. Rajasree, who marries Arun and arrives in Dubai, also struggles to fully adapt and be her normal self in the host country. Throughout the film, these female characters remain under the clutches of patriarchal priorities and rely on men for their happiness and wellbeing. These women hardly react or respond to the men who are responsible for their misery. On the contrary, in *Kallu Kondoru Pennu*, when Venu questions Sita about her decision to return home with the child, she responds in a loud and intense tone by saying, "I brought the baby to my 'home' (her emphasis). I will live the way I want to. Who has the right to question me?" The film ends with Sita murdering Sreekandan, her brother's wife's relative, when he tries to rape her. Sita's subjectivity as the middle-class diasporic migrant woman delves into the possibilities of the agentive woman who is prepared to break the ideological norms and boundaries of 'home' culture.



Shyamaprasad portrays Sita in *Kallu Kondoru Pennu* as the agentive diasporic migrant woman who breaks the norms and values of 'home' culture.

Conclusion

A close examination of key texts and scholarship on diaspora in Indian cinema, especially Malayalam cinema, have shown that diasporic films stereotype Indian culture and tradition in specific ways and classify the Indian diaspora as a homogenised collectivity with common feelings and experiences. Shyamaprasad's films on the diaspora on the other hand, as I demonstrate in this chapter, explore the distinct experiences of diasporic characters and challenge some of the ways in which they are represented in Indian cinema. Importantly, through his films, Shyamaprasad's articulation of diasporic lives and the spaces they inhabit challenges the early claims raised by foremost diaspora scholars who maintained a universal conception of diasporic sensibilities. However, through my analysis, I show that Shyamaprasad's characterisation and narrative style reinforce a culturalist and essentialist view of Indian identity.

By examining the key theoretical debates and discussions on the diaspora and by analysing the migration experiences and the articulation of multiple modalities that structure identity and subjectivity, this chapter constructed a narrative around the ways in which diasporic life shapes spatialised subjectivities, power disparities, and gendered discourses. The

chapter also explores the various social and spatial terrains, such as the family, the workplace, the body, the nation, in which gender operates and evaluates the ideologies and hierarchies it reaffirms or challenges in specific diasporic contexts. Furthermore, it assesses the extent to which the agency of men and women in the films are governed or disciplined in certain social locations.

After the early unproblematic, homogenous, and universal formulations of the diaspora and diasporic spaces, various scholars, including Safran et al., have later described the diaspora, and the Indian diaspora in particular, in terms of “tension between the desire to adapt to the hostland’s political, economic and social norms and the desire to maintain a distinct collective identity.” (2017, p.6). Even while acknowledging the efforts of scholars to reject the idea of ‘being here or there’ and argue for the multiplicity of ‘being here and there’, it is important to problematise the notion of collective identities. Diaspora scholars have emerged with more fluid and open-ended notions of home, belonging, and social identity, where individual experiences, cultural practices, values, and symbols take precedence in the process of their conceptualisation (Lahiri-Roy and Belford, 2021; Belford and Lahiri-Roy, 2019; Boccagni, 2016). This is where an intersectional approach, that focuses on the intricacies of multiple modalities of the migrant subject, is crucial to study the multifaceted, complex, nuanced, ambiguous, and disjunctured articulations of diasporic identities and subjectivities.

Chapter 6: The Spatial and Gendered Politics of Caste: Agnisakshi and Arike

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I theorised the concept of diaspora and looked closely at modalities such as spatiality, displacement, and belonging, particularly in relation to Shyamaprasad's films *Kallu Kondoru Pennu* (A Woman Made of Stone, 1998), *English: An Autumn in London* (2013), and *Ivide* (Here, 2015). Using these films, the chapter examined the lives of immigrant men and women and their varied experiences within the Gulf, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. The chapter analysed the formation and articulation of diasporic subjectivities in these films in relation to the existing literature on the diaspora, especially the Indian diaspora. I divide this section into four categories: 'The creation of an 'East-West binary'', 'A sense of belonging/displacement', and 'Women and domestic spaces' focus on the films *English: An Autumn in London*, and *Ivide*, while 'The Gulf and the diasporic migrant woman' centers around the film *Kallu Kondoru Pennu*.

In this chapter, I discuss how caste functions in India and how some of the key scholars in the area have understood and articulated the phenomenon. More importantly, I examine the intersection of caste and gender in the Indian/Kerala context and how female subjects are dominated or marginalised by systems of power and privilege. I also investigate the representation of caste in Malayalam cinema and uncover how certain tropes become normalised in the politics of representation. Through the representation of caste, several Malayalam films I discuss in the chapter reinforce stereotypes and perceptions about lower-caste men and women. In my analysis section, I primarily examine *Agnisakshi* (With Fire as Witness, 1999), although I also discuss parts of *Arike* (So Close, 2012) that are relevant to the discussion on caste and gender, and critique Shyamaprasad's articulation of caste and gender politics where he challenges and subverts the normative and hegemonic ways of representing

caste in Malayalam cinema. One of the scenes between the central female character and her parents from Shyamaprasad's film *Artist* (2013), which I examined in Chapter Four, is relevant to this equation where caste and gender intersects within a specific institutional context.

Both *Agnisakshi* and *Arike* explore the caste-based rituals, customs, and traditions associated with hegemonic Brahmin community in Kerala and articulate how women are suppressed by the norms and rules enforced by patriarchal forces. Set in the 1930s against the backdrop of India's independence struggle⁵⁹, *Agnisakshi* narrates the story of Devaki Manampalli, a young Brahmin woman and her brief and unhappy marriage to Unni who spends all his life performing religious rituals as part of his Brahmin heritage and fails to satisfy her emotional and sexual needs. The narrative unfurls from Thankam's point of view. Thankam is Unni's half-sister who is often treated as an outcast by the family because she was born to a Nair woman and thus not a part of the dominant Brahmin community. She is denied entry to certain spaces within and around the household, especially in the presence of Brahmin men. These Brahmin households shown in the film are *illams*. An *illam* is a closed space where women are barred from seeing the outside world and are oppressed by caste and patriarchy. *Illams* discipline the female subject and materialise as the principal site of subordination. The *illam*, as spaces of power, is bound by familial and religious norms, particularly in the ways in which it essentialises and marginalises women. Devaki hails from a progressive Nampoothiri⁶⁰ *illam* and she was positively influenced by her brother since childhood, who constantly strived for social and political reform in society. Her husband, Unni, on the other hand, is tied down by

⁵⁹ The Kerala society, at the time, was explicitly divided based on caste and class. Two revolutionary movements are key to this phase, Vaikom Satyagraha (non-violent resistance) of 1924 secured entry to the public roads around Vaikom temple for the 'untouchables' and The Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936, issued by the then ruler of Travancore, Sri Chitra Thirunal Balaramavarma, allowed all Hindu worshippers, irrespective of caste, the right to enter temples. It was also during this phase, the 1920s and 1930s, that B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi triggered the Dalit movement to campaign for the rights of Dalits in British India. Both of them were against the existence of caste system and fought hard to abolish it from the Indian society. The film is based on a Malayalam novel by Lalithambika Antharjanam, a key writer and social reformer of the period who highlighted some of the evil and discriminatory practices in the Nampoothiri society through her critical work.

⁶⁰ Nampoothiris are the dominant Brahmin community in the state of Kerala. They are known for their strict caste-based rituals and orthodox traditions.

traditions and rituals and is focused on maintaining moral order and religious obligations. The film portrays both Devaki and Thankam as often being critical of Unni and his spiritual ways of being. The narrative progresses with Devaki's struggle and loneliness inside the *illam* and her desire to free herself from the patriarchal and traditional practices in the community. Devaki's brother, P.K.P Nampoothiri, actively participates in the national freedom struggle movement against the ruling British forces and mingles freely with people of all religions and castes. He wrote against Brahmin hegemony and the discrimination they showed to other castes and communities. When he was arrested by the state forces, Devaki's father-in-law tells her that she would never be allowed to return to her *illam* as she could be influenced by her brother, whose closest friends are lower caste men. When Devaki's mother falls critically ill, she requests Unni to allow her to visit her mother. Devaki leaves her patrilocal residence despite Unni's dad's strict orders and warning that she would not be allowed to return to the enter the *illam* if she leaves without consent. Later, Devaki joins the freedom struggle as Devi Behan and raised her voice against the oppression of women. Eventually, she joins an ashram in Haridwar, a pilgrim city in North India, and became an ascetic by the name Sumitrananda.

Arike, on the other hand, revolves around three central characters, Shantanu, Kalpana and Anuradha. Shantanu and Kalpana are in a relationship while Anuradha is the latter's friend and accompanies her every time the couple meet. Shantanu is a lower middle-class lecturer while Kalpana is a young Brahmin girl and the only child of her parents. Kalpana's parents never approve of her relationship with Shantanu, a non-Brahmin, and constantly attempt to convince her to marry another person from their own community. Although Anuradha does not believe in '*true love*' (her emphasis) and felt that faithful relationships do not exist, she had high hopes about Shantanu and Kalpana starting a life together. The film advances with the conversations and negotiations among various characters in the film and the fears and anxieties of her family to get Kalpana married to an elite upper caste individual.

The narrative of both *Agnisakshi* and *Arike* revolve around dominant upper caste

Brahmin families who's gendered, and caste-coded behaviour threatens to fracture women's agency, mobility, and desire. By doing so, as I further discuss in the analysis section of the chapter, these films question the deep-rooted caste hierarchies and normative gender ideologies that lead to marginalization and exploitation of Brahmin women.

Caste in the Kerala context

The Indian caste system, often cited as the fundamental institution of Hindu society, involves the division of people into four caste groups or *varnas* (Jodhka, 2016). This classification is based on their occupational practices and access to wealth and power. The Brahmins, who are scholars or priests, at the top followed by Kshatriyas who are warriors or rulers, often characterised by their physical strength. In ancient India, the Brahmins worked in collaboration with the Kshatriyas. The Vaishyas who are the merchants or traders, followed by the Shudras who were into agriculture and cattle-rearing and comprised of mostly peasants, labourers and servants came after the Brahmins in the hierarchical structure. The Shudras served the upper castes as slaves or barbers and were denied entry to temples and other holy places. A fifth category called the Dalits or 'untouchables' performed manual scavenging and are considered pollutants by the upper caste although their primary duty was to serve the upper caste people. Those belonging to the lower caste groups were expected to maintain a certain physical distance with the upper castes under all circumstances (Scaria, 2014). The lower castes also had less access to material resources and got severe punishment if he or she behaves against the norms. The lower caste community members were expected to preserve social hierarchy and were meant to treat the upper castes with respect and honour. They were denied job opportunities and were prevented entry into Hindu sacred places such as temples. For several years, the lower castes in Kerala, such as the Pulaya community, were restricted from wearing clothes, ornaments, or other accessories, and were punished if they failed to limit themselves to these strict restrictions (Alexander, 1968). Thus, the upper castes and the

associated power structures organised civil society in specific political and ideological ways to strengthen caste hegemony during the mid and late twentieth century. The extreme levels of subordination and discrimination within the Hindu religious system in the form of caste led several people convert to Christianity from the late nineteenth century onwards (Samuel, 1985). This was a smooth and easy passage to a different faith where they could socialise, visit places of worship without discrimination, and avoid any sort of public embarrassment.

Post-independence, the national and local governments followed a reservation framework to recognise the socio-economic disparities based on castes. Based on it, citizens were classified as General (forward caste), Other Backward Class (OBC), Scheduled Castes (SCs), and Scheduled Tribes (STs). The SC and ST communities remain marginalised and isolated from the mainstream groups and are socially and economically disadvantaged. The scheduled caste people still occupy the lowest position in educational attainments⁶¹ (Scaria, 2014) and a majority of them continue to be employed as sweepers (Desai and Dubey, 2012). The STs were forced to relocate from their traditional occupations and habitats and lacked exposure to education and other socio-economic needs (Kumar and Yazir, 2017). Historically, in Kerala, the rigid social structure and traditional rules that favoured the upper castes largely prevented the lower castes, particularly those from the bottom-most categories, from attaining cultural capital. Various forms of caste inequality, in terms of education, health, property, law, labour, faith, occupation, social mobility, income, wealth, morality, marriage, family, power and prestige exist within the public sphere in Kerala (Devika and Thiranagama, 2021; Sebastian, 2019; Thiranagama, 2019; Scaria, 2017; Devika, 2016; Pillai, 2014; Scaria, 2014; Devika, 2013; Beteille, 2012; Devika 2010; Lukose, 2010; Steur, 2009; Kodoth, 2008; Osella

⁶¹ Research suggests that despite their relatively smaller population, the Brahmins, especially the Tamil Brahmins, have had more opportunities along with the economic and intellectual resources to dominate elite educational fields such as engineering and medicine (Subramanian, 2015; Fuller and Narasimhan, 2010; Fuller and Narasimhan, 2008). The caste privilege of the Brahmins and other upper castes have often denied the lower castes from securing ample opportunities in these fields and related professions.

and Osella, 2000; Deshpande, 2000). The ideology of religion was central to the formation of caste, which was established as a repressive institution that legitimised the ruling class interests. Scholars such as Kapur et al. (2010), Srinivas (2003), and Beteille (1991, 1992, 1997) have downplayed the relevance of caste and the persistence of privileges for the upper castes. Beteille (1992) argued that “caste no longer plays a very active part in the reproduction of inequality in the strategic domains of Indian society. In those sectors of it where the battle of quotas or reservations is being fought, it is no longer caste but the family that functions as the most active agent for the reproduction of inequality (p.15)”. By disregarding caste as “no longer an important agent of either social placement or social control”, Beteille (1991, p. 25) categorises caste as a mere instrument to mobilise the masses during elections and only an instrument for political support. The anger expressed in mainstream media against caste hierarchy and oppression, according to Beteille (1991), is of no purpose⁶². Other scholars such as Subramanian (2015) and Deshpande (2013) have been critical of Beteille’s standpoint and view caste as a discursive category where the hegemonic upper castes thrive as modern and casteless subjects. Subramanian (2015) views Beteille’s assessment as a reflection of the prevailing discourses on caste in scholarly work and in the public. According to him, the past few decades have seen the treatment of caste as an inherent part of the democratic process and a localised formation that is essentially political in nature. As Subramanian (2015) asserts, Scholarship on contemporary caste dynamics has highlighted the transformative effect of the lower castes’ political mobilization on parliamentary democracy, the public sphere, social movements, civil society, status, violence, and embodiment. The news media, too, now focus on lower castes’ challenges to the existing social and political status quo far more than on caste

⁶² Beteille, in his 2012 article ‘The Peculiar Tenacity of Caste’, clarifies (although he does not refer back to any of his previous claims or the counter-narratives by other scholars) that when he says that social exclusion and inequality of caste is on the decline, he does not mean that all forms of domination and discrimination has ended; he believes that they have been replaced with more subtle and embedded forms of exclusion whose effects on individuals remain the same. Beteille concedes that the evidence related to caste is so diverse that it is extremely difficult to interpret and come to an accurate conclusion.

as a sphere of elite privilege. While many are more celebratory, or at least sympathetic, to the spread of lower caste rights politics as a counter-hegemonic force, they increasingly share Beteille's perspective on caste as a subaltern formation. The postcolonial present thus appears to be one in which non elites have caste while elites have class and other more 'cosmopolitan' affiliations. (p. 296) Without doubt, there is a wide range of scholarship focussed on the plight of the lower castes, which has highlighted the consolidation of caste as a socio-political category rather than one purely determined by biological factors. However, quite significantly, especially in relation to the context of my research and what this chapter seeks to do, Subramanian (2015) claims that such scholarship has not steered the production of critical work on how the upper castes gains privileges and establishes their power and authority. The upper castes, as Subramanian (2015) maintains, "are able to inhabit a universal worldview because of a history of accumulated privilege, a history that allows them a unique claim to certain forms of self-fashioning." (p. 296). The focus on the hegemonic status of the upper castes, particularly the Nampoothiris and Brahmins, which evolved from historical privilege, gives emphasis to a structural critique that does not merely focus on a scholarly discussion of the lower castes. This approach is crucial to question the values and norms of the upper castes in the neoliberal, consumer-driven, patriarchal Kerala society who deny caste inequality and classify themselves as modern and casteless subjects. The lower castes, on the other hand, are pressured to highlight and exaggerate their caste identity. The upper castes, as Deshpande (2013) notes, receive the privilege of having their identity "completely overwritten by modern professional identities of choice", whereas the identity of the lower castes can be "so indelibly engraved that it overwrites all other identities and renders them illegible, along with the choices that they may represent" (p.32). The upper caste can freely access private and public resources while being invisible and without leaving behind their caste status; the lower castes remain hyper-visible and their religious, cultural, and class identities are undermined by highlighting their caste (Mosse, 2020). Also, from an intersectional point of view, it is equally significant to examine how caste

is gendered and how it creates a system where women are constantly oppressed and marginalised in the society.

Caste, Brahmin hegemony and the gendered logic of caste in Kerala

The 'Kerala Model', which I discussed in Chapter Two, played a key role in the creation of dominant narratives around Kerala as one of the most secular and progressive states in India. The myth of the Malayali secularism is further reinforced by the presence of several Christian and Muslim communities in all parts of the state and the fact that it is the only state in India ruled by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) under the Left Democratic Front. However, repressive and restrictive religious and caste practices ensure that non-Hindus are denied entry into temples and other sacred places. In January 2019, Kerala's ruling party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), organised a 'Women's Wall', in which more than five million Malayali women formed a 640-kilometre-long human chain across to fight for women's equity (Steur, 2019). This was in response to the various protests organised by orthodox Hindu groups, supported by the BJP against the Supreme court ruling which lifted the ban that denied women of menstruating age to enter Sabarimala. Some of the protests were initiated by lower caste groups against the powerful Nampoothiri Brahmins who not only displaced the religious rights of the former but also introduced new rules that prevented women's entry into the temple's premises (Steur, 2019.) The dominant upper-caste Hindu organisations, the Yogakshema Sabha (the Nampoothiri Brahmin caste organisation) and the Nair Service Society (the Nair caste organisation) joined hands with the Kerala Catholic Bishops Council, who represented the dominant Syrian Christian community, to oppose the Women's Wall and thereby reinforce Brahmanical hegemony and patriarchal domination (Thomas, 2019). Such discourses create ideological sites where women are subjugated and marginalised and thus serve the hegemonic interests of ritual-centred elite Hinduism. Women are expected to follow strict dress codes to enter the temple premises, especially in Sabarimala and the Guruvayoor temple. The rules on

attire are linked to the history and the ritual culture of temples where they are required to wear only sarees or skirts, although they were granted the permission to wear salwar suits too not so long ago. The fear to challenge the head priest's (Nampoothiri male) authority force them to follow these ritualised customs (Devika, 2020). This submission of both lower caste and upper caste women to Brahmin patriarchy and social order is tied to how it becomes the women's sole responsibility to preserve the sanctity of religious rituals, cultural beliefs, traditional practices, and familial honour or *maanam* (a term I have discussed in previous chapters of the thesis).

Caste became a crucial factor even in the Kiss of Love (KOL) protests in 2014, which was briefly discussed in Chapter Two. Pillai (2014) notes that even the protesters against KOL highlighted notions of contamination and pollution in their slogans, where upper-caste practices, norms, and rituals around the ideas of purity and cleanliness were privileged over others. Many of the protesters against KOL were male from an upper-caste background. Women were often sidelined in television debates and their opinions were ridiculed at times, which is symptomatic of the patriarchal system which interpellates women into ideological subjects. During the protests, women's bodies and actions were constantly gendered, sexualised, monitored, policed, and controlled by bourgeois male heads of the ideological state institutions to discipline their femininity and subjugate their identity based on gender and caste denominations.

This subordination and domination of women, or specifically of the upper caste women in the Brahmanical context are linked to the purity of caste and the need to maintain it. This clearly tells us how caste and gender are so intrinsically connected. As Chakaravarty (1993) notes, "neither land, nor ritual quality, i.e., the purity of caste can be ensured without closely guarding women who form the pivot for the entire structure" (p. 1). Women's chastity or *pavitratha* was given utmost importance in the Brahmanical system and the responsibility to

preserve it was her own. There is an obsessive need to establish control over women and is central to Brahmanical patriarchy (Chakravarti, 1993). The Brahmanical honour is dependent on the extent to which they can limit women's agency to a set of socially prescribed codes and morals. Brahmin women are pressurised to carry out their assigned social and familial roles to uphold male prestige and to preserve her own caste status. As Velaskar (2016) points out, "A woman is goddess when compliant to the caste-gender order and a demon when not" (p. 405). Thus, it is quite clear how the intersection of caste and gender makes it doubly lethal for women and leads to greater forms of marginalisation and domination.

One of the earliest social reformers to critique the oppressive and hierarchical Hindu society which compartmentalised the social masses was B. R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar's approach was relativist and intersectional and claimed that the oppression of women and the inhuman and violent ways in which she is treated in the Indian society can only be viewed in relation to the social hierarchy and how that plays out (Senanayake and Trigunayat, 2020). Ambedkar's relational enquiry aligns with the cultural studies and intersectional approach I adopt in the thesis where, as I establish in the methodology chapter, it is important to recognise and determine the multiplicity and inter relationality of social categories such as gender and caste to decode the interplay of multiple modes of oppression. Senanayake and Trignayat (2020) emphasise the importance of understanding gender and its multiple dimensions from a South Asian context and where the converging of casteism and sexism gain precedence over the mere examination of how women were historically oppressed by patriarchal forces. Similar arguments were made by Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Nivedita Menon, who have been critical of the universalised 'western approaches' and argued in favour of context-specific and culture-differentiated intersectional approaches, as I note in the methodology chapter. Senanayake and Trignayat are critical of western feminist approaches for the lack of addressing certain intersections of gender, such as its intersection with caste, for instance. Despite their

suggestion to adopt intersectionality as a framework, Senanayake and Trignayat (2020) fail to theorise it adequately and also classify it as a ‘home-grown approach’. In their article titled ‘Brahmanical patriarchy and voices from below: Ambedkar’s characterisation of women’s emancipation’, these scholars endorse Ambedkar’s revolt against Brahmanical patriarchy and validate his voice against the subordination and marginalisation of both women and the lower castes; however, they do not examine the extent to which Ambedkar addressed the intersection of the two categories – gender and caste. Moreover, scholars such as Senanayake and Trignayat, merely focus on multiple axes of oppression as the central principle of intersectionality. I revert to Mary John’s conception of intersectionality, which I discussed in Chapters Three and Four; John highlights the significance of ‘identifying’ multiple forms of privileges or disadvantages, which is something many studies on gender and social identities fail to do. According to her, intersectionality is about “providing an insight into the problem itself, by pointing to a place where identities fail to appear or be recognised as we might have expected them to. The failure to ‘see’ the intersectional subject is compounded at the political and discursive levels, when it comes to analysing and opposing such structures or social divisions” (John, 2015; p. 73). John is critical of the approach where merely the sum of various ‘parts’ that constitute racism and sexism are added up together to address women’s experiences. For example, to put it in her words, “black women’s experiences cannot be addressed by adding together general discussions of racism (where black men are the implicit norm) and sexism (where white women are the implicit norm)... the additive equation black women = black + women actually translate as black women = black man + white women)” (John, 2015; p. 73). Translating this into the Indian context, the lower caste women’s experience would be better addressed by focusing on their specific experiences rather than adding together general and broader discussions of casteism and sexism. However, within the context of this chapter, where Brahmin women’s experiences and Brahmin hegemony becomes the central focus, it is important to specifically discuss them although Dalit men are the implicit norm on conversations around casteism. Such

a construction of specificity can be negotiated through the conceptualisation of space as a product of multiplicity and interrelation (Massey, 2005). This is the only way, as Massey suggests, through which we can understand specific experiences of people and places by focussing on the simultaneity, multiplicity, and the way they are interrelated to other processes such as power and hierarchy. The gendered and caste- structured spaces in and around the Nampoothiri *illams* in *Agnisakshi* are spaces that are continuously being constituted through segregation, hierarchy, and power. In *Arike* too, the gendered rules of caste behaviour take precedence over women's agency and mobility, where they are constantly faced with the burden of being the symbols of caste honour.

The representation of caste on screen

There has not been a significant amount of scholarly attention devoted to caste politics in Malayalam cinema despite the medium's popularity and reach in Kerala. Most mainstream Malayalam films until now have rarely managed to produce deeply engaged and impactful narratives on marginalised communities in Kerala (James, 2016; Parayil, 2014). Some of the parallel filmmakers such as Adoor Gopalakrishnan, G. Aravindan, and K.G. George, who were part of the New Wave movement in Malayalam cinema during the 1970s and early 1980s, directed films featuring Dalit characters although even they have not captured the subtleties of Dalit lives and spaces to its entirety. Damodaran and Gorringer (2017), in their analysis of caste politics in cinema, note that there is a symbiotic relationship between the two and argue that a deviant Other is constructed in films through particular ways of caste representation. Although their argument is based on trends in the Tamil film industry, it is fully applicable to mainstream Malayalam cinema as well.

Recently, a few mainstream Malayalam films such as *Manhole* (2016), *Kammattipadam* (2016), *Kismath* (Destiny, 2016), and *Thottappan* (2019) had narratives that were central to the plight of the lower castes. Still, stereotypic patterns of representation exist, especially regarding

the ways in which the characters are portrayed in these films. For example, in both *Kammattipadam* and *Kismath*, dark men and women are chosen to play Dalit characters whereas the Hindu upper castes are shown as fair and good-looking, reaffirming the stereotypical representational pattern in Malayalam cinema. The Dalit male characters in *Kammattipadam* were also made to wear additional protruding teeth and look unappealing to highlight the Dalitness in them. Shaun Romy, who plays the lead role in *Kammattipadam*, once mentioned that it is quite astonishing that a dark girl like her got the opportunity to play a role opposite a fair hero (Harikrishnan, 2016). In fact, the director of the film claims that he struggled to find someone who would agree to play a low-caste woman (Harikrishnan, 2016). Upper caste lead characters, whose surnames in the films would be a Nair, Menon, or Nambiar, dominated Malayalam cinema even in the 1990s and 2000s. These upper caste characters were mostly shown as superior to the lower castes in the films, who mostly portray the role of villains, assistants, and servants.

The post 1990s Malayalam films saw a trend where lower-caste Hindus and Muslim (minority) actors were chosen to play roles that were negative or that were subjected to abuse from the upper-caste male protagonists. Rowena (2010) argues that almost all these characters showed signs of homoerotic attraction to the heroes who were abusing them. These male characters who belong to a lower caste/Dalit background are often portrayed as having a strong desire for the upper caste leading women in the films. On the contrary, there are several instances where the lower-caste women in the films are less attractive and rarely considered even worthy of desire. This period also saw lower caste Hindu actors such as Kalabhavan Mani, Harishree Asokan, Salim Kumar, Kunjan, Indrans, and Muslim actors such as Mamukkoya,

Sainudeen, and Cochin Haneefa, among others play several less significant roles, either as comic relief or as someone the lead characters can tease, blame, or insult at will. The films of this period often fail to recognise the precarious position of the lower castes and rarely make them central to the main narrative. Mokkil (2020) refers to films such as *Achanurangatha Veedu* (The Home of the Sleepless Father, 2006) and *Drishyam* (The Sight, 2013) to suggest how they normalise upper caste hegemony and how they essentialise the subaltern identity of the lower caste characters. A majority of the Malayalam films post 2000s depicted hegemonic narratives of highly masculine upper-caste actors on screen and often represented the dominant subjects in the Nair, Brahmin, or Syrian Christian communities through the narratives (Markose, 2019). Malayalam film titles such as *Paithrukam* (Tradition, 1993), *Pavithram* (Sacred, 1994), *Punyam* (Pure, 2002) display how the industry essentialised and intensified the notions of purity and pollution that were already deeply engrained in the Malayali consciousness.

Scholars such as Raj, Gopinath, and Sreekumar (2016) and Rowena (2013) emphasise the lack of Dalit representation and cinematic discourses that centre around subaltern issues that could be possible through the depiction of their realities on screen. From the discussion on Kerala society in Chapter Two, it is evident that the Malayali consciousness is formed through middle-class, upper caste hegemonic practices and the role cinema plays in creating societal consensus on such dominant ideologies is crucial. The review of Malayalam films in Chapters Two, Four, Five, and Six have shown that Malayalam cinema ever since its inception is deeply rooted in this middle-class, upper caste worldview. Most of these films, such as *Aaryan* (The Illustrious One, 1988), *Kilukkam* (Jingle, 1991), *Dhruvam* (Pole, 1993), *Thenmavin Kombath* (On the Branches of the Honey Mango Tree, 1994), *Aaram Thampuran* (The Sixth Emperor, 1997), *Kakkakuyil* (Crow-Cuckoo, 2001), *Maadambi* (The Feudal Lord, 2008), *Pathinettam Padi* (The Eighteenth Step, 2019), *Aaraattu* (2022), to name a few, glorify upper caste

hegemony through their plot and the portrayal of the main characters. *Aaram Thampuran*, for instance, epitomises the identity of the Brahmin protagonist, Jagannadhan, and degrades the non-Brahmin and lower caste characters in the film. In the film, Jagannadhan Thampuran, played by the upper-caste superstar Mohanlal, is shown as an expert in Indian classical (Carnatic and Hindustani) music, like some of the roles he essayed in the past in films such as *Chithram* (Picture, 1988) and *His Highness Abdullah* (1990). Popular classical music vocalist T.M Krishna (2018) notes, in his article titled ‘Unequal Music’, that Carnatic music is dominated by the hegemony of Brahmin men.



The middle-aged non-Brahmin men takes orders from the ‘powerful’ Brahmin protagonist, Jagannadhan in a scene from *Aaram Thampuran*.

In one of the scenes in *Aaram Thampuran*, Jagannadhan borrows a harmonium from Krishna Varma Thampuran, another upper-caste Carnatic musician in the film. On borrowing it, he asks some of his aides, all middle-aged non-Brahmin men, to play the harmonium and sing a few lines. However, all of them embarrassingly admit their inability to carry out Jagannadhan’s orders, highlighting their lack of proficiency in classical music owing to their non-Brahmin/lower-caste status. These instances reveal how upper-caste ideologies are reinforced through specific narratives and patterns of representation in Malayalam cinema.

In the following sections of the chapter, I show how Shyamaprasad’s films, especially *Agnisakshi* and *Arike*, challenge the Brahmin male hegemony through the representation of

strong and independent women as central characters who voice their opinions against the atrocities of caste and gender, particularly at their intersection. A critique of hegemonic Brahminism and the cinematic representation of the various oppressive and ideological ways in which they function in the society is largely absent in scholarly work on Malayalam cinema. In addition to what I discussed in this section, I previously examined relevant aspects of the representation of caste in Malayalam cinema, particularly in relation to its intersection with gender, in Chapters One and Two.

The spatial politics of caste and gender in *Agnisakshi*

The film *Agnisakshi*, which follows a non-linear narrative, begins in the present with K.M.K Nair aka Thankam's short trip with her son and five-year old granddaughter to Haridwar in order to immerse Unni's ashes. They reside in a small lodge situated near the Haridwar temple. In one of the earlier moments in the film, Thankam's granddaughter runs to the balcony and gazes at the people who walk on the road. The girl smiles as she innocently glares at people's movements, expressions, and busy life, unaware of divisive forces such as caste, that determine the way they looked at each other in the neoliberal Indian society. Thankam, for a moment, revisits the memories of Unni and Devaki and what they told her when she was a young lady. To Unni, life is a "yajnam" (sacrifice) and an "agnihotram" (trial by fire) and expects Devaki to realise it someday. Here, the terms *yajnam* and *agnihotram* that Unni refers to are discursive ritual practices that signify the hegemonic caste-position of Nampoothiri men and are employed to suppress *her* feminine desire for love and sexual gratification. These men employ caste as a disciplinary tool to interpellate women as repressed and powerless subjects and reconstruct their subjectivity through the enforcement of discipline and regulation.

While observing her granddaughter, Thankam remembers her own childhood, where she and her mother were forced to live in a separate house because of their non-Brahmin status. Even as an adult, she was not allowed to attend her half-brother Unni's marriage and was asked

to maintain physical distance from the proceedings that welcome the newlyweds into the *illam*. She tries to step onto the balcony of the *illam* and view the proceedings but the elderly antharjanams⁶³ curse her for getting too close to them and polluting their bodies. The *illam* is a site of surveillance, in the Foucauldian sense, where roles are normalised, identities are imposed, and freedom reduced to negative resistance (Marquez, 2012). The senior inmates of the *illam* produce disciplinary power, which according to Foucault (1977), is not only a form of control but a form of power that regulates women's behaviour in specific ways. The space of the *illam* is thus not only gendered but dynamic and relational, which is shaped by the politics of difference (Massey, 1999; 2005). One of the senior Nampoothiri women tells Thankam, "Maintain some distance. Do not come closer and pollute us. The lower caste has no place here". This relationship between gender and caste hierarchy, as Chakravarti affirms (1993), is one of the main reasons for the subordination and marginalisation of women who are even a part of the larger Nampoothiri family. What is interesting here is that one of the elderly occupants of the *illam* calls her 'Shudrachi' (a female 'Shudra'), a term usually associated with the people in the lowest caste bracket. This indicates that both categories of people, women, and Shudras, are to be blamed and punished for crossing cultural and moral boundaries. The *illam*, in this instance, functions as a disciplinary machinery and works like an exhaustive apparatus to monitor and correct individuals and train them to behave in specific ways, similar to Foucault's conceptualisation of schools, prisons, hospitals, and the army. As Foucault posits:

By way of punishment, a whole series of subtle procedures was used, from light physical punishment to minor deprivations and petty humiliations. It was a question both of making the slightest departures from correct behaviour subject to punishment, and of giving a punitive function to the apparently indifferent elements of the disciplinary apparatus: so that, if necessary, everything might serve to punish the slightest thing; each subject find himself caught in a punishable, punishing universality. (1977, p. 178)

⁶³ The term 'antharjanam', which I have already referred to in Chapter Two of the thesis, translates to 'people who stay indoors.' It is specifically used to refer to Nampoothiri women and hence is gendered and caste coded. The antharjanams' movements are limited to within their homes or illams; they are strictly dictated by social and community norms and are rarely allowed to even share their thoughts or opinions.



The senior inmates of the *illam*, in this scene, humiliate Thankam by calling her 'Shudrachi'. The *illam*, in this instance, works like a disciplinary apparatus.

Devaki, who is also not spared by the institutional practices that are closely bound by Brahmanical patriarchy, is lonely and frustrated in her new home and tries to find company in Thankam. The *illams* architectural and functional aspects are similar to what Foucault highlights about the prison:

It must assume responsibility for all aspects of the individual, his physical training, his aptitude to work, his everyday conduct, his moral attitude, his state of mind; the prison, much more than the school, the workshop, or the army, which always involved a certain specialization, is 'omni-disciplinary'. Moreover, the prison has neither exterior nor gap; it cannot be interrupted, except when its task is totally completed; its action on the individual must be uninterrupted: an unceasing discipline. Lastly, it gives almost total power over the prisoners; it has its internal mechanisms of repression and punishment a despotic discipline. It carries to their greatest intensity all the procedures to be found in the other disciplinary mechanisms. (1977, p. 235-36)

The interior architecture of the *illam* is designed in such a way that most of the rooms, especially the one Devaki resides in, are quite dark and open passages sealed with a tight arrangement of furniture. The *illam*, as shown in the film, is situated in a locality that is dominated by Nampoothiris and has long stairs or enclosed ponds to prevent the unsanctioned entry of lower castes. The *illam*, in some ways, works like 'an exhaustive disciplinary apparatus', in the Foucauldian sense, where it controls and disciplines the individual without much personnel intervention.

During Thankam's first meeting with Devaki, she talks proudly about Unni and tries to give

her assurance on his demeanour and behavioural peculiarities. Devaki, still clearly upset and anxious about the time to come, responds by saying, “How can you be sure he won’t end up being an ascetic? The marriage was to procure an heir within the family. The wife is just a tool for the rituals and the time spent at home”. By raising her voice against the institutional and hierarchical practices that Unni surrenders to, Devaki offers counter-hegemonic resistance to the intersection of caste and gender. Devaki is critical of Unni’s character and tells Thankam, “He does not seem to love anyone. He is afraid of everyone... mom, dad, customs, even God.” She also expresses her frustration about the lack of books in the *illam*. She openly expresses her distaste and opposition to Hindu religious texts and tells Thankam that the only books she could find in her patrilocal home were *Ramayana* (where Ram doubts Sita’s chastity and asks her to prove her purity on her return from Lanka) and *Sheelavathi* (a chaste woman and dutiful wife in Hindu texts), which are religious texts that reinforce patriarchal and hegemonic ideologies about women’s need to be dutiful and devoted towards their husband and the members of his family. Thankam understands Devaki’s moral dilemma and offers her books of her choice. There is a powerful scene in the film, where Thankam takes one of those books to Unni and asks him to have a read. She tells him that the book’s title – *Appante Makal* (Daughter of the father) – and informs him that it is written by a Nampoothiri male who is well-versed in *Vedas* and *Mantras* like Unni. When Unni says “I don’t have to read it when I have ‘you’ (referring to Thankam), a living example in front of me”, Thankam replies, “Some people won’t understand life from just watching or listening. You need to experience it. This book is the story of people who have experienced it differently. You may ask *ettathi* (Devaki) about it.” Shyamaprasad backs up Thankam’s words with a point-of-view shot that focuses on her facial expressions, a mix of boldness and sarcasm. Here, Thankam boldly expresses how Brahmin hegemony suppresses upper-caste women’s mobility and their quality of life (Devika, 2020), and how the elite Nampoothiri males have established a control over those women’s agency and freedom.



Thankam gives a bold and sarcastic response to Unni's query about the book.

Another key characterisation in the film is that of *branthi cheriyamma* (the mentally unstable aunt). Thankam's mother once narrates to Devaki that *branthi cheriyamma* was a beautiful young lady when she first arrived at the *illam* as the senior Nampoothiri Muthappan's second wife. Muthappan physically abused and tortured her and subsequently, she became a victim of his anger and frustration. She cried all the time, murmured things to herself, and eventually became mentally unstable. "Even if we are given ten births as a dog, let us hope we are not reborn as a woman in the midst of these Nampoothiri men", Thankam's mother tells Devaki, thus marking the *illam* as gender and caste-coded spaces where they are constantly reminded of their subject position. Gorringer (2018) links this capacity to establish their control over women and their bodies to the preservation and consolidation of male honour. This concept of honour, in the Indian context, is gendered and the burden to protect it rests solely on women. Thankam's mother's statement about *branthi cheriyamma* emphasises how the discipline-mechanism of Nampoothiri *illams* and the enforcement of regulatory methods by patriarchal powers within it led to the formation of a disciplinary society. Foucault (1977) describes how the disciplinary mechanisms, such as these Nampoothiri *illams*, work to divide, brand, and exclude certain individuals:

all the authorities exercising individual control function according to a double mode; that of binary division and branding (mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal); and that of coercive assignment, of differential distribution (who he is; where he must be; how he is to be characterized; how he is to be recognized; how a constant surveillance is to be exercised over him in an individual way, etc.). On the one hand, the lepers are treated as plague victims; the tactics of individualizing disciplines are imposed on the excluded; and, on the other hand, the universality of disciplinary controls makes it possible to brand the 'leper' and to bring into play against him the dualistic mechanisms of exclusion. The constant division between the normal and the abnormal, to which every individual is subjected, brings us back to our own time, by applying the binary branding and exile of the leper to quite different objects; the existence of a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising and correcting the abnormal brings into play the disciplinary mechanisms to which the fear of the plague gave rise. All the mechanisms of power which, even today, are disposed around the abnormal individual, to brand him and to alter him, are composed of those two forms from which they distantly derive. (p. 199-200)

Foucault's account of the disciplinary mechanisms employed in institutions such as prisons, hospitals and schools, enables us to relate to how Nampoothiri *illams* employ forms of 'binary division and branding' and 'differential distribution' to categorise subjects like branthi cheriyammi as 'mad', 'dangerous', and, 'abnormal'. The *illam*, much like the prison, works as an apparatus of justice with a power to punish in the name of 'treatment' or 'correction' (Foucault, 1984). With the power to punish, these *illams* exercise control and authority over 'abnormal' individuals and subject them to 'dualistic mechanisms of exclusion' as Foucault denotes here.

On one occasion, Devaki tries to initiate a rare conversation with her husband and expresses her desire for emotional and physical attachment to which he replies "The wife doesn't love the husband for him. In the *Upanishad*, Yajnavalkya tells his wife: A wife loves her husband only for herself. A husband loves his wife for his own pleasure. No one loves anyone except themselves." Unni surrenders to *dharma* or the sense of moral duty and preserves the customs, traditions, and disciplinary practices of the *illam* more than his relationship with Devaki. The *dharma*'s emphasis, as per Brahmanical order, is on karma (actions) and the methodical observance of specific rules (Joseph, 2013; Ambedkar, 1995). Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) submits in his article 'Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography' that *dharma* turns out to be one of the key means by which the legitimation of subordination and domination of

subjects takes place. When Thankam boldly questions Unni about his lack of concern for his wife and asks for a clarification, Unni tells her that he needs to be cautious about what other members of his community think and adhere to its ideologies. Chatterjee (1989), in his article titled 'Caste and subaltern consciousness', argues that,

Women's sexuality, her experiences of pain, pleasure, love, desire or sorrow were matters that were routinely ignored. The woman ... was ... thus a de-eroticised creature, occupying as she did a sort of threshold space that was meant to measure the distance between the past and the present... She became a site upon which law, scripture and custom could be inscribed and erased
... (p. 202)

This is particularly true and intensified in the case of Brahmin women who do not necessarily have the same access to social and cultural capital as their male counterparts. In the film, there are several occasions where Devaki does not get a chance to meet Unni during the day and so waits for him to complete his daily rituals and spends the night with him. Nevertheless, as per the Brahmin tradition, the couple needs to wait for an auspicious day for the woman to have sexual intercourse for the first time, which in this case arrives several days after their marriage. These practices, which govern and control the subjects within the institution of marriage, are driven by gender-and-caste-specific family values and beliefs. The regulation of sexuality – Devaki in this instance – is to ensure the discipline and honour of the *illam*. Through these means of institutional and patriarchal authority where gender and caste intersect, Nampoothiri men control women's sexuality and govern the familial and marital spaces they occupy. Subaltern scholars such as Gayatri Spivak (1988) have written about the plight of marginalized women subjects who were wedged between the imperial powers and native men and thereby subordinated and dominated within the discourse of colonialism. As she argues,

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is 'evidence'. It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (Spivak, 1988, 82-83)

In *Agnisakshi*, although Devaki is an upper caste woman, and her circumstances not identical to that of a subaltern woman, she survives in male-dominated spaces and feels completely silenced inside the *illam*. As Solomon says, “every nook and corner of the *illam* has a story to tell about the sufferings of Namboodiri women” (2013, p. 30). It is also, however, intriguing to note that even some of the women in these Brahmin households, particularly the elderly, were obsessed by the notion of purity and honour that they co-participate with the men to internalise the caste norms and gender ideologies and thus strengthen these hierarchical and hegemonic structures (Velaskar, 2016). Devaki, the central character in *Agnisakshi*, is subjected to such a form of caste power that is enforced by the oppressed. The elderly Nampoothiri women in *Agnisakshi*, who themselves have endured a personal history of violence and subordination, become the torchbearers of caste prestige and honour. When Devaki offers food to a lower-caste child, an elderly woman in the *illam* shouts at her and shoos the boy and his friends away, which exemplifies how women are “...constantly controlled and surveilled in their engagements with other castes in the personal and intimate spaces of the Brahmin household, such as the kitchen, the living areas, the bedroom and the grounds of their private property” (Pallavi, 2017, p. 3). However, during several instances in the film, Shyamaprasad portrays Devaki as a woman who strongly expresses her desire to break free of this Brahmin hegemony and their prescribed codes of conduct and lifestyles. When Devaki is prevented from visiting her sick mother by Unni’s father, she leaves the *illam* and does not return. Post-marriage virilocality or patrilocality still remains a forceful practice and ideology in contemporary marriages, where the attempt is to further ensure women’s dependence on their husbands and in-laws. (Abraham, 2017). By leaving the *illam*, Devaki subverts such dominant patriarchal ideologies which were mobilised as means of control and domination and as expressions of power.



In *Agnisakshi*, Devaki gives a firm response to her father-in-law's 'order' not to visit her sick mother and walks out of the *illam*.

Unni's brother later visits her and requests her to return to their *illam*. Devaki responds by saying that she would come only if Unni adopts a more progressive stand. She tells him that she would not dress up and walk anymore like other Nampoothiri women. "Don't expect me to bow my head down in front of others, hereafter," she tells him boldly. "I will go to political gatherings, speak to the public, and will not discriminate against the lower-castes," she continues. Devaki joins the independence struggle and heads the movement for women's emancipation. She makes the headlines in the local newspapers and her photos circulate in their main editions. In one of her speeches at the freedom struggle movement, she says, "I do not belong to a particular religion, caste, or community. I am a representative of women who are oppressed for hundreds of years. You can either praise or curse me, the truth. But remember that you (upper-caste men) are the reason for our suffering. We need to remember the hardships faced by our mothers and grandmothers and clean the system for the generations to come. We should keep fighting for it". The equally significant thing about these scenes is how Shyamaprasad portrays Devaki's efforts and her public responses as a protest to anti-women and anti-lower-caste discourses through her participation in the freedom struggle. Shyamaprasad frames Devaki in a low angle shot in all her speeches, highlighting the power,

determination, and resilience in her thoughts and actions. Through her speeches and political actions, Devaki challenges and counters the hierarchical caste location and the gendered and caste-based power relations administered by the patriarchal Brahmin society.

Although treated as the 'other', Unni's half-sister Thankam is also often portrayed as a resilient woman who lives close to the *illam*. The young Thankam often cross-examines Unni on the foundations of the Brahminical principles and customs and raises questions on his ambivalent subject position that has interpellated him into adopting a conservative approach to caste-based myths, rituals, and traditions. Thankam expresses her strong desire to seek higher education and succeeds in her attempt to do so. When Appan Nampoothiri rejects her idea and forces her to get married, she goes on a hunger strike and convinces everyone of her resolute decisions. Through that, the gendered subaltern in Thankam gains power and goes against the grain of the patriarchal ideologies that reinforce Brahminical supremacy. Despite her double marginalisation due to gender and caste, Thankam articulates her agency and later recuperates her subjectivity through the procurement of education, wealth, and social status.

Later in the film, when Appan Nampoothiri dies, Thankam and her mother are asked to move out of the *illam* premises and relocate to a different place. The non-Brahmin mother and daughter lose all their ties with the Nampoothiri household as soon as the father passes away. Despite their wish to stay there longer, the elderly male members of the community order them to leave the locality. As they walk a few paces out of the *illam*, Unni approaches them. He still stresses the importance of maintaining social order and preserving the caste-based ideologies and suggests her leave for now. However, he regretfully tells her about the hope of having an afterlife in which there exists a casteless society, a social system in which a father and daughter can touch others irrespective of their caste, a world in which human beings do not hate or hurt each other in the name of religious customs and traditions. The crucial aspect about gender-caste dichotomy and double marginalisation is that both Devaki and Thankam had to leave the *illam*

at different stages whereas Unni's position of power is fixed and the spaces he occupies remain the same. Women are either objects of exchange through the process of *kanyadaan* (gift of virgin woman) at the time of marriage or the violator of social order or moral codes at their husband's death. The widow who leaves the *illam* following the death of the husband cannot return to her natal home either as she is cast as an outsider after marriage. Hence, as Chakravarti (1995) affirms, she becomes an outcaste and a symbol of inauspiciousness. These rituals, powered by Brahmanical patriarchy and authority, also signify the regulation of her sexuality and the imposition of permanent widowhood upon her.

When Unni meets Thankam several years later, where he spent the last days of life within the temple premises, he admits that he sacrificed a good life and sincere relationships in the name of baseless beliefs and customs. At one point in the film, Thankam also meets one of the elderly Nampoothiri women in the *illam* who always verbally abused her for being a non-Brahmin. Thankam finds her completely bedridden and learns from her about the physical and mental tortures she faces in her life, especially from her close family who are least considerate about her. The aunt regrets her castiest attitude in the past and apologises to Thankam for her insensitive behaviour towards her. Shyamaprasad frames the narrative from Thankam's point of view by showing Unni and other casteist characters plead guilty of their conservative and ideological thoughts and behaviours.

The intersection of caste and gender in *Arike*

Even in *Arike*, Shyamaprasad subverts Brahmanical hegemony through his characterisation and point of view narratives. When Kalpana reveals to her parents about her relationship with a lower-caste Shantanu, they are visibly upset and do not approve of it. As Kalpana's father and maternal uncle drove to work, the latter suggests she could be married to one of his colleagues who belongs to the same caste. When Kalpana's father agrees to it, her uncle reminds him about her relationship with Shantanu. "He is not a

Brahmin”, he warns with a look of disdain on his face. The lower caste male and the relationship with him, as Chakravarti (2018) asserts, is a threat to the upper caste purity of blood and hence feel the strong need to institutionally prevent sexual access to her through the process of marriage. On another occasion, Kalpana’s family’s spiritual guru, who they address as ‘Guruji’ visits their home. Kalpana’s parents invite him to a private conversation and address their concerns over her future. They request him to offer her some general advice on marriage. Guruji laughs and says, “How do you expect an unmarried man like me to advise a woman on marriage? The elderly couple add, “We have tried to arrange a suitable groom for her, but she wants to decide who she will live with”. Guruji responds by saying, “she is independent. There is no fault in that. Finding one’s own life-partner is a great idea.” Shocked by Guruji’s response, Kalpana’s father Ananthan claims, “... but he is not a Brahmin”. Guruji gives him a sarcastic reply to Ananthan this time, “Not a Brahmin? That is a huge issue! Did you ever enquire whether I am a Brahmin? Are all saints meant to be Brahmins? If you can accept a non-Brahmin like me as your spiritual guru, why can you not approve a non-Brahmin son-in-law?”. By portraying Guruji as a non-Brahmin and a progressive individual who acknowledges women’s need for agency, Shyamaprasad breaks the stereotypical ways of representing spiritual gurus or godmen in Malayalam cinema, where usually politically corrupt and upper-caste men or women characters occupy these roles. The Guruji in *Arike* not only belongs to a lower caste but also speaks against the evils of caste hierarchy, religious ideologies, Hindu beliefs and practices, and the myth around women’s agency.

In another scene later in the film, Ananthan asks Kalpana to sit beside her and enquires whether she is keen to listen to a story. As the story progressed, Kalpana realised that Ananthan’s story is about the physical and emotional hardships her mother had to endure to give birth to her. Ananthan, in a highly emotional manner, reveals to Kalpana how

much her mother suffered and sacrificed to give birth to her and take care of her afterwards. After narrating the story, Ananthan suggests that she should not hurt her mother and not go against her wishes. Here, Ananthan employs pastoral power and tries to convince Kalpana to stay away from the non-Brahmin Shantanu. He further asks Kalpana, “do you think we, your parents, would guide you in the wrong direction? We do everything for your own good and welfare!”, thereby stressing the need for “sacrifice” to attain “salvation” (Foucault, 1982, p. 783) and attempting to discipline her through the politics of ‘care’. Kalpana responds angrily and walks away from Ananthan suggesting that she does not want her parents to take decisions for her.



In this scene from *Arike*, Kalpana’s father Ananthan tries to discipline her and convince her to marry the groom of his choice using pastoral power.

Towards the end of the film, Sanjay Shenoy, the Brahmin businessman her parents chose for Kalpana, meets her on the street. Kalpana’s aunt who arranges the meeting encourage her to talk to him and know him better. Kalpana, however, shows a lack of interest and tells him she is not interested in a conversation. Sanjay tells her that his intention was not to force her into a union with him and that he only wanted to appreciate her for her courage and determination to stick to her choices. They meet with an accident and Kalpana gets severely injured. She declines to meet Shantanu when he visits her at the hospital. She also decides to end their relationship and marry Sanjay. Later, when Anuradha anxiously

enquires about the objective behind the decision, Kalpana tells her that she is no longer the 'perfect' looking woman that Shantanu desired to marry. She says, "Shantanu's Kalpana does not exist anymore, the fair-skinned, scar-free girl has vanished into thin air. I know I have made the right decision" and rejects the unrealistic expectations about women's bodies in Indian society. Kalpana's implicit reference here is to her intimate conversations with Shantanu where he often praises her beauty and the flawless texture of her feet. In an earlier scene in the film, her maternal uncle also makes a passing comment at her during their breakfast, "You seem to be getting slimmer day by day. You need to take your aunt as a role model". She replies, "I do not think so. I have always been like this". Even Shantanu's praises are deflected away with laughs and casual jokes. Throughout the narrative, Shyamaprasad portrays Kalpana as the disciplined subject who is always "described, judged, measured, compared with others... trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded, etc" (Foucault, 1977; p. 191) either by her lover or her family members. Nevertheless, by deciding to cut all ties with Shantanu and marrying another man, Kalpana symbolically subverts her position as a disciplined subject who is objectified by her male lover. As Foucault notes, "where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, 1980, p. 95), although it cannot easily "defeat, overturn or suddenly transform disciplinary power" (Faith, 1994, p. 39). However, resistance identifies and resituates power abuse and offers a compelling response to patriarchal forces who initiate any acts of violation (Faith, 1994). Using a point-of-view narrative approach, Shyamaprasad shows how Kalpana resists power permeated across a range of disciplinary sites and acts as a strong counterforce to attempts of subjection.

Kalpana's friend Anuradha leaves the place, still angry and perplexed by her decision not to marry Shantanu. Interestingly, when Anuradha meets Shantanu later, he tells her that he is confused and that he possibly loved her rather than Kalpana. Shantanu admits

that the lack of opportunity to meet Anuradha in future would hurt him more than Kalpana's absence in his life. This justifies Kalpana's decision to leave Shantanu and marry another man. Shyamaprasad reinforces this critique of the male objectification of the female body through a flashback into Anuradha's past and her life in her late teens. During that time, Anuradha's cousin Balu returns from England and stays with her family at the ancestral home. Even in their very first meeting, Balu teases her for being slim, pulls her hand, and forces her to "eat some chicken" (in his words) to gain weight. Her father who watches this act, smiles and nods in agreement as the camera zooms in on Balu's hands that are firmly thrust upon hers. A scene later, Balu compels her to sit on his bed and objectifies her through an appraisal of her facial and body features. As she feels uncomfortable and tries to leave the room, Balu forcefully pulls her back and coerces her into having sex with him. Although he promises he would return from England and marry her, Balu does not keep his word. In this instance, the control over women's sexuality is enforced to preserve the structural values of upper caste patriarchy and reproduce the hierarchical caste order (Chakravarti, 1995). At different stages in the film, Anuradha faces abusive behaviour from her male neighbours in the housing colony where she lived with her ageing father. Anuradha's characterisation shows how female bodies are objectified by privileged upper-caste males and how that is indicative of their sexist attitude towards women (Szymanski, Moffitt, and Carr, 2011; Spivak and Guha, 2003). In *Arike*, Shyamaprasad depicts Anuradha as someone who makes a powerful transformation from an abused teenager to an independent single working woman and thereby makes a strong statement on the representation of female characters on screen. When Anuradha's male neighbours attempt to abuse her mentally and physically, she firmly opposes their words and actions, and offers resistance. Such resistance to gendered power relations generates political and personal empowerment through the refusal to be violated or subordinated.



In *Arike*, Shyamaprasad briefly traces the journey of Anuradha from an abused teenager to a strong woman who is independent and as someone who reacts against male dominance.

Conclusion

The films *Agnisakshi* and *Arike* effectively show Brahmin women as objects of desire and whose free will is suppressed by powerful patriarchal forces. Their freedom is regulated, their sexuality is controlled, and their agency is limited in the gendered and caste marked spaces within the *illams* and modern Brahmin homes, as shown in these two films. In these films, the leading female characters, Devaki, and Kalpana, become solely responsible for the preservation of the family's honour. Their actions and decisions are questioned and scrutinised by other members in the household, especially by elderly males. The other two main non-Brahmin female characters in the films, Thankam and Anuradha become subjects of exclusion and abjection elicited by the caste and gender-based anxiety they cause to the dominant elites in the community (Kristeva, 1982; Butler, 1993). These women are socially excluded and abjected based on ideological notions around 'dirt' and 'pollution'. Anuradha experiences sexual harassment by a few mostly unemployed men⁶⁴ on different occasions in the film and yet rarely reports it to anyone due to the familial and societal norms around purity and honour.

⁶⁴ Unemployed men making sexual advances to young married or unmarried women is a common trope in Shyamaprasad's films. For instance, in films such as *Ore Kadal*, *Artist*, *Arike* and *Elektra*, numerous male characters fetishized and sexually misbehaved with the central female characters, triggered by unemployment and anxiety around the neoliberal economy.

The chapter examined the intersection of gender and caste and primarily focuses on the factors that lead to the marginalisation and subordination of upper caste women and explore the patriarchal practices that stress upon caste purity. The review of key texts and scholarship on caste in Malayalam cinema would indicate that most Malayalam films engage in stereotypical ways of representing upper and lower caste men and women over the years. However, as I argue in this chapter, Shyamaprasad's films go against this dominant grain of representing caste by offering a critique of caste politics as well as an affirmation of caste marked women's potentialities to both challenge patriarchy and contribute to the larger social good.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This thesis critically examined selected Shyamaprasad's feature films from a cultural studies perspective. The thesis showed how Shyamaprasad's films challenge and reinforce the ways in which the intersections of gender with sexuality, diaspora, class and caste are articulated in contemporary Kerala society and represented in Malayalam cinema. By adopting intersectionality as my analytical method to examine Shyamaprasad's films, I argued that the privileges and disadvantages of male and female subjects cannot be understood and recognised by gender alone and need to be assessed in relation to its intersection with other social identities. The thesis primarily sought to understand how these films articulate notions of gender, sexuality, diaspora, caste and class in contemporary Kerala society. I identified gender as a prominent modality across all the films I chose to analyse. Using a cultural studies approach - which warrants a study of the political and social context of events - I contextualised the articulation of gender in Kerala society and in Malayalam cinema, particularly post-liberalisation. As part of this, I examined the formation and negotiation of the identities and subjectivities of Malayali women in the patriarchal Kerala society in the past few decades. I also explored the notion of an 'ideal' Malayali woman and the societal pressure upon her to preserve 'neoliberal femininity' (Pillai, 2020). The discussion on the politics of gender representation in Malayalam cinema in Chapter Two provides an overview of how male and female characters were portrayed on screen from its days of inception to the present. I extend my discussion on the articulation of gender in Malayalam cinema to the body chapters too. Employing the ideas of scholars such as Foucault and Massey, the thesis also explored the role of space and spatial politics in shaping gender identities and determining power relations. I utilised Foucault's and Massey's ideas on space and power in the analysis of Shyamaprasad's films, especially to understand the dynamics of the relationship between gender and other modalities such as the diaspora, caste, and the middle-class. I also employed narrative analysis

in my film analysis chapters to examine how various narrative aspects of Shyamaprasad's films such as story, visuals, plot, characters, dialogues, characterisation, and different formal elements such as shots, composition, camera angles, acting, lighting, editing, costumes, setting, and props work together in the films.

In Chapter One, I started my discussion by highlighting a major social issue in Kerala, a dowry death, which was one of several instances in the recent past where women were subjected to domestic violence and abuse. Cinema, being an influential medium in Kerala, has inspired crimes and other punishable acts in society, and created the perception that people can take law into their own hands (Prakash, 2014). For example, according to media reports, there have been numerous murders in Kerala that mimicked the scenes from the highly acclaimed and commercially successful Mohanlal-starrer Malayalam film *Drishyam* (The Sight, 2013). The film, which had a sequel released in 2021, was also dubbed into several Indian languages. In the film, the protagonist Georgekutty appears as a saviour to his daughter and wife who commit a murder and suggests that one can go to any extent to hide a crime in order to protect their family. On the other hand, there has also been several Malayalam films, such as *Kurup* (2021), *Take Off* (2017), *Ennu Ninte Moideen* (Yours Truly, Moideen, 2015), *Celluloid* (2013), *Gaddama* (Housemaid, 2011), *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathira Kolapathakathinte Katha* (Manikyam of Paleri: The Story of a Midnight Murder, 2009), *Crime File* (1999), *Devasuram* (God-Demon, 1993), and *Ore CBI Diary Kurippu* (A CBI Diary Entry, 1988), to cite a few, which are based on real-life incidents. Therefore, as I underscored in Chapter One, cinema and society share a strong two-way relationship in Kerala. In the various chapters of the thesis, I not only examined the articulation of modalities such gender, middle-class, diaspora, and caste in the Kerala/Indian society but also discussed their representation in Malayalam cinema. This was done not just to provide a context to the analysis but also to understand the extent to which Shyamaprasad's films reinforce or challenge the

ways in which these social identities are articulated in society or represented on screen. One of my research questions - how do Shyamaprasad's films articulate notions of gender, sexuality, diaspora, caste, and middle-class in contemporary Kerala society – aided the thesis to link the narratives of Shyamaprasad's films to the articulation of these modalities that structure identity and subjectivity in Indian society. This context-centred approach or radical contextualism, which I discussed in Chapter Three, is crucial to the cultural studies methodology I adopted in the thesis. Again, as I explored in Chapter Three, a cultural studies methodology offers theoretical frameworks such as intersectionality to conceptualise, address, and critically examine such specific contexts. In Chapter One, I addressed the research question - why and how is an intersectional approach is useful to discuss gender in Malayalam cinema. In a detailed section on intersectionality in Chapter Three, I discussed what an intersectional approach offers in the analysis of gender. Intersectionality, as I noted, addresses the identities and subjectivities of those who are excluded from a single-axis analysis, and recognises the collective and radical efforts required to fight sexism, classism and casteism. Earlier, in Chapter One, where I highlighted the conceptual and theoretical contribution of this thesis, I make the claim that most studies on gender in Malayalam cinema do not undertake an intersectional approach. Later in that chapter, I emphasised the need for an intersectional approach and explicated how to employ it in the analysis of gender in Malayalam cinema. Further, I adopted an intersectional approach in my analysis of Shyamaprasad's films in Chapters Four, Five, and Six too. The focus on gender and the need to contextualise the role it plays in Kerala society and Malayalam cinema have led me to address another research question – how is the ideal Malayali woman conceived in Kerala society and mainstream Malayalam cinema. I examined this in Chapter Two with a detailed discussion of the matrilineal past of Kerala, the state of women in the state post liberalisation and contemporary times, the role of space and spatial politics in gender, and the representational politics of gender in Malayalam cinema. I will summarise my findings from the chapters in the next section.

Summary of findings

Across the various chapters, this thesis tries to map out the ways in which gender – especially, in its intersection with modalities such as sexuality, diaspora, class and caste – is negotiated in Kerala society and articulated in Malayalam cinema. In Chapter Two of the thesis, I examined how that gender is essentialised and, as a result, how women are marginalised and exploited in contemporary Kerala society. Through my discussion of contemporary events and relevant literature, I identified that the construction of the notion of an ideal Malayali woman is central to this subordination and marginalisation. As I discussed in the chapter, a value-based Hindu middle-class way of life, which embodies women as a model of love, self-control, and patience, expects women to be a devoted wife and a sacrificial mother. Instances of gender, class and caste-based discrimination, particularly against women, are also prevalent in Kerala society. Citing the works of scholars such as Hapke (2013), Lukose (2010, 2005), Sreekumar (2007), and Kodoth (2008, 2006, 2002) among others, I identified that in addition to how women - especially those from a lower socioeconomic background - were historically marginalised and dominated, they were also faced with the adverse effects of economic liberalisation. Poor working and domestic conditions and gender discrimination in both private and public spheres intensified post economic liberalisation in Kerala. In the section on the representational politics of gender in Malayalam cinema, I identified that the characterisation and narratives of Malayalam films for many decades since its inception reinforced gendered ideologies and recreated stereotypical representations of men and women. Upper-caste and upper middle-class masculine heroes became the norm and female characters were limited to girlfriends and housewives who played less significant role in the narratives. The heteronormative family, which is a repressive and hierarchical institution in Malayalam cinema, reduced domestic spaces to sites of gender ideologies and inequalities.

Through the analysis chapters, this thesis examined how Shyamaprasad's films present

a critique of ideological and normative practices in Kerala and the Indian diaspora and explores the ways in which these films affirm, reflect, reinforce, and contest everyday realities in the society. By analysing Shyamaprasad's *Ore Kadal*, *Artist*, *Ritu*, and *Elektra* in Chapter Four, the thesis showed that these films challenge hierarchical gender relations and heteronormative values and practices that are integral to the Indian familial structure. By conducting a literature review of the Indian middle-class and examining the notion of middle-class moralities, the chapter explored how women's gender and sexuality are controlled and regulated by moral and cultural institutions such as the family and the community. In my discussion, I identified that *maanam* or a sense of dignity is gendered in the Indian context, and it is the sole responsibility of middle-class women to preserve the community's and family's prestige and honour. I particularly highlighted the intersection of class and gender, where middle-class families exert a form of manipulative, patriarchal power on women to dominate them; it is a form of power, as I discussed in Chapter Four, that is not established by the manifestation of a consensus but by some form of consent (Foucault, 1982). In my discussion of the representation of middle-class men and women in Malayalam films, I also highlighted the lack of attention given to the intersection of class and gender in existing scholarship on Malayalam cinema.

In Chapter Four, I demonstrated how films such as *Ore Kadal* and *Artist* challenge stereotypical ways in which middle-class men and women are represented in Malayalam cinema. Using an analysis of the narrative structure and characterisation of central characters in the films, the chapter showed how these films subvert middle-class patriarchy using point of view narratives centred around the female protagonists. The focus on female protagonists is significant because most narratives and plots in Malayalam cinema have been predominantly male-centric. The thesis makes the claim that Shyamaprasad presents the male characters in *Ore Kadal* and *Artist* as dispassionate hegemonic masculine individuals as against the female characters who are agentive, determined, and resilient. Similarly, in *Ritu* and *Elektra*, the

female characters disrupt dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality, and challenge middle-class values linked to family and community. In both these films, I suggested that Shyamaprasad depicts middle-class men as the ones who try to uphold moral values and social order in the family and the society at large. Shyamaprasad also portrays the male characters in these films as middle-class men with a strong desire to control women's behaviour, regulate her sexuality, and create disciplined subjects. On the other hand, the director presents the female characters as confident and assertive women who do not abide by social and moral pressures to conform to the dominant ideologies of the heteronormative middle-class familial structure. In my discussion of the film *Ritu* and its central characters, I highlighted the characterisation of Sunny, a homosexual male who works as a software engineer in a multinational company. In my analysis, I illustrated how Shyamaprasad uses narrative and aesthetic tools to highlight Sunny's sense of alienation and frustration in a conservative Kerala society. However, I also claimed that the subordination or marginalisation of characters such as Sunny is utilised to legitimise the hegemonic masculinities of certain other characters in the film.

Films such as *Ore Kadal*, *Artist*, *Ritu*, and *Elektra* break stereotypical and essentialised articulations of middle-class women, especially in the way they challenge social and cultural institutions such as family and marriage. This, as I showed in the chapter, is exemplified through the characterisation of Deepti in *Ore Kadal*, Gayatri in *Artist*, Varsha and Zarina in *Ritu*, and Diana in *Elektra*. With the analysis of these films, the thesis demonstrated how Shyamaprasad's films challenge normative class-gender ideologies and reject idealised notions of domesticity.

In Chapter Five, I analysed three films, *Kallu Kondoru Penne*, *English: An Autumn in London*, and *Ivide*, to explore Shyamaprasad's portrayal of immigrant male and female characters based in the Gulf, the UK, and the US, respectively. In the discussion of the films, I

explored how aspects such as spatiality, belonging, and displacement are articulated in the films. To conceptualise and contextualise the idea of the diaspora and the diasporic subject, particularly in relation to the notions of spatiality, belonging, displacement, and identity, I reviewed the works of key scholars in the area. In my literature review, I identified that some of the early works of diaspora scholars such as Safran (1991), King and Melvin (1999), Green (1998), Cohen (1997, 1995), Said and Simmons (1996), and Chaliand and Rageau (1995), for example, do not fully address the diversity of experiences and identities of diasporic communities. However, I noted that other diaspora scholars such as Clifford (1994), Cohen (2007, 1997, 1995, 1993), Soysal (2000), Anthias (1998), and Brah (1996) among others, rejected the narratives and approaches that suggest the constant maintenance of a concrete or imagined relationship with the original homeland. I also highlighted the works of contemporary diaspora scholars such as Fathi (2020), Murcia (2019), and Lahiri-Roy and Belford (2021) to discuss notions of home, belonging, displacement and identity, and to contextualise these key tropes that I explore in the films I analysed in the chapter. In the sections that followed, I also discussed the Indian diaspora and cinema on the diaspora to find out how Shyamaprasad's films reinforced and challenged some of the ways in which these concepts were articulated in scholarly works and represented in Indian/Malayalam cinema.

Based on my analysis of his films, I claim that Shyamaprasad's representation of diasporic lives and diaspora spaces challenges the early claims raised by some of the foremost diaspora scholars who maintained a universal conception of diasporic sensibilities. I also showed how Shyamaprasad's narrative style and characterisation reinforce an essentialist and culturalist view of Indian identity. This is particularly visible, as I argued in Chapter Five, in films such as *English: An Autumn in London* and *Ivide*, where Shyamaprasad presents the Indian diaspora as a threatening space of Western modernity. The chapter showed how the filmmaker, in several instances in these films, exhibits the ways in which diasporic Indians

could lose the moral values of their homeland and get corrupted by the West. By emphasising the sense of belonging and a feeling of ‘home’ that some of the characters experience – which includes even second-generation immigrants – Shyamaprasad instils a collective nationalist sentiment into the audience. The filmmaker also focuses on certain characters – the lower-class illegal immigrant Shankaran and the Brahmin stay-at-home mother Saraswathi in *English; An Autumn in London*, and the IT employees, Krish and Roshni, who are in a relationship in *Ivide* – who experience a sense of displacement with their hostland. In the following section of the chapter, I highlighted the portrayal of female characters in Shyamaprasad’s diaspora films, especially in the way they construct their lives around the institutions of marriage and family. I argued that the spaces that women characters, particularly Saraswathi, appear become sites of dominant gender ideologies and sexual division of labour; this underscored how the diaspora, as conceptualised by Shyamaprasad, reproduces values of home culture in the Indian context. For example, in one of the scenes in *English: An Autumn in London*, Joy’s wife Saly prepares his lunch and hands it over to him at his workplace. She reminds him to at least wash the lunchbox after eating because she struggled to remove the stains of curry the day before. In *Ivide*, when Krish tells Roshni that he likes to cook, she gets pleasantly surprised and praises him for his interest in cooking. In the film, Shyamaprasad shows the scene, in which Krish cooks a dish for Roshni and she appreciates his skills in return, as one of the key moments that sparked their love. Thus, these scenes from the films reproduce cooking as a woman’s activity and as a rare skill that only a few men possess.



A scene from *Ivide* which shows Roshni praising Krish for his cooking skills.

Quite contrary to Shyamaprasad's representation of women in other films I discussed in Chapter Four and Chapter Six and the diasporic migrant woman in *Kallu Kondoru Pennu* in Chapter Five, the female characters in *English: An Autumn in London* and *Ivide* lack agency and any personal or professional goals and ambitions. For instance, as I emphasised in Chapter Five, most of the women in these two films are portrayed in such a way that they are happy to look after their husbands' or family members' wellbeing and support them to achieve their dreams and aspirations.

In *Kallu Kondoru Pennu*, Shyamaprasad provides a realistic picture of Kerala's Gulf immigrants. The central character Sita's family questions her chastity and expects her to maintain her 'home' culture. I identified this as a manifestation of Foucault's conception of biopower where the purity of her body is linked to her family's honour and culture. However, as I noted in the analysis, Sita transgresses these gender norms and the cultural expectation of her middle-class family. I underscored that Shyamaprasad challenges the stereotypical portrayals of diasporic migrant women in Malayalam cinema who are restricted to submissive roles within the family and the community. Thus, I make the claim that Shyamaprasad presents a unique representation of a female diasporic migrant in Malayalam cinema by showing Sita as an agentive and strong woman who is prepared to break the rigid moral boundaries of 'home'

culture.

In Chapter Six, which examined the spatial and gendered politics of caste in Shyamaprasad's films, I primarily focussed on the hegemony of the upper caste community, in particular the Nampoothiris and Brahmins. This approach, as I mentioned in the chapter, is important to question the norms and values of the upper castes in contemporary Kerala society who deny the existence of caste inequality and classify themselves as modern and classless subjects (Deshpande, 2013). The films of Shyamaprasad I discussed in the chapter also deal with the Nampoothiri and Brahmin communities. I also explored the gendered logic of caste in Kerala to examine the extent to which the intersection of these two social identities – gender and caste – play a role in the domination and marginalisation of women in Kerala. I identified specific contemporary events in Kerala, such as the organisation of 'Women's Wall' by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the Sabarimala temple entry case, and the Kiss of Love (KOL) protests, and discussed how some of these events are linked to the intersection of caste and gender in contemporary Kerala society. These examples were used to emphasise that the bourgeois male heads of the society continuously monitored, controlled, policed, sexualised, and gendered these events and protests to discipline women and suppress their identity based on their caste and gender denominations. A major part of my discussion on the representation of caste in Malayalam cinema explored the focus of Malayalam cinema on a middle-class, upper-caste worldview and the glorification of the upper-caste hegemony through their narratives and the depiction of central characters. Citing examples from films released particularly post liberalisation, I established how specific narratives and characterisation in Malayalam cinema reinforce upper-caste ideologies. In the analysis of *Agnisakshi*, I specifically highlighted how the gendered and caste-based practices of the Nampoothiri *illams* controlled, regulated, and disciplined women and interpellated them into powerless subjects in the process. Further, in the analysis, I mobilised Foucault's concept of disciplinary power to

exemplify how the *illam* functions as a site of surveillance, which controls and regulates women's body and behaviour in specific ways. I explored how *illams* are not only gendered spaces but also relational and dynamic (Massey, 1999; 2005). I also made an analogy between an *illam* and Foucault's 'prison' and showed how they both function as internal mechanisms of repression and discipline. I demonstrated how, through the characterisation of Devaki, Shyamaprasad challenges the dominant and repressive practices within the institution of marriage, especially in Nampoothiri *illams*, which is driven by the caste and gender-specific disciplinary mechanisms of family that controls and governs the subjects. The analysis also drew attention to how Devaki, the female protagonist, defies the hierarchical, gendered and caste-based discourses and practices in the society during her active participation in India's freedom struggle. The chapter also elucidated Shyamaprasad's characterisation of Unni's half-sister Thankam as a resolute and strong-willed woman who often questions her brother for his lack of love and empathy towards his wife and for his deep indulgence in conservative caste-based rituals and traditions. Despite being a woman and a non-Brahmin (as her mother belonged to the Nair community), Thankam refuses to conform to the patriarchal ideologies of the *illam* and eventually convinces her father on the need for women to get educated, find employment, and become self-sufficient. The thesis established how Shyamaprasad frames the narrative from Devaki's and Thankam's point of view, highlighting their efforts to fight against the gendered and casteist characters in the male dominated, hegemonic Nampoothiri community.

In *Arike*, Shyamaprasad's characterisation of the Guruji, the spiritual advisor to the central female character Kalpana's family, is crucial to the narrative. The Guruji, as portrayed by Shyamaprasad, takes a progressive stand against the enforcement of arranged marriages within familial institution and believes that women should have the freedom to take decisions freely and independently. I exemplified how, despite Guruji's intervention and his words of wisdom, Kalpana's family employs pastoral power to discipline her, control her thoughts, and

convince her of the need to follow their wish to marry a Brahmin man of their choice. Through his characterisation and narrative style, Shyamaprasad shows how, like Gayatri's middle-class, upper-caste parents in *Artist*, Kalpana's parents attempt to discipline subjects in order to conform to caste-gender norms within familial institutions. In my analysis, I also showed how Kalpana's friend Anuradha gets constantly objectified by upper-caste males but transforms into an independent and agentive woman who protects and supports her aged father and the household. Shyamaprasad portrays Anuradha as a strong woman who stays firm against aggressive masculine behaviour from family members and neighbours and sets a positive example for everyone around her.

Shyamaprasad's films highlight the patriarchal power structures that women in Kerala are forced to adhere to and underscore the excessive pressure on these women to be moral subjects or the 'ideal' Malayali woman. In the thesis, I show how Shyamaprasad's films also emphasise the excessive pressure on women to be moral subjects and how the burden of honour and prestige rests on women, draw attention to the concepts of marriage and family in the Kerala context, and exemplify how gender intersects with other social identities in Kerala society and the role they play in shaping and negotiating women's identities and subjectivities.

Occasionally, contemporary films such as *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) feature a central female character who challenges hierarchical gender relations and familial values; however, the narratives are rarely intersectional in their approach. There are emerging filmmakers who try to occasionally address social issues staying within the mainstream cinema corpus. However, in these films, central female characters who display strength, resilience, and independence earlier in the film submit to the male lead's display of courage or affection. Even the most recent Malayalam film, Akhil Sathyan's *Pachuvum Albutha Vilakkum* (Pachu and the Magical Lamp, 2023), is an example of such a trend. Other recent films such as Vipin Das's *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* (2022) and Jithin Issac Thomas's *Rekha* (2023) offer positive

representations of gender although even these films force us to conclude that mainstream Malayalam cinema thrives on simplistic dualities or binaries in the representation of social identities and does not take an intersectional approach in storytelling. In the thesis, I identify the opportunity to engage in an intersectional analysis of Shyamaprasad's films, which could not only prompt scholars working on gender and Malayalam cinema to think in that direction but could also provide filmmakers with potential ideas to think about similar intersectional approaches in their narratives and storytelling style.

Despite some of his efforts to challenge stereotypical representations of gender, class and caste in Malayalam cinema, Shyamaprasad does not critically engage with Dalit issues in his films reproducing the normalised trend in Malayalam cinema. That is why a major part of my literature review of caste in Kerala and the representation of caste in Malayalam cinema was based on the hegemony of the Brahmin community. I did emphasise in Chapter Six, citing scholars such as Rowena (2013), Raj, Gopinath and Sreekumar (2016) for instance, the lack of Dalit representation and cinematic discourses around subaltern issues in Malayalam cinema itself and the importance of depicting their realities on screen. Even in *Agnisakshi*, the portrayal of the suffering of Devaki and Thankam and how they offer counter-hegemonic resistance to the patriarchal forces within the *Illam* essentially translates to a critique of the affirmation of power rather than a representation of the oppression of Dalits and lower castes (apart from two or three scenes I discussed in the chapter).

The same can be said about queer representation in Shyamaprasad's films. In footnote 48 in Chapter Four, I referred to a few Malayalam films and their representation of the queer community, also highlighting how actor Dileep's portrayal of Radhakrishnan as a homosexual and transgender in the Lal Jose's film *Chanthupottu* (2005) raised severe criticism among the queer community. This reference was made in the thesis at a juncture where I was critical about Shyamaprasad's characterisation of Sunny in the film *Ritu*, especially in relation to Sharath's

character. In that instance, I underscored Shyamaprasad's problematic representation of homosexuality by arguing that in certain scenes of the film, Sunny's masculinity was subordinated to legitimise Sharath's hegemonic masculinity. Shyamaprasad's approach towards the articulation of queer masculinity has been partial and stereotypical. He has made radical films although there have been occasions when his films reproduced or reinforced stereotypical representations of minorities. As such, his representations of Dalit and queer communities remain subdued.

Significance and original contribution

As I highlighted in the introduction chapter, the thesis employed an interdisciplinary approach to film analysis. By primarily following a cultural studies pathway, the thesis utilises a contextual approach, whereby it tries to understand and evaluate the functioning of power in specific contexts using a range of different theories and concepts. Previously, there has not been any extensive scholarly works on a Malayalam director's films using a contextual approach.

The thesis establishes narrative analysis as a useful analytical approach to study Malayalam cinema and in particular, how a cultural studies approach to examine Malayalam films can utilise narrative analysis. The thesis also makes a broader contribution to gender studies and intersectionality in Kerala and India, where women are exploited and marginalised in multiple spaces in their everyday lives. The research makes an important contribution to scholarly work on Malayalam cinema, where most of the studies on gender do not undertake an extensive intersectional approach. In the majority of scholarly works on Malayalam cinema, as I highlight in my introduction chapter, gender is explored in isolation and not in relation to other modalities that structure identity and subjectivity such as diaspora, caste and class. Again, as I mentioned in my introduction to the thesis, most of these studies do not engage in a clearer and deeper discussion of how the intersection of gender with other social identities is crucial to

the narrative. As I demonstrated in the thesis, an intersectional approach helps to understand how social identities work on various levels, resulting in experiences that are unique to individuals. The oppression or subordination of subjects cannot be fully understood or determined by a single aspect of their identity; it is shaped by other categories too. Additionally, the society in which the individual lives and the specific spaces they occupy play a crucial role in determining their subject positions and the ways in which their experiences are shaped. Using an intersectional approach, the thesis successfully traces the distinct forms of discrimination, exploitation, and domination Malayali women experienced over the years when gender intersects with other social identities.

As part of the cultural studies approach, which I adopted in the thesis, I emphasised the importance of space and spatial politics in the discussion of gender and its intersectional modalities such as sexuality, diaspora, class and caste. In the introduction chapter, I made the claim that existing scholarship on Malayalam cinema does not emphasise enough on the idea of space and its discursive nature. In the same chapter, I examined a few scholarly works on the analysis of gender in Malayalam cinema and highlighted how the authors did not examine the role of particular spaces and why it is crucial to consider it in the analysis of the narrative and characterisation. The thesis explored how power plays out in different spaces or the ways in which power shapes subjectivity in specific spatial conditions. To do this, I mainly engage with scholars such as Foucault and Massey, who have conceptualised the idea of space to understand its role in power relations. I employed Foucault's notions of disciplinary spaces, biopower, and pastoral power and Massey's idea of space being gendered, relational, and dynamic to analyse the characters and narratives of Shyamaprasad's films; for example, how middle-class men and women behave, or the way in which the Nampoothiri *illams* operate, or what happens when characters in Shyamaprasad's films transgress these spaces? In the introduction chapter, I also explored the gaps in scholarship of gender in Malayalam cinema, particularly in relation to intersectionality and space and illustrated how the thesis addresses

them.

The thesis also makes a broader contribution in relation to how women in cinema are conceived by a director in Malayalam cinema. To my knowledge, this is the first detailed study of gender and its intersection with modalities such as diaspora, class and caste in the films of a Malayalam film director. One of the articles I published during my candidature, titled ‘Locating and dislocating gender and middle-class moralities in Malayalam cinema: A study of Shyamaprasad’s *Ore Kadal* and *Artist*’, is one of the few scholarly works that examines the representation of the middle-class in Malayalam cinema, particularly in its intersection with gender.

Limits of the study

The study has three main limitations. Firstly, this thesis only examines nine films of director Shyamaprasad across three analysis chapters. However, I briefly discussed certain aspects of all the other Shyamaprasad films⁶⁵ which do not feature in my analysis chapters such as *Bokshu the Myth*, *Off Season*⁶⁶, *Akale*, *Hey Jude*, and *Oru Njayarazcha* in the introduction chapter. I also mentioned a relevant aspect of *Akale* in Chapter Four of the thesis. As I mentioned in my introduction to the thesis, the films I included in the analysis chapters reproduce particular traits. Those films that did not fit into the specific theme of a certain chapter(s) were not discussed in detail in the analysis chapters. Considering that the focus of the thesis is on gender and intersectionality, I did not engage in a detailed examination of any films that reproduce similar sort of gender politics of the Shyamaprasad films that I already discussed in the analysis chapters. Secondly, my research only included the feature films that Shyamaprasad directed. The thesis does not discuss any of his works for television (telefilms)

⁶⁵ This does not include Shyamaprasad’s most recent film *Kasiminte Kadal* (Kasim’s Sea, 2022), which is yet to be released in any theatres or film festivals.

⁶⁶ *Off Season* (2009) is a short segment (12 min approx.) in the anthology film *Kerala Café* directed by ten Malayalam directors.

or the films in which he has acted. Thirdly, the thesis mostly focuses on cinema and does not engage in a detailed discussion of other visual or new media platforms such as television or web.

Scope for future research

This study examined how Shyamaprasad's films challenge or reinforce the ways in which modalities such as gender, sexuality, diaspora, class and caste are articulated in Kerala society and represented in Malayalam cinema. In my closer observation, gender emerged as a key theme in all Shyamaprasad films. I adopted a cultural studies methodology, which focuses on the contextually and historically specific analysis of the ways in which power and sociocultural relationships are formed, structured, and maintained. With gender being the key focus of my discussion, especially in the way they are portrayed in Shyamaprasad's films and Malayalam cinema in general, I explored the culturally and historically specific events that led to the exploitation and subordination of women in Kerala society, and how they resulted in the conceptualisation of the 'ideal' Malayali woman. For my study, I limited my research on Kerala society and its cultural politics to journal articles and books in the English language. My examination of gender and its intersectional modalities, in relation to the ways in which they are articulated in Kerala/Indian society and represented in Malayalam cinema, is also mostly limited to scholarly work in English. Future research on a cultural studies and intersectional based study on the works of a filmmaker can also utilise more scholarship in the vernacular language. Future study on Shyamaprasad's works can also focus on his telefilms, particularly the ways in which the themes and issues discussed in them reflect the location and period in which they were made. Considering that all his telefilms are adaptations from works of acclaimed writers and authors from Kerala and other parts of the world (like some of his feature films), it would be interesting to examine the extent to which the themes and narratives contextually and historically relate to the cultural politics of Kerala society. As I mentioned

already, some of Shyamaprasad's films too have been based on novels or short stories of authors and writers based in Kerala or overseas. This was above and beyond the scope of my research. However, future research can engage in an extensive comparative study between the narratives of the relevant literary works and Shyamaprasad's films and telefilms.

In the thesis, I made the claim that most in-depth studies of gender in Malayalam cinema do not employ an extensive intersectional approach. However, a few scholars in the recent past, such as Sebastian (2021), Geetha (2021), Pillai (2020), and Mokkal (2020) for example, which I briefly discussed earlier in the thesis, have undertaken an intersectional approach in their analysis of gender politics in Malayalam cinema. These scholarly works would hopefully be a starting point to more explorations of the ways in which the intersectional hegemonies of gender, sexuality, diaspora, caste and class operate in Malayalam cinema.

Finally, as a parting statement, I wish to say that embarking on this research has enabled me to recognise that I was part of a society that did not treat every person the same, a flawed system where the yardstick of fairness and equality would differ based on the specific gender, sexuality, class and caste they belong to. I am now able to critically reflect on my own masculinity and understand the lives and the everyday struggles of women better.

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Filmography

Kallu Kondoru Pennu (A Woman Made of Stone, 1998)

Agnisakshi (With Fire As Witness, 1999)

Boskhu, The Myth (2002 [unreleased])

Akale (Far Away, 2004)

Ore Kadal (*The Sea Within*, 2007)

Ritu (*Seasons*, 2009)

Kerala Café (2010)

Elektra (2010)

Arike (So Close, 2012)

English: An Autumn in London (2013)

Artist (2013)

Ivide (Here, 2015)

Hey Jude (2018)

Oru Njayarazcha (A Sunday, 2019)

Kasiminte Kadal (Kasim's Sea, 2022 [unreleased])

Neelakuyil (The Blue Cuckoo, 1954)

Bhargavi Nilayam (The House of Bhargavi, 1964)

Nadan Pennum Nattu Pramaniyum (The Traditional Girl and the Nobleman, 2000)

Swapnakkoodu (The Nest of Dreams, 2003)

Pappayude Swantham Appoos (Pappas Own Appoos, 1992)

No. 1 Snehatheeram Bangalore North (No. 1 Love Shore Bangalore North, 1995)

Aniyathipravu (The Younger Sister Dove, 1997)

Veendum Chila Veettukaryangal (A Few Other Family Affairs, 1999)

Kochu Kochu Santhoshangal (The Little Moments of Happiness, 2000)

Salt N' Pepper (2011)

Chappa Kurishu (Heads or Tails, 2011)

22 Female Kottayam (2012)

Diamond Necklace (2012)

Pranayavarnangal (The Colours of Love, 1998)

Notebook (2006)

Koode (2018)

Bangalore Days (2014)

Vigathakumaran (The Lost Child, 1928)

Balan (1938)

Gnanambika (Goddess of Knowledge, 1940)

Thulabharam (Weighing Scale, 1968)

Chattakkari (Anglo-Indian Girl, 1974)

Thaniyavarthanam (The Repeating Rhythm, 1987)

Sukritam (Good Deed, 1994)

Godfather (1991)

Gandharvam (The Gandharva Union, 1993)

Kabooliwala (The Man Who Plays Kabuli, 1993)

Murapennu (The Customary Bride, 1965)

Koottukudumbam (Joint Family, 1969)

Mooladhanam (Capital, 1969)

Kuttyedathi (1971)

April 18 (1985)

Aaryan (The Illustrious One, 1988)

Adhipan (The Lord, 1989)

Kireedom (Crown, 1989)

Chanakyan (The Wise One, 1989)

Parampara (Series, 1990)

Amaram (The Stern, 1991)

Devasuram (God-Demon, 1993)

Spadikam (Crystal, 1995)

Meleparambil Aanveedu (The Men's Villa of Meleparambu, 1993)

Hitler (1996)

Mithunam (1993)

Aaram Thampuran (The Sixth Emperor, 1997)

Chandralekha (1997)

Njangal Santhushtaranu (We Are Happy, 1999)

Ravanaprabhu (Ravana, The Prince, 2001)

Chathurangam (Chess, 2002)

Balram vs Tharadas (2006)

Chinthamani Kola Case (The Murder Case of Chinthamani, 2006)

Christian Brothers (2011)

Kasaba (2016)

Drishyam (The Sight, 2013)

Drishyam 2 (Sequel to The Sight, 2021)

My Story (2018)

Love 24x7 (2015)

Kanmadam (Viscous Rock, 1998)

Chinthavishtayaya Shyamala (The pensive Shyamala, 1998)

Dhosth (Friend, 2001)

Swapnakoodu (Dream House, 2002)

Cycle (2008)

Oru Vadakkan Selfie (A Selfie from the North, 2015)

Lucifer (2019)

Bro Daddy (2022)

Adaminte Variyellu (Adam's Rib, 1983)

Irakal (Victims, 1985)

Aham (I, 1992)

Kilichundan Mampazham (Bird's Beak Mango, 2003),

Traffic (2011)

You Too Brutus (2015)

Moothon (The Elder One) 2019)

Njan Mary kutty (I am Mary kutty, 2018)

Mumbai Police (2013)

Ardhanari (Half Woman, 2012)

Chanthupottu (2005)

Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge (The Brave Heart Takes the Bride, 1995)

Dil To Pagal Hai (Love is Crazy, 1997)

Kuch Kuch Hota Hai (Something... Something Happens, 1998)

Ezham Kadalinnakkare (Beyond the Seventh Sea, 1979)

Dollar (1994)

Kabhi Kushi Kabhi Gham (Sometimes There is Joy, Sometimes There is Sorrow, 2001)

Drama (2018)

Two Countries (2015)

Life of Josutty (2015)

Escape from Uganda (2013)

Varnapakittu (Vibrant Colours, 1997)

Akkare, Akkare, Akkare (Far, Far Away, 1990)

Jacobinte Swargarajyam (Jacob's Kingdom of Heaven, 2016)

Pathemari (Dhow, 2015)

Gaddama (Housemaid, 2011)

Arabikatha (Arabian Tale, 2007)

Dubai (2001)

Pardes (Foreign Land, 1997)

Varavelpu (Welcome, 1989)

Mampazhakkalam (The Mango Season, 2004)

Perumazhkkalam (The Rainy Season, 2004)

Pavithram (Purity, 1994)

Manhole (2016)

Kammattipadam (2016)

Kismath (Destiny, 2016)

Thottappan (2019)

Achanurangatha Veedu (The Home of the Sleepless Father, 2006)

Paithrukam (Tradition, 1993)

Punyam (Pure, 2002)

Kilukkam (Jingle, 1991)

Dhruvam (Pole, 1993)

Thenmavin Kombath (On the branches of Honey Mango Tree, 1994)

Kakkakuyil (Crow-Cuckoo, 2001)

Maadambi (The Feudal Lord, 2008)

Pathinettam Padi (The Eighteenth Step, 2019)

Aaraattu (2022)

Chithram (Picture, 1988)

His Highness Abdullah (1990)

Kurup (2021)

Take Off (2017)

Ennu Ninte Moideen (Yours Truly, Moideen, 2015)

Celluloid (2013)

Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathira Kolapathakathinte Katha (*Manikyam of Paleri: The Story of a Midnight Murder*, 2009)

Crime File (1999)

Ore CBI Diary Kurippu (A CBI Diary Entry, 1988)

Pachuvum Albutha Vilakkum (*Pachu and the Magical Lamp*, 2023)

Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey (2022)

The Great Indian Kitchen (2021)

Rekha (2023)