



Portrayal of Toxic Masculinity in Malayalam Movies: Kumbalangi Nights and Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the representation of toxic masculinity in two contemporary Malayalam films, *Kumbalangi Nights* (Narayanan, 2019) and *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* (Das, 2022). The study develops a scene-based reading of the films by connecting selected dialogue, character behaviour, domestic relationships, and moments of conflict with scholarship on hegemonic masculinity, patriarchy, gendered power, and intimate partner violence. The analysis identifies recurring practices of dominance, aggression, sexual entitlement, emotional repression, control over women's choices, rigid gender roles, and violence when masculine authority is challenged. Shammi in *Kumbalangi Nights* is examined as a performance of the culturally idealised "complete man," whose authority depends upon control of the domestic sphere. Rajesh in *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* is examined through domestic violence, restrictions on Jaya's education and autonomy, and the protection of masculine prestige. The study argues that both films distinguish masculinity from domination: they expose harmful masculine practices while also opening narrative possibilities for care, vulnerability, equality, and agency. The comparative analysis contributes to discussions of changing representations of masculinity in Malayalam cinema.

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Introduction

Cinema functions as a cultural form through which societies represent gender, family, authority, intimacy, and acceptable behaviour. Contemporary Malayalam cinema has increasingly moved away from uncomplicated images of the invulnerable male hero and toward more complex representations of masculine identity. *Kumbalangi Nights*, in particular, has been discussed as a film that unsettles the conventional heroic male image and exposes the violence that can accompany patriarchal authority (Gangadharan, 2021; Liyana & Aravind, 2024; Sooraj & Krishna, 2022).

The present article develops the original project on toxic masculinity in *Kumbalangi Nights* and *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey*. The source project identifies aggression, dominance, sexual aggression, emotional repression, control, and rigid gender roles through detailed scene observations. This revised article retains those observations while strengthening the academic structure through a theoretical framework, literature review, methodology, comparative analysis, findings, limitations, and scholarly references.

The concept of toxic masculinity requires careful use. It does not mean that masculinity itself is inherently harmful or that all men exhibit toxic behaviour. Instead, it refers to particular culturally reinforced norms and practices—such as compulsory toughness, domination, emotional restriction, entitlement, and violence that can become harmful to individuals and relationships (Sculos, 2017). Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity is useful because it explains how culturally dominant forms of masculinity can legitimise gender hierarchy.

This article asks three questions: (1) How do the selected films represent toxic masculine practices? (2) How are masculinity and authority connected to family, gender roles, and control? and (3) Do the films reproduce toxic masculinity, or do they also challenge it by presenting alternative forms of masculinity and female agency?

Literature Review

Masculinity is increasingly understood as plural, relational, and socially constructed. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) describe hegemonic masculinity as a culturally dominant configuration that legitimises a gender order and exists in relation to other masculinities. This framework is particularly productive for film analysis because cinematic characters often embody socially recognisable expectations of the “proper man,” including strength, independence, heterosexuality, authority, economic competence, and control.



Sculos (2017) argues that toxic masculinity is better understood as a cluster of norms, beliefs, and behaviours than as a fixed male essence. This distinction is important because it directs analysis toward specific harmful practices rather than treating men as inherently problematic. Aggression, dominance, rejection of vulnerability, and status anxiety can therefore be examined as culturally produced performances.

The existing scholarship on Kumbalangi Nights strongly supports such an approach. Gangadharan (2021) argues that the film subverts conventional masculine and patriarchal roles within the family. Sooraj and Krishna (2022) read the film through hegemonic masculinity and argue that it unsettles the traditional filmic hero by exposing the toxic dimensions of a supposedly ideal masculine identity. Mathew (2022) situates the film within capitalist patriarchy, the heteronormative family, and a crisis of care. Liyana and Aravind (2024) examine masculinity, gendered space, and violence in recent Malayalam cinema and identify Shammi as a significant representation of the “complete man.”

Recent scholarship has also examined *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* in relation to intimate partner violence and women’s resistance. Subramani and Borah (2024) use qualitative textual analysis and frameworks of coercive control and resistant vulnerability to examine the film alongside *The Great Indian Kitchen*. Their study highlights women’s agency in confronting patriarchal violence. The present article complements this work by focusing specifically on how the film constructs and destabilises masculine authority.

Although the two films have been studied separately, a focused comparison of their representations of toxic masculine practices remains useful. The present study therefore brings them together to examine how male authority operates across romantic, domestic, familial, and social spaces.

Theoretical Framework

Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity provides the principal framework. It refers not simply to the most common form of masculinity but to a culturally authoritative pattern that legitimises gender hierarchy (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In film, hegemonic masculinity can be examined through questions such as who makes decisions, who controls domestic space, whose emotions are legitimate, who performs care work, and whose authority is treated as natural.

Toxic Masculinity



Toxic masculinity is used here as a complementary concept for identifying harmful practices rather than labelling masculinity as inherently toxic. The analysis concentrates on dominance and control, aggression and violence, emotional repression and masculine prestige, rigid gender roles, and sexual entitlement.

Patriarchy and Gendered Space

The article also treats the home as a gendered space rather than a neutral background. Dining rooms, kitchens, bedrooms, workplaces, farms, and family compounds can become sites in which authority is produced and contested. This is particularly relevant to both films because masculine power is repeatedly expressed through control over everyday domestic arrangements.

Methodology

The study uses qualitative close textual analysis of *Kumbalangi Nights* (Narayanan, 2019) and *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* (Das, 2022). The films are treated as primary cultural texts. Selected scenes identified in the original project are analysed through dialogue, character actions, interpersonal conflict, use of space, and narrative turning points.

The unit of analysis is the scene or sequence in which masculine identity is performed, challenged, defended, or transformed. Each selected scene is examined by identifying the masculine practice represented, relating it to the theoretical framework, examining responses from other characters, and considering whether the narrative reinforces or critiques the practice.

The study is interpretive and does not claim to measure audience attitudes or establish causal effects of cinema. Its conclusions are therefore limited to representations and narrative framing within the two selected films. Audience surveys, interviews, reception studies, and larger-scale content analysis would be required to establish broader social effects.

Analysis of Kumbalangi Nights

Bobby: Sexual Entitlement and Masculine Pride

The original project identifies a theatre sequence in which Bobby attempts to kiss Babymol despite her refusal. Her resistance challenges his expectation of compliance, and his response is connected to wounded masculine pride. The scene can be read through sexual entitlement because Bobby's desire is



initially placed above Babymol's expressed boundary. The significance of the scene lies in its rejection of the assumption that masculine identity provides entitlement to a woman's body.

The scene also shows that toxic masculine behaviour can emerge through relatively ordinary romantic interaction rather than only through extreme violence. By allowing Babymol to resist and by showing Bobby's anger, the film exposes the instability of a masculine identity dependent upon compliance from women.

Saji and Bobby: Masculinity as Competition

The repeated conflicts between Saji and Bobby show another form of masculine performance. Physical strength, anger, pride, and the desire to establish superiority become means through which the brothers negotiate status. Their conflicts suggest that masculinity is relational: men may perform masculinity in front of other men in order to secure recognition.

At the same time, the film complicates these characters rather than presenting them as fixed embodiments of toxicity. Their vulnerabilities and changing relationships create the possibility of alternative masculine identities based on affection, responsibility, and mutual care.

Shammi and the "Complete Man"

Shammi is the strongest representation of hegemonic masculinity in the film. His carefully maintained appearance, grooming, confidence, and repeated concern with being a "complete man" construct masculinity as a visible performance. Scholarship similarly identifies Shammi as a figure through whom the film satirises the conventional Malayalam film hero (Liyana & Aravind, 2024; Sooraj & Krishna, 2022).

Shammi's relationship with domestic labour is especially significant. He rejects comparison with a man who performs household work while his wife earns money, implying that domestic labour is incompatible with his masculine identity. This scene reveals a gender ideology in which breadwinning and authority are coded as masculine while care work is feminised. Mathew (2022) connects the film's family structure with a broader crisis of care and patriarchal organisation.

Shammi's authority is also spatial. He regulates who may enter the premises, wants access to private conversations, and attempts to organise family routines. His insistence on controlling the dining arrangement transforms an ordinary family activity into a demonstration of patriarchal authority. The film therefore shows that domination is produced not only through dramatic violence but also through everyday practices.



Violence and the Collapse of Masculine Authority

The final confrontation is the most extreme expression of Shammi's toxic masculinity. When the women challenge his authority and the possibility of Bobby and Babymol's relationship becomes clear, Shammi's control begins to collapse. His response escalates into physical violence. The original project interprets this sequence as the culmination of his desire to maintain supreme authority.

The scene is significant because violence appears when recognition of masculine authority disappears. Shammi's identity depends on being accepted as the unquestioned man of the household; when that status is challenged, violence becomes an attempt to restore hierarchy. This interpretation is consistent with scholarship linking the film's representation of masculinity to gendered violence and the maintenance of hegemonic power (Liyana & Aravind, 2024).

Importantly, the film does not glorify Shammi. It turns the characteristics traditionally associated with the powerful male hero—physical confidence, grooming, control, authority—into signs of danger and absurdity. In this way, Kumbalangi Nights participates in a broader transformation of Malayalam cinematic masculinity.

Analysis of Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey

Family Authority and Educational Inequality

The film begins its critique of patriarchy through Jaya's education. The original project identifies the scene in which Jaya expresses her academic aspirations but male relatives dismiss her opinion. Her brother receives greater educational investment while her opportunities are restricted. The declaration that men make decisions in the household explicitly establishes a gendered hierarchy.

This is a form of toxic masculine authority that operates without physical violence. Jaya's autonomy is restricted through decision-making power and the assumption that her aspirations require male approval. The film therefore demonstrates that masculine dominance is embedded in ordinary family decisions as well as overt abuse.

The Progressive Male and Hidden Control

Jaya's relationship with her college professor further complicates the representation of masculinity. He initially appears progressive and supportive of women's rights but gradually becomes controlling. He attempts to regulate her behaviour and social relationships. The contradiction between progressive self-



presentation and possessive behaviour shows that patriarchal control can survive beneath apparently modern language.

The eventual physical violence makes the contradiction visible. The film thus challenges the idea that toxic masculinity belongs only to obviously traditional or aggressive men. Control and possessiveness can also appear within relationships that initially seem progressive.

Rajesh: Domestic Violence and Coercive Control

Rajesh represents the most sustained form of toxic masculine behaviour in the film. After marriage, he restricts Jaya's education and repeatedly hits her for minor reasons. The original project notes a recurring pattern in which violence is followed by nominal apology and temporary reconciliation before the behaviour returns. This pattern demonstrates the normalisation of abuse within the marital relationship.

Rajesh's control extends beyond physical assault. He attempts to determine household routines, food, education, and Jaya's choices. The problem is therefore not simply anger but a broader structure of coercive authority. Subramani and Borah (2024) similarly identify intimate partner violence and women's resistance as central concerns in the film.

The response of the family is also important. When Jaya seeks help, she is advised to adjust and compromise. The film consequently shows that toxic masculinity can be sustained by social structures that minimise violence. Individual behaviour is embedded within a wider patriarchal environment.

Masculine Prestige and Emotional Repression

After Jaya physically challenges Rajesh, he attempts to hide the fact that he has been defeated by his wife. The original project interprets this as evidence of emotional repression and concern about masculine prestige. His inability to acknowledge vulnerability contributes to resentment and the desire for revenge.

This dimension demonstrates that toxic masculinity can harm men as well as women. When weakness, fear, or vulnerability are treated as unacceptable, men may conceal emotional experiences rather than seek support. The result can be further aggression and isolation.

Jaya's Resistance and Agency

Jaya's response to Rajesh is initially physical self-defence, but her longer transformation involves education, independence, work, and decision-making. Her development challenges the assumption that



women's security must depend on male protection. The narrative connects resistance to broader autonomy rather than treating physical retaliation as the only solution.

The later emphasis on economic agency is particularly significant. Jaya's participation in business and independent decision-making reverses the earlier hierarchy in which Rajesh controlled her education and choices. The film therefore presents empowerment as multidimensional: bodily autonomy, education, work, financial independence, and the right to make decisions.

Comparative Discussion

The two films share a central concern: masculine authority becomes destructive when it is treated as entitlement to control other people. Shammi and Rajesh differ in personality and narrative context, but both understand domestic life as a space in which their authority should be recognised. Both respond negatively when women refuse obedience.

The films differ in emphasis. *Kumbalangi Nights* examines masculinity through brothers, family structures, care, and the symbolic construction of the "complete man." *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* focuses more directly on marriage, domestic violence, women's education, and economic autonomy. The first exposes the performance of patriarchal masculinity; the second traces a woman's movement from subordination toward independence.

Both films also connect masculinity with domestic labour and gender roles. Shammi rejects domestic work because he associates it with femininity, while Rajesh attempts to organise Jaya's life according to his preferences. In both cases, gender roles become mechanisms for protecting masculine authority.

Violence appears in different forms and should not be treated as identical across the characters. Bobby's sexual boundary violation, the physical conflicts between Saji and Bobby, Shammi's extreme violence, and Rajesh's domestic abuse represent different levels and contexts of harm. Their common analytical feature is the relationship between entitlement, control, threatened status, and the use of power.

The films ultimately challenge the idea that masculinity is naturally synonymous with dominance. *Kumbalangi Nights* foregrounds care, brotherhood, emotional vulnerability, and alternative family relations. *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* foregrounds resistance, education, economic independence, and equality. Both therefore create narrative possibilities beyond toxic masculine authority.



Major Findings

1. Toxic masculinity in the selected films is represented through specific practices of domination rather than masculinity itself.
2. Male authority is repeatedly connected to control over women's bodies, education, labour, mobility, speech, and choices.
3. Violence becomes especially visible when masculine authority or masculine prestige is challenged.
4. Domestic spaces function as major sites for the performance and negotiation of gendered power.
5. Emotional repression and fear of humiliation contribute to masculine conflict and escalation.
6. Both films destabilise conventional heroic masculinity by exposing its social and personal costs.
7. Both narratives make alternative forms of agency, care, equality, and emotional vulnerability visible.

Limitations

The study is limited to two Malayalam films and employs qualitative close reading. It does not measure audience responses, establish causal effects of film viewing, or claim to represent Malayalam cinema as a whole. Interpretations are shaped by the theoretical concepts adopted. Future research could combine textual analysis with audience reception studies, interviews, surveys, or larger comparative samples of Malayalam films.

Conclusion

Kumbalangi Nights and Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey provide significant examples of contemporary Malayalam cinema engaging critically with masculine authority. Through Shammi, Kumbalangi Nights exposes the instability and violence behind the performance of the "complete man." Through Rajesh and Jaya, Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey exposes domestic patriarchy and demonstrates the importance of female autonomy.

The major contribution of the two films is not simply that they depict harmful men. More importantly, they question cultural assumptions that make domination appear masculine. Respect, empathy, care, equality, vulnerability, education, and autonomy emerge as more sustainable alternatives to coercion and control. The comparative reading therefore demonstrates how Malayalam cinema can function as a critical space for rethinking masculinity and gender relations.

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