

# Malayali young men and their movie heroes

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In this chapter, we are bringing together two of our own abiding interests - masculinities and popular culture - and think about how they are configured within the arena of cinema, by focusing in on Kerala's two major male movie stars and especially upon the relationship they have with their young male fans (Osella & Osella 1998, 1999, 2000b, 2001). For lack of space, time and expertise, we will not here be taking an approach which has been common in cultural studies or film studies, and which would surely enrich our argument - looking at films and interpreting them as texts. We will instead approach our subject from a classic anthropological angle, which intersects with cultural studies and film studies at the nexus of audience and hence - we hope - further justifies our eclectic borrowing of theoretical perspectives drawn from these disciplines. We will begin with the film audience - those who receive or subvert cinematic messages, who form relationships with the stars (whether in fantasy or actually) and with each other, mediated through cinematic modes of being or styles of doing . In discussing Malayalam cinema's two major heroes and the attributes they are perceived to embody, we will pick up and extending to the stars the suggestion that mythic and religious figures - hence, we add stars - provide helpful anchor points for people doing identity work (see e.g. Roland 1988:253, 297; Kakar 1982:4; 1986:114; 1989:135; Obeyesekere 1990). In line with other work on stars, we are then considering cinema as a modern arena analagous to myth, a forum for collective fantasy which can act as a source of helpful orientations or archetypes (Gandhy & Thomas 1991)<sup>i</sup>. Stars are then particular nodes within that arena, dense points of transfer of desire, belief, self-affirmation or transformation and so on. Stars are also to be considered not only in particular roles on specific films but more generally - following insights from media studies - intertextually, or across the broad range of arenas in which they appear - film, cinema magazine pin-ups, newspaper

interviews, public appearances and so on (e.g. Dyer 1998; Gledhill 1991). Fans and fan activities actively contribute to these parallel texts (e.g. Jenkins 1990). We should also add that we ourselves both enjoy these movies as entertainment, sources of aesthetic pleasure and emotional triggers and do not in any way subscribe to common elitist academic views (following e.g. strict Frankfurt school or Gramscian interpretations) that popular entertainment is mindless 'mass culture' devoid of value and working as ideological apparatus. Here we take strong issue with Dickey's Marxist-inspired work on Tamil cinema (Dickey 1993, 2001)<sup>ii</sup>. While we have collected data - to which we will occasionally refer- from girls and women about cinema and its male heroes, our particular focus here is masculinity in its various expressions and embodiments by men, particularly the ways in which young men draw upon the various aspects of masculinity performed by male stars.

The importance of cinema in the cultural, social and fantasy lives of Indians is by now a taken-for-granted - if still relatively understudied and undertheorised - phenomenon (e.g. Kakar 1989:25ff; Dwyer 2000, Dwyer & Pinney 2001). Strong suggestions come from Indianist psychoanalytic literature that the process by which film becomes meaningful in a person's inner life is somehow specifically Indian, and is linked to a contextual sense of self, shifting identity and so on (see e.g. Kakar 1989:27; Roland 1991:253;297). This view relies upon a distinction between solid bounded Western persons (normatively presumed to be internally stable) and fluid shifting Indian persons (who normatively need external anchors) but is contested by post-Freudian psychoanalytic analyses, upon which much 'Western' film theory heavily depends, which posits all selves as complexly configured and unstable. We believe that the stable and essentialised post-enlightenment subjects which have been assumed as a base in analyses which make distinctions between 'European' or 'Western' selves and their

fluid Asian ‘others’ have by now been adequately demonstrated as fictive.

Acknowledgement of the fragmented or multiple nature of self and subjectivity in all ethnographic settings alerts us to the possibility that identities are neither bounded and set once and for all nor internally consistent (see e.g. Kondo 1990; Gupta & Ferguson 1992). We will work with the notion of the ‘dividual’, not, pace Marriott, as a uniquely South Asian type of self standing in contrast to Euro-American stable individuals, but as a useful way of thinking about all selves: partible, fluid, in flux and in continual processes of exchange with others, whereby characteristics are transferred between people (Marriott 1990). We find that the dividual is also useful in being a fully corporealised self, rather than an abstract ‘consciousness’.

While following up suggestions about the importance in identity work of the person of cinema in South Asia, we begin then from two core assumptions: that Indian popular culture need not actually work very differently from that of the West, while Indian and Euro/ North-American selves are equally shifting and multiple, such that to make a dichotomy between the uses of Indian and American cinematic forms is not helpful<sup>iii</sup>. While allowing Gledhill’s point about the “separate identity” of other cinemas and the “national specificity of Hollywood”, still there remains something common in the ways in which cinema does its cultural /psychic work. Popular Hollywood cinema also runs through familiar sets of moral dilemmas, fantasy situations and existential crises, while recurring stock characters such as the Autonomous Hero, the Teenage Rebel, the Bad Woman, and so on are clearly discernible. Thus, just as Obeyesekere argues that we can use psychoanalytic theory in South Asia but need to understand that here symbol, fantasy, therapy, identity-work, may be experienced and played out differently from classical theory’s expectations - notably, that they may be placed in a strong collective context of community and articulated against a different set

of background goals (Obeyesekere 1982, 1990), we assert here that we do not need to reject outright either film theory or psychoanalysis, but can use them cautiously and in suitably modified forms (see e.g. Kurtz 1992). The very existence and viability in Western academics of the discipline of media studies confirms that cinema plays exactly the same strong role in people's fantasy lives in the USA/Europe as it does in Asia. And at the same time, as Gledhill points out, in Europe/USA, "cinema still provides the ultimate confirmation of stardom" (1991:xiii), stardom being a phenomenon which provides a focus for this paper. For these reasons, although film theory's appeals to the tools of psychoanalysis have been heavily criticised (notably for working with assumed of maleness and whiteness in its subjects), we will continue here to draw upon it, while at the same time retaining the right to take a sceptical stance on certain aspects of it. At the same time, we acknowledge the possibility that the grounds for fantasy life may be wider than those conventionally discussed. As Jayamanne and Eleftheriotis remark, critiquing unmediated uses of film theories developed in relation to Hollywood movies, the fantasy worlds crafted and the desires evoked may not be 'secret, guilty pleasures' of an individualistic and privatised sort, primarily concerned with issues of sexuality, gender and so on, but may also address other arenas - specifically, dreams of modernity (Jayamanne 1992; Eleftheriotis 1995).

What follows is drawn from three periods of resident fieldwork in Kerala, totalling 3 years, during which time we have undertaken interviews with film fans - male and female, young and older, from casual cinema goers to committed members of film star fan associations - watched Malayalam movies, looked at cinema magazines and collected many impressions about Kerala's cinema scene. While we have worked with fan clubs in the city, most of our background data and

understanding of the relevance of cinema and what we can call cinematic modes of being in daily life comes from fieldwork in a rural area<sup>iv</sup>.

Valiyagramam (pseudonym) is a mixed *gramam* (village; rural settlement) in which class differentiation has been considerably exacerbated by the recent impact of migration to the West Asian Persian Gulf countries and by economic liberalisation. The particular zone where we work is characterised by a rapidly expanding middle-class, a small and declining elite and a substantial and increasingly impoverished working class sector, comprising many who work precariously as casual day labourers. Villagers are also divided - and stratified - by *sammudayam* or *jati*, community or caste. Hindu families of traditionally high caste status (such as Brahmans and aristocratic Nayars) live largely in the village interior near to temples; other communities (Christians and lower-caste Hindus) live scattered around the village. Residential areas are divided between a few *colonies*, neighbourhoods inhabited by single communities, and mixed areas, by far the majority. Members of Dalit castes - Pulayas and Parayans - continue to live in segregated areas, at the edges of the paddy-fields; they are still overwhelmingly employed as labourers, moving into areas such as house-construction or inland fishing as the agricultural economy continues to decline. Caste and class still tend to correlate here, but it is fundamental to understand that Kerala, with its long history of dense international connections and high level of participation in the global economy and political order, cannot be consigned to the fictive 'premodern' world of romantic anthropology, and that the masculine identities which young men are crafting are decidedly and self-consciously 'modern', in a state whose self-image as 'progressive' is over-determinedly modern.

Cinema is important among all social groups: watching practice differs, such that day labourers are more likely than the 'middle class respectable' to visit the

cinema in town with wife and children as a treat, while those of higher status will hire videos to watch at home on VCRs; almost everybody stays home or visits TV-owning neighbours on Sunday afternoon to see the weekly Malayalam movie shown on regional public TV; wealthier villagers have access to cable and a richer variety of films. Malayalam cinema began in 1928, with the first talkie in 1938, and from its beginning has tended to draw not on theatre or mythologicals but on literature. There are just 475 permanent cinemas in Kerala (pop. around 60 million) and currently the average cost of making a single-starrer is around \$ 200 000. While some film theory has drawn a distinction between melodramatic forms and narrative forms, tending then to figure the former as typical of South Asian and the latter as Hollywood styles, Malayalam cinema consciously works and claims to transcend such divides (as it claims also to move beyond the popular : parallel cinema break by producing quality mass films) in melding melodrama-style, song-and-dance formulas, stock characters and set-piece scenes with strong plots and tendencies towards realism and ‘interior’ acting. As Jayamanne notes, following Gunning and writing on Sri Lankan family dramas, the emergence of modernist narrative modes in cinema does not purge out melodramatic aspects such as the spectacular. Indeed, melodrama itself contains narrativity, such that viewers find themselves attracted to stock characters and formal set-pieces (such as the death-bed scene) in a way which engages them and draws them into a story (1992:148).

### ***Mammootty and Mohan Lal***

First off let us approach Kerala via its diaspora: take a trip to the large and long-established ‘Kerala Org.’ Website (<http://www.kerala.org>) and follow links for movies<sup>v</sup>. The picture galleries, interviews, and film reviews make clear that despite the presence of several male stars or *heroes*, there are only two major players in the

industry - Mammooty and Mohan Lal<sup>vi</sup>. Even the relative newcomer Suresh Gopi (two photo clips on Kerala Org compared to Mammooty's six and Mohan Lal's four) who was mentioned to us by a (very) few field informants as favourite is often claimed to be a copy of Mohan Lal. Although Mohan Lal is the slightly higher paid (Rs 50 lakhs per film to Mammooty's Rs 35 lakhs) of the two megastars and generally the bigger box-office draw, Mammooty is widely accorded more respect for his acting abilities and has won more awards (five state and three national). There appears then to be a slight division of role. At the same time, we would argue that the two are of equal status in Kerala, competing in the popular cinema market and each commanding a wide fan base. The 2000 Onam (new year) special edition of the weekly Malayalam magazine 'Cinema News' contains two full page colour 'pin up' photos: one each of Mohan Lal and Mammooty, with no other actor getting a look in. While Mammooty has more often ventured into 'art' or parallel cinema ('Vidheyan' ('The Servant'), 'Mathilukal' ('Walls' - which won prizes internationally and was released in Europe) and most lately, 'Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar'), Mohan Lal has also sought awards and international acclaim ('Kala Pani'; 'Vanaprastham' (issued in Europe as 'The Last Dance')); while Mohan Lal is frankly popular and populist, Mammooty's main work is also in popular cinema and his fan base is similarly broad.

Yet the pair, when we turn from Kerala Org's website and towards the closer focus afforded by fieldwork data, are not mere rivals, equal competitors for the crown of most popular Malayalam cinema hero, although this is sometimes how they are set up (notably, of course, in film magazines and by the more ardent members of fan clubs). They seem to embody different styles of hero and to have different types of appeal to audiences; sociologically, their fan bases trace slightly different social

groupings. We find that fans and casual watchers pick up many points of alleged contrast between the pair, such that we enter into an economy of a proliferation of difference and of dispersal of the star persona to cover a vast realm and to permit different audience groups to enter into relationships with the stars at different registers<sup>vii</sup>. At the same time, un-defined characteristics - “manliness”, “toughness” - are equally applied to both. So, what differentiates the two?

Mammootty often plays a Brahmin or high-caste Nair; he is repeatedly seen in uniform; he is also strong in ‘family dramas’ or ‘sentimental films’. He made a string of highly popular crime movies in the 1980s (‘CBI diary’ series; ‘Inspector Balaram’) in which he played a sharp police inspector. He has famously played a military officer (‘Nair Saab’; ‘Koodevide’; ‘Kandukonden kandukonden’) and IAS officer (‘The King’). Young male fans characterised him as taking roles for “tough characters and family men, a person who is able to make decisions on his own”. He is good at playing repentant son, tragically widowed father, capable brother. Young male fans singled out as areas of especial virtuosity his abilities in playing ‘elder brother’, ‘policeman’ and ‘Christian’. We can then see an aspect of Mammootty which is his affinity with roles implying powerful and respectable men of status in control.

Mammootty embodies, performs and alludes to a familiar style of masculinity, popular among both men and women. In Mammootty’s picture gallery on ‘Kerala Org’ we repeatedly see him as man-of-action or phallic hero: in military or police uniform; cocking a gun; standing in ‘hard’ pose in vest and combat pants; pointing an accusatory and threatening finger into a co-actor’s face; standing erect and aloof. If we see him at all with a woman it is often a screen mother, a grey-haired lady looking proudly at her son who finally, in mother’s presence, permits himself a smile. He was identified to us by

cinema watchers as “manly”; “even in roles in which he apparently begins as powerless, viewers know that the worm will surely turn”.

Mohan Lal began as a small-time villain or ‘negative hero’ - characterised by one informant as an “angry young man” - who grew to stardom in the late 1980s<sup>viii</sup>. His versatility was mentioned by many as a motivation for liking him: he is often perceived as able to ‘do’ violence, love, comedy, drama and so on, and is put forward by his supporters as a ‘real’ star, an actor who can constantly surprise his public and offer them new insights into his enormous talent. We heard several stories of his unexpected on-set improvisations in dance or dialogue, and one fan offered the interesting observation that, “he has many different ways of smiling”.

These differentiated styles of masculinity are also, we must note, nuanced through class and ethnic styles. There is a clear status aspect to the two players’ appeal: one fan based his preference for Mammooty on the fact that the latter is “a gentleman”: Mohan Lal is generally not considered anything like gentlemanly. In contrast to Mammooty’s martial Nairs, Brahmin Police officers and powerful newspaper editors, Mohan Lal’s classic roles include auto-driver, would-be labour migrant, and fisherman. Mohan Lal is a Trivandrum man, raised and well-connected in the state’s capital city: he is clearly identifiable as a Travancore (south Kerala) Hindu. While Mammooty’s birthplace, connections and accent mark him out as a Cochin (central Kerala) man, his name marks him as a Muslim. As Eleftheriotis points out, writing of the difficulties of using existing film theory to analyse the heroes of Greek popular film, theory’s version of dominant masculinity and hence the hero figure has been rooted in silent premises of whiteness, of Anglo-ness, of certain positioning in relation to such things as technology or global class relations, despite theory’s pretensions to globality. He finds particularly worrying film theory’s failure to notice how its version of dominant masculinity as a

“preoccupation with order, power, control, mastery and domination” involves a “blindness to issues of race”, a failure to acknowledge its inherent whiteness. We need not necessarily accept here Eleftheriotis’ consequent refusal to find relevance in film theory, because, working in South Asia we are privileged: post-colonial post-partition local versions of masculinity are overdetermined by ethnicity, such that analysis has long since been dealing as a matter of course with these issues. Indeed, issues such as the means through which South Asian masculinities have been expressed through race or ways in which Muslim-ness has been dealt with in film have been central to analyses of Indian social life and its representations (see eg Roy 1988; Nandy 1988; Sinha 1995; Hansen 1996). We will return to think more about the implications of the two stars’ ethnic and class identifications later<sup>ix</sup>.

Mohan Lal is more of a song-and-dance man than Mammooty; the latter often appears uncomfortable in his singing scenes while, as even his fans admit, “he can’t do comedy ....and no dancing!!” Even Mammooty’s capacity to carry a romance scene is often criticised. His die-hard fans admit the criticism of Mohan Lal fans that Mammooty is not ‘flexible’, unable to cover Lal’s range. And yet what is often mentioned by those who like Mammooty is his ability to evoke emotion, his skill in the particular niche which he has made his. This is sometimes linked by film-watchers with a commitment to a sort of realism, but we should note that, this being art and not life, the ‘realism’ of the Malayalam cinema is of a certain order, associated with an ‘interior’, restrained style of acting: terminal illness, kind or cruel fate and romantic misunderstandings make their appearance as regularly as among Hollywood or Hindi films.

While Mammooty’s ‘hard man’ roles endear him to teenage boys and younger men, his other strength - as powerful and capable family man - works especially well

with mature women and in the family dramas for which he is equally noted (cf Jayamanne 1992 on Sri Lankan 'family melodrama'). Commenting upon this, one Mohan Lal fan commented cynically, "women like tough people", while several non-partisan cinema fans argued that women use cinema as a form of emotional release, and "like / need to cry". Mammooty's family tragedies provoke welcome tears and endear him to those older women who are looking in a hero for a competent mature man: a good father, a fascinating husband, a masterful figure in the family. Mohan Lal, meanwhile, is the more popular of the two among the younger, unmarried women: one young man argued that Mohan Lal must be more attractive to girls and women because he plays a "maximum lover, like Marlon Brando", going beyond women's expectations based on their real-life menfolk. From a hypothetical female perspective, if Mohan Lal then deals in pre-marriage romantic fantasies, Mammooty appears to trade in the grittier realities of negotiating family life after marriage and parenthood.

Many informants thought that Mohan Lal was generally the more popular star among younger people, with Mammooty catering for 'older viewers', but we find plenty of young men among Mammooty's fans, contradicting another popular stereotype - that Mammooty is simply a 'women's actor'. Clearly, the subjectivities of cinema watchers are more internally complex than popular opinion imagines, such that any simple linear relationship of 'identification' or correspondence between star 'type' and fan 'type' cannot be made<sup>x</sup>. The most we can do is trace out some areas of specialisation or difference, listen to what fans tell us about their two heroes and try to understand ways in which Mammooty and Mohan Lal limit each other's horizons, playing out a dialogue within a broader scene of a range of cinematic 'types'.

Mammooty fans, asked to justify their preference, invariably make reference to their hero's physical glamour and artistry. Mammooty is respected for his art, his

handsomeness, his speech. He is presented - negatively by detractors, positively by fans - as 'perfect': an actor who begins with a good physique, handsome face and thrilling voice, and adds to it linguistic talent - he does films in Tamil, Telugu and Hindi, undertaking his own dubbing - and 'serious' acting ability. "He goes deep into a character and justifies the character"; "He's prepared to change himself for a role"; "You won't see him when you watch a film, just the character"; "He is so skilled at serious expressions, when you see him as a policeman you'll feel as though you're looking at a real policeman". Some fans believed that Mammooty "just reads a script quickly and then improvises from his own imagination"<sup>xi</sup>. In his alleged 'seriousness' or intellectualism and 'artistry' he also, importantly, embodies an aspect of Malayali fantasy ethnic identity. Many Malayalis, in a state which proclaims 100% literacy and a progressive outlook, like to differentiate themselves from "illiterate and unclean" northerners and "backward unworldly" other southerners. Malayalis hold strong aspirations towards modernity and development, and distinguish themselves from other non-metropolitan Indians by virtue of their proclaimed abilities to pursue these goals and act "in pursuit of progress" - *progressinu vendi* (F & C Osella 2000a).

Malayalam cinema is part of this modern self-identity, often proclaimed as "different" - in avoiding the excesses of Hindi / Telugu movies and healing the split between 'art' and 'popular' cinema by having a popular cinema which is artistically valid<sup>xii</sup>. If this were actually ever 100% true, lately with films such as 'Harikrishans' (a dual starrer new year festival release which was unashamedly a star vehicle for both actors) Malayalam cinema has clearly been moving more towards populism and the styles favoured in Tamil or Hindi films. Still, we must allow a certain degree of difference, affected for example by the predominance and popularity of 'realist' family dramas and the influence on film of literature (in a literate and media-savvy state). Most

informants resisted any questions leading towards comparison of Malayali and other regional cinemas, and flatly refused to compare their two stars with those of other states: Kamal Hassan was grudgingly admitted as superior to Rajnikanth who was felt to be “for illiterate people”, while neither of these two Tamil stars were felt to come anywhere near the standard of Kerala’s own two heroes.

Meanwhile, more than one Mammooty fan remarked scathingly (and unfairly, see e.g. ‘Kalapani’, ‘Vanaprastham’) that Mohan Lal can only take ‘light’ and ‘masala’ roles. Fans defend his flops by blaming them on poor script, direction and so on (as we would expect from Srinivas REF). Yet Mohan Lal is enormously popular among both young men and younger women, who will go to see him even in a film reputed to be bad, appreciating his ability - unlike Mammooty - to play the romantic and funny lover, and to emote during love-song scenes. Young men admired his ‘timing’ in both comedy and in song sequences, claiming that although fat and not an agile mover, he dances rhythmically and ‘naturally’. Some claim that whatever he does, “you can see a rhythm in it”. Even Mammooty’s staunchest fans admit that “when he dances, it’s ugly”; “he has no flexibility”.

While Mohan Lal is said to have enormous ‘talent’ and ‘screen presence’, in contrast to Mammooty’s ‘artistry’ in allegedly concealing himself as star within his acting role, the attraction of a Mohan Lal film was frankly claimed by many fans to be the prospect of, “watching Mohan Lal for three hours, not the film”. One fan explained that, “when you come out of the film you feel that you have spent time with someone very intimate to you:- everyone feels like that with him”. If Mammooty can be attractive because of his artistry in making a convincing portrayal of something other than himself, Mohan Lal appears to be attractive by virtue of actually - apparently - being himself. “You can’t tell whether he’s acting or not”; “you don’t

feel that he's acting"; "he's not actually acting, but behaving as he himself would in that situation". 'Mohan Lal' then appears, in the manner of the older generation of Hollywood stars, to be perceived across contexts as consistent (Dyer 1998:20).

And if Mammooty represents an unapproachable but admirable ideal of perfection and mastery for his young male fans, Mohan Lal was claimed by most to be an everyman, a regular guy next door. Fans continually told us that in 'real life' Mohan Lal is terribly shy and a quite ordinary person, with no aura of stardom: only in front of the camera does he transform. "You could not believe that this person is the same as the one on screen". Those who had met Mammooty reported a different experience, an encounter not with familiarity and frail mortality, but with unfathomable and majestic star quality. Those who had met Mohan Lal spoke of his ease at mingling with the public, and his willingness to take a drink. As Pramod Kumar puts it in Kerala Org's review of Lal's career, "He is the alter-ego of the average Malayali". Mammooty is characterised by detractors as less fallible and human than Lal, less approachable: he is said to maintain barriers between himself and his public (for example, keeping the public off-set at location shootings), while his public image as good Muslim and family man prevents him from being seen as a man one could offer to take for a drink with the lads. We have never heard him claimed, unlike Lal, as any sort of 'alter ego of the average Malayali'.

Fans actually revel in Mohan Lal's imperfections, a stance which is also attributed to the star himself. He is commonly, even by ardent fans, described as fat, bald (or with transplanted hair), unable to dance properly and so on. One group of fans recounted to us the disaster that followed his nose operation, which ruined his voice; another group pointed out that he walks with one shoulder lower than the other, but that this is seen as a charming imperfection which others now imitate. Many

scandals and malicious rumours have attached to him - that he had illicit affairs, that he was suffering from AIDS, that his wife is a drug addict. In his imperfections, he appears reassuringly human and 'one of us', in contrast to Mammooty's other-worldly perfection and apparent invulnerability. In drawing attention to Mammooty's uncanny perfection and Lal's struggles with his weight, his hair, his many imperfections, Lal's artistry then becomes magnified among those of his fans who like to claim that Mammooty's appeal is based entirely upon the latter's "good voice, face and body". Conversely, when Mohan Lal partisans are claiming artistry for him, it is naturalised as 'talent', an inborn quality, and contrasted to Mammooty's strained and forced pursuit of excellence via technique<sup>xiii</sup>.

Moral ambivalence is another attribute called up by Lal's roles, a quality which resonates with young men who reject a cinematic dualism in favour of a more nuanced understanding of motivation and action. Asking about Lal's best films, we were often referred to roles in which he begins as a frank rowdy (*goonda*) before transforming into a negative hero; in which he begins as innocent but is forced by circumstance into a violent lifestyle; or in which he "wins in the end without having to become good" (Kiridam, Chengol, Devasuran, Vyarangil, Aranthamburan). Some fans compared him to Amitabh Bachan in his ability to represent people "reacting to life in a way that you would like to do, but don't". Others noted that he is excellent at portraying a "hard drinking man". The film which most agree catapulted him into stardom was 'Rajavinde Makan', in which he played an underworld don. Fans spoke warmly of a series of films in which Mohan Lal essentially repeated his role or played the same character but from slightly different angles - the *goonda* who is also benevolent or kind to the poor and downtrodden (Devasuram, Aranthamburan, Usthad, Spadikam). Lal's moral ambivalence is another means of crafting intimacy

with young men, while Mammooty's taking of the moral high ground (in film as in public persona) removes him from the plane of the ordinary, the fallible, making him less accessible to many.

Older cinema watchers, notably married women, offer a different view of Lal, seen to be still haunted by his early days as villain and judged negatively for his populism. For this group, Mohan Lal represents the basest and worse aspects of Malayali-ness, those parts of Kerala culture which seem to challenge the modern aspirant values of respectability, intellectualism and sophistication. If Lal is indeed the "alter-ego of the average Malayali", then that Malayali is being elided with a lower- middle-class or working class (probably) Hindu male, a point to which we shall later return. One married middle-aged female librarian, disparagingly referring to Mohan Lal as 'chappatti face', disparaged his appeal as "Fat and ungainly", while complaining that his films held no interest for her, being, "Just *dish-dish*" (violence).

### ***The fan clubs***

We now move to consider the activities of fan clubs and to hear what hard-core movie-goers such as these have to say about their heroes.

Fan clubs or associations are an India-wide phenomenon (see e.g. Srinivas REF). In Kerala they tend to be neighbourhood based, with each locality having its own chapters of the Mammooty and Mohan Lal associations or local fan clubs which are affiliated to the all-Kerala umbrella. City clubs, the most organised and active, meet regularly - often daily - in public spaces and offer space for sharing movie or star talk, general socialising and the undertaking of a range of wider activities. Minimally the associations drum up support for films with 'their' star; they put pressure on cinema owners not to withdraw films just before significant anniversaries

(such as '100 days'). As with other 'street' activities, membership in a fan association is not an option for girls or young women, but is confined to males. Most young men drop out of active membership after marriage and certainly by the age of thirty. The picture as regards membership and activities is very similar to that described by Dickey in Tamil Nadu (2001).

True to the differentiated images of their heroes, those young men who choose to take fandom a stage further by joining a star association split themselves roughly into differentiated groups. We say roughly because in Kerala, unlike other states, fandom is not a matter of rivalry, political partisanship or even life and death (cf Srinivas XXX; Pandian 1992; Dickey 1993, 2001). Many fans criticised the producer of the recent dual-starrer 'Harikrishnans' for producing two endings, to be shown in different regions, allowing both stars to 'get the girl' in the final reel, where she - unable to decide - tosses a coin. Yet others told us that the original print had shown Mammooty as the successful suitor, and that it was after considerable press and fan protest that the director had hurriedly spliced in an extra shot allowing a version in which Mohan Lal wins.

While there is then a 'hard-core' central group who remain partisan and always committed to 'their' star, ready to protest should he appear - as in 'Hariksrishans' - to lose out, in general young men frequently shift associations and change allegiances. This is not thought disloyal or inconsistent; it is understood that the balance between the stars will change over time; as new films come out one might move into ascendancy and take fans with him into his association, only to see them switch to the other association when a good film with the other star comes out and draws fans in. Efforts have been made within the industry to maintain this harmonious state: the star Prem Nazir is credited by fans with having laboured

towards harmony by making it commonplace to take cross-communal roles, working against crystallisation of any one star with one community or one political affiliation, breaking up the star's intertextual consistency in these arenas (contrasting strongly with neighbouring Tamil Nadu, see Pandian 1992). Mohan Lal and Mammooty have often appeared together in films ('Madras Mail'; 'Adimagal'; 'Naanayam'; most recently in 'Harikrishnans') and often make public appearances or photo-calls together. Recently, they have been engaged together as business partners in setting up a Malayalam TV channel<sup>xiv</sup>. This lack of partisanship fostered within the industry may also develop spontaneously: as Jenkins points out (writing on Star Trek fans), many fans find their initial attachment to a particular character or TV programme serves as "point of entry into a broader fan community", drawing them into a wider culture of fandom in which many stars and programmes are appreciated.

Still, as we have suggested, while the majority of the general population will happily watch films with either star in and while even fan club members may shift sides, most cinema goers do argue for a differential appeal between the two styles. We certainly found obvious social differences in fan club membership. In one city, the Mammooty fan club was composed mostly of respectably employed or college-going young men in their mid to late twenties. The secretary - like several members - is a Muslim, while club membership is fairly mixed community-wise. This group meet each evening on the steps of a temple to talk and plan activities. The Mohan Lal club met in the rougher public space of a tea-shop and often retired from there to a drinking club for beer and non-veg snacks. Members of this association tended to be younger (from mid teens) and Hindu, with a few Christians and very few Muslims, and of a more heterogeneous class background. Some branches of the Mohan Lal club exist in the poorest squatters' neighbourhoods among the 'roughest' of young

men. Overall, both group's memberships correspond to the 'active fan' sociological profile outlined by Srinivas: the same sections of society - but, crucially, not the same people - who are active in party politics (the lower-middle classes / working classes) also become active in fan associations (Srinivas REF ). Those from professional and very high caste / class backgrounds tend not to be involved.

Members of fan clubs make it a point to see a star's new movie (often more than once) in the first few days, generally as group outing and taking seats with block bookings. From this early viewing, they undertake to spread the word about the film by word of mouth and encourage others to go and see it. They also feedback to the star their reactions to the film and reported to us that the stars listen and take on board fan reaction - as they probably do, since success depends ultimately on popular support (cf. Srinivas REF on the power exerted over Andhra star Chiranjeevi by his fan associations). Mohan Lal fans - young men, remember, who are under elders' watchful eyes at home - clearly relished the power and autonomy open to them as members of the association, seen for example in the opportunity at 'first showings' to turn a public space for a while into a space of their own. "No decent people would attend a premiere" remarked one fan laughingly, referring to the shouting, clapping and drinking that goes on during such occasions.

A key feature of both associations is to raise money and distribute it charitably (cf Dickey 2001). Young men stressed the social service which they carry out, giving us photographs of activities carried out "in the star's name". Mohan Lal's association - formed in 1983 and reconstituted in 1996 as an all-Kerala umbrella for local fan clubs - states its aims as dual:- "cultural and welfare activities" and it participates, for example, in sponsoring mid-day meals for the poor at an underfunded local rehabilitation project, organising fans to donate blood, or giving out free tickets for

Mohan Lal's films to old age homes and orphanages. The Mammootty Association was formed in 1983 with the scope, according to one fan, of, "the worship of Mammootty". Some claimed that Mammootty had wanted nothing to do with fan activity but, realising the potential for good, had requested the association to reformulate itself, which it did in 1996, into a dual fan and welfare society with the twin aims of (1) publicising / promoting Mammootty's films; (2) charitable work. Mammootty's fans state honestly that it was at his suggestion rather than their own initiative that they expanded their scope to include welfare activities, and affirm that he "believes in charity". Special days such as the star's birthday are celebrated - in Mammootty's case in recent years with pledges for eye donations, distribution of clothes to the poor and construction of a bus shelter; among Mohan Lal's fans, with a party at an orphanage honoured by attendance of someone from the film industry and distribution of food and sweets to "all 350 residents".

We here turn to a comparison with Lott's analysis of Elvis fans and impersonators (1997). Elvis and Malayalam film fans echo each other's words in stressing firstly the importance of charity work and secondly that it is all done in the name of the star. We can, we think, apply here Lott's interpretation, that fans have an impulse to "working class mutuality and solidarity" and are concerned in the use of the monies they raise with "human connection", "real needs, not just money" (Lott 1997:218). This desire for human connection and solidarity cannot be met by making cash donations, but embodies itself in the complex arrangement and execution of what we can - without diminishing them - call performances of solidarity, as in projects like mass feeding of the poor. Another aspect of this charity work is raised by Lott's assertion that fans wish to be able to bestow the same "sudden extraordinary gifts of which Elvis was capable". One fan told us a story of seeing Mammootty give Rs 50

to a beggar: the association's birthday distribution of clothes to the poor follows a similar logic of benevolent largesse. In a photograph we were given by one Mohan Lal club of a mass feeding they had undertaken, lines of weary festival-goers at the time of Thiruvananthapuram's great Attuckal Devi goddess festival sit patiently waiting on the floor as fan association young men - on their feet and active, protagonists of the situation - ladle out free rice and curries. The photograph reminds us of Lott's remark about "the propensity of working class men to ... enact[ing] rituals of self-assertion and imaginary beneficence" (213), while reminding us that the beneficence is not always imaginary.

Again, the star makes possible positive identifications with the self - in Mohan Lal's case especially, a self who is working class and in solidarity with the poor, or in Mammooty's case a solidly bourgeois self who is a generous patron. The star also permits, via fan activity, magical transformations of the self - an unexpected opportunity to distribute largesse like a high-caste wealthy patron; the possibility that through involvement in the fan association and its work one might participate in the star's power and reach. The extended and enhanced sense of self achieved by fans brings us on to think more closely about how issues of gender and power are configured within fandom, within relationships to stars, around the figures of stars themselves, and by virtue of membership of a powerful association.

### ***Young men and movie stars***

Visiting the theatres in town once or twice a week, paying Rs 10 - 30 to see mostly Malayalam and occasionally Hindi or Tamil movies, *payyanmar* (unmarried young men) study the film heroes/villains and try to copy their clothes, hairstyles, slang and mannerisms. Whole portions of *dialogue* (*sambhasanam*) are learnt off by

heart, as are the songs; a "good" film will be seen several times by those with access to money. Because of friends' discussions, film magazines and radio, all boys, even those with little money, are familiar with at least the plot details, songs, catchphrases and fashions of the latest film. Regular group outings to the cinema is the major social activity for younger men, who have neither the money nor have yet arrived at a stage in life where a trip to the bar - many older men's preferred social outing - is appropriate. The content of films also provides them with important reference-points in relation to their lives and aspirations.

In some societies with no formal rites of passage towards adulthood, heterosexuality can become the cornerstone of an imagined gender stance, such that evidence of attraction to women becomes evidence of 'manliness' (Britten 1989:18; Rich 1980). Queer studies writers are the latest in a line of gender theorists to point out the pernicious effects - for politics and sociological analysis alike - of taking for granted this common-sensical but inappropriate and empirically inaccurate elision between sexual object choice and gendering (e.g. Caplan 1987:20ff & Weeks 1987, both in ed Caplan; Peterson 1998:96ff; Halberstam 1998). In any case, in their relative lack of interest in female stars and turn towards male stars we feel that Kerala young men are playing out an approach towards gendering which clearly does not take as its foundation hierarchic heterosexuality (following Britten 1989). To be sure, heterosexual activity is present and plays a part in making gender (see C & F Osella 1999, C&F Osella 2001), but in the realms of shared fantasy and cultural life, we would argue strongly that young men's tentative (and illicit, difficult) relationships with young women lack the substance of their relationships with each other and with their male movie heroes.

Some methodological problems in gender analysis need to be raised here, an issue heightened by our interdisciplinary plunderings. Most problematically, we need to address the vexed question of desire; much film theory and some gender studies has explored and problematised desire to the extent that it takes for granted some degree, for example, of homosexual desire in men's watching of men on film. We have - after much discussion and argument, by no means resolved, between ourselves - decided to accept a cautious version of this line in the paper, so that when we find young men talking of the physical attractiveness of the stars to women, or hypothesising the reactions among girls to the stars, we talk of homoeroticism. We remain acutely aware of possible objections to or criticisms of taking such a perspective. One might, for example, argue that the situation here is more one of homosociality than homoeroticism, and that the two should never be confused<sup>xv</sup>. We might then counter-argue that the homosexual desire present here is self-evident both from the boys' talk, from the very position of the star as object of desire, and from what both psychoanalytically inclined gender and film theories have taught us about the ways in which - universally - we as humans form our gendered subjectivities and are attracted and respond to each other and to various fantasy figures. On the other hand, it might be argued that we cannot transpose theories based upon desire and stressing sexuality to contexts outside of the sexualised and desire-driven north Atlantic context; a local theory of desire and attraction might serve better to understand motivations - and we must then ask of course, can we identify one? One might follow the lead of Jayamanne, who suggests that films might address such collective fantasies as the desire for modernity rather than the "guilty pleasures" of individualised sexualised desires<sup>xvi</sup>. Again, we could counter the counter arguments against assuming the presence of homosexual desire or recognition of attraction as

being standard ones born of the unconscious self-protective motivations of the carefully bulwarked and totally constructed non-natural heterosexual self, arguing that if we turn seriously to gender theory, we must admit a homosexual component to all desiring selves, so why refuse blankly to see it when it appears to stare us in the face?

While careful then to maintain distinctions between homosociality, homoeroticism and homosexuality<sup>xvii</sup>, and always mindful of the possible dangers of using high theory to evaluate local cultures, we take a lead here from Muraleedharan's recent delightful queer reading of the Mohan Lal star persona and his justifications for doing so. If a local (Malayali) writer feels that homosexual desire can be read into films - indeed, he goes further to assert that in particular, "Mohanlal films recurrently negotiate male-male desire, imagined in both physical and emotional terms" (2002:189), then we are perhaps more justified in permitting the possibility of such an interpretation, while acknowledging that this remains simply one possible reading of some aspects of our data - not necessarily correct in all (or any cases), but available as a possible response. This enables us to think of Mohan Lal and Mammooty as vessels of desire in its very widest sense.

At the same time, we can take up the insights provided by Jefford's XXXX analysis of the Vietnam and 'buddy' Hollywood movie, that equality and friendship between men can be celebrated and performed precisely because it is predicated upon a deeper sense of difference and hierarchy: that of gender, with woman as the absent and inferiorised other. This segregated celebration of masculinity which then helps in masculinity's reproduction and in the limiting of masculinity to males<sup>xviii</sup> would apply equally to the male-male bonds portrayed on screen - the stars' on-screen friendships and sidekicks; to the fantasy male-male bonds forged in the cinema darkness - between male viewer and on-screen here; and to the male-male bonds built up within

fan clubs and social activities around cinema-going. Again, the relative absence of women from cinematic arenas is relevant here: remember that Malayali cinema - unlike Hindi counterparts - does not have female stars; that girls and women participate less strongly in cinema-going and *fillum* culture; and that females are entirely absent from fan clubs and fan activities. More than a mere absence of women, the community of males appears to be reproduced and defined here in a belligerent opposition to women, as young men aggressively embody and mimetically perform hyper-masculinity in the space they take as their own and make uncomfortable for young women - the street. Jain notes, "I remember vividly (...because of the sense of vulnerability it engendered in me, as a relatively well-off young woman), the way in which young men and boys on the streets adopted Bachchan's hairstyle, clothing, stance, 'attitude' and gestures, punctuating their Bachchan style fights with the obligatory *dishum-dishum* sound effects..." (2001:219).

One effect in Kerala of cinema-related activities is to provide adolescent and post-adolescent boys with a safe segregated social space in which they can socialise, share information, try out their fledgling masculine identities and grapple with the demands of their emerging sexualities. This is especially important among middle-community youths: those from the poorest labouring families are drawn early into paid work and at least a contributory masculine 'breadwinner' role, while high caste Hindu young men undergo a formal rite of passage towards adult manhood (the *upanayanam* sacred thread ceremony), but middle community young men, whose families generally push them to study and may delay marriage until late twenties / early thirties, face an extended adolescence and an unclear situation regarding their position in the hierarchical worlds of gender and maturity. In other words, in the absence of external structures or validation for their passage towards manhood, we

are suggesting that the boys turn inwards to the peer group (cf Jackson 1990:168ff). Murphy, writing about Seville, notes that here also adolescent males in street culture indulge in displays of “exaggerated masculinity”. In the absence of adults, the young men can “only gauge gauge their progress in establishing a reputation for manliness by comparing their own behaviour (and claims) with those of their peers” (p388). The life of the street, then, acts like a rite of passage in a riteless society and enables the reproduction of masculinity. When no formal rite or adult-led passage is available, young men turn inwards to the peer group in competitive and often exaggerated performances of masculinity.

The Malayali refusal to countenance genuine rivalry between the two stars, and the common phenomenon of switching or sharing allegiance, confirms for us that both Mammooty and Mohan Lal are necessary in a full fantasy life and that the range of characteristics which each embody need all to be kept available to young men in their street peer-performances. Some informants mentioned that in pre 1980s cinema one major male star would cover roles now differentiated between Mammooty and Mohan Lal. The upcoming star Suresh Gopi was similarly claimed by supporters to be healing the split in the star figure, covering all aspects of the male hero. Yet most acknowledge that by now the range of roles and the development of Mammooty and Mohan Lal’s respective repertoires means that no one star will ever again be able to encompass all the subtleties and complexities afforded by an enjoyment of both actors’ films. Mammooty fans sometimes paint Suresh Gopi as a mere copy of Mohan Lal - a villain turned violent hero - and refuse to see in him any potential for taking on the mantle of physically perfect character actor which they claim only Mammooty embodies. Meanwhile, one Mohan Lal fan modestly characterised his hero’s famous ‘range’ as really coming down to just “romance, comedy and action”.

This then leaves out genuinely serious drama or family roles, which is where Mammooty of course excels. As one cinema-owner remarked, “Both actors will be accepted by audiences, but they do tend to be role- specific”. While fans may then engage in rhetorics of dismissing the ‘other’ star, in practice they acknowledge the partial nature of their favourite’s abilities and are actually almost always film fans in a more general sense, who enjoy movies per se, and who have fan relations to the stars which are not exclusive.

The relative elaboration of male over female stars is also relevant here: young men might, we could imagine, (and following Britten, above, on hierarchic heterosexuality) choose to focus on female ‘pin-ups’. That they do not do so<sup>xix</sup> testifies to the enormous double power for young men of the male star: he is able to act both as object of desire - (for those negotiating heterosexual identities, in a transformed, disguised or displaced homoeroticism) - and as vehicle for youthful aspirations. In a classic and much cited early article (Mulvey 1975 cited in e.g. Neale 1993), Mulvey identified two distinct modes for male viewers of looking in cinema - one located in female stars who are there to be looked at with desire and one located in male stars who provide figures for identification. Neale, discussing ‘masculinity as spectacle’, challenged this dichotomy by alerting us to ways in which “the narcissistic male image - the image of authority and omnipotence - .... can involve an eroticism, since there is always a constant oscillation between that image as a source of identification and, as an other, a source of contemplation (Neale 1993:13<sup>xx</sup>). Outside of cinema, Lott also argues that the figure of Elvis acts in both ways, simultaneously “fetishized object ... of fascination” and “the ideal ego they [fans] seek to inhabit or even replace”. We follow Lott’s insight to note, with him and following Holmlund’s reading of the appeal of Stallone, that the two forms of pleasurable looking cannot

actually be so clearly demarcated and can certainly not be assumed to be so easily elided into a simplistic dichotomous gender model: while stars themselves may slip between the two modes, a viewer - of either sex - can also simultaneously want to be and to have the star (Lott 1997:200; Holmlund 1993; cf Jenkins 1990:157).

If we follow queer theory in delinking desire from identity and in insisting upon the recognition that “heterocentric texts may contain queer elements”, while “straight-identified people experience queer moments” (Muraleedharan 2002:182), then young men’s pleasure and ability to slip into different imagined subject positions may be indicative of fluidity in gendered subject positions, of fluidity in choice of desire-object, or of both. In thinking of these valences of attraction, homoeroticism may not even be a useful term in identifying the frank pleasure taken by some young male viewers in their male stars. When young men talk about the ways in which Mammooty arouses emotion in women, Mohan Lal’s smile evokes desire and overcomes resistance in women, or express pleasure in seeing their heroes’ bodies displayed on screen, we cannot say whether this suggests young men’s ability to slip into the imaginary position of female spectator or to accept a homoerotic pull. Rather than try to fix the ways in which pleasure and attraction might be flowing here, then, let us follow Muraleedharan in simply insisting upon the possibility of allowing a queer reading of fan phenomena.

Mammooty fans were most explicit about their hero’s role as masculine object of veneration and desire: “He fulfils our imagination of a real man in his body and his voice”; “he has a very good body and is physically fit”; “he is the ideal man”; “he’s a complete man”; “he is handsome to us young people”; “he’s very good at doing masculine characters”; “he’s very good at playing positions of power”. Mammooty is an acknowledged target of fantasies about manhood and manliness. A

possible homoerotic aspect of fans' relationship, already suggested by the way in which they tend to dwell upon Mammooty's physique and handsomeness, is further hinted by the apparent ease with which young men slip themselves into the minds of imaginary womenfolk to talk about what makes Mammooty so attractive to women. One fan confidently asserted, "Mammooty is more popular among women because he is the perfect man"; another echoed a familiar opinion "especially older women like a strong and decisive man". Fans spoke appraisingly of Mammooty's roles in women-pleasing 'family dramas' such as 'Pappayude sondham appus', in which Mammooty plays a widower who, in the words of fans, "gives both mother and father love to his child" with the result that women seeing the film "cried a lot".

Mammooty is credited with the ability to arouse strong emotion *in women*. This location of the strong emotion among women, who occupy a gendered space which is a conventional locus for emotional outlet, preserves a local equation making emotion the province of the uncontrolled - i.e. not mature men; at the same time, easy talk of Mammooty's appeal to women and appreciation of his ability to portray and evoke tears makes it clear that the performance is widely esteemed and the appeal shared cross-sex.

While the decidedly physically imperfect Mohan Lal would apparently less easily move into the position of object of homoerotic desire, still fans are able to appreciate aspects of erotic attraction in him<sup>xxi</sup>. For Mohan Lal fans, the critical thing - sweeping aside the bad hair, skin, nose and so on - is the actor's smile. "When you see that smile, you'll fall in love with him", asserted one (male) fan (speaking to Filippo). Another agreed that, "his smile is his real weapon". Fans also told us that 'Vanitha' women's magazine had even printed his photograph with the caption "Krishna's thieving smile", associating him to the playful and sensual god Krishna

and turning his smile, as in the above male fan's description of it as 'weapon', into a means of aggression or cheating, via seduction. One point of permitting a queer reading of the relationship between fan and star is that it enables us to think about the importance of contact, a central plank of both Taussig's hypothesised mimetic power and the dividual's ability to transfer qualities. For Taussig, mimesis is not a simple copy, but a fusion of self and other whose power is predicated upon contact with the original (Taussig 1993, 1997). A dividual, or partible person, is subject to absorption or transfer of qualities from others, and depends for the illusory wholeness of its fantasy self upon the incorporation of aspects of others (Marriott 1990; Strathern 1988; cf Busby 1997, 2000 & Freeman 1999 on Kerala dividuals). More than distant admiration (the wanting to be), theorising a relation as the wanting to have, as a desire for intimate contact, expresses the transformative possibilities engendered by contact, where one can assume that the deeper and more intimate the contact, the greater the possibility of transferring qualities.

Fans are most explicit about their recognition of an attraction towards stars based upon their 'manly qualities'. Here the qualities put forward are not connected to physical beauty or characteristics but to modes of action, and are linked to the second aspect of stardom - its use as a vehicle of aspiration or fragment of the narcissistic self which self-consciously performs gender. Mohan Lal is admired for his roles in which he drinks hard, fights readily and successfully, and cuts decisively through bourgeois scruples and conventional moralities to "react... to life in a way that you would like to do, but don't". Mammooty was similarly characterised by fans as appealing because of his ability to "fulfil in movies ambitions that people have but can't realise". We need now to think a little more now about action and its close relative, violence - in movies at least.

Mammootty - real name Mohammed Kutty - is actually a Muslim, a fact often mentioned by young male fans<sup>xxii</sup>. Muslims - a Kerala minority population - are widely stereotypically associated by Hindus and Christians with violence, sexuality and aggressive masculinity. They are said to be quick to anger, quick to react to slight or threat: proud and emotional. Mammootty is then perhaps especially useful to young men looking for a phallic/ potency figure in which to participate. In any case, Mammootty allows young non-Muslim men to experience a fantasy relationship with a powerful mature Muslim man, a fascinating other. That he comes from the community coded (by Hindu and Christian alike) 'other' in Kerala adds a twist similar to those already explored in analyses of white - hence dominant - Anglo masculinities (e.g. Mailer as cited in Back 1994). It is possible, (following e.g. Lott on the 'blackness' of Elvis and other white working class heroes) to argue that working class Hindu masculinity, while at one level defined in opposition to the Muslim other, at another level actually relies upon an incorporation of aspects of masculinity (such as decisiveness or readiness for violent action) especially associated in the cultural landscape of ethnic stereotype with Muslimness<sup>xxiii</sup>. This argument is bolstered when we turn to the style of masculinity enacted by Mohan Lal, the populist star standing in contrast to Mammootty's elite style and attracting a younger and slightly more proletarian and more Hindu following. Violence - generally understood in Kerala as an essentialised (stereotyped) characteristic (*gunam*) of Muslims in opposition to stereotypes of Hindu passivity<sup>xxiv</sup> - is one of Lal's mainstays. Over and over he has played the *don* or *goonda* figure. Just as Lott argues that white audiences gain access to black practices, without having to acknowledge their relationship with actual black people, by means of a relationship with a white star who enacts attractive aspects of blackness, we can suggest that Mohan Lal, in a more indirect and hence 'safer' way than Mammootty, enables young male audiences to access the

phallic power embodied in Muslim ‘aggression’ and ‘propensity for violence’ - as in many cultural contexts, characteristics which are in Kerala actually a necessary part of young Hindu and Christian men’s experiences of masculine power. Again, similarly, Jain considers calendar art portrayals of Hanuman and Ram and the processes by which bodybuilding-style muscularity became acceptable, largely through the art-work of P. Sardar, a Muslim artist and bodybuilder, “ what is reproducible about Sardar’s body is his muscularity, rather than his Muslimness” (2001:207).

Turning from violence to romance - from masculinity as dominance to masculinity as performance aimed at claiming the centre of attention and at attracting women - we should return to the question of dancing (important in that all Malayali popular films are musicals), where we find a sharp contrast marked out: Mohan Lal is admitted not to be not a skilled dancer but is claimed as ‘rhythmic’, ‘flexible’, and as improvising moves in a naturalistic way; Mammooty is rigid and inflexible and actually prefers to maintain stillness than to move at all<sup>xxv</sup>. During musical numbers we often find him taking on the role of the appreciative observer, sitting in a chair while a woman dances for him; or standing pensively / moodily looking into the distance as he lip-synchs his song; often he makes recourse to the prop of a musical instrument, ‘playing’ the *veena*. The stars in their use of the musical then also embody two different aspects of phallic masculinity: firstly Mohan Lal in his dancing evokes the jack-in-the-box, clowning, popping up out of nowhere, ‘surprise’, almost comic, phallic style, as delineated in Garber’s work on transvestite performance or explored in Kakar’s analysis of the playful allure of Hindi actor Shammi Kapoor and hinted at in Cohan’s discussion of the ‘rise’ of Fred Astaire (Garber 1992; Kakar 1989:37; Cohan 1993); here the phallus’ unpredictability and ungovernability, its tendency to magical appearance and disappearance, is alluded to, which goes along

with an admission or hint of its fallibility. The possibility of the actor - especially the dancing actor - using the whole body as phallus is also explored in Lal's playful dance and aggressive flirtatious teasing. On the other hand, with Mammooty we are faced with the phallus' fantasy image: rigid and impervious, reassuringly solid and constant. Perhaps nowhere more than in this question of dance (or 'no dance') styles do the two actor's differences become apparent. The differentiated phallic styles which the actors embody - the magical but fallible versus the perfect but forever unattainable - correspond to what fans perceive of the pair as stars: for Lal partisans, Mohan Lal the true star, whose imperfections are acknowledged and help bring him into intimacy with us, where Mammooty is unapproachably immaculate and invulnerable. Among Mammooty partisans, their hero is an example of perfection achieved through self-crafting and discipline.

Earlier, we suggested that masculinities are always nuanced through - or, following Hall and Fernandes, experienced via modalities of - class and ethnic identities: "race is ... the modality in which class is 'lived' " (Hall 1980, cited in Bradley 1996:126; cf Fernandes 1997:6). Further consideration of this point brings us back to the assertion - common to the point of banality in that one hears it over and over - that Mohan Lal is the 'average Malayali' or 'Malayali alter ego'. Lal, remember, is strongly identifiable as Travancore high-caste Hindu (Nayar), while Mammooty is equally strongly coded as 'Muslim' and as from Cochin. A modern post-unification 'Malayali' identity must encompass all three of Kerala's major communities and all three of its regions. Yet if Lal can be seen as the prototypical Malayali, this confirms for us the dominance - or attempt to claim dominance? - of south Kerala, Travancore (where the modern state capital Thiruvananthapuram is located), over other regions, and of Hindu - particularly Nayar - identities over others<sup>xxvi</sup>. Also relevant here are

Malayali ethnic stereotypes especially prevalent among dominant Hindu communities in which Muslims are represented as especially 'backward', unable or unwilling to participate fully in Kerala's modernist reform programmes involving full literacy and education, including for women, and the two-child norm with post-partum sterilisation after the second child. Christians in this fantasy ethnic landscape are represented as too modern, willing to ignore demands of family and tradition in their eagerness to make money and permitting their womenfolk a dangerous and scandalous degree of freedom. If film and gender theory's dominant masculinity is actually - despite its claims to universality - actually one local version, then here we have another local version of dominance which is both eliding and suppressing aberrant (local) others. At the same time, if we follow the suggestion that films speak to a nation's dreams of modernity, the presentation of Lal - Travancore Hindu - as 'the average Malayali alter-ego' suggests a dominant reading in which Muslims and Christians are figured out of the picture for being, respectively, not modern enough or too modern. Mohan Lal - said to be, remember, reassuringly always himself, no matter what role he takes - is then called upon to represent 'Malayali man': a fantasy image of dominant Hindu masculinity which is able to maintain a core stable self underneath many changes, negotiating a successful and 'correct' middle way through the demands of modernity (Jayamanne 1992; Eleftheriotis 1995).

If Lal is the explicitly acknowledged alter ego, Mammooty then appears as the unacknowledged other self. Further consideration of the implications of Mammooty's Muslimness brings us to Roy's analysis of the Muslim actress Nargis, who famously played the role of the 'ideal Indian woman' Radha in the classic blockbuster film, 'Mother India'. Roy argues that the film - in which 'Indian' becomes elided into 'Hindu' - acts as nationalist allegory for the repudiation of Muslim difference. The national

fantasy ethnic identity requirement of an enactment of repudiation of Muslimness then means that “only a Muslim can assume the iconic position” and take the role of the perfect Hindu woman (1998:168). Mammooty the Muslim in his reassuring competence at playing the Hindu (in e.g. ‘Nairsaab’, the prototypically dominant Malayali Hindu identity) then simultaneously bolsters the dominance of ‘Hindu’ as the modal Malayali ethnic identity and acts out what Roy identifies as the duty of the minority: “the abjected who must compulsively ... keep enacting their good citizenship”, by performing as the “good Muslim”, the one who is able to assuage all anxiety about sinister difference by successfully erasing all signs of that difference.

Mammooty’s knack of being “totally believable” when playing Hindus and his alleged especial ability to play Christians (Kerala’s ‘other others’) - an ability mentioned by many Christian and well as Hindu fans (see e.g. ‘Kottayam Kunnachan’) - suggests yet another aspect of this star’s special relationship with otherness: that of especial mastery of difference. That Mammooty is somehow possessed of special powers of transformation is reinforced by the often made comment that another Mammooty speciality is to take an apparently negative role and transform it into a positive one. A famous example of this process is his portrayal of Chandu in the classic historical “Oru Vadakkan Veera Katha”. Here he takes on a character familiar to all Malayalis from folklore - where Chandu is depicted as a scheming, jealous traitor - and re-works the traditional story to show the events and motivations - the treachery of others, the broken promises and unfair treatment suffered - which led to his final act of murder, itself refigured as an act of self-defence gone accidentally wrong. If Mohan Lal trades in images of the villain with a heart of gold, Mammooty explores the same territories of ambivalence, but does so with reference to a more complexly figured interior landscape and a far more encompassing and richly textured relationship with the figure of the

other/outsider. He reminds us of Roy's comments about the (similarly linguistically gifted 1998:18) and excessively mimetic Sir Richard Burton, the colonial adventurer who was a "byword for ... cross-cultural impersonation" (1998:17); "wherever he goes, he signifies a pervasive liminality, if not a pervasive alterity" (1998:32). This also evokes Taussig's remarks on the mimetic as that which is similar - not similar to anything, just similar (1993). Unlike Mohan Lal, whose fans enjoy his films as "3 hours with Mohan Lal himself", Mammooty is a master of mimetism and transformation. If we feel that we cannot really know him, it is because he is never actually there. In contrast to Mohan Lal's reported 'star presence', Mammooty offers a bewildering enigmaticness. .

### ***Some Conclusions***

Dyer notes, of Hollywood, "stars were gods and goddesses, heroes, models - embodiments of ideal ways of being. In the later period, however, stars are identification figures, people like you and me" (Dyer 1998:22). Of such a mixture of familiarity and otherness, proximity and distance, is the ideal modern hero made. As work on stardom has gone beyond issues such as consistency and imputation of character or presenting stars as relatively stable constellations of characteristics or styles, more recent analyses, similarly to Garber on the lure of the transvestite performance or Lott on Elvis impersonators, stress the very unpredictability and complexity of the performer to whom desire attaches (Garber 1992; Lott 1997). In the end, if Mohan Lal appears to command bigger box office and act more successfully as an all-round 'star', then as much as any specific and obvious appeal which he may hold based upon the perceived affinity which he holds for the cinema-going classes - young, male, proletarian / lower-middle - or affinity with Malayali fantasy ethnic identity as coded in its dominant 'modern Travancore Hindu' modality, his success may eventually be due to his famous 'flexibility'. But in contrast to Mammooty's anxiety-provoking capacities for

transformation, Mohan Lal's flexibility suggests qualities of mutability permitting him to embody a variety of interesting and alluring imaginary positions with which to play, while always remaining safely anchored to a stable and recognisable core identity as 'Mohan Lal'. He thus assuages young men's anxieties about identity by offering the spectacle of stability which can assimilate changes without threat to self.

At the same time, if Mammooty embodies and offers entries into extraordinariness (beauty, talent), otherness and transformation, and the possibilities of crafting a more perfected and masculinised self, Mohan Lal offers the reassuring spectacle of the regular guy, just like the fan, who hits the big-time. One might wish to be like Mammooty but often feels that one already is in some way like Mohan Lal. Fans consistently maintain that Lal conducts an 'ordinary life' and is an 'ordinary person', something which cannot hold credibility when spoken of about a highly paid movie star, but which offers another point of focus for thinking about Lal's popular appeal and the type of star he is. 'Naturalness' and 'authenticity' occur over and over when talking about Lal - his manner, dance rhythm, walk, smile, myriad imperfections and so on. Lal appears then as an elevation of the ordinary via the hyper-ordinary towards the extraordinary: he is at once the guy just like me and the guy who has natural talent in every direction. Mammooty is a necessary complement to this figure, in his aspects as the always already - by virtue of innate otherness - truly and authentically extraordinary: both perfectly other and a perfect other.

Finally, Kerala young male fans - literate, articulate, sophisticated - work with a fiercely defended fantasy ethnicised self-image which sets them apart from the passionate and putatively simple Tamil or Telugu movie fan. While Tamil fans may self-immolate on the death of a star; while Telugu fans will tattoo a star's name onto their arms; the Malayali fan will switch sides and change fan association at will. And

while Tamil fans affected to overlook their hero MGR's balding and fat countenance, Malayali fans at once revel in Lal's imperfections and claim him as their own doppelganger. While young men repeat dialogue and copy hairstyles, follow *fillum* fashions and modify their walks, they maintain a sense that this is all play, a matter of aesthetics and surfaces. The fragmentations of ethnic and class modalities inherent within the two-star universe eventually then have the potential to unify at the higher level of the fantasised and aspired towards 'Malayali' identity: different both from other Indians and from other southerners, marked out by its relationships to modernity, education, cultural sophistication, and endowed with a deep sense of irony and reflexivity. This 'Malayali' identity is, by sleight of hand, assimilated into a dominant community's vision of itself. Travancore Hindu man comes to be Malayali man, and is held to be flexible yet stable, and treading an ideal path through the modern world: neither reluctant nor too-eager to embrace modernity. He does not pretend perfection, but is reassuringly fallible and approachable, generally triumphant but often only through a willingness to transgress the rules and confront power with force. In youthful male fan activity, this cultivated Malayali ethnic identity then articulates with the fan's subject position as fledgling man testing out various masculine aesthetics to permit Malayali young men to develop a keen appreciation of the fluidity and artificiality of masculine identities.

So we move to suggest that Mammooty and Mohan Lal embody and perform different styles of manliness, none of which one would want to dispense with in one's potential repertoire as a fledgling man testing out new subject positions and public personas. In line with recent moves from queer theory, (see e.g. Peterson 1998 for summaries), we insist upon anti-essentialist analyses of gender, and on a configuration of the masculine self which is - like all possible selves - complex,

shifting, internally plural, inconsistent and so on: masculinity as never achieved, always performed and necessarily open to question and change. At the same time, as Gledhill writes, in her introduction to 'Stardom', on Hollywood, "What emerges from these essays ... is a new conception of identity as multiple, ambivalent, contradictory, always in the process of construction, but rarely dispensable" (Gledhill 1991). From this perspective, a simple one-off identification with either a star or a film character is unlikely, being unable to encapsulate the complexity of the gendered self. Malayali *payyans* are caught between aspirations towards the glamour, violence and access to sex cinematically represented by villainy or ambivalent heroes and the possibility of behaving like the wholly good character. One would want to be able to practice - or imagine oneself - speaking like Mammooty, in a voice which resonates power, warmth and sensuality; one would want to imagine oneself as Mohan Lal, singing and romancing a girl; one would aspire to this one's swaggering gait, that one's expression of amused disdain. One wants to participate in Lal's 'average Malayali' alter-ego and in Mammooty's range of recognisable 'types' of dominant masculinity, the former's access to Hindu 'normality' and the latter's access to Muslim exceptionalness. And few of these potentialities could be dispensed with. Only if working class styles of masculinity are totally figured out in favour of a sober bourgeois orientation can some - not all - aspects of Mohan Lal's persona then be ignored - drinking, fighting, dancing. And even then, the associations called up by Lal's rejected activities - physical strength, male sociability, aggression, forcefulness - are still dealt with or traced by other means within the context of Mammooty's higher status style: the police inspector with his legitimate gun replaces the *goonda* with his hastily grabbed weapon; the man of violence is only rendered such temporarily, generally by personal

tragedy which seeks solace in drink, with motivations explored in flashback and sometimes resolved in repentance and reform.

We are then thinking here not of identification but of temporary adoption and ‘trying on’ - or, better, ‘taking in’ - of characteristics, of partial and temporary incorporations into the self of such aspects as the smile, the walk, the deep voice<sup>xxvii</sup>. During film-watching and the subsequent *ad hoc* mimetic performances which take place within the group - reciting dialogues, acting out fights, singing songs - *payyans* are engaged in mimetic exchanges of characteristics with the stars, characteristics which are also then available to be detached from a particular hero and circulated within the wider group. In this identity crafting, fans can then be thought of not so much as identifying with their heroes as taking on parts of them, in processes which suggest the encounters of mimesis and alterity theorised by Taussig, in which the very fact that one is not striving to be an exact replica, but is instead fusing self and other, sameness and difference, is what is productive and potent, tinged with magical powers of transformation. Thinking of the embodied nature of fan incorporation of star characteristics - remember that fans generally speak about a gait, a smile, a bodily disposition - also helps us overcome possible objections to or problems with psychoanalytic arguments about the fractured self, by enabling us to turn instead towards a less abstract concept with a long history of usefulness in theorising personhood: that of the *dividual*. No longer - since Strathern’s work and its take-up by anthropologists working in various locations (Strathern 1988; cf Busby 1997, 2000) - rooted in Marriott’s original dichotomising on Western stable individuals and Indian fluid selves (Marriott 1990; see also Daniel 1984), the *dividual* enables us to think about the instability of the self and the ways in which aspects like gender are shaped. We can think of Malayali *payyans* as located in a mimetic economy, in

which they take and exchange characteristics, parts of self and other, with their on-screen heroes and with each other, reproducing and newly fashioning over each generation and with each shift in masculine style what it means to be a Malayali man, negotiating the demands of modernity and finding a way to move through the various arenas - family, work, lesiure - around him.

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<sup>i</sup> Several early readers of this paper have noted correspondences between the two star figures here and the archetypes of Ram (or Siva) and Krishna. While we also noted such correspondences, which undoubtedly exist and surely hold psychic and emotional relevance for certain sections of the Malayali population, we choose not to pursue this line of argument. As Srivastava notes, in his introduction to his special issue of the journal *South Asia*, “it is not clear ... that analytical recourse to *The Laws of Manu* ... is adequate to an understanding of the ... present” (2001:3). (See also his paper in this volume). Impatience with both the limitations and also the post-Hindutva political implications inherent in post-Dumontian lines of anthropological work reliant upon the texts of high Hinduism to explore current ethnography are also factors here.

<sup>ii</sup> See Pandian 1992 for a more nuanced and sensitive analysis of the ambivalences inherent in popular culture.

<sup>iii</sup> Of course there are many stylistic differences, which one would want to take into account in a study of form in the medium.

<sup>iv</sup> We have been supported through various periods of Kerala fieldwork and writing-up from the period June 1989 to September 1996 by: the Economic and Social Research Council of Great Britain; the London School of Economics; the Leverhulme Trust; the Nuffield Foundation; and the Wenner-Gren Foundation. Sussex and SOAS financed the summer 1999 field trip during which the fan-club interviews took place. This paper was originally presented in September 2000 as part of a panel on South Asian Masculinities at Edinburgh, the 16th Modern Asian Studies Conference. We want to thank earlier readers of it for comments: Radhika Chopra; Rachel Dwyer; Steve Hughes; Andy Medhurst; and discussants at the Edinburgh conference.

<sup>v</sup> There are several other websites dealing with what is known affectionately by NRIs as ‘Malluwood’: <http://members.tripod.com/mcinema2> is one good one; [http://members.xoom.com/\\_XMCM/suma\\_praveen](http://members.xoom.com/_XMCM/suma_praveen) is another.

<sup>vi</sup> There are several female actors, but informants agreed that none of them are ‘stars’ in the way that male actors can become. Some women offered reasons as rooted in scriptwriters’ and directors’ inability or unwillingness to come up with decent parts for women; others with the transient and limited nature of the female acting career, which is much shorter and linked more closely to youthful physical glamour.

<sup>vii</sup> Thanks to Radhika Chopra for this point.

<sup>viii</sup> In this he might appear to mirror Amitabh Bachan, but actually has quite a different style, being equally noted for comedy, romance and dance.

<sup>ix</sup> Kerala was formed in 1956 by the unification of formerly British administered Malabar with the erstwhile Hindu princely states of Travancore and Cochin, ten years after the latter had become part of the Indian Union. The modern state consists roughly of one third Hindus, one third Christians and one third Muslims, the populations being respectively roughly concentrated in the three areas which were formerly separate.

<sup>x</sup> As Jenkins, writing of USA Star Trek fans and their multiple identifications within a range of on-screen characters, notes, “identification with any one character or text is only momentary within the liminal play with identity that constitutes the filk (sic) song as a whole” (1990:157).

<sup>xi</sup> We note that Mammootty himself has sometimes suggested this in interviews.

<sup>xii</sup> While we personally find Tamil movies often far more entertaining than Malayalam ones - certainly the music and dance is more finely developed - this line between Kerala and other southern styles is grossly overstated by Malayalis, as are other aspects (clothing, speech) of alleged Malayali superior difference.

<sup>xiii</sup> In reply to questions about the differences between the two, one fan offered the following: “There are two types of school kids’ reactions to getting good marks in class: the first one thinks, ‘that’s great, let’s hope the exam also goes like this’, and when the exam comes he gets a good grade. The second one doesn’t let the book down from his hand for one second to study for that exam. Mohan Lal is first type, Mammootty is second type.”

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<sup>xiv</sup> Again, Muraleedharan's queer reading provides food for thought, in citing two films in which Mohan Lal kisses Mammooty, further complicating the dialectic whereby the pair are separated (distinguished) from each other and joined together (2001:183).

<sup>xv</sup> We are anxious to distance ourselves equally from the vast body of work pathologising Indian male sexualities and relations to women (Carstairs 1957; Kakar 1982; Caldwell 1999); and also from orientalist traditions of feminising the Indian male (see e.g. Nandy 1988; Sinha 1995). See our recent paper on semen-loss where we argue against interpretations which posit neurotic sexualities in India (Osella & Osella 2001). At the same time, we have found uneasy reactions among European audiences to ethnographic material on, say, hand-holding and close male friendships - reactions which range from anxious / amused recognition of the phenomenon to indignant accusations towards us of perpetrating the orientalists' 'effeminate Indian' stereotype or failing to understand heterosexual homosociality. For these (methodological, political) reasons, we do not choose here to pursue the suggestion made by Muraleedharan (2001:181; as an Indian man, very differently positioned from two European writers) that we dissolve distinctions and recognise a continuum running between homosociality and homosexuality.

<sup>xvi</sup> Eleftheriotis also notes that Greek popular cinema reflects Greek anxieties about finding a place within global modernity (1995:242).

<sup>xvii</sup> A distinction - interestingly - often elided by academic colleagues, who have taken (often indignant) exception in public presentation of this material to any suggestion that there may be elements of homoeroticism - never mind outright queerness - in young men's relationships with stars and each other. Indeed, Muraleedharan's (surely?) eminently reasonable point that "heterosexual and straight-identified people experience queer moments" does not appear to be taken at all for granted (2001:182). It is interesting that in a radically deconstructivist intellectual climate in which academics acknowledge the artificiality of race and gender, (and even now, thanks to e.g. Lacquer 1990 and Butler 1993 biological sex), 'heterosexuality' still appears to be unquestioningly essentialised and naturalised.

<sup>xviii</sup> cf Halberstram (1998) on female masculinities and the detachment of 'masculinity' from 'men'.

<sup>xix</sup> There are of course gossip and photos in movie magazines and on the www, but actresses do not attract even 10% of the attention lavished upon Mammooty and Mohan Lal.

<sup>xx</sup> Male discomfort with confronting homoerotic elements are commonly dealt with, according to Neale, by means of violence. This serves both to repress the desire to use another male as erotic spectacle and - as when action heroes strip and fight- enabling the spectacle.

<sup>xxi</sup> And interestingly, he is the star identified by Muraleedharan as being the more easily read queerly (2002).

<sup>xxii</sup> Hindu fan anxieties about Muslim Indianness - as problematic ethnicity or untrustworthy state loyalty - are being fanned in Kerala, as elsewhere in India, since the late 1980s with the rise of Hindutva rhetoric from groups such as BJP & RSS. Doubts about their hero are assuaged by the common fan story that Mammooty donated 2 lakhs to the Kargill effort against Pakistan.

<sup>xxiii</sup> The position is most clear of course in regard to Hindus and Muslims; while Christians share Hindu stereotypes of Muslims, Christians' own perceived community-specific qualities (*swabhavangal*) - which include decisiveness and determination - place them in a slightly different position.

<sup>xxiv</sup> We stress that, as elsewhere in India, this imagination of 'Muslimness' is an anxious fantasy stereotype.

<sup>xxv</sup> Islamic prohibitions on dancing may or may not be relevant here.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Because our fieldwork has always been in Travancore, what is sorely missing here is a perspective from north Kerala. Further fieldwork in Malabar and among Muslims (planned Sept 2002- 04) will surely draw out yet more complexities in the arguments we are making here. For now, take this paper as a Travancorean reading.

<sup>xxvii</sup> This could lead us into long-standing debates in film and gender theories about the differences between masquerade, camp, drag and so on. We choose to sidestep such debates for lack of space.