

The Rise of Violence and Toxicity in Mollywood: Transitioning Heroism from Virtuous to Blood- Bathed Violent Shades in Selected Malayalam Films

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Abstract

Malayalam cinema, widely known for its rich storytelling and compelling characters, has traditionally presented heroes who embodied virtue, morality, and righteousness. This paper examines the shift in Malayalam cinema from the portrayal of the virtuous hero to the rise of the violent anti-hero, focusing on *Marco*, *Pani*, *Sookshmadarsini*, and *RDX*. Traditional heroism, characterized by moral righteousness and self-sacrifice, has given way to protagonists who embrace aggression and moral ambiguity. Through detailed analysis of these films, this study explores how violence, revenge, and psychological complexity have become central to hero narratives, reflecting societal changes and audience preferences. By deconstructing this evolution, the paper sheds light on the broader implications of glorifying brutality and redefining heroism in contemporary Malayalam cinema

Keywords: Malayalam Cinema, Toxicity, Aggression, Virtue, *Marco*, *Pani*, *Sookshmadarsini*, and *RDX*

Introduction

The portrayal of heroism in cinema has undergone significant transformation over the decades, reflecting changing societal values, cultural dynamics, and audience expectations. In the context of Malayalam cinema, popularly known as Mollywood, there has been a discernible shift from the traditional depiction of virtuous, morally upright heroes to complex characters embodying shades of grey, often intertwined with elements of violence and toxicity. (Jijo Alex / etimes.in / Jan 28)

The earlier characters, despite being entangled in conflicts and personal struggles, sought justice through resilience, intelligence, and emotional strength rather than sheer brutality. In earlier narratives, vengeance was driven by a deep moral conviction rather than unrestrained aggression. Blood-soaked, rage-fueled hero introductions were never a signature of Malayalam cinema; instead, heroes were introduced with emotional depth, their struggles unfolding in ways that allowed audiences to empathize with their journey. This research paper explores this paradigm shift in Mollywood with specific reference to the films *Marco*, *Pani*, *RDX*, and *Sookshmadarsini*. These films exemplify the emergence of the “violent hero,” a figure whose actions, while often morally ambiguous or outright aggressive, are framed as justifiable within the narrative context. Unlike the traditional virtuous hero characterized by selflessness, integrity, and adherence to social norms, the modern hero navigates a complex moral landscape where personal vendettas, psychological struggles, and societal pressures drive their actions. The evolution challenges the

conventional binary of good versus evil, presenting protagonists who blur ethical boundaries and redefine the notion of heroism. The research paper aims to analyze how the selected films reflect broader cultural and psychological undercurrents, examining the factors that contribute to the glorification of violence and toxicity as heroic traits. By deconstructing the characters and narratives of *Marco*, *Pani*, *RDX*, and *Sookshmadarsini*, this paper seeks to understand how Mollywood is reshaping the hero archetype, moving from the white, morally unblemished hero towards protagonists who exist in the grey areas of human experience.

The Concept of the Virtuous Hero in Earlier Times

In classic literature, the idea of a virtuous hero is often rooted in qualities such as honour, courage, integrity, and selflessness. These heroes adhere to strong moral principles, serving as paragons of virtue and often undertaking noble quests for the greater good. Examples of such heroes include Odysseus from Homer's *The Odyssey*, whose bravery and intelligence guide him through perilous adventures; King Arthur from Arthurian legends, renowned for his chivalry, justice, and leadership; and Beowulf, the titular character in the Old English epic, celebrated for his strength, loyalty, and determination to protect his people. These characters embody the ideals of their societies, upholding values that inspire and instruct audiences on the nature of true heroism.

The virtuous hero, a figure celebrated across global cinema, has historically been depicted as a character of unwavering chivalry, integrity, and moral righteousness. In classic Hollywood, characters like Atticus Finch from *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) exemplify virtue through their deep sense of justice and compassion. Atticus, portrayed by Gregory Peck, stands as a beacon of moral courage, defending a black man in a racially prejudiced society despite societal backlash. Similarly, in British cinema, Sir Thomas More in *A Man for All Seasons* (1966) is a hero defined by his moral fortitude, choosing to sacrifice his life rather than compromise his ethical principles. In Japanese cinema, Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) presents Kambei, a wise and selfless leader who gathers a band of warriors to protect a defenseless village from bandits. His leadership and commitment to righteousness define him as a virtuous hero. Likewise, in Indian cinema, characters like R.K. Narayan's *Malgudi Days* protagonist Swami, though a child, display an innate moral sense, standing against corruption and wrongdoing. In earlier Malayalam cinema, Mohanlal's character in *Bharatham* (1991) represents virtue through his deep familial loyalty and sense of duty. These characters, defined by their honor, sacrifice, and adherence to ethical codes, have shaped traditional heroism in cinema, starkly contrasting with the morally ambiguous protagonists seen in contemporary films. These characters highlight the enduring appeal of virtuous heroes whose ethical fortitude and sacrifices resonate across generations, serving as timeless exemplars of heroism rooted in virtue and moral clarity.

Writers and filmmakers such as M.T. Vasudevan Nair, Bharatan, and Priyadarshan meticulously crafted protagonists who upheld ethical values, often serving as role models for society. However, a significant shift in storytelling and character portrayal has emerged, marked by an increasing acceptance of violence as an integral part of heroism. Today's Malayalam films, embraced by audiences with unprecedented enthusiasm, depict protagonists who revel in aggression, taking justice into their own hands with relentless brutality. This shift suggests not only an evolution in cinematic narratives but also a changing audience perception, that is more receptive to extreme violence, aggression, and morally ambiguous protagonists. The overwhelming acceptance of blood-drenched revenge arcs and ruthless characters raises questions about the evolving sensibilities of viewers and the direction in which Malayalam cinema is headed.

Multifaceted talent Balachandra Menon had directed and scripted numerous films in the 1980s and 1990s. He had directed 40 films and acted in over 100. In many of his films, he portrayed the virtuous hero, often as a middle-class individual grappling with societal challenges while upholding moral values. His characters were relatable, reflecting the common man's struggles and ethical dilemmas. Films like *April 18* and *Karyam Nissaram* showcased Menon as an upright, principled man navigating family and societal expectations with grace and integrity. Character Unni played by actor Jayaram in *Pattabhishekam* (1999), directed by Anil Babu, is a simple and kind-hearted man who, due to unforeseen circumstances, is compelled to pose as an elephant's caretaker. Despite the comedic undertones, Unni's inherent goodness and selflessness shine through as he navigates the complexities of his assumed identity. Mohanlal's character, in *Midhunam* (1993) directed by Priyadarsan aligns with the classic Malayalam cinema hero, where strength is defined not by physical aggression but by emotional endurance, responsibility, and moral uprightness. His character starkly contrasts with modern anti-heroes, who often rely on violence and vengeance to establish dominance. Sethu's journey reflects the trials of a righteous individual striving to maintain integrity amidst adversity. Gopinathan, portrayed by Mohanlal is a classical musician whose sense of duty and love for his brother lead him to make profound personal sacrifices, showcasing his moral strength and emotional depth in Sibi Malayil's directorial *Bharatham* (1991). The shift in cinematic representation of violence marks a stark transformation in the way Malayalam cinema portrays death and brutality. Earlier films, such as *Sadayam* (1992), directed by Sibi Malayil and written by M. T. Vasudevan Nair, depicted violence through a philosophical and poetic lens. Mohanlal's character, Sathyanathan, committed murder with a warped sense of salvation, believing he was sparing young women from a life of exploitation. Despite its grim premise, the film handled violence with restraint, using subtle imagery and emotional weight to convey its impact.

In *Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha* (1989), directed by Hariharan, Mammooty plays Chandu, a misunderstood warrior whose noble actions are overshadowed by false accusations. Despite the betrayal, Chandu's character remains honorable, revealing the complexity and resilience of a virtuous hero. These portrayals underscore the traditional Malayalam cinema's celebration of virtuous heroes, emphasizing moral fortitude, altruism, and the triumph of good over adversity. Characters were often rooted in familial values, community responsibilities, and personal integrity, reflecting the cultural ethos of the times.

Transitioning Heroism from Virtuous to Blood-Bathed Violent Shades

Malayalam cinema has undergone a significant transformation in its portrayal of heroism, shifting from the depiction of virtuous, morally upright characters to more complex, morally ambiguous, and even violent protagonists. This evolution mirrors broader cultural and societal changes, reflecting shifting attitudes toward power, justice, and personal identity. Films like *Marco*, *Pani*, *Sookshmadarsini*, and *RDX* exemplify this trend, presenting heroes whose actions blur the lines between right and wrong.

In *Marco*, the protagonist navigates a morally grey landscape, where his choices are driven by personal vendettas and survival instincts rather than traditional virtues. The movie depicts dramatic transformation, shifting from the portrayal of virtuous, self-sacrificing individuals to complex, morally ambiguous figures who often embrace violence as a means of asserting power and protecting personal values. This evolution of recent Malayalam Cinema where aggressive violence is not just a narrative tool but a defining characteristic of the protagonist was well received by the audience. In *Marco*, the film opens with a harrowing scene where the hero is introduced in an act of brutal aggression by tearing down the face of a dog. This shocking display sets the tone for the character's trajectory, where violence is both a personal

creed and a symbol of unwavering loyalty to family. The act is disturbingly justified within the film's moral framework, presenting the hero as someone willing to go to any extent to safeguard his family's honour and security. This narrative choice reflects a departure from the traditional heroic ideals of restraint and moral righteousness. Further into the film, Marco's character reveals his willingness to forsake the love of his life, prioritizing personal vendetta over emotional connections. This is vividly portrayed in a sequence where Marco confronts the villains responsible for his family's downfall, engaging in a relentless bloodbath. The violence escalates to shocking extremes, including scenes where harm is inflicted on a pregnant woman and even a newborn child, solely to satisfy the narrative's heightened "violence index." Such depictions underscore a troubling glorification of brutality, where the hero's capacity for violence becomes a measure of his chivalry and strength.

In stark contrast, films like *Pavithram* (1994), starring Mohanlal and directed by T. K. Rajeev Kumar, celebrate a different kind of heroism. Mohanlal's character, Unni, sacrifices his romantic relationship to take on the responsibility of raising his younger sister after their mother's death. His heroism is rooted in selflessness, emotional resilience, and an unwavering sense of duty towards family, the qualities that starkly oppose the violent, vengeful traits celebrated in *Marco*. The juxtaposition of these films highlights a broader trend in Malayalam cinema, where the traditional image of the virtuous hero is increasingly overshadowed by characters whose moral complexities and violent tendencies are not only accepted but admired. The blood-soaked, vengeance-driven protagonist of *Marco* is emblematic of this shift, reflecting a cultural fascination with anti-heroes whose strength is measured by their capacity for violence rather than their moral fortitude. This evolution in cinematic heroism raises critical questions about the values being celebrated in contemporary narratives and their impact on societal perceptions of strength, honour, and masculinity.

Joju George's directorial *Pani*, delves into the psyche of a character whose violent tendencies are a response to deep-seated societal injustices, challenging the conventional boundaries of heroism. The film introduces Giri, a massive, terror-inflicting figure whose dominance is established through scenes where he manhandles adversaries, asserting his power and influence in the town. The narrative is set against the backdrop of Giri's well-established, affluent family, blacklisted by the police and associated with notorious figures like Warrant Davy. The film celebrates the extent of Giri's family's wealth and influence, contrasting it with the dark undercurrents of their criminal entanglements. Despite his violent exterior, Giri's character reveals a softer side, especially in his tender affection towards his wife. This duality mirrors the transformation seen in *Devasuram* (1993), directed by I. V. Sasi, where Mohanlal's character, Mangalassery Neelakantan, transitions from a ruthless feudal lord to a man capable of deep love and vulnerability, particularly towards the character played by Revathi. In *Pani*, Giri's vengeful journey is triggered when his wife, family, and friends are brutally attacked. His relentless quest for revenge sees him challenging both the judiciary and police systems, opting to dispense justice through his own brutal means paralleling Neelakantan's defiance of societal norms to avenge personal wrongs in *Devasuram*.

The film's climax is a crescendo of violence, foreshadowed throughout with ominous hints about the gruesome fate awaiting the villains. In a shocking finale, the antagonists meet their end in an explosive sequence, literally shattering into pieces. This graphic depiction of vengeance, involving everything from knives to firearms to visceral explosions, reflects a deliberate attempt to satisfy the audience's appetite for cinematic violence. The acceptance of such an intensely violent climax by viewers underscores a cultural shift, where the cathartic release provided by brutal retribution resonates more deeply than traditional

narratives of moral redemption. *Pani* thus embodies a cinematic trend that equates a hero's capacity for violence with strength, resilience, and, paradoxically, a form of justice.

Sookshmadarsini portrays a hero who operates in the shadows, using morally questionable methods to achieve what he perceives as justice. The film takes a dark turn by normalizing crime, presenting brutal actions in a disturbingly casual manner. One of the most chilling moments in the movie involves the protagonist, played by Basil Joseph, cracking jokes while ruthlessly killing his own sister, a psychotic act that reflects his complete detachment from morality. In a particularly horrifying sequence, he lets his sister's body rot in acid, displaying a level of cruelty and detachment reminiscent of Shabby from *Kumbalangi Nights*. The protagonist of *Sookshmadarsini* is not a hero in the traditional sense but a master manipulator, a cunning and mysterious figure who navigates his way through the film with calculated deception. His crooked, deceitful nature adds a layer of unpredictability, making his actions both repulsive and compelling. Despite his morally corrupt approach, the character has managed to strike a chord with audiences, proving that the appetite for toxic and shrewd protagonists is growing in modern cinema. The film taps into the audience's fascination with psychological thrillers, pushing the boundaries of heroism into darker, more unsettling territories.

RDX highlights the raw, unfiltered aggression of its lead characters, whose violent actions are both a reflection of their environment and a rebellion against it. The film delves into the unwavering bond of brotherhood and passionate friendship, portraying a trio of protagonists who navigate their world through a mix of loyalty and relentless brutality. The extremity of violent acts, including aggression towards women and even an infant, underscores the film's willingness to push boundaries in its depiction of vengeance and justice. The dynamic of equally powerful heroes was previously explored in Malayalam films like *Ravanaprabhu* and *Valyettan*, where brotherhood and strength were central themes. Joju George's directorial *Pani* also focuses on the power of a fearless, tightly-knit gang driven by an unyielding sense of courage and determination. Much like *Pani*, *RDX* justifies its heroes' descent into crime and violence by portraying it as a reaction to an attack on their family. The film's brutal fight sequences, heavily influenced by martial arts choreography, have drawn both criticism and acclaim. While some viewers find them unsettling, younger audiences have embraced them for their high-adrenaline spectacle. What sets *RDX* apart is its emotional grounding. Despite the protagonists' violent streaks, the narrative emphasizes love, relationships, and family ties, framing their actions as instinctive responses to protect their loved ones. Initially choosing to suppress their darker sides in favor of peaceful lives, the heroes are ultimately pulled back into a cycle of vengeance when their families are threatened, triggering their return to violence.

This shift from the virtuous hero to the violent, anti-hero archetype raises critical questions about the evolving nature of heroism in contemporary Malayalam cinema. It reflects a growing acceptance of flawed protagonists, whose moral complexities resonate with audiences facing an increasingly complex world. This paper aims to explore this transition, analyzing how these films redefine heroism through their characters, narratives, and thematic constructs.

Conclusion

The evolution of heroism in Malayalam cinema reflects a broader shift in societal narratives, moving from the virtuous, morally upright protagonist to the flawed, aggressive anti-hero. Earlier heroes, exemplified by characters like Sethu in *Midhunam* or Mangalassery Neelakandan in *Devasuram*, embodied chivalry, integrity, and emotional strength, resolving conflicts with wisdom rather than brute force. In early

Malayalam cinema, the virtuous hero was a central figure, embodying moral integrity, selflessness, and adherence to societal values. However, contemporary films like *Marco*, *Pani*, *Sookshmadarsini*, and *RDX* showcase protagonists who justify extreme violence as a necessary means of justice or vengeance. This transformation signals a growing audience preference for raw, unfiltered portrayals of masculinity and power, challenging traditional notions of heroism. While this change reflects the complexities of modern society, it also raises questions about the normalization of brutality in cinematic storytelling and its impact on cultural perceptions of heroism.

However, contemporary Malayalam cinema has taken a more explicit and graphic approach, normalizing extreme brutality. Where older films relied on suggestion such as a lifeless body or splattered red paint, to depict violent acts, modern films like *Marco*, *Pani*, *Sookshmadarsini*, and *RDX* take it a step further, showcasing visceral imagery like bodies being blown apart, hearts being ripped out, and victims being tortured in the most grotesque ways. The act of killing has evolved from an emotional and psychological conflict to a spectacle of aggression, often framed as heroic.

This progression raises significant questions about the audience's evolving appetite for violence in storytelling. While death remains a fundamental narrative element, the manner of its portrayal has drastically changed. Does this signify a desensitization to brutality, or is it a reflection of the socio-political unrest shaping contemporary storytelling? The research paper does not object to the portrayal of death itself but rather examines the shift in how violence is aestheticized, celebrated, and consumed in modern Malayalam cinema.

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