



The Interrelationship between Hyper-masculinity and Urbanity: A Study on the Alpha Male Characters in *Malik*

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Abstract

Malik is a 2021 Malayalam gangster thriller film directed by Mahesh Narayanan. The film recounts the rise of Sulaiman Ali as the 'godfather' of Ramadapally, a coastal town situated near Thiruvananthapuram city. The evolution of Sulaiman from the son of a school teacher to a violent alpha male gangster is directly related to the social space of Ramadapally, which is a ghettoized town of fisher folks belonging to marginalized communities. Hypermasculinity is the sociological exaggeration of masculine features such as physical or psychological aggression, strength, and male libido. Male social construction demands continuous reinforcement and exhibition of these traits. Along with the protagonist Sulaiman Ali, other characters David and Freddy are specimens of hypermasculine men in *Malik*.

Henri Lefebvre says that the capitalist relations of production are reproduced in space and capitalism survives by producing and occupying space. In the neo-capitalist era, the state plays a key role in the capitalist production of urban space. The intervention of the state in the process of the production of space is a motif in *Malik*. The impact of the state intervention and the conflict between the cores and peripheries of urban areas are formative forces in the development of strong, power-hungry, violent, risk-taking men like Sulaiman. This paper tries to understand the relationship between the developments of hypermasculine traits in men with the socio-political conditions of the urban space inhabited by them by analyzing the hypermasculine characters in *Malik*.

Keywords

hypermasculinity, urban space, alpha male, romance, shadow

Malik is a 2021 Malayalam drama, political thriller film directed by Mahesh Narayanan. The film tells the story of the rise of Sulaiman Ali as the 'godfather' of Ramadapally, a coastal town near Thiruvananthapuram city, predominantly inhabited by Muslims. The evolution of Sulaiman from the son of a school teacher to a violent, hyper-masculine gangster is directly related to the social space of Ramadapally and the nearby town of Edavathura, which are ghettoized settlements of fisher-folks belonging to marginalized communities. This paper tries to analyse the relationship between the development of hyper-masculine traits in men with the socio-political conditions of the urban space they inhabit in *Malik*, using the ideas on the production of space by Lefebvre and Soja.

The French Marxist thinker Henri Lefebvre argues that social space is socially produced and also that the capitalist relations of production are reproduced in space (Lefebvre 26). Capitalism survives and conceals its contradictions by producing and occupying space. This idea emphasizes the crucial role of urbanity in exercising power and hegemony. In the words of Soja, 'urban planning was crucially examined as a tool of the state, serving the dominant classes by organizing and reorganizing urban space for the benefit of capital accumulation and crisis management' (Soja 95). Ramadapally and Edavathura, two places in the peripheries of an urban centre, are constantly at the receiving end of the attempts for spatial organization and reorganization by the capitalist forces and the state. These processes of the spatial organization have a huge impact on the lives of the inhabitants. The development of the key characters in the film like Sulaiman Ali, David, and Freddy are deeply entwined with the changes that happened to their living space. These characters display toxic hyper-masculinity traits, which could be interpreted as the direct result of the repressive, unjust, neglected, financially poor space in which they were born and brought up.

Masculinity refers to a set of socially constructed values generally associated with the male sex, such as courage, the pursuit of power, and independence (Josephina72). Masculinity is not natural but a constructed notion based on certain values, and it has little to do with human physiology or physical strength (Millet 26-27). Masculinity is the sociological exaggeration of masculine features such as physical or psychological aggression, strength, and male libido. Male social construction demands a continuous reinforcement and exhibition of these traits (Josephina 73). Hyper-masculinity is also characterized by certain toxic traits like alcoholism, workaholism, and violence. These traits are a means to cope with the repression of emotions which is another characteristic expected of hyper-masculine men (Holloway). The willingness to take risks and get exposed to dangers is another characteristic highly valued by patriarchy in men. It is interesting to note that many of the hyper-masculine traits are valued by capitalism. Workaholism, individualist independence, competitiveness, repression of emotions and sentiments, willingness to take risks and face danger are values that are considered useful for surviving and thriving in a capitalist world. Thus it can be said that the construction of hyper-masculinity is overdetermined by patriarchy and capitalism. In *Malik*, the exploitative nature of capitalism affects people's everyday lives through the unevenness in development.

In his work *The Postmodern Geographies*, Edward Soja stresses the importance of uneven development in the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. Soja correlates Lefebvre's and Ernst Mandel's ideas on capitalist geography to say that 'survival of capitalism and the associated production of its distinctive spatiality have depended upon the differentiation of occupied space into 'overdeveloped' and 'under developed' regions, the juxtaposition and constant combination of development and underdevelopment'. In *Malik*, Edavathura and Ramadapally are underdeveloped regions that are situated near the developed urban centre of Thiruvananthapuram. The people and places in the peripheries are exploited by the centre. The exploitation of the periphery by the core is primarily carried out through the geographical transfer of value. 'In the geographical landscape of the capital, there will be areas of greater and lesser productivity, high and low capital to labour ratios, varying rates of profit all within the same integrated market for commodities' (Soja 113). The resources and the value of the labour of the people of Edavathura and Ramadapally are exploited by the capitalist of the urban centre with the help of the state and the bureaucracy.

The main hyper-masculine characters of *Malik* are Ali, David, and Freddy. Ali and David belong to the first generation of violent men, while Freddy is the son of David, who follows in his footsteps of David. Ali and David's duo first entered the world of crime and violence by beating up the headmaster of their school. The headmaster was a Christian priest who made students hailing from poor backgrounds do jobs like cleaning toilets for meagre wages. Their first act of violence was a reaction against their squalid social conditions. In addition to poverty, getting a quality education was a challenge, as there was only one school for both Ramadapally and Edavathura. After dropping out of school, David and Ali engaged in petty crimes like stealing petrol and selling Marijuana to earn a living. Doing their traditional occupation of fishing was not enough to guarantee a decent living as a reasonable price was not offered for the fish caught by the fisher-folk by the mediators from the city. This is also an instance of geographical transfer of labour value from the periphery to the core. People like Ali and David are lured into unlawful activities because that is the only way to escape poverty's clutches and attain power, protection, and prosperity. The three characters developed Hyper-masculinity to succeed in their endeavours of mafia activism.

The issue of waste management in neo-capitalist cities is an important dimension of the core-periphery relationship. More often than not, the waste from the urban centres is transported and dumped into the regions outside the city. The vicinity of the mosque in Ramadapally is such a place that, unfortunately, it became the dumping yard of Thiruvananthapuram city. Despite constant appeals and pleas from the mosque authorities, people continued to dump garbage in the mosque yard. The state and its apparatuses turned a blind eye to the plight of the inhabitants of Ramadapally. But when Ali took the law into his own hands to react against the issue, the law enforcers came down hard on him. Here a hyper-masculine response from Ali was triggered by the indifference and inaction of the state. Ali packed the waste from the mosque yard into sacks and dumped them back into the houses in the city from where it came. This was an unforgivable act of impudence as far as the state was considered, and it responded in an exceedingly violent manner. Ali was brutally beaten up inside the police lock-up and later

handed over to Chandran's men. Chandran and the gang tied him up, half-naked with waste, and dumped him back into Ramadapally. This is not just an example of the state standing for removing obstacles that challenge the core but also an instance where the people from the peripheries are treated like dirt. It is the state that sets in motion a vicious cycle of organized crime and violence. The dumping of waste in Ramadapally was severely hampering the potential of Ramadapally mosque as a pilgrim centre, as worshippers refrained from visiting the mosque even on Fridays because of the stench and grotesqueness of the accumulated garbage. The transfer of economic value to the periphery is hindered by the hierarchical organization of space. Ali, an inhabitant of the exploited periphery space, was forced to resort to crime and violence for survival and better appropriation of his living space.

Henri Lefebvre proposed the idea of two circuits in the circulation of surplus value in post-war capitalism. The primary circuit refers to the Industrial production of commodities and their circulation and consumption. While the 'secondary circuit is deeply involved in the manipulation of the built environment, the extraction of urban rent, the setting of land values, and the organization of urban space for collective consumption, in all cases facilitated by the local and national state' (Soja 97). The growing prominence of the secondary circuit in the realization of value in neo-capitalism is evident in the state's attempt to take over Ramadapally for a proposed harbour project. In his work 'The Postmodern Geographies', Edward Soja says, 'a core country or core region within a country can become part of the periphery, and an erstwhile periphery can become part of the core, just as individuals can shift from proletariat to bourgeoisie from one generation to another'. The harbour project is the attempt of the state to assimilate Ramadapally to the core of the city. However, the assimilation process only involves the land, not its inhabitants. The inhabitants of Ramadapally are under the threat of getting evicted from the land. The only obstacle that stands between the state and the people of Ramadapally is the alpha male figure of Sulaiman Ali, who is the head of the parallel state in Ramadapally. The power wielded by Ali is the result of the confidence people have in him. Over the years, this confidence was gained by giving them justice and security, which the state apparatus failed to give.

Through his 'strong man' attitude, Ali consolidated his position as the leader and protector of the people of Ramadapally. 'Men in this society are assigned three traditional roles: providing, protecting, and procreating. In order to fulfil these roles, little boys are required to repress more of their emotions. Our culture maintains- and rightly so- that men are more efficient workers and warriors when they are not inconvenienced by tender feelings' (Allen and Robinson 6). Sulaiman Ali, as the narrative progresses, becomes more and more emotionally inexpressive and nonchalant. He starts to commit crimes, including murder, without flinching and without any hint of hesitation or remorse. In the scene in which Ali kills Chandran, even David is shocked to see the cold-bloodedness with which Ali lynched Chandran to death. With blood splattered across his face, Ali passes an indifferent look to David, which David greets with disbelief. This kind of extreme apathy and indifference is instrumental for the consolidation of power and stamping of authority amongst his supporters and threatening adversaries. Ali, David, and

Freddy are coerced by the circumstances to repress their emotions to live up to their reputation as strong men.

The emotional side of Ali resurfaces time and time again in the narrative despite his best efforts to keep them in check. Ali is deeply distressed by the animosity of his mother. Though he is respected by a large number of people, the only person's affection that Ali intensely longs for is his mother's. But on the exterior, he effectively hides the pain. His mother refuses to see him even when he decides to go for the holy pilgrimage of Hajj, as she disapproves of his illegal activities. The depth of emotional anguish of Ali is revealed to the audience in the scene in which he encounters Freddy in the prison room. From Freddy, he comes to understand that though she detests how he operates, she is appreciative and respectful of what Ali has done for the Ramadapally community. Swelling with pride and relief, he says to Freddy, 'At least my mother agreed that Sulaiman has his own reasons for what he does'. When Freddy tries to assassinate Ali in the prison room, Ali manages to fight back and gets hold of a pistol. He had Freddy cornered and helpless. But contrary to his reputation as an unforgiving and merciless killer, Ali spares Freddy's life and does not pull the trigger. He backs away dejectedly and says in a disappointed voice 'to kill you too, I can't'. In this display of rare forgiveness for his nephew, the audience are seeing an exhausted old man who is tired of hiding his emotions for most of his life. Another instance when Ali spills his repressed emotion and betrays his alpha male posturing is in the scene in which he sees the body of his son. Taking the dead body of his son in his arms, he sobs intensely. He is letting himself be openly emotional just because he is aware that no one is watching him. After some minutes, he reclaims his former strong and indifferent attitude. When he goes back to the mosque compound, Ali puts on an ice-cold attitude while his wife Roselyn cries inconsolably. Ali is consciously refraining from letting out his emotions in front of the public to safeguard his status as the provider and protector of the community. It is the patriarchal notion that emotions are a sign of weakness that prompts Ali to behave that way. But ultimately, it was the socio-political conditions of Ramadapally that gradually shaped the hyper-masculine character of Ali. In the instances mentioned above, the audience is shown that below the hyper-masculine Ali there is an Ali who is fragile, tender, and emotional. That Ali was forced into exile by the joined effort of patriarchy and capitalism.

The willingness to take risks for succeeding is considered a masculine trait. The hyper-masculine characters in *Malik* have no aversion to taking risks. They compete against rival gangs, judiciary, and state apparatuses frequently, often risking their lives. The rise of Ali and David to power was primarily because of their readiness to confront adversities and try out plans which have high chances of failing. Their rise to power was gradual. From doing petty crimes, they rose to become the henchmen of more powerful criminals like Chandran. David, Ali, and the gang worked for Chandran to smuggle foreign goods from ships anchored in the far sea. This itself was a risky task, where they were up against the surveilling eyes of the customs officers. After falling out with Chandran, they captured control of the whole smuggling business by outsmarting Chandran's hired thugs. This was an extremely risky move, but they went ahead with the plan spurred on by their masculine urge for revenge, competitive spirit, power hunger,

and a little bit of masculine arrogance. Smuggling goods and selling them in their streets was a radical move, as it involved the realization of their labour value in their own social space. Earlier, people like Chandran, more powerful and with more social connections, were using the labour of Ali and the gang to do the illicit smuggling of goods. They did the risky part for him while he stayed on the shore without getting his hands dirty. This is yet another example of the core exploiting the periphery. Even in shady businesses, it was the people from more privileged spaces and communities that reaped the rewards. The value always flowed from the periphery to the core. The periphery only acted as a source of cheap labour and resources. But Ali, David, and the gang reversed the trend when they captured the business from Chandran and turned Ramadapally into an (in)famous market for smuggled goods. Though illegally, they were appropriating their labour and their space for the benefit of the inhabitants of Edavathura and Ramadapally. But it came at the cost of David and Ali often risking their lives. The legacy of crime, violence, and revenge did not end with Ali and David. David's son Freddy was also forced by social conditions to bear the unbearable heaviness of hypermasculinity.

By the time Freddy was born, the rift between Edavathura and Ramadapally had worsened owing to communal tensions. David and Ali went separate ways, and a feud developed between them following the communal riot and the subsequent police firing. Freddy inherited a history of violence and a duty of revenge. He was brought up feeding the stories of cruelty and injustice meted on David and Edavathura by Ali and his people of Ramadapally. Naturally, Freddy became a young man hungry with aspirations to become an alpha male capable of dethroning Ali. But the fact that hyper-masculinity is a heavy cross to bear became most evident in Freddy. He is too young and soft to fill the shoes of David. His confusion, fragility, and simultaneously the determination to live up to his bidding as a tough man despite the confusion are obvious. This mental conflict is the defining trait of the character Freddy. He was assigned the role to finish off Ali inside the prison but was hesitant to take up the task. Though he agrees eventually, he fails to find the nerve to do the act and falters. In the introduction scene of Freddy, the audience gets a glimpse of the living condition of David's family. Edavathura has changed; the debilitated shacks are replaced by villa-type concrete buildings, which is a state-sponsored development project following the tsunami disaster. Though the physical landscape of Edavathura has altered, the social conditions continue to be like in the past. Freddy's peers, like Shibu, are still caught in the cycle of crime and legal cases. Freddy is pushed to follow that path both by his parents and his friends. Through Freddy, a member of a new generation is victimized by the social conditions of the urban periphery of Edavathura. Indirectly Freddy is the victim of the underdevelopment in Edavathura. 'not for us, you should do this for all our people of the coast who died. You should do this for your mother' (*Malik* 2:39:05–2:40:05). These are the words of Freddy's mother, who is giving words of encouragement to his son to murder his uncle Ali. This not only gives an idea about the upbringing of Freddy but also the fact that hypermasculinity is not exclusively displayed by men.

Gender is a socially constructed structure that is based on certain values, and the values associated with masculinity could also be imbibed by women. The women characters in *Malik*, like Roselyn and Freddy's mother, exemplify women with certain

hyper-masculine traits. Roselyn is not timid, shy, or submissive, the traits which are traditionally associated with femininity. On the contrary, she is an assertive, boisterous, and enterprising woman who stands her own in a men's world. Roselyn's character is moulded by the socio-spatial conditions of Edavathura. She develops hyper-masculine traits to react against and resist the adverse effects of the underdevelopment of her coastal hamlet. Like Ali reacted against the dumping of waste in the mosque, Roselyn openly challenged Chandran by refusing to sell fish to him for an unfair price. She also organized fellow fisher-folk women to stand with her. In the scene in which she meets a top police officer, Roselyn's body language is not at all intimidated by a man in a powerful position. Her voice is threatening rather than pleading when she says, 'you deal with everything that is going to happen in the next 15 days'. In Ali's absence, it is Roselyn that came forward to lead Ramadapally, not anyone of Ali's male accomplices. She can take up a role that could only be successfully carried out by a person with strong hyper-masculinity is because Roselyn shares with Ali and David, the experiences of the socio-spatial conditions of Ramadapally and Edavathura. They are all shaped in the same mould. David's wife also shares the masculine qualities of David. She carries intense hatred against Ali's family, and she openly declares that she will raise her son, sowing in him the seeds of revenge to take down Ali. Unfortunately, it was that kind of toxic upbringing, along with the social conditions and 'spatial poverty' of his living space, which eventually ended Freddy in jail. Roselyn's daughter is also learning the same values imbibed by her parents. She stands up for her wishes and is not hesitant to raise arms against men if they threaten her. The film also presents her as the most probable successor of Ali's activities. The main female characters in *Malik* reiterate that gender and gender roles are a social construct, which is inextricably related to socio-spatial conditions of a particular region which the individual inhabits and is not entirely dependent on cis-gender.

The rampant violence, crime, and illegal activities in the urban peripheries can be seen as a result of the repressive control and the exploitation of the labour and resources carried out by the state and the capitalist forces on the peripheries. In neo-capitalism, space has a major role in the realization of capital and the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. In addition to the class conflict in workplaces, 'class conflict over housing and the built environment, the state provisioning and siting of public services, community and neighbourhood economic development, the activities of financial organization, and other issues which revolved around how urban space was socially organized for consumption and reproduction' attained immense significance in the critique and practical resistance against capitalism (Soja 95). A harbour is an instalment that will facilitate the flow of commodities and capital at a swift pace and in huge quantity. It is a natural process; after the continued accumulation of capital at the core, the core region starts to expand beyond its previous boundaries. The plan to construct a harbour by taking over the land of Ramadapally could be read as such a move of capitalist territorial expansion. In *Malik*, the state is projecting an infrastructure development by evicting the original inhabitants of the land. This is a peculiarity of the process of the production space under capitalism. The inhabitants of the space are not given any say in the organization and reorganization of their living spaces. This predicament could be

understood using the idea of the 'right to the city' put forward by Henri Lefebvre. 'The right to the city stresses the need to restructure the power relations that underlie the production of urban space, fundamentally shifting control away from the capital and the state and toward urban inhabitants' (Purcell 101-102). According to this concept, the inhabitants of the city should have the right to participation and the right to appropriation. The right to participation maintains that citizens (inhabitants) should play a central role in any decision that contributes to the production of urban space. (Purcell 102).

In Arabic, *malik* means the chief of a village or community. How did Sulaiman Ali become the *malik* of Ramadapally? To answer the question, it is not enough to consider Sulaiman as a ruthless mafia don who commanded fear solely through his brutal actions. Ali became the apple of the eye of the people of Ramadapally, not just by being the hypermasculine 'provider and protector.' The popularity of Ali could be interpreted as a result of his success in allowing the inhabitants of Ramadapally to assert their right to the city'. In addition to providing and protecting his people through his alpha male gangster activities, he gave them a chance to the people to participate in the organization and appropriation of their living space. His interventions like protesting against the dumping of waste in the mosque yard, his efforts to bring a school to Ramadapally, and forceful prevention of sand mining from the coast are clear efforts to get positively involved in the organization of space of his locality and community. In this respect, Ali is entirely different from the official representative of the people of Ramadapally, MLA Abu. Both Abu and Ali are from Ramadapally. But after becoming a part of the state, Abu had to prioritize the interests of the capitalists and the state to facilitate the smooth exploitation of the people living in the peripheries. This makes Abu a class traitor, while Ali though a criminal in the eyes of the state, is the true representative of the people. The unfortunate side is Ali, and other characters gained power for appropriating space only through extreme hypermasculinity and, in the process did damage to themselves and the people around them. But it was a necessity as they were against the might of the state and the corporates, who operated with the use of extreme systemic violence for their survival and reproduction.

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