Invariably all the films of MGR and RK, much like any other commercial [masala] feature film, have the structure of the classical drama. A typical classical drama, as explicated by grammarians and dramatists during the Renaissance, starts with protasis [exposition], followed by epitusis [complication] and catastasis [new and further element of complication], reaching catastrophe [resolution], and is wound up with epilogue. The catastrophe consists of peripeteia [reversal of fortune or conversio] and anagnorisis [transition from ignorance to knowledge or cognitio]. Epitasis and catastasis are achieved by creatively combining elements of suspense and surprise with narrative knots and twists.

This traditional linear structure of conflict-development-climax-denouement model is, however, adapted to the screen by incorporating elements of the grand kaavya literature and folk cultural koothu performance. While the main story moves forward vertically, it is interspersed with horizontally laid out branch stories, song-and-dance inserts, parallel comedy tracks and stunt sequences. Thus, the whole film in effect becomes a spectacular assemblage of nava rasas. MGR and RK adroitly manoeuvre these elements to establish their respective screen images.

01. DEEP STRUCTURE

01. 01. Narrative Sequencing:

The ‘assemblage’ structure could be demonstrated by subjecting MGR’s Naadoadi Mannan [1958] and RK’s Annuamalai [1992] to a detailed analysis. The narrative sequencing of these two films are provided in Appendix-2.
Naadoadi Mannan is the first ‘complete’ MGR film because it is he who is the sole ‘auteur’ of this film: it marks the directorial debut of MGR, at a time when he was fast climbing up the popularity ladder, and was becoming more assertive of his position in the filmdom; it is the first production of Emgeeyar Pictures Pvt. Ltd., a company which he floated in the same year; the story is evolved by the Story Department of Emgeeyar Pictures, including RM Veerappan. Technically, a part of the film is in Geva colour, and MGR for the first time appears in double roles.

Annaamalai, produced by K Balachandar’s Kavithalayaa, is a remake of a Hindi film, which has also been remade in Telugu. RK was so pleased with the outcome of the film that he presented gold chains to the director Suresh Krishna, music director Deva and the lyricist Vairamuthu during the release of its audio-cassette. The film, when released, was enjoyed for the comedy, especially for the ‘kadavulae kadavulae’ sequence. During the 1996 elections the film gained political currency because of the song praising Annaamalai’s cycle. Thamizh Maanila Congress [TMC], having cycle as its symbol, extensively used that song in its campaign. ‘Annaamalai’ himself became very outspoken in support of the DMK-TMC combine.

01.02. Opening, Closure and Silence:

An analytical look at the exhaustive list of the structural sequencing of the two films above shows that the point of attack and the point of closure converge on a ‘kairological’ note.

Like all the narratives, the samples also begin in medias res – in the middle of things. The ‘point of attack,’ that is, the point at which the narrative opens, depends very much on the demands of the story/stories taken. Naadoadi Mannan, for example, opens with the demonstration of the ‘revolutionaries’ led by the hero, and the exposition of the vast back-story material is done in instalments exclusively through conversations. Annaamalai opens with the decision of the hero’s friend to be with him on the
festive day. The back-story, however, is provided very early by prefacing the titles with the sequence portraying the boyhood friendship. This narrative devise of prefacing makes the narrative look chronological without cutting into the time meant for RK. It also avoids the need for a flashback, which could be detrimental because, if the story of the childhood friendship is to be inserted anywhere in the course of the narrative, it would in all probability only disrupt the viewers’ identification with RK – it will not be, after all, the same RK who acts as a kid!

Though the films of MGR and RK as a norm open in medias res, they have perfectly rounded off closures. Both the opening and the closure in each of their films, barring an exception or two, converge on a ‘kairol ogical’ note, marked by triumphant reversal and grotesque inauguration of the new epoch. Thus, the ‘curtain-raiser’ demand for democracy in Naadooadi Mannan is fulfilled in the grand finale. The milkman’s jubilation in Annaamalai gets doubled at the end.

But what is striking is the evasive nature of the ‘roundness’ of the closure. The conflict will be resolved by leaving unresolved all the concomitant issues that in fact make up the conflict. For example, the ‘silences’ in Naadooadi Mannan encompass the following queries:

- What is the fate of the revolutionary group led by Madana’s father? [His ‘revolution’ comes to an end once he motivates the depressed MGR to rescue the princess.]
- What is the reason for eliminating Madana in the middle? [There is no comparable reason provided for such a grave action.]
- What about the vagrant’s past, except for a passing reference?
- What exactly is the ‘intellectual revolution’ [arivu puratchi] that MGR is seen to propagate?
- Why should monarchy end, when the princess is rescued? [There are also other reasons why the monarchy need not end – the king-in-waiting is a good man,
and the vagrant himself has assumed enough power to enact new laws.

- What happened to the plan of the minister and the commandant to kill the vagrant?

- How is it possible to have such a long secret way between the island and Rathnapuri?

- What is the reason to tattoo a star and the name on the back of the princess?

All these questions are not answered, but all the problems are solved! And the solution is in the person of MGR himself! The same pattern could also be found in Annaamalai, which remains silent on some pivotal issues:

- how can RK, owning a prime property [spacious enough to build a five-star hotel!] and whole battalion of cattle, call himself poor? [The narrative also remains silent regarding the jarring contradiction in singing the ‘milkman’ song in a luxury-filled drawing room of the millionaire.]

- when the story of RK’s friendship could start with his boyhood, why should his and his friend’s lovers be deprived of their past? [The most disturbing thing about the narrative is the unusual silencing of women.]

- why are the marriages conducted in such a hurry and in an unconventional manner? [We could understand the hurried and secret marriage of RK’s friend; but what is the need for RK to get married like this?]’

- how can we justify the action of making the hireling the scapegoat for all the wrongs done by the villains, who go scot-free at the end?

- why is RK’s growth presented in a quick montage? Is not his meteoric rise so sudden and near-miraculous?

All such questions are ‘answered’ by the sheer perfection of the evasive closure, which ‘dis-solves’ them in the person of RK.
01.03. Inventory of Functions:

Surprisingly, such a long narrative breakdown as given in the beginning consists of a very limited number of functions, which are repeated endlessly [till the time comes to close the film!]. Based on the insights drawn from the two samples, and correlating them with the repertoire of films of MGR and RK, we can list the major functions to include:

1. **Lack**: ‘Lack’ is a comprehensive term, which includes a person to be rescued, a wrong to be avenged [for example, killing someone close to the heart of hero such as parents, sister and lover], a mission to be accomplished, a relationship to be reconciled, a property to be redeemed, a rightful position to be restored and a culprit to be exposed. Sometimes the lack can also be potential or imminent, such as a conspiracy to usurp the throne. One or more of these would form the initial lack with which the narrative is set in motion. Subsequently, with the progress of the narrative additional lacks are included. The number and the acuteness of the lack/s provide the justification for the action of the hero.

2. **Mission**: The hero is despatched on a mission to rectify the lack. Sometimes the hero who means his business will be provoked by the avaricious villain to take on a mission. The mission gets tougher as he is faced with newer lacks, and reaches its toughest peak during the climax.

3. **Villainy**: The lacks are usually the result of villainy. The villain or a group of them constantly schemes to obstruct the mission of the hero, and to eliminate him, if possible. As the hero’s reconnaissance becomes more threatening, the villain turns more ruthless and heinous. In direct combat with the hero he manifests his most brutal and cruellest self.
4. **Setback / Success**: The hero meets with initial setbacks, which inevitably turn into initial successes for the villain. Sometimes the reverse also happens. After each setback the hero bounces back with renewed strength and determination. Setbacks and successes, both big and small, are alternated repeatedly till the hero and the villain reach the stage of final confrontation.

5. **Instigation / Intercession**: One or more of villain's henchmen misinform him and instigate him. Sometimes the advances made by the hero aggravate the situation. As a corollary to instigation, a hero’s aide or a good-natured villain’s aide intercedes with the villain to mend ways. A similar situation might arise also for the hero, which would result in temporary setback to his mission.

6. **Misunderstanding / Enlightenment**: The hero being misunderstood by one or more of his close associates [especially by his lover] can cause a temporary setback. Frequently, the villain will misunderstand the good intentions of the hero. It is also possible that the hero himself misunderstands one or more of his friends and helpers. All the misunderstandings, except the one by the villain, will be cleared as enlightenment dawns on the concerned persons in the course of the narrative. The villain will, however, persist in misunderstanding the hero till he repents or is punished at the end.

7. **Romantic Interlude**: Romance forms an inseparable part of the hero’s mission. Very often it is just thrust on him, and so it becomes a liability, at least initially. The heroine in such cases would sooner or later realise the importance of his mission and become his helper. The heroine and women in general are vulnerable – they can be easily abducted by the villain, for example – and hence a burden to the hero.

8. **Changing Camps**: The villain’s aides – occasionally the hero’s also – change camps giving a twist to the narrative. Changing camps usually happens just
preceding or during the climax. Sometimes it is employed to as a narrative devise to complete the closure.

9. Lucky Coincidences: The hero and the villain will always have their helpers [like the comedian for hero] standing with them till the end to lend them moral support. even physical support, if need be. Besides such helpers, there are coincidences that may favour either the hero or the villain. While in the course of the narrative the 'luck' may alternate between the hero and the villain or be more on the side of the villain, it invariably favours the hero in the climax.

10. Elimination: Through a series of hide-and-seek type chases, confrontations and fights, the villain is increasingly weakened. by progressive isolation of the villain: first by eliminating his henchmen. and then his major aides one after the other. Finally the main villain is exposed in the climax and handed over to the police to be punished further. Occasionally, the villain after the final blow repents. He might also, at times, commit suicide. While the elimination attains massive proportions in the climax, it is spread throughout the narrative at regular intervals, enabling the hero to exhibit his valour.

11. Reversal: In the act of eliminating the villain, all the lacks are corrected. The victims to villainy are rescued and they return to their rightful place. Fortune returns. The hero accomplishes his mission. Reversal occurs on a smaller scale with every success of the hero during the course of the narrative.

12. Reward / Punishment: Once the mission is accomplished, the hero is praised and rewarded. The most common ultimate reward is the heroine, whom he marries. Reward and its converse punishment are, like other functions, spread throughout the narrative flow, though the grandest rewards or the gravest punishments are reserved for the climax.
01.04. Narrative Layout:

01.04.01. Stories and Storylines:

A close look at the narrative sequencing tells us that the two films do not say a story each, but each is a story of stories.

There are at least four stories present in Naadoadi Mannan: 01. the story of a vagrant impersonating the king because of identical physical structures, 02. the story of finding the lost princess, 03. the story of infighting among the royal coterie to usurp the throne, and 04. the story of a revolutionary group fighting against monarchy to establish democracy. Besides these, there are also a number of ‘short’ stories and snippets such as the story of a woman saved by the hero, and the parallel story/stories of the comedian.

At least five stories could be identified in Annaamalai: 01. the story of friendship between a poor milkman, who is fatherless and a rich businessman’s son, who is motherless, 02. the story of a poor man becoming a millionaire, 03. the story of a father whose daughter falls in love with his foe, 04. the story of a brother’s affection for his sister, and 05. the story of a politician who repents and becomes good. There are also other ‘short’ stories and snippets: the milkman rescuing a woman from thugs, a man seeing a woman naked, an educated woman falling in love with an uneducated man, and a rich man falling in love with a poor woman. Many more of such ‘short’ stories and snippets are told in the form of comedy.

All these stories are woven into ‘one’ story revolving round the hero through two overlapping storylines: 01. the external storyline [which narrates how the hero achieves something external to him; it may be a ‘mission’ to be accomplished or a person to be rescued or an object to be brought], and 02. the interpersonal storyline [which is usually the romance between the hero and the heroine/s].
The main storyline in *Naadoadi Mannan* is the external storyline to which the interpersonal storyline is subordinated. The comedy track is only tangentially related to the main storyline – the only link is that the comedian is a friend of the hero. In *Annaamalai*, though the main storyline is the external storyline, the interpersonal storyline, which extends beyond romance to paternal and fraternal love, gets almost an equal emphasis. Unlike in *Naadoadi Mannan*, the comedy in *Annaamalai* is integrated with the story of the hero by involving him in the comical situations and, more importantly, by making him play comedian.

01.04.02. ‘Non-story’ Narrative Components:

*Naadoadi Mannan* is a pretty long film, and the total running time is around 3 hours and 30 minutes. The film is divided into two halves, with the pre-interval half running for about 2 hours. There are 11 song-dance sequences accounting for about 40 minutes, and 8 stunt sequences accounting for an equal amount of time. The comedy, running almost as a parallel track, intersects with the narrative flow at least 8 times. The comedy track also has two song-dance sequences. Excluding the song-dance sequences, the comedy alone accounts for about 25 minutes. *Chart 3.1* illustrates the category-wise allocation of time.

Thus, around 50% length of the film is occupied by the ‘story’ component, and the remaining 50% by the ‘non-story’ components such as song-dance, stunt and comedy. The ratio between story and non-story components remains more or less constant in all the MGR films, though the percentages of the non-story elements occasionally fluctuate. A significant trend that could be easily detected in this regard is that in the later films of MGR song-dance sequences [especially with romantic themes] occupy a more prominent place than stunt sequences. *Ulagam Sutrum Vaalipan* [1973], for example, has the composition as shown in *Chart 3.2*. 
Chart 3.1

Distribution of Time

*Naadoadi Mannan*

- Story: 50%
- Comedy: 12%
- Stunt: 19%
- Song & Dance: 19%

Chart 3.2

Distribution of Time

*Ulagam Sutrum Vaalipan*

- Story: 53%
- Comedy: 14%
- Song & Dance: 25%
- Stunt: 8%
Chart 3.3
Distribution of Time
Annaamalai

- Story: 58%
- Comedy: 10%
- Song & Dance: 29%
- Stunt: 12%

Chart 3.4
Distribution of Time
Maappillai

- Story: 57%
- Comedy: 15%
- Song & Dance: 15%
- Stunt: 13%
In the case of RK, the story component has a slight edge over the non-story components put together. In *Annaamalai*, for example, there are seven songs [including the repeat of a song] occupying around 32 minutes, at least six stunt sequences accounting for around 19 minutes, and sequences which are predominantly comical occupying around 16 minutes. Thus, the non-story components take around 42% of the total running time of 157 minutes. *Chart 3.3* illustrates the category-wise allocation of time.

The ratio between story and non-story components is more or less constant in all RK films. To cite one more example, *Maappillai* [1989] with a total running time of 144 minutes comes very close to *Annaamalai* [though there are variations in the non-story components] as *Chart 3.4* highlights.

It could, therefore, be said that in the assemblage structure the story component gets more importance in RK films than MGR films. The percentages of the non-story components, however, vary from film to film depending upon the nature of the story.

**01.04.03. The Right ‘Masala’:**

Though most of the salient features of the assemblage structure are to a great extent applicable to any typical Thamizh commercial film. MGR and RK significantly differ from others in striking the right ‘masala mix,’ capable of eliciting a favourable viewer response. Their unique innovation lies in the manipulation of the ‘short’ stories and snippets of the story component, and the songs, stunts and comedy of the non-story component. While doing away with these apparently peripheral things may not in any way harm the main story, it cannot certainly be done without seriously distorting the kind of screen image they have built up. Indeed, such an image would not have been possible in the first place but for these seemingly disposable items.

*Naadoadi Mannan*, as could be seen, amply illustrates this dynamics. Of the many ‘short’ stories and snippets, the one totally unrelated to the main story occurring
in the beginning is that of MGR protecting the 'chastity' [karpu] of a helpless woman. Following this is a snippet depicting how MGR insists on accompanying the heroine because a young woman daring to travel alone is prone to be sexually assaulted. Another snippet towards the end of the film depicts an MGR who, upholding the Thamizh culture, keeps a sword between him and his lover, because young unmarried men and women are supposed to avoid physical closeness'. Thus, he proves himself to be a protector of women's chastity and in the process emerges as a chaste and trust-worthy man who upholds Thamizh culture!

The basic ingredients of the image of MGR are best actualised in the clever 'mix' of song-dance sequences. Let us consider the following list of songs in Naadoadi Mannan:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENT</th>
<th>CONTEXT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01. Socio-political</td>
<td>VO: Title song, greeting the 'pure' Thamizh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02. Moral</td>
<td>Solo. The hero advises the sleeping prison guards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03. Romantic</td>
<td>Duet: The heroine takes initiative to woo the hero.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04. Semi-romantic</td>
<td>Group: The court dancers welcome the new king, praising his valour and character.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05. Romantic</td>
<td>Duet: The comedian couple sing on taking to sanyasa.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06. Socio-political</td>
<td>Duet: Hero and heroine go around the villages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07. Philosophical-moral</td>
<td>Solo: Hero sings while going for country visit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08. Moral</td>
<td>Duet: The comedians' satirical hit at villain's men taken hostages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Romantic</td>
<td>Duet: The heroine fantasizes romancing with the hero.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The songs, particularly the ones with moral and socio-political overtones, are
thrust into the narrative. They are either unnecessary or redundant. But these are the
songs which become the sacred ‘kolhai paadalgal’ [ideological songs] for the fans.
While these kolhai paadalgal enable MGR to project the image of the saviour of the
oppressed, the romantic songs present him as an object of lust and love.

That RK’s ‘masala mix’ differs from MGR’s could be exemplified with
Annaamalai. The first obvious difference is in the importance given to the story com-
ponent. Compared to MGR’s Naadoadi Mannan, Annaamalai gives more importance,
as noted earlier, to the story. Secondly, the external and interpersonal storylines in
Annaamalai are almost equally emphasized. Thirdly, the comedy is by and large inte-
grated with the story by involving the hero in such sequences. In fact, the hero himself
frequently plays comedian. This is something of a rarity in MGR films. RK resembles
in this aspect K Bhagyaraj, who is known for stereotyping himself as the naïve and
unassuming hero. There lies the weakness of Bhagyaraj – he can only be a ‘naïve and
unassuming’ hero! RK, on the contrary, is not exclusively naïve: he is also a man of
action who can tackle the villains both intellectually and physically. Being a ‘groteque
desperado,’ we could say, is the hallmark of RK.

Another important difference between MGR and RK lies in the composition of
themes for songs. Compared to MGR, RK has fewer songs that are purely romantic in
nature, as is the case in Annaamalai:

01. Social [philosophical]  
   Solo: The hero sings celebrating ‘maattu pongal’ with
   the people.

02. Romantic  
   Duet: The heroine fantasizes romancing with the hero.

03. Romantic  
   Duet: The hero and the heroine sing immediately after
   the wedding.

04. Moral [psychological]  
   Solo: The hero sings on the virtues of determination and
   hard work.

05. Romantic  
   Duet: The heroine recalls the past on seeing her
husband’s cycle.

06. Moral [psychological]  *Solo:* The hero sings in a philosophical [nihilistic] vein, when he slaps his daughter for falling in love with his rival’s son.

07. Social [philosophical]  *Solo:* A repeat of the first song. The hero sings in order to reiterate that he has not forgotten his past.

When the diagrammatic representations of the classification of songs in *Naadoadi Mannan* and *Annaamalai* [Charts 3.5.1 and 3.5.2] are juxtaposed, it could be seen that the romantic songs constitute 55% in *Naadoadi Mannan*\(^1\), whereas it is only just above 40% in *Annaamalai*. The non-romantic songs in *Naadoadi Mannan* fall into the rather clear-cut categories of moral and socio-political, but they always have a social dimension. In *Annaamalai* they tend to be more individual-centred – RK-centred, to be precise. Each song is marked by multiple tonalities\(^2\), though one tone might dominate. Interestingly, whether the predominant tone is social, political or moral, the reference point is always the individual person of RK.

From the psychological point of view, especially of the modern-day youth, such songs emphasising individual achievement have a great motivating potential because they ‘sync’ with the values of the youth – self-respect, self-esteem, self-confidence, determination, hard work, success orientation, believing in oneself, positive thinking, enjoyment, freedom, justice consciousness, confronting the wrong-doers, and so on. Younger heroes like Ajith try to imitate RK in including at least one such ‘motivational’ song, as, to cite an example, he sings in *Dheena:* “The match-stick will not be lit unless someone roughs it up...”

Occasionally, world-negating and nihilistic attitude also pops up in RK’s songs [such as the sixth one in the list above], a kind of attitude that MGR does not normally manifest.
Chart 3.5.1

Classification of Songs
Naadoadi Mannan

moral 27%
socio-political 18%
romantic 55%

Chart 3.5.2

Classification of Songs
Annaamalai

moral-psychological 29%
socio-philosophical 29%
romantic 42%
01.05. Double Climax:

Since a film is screened in the movie houses of Thamizh Nadu as two halves to make provision for the interval, it has become normative that the narrative also is divided into two more or less equal halves. This has given rise to the practice of ‘double climax’ structuring of the narrative. The narrative climaxes with an unexpected ‘turning point’ just preceding the interval, and this apparent ‘narrative discrepancy’ is sorted out in the post-interval half. The following narrative schema highlights the general double climax structure:

Phase 01. The Beginning: It consists of establishing the narrative context, introducing the main characters, and initiating the central conflict.

Phase 02. The Pre-Interval Development: The conflict initiated in the first phase undergoes a series of mutations with many twists and turns, acquires newer dimensions and gets more complex and intensified as the story moves ahead. Tension builds up, and as the interval approaches, it reaches its peak with a turning point.

Phase 03. The Turning Point: The turning point is like a mini climax. It may involve an unexpected setback to the hero or villain, or a new mission entrusted to the hero, or the appearance of a totally new problem. This keeps the viewers guessing during the interval as to what is in store for them during the next phase.

INTERVAL

Phase 04. The Post-Interval Development: This phase starts with a twist, suspense or surprise, and with further turns and twists, the story moves forward towards the final showdown. The viewers are provided, through timely doses of back-story information, with additional and newer insights into the characters. Tension mounts as the climax approaches, the viewers’ involvement and expectations soar high, and the
conflict swells up in magnitude and intensity.

**Phase 05. The Climax:** It marks the direct confrontation of the hero and the villain. The climactic fight is the fiercest and the longest. The villain is defeated, the hero emerges victorious, the victims of villainy are rescued, and the core conflict is resolved with reversal of fortunes.

**Phase 06. The Denouement:** The viewers are greatly relieved of their tension as the hero triumphs. In the denouement that follows, loose strings are tied up and the story is given a finishing touch.

In the films of MGR and RK special attention is being paid to the point at which the narrative is to be divided, because a bad break may fail to pull the viewers back into the movie house after the interval. The two films taken for a detailed structural analysis amplify this point.

The narrative in *Naadoadi Mannan* is so structured that various events lead to a 'climax' in the pre-interval phase. At this point, the narrative 'almost' comes to a close – the villain and his gang are taken captive, preceded by the characteristic climactic fight – but for the indication that the main villain is yet to be tackled. Such a break provides the viewer with enough scope to anticipate and discuss during the interval what is going to follow in the next half. A surprise awaits the viewers when they reassemble inside the theatre – the villain escapes, fatally injuring the heroine! That sets in motion another round of narrative cycle traversing through *epitasis* and *catastasis* to the climactic *catastrophe*.

The break in *Annaamalai* is more dramatic. The pre-interval phase comes to a dramatic close when the hero victimised by the villain challenges face to face that he will "obstruct the villain's growth by his own growth." He then turns towards the camera [and the viewer], and walks in slow motion to fill the screen. A literal 'turning
point' indeed! The viewers now have enough things to discuss, anticipate and dream about during the interval. In direct contrast to the vengeance-filled triumphantistic note with which the first half has ended, the post-interval half begins with a series of setbacks, which makes the viewers sit erect in surprise, and heads towards catastrophe in a typical cyclical fashion.

The intervention of interval then is crucial, and it radically transforms the narrative structure, which in effect, becomes two ‘narratives’ disjointed and conjoined by interval.

01.06. Dramatis Personae:

A functional analysis of the dramatis personae in the films of MGR and RK reveals that there is only one prime character [the protagonist], one significant active character [the antagonist], one significant passive character [the heroine], one subordinate passive character [the victim], two sets of subordinate active characters [hero’s allies and villain’s aides], and other characters used as mere human props. This could be represented diagrammatically as shown in Figure 3.6. Applying this character scheme to Naadoadi Mannan, we find:

01. The Hero – the vagrant
02. The Villain No.1 – the royal priest
03. The Villain No.2 – the competitor to the throne
04. The Victims – the king-in-waiting and the queen
05. The [First] Heroine – a member of the revolutionary group
06. The [Second] Heroine – the princess
07. The Hero’s Allies – the minister and the commandant, the comedian friends and the leader of the revolutionary group
08. The Villain’s Aides – the royal adviser and the henchmen
09. All the other characters, who are reduced to ‘human props.’
Figure 3.6

Hero-centric Model of Dramatis Personae

HUMAN PROPS

SIGNIFICANT
ACTIVE
villain

SUBORDINATE
ACTIVE
hero/villain’s aides

PRIME CHARACTER
hero

heroine

SIGNIFICANT
PASSIVE

SUBORDINATE
PASSIVE
victim

HUMAN PROPS

HUMAN PROPS

HUMAN PROPS
Based on the following observations, it could easily be said without much hesitation that *Naadoadi Mannan*, like any other MGR film, is hero-centric.

01. *Naadoadi Mannan*, being a ‘double act’ film – the hero and the main victim are MGR himself – provides MGR with greater facility to occupy most of the screen time with his physical presence. Even in scenes where he is not directly present, his presence is indirectly acknowledged [such as the villains plotting to eliminate him].

02. Interestingly, the king-in-waiting is never enthroned. Because he was not conscious on the day of coronation, it is the vagrant who is acting as the king gets the privilege. He usurps, in the course of the narrative, the royal authority to enact new laws. Finally, in the very act of rescuing the princess and marrying her, he topples monarchy, and emerges as the popular leader. Thus, the king-in-waiting remains a victim all through – may be a ‘happy victim’ at the end.

03. The two heroines and the queen exist exclusively for the sake of MGR. The first heroine, the daughter of a revolutionary, gives company to the hero [a hero cannot be without a heroine!] and enables him to appropriate signs of being a revolutionary. When the time approaches for him to encounter the princess, she is eliminated [only one heroine at a time!]. The princess on her part serves as a ladder for MGR to climb up to the seat of power. The queen is there to testify to the moral consciousness of the chaste MGR. All these women are enamoured by MGR’s charm and bravado, and entertain fantasies of romancing with him. But for a few bits of information that is communicated through them, they remain passive and susceptible to villainy, and thus an added liability to MGR, who is already burdened with the noble duty of redeeming the country.

04. The villains are there to bear witness, and then fall a prey, to the valour, intelligence and patriotism of MGR. Through their scheming and heinous and illegal activities, they help the development of the story.
05. The comedy is used as a *time-filler*, not even to provide relief from the 'narrative tension.' The comedy has its own 'track,' superficially touching the main story occasionally.14

06. The allies of the hero and the villain serve a very limited purpose of being a stepping-stone or a stumbling block to MGR in realising his mission. Once their assigned function is over, they are eliminated [by the villain or by MGR, depending on whose side they are] or they simply vanish from the scene.

07. The hero-centricity is subtly manifest in the narrative 'silences,' that is, things left unfinished and questions left unanswered, by projecting, as noted earlier, the person of MGR as the ultimate solution.

While RK differs from MGR in certain respects, his films, much like MGR's, are also hero-centric, as Table 3.7 illustrates.

01. The prime character in *Annaamalai* is undoubtedly RK, because all the 'stories' the narrative consists of are centred only on RK, and told only from RK's perspective. He is not only the hero but also the main victim.15 By alternating the roles of hero and victim, RK becomes the sole focus of viewer's emotional involvement. Such RK-centredness is further reinforced by the frequent adulatory references to him by other characters, including the villains who finally concede that he is 'the ideal son' or 'the ideal friend.'

02. The plight of women in *Annaamalai* proves by contrast the unshakable centrality of RK. The heroine and the villain's counterpart do not have any history. The heroine enters the narrative only to be seen by RK, to be an object of his love, and finally to settle down as his good 'house-wife.' When she tries to intervene in such a serious decision as selling the property, she is ignored. Similar is the fate of the villain's counterpart – she is there for a while to provide some romantic entertainment to the
### Table 3.7

**COMPARATIVE LISTING OF DRAMATIS PERSONAE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHARACTER</th>
<th><strong>NAADOADI MANNAN</strong></th>
<th><strong>ANNAAMALAI</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Hero</td>
<td>the vagrant</td>
<td>the milkman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Villain</td>
<td>villain 1: the royal priest</td>
<td>villain 1: hero’s friend and his father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>villain 2: the competitor to the throne</td>
<td>villain 2: his brother-in-law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Heroine</td>
<td>heroine 1: a member of the revolutionary group</td>
<td>hero’s lover-turned-wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>heroine 2: the princess</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Victims</td>
<td>the king-in-waiting and the queen</td>
<td>hero himself, his friend, his mother, sister and daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hero’s Allies</td>
<td>the minister and the commandant, the comedian friends and the leader of the revolutionary group</td>
<td>hero’s comedian friend, the minister, hero’s mother and sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Villain’s Aides</td>
<td>the royal adviser and the henchmen</td>
<td>the underworld don and his henchmen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the other characters are reduced to ‘human props.’
villain, the hero and the viewer, and then ‘merges’ with the background. The hero’s sister and daughter are there to exemplify the intensity and extent of RK’s affection by adding a few twists to the story. The only woman character of some importance is the hero’s mother. But even she is portrayed as the one who does not go against her son. She is the pieta, the suffering mother.

03. The villains are depicted as persons excessively obsessed with scheming and plotting against RK, as if the raison d’être for their existence is derived through their actions vis-à-vis RK. This is further augmented by the fact that the villains are personally related to RK through marriages – villain-2 is the father of his friend [villain-1], who is the future father-in-law of his daughter; villain-3 is his brother-in-law, who is also a relation of villain-2. Surprisingly, all three of them repent and surrender at different times to RK to be magnanimously pardoned by him.

04. The list of victims presents a peculiar mix. Besides RK, his villain-friend also is a victim. He is freed of guilt by bringing to light, through the agency of RK’s mother, that he has been kept in the dark of the villainy of his father. RK’s mother and sister are portrayed both as victims and hero’s aides – it is precisely because they dare to help RK that they are victimised.

05. Nothing is known about the comedian-friend’s background except the fact that he remains single. He is RK’s trustworthy companion cum informer, and frequently indulges in praising RK, employing adjectives, which are, strangely enough, similar to those used by RK’s lover. Regarding comedy, he plays only the second fiddle to RK.

06. Of the allies of the hero, the minister enables the hero first to have a dig at politicians, and later to borrow bank loans. On the villain’s camp, the underworld don [his name also is Don!] hired by the villain, in the process of executing his assignment gets killed by RK. Characters other than the ones mentioned so far serve as ‘props’.

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07. A closer look at the ‘silences’ in the narrative of *Annaamulai* [listed earlier] would reveal how the narrative itself is distorted and bent to correspond to the image of RK. Much like MGR, RK in his own way is the sole answer to the unanswered questions.

Thus, it could be safely concluded that the films of MGR and RK are pronouncedly *hero-centric* with a pre-set *formula*, and all characters other than the hero are truncated or mutilated so as to fit the image-building schema.

### 02. SNOWBALL DYNAMICS

The relationship between films in the case of MGR and RK is one of *snowballing*, that is, the image created in one film is carried over to the next film, reinforcing the previously constructed image and adding an embellishing and enhancing layer to it. The choice of the themes, the treatment and the characterisation are most often stereotypical, *redundant* and serial-episodic. As samples, three films each for MGR and RK are considered – *Marma Yoagi* [1951], *Aayiraththil Oruvan* [1965] and *Meenava Nanpan* [1977] for MGR; *Pathinaaru Vayathinilae* [1977], *Maappillai* [1989] and *Baatshaa* [1995] for RK. Of the films chosen for MGR, *Marma Yoagi* is one of the earliest films featuring him as the hero; *Aayiraththil Oruvan* marks the peak; by the time *Meenava Nanpan* was released he was more a politician than an actor. In the case of RK, *Pathinaaru Vayathinilae* is from the initial stage when he was considered a ‘stylised’ villain; *Maappillai* marks the peak of his career; *Baatshaa* comes from a time when he started intervening in politics. All the six films were considered box-office hits, and had run for at least 100 days.
02.01. The Image of MGR:

02.01.01. *Marma Yoagi*:

In *Marma Yoagi* MGR plays the role of Karikalan, the legitimate prince, who has grown up in the forest as a 'do-gooder anti-social.' He dares to confront the queen in her court and warn her to mend her ways. After a series of deadly encounters, he finally emerges victorious. The heavy influence of Errol Flynn and Douglas Fairbanks on MGR is more than obvious. He comes across as a typical swashbuckler, swinging from chandeliers and tree branches, fencing with dexterity, and riding horses with a professional finesse – a chivalrous and dare-devilry mix of gymnastics, aerobics, martial arts, circus and sports. He is a man of action, and hits the target with precision. "If I aim, it will not miss; if it is going to miss, I will not aim," declares MGR. This 'do-gooder action hero' image is one of the core elements of his future image-politiking.

Though not a member of the DMK officially when *Marma Yoagi* was released, MGR was slowly but definitively getting himself tuned to the DMK ideology. The frequent references to unjustifiable and unbearable taxation and to law as favouring only the rich are clearly an indirect hit at the Congress ministry. That MGR wanted to conform to the DK ideology of rationalism could be seen from the way the ghost scenes are given rational explanations in this film. Once he came to be identified as a DMK actor, MGR was more blatant in his political hits, and more conspicuous in identifying himself with the party.

Another core element of image-politiking is the display of his beautiful and muscular body. The beginnings of this element could be detected in *Marma Yoagi*, when the girl sent to seduce him falls in love with him instead. A related aspect of protecting women could also be seen this film. For example, the dictator Urvasi, while pleading with MGR to spare her, refers to people's acclaim that he "cannot bear the sight of a woman crying." One aspect that remains ambiguous in this film concerns
women taking the initiative to fall in love with him. It looks that the love is mutual from the beginning, and MGR is seen to evince more interest in the girl, when, for example, he dares to enter the enemy camp to meet her. A disturbing fact in this context is the virulent attack on women [under the pretext of attacking the courtesan] – an aspect that persists till the end, in spite of his protector image.

MGR took care from the time he started playing the lead roles to identify himself as a Thamizh. That was also a time when the whole of Thamizh Nadu was witnessing linguistic revivalism vis-à-vis Hindi imposition. Thus, in *Marma Yoagi*, MGR is *Karikalan*, the name of the legendary Choala king of the Sangam era.

02.01.02. *Aayiraththil Oruvan*:

*Aayiraththil Oruvan* contains all the core elements identified in *Marma Yoagi*, and goes beyond. First of all, the film reinforces the image of MGR as a do-gooder, in the style of Robin Hood. It goes a step further and establishes that MGR is not an ‘anti-social’ by nature; he is only forced by circumstances to indulge in robbery. Even as a robber, he is a man of principles – he only loots ships of other robbers, and not of the passengers. He is so patriotic that he sends his share of booty to his countrymen suffering under dictatorship.

The series of stunt sequences in this film only conform to MGR’s ‘action hero’ image, which is further embellished by depicting him as a thinking man of action. Thus, MGR would restrain his companions who react emotionally, and take time to plan and execute the socio-political transformations.

By now MGR’s own political view-points have undergone a sea-change. There has been a steady watering down of the meaning of ‘revolution.’ Already in *Naadoadi Mannan* he would articulate his version as an ‘intellectual revolution.’ In *Aayiraththil Oruvan* he is categorical that no transformation will be possible through rebellion. In
the political sphere, his own party has given up its 'revolutionary' demand to secede as 'Dravida Nadu' from India. A shrewd politician he is, MGR continues to maintain a semblance of 'revolution' while at the same time divesting 'revolution' of its radical content. This is necessary for him, if he has to appeal to all sections of the people, without at the same time alienating the subaltern masses. Accordingly, he would now talk of working for the 'general public' and of the difficulties awaiting a person committed to the people.

One aspect that stands out most in this film is the image of MGR as a great renouncer. Though other films released before Aayiraththil Oruvan also have dealt with this theme, it is in this film that the renouncer MGR is so prominently displayed. When the princess of the island country invites him to live in the palace, he firmly declines the offer, because his companions are forced to be slaves; when the defeated chief of the robbers offers him the honour of being the chief, he refuses to budge, because his sole aim is the liberation of his country; finally, when the king offers him the throne, he promptly declines the offer, because the king, after his repentance, will govern well. When we see this renouncer image against the backdrop of political happenings, we can understand that this is a political response to those within the DMK who accused MGR of nurturing political ambitions.

The ambiguity in Marma Yoagi's depiction of woman taking the initiative to fall in love is fully resolved by 1965. Thus, in Aayiraththil Oruvan, the heroine is attracted by MGR's valour, beauty and skill, and entertains romantic fantasies. But MGR clearly subordinates romance to duty. Only when she pretends to have consumed poison, he relents — that too, for the sake of saving her life! The sadistic anti-women streak, noted as 'disturbing' in Marma Yoagi, persists here also. The sequence of whipping and auctioning the heroine is an example.

The tendency to deify MGR [as 'holy,' 'god-given gift,' and eventually, 'god' himself] could be noticed in this film. The heroine who has misunderstood him, for
example, realises how ‘holy’ he is, when she overhears his companion praising him for the sacrifices he has made for others.

02.01.03. Meenava Nanpan:

The overall tone of Meenava Nanpan is triumphalistic, featuring many of the core elements of image-politiking. MGR as the voice of the voiceless continues to be the ‘action hero.’ The ‘do-gooder’ image is so neat that it is flat, lacking depth and complexity. He makes romance secondary to duty, while the girl falls in love with him attracted primarily by his commitment to the poor, though physical attraction is not entirely ruled out [as the romantic songs indicate].

The state machinery is presented in a positive light, and the government is portrayed as recognising the good works done by the individuals, listening to people, and responding to their needs. The poor fisher-folk, for example, are provided with mechanised boats. Thus, while MGR reinforces his image as the saviour of the down-trodden, he introduces the government as a ‘co-redeemer.’ We can understand this ‘image enhancement’ because when Meenava Nanpan was under production MGR was sure enough to capture power in the State. The next and the last film goes a step further and proclaims his government’s ‘manifesto.’

There are also plenty of political references in this film. The AIADMK’s symbol of twin-leaves finds a place in the mise-en-scene. ‘Anna’ becomes a frequent reference point. There are also snippets to brush up the memory of the people regarding events, which had taken place in the past. For instance, MGR refers to his earlier experience of being shot at. There is also subtle reference to 1972 ‘split’ in the DMK – MGR is humiliated by his father-in-law [the then Chief Minister M Karunanidhi], who is the cause for MGR leaving the house [the DMK]. It is not difficult to guess that this ‘brushing up’ is done with the forthcoming elections in view.
The ‘orphan syndrome,’ which frequently recurs in MGR films, is very effectively used in *Meenava Nanpan*. MGR, who calls himself an orphan, ‘adopts’ his mother and father. Such an ‘adoption’ has occurred in many films earlier, particularly with reference to his oft-repeated ‘community of mothers.’

02.02. The Image of RK:

04.02.01. *Pathinaaru Vayathinilae*:

*Pathinaaru Vayathinilae*, an early RK starrer, is the story of a sixteen-year old girl who is deserted by a doctor. The girl later realises the true love of *Chappaani* [‘one who limps’], an orphan given refuge by her mother. *Parattai* [‘one who is unkempt’] attempts to rape her, but is murdered by Chappani, who is arrested by the police. The girl waits for the day of his release. Kamal plays the lead role as Chappaani, and RK is cast as Parattai, one of the two villains.

*Parattai*, as the name implies, comes across as a ruffian, unkempt and shabbily clad. His dress – a combination of lungi [sarong], banian [vest] or shirt and towel – is typical of any rural unemployed youth. His dark complexion and the manners present him for the rural youth as the next-door neighbour. This aspect of ‘physical appearance’ is one of the core elements of the ‘RK image’ to be evolved later.

A related and equally important aspect is the character of RK. He is a man of vices – he smokes beedi, drinks, chews betel-and-nuts, is rough and brutal in his dealings, indulges in idle rumour, and is foul-mouthed. What is noteworthy here is the blending of RK’s character with his appearance, which makes him look natural and credible.

Another important, probably the most important, core element of RK image is his ‘style’ – the speed with which he delivers the dialogue, and the associated manner-
isms, both verbal and behavioural. "ithu eppudi irukku?" [how is it?], for example, is the verbal tag that repeatedly occurs in this film, always as a 'suffix' to an obscene comment on women. Ironically, it is this 'tag' [or 'style' for his fans] that endeared the youth to him.

This film is symptomatic of RK's attitude towards women. He relishes eve-teasing, and, much worse, passing vulgar and contemptuous remarks, particularly on young women. For him, woman is a sex object, to be lusted and consumed by man. From the beginning, for example, he is lascivious of the heroine, and passes on salacious comments to the merriment of his friends. He is seen in the village fair entertaining such comments. Finally, he attempts to rape her. What is disconcerting is the way in which such crude and inhuman double entendres are made a laughing matter.

All these elements, marking the 'pre-hero image' of RK, are retained, in a modified and refined form though, as the core of the 'post-hero image' as well.

02.02.02. Maappillai:

In Maappillai RK plays the role of 'maappillai' [son-in-law] who, with vengeance, subordinates an arrogant and independent mother-in-law. The 'anti-women' attitude, so dominantly displayed earlier, persists in Maappillai as a noticeable streak — whether it be his confrontations with his mother-in-law or the intimidation of the girl at night in the ladies' hostel. The streak, however, is justified by portraying RK as an 'honest, justice-conscious, and angry young man' who only subjugates haughty and insolent women. Without negating this 'anti-woman streak,' other nobler dimensions are added to project the image of RK as a 'pro-woman hero.' Thus, he will rescue the girl from forced marriage and magnanimously suffer the consequences; as the responsible elder son in a fatherless family, he will not be quick to entertain romantic dreams, even when pestered by the rich girl [he yields only when she blackmails him by jumping into the river]; he will revere his mother as god, and go to any extreme to fulfil
his sister's wishes.  

Similar dynamics is at work in the way RK identifies himself with and as the poor. As a villain in *Pathinaaru Vayathinilae* he appears as a deprived and depraved poor young man. In *Maappillai*, he retains, as the poor man himself, the ruggedness of the poor, articulates, as their spokesman, their state of deprivation, and sublimes, as a role model, the depravity by indulging in romance and directing his 'anger' against the [haughty] women.

The element of 'style' continues, and, by the time of *Maappillai*, it has become his identity. The 'speed' encompasses the whole person of RK – his walking, talking, and every movement of his body. Thus, when he says "cheeviruvoom" ["we'll chop you off"], it is not merely the phrase but the whole personality and the total context [including the camera angle and the sound effect] that constitute the 'style.'

The complexion, unkempt hair and other physical features blend well with his character in *Maappillai* also. A noticeable modification occurs in presenting him as a man of vices. While he exhibits 'anti-social' or 'socially not approved' behaviour, he is seen to be more cautious, as is the case when the fully drunk RK creates a scene in the ladies' hostel – only his friend deceives him to drink, and that too for the first time.

02.02.03. *Baatshaa*:

In *Baatshaa* RK plays the role of Manickam, who takes the place of his deceased father and dedicates his life to the well-being of his step-mother and her children. As a disciplined and helpful auto-driver, he is shown to be a subaltern hero. But behind Manickam is the history of Manik Baatshaa, a dreaded criminal from the Bombay underworld. The 'ghost' of Manik Baatshaa overshadows Manickam like a halo ['enghosted,' as it were; the eerie effect is achieved technically by projecting the film in the negative and adding sound effects]. The story of Manik Baatshaa is neatly
‘encased’ within two segments of Manickam’s story. Taken as a whole, the narrative presents RK as a ‘split’ personality consisting of the ‘enghosted’ Manickam and the ‘encased’ Manik Baatshaa. Given the political climate that prevailed when Baatshaa was released, this ‘enghosting-encasing’ technique was devised to send a veiled political warning to RK’s opponents – RK is ‘good for the good,’ but he can be ‘worse’ for the bad! He is a ‘subaltern hero’ with a ‘socially deviant’ [subcultural] personality!

The ‘deviant’ image of RK in Baatshaa matches exactly with his ‘deviant looks,’ as is the case with all his films. The ingenious combination of style with the character of Baatshaa, and comedy with that of Manickam adds an embellishing layer to his image as the ‘style king.’ The way he delivers the line, “If this Baatshaa says once, it is like saying a hundred times,” accompanied by fast twisting of the fingers and freezing with pointing the index finger upward, was publicised enough to make it the ‘unique selling proposition’ that successfully marketed the film and the actor’s political avatar.

Regarding other elements of RK image, Baatshaa conforms to the norm: he is dedicated to his family, he values friendship, he is forthright and just in his dealings, he places duty above romance, and so on.

02.03. Concurrence versus Difference:

The foregoing analysis of three samples each for MGR and RK reveals the snowballing dynamics that is actively at work. The core elements of image-politiking are permanent, while the subsidiary elements are used as embellishing and enhancing layers or added merely as decorations. By contrast, the films of Sivaji Ganesan and Kamalhaasan, the foremost rivals of MGR and RK respectively, have an ‘insulatory additive’ dynamics. That is, the image created in a film is self-contained and self-insulated [single-episodic], and is not, in general, carried over to the next film. Their films are, therefore, vibrantly entropic, and the divergent roles they play ‘add’ up to their image as ‘great actors.’
Sivaji, for example, dabbles in a variety of genres and subjects – historical, mythological and social-familial – but always rendering the character come alive with his excellent, often exaggerated, performance. A cursory reading of the titles of Sivaji’s box-office hits during the sixties, a period marked by intense cut-throat competition between the two mega stars [MGR and Sivaji], would suffice to illustrate the ‘insulatory additive’ dynamics. In *Kappaloattiya Thamizhan* [The Thamizh who Launched the Ship], 1961, he is the nationalist freedom fighter V O Chidambaram Pillai. The roles he plays in the mythologicals such as *Karnan*, 1964, *Thiruvilaiyaadal* [The Divine Play], 1965, and *Saraswathi Sabatham* [Saraswathi’s Oath]. 1966, are so widely unconnected that no cohesive image emerges out of these films [except the fact that he acts superbly well]. In the family-based ‘socials’ including *Paava Mannippu* [Forgiveness of Sins], *Paasa Malar* [Affectionate Flower] and *Paalum Pazhamum* [Milk and Fruit], all three released in 1961, *Aalaya Mani* [The Temple Bell]. 1962, *Iruvar Ullam* [The Heart of Two]. 1963, *Puthiya Paravai* [New Bird] and *Kai Koduththa Theivam* [The God who Lent a Hand], both 1964, *Ootti varai Uravu* [Relationship Up to Ooty] and *Iru Malargal* [Twin Flowers], both 1967, *Uyarntha Manithan* [The Great Man] and *Thillana Mohanampal* [Dancer Mohanampal], both 1968, and *Vietnam Veedu* [The Vietnam (like) House], 1970, his roles range from hero to anti-hero, from handsome young man to respectable elder, from upright and law-abiding man to a man of loose morals, from ‘the man who lives happily ever after’ to the one who dies. Even the films in which he plays double roles [or more than the double, as the case may be] such as *Navaraathiri* [Nine Nights], 1964, *Enga Oor Raja* [The King of our Village], 1968, and *Theiva Magan* [The Divine Son], 1969, are primarily designed to exhibit his acting skill. The roles are so divergent that the image painted in a film is immediately erased or undone by the next film and a new image is painted, which in turn is erased.

Same thing could be said of Kamal, who has dedicated himself as an actor to on-going experimentation and innovation, without bothering much about the outcome. Thus, in *Guna*, 1991, he is a deglamourised [‘compulsive obsessive’] neurotic; in *Thevar Magan* [Thevar’s Son], 1992, he is the foreign returned son of a feudal lord; in *Sathi*
Leelavathi, 1995, he is a bigamist oscillating comically between the two women; in Inthiyan [Indian], 1996, he is both a freedom fighter who fights against corruption and his son who is only too willing to compromise; in Avvai Shanmugi, 1996, he is a divor- cee masquerading as a woman to win his wife back; in the much hyped Hei! Ram, 2000, he is a victim of the partition of India-Pakistan; in the recent Thenali, he is a Sri Lankan Thamizh who needs psychiatric help; in the latest Aalavanthaan, 2001, one of the double roles is a psycho.

Sivaji and Kamal compete with their own performance by trying to outdo one performance by the next. They achieve this primarily through expert ‘acting,’ which establishes the difference between characters. This could be seen vividly in the films where they play double or more roles – they pay meticulous attention to differentiate roles, rendering through acting each role with a unique personality. That explains why their films are invariably entropic, and they are appreciated as ‘character artistes.’ On the contrary, MGR and RK, revered as ‘charismatic artistes,’ rely on ‘action,’ and compete with their own performance, paradoxically, by concurrence of one performance with the previous one. While their films are not as entropic as that of Sivaji and Kamal, they take extreme care to inventively chisel their roles – a semblance of being entropic is offered by introducing a new style in fight or mannerism, new and more glamorous heroines, exotic outdoor locations for song-dance sequences, and political overtones – to converge on their image as ‘super-powers.’

03. NARRATIVE DEVICES

Given the fact that MGR and RK are more image-conscious than their contemporaries, they appropriate all available narrative devices, not merely for the purpose of effective story-telling but primarily as vehicles of effective image-building. For this reason, the way they employ these narrative devices is more functional than aesthetic.
03.01. Story-within-story:

‘Story-within-story,’ akin to the short stories and snippets discussed earlier, stands for any mini-narrative form that is not directly connected [or only remotely connected] to the main story. As a narrative device, it encompasses:

- Unrelated plays or side stories deliberately inserted
- Court scenes, often too contrived to flow with the main story
- Documentary footage, both audio and visual
- Snippets or a ‘pass-by’ mini-narrative
- Icons in the mise-en-scene
- Indicators of overall climate
- Songs
- Comedy

The early DMK activists, especially from 1949 to the late fifties, extensively used this narrative device of story-within-story to deliver alliterative rhetorical monologues as a response to the current socio-political happenings. Their film rhetoric in conjunction with the overall media rhetoric helped the DMK in a number of ways: in the political front, to propagandise its ‘anti-North, anti-Brahmin, and anti-theist’ ideology; in the socio-cultural front, to advocate social reforms and to campaign against the prevailing social evils; and in the linguistic front, to champion the revival of the Thamizh language and cultural heritage.

To this end, the DMK activists frequently resorted to highly dramatic ‘confrontational scenes,’ which would lend themselves for the hero to deliver his rhetorical pronouncements in the form of presenting his arguments. Thus, through the court scenes in Vaelaikkaari [1949] the DMK founder Annadurai comes up with his scathing attack on the deceit of religious heads. In Paraasakthi [1952] Annadurai’s disciple M Karunanidhi goes a step further in his vitriolic attack on religion. Similar criticisms are
found, though in a much diluted and mutilated form, in later films such as Karunanidhi’s *Manohara* and Annadurai’s *Sorka Vaasal* [both 1954].

Rhetorical plays, ranging from plays proper to play rehearsals and musical storytelling form of *kathaakaalakshepam*, have been employed with varying degrees of success. The trend starts with Annadurai’s *Nalla Thampi* [1949] in which is featured ‘kinthanar kathaakaalakshepam.’ Commenting on the film, Annadurai himself jovially remarked, “Between kinthanaar kathaakaalakshepam and campaign on prohibition my story has also been skilfully packaged!” The story of ‘Anarkali’ in Kannadasan’s *Illara Jothi* [1954], the rehearsal of the play on ‘Cheran Senguttuvan’ in Karunanidhi’s *Raja Rani* [1956], and the play of ‘Samrat Ashokan’ in Murasoli Maran’s *Annayin Aanai* [1958] are replete with ‘anti-Delhi, anti-North, and anti-Congress’ sentiments. Sometimes, even documentary footage is also used, as in N S Krishnan’s *Punam* [1952] where a documentary footage featuring the proceedings of the DMK’s First State Level Conference held in December 1951 finds a strategic place.

MGR, as a DMK artiste, identifies himself with the DMK mainstream by selectively adopting the mini narrative forms. He does not, for example, entertain play-inserts. He does adopt court scenes, but prefers dialogical settings to elongated monologues, as exemplified in the court-inserts in the early films scripted especially by the DMK activists like Karunanidhi and Kannadasan. There are court scenes in Karunanidhi’s *Raaja Kumaari* [1947] and *Manthiri Kumaari* [1950], A S A Swamy’s *Marma Yoagi* [1951], Thanjai Ramaiyadoss’ *Gule Bakaavali* [1955], and Kannadasan’s *Mathurai Veeran* [1956]. On rare occasions MGR has used documentary footage also, as *Ulagam Sutrum Vaalipan* [1973], which uses clippings of leaders like Gandhi, Nehru and Annadurai speaking on harnessing scientific inventions for social development.

Without intruding into his action hero image, MGR subtly manipulates other forms of story-within-story to maintain his identity as a DMK artiste, and at the same time to propagate his own vision of society. He frequently places the party symbols,
photographs of party leaders, and names of party leaders, Thamizh kings and Thamizh scholars, both contemporary and legendary, as icons in the mise-en-scène, the ‘setting’ of a scene. In Ithaya Kani, for example, he introduces the AIADMK’s symbol of twin-leaves; in Rikshaakaaran, pictures of Gandhi, Anna, Bharati and Crucifix are among the props in MGR’s hut; in Neethikku Thalai Vanangu, a street is named after Thalamuthu, a DMK martyr; similarly, in Thirudaathae, an orphanage is named after the Thamizh scholar Thiru Vi Ka.

What is amazing is MGR’s resourcefulness in inventing new forms or putting the existing forms to new use. The foremost invention is the ‘pass-by’ mini-narrative, an ‘event’ that gets his attention only momentarily as he ‘passes by.’ In Oli Vilakku, for example, as MGR walks along the street, he would pause for a while to enquire into the health of an old lady. In Meenava Nanpan, he would, in a ‘split-second’ encounter, ‘adopt’ parents for him.

‘Indicators of overall climate’ are ‘cues’ provided before or as the film commences informing the viewer from what perspective the film needs to be interpreted. Thus, in Ithaya Kani he prefaces the film with a voice-over quote of Annadurai acknowledging him as his ‘ithayo kani’ [dynamic equivalent of ‘the apple of the eye’]. In Naadoadi Mannan he does the prefacing through the title song exalting the Thamizh language and the Dravida Nation. The songs and comedy, besides fulfilling their unique roles, play the ‘surplus’ role of being stories-within-story. Particularly note-worthy is the ‘narrativising’ of some songs, especially the moral and the political ones. In Thirudaathae, for instance, a narrative context is created for the take off of the song advising the kids not to steal. Similarly in Rikshaakaaran a narrative ambience overshadows the song, “Let those who laugh there continue laughing – theirs is a haughty laugh!”

Much of what is discussed above is not applicable to RK. There are instances of RK employing the story-within-story device, particularly songs, comedy and pass-by mini-narratives, but the practice is not consciously and consistently political till the
early nineties, as will be seen later in the section on ‘tactexting.’

03.02. Double-roles:

‘Double-roles,’ or ‘double-acts’ as it is popularly called, is a technologically constructed narrative device, which enables a person [the hero as a norm; occasionally also the heroine] to play simultaneously two distinctly different characters.

When the ‘double-roles’ technique was introduced in the fifties, it was surely a novelty and was received by the audience with excitement. That this technique is still a popular narrative device – at a time when we have super computers generating amazing virtual realities – indicates that its prevalence is for reasons other than being novel.

This device is more often seen in the films of mega stars [for example MGR, Sivaji. RK and Kamal] or mega directors [for example. Shankar’s Jeans]. An obvious reason for this phenomenon is the space it gives the hero to monopolise the film. The hero, playing two roles simultaneously, inevitably occupies more time. Thus, the centrality of the hero, which might otherwise be criticised as ‘undue,’ is justified thanks to this device.28 Added to this is the opportunity the hero gets to act with two heroines at a time. This can be a real feast to the fans, because they, with their hero, have the voyeuristic pleasure of gazing at two beautiful young girls.29

That this device gives a golden opportunity for the hero to exhibit his histrionic skills can be another valid reason. Versatile actors like Sivaji and Kamal, who have played double roles in more films than their respective rivals [MGR and RK], are known for using this device to show their audience how multifaceted they are. In the case of MGR and RK often it is not the case. In fact, their double acting in general is poor, and they differentiate the two roles primarily through heavy make-up and contrasting costume, and not through acting. MGR, who invariably struggles in double roles, for example, tries to manage by means of exaggerated mannerisms. Naadoadi Mannan is a
case in point: his mannerism in his role as the king-in-waiting is overdone to the point of annoyance.

A majority of films, however, attempt to provide an interesting plot through double acting. Disappointingly, even here, barring a very few exceptions, most of the double roles could be dispensed with, without affecting the main story because of ‘narrative superfluity.’ What is interesting, however, is the clever use of double acting as a cinematic variant of the psychological game of Jekyll-and-Hide. Sometimes one role may act as the ‘conscience’ personified. In any case, this device helps the hero keep his moral image intact while indulging in amoral, anti-social activities.

Based on the above observations, the double acting of MGR and RK could be compared. Table 3.8 delineates the two roles in six films each for MGR and RK. In both MGR and RK films, one role is inevitably the hero, and the other is either a villain or a victim or a helper. In some films where one role is on par with the other in terms of character strength and centrality, the hero may also be a helper, in which case the other role will assume ‘heroship.’ In some other cases, the victim becomes a helper, but after being ‘redeemed’ by the hero.

There are three possible relationships between the two roles as shown in Figure 3.9. In the hero-villain relationship, the hero confronts the villain, who is either ‘condemned’ to death at the end [Raajaa Daesingu; in Billaa the villain is condemned but not by the hero] or ‘condoned’ after he repents [Netrikkann]. In hero-victim relationship, the hero takes on himself the task of rescuing the victim from the clutches of the villain [not of the double roles]. Sometimes, the victim is rescued early, in which case he becomes hero’s collaborator [Siriththu Vaazha Vaendum]. In hero-helper relationship, both of them collaborate in tackling the common villain.

The roles chosen to be paired as given in the table above reflect an asymmetrical social system. In the case of MGR, the society is divided along the lines of the rich
### Table 3.8
CLASSIFICATION OF DOUBLE-ROLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rajini Films</th>
<th>MGR Films</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FILM</strong></td>
<td><strong>ROLE-01</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Billaa</strong></td>
<td>innocent rope-dancer [hero]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Netrik Kann</strong></td>
<td>upright son [hero]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Poakkiri Raajaa</strong></td>
<td>poor petty thief [hero-helper]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moonru Mugam</strong></td>
<td>foreign-educated businessman [hero-helper]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Raajuathi Raajaa</strong></td>
<td>foreign-educated estate owner [hero]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Muththu</strong></td>
<td>servant in a landlord’s house [hero]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Naadoadi Mannan</strong></td>
<td>revolutionary vagrant [hero]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Raajaa Daesingu</strong></td>
<td>prince [hero]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Enga Veettu Pillai</strong></td>
<td>poor unemployed youth [hero-helper]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maattuukaara Vaelan</strong></td>
<td>cowherd [hero-helper]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ulagam Sutrum Vaalipan</strong></td>
<td>talented police officer [hero]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Siriththu Vaazha Vaendum</strong></td>
<td>police officer [hero]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3.9

DOUBLE ROLES - AN ANALYTICAL MODEL
x the poor, moral x immoral, legal x illegal, physically strong x physically weak, the educated x the illiterate, and so on. Over and above these, RK’s social system also includes: the pro-social x the anti-social, the comical x the serious, and the spiritual x the mundane. MGR in his twin roles ‘confronts’ the divided society and, through legal justice, ‘neutralises’ the disparities. RK, on the contrary, while ‘acknowledging’ the disparities, ‘naturalises’ them through spiritualising them. Both, however, evade the core issues, which continue to remain unresolved – a point to be discussed in the next chapter.

03.03. Evil-incarnate Villain:

MGR and RK portray their villains as though they are ‘evil incarnate,’ reducing them to single-agenda existence – they exist only to oppose and eliminate the hero, who, however, is invincible and undefeatable. Such a reduction of personality is obviously based on the logic of ‘worst villain makes the best hero’. The evil-doings of the villain are exaggerated only to accentuate the unconquerable power of the hero.

There is a remarkable agreement between MGR and RK in the depiction of the villains, whose characteristics include the following:

- **Physical**: tough, well-built, often ugly-looking and dark complexioned [particularly the henchmen]...
- **Defence**: acquainted with all sorts of martial arts, having easy access to weapons, with a fortified and technically advanced hideout...
- **Moral**: immoral, laissez-faire, corrupt, anti-social, in the constant company of wine and women, deceitful...
- **Legal**: dreaded criminals wanted by law for murder, rape, smuggling, etc.
- **Intellectual**: criminal-minded, ingenious, shrewd, clever, scheming, cunning...
- **Socio-political**: dangerous, powerful, having connections in high places, often working against the interest of the country...
- **Economic**: very rich, avaricious, tendency to hoard, obsessed with riches, in-
dulge in illegal businesses like smuggling...

- **Family:** frequently without any family; if they have one, often ready to betray family members, and sometimes blindly attached to one or more family members...
- **Emotional:** over-confident, not aware of one's own weaknesses, egoistic, short-tempered, vengeful...
- **Psychopathological:** depraved, maniacal, perverted, sadistic...

The list, though long as it might look, is not exhaustive. Even with this rather incomplete list, to think of a person having most, if not all, of these characteristics is indeed nightmarish. To add to this, the camera angles and movements, and sound effects are so manipulated as to heavily distort the image of the villain, who comes across as an evil personified.

It is to be remembered, however, that a film would normally have more than one person set against the hero. There is, in fact, a 'hierarchy' of villains, as Figure 3.10 illustrates.

It is the 'villainy' actualised in different degrees at different points in the narrative by the hierarchised gang of villains that makes the mission of the hero look insurmountable. The importance is in the descending order as one goes down from the 'main villain' to the 'henchman.' Accordingly, the effort put in by the hero is the least while tackling the henchmen, and it increases as he moves up the ladder. Figure 3.10 shows the relative effort required of the hero, corresponding to the type of villain he confronts.

The stunts listed in Table 3.11 are in the order of their occurrence in the film Naadoadi Mannan. In minor fights, the hero's body is not touched. In major fights he may receive a blow or two, that too initially, in order to provoke him. In very major fights, there is reciprocal physical assault, but it is more on the villain. In the climactic fight, violence
**Figure 3.10**

**HIERARCHY OF VILLAINS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRUELTY</th>
<th>DISPOSABILITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>TYPE</strong></td>
<td><strong>OF VILLAIN</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>most dangerous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>main villain</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>co-villain/s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>major aide/s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other important aides</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>henchmen</td>
<td>🔻</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>least dangerous</td>
<td>easiest to eliminate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMPOSITION OF FIGHT</td>
<td>NATURE OF FIGHT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01. The hero rescues a helpless woman from thugs who try to rape her.</td>
<td>very minor fight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02. The hero fights with villain’s henchmen, and they flee.</td>
<td>minor fight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03. The hero fights with villain’s henchmen, and they flee.</td>
<td>minor fight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04. The hero encounters villain’s major aide and his henchmen in direct combat, and takes them captives.</td>
<td>very major fight just before interval; involves violent physical assaults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05. The hero fights with villain’s additional henchmen. The villain’s major aide escapes from captivity after seriously wounding the heroine.</td>
<td>major fight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06. The hero rescues the heroine from the captivity of villain’s major aide, who gets killed by drowning into the sea.</td>
<td>very major fight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07. The hero fights with the guards, and gains entry into cave prison.</td>
<td>minor fight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08. The hero directly encounters the villain. At the end of this major fight, the villain is defeated.</td>
<td>longest and fiercest climactic fight; involves violent physical assaults</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
is let loose on both sides [usually there will be other people with the hero] with physical assaults.

While granting that the war between the villain and the hero is reminiscent of the mythological war between the good and the evil, the ‘devas’ and the ‘asuras,’ a critical look at the films of MGR and RK would tell us that the villains are not without any good, and, conversely, the heroes are not without any blemish. In many films the villains do have a ‘positive side’ — however thin it may be — and the heroes, their ‘darker side.’ MGR’s image, as we have noted earlier, is one of ‘do-gooder’ with an ‘anti-social’ streak popping up now and then. RK’s image accommodates much more ‘deviance’ as an integral part of his personality structure. Leaving this aspect aside, the ruthless and inhuman way in which the hero eliminates the villain’s men and often the villain himself would be sufficient enough to militate against the ‘good’ hero! This means that the villain and the hero have something in common, as Figure 3.12 highlights.

What attracts our attention is the dynamics of ‘good-evil interface’ in the ‘hero-villain continuum.’ The ‘evil’ in the hero is justified because of the noble ‘end’ — ‘the end justifies the means’ — an unacceptable or at least debatable ethical principle. The ‘good’ in the villain is actualised in his act of surrendering to the hero and repenting for his evil-doings.

03.04. Comedy:

In a film that effectively tells the story, the comedy normally plays a crucial role, especially when the story involves a heavy theme. Any effective narrative would also take the viewer along as it progresses towards peak moments, building up tension both within the story and outside of it, that is, in the viewer. Comedy comes as a welcome relief during such moments. Sadly enough, such a creative interpolation of comedy with the story is a rarity in Thamizh films.
Figure 3.12

HERO-VILLAIN CONTINUUM

good-evil interface

VILLAIN

the worst

HERO

the most perfect

EVIL

GOOD
Often enough, comedy is treated as a convenient time-filler - in order to stretch the film for about two-and-a-half hours, an average length of a typical Thamizh film. The comedy moves parallel to the main story as a separate ‘track,’ and the hero is not physically present in most of such sequences. The only ‘connection’ is that the comedian will be given the identity as hero’s friend. Surprisingly, even RK films are no exceptions, particularly the ones in which RK combines with another professional comedian. The ‘narrative autonomy’ of the comedy track has become almost a tradition in Thamizh filmdom. As an unavoidable corollary, the comedy actors also function ‘autonomously,’ evolving the content themselves independently of the director!

The ‘positive’ side of the ‘narrative autonomy’ enjoyed by the comedy [and the comedians] is its use in commenting on socio-political issues of the day, by satirising, parodying, belittling or passing derogatory remarks. The pioneer in metamorphosing comedy into an effective weapon of socio-political critique is N S Krishnan31, later known as ‘Kalaivaanar.’ His ‘kinthanaar kathaakaalakshepam’ in Nalla Thampi, and ‘Aimpathum Arupathum’ in Manamagal [1951] are classic examples of what a socially conscientious person could do with comedy. Comedians like Nagesh and Chandra Babu continued the NSK tradition, but very much toned down - so toned down at times as to reach the point of no significance. Of late, the new entrant Vivek seems to imitate NSK in criticising superstitious cultural and religious practices.

An interesting use to be noted in this context is the ‘comical inversion,’ which refers to making the comedy an ‘inverse’ of the main story; the comedian in turn becomes an ‘inverted hero.’ In Raaman Thaediya Seethai, for example, the hero MGR in his search for an ideal woman administers tests on several of them before ticking off one. His comedian friend inverts this story by falling in love blindly, and getting married in a haphazard manner. His weak body [exposed in a boxing contest] is an inversion of the hero’s handsome body. The message of comical inversion is clear: a foolish and weak man like the comedian deserves only such a wedding; conversely, ‘selecting’ an ideal wife is the prerogative of a rich, intelligent and handsome man like...
MGR. Similar inversions could be found in a number of MGR starrers [Naadoadi Mannan, Urimai Kural, etc.]. Comical inversion is not very uncommon in RK films. In his latest film Padaiyappaa, the comedian Senthil, who is of same dark complexion as RK, is presented as an inverted hero. In the pretty long sequence of introducing the hero to the heroine, constant comparison is made between the comedian and RK. In another sequence when the friends go for engagement of the comedian, he is lent the hero’s attire, only to be stripped shortly!

A clever use of the comedy is to make the comedian the mouthpiece of the hero. In Ithaya Kani, for example, the comedian refers to seeing the ‘vaaththiyaar’ film Thaikkuppin Thaaram seven times and is in all praise for the bull-fight. In Enga Veettu Pillai, the comedian declares that the whole country has adopted MGR as their ‘household son.’ In RK’s Annaamalai, the comedian constantly describes the attractiveness of RK and speaks on his behalf [and on behalf of the ‘poor’].

03.05. Dramatic Intro:

To emphasise the importance and centrality of the hero, he is often introduced dramatically. The hero’s entry happens as a sudden ‘intrusion’ in the story. In sharp contrast to the conventional entry, where the hero’s entry realistically flows with the narrative, in the dramatic entry, it is as though he appears from nowhere, and this ‘suddenness’ may not be justified at all. This type of entry is very common in the films of MGR [like Kumari Koattam, Periya Idaththu Penn, Meenava Nanpan, and Mathuraiyai Meetta Sunthara Paandiyan] and in the films of RK [for example, Padaiyappaa]. The context in which such a dramatic entry occurs always corresponds to their image as the representatives of the poor and the marginalized, or as the saviours and protectors of women in danger. Interestingly, all such entries happen in a confrontational situation.

Foreshadowing the entry is yet another popular way of introducing the hero,
especially in the case of RK. Other characters in the film are shown, in a chain of events, to compliment, adore and revere the hero, who is yet to be introduced. This makes the viewer wait with expectation for his arrival, and finally the hero appears, much in the fashion of a divine apparition, amidst singing and dancing. This ‘delay-expectation-arrival’ technique in films like *Baatshaa* and *Arunaachalam* symbolises his ‘supermanship’ or ‘divinity’. This may be extended even to the initial titles. for example, an eerie BGM accompanies the computer-generated title of RK.

03.06. The End-Clips:

The story comes to a close, in a typical film, when the climax is completed with a denouement. But in quite a few films, it could be noticed, a set of visual clippings come after the formal closure and just preceding or accompanying the credits [the ‘end-clips’]. These clips apparently have no bearings whatsoever on the story proper, but they do have an important role to play in giving a ‘finishing touch’ to the image. While the denouement winds up the story, it is the end-clip that marks the closure of the tone and mood of the film. Interestingly, from the image-building point of view, the tone and mood commence already in the title and close with the credit. Thus, the image construction is a ‘title to credit’ process. If the presentation of the titles [with subsequent but more impactful dramatic entry of the hero] is designed to attract the viewer based on the law of primacy, the end-clips work on the law of recency by subtly persuading the viewer as to the kind of image they are to remember and the message to be taken home.

The typically conventional ending would stop with the freeze frame of the ‘union of lovers’ [hero and heroine]. A variation of this is the couple [or the hero and his people] turn towards the camera and bid farewell to the viewers. In *Sivaa*, to cite an example, RK asks the girl to hold him tight to pose for the camera, and then talks directly to the viewer. In *Mathuraiyai Meetta Sunthara Paandiyan* the camera zooms out of the riotous revelry of the crowd to zoom in on MGR.
The most popular ending involves the repeat of the first ['inaugural'] song of the hero either in full or a segment. Sometimes it may be just the catchy tune that closes. In Guru Sishyan, for instance, the end is the song, “I’ve discovered the lovesickness...” In Padayappaa, it is, “Hoist the flag of victory...” Such songs in MGR films often justify the titles, as in Thani Piravi ['Only once I’ve spoken with you, you are unique by birth...']. In many of his films, however, a brief, often two-stroke, dialogue justifying the title precedes, as in Siriththu Vaazha Vaendum, the song repeat “I am an actor in the stage of world” is preceded by a two-stroke conversation justifying the title:

“If only a good man cries, others will laugh.”

“Yes, all must live laughing...”

In Raaman Thaediya Seethai, the old lady justifies the title, while blessing the couple. “The Seethai is best suited to the Raaman.”

While in MGR films the end-line justifies the title, in RK films it is the ridicule of the conventional denouement, as in Nallavanukku Nallavan and Mister Bhaarath, where a character mocks at the stereotypical ending of the police coming to arrest the culprits.

In some recent films, RK goes a step further by mixing the reel and the real. In Raajaa Chinna Roajaa the ‘mix-up’ takes place within the universe of the cinematic discourse: In the shooting for the song, “If you ask who’s the super-star, even a small kid would answer” RK acts as RK with another woman [acting as heroine for that episode] while his wife [heroine] gets upset looking at this. RK suspends acting to cajole his wife; and the song continues with the crawling credits. In Arunaachalam it is the mix of shots from the film and shots taken while the actual shooting was done. This mix of visuals against the backdrop of the song in praise of ‘Arunaachalam’ presents RK as a genuine actor who does not act in real life. It should be remembered that this film was released when the political parties were desperately seeking for RK’s political intervention.
In the field of advertising, the USP [Unique Selling Proposition] means a lot in the effective positioning of the brand. In the field of cinema, such a marketing strategy has been successfully applied by RK to ‘position’ his image. The beginnings of this could already be seen in MGR starrers, though he did not extensively use this devise. For example, MGR’s statement in Marma Yoagi, “If I aim, it will not miss [to hit the target]; if it is going to miss, I will not aim,” was such a hit that it almost became a proverb. In Naadoadi Mannan he says, “There are many who have ruined themselves without trusting me; there is none who has trusted me got ruined.”

By combining such ‘propositions’ with his ‘style,’ RK has managed to strike the right formula to evolve a saleable USP for each film, more specifically the films released during the 1990s: “Don’t provoke me; if you do, I’ll do what I say and what I have not said” [Annaamalai], “I am the union, I am the leader – always” [Mannan], “If I say once, it is like saying a hundred times,” “God tests the good, but does not forsake: He gives plenty to the bad, but forsakes them” [Baatshaa], “No one knows when I’ll come, how I’ll come; but I’ll come right at the right moment” [Muththu], “God says thus, and Arunachalam accomplishes it” [Arunaachalam], “My way is a unique way, don’t interfere” [Padaiyappaa]. The USPs are too numerous to be listed here.

Even a cursory reading of these pronouncements of RK would indicate how these are politically motivated. But what interests us here is the way these USPs are advertised to promote his films. These statements were given the status of the Vedas and included in all the publicity materials of the films – posters, hoardings, newspaper ads and stills, and trailers. RK politicized the narrative; narratived the politics; and commercialized both to make profits in crores – an aspect to be looked into later. No other Thamizh actor to this day has made such a successful use of this narrative device to promote his/her business.
03.08. Other Devices:

Of the other narrative devices, a stereotypical and bland device is 'masking,' seen frequently in MGR films. The villain would employ a damsel to wear a mask, which would make her a heroine's look-alike. MGR would, as to be expected, tear off the mask to reveal the identity of the person [for example: Raaman Thaediya Seethai, Kumari Koattam and Rikshaakaaran]. Another variation of 'masking' device is using the dead persons as though they have come alive [Thani Piravi and Raaman Thaediya Seethai]. This masking device with its variations is employed to add a twist to the story and take it forward or to force the story to end.

The most contemporary and the most fascinating narrative device concerns the use of technology, including computer graphics, special effects and Dolby sound—besides manoeuvring camera, lighting and editing. These are increasingly employed with other narrative devices to boost up, as evident in the recent RK starrers from Baatshaa onwards, the invincible image of the hero.

04. CULTURAL SOURCES

04.01. Kaavya, Kooththu and Assemblage:

According to Thamizh cultural and literary tradition, there are three main branches of Thamizh [muth-thamizh]: iyal [prosody], isai [music], naadakam [drama]. The drama is subdivided, as mentioned in Silappathikaaram, into at least two types of performances: vaeththiyal [performed in the royal court, meant exclusively for the royal families, the nobles and the poet-scholars] and pothuviyal [performed mostly in the temple premises, meant for the general public]. Usually, naadakam is an admixture of all the three branches—the isai [musical accompaniment] is an absolute requirement for the drama; the songs and the plots belong to iyal. While vaeththiyal continued to
enjoy the palatial comfort, it is the pothuviyal that eventually metamorphosed itself into the folk form kooththu.

When the 'stories,' 'storylines,' and the 'non-story' components of a film are woven together, the resultant narrative has the structure of a more or less coherently laid out 'assemblage,' which contains aspects of both kaavya and kooththu forms.

Kaavya, meaning epic, has a well-knit grand narrative structure, subsuming innumerable mini-narratives as 'branches', which are employed either as illustrative examples or as biographies of related characters. Kaavya is essentially hero-centric, and the characters are assigned values vis-à-vis their bond[age] to the hero. The inherent ideology is status-quoist. and the overall tone is characterised by grandeur, beauty and ethics. All these aspects of kaavya are applicable to film as well. In fact, these aspects form the very backbone of the deep narrative structure of the films of MGR and RK.

Kooththu, meaning 'play' in rural parlance, has, as opposed to kaavya, a loosely-knit narrative structure, replete with folk songs, dances, stunts and double entendres. Kooththu is performed as an inseparable part of the annual village festival [oor thiruvizha] in honour of the village deity, for the twin-purpose of entertaining and giving a socio-religious message. Such a festive context provides kooththu performance also with certain 'liminal freedom,' which manifests itself as social criticism, mainly through the character of the 'buffoon,' who plays a variety of roles including that of a jester and a commentator. Kooththu, which is characterised, therefore, by religiosity, entertainment and social criticism, often has as its contents the semi-historical and semi-mythological folk heroes and heroines. Sometimes, the folk derivatives of the branch stories from kaavya also constitute the contents of kooththu. Film as a mass medium appropriates these features of kooththu, empties them of their radical and subversive potential, if any, and incorporates them with its kaavya core. Thus, film in effect is a kaavya performed as a kooththu.
The films of MGR and RK often draw their motifs, themes, and even plots from three divergent cultural sources: the pan-Indian *kaavyas* and *puranas*, the region-specific *kooththu* folktales and myths of oral traditions, and the corpus of Thamizh classical literature starting from the *Sangam* age. The use, however, is very subtle and the motifs are re-enunciated metaphorically or metonymically within the universe of contemporary discourse.

The frequently recurring archetypal characters include *Rama–Sita* [ideal husband-wife relationship], *Kovalan–Mathavi* [extramarital sex], *Kannahi* ['queen of chastity'], *Rama–Ravana* [good versus evil], *Krishna–Gopis* ['lila,' the play; by extension, eve-teasing], *Lakshman* [ideal brother], *Karnan* [ideal friend], *Saguni* [the schemer], *Kunthi* [virgin mother; by extension, one who gives birth through premarital sex], *Murugan–Valli–Theivanai* ['legal' bigamy], *Nallathangal* [folk version of *pieta*, the suffering mother], *Mathurai Veeran* [folk hero from an untouchable community], *King Manu* [symbol of justice], *Thiruvalluvar* [The Great Intellectual], munificent nobles and chieftains like *Pari*.

Thus, the films of MGR and RK serve as a synthesis of dominant and subaltern cultures both in form and in content.