

A Study on the Use of Double Acting in Tamil Cinema Screenplays

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Abstract—Tamil cinema has long employed the technique of double acting as one of its most enduring and culturally significant narrative conventions. This research investigates the structural, thematic, and visual dimensions of double acting as deployed in the screenplays of four landmark Tamil films: *Jeans* (1998), *Maatran* (2012), *24* (2016), and *Mersal* (2017). Selected to represent different decades, genres, and directorial approaches, these films collectively chart the evolution of double acting from a primarily entertainment-driven device to a sophisticated instrument of emotional, ethical, and socio-political storytelling. The study employs a qualitative methodology integrating textual and narrative analysis, thematic mapping, metric scoring, coded scene analysis, and film-wise frame analysis. Theoretical grounding is provided by duality theory (binary opposition), psychoanalytic theory (Freudian and Jungian frameworks of identity), and auteur theory. Findings demonstrate that double acting in Tamil cinema has evolved through three discernible stages: entertainment, emotional complexity, and ideological engagement and that visual language, including framing, lighting, colour palette, and shot composition, has developed into an integral narrative system rather than a purely aesthetic accompaniment. The study further explores how Tamil star culture, with specific reference to the personas of Vijay, Suriya, and Prashanth, actively shapes the construction of dual characters at the screenplay stage, negotiating between dramatic logic and commercial imperatives. The results contribute to the growing body of scholarship on South Indian cinema and specifically to the underdeveloped field of Tamil screenplay studies.

Index Terms—Double Acting, Tamil Cinema, Screenplay Structure, Dual Characterisation, Star Culture, Narrative Analysis, South Indian Cinema

I. INTRODUCTION

Within the conventions of Indian popular cinema, few narrative techniques have proven as persistently inventive, commercially productive, and culturally resonant as the practice of double acting: the casting of a single actor in two or more distinct roles within the same film. In Tamil cinema, a regional industry with over a century of unbroken filmmaking tradition, this convention has evolved from a theatrical novelty into a foundational element of screenplay craft. It speaks directly to the industry's unique configurations of star worship, audience expectation, and storytelling ambition. This study examines four Tamil films—*Jeans* (1998), *Maatran* (2012), *24* (2016), and *Mersal* (2017)—as representative case studies of this evolution, analysing double acting not as a performance phenomenon but as a narrative and screenwriting strategy. The Tamil film industry is one of the oldest and most productive regional film industries in India, with a heritage spanning mythological drama, social realism, political cinema, and contemporary commercial blockbusters. Through all the stylistic and thematic transformations of the past seven decades, one technique has remained consistently present: the dual role. From its early deployment as comic spectacle where lookalike characters generate misunderstandings and situational humour to its contemporary manifestation as the structural spine of revenge narratives and science-fiction thrillers, double acting has demonstrated a remarkable capacity for reinvention. Each era has found new purposes for the device: the 1990s used it to amplify romantic comedy; the 2010s deployed it as a vehicle for social criticism and psychological depth.

The link between double acting and Tamil star culture is inseparable from the creative logic of the device. The four films selected for this study are built around some of the most commercially powerful stars in Tamil cinema's recent history: *Mersal* features Vijay, whose dual public identity as mass entertainer and socially conscious advocate is encoded in his triple role; *Maatran* and *24* both feature Suriya, whose image of disciplined heroism and emotional depth informs both the assertive and reflective twins of the former and the morally contrasting generations of the latter; *Jeans* revolves around Prashanth, whose youthful romantic persona shaped the comedic possibilities of the double role in that film. In each case, the screenplay negotiates between the dramatic requirements of the dual role and the commercial imperatives of the star's established image.

Despite the cultural ubiquity of double acting in Tamil cinema, the topic has attracted surprisingly limited scholarly attention, particularly from the perspective of screenplay analysis. Where studies of double acting in Indian cinema do exist, they tend to concentrate on performance and spectacle on how actors embody multiple roles rather than on the prior creative decisions made by screenwriters regarding character design, structural integration, and thematic purpose. This study seeks to redress that imbalance by positioning the screenplay as the primary unit of analysis. The central argument is that double acting in Tamil cinema is not merely a performance challenge or a visual trick but a structured narrative device whose sophistication and thematic ambition have grown substantially over the period examined.

1.1 Background of Study

Double acting in Indian cinema has its roots in the theatrical traditions of disguise and impersonation that preceded film. In Tamil cinema specifically, the technique gained significant traction from the 1950s and 1960s, initially drawing on stage conventions of identical-character confusion and moral opposition between good and evil doubles. Over subsequent decades, Tamil screenwriters developed the convention in multiple directions: incorporating it into action films, family dramas, science-fiction narratives, and revenge thrillers. The four films selected for this study *Jeans* (1998), *Maatran* (2012), *24* (2016), and *Mersal* (2017) represent four distinct moments in this development, each reflecting the technological

capabilities, audience expectations, and social concerns of its era. *Jeans* emerged during a period of expanding production ambition in Tamil cinema, when international locations, elaborate song picturisations, and high-budget special effects were being integrated into commercial productions. Director S. Shankar's film used double acting within a romantic comedy framework, deploying practical cinematic techniques split-screen editing, body doubles, careful blocking to create the illusion of twin interaction. *Maatran*, directed by K. V. Anand, explored double acting through the biologically unique premise of conjoined twins, placing the dual identity at the literal centre of the narrative in a way that demanded both technical innovation and emotional investment. *24*, directed by Vikram Kumar, incorporated triple roles within a science-fiction framework involving time manipulation and intergenerational conflict, demonstrating that the device could sustain sophisticated conceptual and philosophical storytelling. *Mersal*, directed by Atlee, used a triple-role construction within a revenge narrative explicitly organised around a critique of healthcare corruption and institutional injustice, showing that double acting had become a vehicle for socio-political commentary.

1.2 Research Questions

This study is guided by three principal research questions:

1. How do the screenplays of the selected films use the concept of dual roles to generate narrative conflict and resolution?
2. How do the directors of these films deploy cinematic technique framing, lighting, editing, and visual effects to realise double acting across different genres?
3. How does the theme of dual identity in *Mersal*, *24*, *Maatran*, and *Jeans* reflect broader social and cultural concerns within Tamil society?

1.3 Objectives

The study has three principal objectives: to analyse the narrative functions of dual roles across the selected Tamil films and identify how double acting serves structural and thematic purposes at the screenplay level; to evaluate the technical and visual execution of double acting across different genres and time periods, examining how cinematographic choices reinforce

characterisation and meaning; and to explore how themes of identity, duality, morality, and social commentary are constructed and communicated through the dual-role device in each film.

1.4 Significance of Study

This study contributes to scholarship at multiple levels. Academically, it fills an important gap in Tamil film studies by foregrounding the screenplay as the analytical focus, rather than performance or spectacle. The research opens methodological possibilities for further scholarship on South Indian cinema that takes writing and narrative structure seriously as objects of inquiry. For industry practitioners, the findings offer structured insight into the techniques narrative, visual, and thematic that have made dual-role screenplays commercially and artistically successful across different periods. Culturally, the study demonstrates that Tamil commercial cinema has consistently used double acting to engage with questions of justice, identity, family, morality, and institutional power, establishing it as a form with genuine social resonance beyond entertainment value.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gopalan (2019) provides a foundational framework for understanding the structural distinctiveness of Indian popular cinema. Characterising it as a "Cinema of Interruptions," she argues that devices such as song-and-dance sequences, intermissions, and dramatic digressions construct a unique visual and narrative time-space rather than disrupting narrative coherence. This framework is directly relevant to understanding how double acting functions in Tamil cinema not as an anomaly imposed on otherwise classical narrative structures, but as one of several devices that constitute the industry's distinctive storytelling grammar. The dual role, like the song sequence, creates a structured interruption that expands the narrative's emotional and thematic range.

Ghosh-Ray (2024) offers the most directly relevant engagement with the double-casting phenomenon in an Indian context. Examining the narrative strategy of using stars in double roles in Hindi films, she argues that the device is informed by the logic of star amplification using a second role to expand the star's presence and commercial value and is rooted in the mythical pantheon of multiple divine incarnations,

negotiating anxieties of colonial and post-colonial cultural identity. Her analysis of the "bricoleur strategy" through which filmmakers assemble double roles from available cultural materials applies equally to Tamil cinema, where the star's extradiegetic image, fan expectations, and cultural mythology all inform how dual characters are constructed at the screenplay stage.

Rudhraiah and Ganga (2011) provide the most comprehensive theoretical account of Tamil star culture and its relationship to genre and spectatorship. Their central argument that stars in Tamil cinema are not icons for a genre but are themselves the genre has profound implications for understanding double acting. If the star is the genre, then a double role is not merely a plot device but a genre event: it doubles the genre, providing two versions of the star-as-phenomenon for the audience to consume. The mobilisation of fan communities around star personas, and the specific expectations those communities bring to films, directly shapes how screenwriters approach dual-role construction: what qualities to emphasise, which aspects of the star's image to affirm, and how to create the impression of genuine differentiation within what is ultimately a single star performance.

Dieguez (2013) approaches the double from a neurocognitive and literary perspective, tracing the recurring fascination with the doppelgänger, alter ego, and second self across Gothic and Romantic literature. His argument that pathological illusory doubles, literary creations of the double, and widespread cultural beliefs about the soul share underlying cognitive mechanisms provides a theoretical backdrop for understanding the cross-cultural and cross-historical appeal of the double role. In the context of Tamil cinema, it suggests that double acting taps into deep-seated cognitive and cultural structures the desire to encounter oneself as another, to see identity divided and multiplied that extend far beyond the specificities of any particular industry.

Hari Prasad (2024) documents the evolution of editing technology in Tamil cinema, demonstrating through case studies of Indian, Anbe Sivam, Aayirathil Oruvan, and Visaranai how successive technological advances digital compositing, non-linear editing, colour grading, and documentary-style verité aesthetics have transformed what Tamil filmmakers can achieve visually. This technological trajectory is directly relevant to the evolution of double acting,

where each generation of filmmakers has deployed the available tools to make dual-character interactions more convincing and narratively integrated. The shift from the practical split-screen techniques of *Jeans* to the seamless CGI compositing of *24* and *Mersal* is inseparable from this broader technological history.

Kumar and Kalimuthu (2020) confirm a shift in Tamil storytelling methodology across recent decades, noting changes in hero portrayal, the incorporation of social awareness themes, and significant increases in production scale and investment. Their analysis suggests that Tamil cinema's growing engagement with political and social subject matter has shaped not only what films are about but how they are structured including how the dual role is used to embody ideological opposition and social critique. Kumaran (2026) adds a gender-critical dimension, revealing how Tamil comedic conventions, including double-acting scenarios, frequently reinforce hegemonic masculinity and conventional gender roles, a limitation that the current study acknowledges and that future research should address.

2.1 Research Gap

The study of screenplay practice as an independent analytical field remains relatively underdeveloped in South Indian film studies, and this is particularly true of the double acting convention, which is essentially a phenomenon of writing of the decisions made at the script stage about character design, narrative structure, and thematic purpose before it becomes a production or performance challenge. Overseas scholarship has examined double-role narratives through the lenses of narrative theory and performance studies, but these studies have overwhelmingly focused on Hollywood and European cinema, with little systematic attention to regional Indian industries such as Tamil cinema. The handful of studies that do address double acting in Indian cinema generally approach it through the lens of spectacle or performance, emphasising the actor's embodiment of multiple roles rather than the screenwriter's strategies for structuring and thematising those roles. This study fills that gap by treating the screenplay its character architecture, structural choices, and thematic intentions as the primary object of analysis.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative methodology, which is particularly appropriate for the analysis of cinematic texts where meaning is produced through the overlapping and mutually reinforcing interactions of narrative structure, visual language, performance, and sound. Qualitative analysis, grounded in perception, contextual interpretation, and close reading of meaning-making processes, enables a more comprehensive understanding of how double acting functions as a narrative device than quantitative methods could provide. The research integrates four complementary analytical approaches, each designed to illuminate a different dimension of the double-acting phenomenon.

Textual and narrative analysis treats each film as a multi-layered text composed of several interacting signifying systems: dialogue, characterisation, screenplay structure, cinematography, editing, and sound design. Through systematic close analysis of these elements, the research traces how dual roles are encoded in the screenplay and developed across the narrative arc. Performance analysis examines how the physical and vocal differentiation of roles voice modulation, gesture, posture, rhythm of speech is anticipated and supported by the screenplay's characterisation decisions. Thematic analysis maps the narrative function, character differentiation strategies, visual and technical treatment, thematic depth, and structural organisation of each film. Metric analysis rates each film across five parameters narrative integration, character differentiation, plot complexity, emotional impact, and revelation effectiveness on a high/medium/low scale, enabling systematic comparison across the corpus. Coded scene analysis applies a moral score scale (-5 to +5) to selected key scenes from each film, tracking the ethical dimensions of double acting and its evolution across the four films. Film-wise frame analysis examines four visual parameters visual character separation, shot composition and spatial arrangement, lighting and colour contrast, and symbolic frame meaning to understand how cinematographic choices reinforce and extend the screenplay's narrative and ideological intentions.

The theoretical framework draws on three bodies of theory. Duality theory, grounded in Lévi-Strauss's concept of binary opposition, provides tools for

analysing how paired characters are constructed as contrasting ideological forces rational versus instinctive, institutional versus rebellious, responsible versus corrupt. Psychoanalytic theory, drawing on both Freudian and Jungian frameworks, supports analysis of the shadow self, the alter ego, and the psychological functions of doubling the ways in which a second character can embody the repressed, the idealised, or the morally opposite dimensions of a single psychic complex. Auteur theory enables consideration of how the distinctive directorial signatures of Shankar, K. V. Anand, Vikram Kumar, and Atlee their characteristic visual styles, thematic preoccupations, and approaches to star performance shape the deployment of double acting in each film.

IV. FILM-BY-FILM ANALYSIS

4.1 Jeans (1998): Double Acting as Comic Spectacle
 Jeans, directed by S. Shankar, represents the earliest chronological entry in this study and exemplifies the use of double acting as primarily a vehicle for comedic entertainment and romantic confusion. The film centres on twin brothers whose physical similarity generates a sustained series of mistaken identities, family misunderstandings, and romantic complications. At the screenplay level, the dual role is supplementary rather than constitutive: it provides the mechanism for situational comedy and delayed romantic resolution, but the film's core emotional and narrative drive the romantic pursuit would be achievable through other means. Character differentiation in Jeans is primarily external, relying on costume, hairstyle, and exaggerated behavioural traits that allow audiences to track identities at a glance while preserving the comic potential of situations where other characters cannot.

The thematic analysis of Jeans reveals a screenplay structured around the pleasures of recognition and confusion rather than psychological depth or ideological engagement. The screenplay assigns each twin a distinct social context and sets of behavioural habits, but neither character is developed to the point of genuine psychological individuation. Their differences are situational and performative rather than moral or philosophical. The narrative function of double acting in this film is to generate obstacles comedic, romantic, and familial that drive the plot toward its inevitable resolution in revelation and

reconciliation. Visually, the film operates within the technological constraints and generic conventions of 1990s Tamil cinema. Character separation relies on practical techniques: split-screen compositions, body doubles, careful blocking and editing to simulate the presence of twins in the same space. Lighting is bright, balanced, and consistent across both characters there is no ideological differentiation through colour palette or lighting design, as the film's tonal requirements are uniformly warm and accessible. Shot compositions are frequently symmetrical, using the visual doubling of space to heighten the irony of situations where the audience knows both identities while the characters do not. The coded scene analysis rates the film's moral framework as essentially benign. The deception practised by the twin characters scores lightly negative (−1 to −2) but is consistently framed as harmless and comedic rather than genuinely harmful. The film's final revelation, which restores clarity of identity and resolves the accumulated misunderstandings, scores positively (+4), reinforcing the screenplay's essentially conservative ethical logic: confusion is temporary, truth eventually emerges, and romantic and familial harmony is restored. The metric analysis rates Jeans as high on narrative integration the dual role is efficiently used to drive the comedy plot but medium on character differentiation and plot complexity, reflecting the screenplay's relative lack of psychological depth and structural sophistication.

Despite these limitations, Jeans is significant in the context of Tamil cinema's history with double acting. It demonstrates that the device was commercially viable and generically flexible in the late 1990s, capable of anchoring a high-budget romantic comedy. It also illustrates, by contrast, how substantially the technique would develop in subsequent decades. The relative simplicity of Jeans' approach external differentiation, linear structure, comic rather than dramatic stakes makes visible the nature of the advances achieved by the films that followed.

4.2 Maatran (2012): Double Acting and Emotional Interdependence

Directed by K. V. Anand, Maatran reconceives the double role through the biologically unique premise of conjoined twins Akilan and Vimalan making duality simultaneously physical and psychological in a way unavailable to conventional dual-role screenplays. Because the twins share a body, the screenplay cannot

rely on the spatial separation of characters that most double-role films use as their primary differentiation strategy. Instead, character individuation must be achieved through internal qualities: personality, emotional disposition, decision-making style, and moral orientation. Akilan is scripted as emotionally impulsive and assertive; Vimalan is reflective and morally restrained. These differences emerge through dialogue, through each character's responses to shared situations, and through the micro-expressions and vocal modulations that the screenplay anticipates and supports. The narrative function of double acting in *Maatran* is constitutive rather than supplementary. The conjoined twin premise generates every major conflict in the film: it shapes how the characters experience romantic desire (complicated by their physical inseparability), how they respond to the corporate conspiracy directed against them, and how they ultimately face the possibility of surgical separation. The double is not an occasional plot device but a continuous narrative presence, a condition that the screenplay uses to explore interdependence, sacrifice, and the ethical complexity of autonomy. The metric analysis rates *Maatran* high on narrative integration and emotional impact, reflecting the screenplay's success in making the dual role emotionally meaningful rather than merely structurally functional. Visually, *Maatran* deploys seamless VFX integration to portray conjoined twins convincingly, with meticulous attention to camera blocking, choreography, and spatial continuity. Shot composition in the film's early sequences is characteristically symmetrical, with both characters occupying equal visual space and moving in coordinated patterns that reinforce their unity. As the corporate conspiracy intensifies and internal tensions between the twins emerge, the compositions tighten and become more asymmetric, visualising the fractures within an outwardly unified entity. The most powerful compositional shift occurs during the surgical separation sequence, where symmetrical, warm-toned compositions give way to cold, clinical lighting and fragmented spatial arrangements that visualise the irreversibility of individuation.

The lighting and colour design of *Maatran* tracks the emotional arc of the twins' relationship with unusual directness. Early sequences, which establish the twins' world as one of shared warmth and comic resilience, are rendered in balanced, warm lighting. As external

threats accumulate and the possibility of separation becomes real, the palette shifts toward higher contrast and cooler tones. After the surgery, when each twin must navigate individual existence for the first time, the visual world becomes perceptibly colder blues replace the earlier warmth, and negative space in the frame expands to suggest emotional emptiness and disorientation.

The coded scene analysis rates *Maatran*'s ethical framework as consistently oriented toward collective responsibility and sacrifice. The twins' decision to investigate the corporate conspiracy despite personal risk scores +4, reflecting courage and social responsibility. The surgery decision itself scores +2 ethically complex and emotionally devastating but ultimately necessary for survival. The corporate antagonists, whose negligence with health products provides the film's external conflict, score -4, positioning corporate greed as the film's primary moral antagonist. The overall moral architecture of *Maatran* presents double acting as a meditation on ethical interdependence the idea that identity is never entirely individual, and that the cost of autonomy may be measured in the dissolution of a shared self.

4.3 24 (2016): Double Acting in Science Fiction

Writer-director Vikram Kumar's 24 represents the most formally ambitious deployment of double acting in the corpus, extending the device into a science-fiction framework involving time manipulation and three temporally separate versions of the same actor: Sethuraman (the scientist who invents a time-controlling wristwatch), Athreya (Sethuraman's brother-in-law who murders him to possess the watch), and Mani (Sethuraman's son, who inherits the watch and must ultimately confront Athreya). Each character embodies a distinct ethical position in relation to power and knowledge: Sethuraman represents innovation in the service of collective benefit; Athreya embodies the corruption of power by greed and dominance; Mani traces an arc from innocent ignorance to mature moral responsibility. These positions are not merely character traits but the philosophical architecture of the screenplay, the framework through which the film's central argument about the ethics of technological power is organised. The narrative function of double acting in 24 is foundational to the film's premise in a way that exceeds even *Maatran*. Without three roles, there is no

film: the entire causal logic of time manipulation, intergenerational conflict, and moral reckoning depends on three versions of the same person occupying different temporal positions and enacting different ethical choices. The screenplay is constructed as a tightly integrated cause-and-effect system in which every action taken by one character in one timeline has consequences for the other characters in their respective timelines. The metric analysis rates 24 as high on narrative integration, character differentiation, and plot complexity, and medium on emotional impact reflecting the film's greater investment in conceptual sophistication than emotional intimacy.

Visually, each of the three characters is assigned a coherent cinematographic code that communicates their psychological and ethical identity. Sethuraman is framed in stable, centred medium close-ups with balanced, neutral lighting that conveys intellectual composure and moral clarity. Athreya is rendered through low-angle shots, high-contrast shadow lighting, and asymmetric framing that emphasise instability, menace, and the obsessive single-mindedness of a character trapped by his own greed. Mani's early scenes use wide shots and loose composition to signal immaturity and irresponsibility; as his moral awareness develops across the narrative, his framing progressively tightens and centres, mirroring his growth into the inherited responsibility of his father's legacy. The time-freeze sequences in which active characters move through a world rendered immobile are composed in multiple spatial planes, with figures arranged in foreground, mid-ground, and background, conveying the complexity of temporal manipulation without verbal explanation.

The coded scene analysis assigns the film's moral extremes to Sethuraman's act of invention (+5, representing scientific ambition in the service of collective good) and Athreya's assault on Sethuraman's family to claim the watch (-5, representing the most unambiguous expression of power corrupted by self-interest). Mani's trajectory from moral neutrality (0 when he first misuses the watch for personal amusement) to moral sacrifice (+5 when he abandons personal gain to restore ethical balance) constitutes the film's emotional and philosophical resolution. 24 demonstrates that double acting, deployed within a science-fiction framework and supported by sophisticated visual language, can

sustain genuinely complex intellectual and moral argument within a mainstream commercial film.

4.4 Mersal (2017): Double Acting as Social Critique
Atlee's Mersal represents the most ideologically complex deployment of double acting in the corpus, using a triple-role structure Vetri, Dr. Maaran, and the flashback patriarch Vetrimaaran to construct a revenge narrative that simultaneously functions as a critique of systemic corruption in the Indian healthcare sector. Each identity in Mersal functions not merely as a distinct character but as a distinct ideological force. Vetri embodies public rebellion: his role as a magician is a metaphor for the theatrical disruption of corrupt systems, using illusion and spectacle to expose what institutional power conceals. Dr. Maaran embodies rational institutional reform: his battles within the hospital system represent the attempt to change corrupt structures from within rather than by confronting them publicly. Vetrimaaran, the flashback patriarch whose death at the hands of medical negligence provides the moral origin of the entire revenge plot, embodies ethical integrity: he is the standard against which the present is measured and the wound who's healing the narrative seeks.

The screenplay's structural approach to double acting is more complex than in any of the other films. Rather than establishing dual identities early and sustaining audience awareness of them throughout, Mersal practises systematic delayed revelation: the connections between Vetri, Maaran, and Vetrimaaran are withheld and disclosed progressively, with each revelation requiring audiences to reinterpret all preceding scenes in a new light. This approach uses identity ambiguity not merely as a source of suspense but as a structural principle the fragmentation of identity across the narrative mirrors the fragmentation of justice across generations, and the gradual unification of the narrative reflects the gradual reconstitution of a just moral order.

The visual language of Mersal is the most systematically developed of the four films, with each character assigned a distinct colour palette, spatial register, and compositional logic. Vetri's sequences are rendered in warm reds, oranges, and golden tones associated with defiance, spectacle, and passion; he is typically framed in open, expansive compositions public stages, urban crowds that connote exposure and confrontation with power. Dr. Maaran inhabits a world

of cool blue-white clinical tones that connote rationality, professional integrity, and the constraints of institutional procedure; his spaces are enclosed and symmetrically framed, suggesting reform conducted within the system's own visual grammar. Vetrimaaran's flashback sequences are rendered in natural, unfiltered light that connotes moral authenticity and human dignity a visual counterpoint to the mediated and instrumentalised visual worlds inhabited by his successors.

The coded scene analysis rates Mersal's moral framework as consistently high in ethical seriousness, with the revelation of medical corruption scoring +4 and the final exposure of systemic wrongdoing scoring +5. Vigilante excess Vetri's abduction and interrogation of corrupt officials scores -2, a deliberate acknowledgment within the screenplay that justice pursued outside legal frameworks carries its own ethical costs. This nuance distinguishes Mersal from less sophisticated revenge narratives and reflects the screenplay's awareness of the moral complexity it is navigating. The metric analysis rates Mersal highest of the four films on narrative integration, character differentiation, plot complexity, and revelation effectiveness, confirming its status as the most mature

realisation of double acting as a narrative device in Tamil cinema.

V. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 The Evolution of Narrative Function

Across the four films, the narrative function of double acting undergoes a clear and consistent developmental trajectory. In Jeans, the dual role is supplementary to the narrative: it provides the mechanism for comedic confusion and delayed romantic resolution, but it does not determine the film's structural logic. In Maatran, the double role is constitutive of the narrative premise: the conjoined twin scenario cannot be removed from the story without destroying it entirely. In 24, triple roles are foundational: the entire causal system of the screenplay depends on three ethically differentiated versions of the same person interacting across time. In Mersal, the triple role becomes ideological infrastructure: the film's critique of institutional corruption requires multiple identities to embody different modes of resistance and different relationships to justice.

Parameter	Jeans (1998)	Maatran (2012)	24 (2016)	Mersal (2017)
Narrative function	Entertainment / comedy	Emotional depth	Conceptual / sci-fi	Ideological critique
Character differentiation	External (costume, hair)	Internal (personality)	Psychological + moral	Ideological + visual
Visual treatment	Practical editing	Seamless VFX	Advanced CGI	CGI + colour coding
Thematic depth	Superficial	Identity & sacrifice	Ethics of power	Social justice
Screenplay structure	Linear / comic	Linear / emotional	Multi-timeline	Non-linear / revelation
Moral framework	Benign deception	Sacrifice & solidarity	Responsibility vs greed	Justice vs corruption

5.2 Character Differentiation and Star Culture

The mechanisms through which Tamil screenwriters differentiate dual-role characters have grown markedly more sophisticated across the period under study. Jeans relies on immediately legible external markers costume, hairstyle, and situational context that allow audiences to track identities without demanding psychological engagement. Maatran, constrained by its unique physical premise, achieves differentiation primarily through dialogue and emotional micro-expression, requiring both the screenplay and the performance to carry the full

weight of individuation. In 24, differentiation is primarily psychological vocal rhythm, gestural economy, and ethical disposition establish distinct identities across characters who look identical but think, act, and value differently. Mersal achieves differentiation simultaneously at multiple levels: linguistic register (dialect, vocabulary, speech rhythm), professional behaviour, spatial location, emotional mode, and colour palette all operate in concert to establish three distinct ideological presences. Star culture mediates all four cases in ways that directly shape the screenplay's approach to

character design. In *Jeans*, the Prashanth persona required both twins to maintain romantic appeal and youthful charm the dual role amplifies the star's presence rather than complicating his image. In *Maatran* and *24*, Suriya's established image as a disciplined, emotionally engaged action hero is distributed across two or three characters who embody different facets of that image: in *Maatran*, one twin is more assertive while the other is more reflective, both qualities present in Suriya's established persona; in *24*, the three roles span the full range from heroic inventor to ruthless villain to immature young man finding his moral bearings. In *Mersal*, Vijay's dual public identity as mass entertainer and socially conscious advocate is structurally encoded in the screenplay: one character (Vetri) enacts the entertainer's theatrical flamboyance; another (Dr. Maaran) embodies civic responsibility and professional integrity. Star culture does not merely constrain the screenwriter's choices but actively generates the narrative possibilities of the dual role.

5.3 Visual Language as Narrative System

One of the study's central findings concerns the transformation of visual language from a practical necessity into a systematic narrative system. In *Jeans*, visual choices are genre-consistent bright, warm, accessible but not character-specific: both twins inhabit the same visual world, differentiated only by external costume markers. By *Mersal*, each character inhabits a distinct visual register, with colour palette, lighting design, spatial composition, and framing all encoding ideological position. This means that audiences receive character information through cinematography as much as through dialogue and action, distributing narrative weight across the full range of cinematic signification.

Frame composition has undergone a parallel evolution. In *Jeans*, symmetrical compositions are used primarily for comic timing, creating the spatial conditions for mistaken-identity humour. In *Maatran*, symmetrical and asymmetrical compositions track the emotional relationship between the twin's unity, tension, and eventual separation with the frame's spatial logic functioning as an emotional barometer. In *24*, asymmetric framing of Athreya communicates psychological instability and moral disorder before a single word of villain dialogue is spoken. In *Mersal*, the convergence composition of the climax where divided visual structures come together for the first

time enacts the screenplay's argument that justice requires both spectacular disruption and systemic reform. Frame composition, across these four films, has become a narrative tool as much as a visual one.

5.4 Ethical Dimensions and Social Commentary

The coded scene analysis reveals a consistent ethical evolution across the four films that mirrors their thematic development. *Jeans* treats deception as essentially harmless, with moral scores clustering near neutrality and the final revelation restoring ethical order without demanding moral reflection. *Maatran* introduces genuine ethical complexity through the surgery decision necessary but emotionally devastating and positions corporate negligence as a serious moral antagonist. *24* constructs a stark moral binary between responsible innovation and destructive greed, resolved through a young man's moral growth and self-sacrifice. *Mersal* acknowledges the ambiguity of vigilante justice while framing it as a response to institutional corruption so severe that it forecloses legitimate legal recourse.

This trajectory suggests that Tamil cinema has progressively used double acting as a vehicle for ethical inquiry as much as entertainment. The dual role, which began as a device for comedic confusion, has evolved into a structure for exploring moral complexity, social responsibility, and the relationship between individual agency and institutional power. The coexistence of multiple identities in a single film creates space for multiple ethical perspectives to be embodied simultaneously for the narrative to hold contrasting approaches to justice, responsibility, and identity in productive tension rather than resolving them prematurely.

VI. KEY FINDINGS

Finding 1: Evolution through three stages. Double acting in Tamil cinema has evolved through three discernible developmental stages: entertainment-driven (*Jeans*), emotionally complex (*Maatran*), and ideologically engaged (*24* and *Mersal*). Each stage reflects both the technological capabilities and the social concerns of its era, demonstrating that the device is not static but continuously responsive to its cultural context.

Finding 2: Increasing screenplay complexity. The screenplays of double-role Tamil films have grown

substantially more complex across the period studied. Simple linear narratives driven by situational confusion have given way to non-linear structures, multi-timeline causal systems, and carefully managed revelation strategies. Dual identity has shifted from a premise imposed on the screenplay to a structural principle organising it at every level.

Finding 3: Sophistication of character differentiation. Techniques for distinguishing dual characters have evolved from reliance on external visual markers (Jeans) to internal psychological and ideological differentiation (24, Mersal). This evolution reflects both advances in filmmaking technology and a growing recognition, at the screenplay level, that the dual role's narrative potential is maximised when characters are genuinely distinct in thought, motivation, and moral orientation rather than merely in appearance.

Finding 4: Frame composition as narrative tool. Frame composition has shifted from a purely visual and practical function to a significant narrative and ideological instrument. Lighting, colour palette, spatial arrangement, and symbolic framing now carry meaning that complements and extends the written screenplay, enabling filmmakers to communicate character identity and thematic argument at the level of the image rather than only through dialogue and action.

Finding 5: Star culture as creative constraint and opportunity. Tamil star culture remains a structuring force in dual-role screenwriting. The star's extradiegetic image, their established screen persona, fan expectations, and commercial positioning both constrain the screenwriter's choices and generate creative possibilities. The most successful double-role screenplays use the dual role to negotiate and expand the star's image, affirming established qualities while introducing new dimensions.

Finding 6: Ethical engagement and social commentary. Modern Tamil double-role films systematically use the device to engage with social and ethical questions: healthcare corruption, the ethics of technological power, the cost of autonomy, the relationship between individual resistance and systemic change. Commercial cinema has proven capable of sustaining serious ideological inquiry through the dual-role framework, suggesting that the device's cultural significance extends well beyond entertainment.

Finding 7: The primacy of the screenplay. Despite the significant role of advances in visual technology in enhancing the credibility and sophistication of dual-character interactions, the quality of the screenplay remains the foundational determinant of a double-role film's success. VFX can make two versions of the same actor more convincingly share a screen; it cannot supply the clearly differentiated characters, coherent causal logic, and thematic depth that make a dual-role narrative meaningful.

Finding 8: Audience expectation transformation. Audience expectations of double-role Tamil films have undergone significant transformation across the period studied. What was once received as a novelty and spectacle, the curiosity of seeing one actor play two roles is now expected to be grounded in psychological depth, thematic substance, and narrative logic. Films that satisfy both the visual and the intellectual-emotional dimensions of audience expectation, such as 24 and Mersal, have achieved the greatest critical and commercial recognition.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated, through systematic analysis of four Tamil films across four decades, that double acting is neither a static commercial formula nor a mere performative spectacle but an evolving and increasingly sophisticated narrative device with genuine aesthetic, thematic, and social dimensions. The trajectory from Jeans to Mersal, from comedic confusion to ideological critique, reflects a broader maturation of Tamil screenwriting practice in which the dual role has become a lens for examining questions of identity, justice, morality, and social power that matter beyond the cinema hall.

The study's most significant contribution is its methodological commitment to analysing double acting from the perspective of the screenplay rather than the performance. By examining how Tamil screenwriters design dual characters, integrate them into narrative structures, and deploy them in service of thematic argument, the research reveals dimensions of the technique that spectacle-centred or performance-centred analyses cannot access. The finding that visual language—framing, lighting, colour, spatial composition—has developed into an integral narrative system in modern Tamil double-role cinema is particularly significant, suggesting that the

collaboration between screenwriter and director in these films produces a more comprehensively unified work than is sometimes acknowledged in scholarship that treats writing and cinematography as separate domains. The relationship between double acting and Tamil star culture emerges as a creative dialectic rather than a simple commercial constraint. Stars generate narrative possibilities for the dual role their established personas create the conditions for meaningful character differentiation, amplification, and complication while the dual role in turn offers filmmakers opportunities to manage, expand, and occasionally subvert those personas. This dialectic is one of the most distinctive features of Tamil commercial cinema and deserves continued scholarly attention. The ethical dimension of double acting, tracked through the coded scene analysis, reveals that Tamil cinema has progressively used the device as a vehicle for moral inquiry. From the benign deceptions of Jeans to the systemic critique of Mersal, the dual role has become a structure for holding moral complexity for embodying contrasting approaches to justice, responsibility, and identity simultaneously without prematurely resolving the tensions between them. This capacity for ethical nuance within commercial entertainment is one of the most compelling aspects of Tamil cinema's tradition of double acting.

The limitations of this study are acknowledged: the analysis is restricted to four films, qualitative methods introduce interpretive subjectivity, and the focus on male-starred productions leaves female dual-role performances unexamined. Future research should extend the corpus to include older and more recent films, incorporate audience reception data, and develop the gender dimension of Tamil double-role cinema. Comparative studies across South Indian film industries examining how Telugu, Malayalam, and Kannada cinemas have deployed the device would further enrich understanding of regional variation within a shared broad tradition. In summary, double acting is Tamil cinema's most distinctive, durable, and intellectually generative narrative convention. Its continued evolution across the decades examined in this study attests to the creative vitality of Tamil screenwriting and to the industry's capacity to renew and deepen familiar conventions in response to changing cultural, technological, and social conditions. From the playful twins of Jeans to the

ideologically charged triple roles of Mersal, double acting has grown from a popular novelty into a mature narrative art form.

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