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THE EVOLUTION OF HEROISM AND MASCULINITY THROUGH MUSIC IN THE FILMS OF DIRECTOR LOKESH KANAGARAJ

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Abstract

This paper examines how music contributes to the construction and changing presentation of heroism and masculinity in selected films directed by Lokesh Kanagaraj. The study focuses on Maanagaram (2017), Kaithi (2019), Master (2021), Vikram (2022) and Leo (2023), considering songs, background score, recurring musical motifs, sound effects and the relationship between music and visual action. Using qualitative textual analysis, it explores how musical cues announce protagonists, intensify action, create collective excitement and shape audience expectations. The analysis identifies a movement from relatively restrained, tension-oriented sound worlds in the earlier films towards highly recognisable thematic cues and performance-centred musical moments in the later star-driven films. At the same time, the films complicate conventional masculinity through characters marked by vulnerability, fatherhood, guilt, responsibility, addiction, restraint and emotional attachment. Music does not simply celebrate physical power; it can also signal danger, moral ambiguity, loss and the costs of violence. The paper argues that Kanagaraj's cinema uses sound as a narrative language that both reinforces familiar Tamil action-hero conventions and creates space for more conflicted forms of masculinity. The study is interpretive and does not claim to measure audience response or represent all Tamil cinema.

Keywords: Tamil cinema, Lokesh Kanagaraj, film music, background score, heroism, masculinity, sound design, action genre

Introduction

Tamil cinema has long shaped popular ideas of the hero through the combined force of performance, dialogue, image, action and music. A protagonist's entry, a dramatic confrontation or a moment of sacrifice is rarely communicated through visuals alone.

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Musical themes, rhythmic patterns, vocal hooks and shifts in sound can give a character symbolic weight before the character speaks. Film music therefore functions not merely as entertainment but as a storytelling device through which power, emotion, social identity and moral position are made audible.

Lokesh Kanagaraj is a significant contemporary director whose films frequently combine crime, action, ensemble narratives and larger-than-life star performances. Across Maanagaram, Kaithi, Master, Vikram and Leo, music and sound help organise suspense, character identity and action. The films also offer different models of the male protagonist: the ordinary man drawn into danger, the father seeking his daughter, the flawed teacher confronting violence, the ageing operative returning to action and the family man whose concealed past resurfaces. These figures make it possible to study heroism as something more complex than physical dominance.

The musical authorship of the selected films also offers a useful comparative dimension. Maanagaram is associated with Javed Riaz's music, Kaithi with Sam C. S.'s score, and the later films Master, Vikram and Leo with Anirudh Ravichander's music. This changing set of collaborations makes it important not to describe the director's sound world as the work of one composer alone. The films nevertheless share an interest in using sound to shape anticipation, rhythm and character identity.

The research therefore studies the finished audiovisual texts while recognising the distinct contributions of composers, sound designers, editors and performers.

Introduction

The phrase 'heroism and masculinity' is used here to describe cinematic representations of courage, authority, physical strength, emotional control, responsibility and relationships with others. Masculinity is not treated as a fixed or universal identity. Instead, it is understood as a set of qualities that films construct through bodies, speech, action, sound and social relationships. A hero may display aggression in one scene and tenderness or fear in another. The score can underline this tension: forceful music may accompany a violent act, while a quieter passage may reveal the emotional burden behind it.

AIM and objectives

The main aim is to analyse how music shapes representations of heroism and masculinity in selected films directed by Lokesh Kanagaraj. The specific objectives are:

- To identify the narrative functions of songs, background score and recurring musical themes in the selected films.
- To examine how music signals hero entry, power, threat, vulnerability and transformation.
- To explore the relationship between musical intensity and different models of masculinity, including fatherhood,

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friendship, authority and emotional restraint.

- To compare the sound and music strategies across the selected films without assuming that all films use the same formula.
- Research questions
- How do songs and background score contribute to the construction of the central male hero?
- In what ways does music reinforce or complicate conventional ideas of masculine strength and dominance?
- How do musical strategies change across the selected films and their different narrative worlds?

Literature Review

Writing on Tamil cinema has shown that film is closely connected with popular culture, political identity and the formation of public figures. Baskaran's historical studies trace the development of Tamil cinema and its relationship with social change, performance traditions and public life (Baskaran, 1996; 2009). Pandian's study of M. G. Ramachandran demonstrates how screen images of the heroic male can become intertwined with political authority and popular identification (Pandian, 1992). These works provide a foundation for understanding why heroism in Tamil cinema carries meanings that extend beyond the plot of an individual film.

Velayutham's edited collection situates Tamil cinema within broader debates about industry, identity, audiences and cultural politics (Velayutham, 2008). Such scholarship cautions against treating Tamil films as isolated entertainment products. The image of the hero is shaped by genre conventions, star histories, social expectations and the circulation of film culture. However, the present study narrows the focus to the musical and sonic construction of heroism in one contemporary director's body of work.

The political and cultural history of the Tamil screen hero is relevant even when a contemporary film is not overtly political. Earlier star-centred traditions often presented the hero as a figure of protection, justice and moral certainty. Contemporary action cinema inherits some of these expectations but places them in narratives shaped by crime, institutional distrust, urban anxiety and transnational genre influences. A contemporary protagonist may be admired for courage while remaining ethically uncertain. Music becomes one of the ways the film manages this double position: the cue can invite excitement while the scene itself displays the destructive consequences of violence.

Studies of film sound offer a useful vocabulary for this enquiry. Chion (1994) explains that sound and image interact to create meaning: music can attach emotion to an image, guide attention, shape rhythm and influence how a scene is interpreted.

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A recurring musical phrase can become associated with a character or idea, while silence or a sudden reduction in sound may make a gesture or threat more noticeable. This approach is important for action cinema, where sound contributes to the perceived force of movement and impact.

Work on genre also helps explain the conventions within which action heroes operate. Gopalan (2002) examines the use of interruption, spectacle and action in Indian popular cinema, showing how action sequences can reorganise narrative time and audience attention. In this context, music may suspend ordinary dramatic flow and turn an entrance, fight or revelation into a set-piece. Dyer's discussion of star images (1998) is also relevant because the meaning of a screen hero is shaped not only by the character but by the cultural meanings attached to the performer. A musical theme may consequently function as both a character cue and a recognisable star cue.

Masculinity studies encourage attention to the contradictions within the heroic image. Rather than assuming that masculinity is simply toughness, this paper considers how films represent control, vulnerability, paternal care, loyalty, guilt and the use of violence. A character's ability to fight may be celebrated, questioned or shown as damaging. Music can help express these contradictions by shifting between energetic, threatening, solemn and intimate registers.

Research gap and conceptual approach

The cited scholarship establishes the importance of Tamil cinema's star culture, action conventions and audiovisual form. Yet a focused comparison of music's role in shaping masculinity across Kanagaraj's films offers a useful angle. This paper brings these strands together through three linked concepts: (1) musical identification - how a theme or song becomes associated with a character; (2) sonic power - how rhythm, volume, repetition and orchestration intensify authority or threat; and (3) emotional counterpoint - how music reveals vulnerability or moral conflict beneath the heroic surface. These concepts guide the analysis without reducing every cue to a single meaning.

A further distinction is made between a song as a complete musical number and a score cue embedded within dramatic action. A song may become an independent cultural object through audio releases, choreography, promotional videos and audience reuse. A background cue is more closely tied to the timing of a scene, although it may later become identifiable outside the film. Both can contribute to hero construction, but they do so through different modes of circulation. The paper considers these differences when discussing mass songs and recurring character themes.

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Selected film corpus

The study considers five feature films: Maanagaram (2017), Kaithi (2019), Master (2021), Vikram (2022) and Leo (2023). They provide a useful range of narrative structures and protagonist types. The earlier films foreground ensemble storytelling, survival and duty, while the later films place greater emphasis on star-centred musical moments and recognisable character motifs. The selection is purposive rather than exhaustive; it does not claim to cover every work associated with the director or the wider Tamil film industry.

The five films also allow the study to compare distinct narrative scales. Maanagaram is structured around intersecting lives in an urban environment; Kaithi builds much of its tension around a night-long rescue and transport mission; Master balances a school setting with a conflict involving organised crime; Vikram expands into a networked action narrative; and Leo places family identity beside a violent past. This variation is valuable because the function of music is partly determined by the story situation in which it appears.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive design based on close textual analysis of films and their soundtracks. The unit of analysis is not only the complete song but also the musical and sonic event within a scene: a character introduction, a transition, an action sequence, a moment of revelation or an emotional pause.

The method is appropriate because the research questions concern meaning, representation and audiovisual form rather than numerical audience behaviour.

Sources and sample

The primary sources are the five selected films and their released audio tracks or soundtrack materials where identifiable. The analysis attends to the music as heard in the film, since placement, editing and interaction with dialogue and effects can differ from listening to an isolated album track. Secondary sources include books and scholarship on Tamil cinema, film sound, genre and star image. Film credits are used to identify the director and music or score credits where relevant.

Analytical procedure

The analytical procedure is based on scene-level textual observation. Relevant sequences are grouped according to narrative function and compared across the corpus. For a final student submission, the researcher should view each selected film directly, note exact sequence timings and verify the described cues against the version of the film being studied. The analysis considered the following features:

- Placement: whether music accompanies an entrance, pursuit, fight, revelation, celebration or moment of reflection.
- Musical form: song, instrumental theme, recurring motif, rhythmic build, vocal refrain or deliberate reduction of music.

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- Sonic qualities: tempo and pulse, percussion, repetition, melodic contour, vocal texture, dynamics and the use of silence.
- Character meaning: whether the cue suggests confidence, authority, danger, uncertainty, care, grief or moral conflict.
- Audiovisual relation: how the score interacts with editing, camera movement, dialogue, sound effects and performance.

Scope and limitations

The study is limited to a small, purposive sample of five films and uses interpretive judgement. It does not include interviews with the director, composers, sound designers or viewers. It does not measure streaming numbers, box-office performance, social-media circulation or audience attitudes. Therefore, claims are made about the films' representational strategies, not about what every viewer feels or how all young audiences respond. Music credits and soundtrack versions can vary by release format; the analysis consequently distinguishes film-sequence function from claims about a single definitive recording.

The researcher also recognises that film music is collaborative. Composition, orchestration, sound design, mixing, editing, performance and choreography all contribute to the final sonic experience. The director's role is important, but musical meaning should not be attributed to the director alone.

The composers and other creative departments remain essential to the films' sound identities.

For analytical consistency, a cue was interpreted in relation to the scene before assigning it a thematic label. For example, a high-energy passage was not automatically coded as 'heroic'; its meaning depended on whether the sequence represented rescue, threat, celebration or intimidation. Similarly, a quiet passage was not automatically treated as vulnerability. Attention was paid to character action, dialogue, editing and the consequences shown in the narrative. This scene-first procedure helps avoid treating musical style as if it had a fixed meaning in every context.

Results and Thematic Findings

The preliminary comparative reading suggests that music in the selected films performs several recurring functions. It marks character identity, intensifies the physical experience of action, organises suspense and creates emotional contrast. The following themes describe interpretive patterns for close examination in the film texts; they are not statistical findings from a viewer survey and should be checked against scene-level notes from the researcher's own viewing.

Music as a signature of heroism

In the later films, recurring themes and highly recognisable musical passages help establish a character's presence. In Vikram, musical motifs associated with the central character and the wider criminal world contribute to a sense of scale and anticipation.

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In Leo, the use of recurring cues and prominent song moments helps construct the protagonist as both a family figure and a dangerous individual with a concealed history. Such music can work before the character acts: it prepares the viewer to interpret the entrance as significant. The cue therefore becomes a form of sonic identification.

This function is different from simply making a hero appear powerful. A theme can also create uncertainty: it may suggest that a character is feared, morally ambiguous or connected to a larger network of violence. The musical identity of a protagonist is consequently not always equivalent to uncomplicated admiration. In this sense, the recurring theme can operate as a warning as much as a celebration. It can prepare the viewer for a powerful character while also suggesting that the character's arrival will disturb the social order of the scene.

Action, rhythm and sonic power

Kaithi and Vikram use sound to sustain tension around movement, pursuit and confrontation. Rhythmic drive, low-frequency weight, repeated patterns and sudden changes in intensity can make action feel urgent and physically forceful. In Maanagaram, the urban ensemble structure places emphasis on movement through the city and intersecting destinies; sound contributes to suspense and momentum rather than relying solely on a single star-centred hero theme.

Across the corpus, music and sound effects help organise the viewer's attention and give action sequences a distinct pace. The contrast between sustained rhythmic propulsion and sudden pauses is especially important: a reduction in music can expose breathing, footsteps, impacts or dialogue, making a moment feel immediate. The alternation between density and relative quiet can therefore be as significant as loudness itself.

The mass song and public performance

Master's 'Vaathi Coming' and Leo's 'Naa Ready' illustrate how a song can operate as a public performance moment as well as a narrative element. The song sequence creates an atmosphere of collective participation, with rhythm, repetition, choreography and the star's screen presence reinforcing one another. These sequences connect the individual hero to a crowd or social space. They also show how masculinity can be staged as charisma and control over a shared performance environment, not only as physical victory in a fight. At the same time, the crowd's participation complicates the idea of solitary heroism. The hero's image is amplified through collective movement, group response and the social energy of the song. The sequence becomes a meeting point between film narrative and popular performance culture.

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Masculinity beyond physical strength

The protagonists are not uniformly invulnerable. Kaithi's Dilli is defined by the urgent responsibility of protecting his daughter and helping others, while Master presents a protagonist whose personal flaws complicate his authority as an educator and protector. Leo's family relationships place domestic identity beside the threat associated with the hero's past. These narrative features matter because they offer motives beyond dominance. Music that shifts from forceful action to restrained or emotionally charged passages can make care, fear, guilt and attachment part of the heroic image. This is important because vulnerability does not necessarily cancel the hero's strength. Instead, the films can represent strength as the ability to accept responsibility, endure uncertainty or protect someone who is dependent on the protagonist. Such qualities broaden the emotional vocabulary of the action hero.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings indicate that music is central to the construction of heroism in Lokesh Kanagaraj's selected films. It establishes character identity, amplifies action, creates anticipation and turns certain scenes into memorable set-pieces. The soundtracks also participate in the circulation of star image: a recognisable cue can carry meaning beyond the immediate scene because it links a character to a wider audiovisual identity. This supports the view that film sound is an active storytelling system rather than background decoration (Chion, 1994).

At the same time, the films complicate a narrow model of masculinity based only on physical strength. Their male protagonists are shaped by responsibility, family bonds, friendship, professional roles, personal flaws and unresolved histories. Dilli's fatherhood, JD's imperfection, and the family-facing identity presented in Leo reveal that the hero's emotional and social relationships are part of his construction. The musical design can intensify masculine power while also making room for vulnerability and moral uncertainty. The result is not a complete rejection of the mass hero, but a more layered version of that figure. The music's meaning is therefore relational: it emerges from the conjunction of the sound cue, the character's actions, the star's established image and the viewer's knowledge of the story. A triumphant cue may sound celebratory in one context and unsettling in another when the narrative foregrounds the cost of violence.

A comparison across the five films suggests a shift in emphasis. Maanagaram and Kaithi use sound strongly in support of ensemble tension, survival and narrative propulsion. Master, Vikram and Leo make more overt use of star-centred songs, signature cues and large-scale musical set-pieces. This should not be read as a simple linear evolution in which later films are necessarily more sophisticated. Rather, the differences reflect changes in narrative design, performer image and the role assigned to music within each film.

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In conclusion, music in Kanagaraj's cinema helps define what the hero sounds like, how his power is recognised and where that power becomes emotionally complicated. Heroism emerges through the interaction of score, song, sound effects, performance and narrative context. Future research could extend this study through interviews with composers and sound teams, detailed shot-by-shot sound analysis, or audience research across age groups. Such work would help distinguish textual interpretation from actual patterns of reception. It could also compare different musical departments and investigate how songs move between theatrical exhibition, streaming platforms, fan edits and short-form video. These forms of circulation may alter the relationship between a film's original dramatic context and the way a musical cue is remembered in popular culture.

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