

Constructing A Universal Star: The Intersection Of Cine-Politics And Comradery Capital In Kamal Haasan's Cinema

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9. Constructing a Universal Star: The Intersection of Cine-politics and Comradery

Capital in Kamal Haasan's Cinema

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Introduction

Kamal Haasan is established as the most versatile figure in the Tamil film industry of South India. Haasan has a prolific career which spans more than fifty active years in the world of cinema and a star body that renders consistency, experimentality, and provocativeness. A quick journey through his oeuvre reveals the contributions of his role as an actor on-screen and a writer, director and producer off-screen. His work has given him the honour of four National Awards for acting and a reputation of representing Indian submissions to the Academy Awards seven times - for nearly half the age of the Indian film industry. The visibility of the celebrity status of Haasan is notorious as much as it is renowned and it can specifically be termed as an “artistic notoriety” thanks to his voracious and exceptionally unconventional pursuits for creativity and originality. Although strictly identified as a Tamil actor, his engagements with Hindi, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada film industries gave him the status of an Indian star whose image is that of a national icon.

Comradery capital refers to the value generated from the way celebrities present their friendships and interactions with each other, particularly in public settings. In India, film stars often emerge to project a popular image that establishes a collective emotional bond with the masses. The stardom and celebrity branding of popular Indian stars are a result of constructing a star-fan relationship through which stars expand their artistic career and public image to new heights. The concept of comradery capital in the Indian cinematic context can be used to understand how a star is commodified through the sense of multiplicities that attract a range of audiences. Kamal Haasan's stardom and career exemplify this idea as his extensive body of work and multifaceted persona have created a strong sense of community among his fans and

followers. His films often address social issues and cultural themes that resonate deeply with the Indian audience, thereby fostering a collective identity and shared experiences. Haasan's career highlights how comradery capital can be built through a combination of artistic excellence, cultural relevance, and active participation in societal discourse.

This chapter examines the multifaceted persona of Kamal Haasan, exploring his evolution from a regional icon to a transnational star, through the lens of comradery capital. It analyses how Haasan shaped his star image within his Tamil Nadu fan base, where fans, communities, and fellow actors affectionately call him *Ulaka Nayakan* (Universal Star) as a sign of respect and comradery. This chapter argues that Haasan's construction of his popular image denotes his versatility that appeals to a diverse audience, enhanced by his roles as actor, director, producer, and political figure. His unconventional cinematic endeavours have not only challenged traditional societal norms but also contributed to the commodification of his celebrity status, transforming him into a modern auteur.

Haasan's embodiment of fluid corporeality that reflects global gender norms and political identities often transcends gender and mythical archetypes, disrupting established narratives. By uprooting historical and cultural texts and deconstructing their established origins, Haasan crafts a unique star persona that resonates with a broad audience. Haasan's comradery capital, formed through the emotional and ideological bond he fosters with his audience, is pivotal in his cine-political strategy. In South Indian cinema, Haasan emerges as a star-politician who commodifies his star-actor-political image. The foundation of his political party, "Makkal Needhi Maiam" (Centre for People's Justice), exemplifies this commodification, elevating his celebrity dynamics and reinforcing his connection with his fans. Haasan's influence extends beyond the screen through this comradery capital, solidifying his status as a powerful and multifaceted figure in Tamil cinema.

Kamal as *Nayakan*: Comradery Cine-politics in Tamil Cinema

The rise of Kamal Haasan through political and historical narratives is an important aspect of his star discourse and celebrity stature. The construction of the celebrity star in south India is part of the “cine-politics” that operates as a communicative cross-over between society and cinema where an actor is made to “communicate through other channels than the films” or “parallel to the diegetic content of the narrative” (Prasad 2014: 142). This is why the figures of M.G. Ramachandran (MGR), N.T. Rama Rao (NTR), Rajkumar, and Jayalalithaa are “understood as ‘roles’ or personas who extend beyond the film text into the socio-political in unprecedented ways” (Hutnyk 2018: 3). However, what makes Kamal Haasan different is the way he involves himself in narratives; as an actor-filmmaker in the cinematic as well as a politician-figure in the public. The political narratives of Kamal’s films tend to always make a statement on specific issues in which the ordinary viewer is involved in a direct way. These films deal with the corruption of societies and the deterioration of competent government and justice systems; themes that ultimately lead to the trope of introducing a saviour-type hero (Dickey 1993: 127).

Comradery capital and celebrity branding intertwine in modern consumer culture and media discourses where the construction of a collective affinity toward a product or an individual affects its marketability. Here, Kamal adopts a strategy that pleases both the audience who see him as a star-actor and himself as an artist. His films reconstruct historical figures, events and data to reintroduce the *political* to the cinematic medium for a critical dissection and evaluation. Such films contain a mass hero who is visualized as someone the audience can trust and follow, but at the same time the actor/filmmaker (here, Kamal Haasan) can intervene in the narrative to assert a particular opinion. For instance, the 1987 Mani Ratnam film *Nayakan* (Hero) uses the political and artistic body of Haasan as its diegetic focus. The film’s story is based on the real life of Varadarajan Mudaliar aka Varadha Bhai who reigned

upon Mumbai with his network of gangsters (Julia 2005: 216). Maudaliar's historical body is cinematized through the character Velu Naicker (Kamal Haasan), and the film revolves around his journey through the dangerous Dharavi slums of Mumbai, establishing him as a 'Nayakan' (hero/leader/godfather) among the minority slum residents of Tamil ethnicity. The film is widely regarded as a south Indian adaptation of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) through Kamal Haasan's imitation of Marlon Brando and the film's extensive borrowing from the style of Hollywood gangster films.

In *Nayakan*, Velu's transformation into a hero image is portrayed in the film as a protector/saviour of Dravidian¹ cultural ethos, and his resistance against authority is incorporated into the narrative as a typical 'Tamil' response to the 'Hindi' dominated Bollywood and its politics. Madhava Prasad's (1999) idea of cine-politics emphasizes the authority of a star and its relation to films that represent a particular linguistic community. The reading of Kamal's body as an enforcement of Tamil political identity is central to its star construction. Rajadhyaksha and Willemen note that the film is more than a Hollywood imitation; it incorporates decades of Tamil Nadu's star-politician imagery and appeals to Tamil anti-Hindi sentiments. Notably, it features a popular scene where Velu, after being beaten, responds in Tamil to a Hindi-speaking cop. The film's latter half shifts from Bombay to Madras for the climax (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1999: 480).

Nayakan chiefly contributed to the construction of Kamal Haasan's stardom as a political, ethnic, and cultural 'mass hero' who explicitly espouses controversial and subversive political narratives. The climax of the film presents Velu's release from judicial custody, his arrival to an emotional and supportive crowd gathered at the courthouse, followed by his unexpected death in the streets. The film returns to where it started its narration - the streets of Tamil Nadu - and here, the valorization of Kamal's body as a political signifier is restored in a localized scenario. According to film scholar S. V. Srinivas (2006), this narrative device places

the spectator within “a space endowed with linguistic, cultural and civilizational valence. Therefore, the foundations of South Indian cine-politics lie in the *production of the local*” (Srinivas 2006: 36). *Nayakan* helped Mani Ratnam to establish himself as a major filmmaker in India and the films that followed it reduced the gap of aesthetics in Tamil cinema as a regional cinema and blended its stylistic approach to that of Bombay cinema (national cinema) (Velayutham 2008). In the case of Kamal Haasan, his star production is beyond the structures of the local but has the quality of an international stature being localized. *Nayakan* blends melodrama and music, violence and comedy, realism, and delirium to fix a ‘Tamilized’ gangster figure in a Hollywoodized structure. The film’s reputation as one of the best productions from Indian cinema² is its actor-centric approach to manufacture a film that succeeds the limitations of the local.

Star Branding of Kamal Haasan in Indian Cinema

The popularity of South Indian actors is defined by a range of signifiers and concepts such as stardom, mass-film, and fandom. In all these aspects of South Indian cinema, the stardom of Kamal Haasan has emerged as a platform where he lets himself become a subject of his own experimentation. To divert from the fixed coordinates of hero-construction to break stereotyping, an actor is required to possess a flexible star body and its variations must open new narratives of cinematic perception. Gledhill (1991) argues that the essence of an actor’s performance is measured by the extent to which the desire of the character is reflected in his/her body language. Wyatt (2006) posits that stardom emerges from the act of monopolising “a unique set of individual characteristics” among which, the physical aspects of the star body are exceptionally significant (31). Using the flexibility of his body as a source for engendering a multiplicity of meanings is therefore a recurring narrative rhetoric of Kamal’s films.

Bodies are susceptible to contexts and their change; they are “processes continually moving” (Coleman 2009: 1) and “multiplicities that are never just found but made and remade”

(Budgeon 2003: 50). The early establishment of Kamal Haasan's stardom is associated with his role in films that use his young and non-masculine body as a romantic ideal for expressing a traditional south Indian imaginative sexuality and gender fluidity expressions. Traces of such an artistic double performativity of bodies can be found in the traditional Indian context. The concept of Indian mythical androgyny (*Ardhanarishvara*) could be connected to the acting ideologies of Kamal Haasan. The *Ardhanarishvara* myth offers the image of a godly figure called 'Ardhanarishvara' or 'The Lord Who is Half Woman' (a form of Shiva whose left half is the goddess Parvati or Shakti) with both feminine and masculine characteristics, and is often equated as a figurative idealization of perfection (Jones and Ryan 2007: 43)

The theorization of stars does not consider them as individual actors but certain "types" that predetermine a specific conception about their bodies and such a type always "exists alongside the character she/he has created, as an ur-text" (Gopinath 2017). The type of gender performativity executed by the body of Haasan is layered with these myths about an equal, yet constantly fluctuating identity transformation. This *Ardhanarishvara* binary does not limit the actor within the makeovers or masquerades but expands his textual control through roles that illustrate his underlying "performance" over the body. Haasan transcended the role of an actor to construct a directorial self-space, wherein his ideologies and principles, articulated through his films, engage with and embody the sensual dimensions of cinematic experience (Barker 2009: 92).

Haasan's *Ardhanarishvara* idealisation is a form of mythological resurrection that amounts to the visualisation of gender fluidity on screen. Kamal Haasan has realized this in several films in which he played both feminine and masculine sides interchangeably or simultaneously. Films like *Avvai Shanmugi* (1996), *Dasavathaaram* (2008), *Indian* (1996), and *Manmadha Leelai* (1976) are a few examples that illustrate this.

The development of stardom turns an individual into a marketable commodity in which a new power of communication is possible between the star and the audience and it is “independent of the vehicles in which they appeared” (Turner 2004: 15). The uniqueness of the celebrity is something that makes them “well known for their well-knownness” (Boorstin 1971: 58). This is to note that the notoriety of Haasan’s celebrity status not only accentuates his authority over the cinematic medium but his ability to transgress borders to connect conflicting and contradicting ideologies and imaginations with the audience. He does this in a purely experimental way which is explicitly political and often highly critical of the normative functionalities of social and cultural hegemonic orders of the regional Tamil public space.

The political intervention of Kamal Haasan as an actor shows his artistic flexibility to adapt stories outside the purview of mainstream social focus. Many of his challenging roles are characters who are marginalized in some way, and their representations in films always make political statements. These narratives allow Haasan as an actor or director to politicize events and texts of historical and contemporary significance to a fictional modality of cinema to reveal his underlying intentions as a deeply non-conformist filmmaker. For example, the bilingual religious and political film *Hey Ram* (2000), directed by Haasan himself, was a controversial attempt to manoeuvre history with its own interpretation. It depicted the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, the most important historical event in modern Indian history, and is based on the politics of pre-Independent and post-Independent India, where the focus is on the aggression of the Hindus towards Mahatma Gandhi and the Partition of India and Pakistan. In the film, the story of the protagonist Saket Ram (Kamal Haasan) is mirrored with the life of Nathuram Godse, Gandhi’s assassin, to reconstruct the historical violence through the point-of-view of the perpetrator. The film was a vehicle for the reinvention of memories by reconstituting and reinterpreting events as cinematic texts. Vyjayanthi Rao (2011) argues that the protagonist embodies both historical and contemporary ideologies, blending Gandhian

ethics with modern nationalism, and as a passive observer of unfolding events, the audience is left to interpret the historical context through the film's vivid portrayal of violence (390).

In *Avvai Shanmugi*, which is an adaptation of the Hollywood comedy *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1982), Haasan played the role of a Tamil *paatti* (old woman/grandmother) named Shanmugi. Through the masquerade of Shanmugi, Haasan produced a “female-centric action comedy”, and his efforts to undergo physical transformations to ‘become’ the character was quite remarkable, especially reports say that he patiently waited for more than five hours to make a perfect shot (Srinivasan 1997). Many of Kamal's films deal with the actor/filmmaker's direct and deliberate intervention in the political dimensions of the plot by unconventional ways that are explicitly violations of the generic heroic narratives. Like the dwarf-hero in *Apoorva Sagodharargal* (1989), the ‘female hero’ in *Avvai Shanmugi*, a senior citizen vigilante in his double-rolled *Indian*, a mentally challenged lover in *Guna* (1991), a gangster in *Nayakan*, and a terrorist in *Unnaiyol Oruvan* (2009), all these hero-constructions are mixed with a multitude of temperaments and appearances which are often unsuitable for a traditional hero figure, and therefore fundamentally iconoclastic. This also made Kamal to be treated as a “universal star” among the superstars of Tamil cinema, and oftentimes fans seeing his stardom as something that cannot be imitated or followed.

Kamal's willingness to go through physical transformations of his star body is evidence of his evolution as a star of his own, an author of his own and an *auteur* of his own. S. V. Srinivas (2016) opines that *Indian* (1996) “introduced the blockbuster and the south Indian superstar to each other” and observes that Kamal Haasan has “the most impressive range of stories—and the least formulaic ones—to his credit” (14). It used Haasan as a vehicle to articulate a nationalist hero in its narrative who is an ‘old man’ ready to go to any extremes to annihilate ‘subjects’ that are threats to a just and egalitarian society; this includes killing his son. Using prosthetic make-up, Haasan's physical transformation in the film and the action

sequences together enunciate a strange use of mise-en-scène to construct an unfamiliar ‘hero’. In this sense, the heroes of Kamal Haasan are mass heroes who defy the genre of political mass films in south India³.

Haasan chooses experimental approaches in his films to enforce an idea about how cultural and religious stresses affect education and fundamental rights in a democratic, yet deeply traditional Indian society. His experimentations reflect his inquisitiveness as an artist to outperform himself as a performer and maker of cinema rather than a mere star or celebrity. This is a different form of stardom in Tamil cinema, or even in the wholeness of Indian cinema is unknown to such an effective persuasion of an individual artistic quest for experimentation. This brings much attention to the qualities of Haasan’s authorship in cinema as an actor and director. The classical *auteur* theory generally considers the director as the author of the film and the director’s complete discretion is emphasized over anything. However, today’s post-structuralist discourses dismiss this approach through different points of view that eliminate the monolithic concept of the author. The ‘death of the author’ argument further advocates for the search for multiple authors who contribute to a dialogic cinematic discourse; they must account the author as an organiser of “pre-existing voices, ideologies, and discourses, without losing an overall shaping role” (Stam 2000: 6). For Kamal Haasan, this “overall shaping role” of an *auteur* is a continuously shifting one; between the roles of Haasan as a star-actor, filmmaker and a conscious participant in political matters.

Kamal as *Ulaka Nayakan*: The Marketing of a ‘Universal Star’

Kamal Haasan’s star branding in Indian cinema is associated with his identity as an exceptional star, extending beyond traditional fan engagements to encompass a multifaceted network of events, performances, and collaborative efforts within the industry. Events and star nights serve as platforms for Haasan's charismatic performances while marketing promotional and publicity events strategically enhance his public image and reach. Public appearances and rhetorical

gestures further solidify his connection with audiences, employing non-verbal communication to convey his ideologies and values. Collectivism and collaboration among industry peers operate as a pressure group, forming a hidden cartel of stardom that elevates Haasan's stature and maintains his star value. This collective effort is complementary, contributing to his enduring star status, marked by hallmark respect, love, and comradeship within the industry.

In the film *Thevar Magan* (1992), Haasan acts with Sivaji Ganesan, one of the most important actors in Tamil cinema's yesteryears. His performance in the film and its transformative politics are observed as a 'tribute' to the legacy of veteran actor Sivaji Ganesan and concentrate its "focus of a neo-traditionalist discourse valorising fundamentalism along with the star's screen image" (Rajadhyaksha and Willemsen 1999: 511). The film clashes with the traditional and modern aspects of the star in a single text, which as a result ends up in a transformation that imitates, expels, and adapts a new model of the star; the continuities and discontinuities merging on the single star-body of Haasan. It is remarkable that Haasan followed the path of Sivaji Ganesan in terms of acting excellence while Rajinikanth, his star rival, on the other hand followed the path of another megastar, M. G. Ramachandran. While Rajinikanth is more of a 'people's star' who enjoys repeating his stylized roles for the masses, Kamal's focus is on the ways in which he can perform acts that challenge the pasts of history.

The prevalence of fan wars and sensationalism in Tamil cinema on social media often lead to heated debates and inflated box-office figures. The relationship between Rajinikanth and Kamal Haasan as both artistic rivals and friends emphasizes the comradeship that brands the popular cinematic discourse of Tamil cinema and its star and fan-based marketing strategies. Rajinikanth considers Kamal Haasan both his biggest rival and closest friend, although there's an underlying tension stemming from their early roles, notably when Rajinikanth played a villain opposite Kamal Haasan's hero in *Apoorva Raagangal* (Jha 2022). Their on-screen rivalry and off-screen mutual respect fuel their fans' intense rivalry, and the construction of a

dichotomous star structure creates a competitive setting in which both actors and their fans attempt to outshine the other, thereby making new experiments and products in the media market. The friendship between such actors is significant to make the competition healthy and complimentary which is mutually beneficial for the cinema industry. Haasan's and Rajinikanth's ability to coexist peacefully sets them apart from their predecessors, emphasizing the importance of unity in an industry often driven by division (Srivatsan 2019).

Whenever Rajnikant and Kamal Haasan appear together in the public, they explicitly show their admiration and love for each other (Times of India 2022). Pictures of their meetups often break the internet and fans root for their 'legendary friendship', expressing their elation by leaving comments such as: "Two legends together", and "Decades may pass but the love they have for each other remains the same. Lucky to witness such Legendary Friendship" (The Indian Express 2023). During the audio and trailer launch event for his film *Vikram*, Haasan reflected on his enduring camaraderie spanning over four decades with Rajinikanth (Kumar 2022). He emphasized that his constructive rivalry with colleagues, both in the film industry and politics, will persist, stating that he trusts his friends to maintain their maturity by not allowing political disparities to tarnish their friendships.

Kamal Haasan's reputation as an experimental filmmaker is also his marketability as a bankable star. Often, audiences have disproportionate opinions regarding the consumption of his star image as a typical local Dravidian hero with which the popular fandom of Tamil cinema is accustomed. Instead, Haasan resonates with a star body that can be gazed at as a culmination of everything typically impossible in Indian cinema. This makes Kamal look like an international celebrity, the 'Universal Star', a title translated in Tamil as *Ulaka Nayakan*. The *Ulaka Nayakan statue* of Haasan is primarily constructed around his experimental films that refer to international/universal themes. This was explicitly used in the 2008 film *Dasavathaaram*, in which Haasan appeared in ten different characters, and has a tribute song

called *Ulaka Naayakane* (O, Universal Star!), an ode that celebrates his star image by showcasing the film's behind-the-screen actor-to-character transformations. The methods adopted by Hassan in his acting are textbooks not only for Indian cinema but for film aficionados elsewhere in the world; Hollywood filmmaker Quentin Tarantino citing *Aalavandhan* (2001) as an inspiration for the aesthetics of *Kill Bill: Volume I* (2003) is one such example (Janani 2020).

Dasavathaaram was a dream project of Hassan that not only portrayed a variety of characters played by a single actor but touched on international themes such as disaster, bio-war, and terrorism in the Indian cultural scenario. Haasan even portrayed then-American President George W. Bush alongside nine other individuals from different periods, genders, ages, languages, cultures, races, religions, and castes. The film draws on the *Dasavathara* story of Hindu mythology and reconstructs it in the modern era. This compared Haasan with the role of the Hindu God Vishnu and His ten incarnations (Avatars) in the modern era of globalization. The mythical transformation from the *Ardhanarisvara* to the *Dasavathara* is an exponential growth of a star body in terms of its expansion to more possibilities; it is Haasan's star transformation from his first major protagonist Prasanna to the portrayal of an international political figure like George W. Bush.

Besides this, Haasan's political image was too iconoclastic for the regional cultural fabric of Tamil politics, and it often violated the essentialism of traditional belief systems and practices. An atheist and an open critic of religion, Haasan frequently intervened to criticize the political use of religious sentiments to limit freedom and explicitly questioned it in some of his films like *Unnal Mudiyum Thambhi* (1988), *Dasavathaaram* (2008), and *Anbe Sivam* (2003). His recent films like *Vishwaroopam* (2013) and *Vishwaroopam II* (2018) deal with international terrorism and its relationship with religion and nation. Haasan is ultimately

perceived as an artist who makes Indian films with an international sense of craftsmanship to disturb the regionality of Tamil cinema, and he is arguably the only Indian filmmaker to do so.

Despite being progressive and active in public discourses, Haasan's ideological imaginations often collided with his attempts to form the celebrity image of an actor-politician. He founded his political party Makkal Needhi Maiam (Centre for Justice) in 2018 and contested in elections, but failed to win any assembly seats. According to Drake and Higgins (2006), the phenomenon of the "celebritization of politics"- "the re-framing of political debate through celebrity discourse"- is defined by "the *particular* celebrity, the mode of performance they adopt, their earlier image, and the political claims that they make" (99-100). Since the performative function of Haasan's stardom is maintained by his unconventionally radical approaches to cinema and public life, the public reception of his political image was out of order with existing populist conceptualizations. The rational attitude of Haasan explicitly disregarded the popular religious worldview of Tamil culture, and his appearance as a fair romantic ideal body further rejected an indigenous Dravidian symbolization. The image worship of film stars in Tamil Nadu is a normalized and repeated act, and it must be viewed as part of Tamil cinema's important functioning as a medium of cultural expression (Selvan and Brindha 2020). Kamal's political ideology envisions the ideal practice of values such as freedom, equality, secularism and harmony, but when he speaks to a culturally sensitive population with heterogeneous perspectives and motives, there emerges a conflict between his cinematic performance and political performance. The result of him being an embodiment of universal idealizations, is a form of alienation to his celebrity status in real regional political context. Here, the cinematic body of Haasan does not align with his political persona to generate a mass appeal among his fans because the cine-politics is not just about the star value of a celebrity. Hutnyk (2018) observes that:

The cine-political is not star charisma at the ballot box, nor is it a propaganda vehicle, but a moment in the history of cinema when specific audiences have been prepared to follow the leadership of on-screen political investments orchestrated by adept political operatives—and then act to consecrate such figures as leaders (3)

However, despite these setbacks, Haasan exemplifies community engagement through social activities, charities, and collective actions, fostering a sense of camaraderie within the industry. Haasan's role as a patron saint for upcoming talents underscores his commitment to nurturing the next generation of stars while retaining his own stardom. Haasan actively engages in collective initiatives like *Nadikar Sangham* (South Indian Artists' Association), South India Superstar gatherings, award ceremonies, as well as welfare programs and social audits, reinforcing his influence despite his political ambitions. Social activism further distinguishes Haasan, as he champions civil society movements, advocates for social justice, secularism, cultural heritage, and gender equality, aligning his star power with meaningful societal change.

The star studies of South Indian actors generally focus on how they become a locus point where expressions of Indigenous cultural identities and politics operate as opposed to the conflicting national and international signifiers of language, identity, art, and politics. Since Westernized discourses on Indian cinema belittle such regional cinemas as “low art forms” (Murthy et al. 2015), Tamil cinema’s popular trope of using a monolithic heroic figure can be observed as part of its entrenched “spectacle spaces”, which are “other spaces”/ “heterotopias” that package “an ‘exotic culture’ in an ‘exterior’ space” (Leonard 2015: 159-60). Such spaces are sustained by local fans and followers ritualistically worshipping their favourite celebrity stars who often gain popularity beyond their original cultural ground. Kamal Haasan’s 2018 speech at Harvard contained criticisms and visions about Tamil Nadu politics⁴; an endeavour that not many Indian celebrities are capable of doing. Not reluctant to express his opinions to a global audience, he actively departed from the conservative position of contemporary stars.

Therefore, having a transnational stardom, Haasan satisfies the proposition that “the term, ‘Cinemas of South India’,... does not carry an essentialized identity of being a ‘South Indian’” (Prakash 2010: 17). Here, the versatile and unconventional star-text of Kamal Haasan becomes a controversial exemplification of a non-essentialized celebrity figure in Tamil cinema. He incorporates experimented cinematic realities with politically contradicting multitudes to express his progressive and intellectual attitudes to a fundamentally traditional fandom of South India.

Conclusion

Kamal Haasan’s illustrious career spanning decades has earned him a devoted fan base, transcending regional and cultural boundaries. The vulnerability of his body is an essential source of his performance as an actor, director, screenwriter, producer, dancer, choreographer, and so on. His ability to adapt to any transformation or thematic integration to express his agency as an *auteur* of experimental filmmaking is evidence of why he can assert historical re-representations and political reassertions into the medium of cinema. Haasan uses this medium to explore the infinite possibilities of making cinema by directly and fearlessly engaging with searing issues of culture, religion, politics, law and matters concerning the nation. His ability to portray diverse characters with depth and nuance has cultivated a strong sense of comradeship among his admirers, who resonate with his multifaceted performances and artistic integrity. As a celebrity brand, Kamal Haasan embodies authenticity and credibility, qualities that have made him an influential figure both in the entertainment industry and beyond. His foray into politics further amplifies his brand, as he champions social causes and engages with issues of public concern, garnering support and admiration from his followers. The synergy between comradeship capital and Kamal Haasan’s celebrity branding underscores the profound connection he shares with his audience, shaping perceptions and fostering enduring loyalty. Haasan is a figure of controversy, an iconoclastic celebrity *auteur* and a popular politician, who

takes up issues of historical and contemporary significance to the point of modern deconstructions and constantly gets involved in the process of reinventing his image in terms of a hero, star, and celebrity.

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Notes

¹ The Dravidian cultural ethos refers to the distinctive cultural, linguistic, and social characteristics of the Dravidian peoples, predominantly inhabiting the southern part of India, including the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh.

² *Nayakan* was included in *TIME Magazine*'s list of "All-Time 100 Movies" (Corliss 2010). The film was also India's official entry into the 60th Academy Awards.

³ Mass films are generally popular commercial films made for the masses and they contain constructs that are intended to please populist notions and collective spectatorship. For a detailed study, see Srinivas (2009).

⁴ Kamal Haasan addressed students at the India Conference, held at Harvard in 2018. He appeared in traditional attire and spoke about the "mediocrity" that plagues the current Tamil Nadu politics to emphasize his desire for radical changes. See (Haasan, 2018b) for the speech. For the full text of the speech, see (Haasan, 2018a).