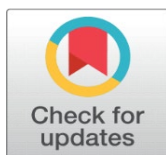
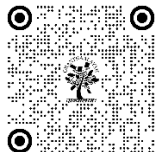


# ARRIVAL OF COMPLEX TV IN TAMIL OTT SERIES: A STUDY OF SUZHAL - THE VORTEX

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## ABSTRACT

The world of visual storytelling has taken many forms over the last century. The narrative approaches have constantly changed along with advancement of technology. This study attempts to look at how the 21st century's prominent technological advancement, the internet, has influenced the script writing process and narrative techniques of television series. Using the poetics of complex TV, a textual analysis of the pilot episode of Suzhal - The Vortex was conducted. It is seen that the quintessential complex TV elements such as ambiguity, use of the anti-hero, and multiple plots, which existed in the West, have started to manifest in Tamil OTT series, with Suzhal - The Vortex serving as a microcosm of a larger trend.

**Keywords:** Complex Narrative, Complex TV, Poetics of Cinema, Tamil OTT Series, Streaming Services

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. OVERVIEW

With the arrival of any technology, the form of a media text undergoes radical changes. Every technology offers a new range of possibilities in which a story can be told. Creators have been able to push the boundaries of storytelling with new innovative approaches as and when a technology emerges. What has the late 20th century's prominent technology the internet brought to the capabilities of storytelling? What kind of potential did it come with? How have creators taken advantage of the new media technology to create new approaches to storytelling?

This paper tries to investigate these questions by tracing the evolution of television shows after the advent of streaming services. It also explores whether the aspect of quality TV has reached the Tamil OTT services or not by considering the parameters created for complex TV and ascertaining its presence in the Tamil OTT series, [Suzhal - The Vortex \(2022\)](#).

## **1.2. THE EVOLUTION OF QUALITY TV**

The term quality TV was coined by TV critics in the United States of America in the 1970s after the critical reception of shows like Hill Street blues and Rich man, Poor man. It was not clearly defined what the term meant but people seemed to identify it when they watched it [Thompson \(1996\)](#). [Cardwell \(2007\)](#) explains it as television content which is marked by its high production values, sophisticated themes, and meticulous characterization and performances. It also carries the specific contribution of an author, who adds a unique stylistic approach and an artistic integrity. The concept of quality television is also defined by what it is not in comparison to conventional television. This is best epitomized in HBO's slogan - 'It is not TV, it is HBO' [Schluetz \(2017\)](#).

The term 'quality TV' is understood as a specification of television content which was not limited by the traditional and conventional television. Quality TV produced complex content which was labyrinthine, puzzling, and elaborate [Buckland \(2009\)](#). It demanded ambitious subject matter with high aesthetics and as a result attracted specific target groups. Television shows became both art and merchandise. Quality TV became a brand for the distributors and provided various genre choices to the audience. These changes were the by-product of a transformation that American television went through. These changes influenced the production, distribution, marketing, media use, and reception of the content.

## **1.3. CHARACTERISTICS OF QUALITY TV SEEN IN CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION SERIALS IN THE WEST**

The evolution of technology, audience, and the television landscape created an impetus for high quality television serials like Breaking bad (2008-13), Game of thrones (2011-19), and House of cards (2013-2018) in the USA. These shows are considered highly innovative, both in their content and form. They challenged the viewing habits of audiences and demanded complete involvement with the story narrative in order to understand and enjoy the content. These serials established new ground where old television customs, narrative structure, genre expectations were constantly challenged which led to the development of a unique set of characteristics which were often associated with quality TV [Schluetz \(2017\)](#). There are identifiable and distinctive characteristics of quality TV.

### **1.3.1. COMPLEXITY**

[Schluetz \(2017\)](#) states that the core element of quality TV is narrative complexity. It is a unique storytelling aspect which combines the technique of series and serials and thus develops a flexi-narrative which is complex in nature. A multi-folded narrative which combines digressing story lines, an ensemble cast, and a sequence that allows continuous storytelling and gradual character development. Quality serials also have an extended reference structure. It overflows from the primary media text across other platforms creating a longer and more immersive experience [Brooker \(2001\)](#) as cited in [Schluetz \(2017\)](#).

One of the examples would be the 'The Lost experience' Artificial and Virtual Reality game. This game was inspired by the ABC's serial *Lost* (2004-10) and it acted as a bridge between multiple seasons of the show. This is an intertextual reference that linked the show and the game. Such related content can come from an array of mediums like product merchandise, comic books, blogs, websites, DVDs, user generated content like fan art, wikis etc. [Schluetz \(2017\)](#). These para or supplementary texts act as an extended forum for understanding the characters, plot, and interpretation of the original text [Gray \(2010\)](#) as cited in [Schluetz \(2017\)](#).

### **1.3.2. AMBIGUITY**

One of the other aspects of narrative complexity is ambiguity. [Schluetz \(2017\)](#) explains that the quality serials usually contain many blank spaces or unarticulated moments, and therefore, they are ambiguous. Narrative techniques like cold openings, evident contradictions, mysterious actions, and covert motives are some of them. As a result, the audience needs to be patient, willing, open, and have the skill to connect the dots to generate meaning. The more open moments without proper closure a show have, the more exploration is needed.

### **1.3.3. ANTI-HERO**

Another distinct aspect of quality series is having an anti-hero or morally ambiguous characters. It became the trademark approach of the decade in the 2000s. Characters who are not good, nor evil, but constantly blurring the boundary between the two, became more popular. This also gives a chance for the writers to explore the subtleties of character progression and development.

### **1.3.4. TYPES OF SERIAL NARRATIVE STRUCTURE**

TV serials can be differentiated based on their narrative structure. This distinction is not a dichotomous one. The function of character development and plot-flexibility indicates that the seriality can offer varying degrees of narratives. [Schultz \(2017\)](#) identifies four types of narratives.

#### **1) Anthology Series**

Anthology series are the ones that have different episodes connected by an overlaying theme. They are not connected by a continuing plot narration or the same characters. Some prominent examples include Prime Video's *Putham pudhu kaalai* (2020), *Putham pudhi kaalai vidiyatha* (2022), and Netflix's *Navarasa* (2021). Different writers and directors come together and tell stories which are united by a common theme.

#### **2) Episodic Series**

Episodic series are stories where each episode is independent of the other. They have the same recurring characters, but each episode exists as an individual self-contained unit. The continuous narrative arcs are very minimal or absent entirely. The characters always stay the same. E.g., *Friends* (1994-2004), *Everybody loves Raymond* (1996-2005), and *The Simpsons* (1989-ongoing). Each episode focuses on a few narrative arcs which get concluded within the episode and are rarely carried forward to the next episode.

The pure version of the series has become rare in the modern era. Series like BBC's *Sherlock* (2010) try to combine the episodic narration like the murder of the week with the backstory arc which spreads across the season. The advantage of

combining both episodic narration and serial narration is that it appeals to both types of audiences.

### 3) Continuous Serials

Continuous serials on the other hand have an ongoing narration with characters that are constant. All the Indian regional television soap operas are examples of this. In the United States of America, serials may go on production for one part of the year, and they are released in the next part of the year. Meanwhile in India, the typical format is that they get telecast every day of the week except weekends. Occasionally, old, and new story arcs are interconnected to keep the story running.

Even the limited serials can be put under the same category because they also follow the same format of an ongoing story but rather in a specific number of episodes. Examples include Netflix's *Sacred Games* (2018) and the haunting of Hill house (2018), and Prime Video's *Paatal lok* (2020).

### 4) Hybrid Forms

Complex shows like *Breaking Bad* (2008-13) and *Mad men* (2007-15), come under the hybrid form. They have story arcs that have elements of both episodic narrative and serial narrative. These shows will have both long-term story arcs and individual episode story arcs. [Mittell \(2006\)](#) terms this type of narrative as the "flexi narrative". These shows are usually concluded not because of loss of audience interest but because the story has to come to an end. The interaction between the episodic narration and serial narration is the trademark of narrative complexity [Mittell \(2006\)](#).

## 1.4. COMPLEXITY IN CONTEXT

[Mittell \(2015\)](#) posits that in the first two decades of the new millenium, a novel model of storytelling has evolved which contrasts the traditional episodic and serial narrative forms. He terms this new emergence as narrative complexity. He argues that this is a distinct narrational mode of contemporary American television. According to [Bordwell \(2012\)](#), it is a paradigmatically different "set of norms of narrational construction and comprehension" that go beyond visual movements, genres, and specific artists to invent a consistent category of practices.

## 1.5. POETICS OF COMPLEX TV

[Mittell \(2006\)](#) came up with operational parameters for defining narrative complexity in television serials based on the theory of poetics. The approach of poetics was first developed for film by David Bordwell, a renowned film scholar. The theory provides a contextual window to understand the narrative form. Unlike narratology, which looks deeper into the structure and form of pure narration, poetics include variables like technological advancements in the medium, evolution of audience along with access to technology, critics' analysis, and creators, which influence the evolution of the narrative [Mittell \(2006\)](#).

The poetics approach does not restrict itself to just the text but also includes the context as well. It concentrates on the specific ways in which the text makes meanings rather than representation or cultural aspects. It focuses more on understanding how a text works rather than what it means.

## 1.6. THE POETICS OF CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION STORYTELLING

Based on Broadwell's poetics of cinema, Jason Mittell formulated the poetics of contemporary television storytelling. As proposed by Bordwell's examination of the cinema narrative, narrative complexity can be taken into consideration in order to better comprehend the storytelling techniques used in modern television programming. A "narrative mode" is, in Bordwell's words, a canonically defined collection of rules of "narrational formation and comprehension," one that cuts across genres, particular authors, and aesthetic movements to create a unified group of practices. [Bordwell and Thompson \(1985\)](#) identifies specific cinematic modes, such as classic Hollywood, art cinema, and historical materialism, each of which employs a unique storytelling technique while drawing from and referencing earlier forms. Although there is no doubt that cinema influences many aspects of television, particularly in terms of visual style, it is inadvisable to map a model of storytelling tied to self-contained feature films onto the ongoing long-form narrative structure of series television, where ongoing continuity and seriality are key features.

[Mittell \(2015\)](#) believes that it would be more beneficial to create a vocabulary for television narrative on its own terms. In contrast to film and literature, television seems to be ideally adapted to the framework of a television series, and thus sets it apart from other traditional forms of episodic and serial storytelling. These distinctive aspects of storytelling are the foundation of television's narrative intricacy. With a broader perspective on television as a cultural phenomenon, where form is constantly in conversation with cultural contexts, historical formations, and modes of practice, [Mittell \(2015\)](#) confronts television's formal elements. He constructs nine operational parameters through which any contemporary television text can be analysed. They are - beginnings, authorship, characters, comprehension, evaluation, serial melodrama, orienting paratexts, transmedia storytelling, ends.

## 1.7. SUZHAL - THE VORTEX

Created by the filmmakers Pushkar-Gayathri, *Suzhal - The Vortex* is an Indian crime-thriller web series released on Amazon Prime Video in June 2022. The Tamil series focuses on the investigation of a young girl who goes missing in the fictional town of Saambaloor in Tamil Nadu. Actors R. Parthiban, Kathir, Aishwarya Rajesh, and Sriya Reddy are featured in it.

Produced by Wallwatcher Films, the series was collectively directed by Brama G and Anucharan Murugaiyan. The web series' first season consists of eight episodes. Sam C.S. composed the music, while Mukeswaran was responsible for cinematography and Richard Kevin for editing.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

With fast growth in the accessibility of the internet and better bandwidth connection in every household, exponential distribution of online video has become a reality in the past few years. As a result, the number of video-on-demand services has increased rapidly ([Audiovisual Observatory, 2014](#)). Consumers are slowly shifting from cinema and TV to online services that provide them more choices and freedom. They merge catalogs and the absence of time schedules with easy accessibility [Alaveras et al. \(2015\)](#). We are witnessing a shift in consumer's attitude from ownership of content like buying DVDs and VHS tapes to having easy access to



a broad library at any place, any time [Joshi \(2015\)](#). VOD services also allow users to watch any program in an interactive method. This interactivity is the main feature of these services. A customer using it can play, resume, pause, stop, fast forward, rewind, abort, and fast search (Ma, Shin, n.d).

Complex television uses a variety of techniques, with the assumption that a series is a collective narrative that develops over time, rather than resetting back to the start by giving a closure at the end of every episode. When analyzing how characterization is evolving, [Mittell \(2015\)](#) points out that we can understand the poetics of TV storytelling only by paying attention to its contexts as well. The technological ecosystem and viewing habits of audiences help in shaping creative possibilities available to writers. These contexts clearly differentiate serial television's features from other media. Complex television encourages audiences to pay attention and put the pieces together themselves to comprehend the narrative. Contemporary programming has created an extent of planned confusion - it has pushed the medium's tolerance towards viewers to be confused [Mittell \(2015\)](#). Again, this is also because the platform facilitates the viewers to go back and watch any episodes any time if they weren't able to comprehend what they had seen. Screen writers for television do not have to keep it simple anymore.

Another method of looking at the influence of VOD on storytelling is to evaluate the audience. [Sharma \(2016\)](#) discusses how fragmentation of the audience has taken place due to the change in storytelling states. The three major broadcast networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC in the United States of America dominated the television industry for many years. They created the majority of the television content, and the plot structure was kept simple to appeal to a broad audience [Sharma \(2016\)](#). With the arrival of other networks such as HBO and VOD services like Netflix, audiences have become splintered. This transformation of television audiences has translated into how television shows are created, distributed, and received. Netflix deliberately associates itself with niche audiences.

Scholars state that the modern age serial television is challenging for the audience on an intellectual and emotional level. It is open and nuanced. [Schluetz \(2017\)](#) claims that contemporary TV is hard to understand and even hard to watch sometimes. A viewer has to make a conscious effort to decode the meaning. When a viewer masters this requirement to deconstruct and reflect on the experience, it can be rewarding intellectually. The sense of achievement for the audience once they successfully complete the show and understands it, adds another layer of enjoyment.

The complex nature of quality TV is a reflection of many layered entertainment experiences. It drives itself towards artistic status through the consciousness of authority, which adds more value to the act of television viewing. Audiences consider that watching complex TV is better than watching regular TV because it brings with itself a cultural status [Newman and Levine \(2012\)](#). This cultural status might be commodified in the form of DVDs. DVDs also stand for collectability, meaning that the complex TV is worth preserving which in turn adds value to the act of watching quality TV. [Gray \(2010\)](#). In this manner quality TV brings itself a symbolic value. By watching and appreciating it, the audience achieves an status of authority in their own view as distinct from a normal TV viewer. Through consumption and further discussions on forums like blogs and websites, it builds symbolic capital [Bourdieu \(1985\)](#).

[Burroughs \(2019\)](#) postulates that the burgeoning streaming industry is undergoing a drastic shift in distribution and consumption of online content. His study identifies two distinct categories of streaming audiences - the cord cutters and

cord nevers. While the first category identifies viewers who grew up watching television and have given up their TV consumption habits, the second category refers to audiences who have only ever watched content on digital devices. This distinction is not merely determined by age, but also by a technological shift. Both digital immigrants and digital natives converge online to consume streaming content. Audiences that watch VOD service are also molded by algorithms, that is, their viewing patterns are determined by the fact that streaming services study their preferences and offer them similar content.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

Through an analysis of Amazon Prime's original series *Suzhal - The Vortex*, this study will investigate the narrative structure and narrative elements of the series and verify them against the poetics of complex TV. *Suzhal - The Vortex* was chosen since it is the first original Tamil drama series that Amazon Prime picked to launch its original programming in the state of Tamil Nadu, India. The series is currently the highest rated Tamil TV series based on popularity [TV Series, Tamil \(Sorted by Popularity Ascending\)](#). (n.d.).

The researcher will utilize the complex TV narrative framework that [Mittell \(2015\)](#) terms the new method of storytelling. This structure has already been used in many contemporary American television programmes.

#### **3.1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

R1. Is the parameter defined for the pilot episode of a complex TV present in Tamil OTT series *Suzhal - The Vortex*?

#### **3.2. STUDY DESIGN**

Poetics, which [Mittell \(2015\)](#) uses as the basis for his work, is "an emphasis on the specific ways that texts produce meaning, preoccupied with formal characteristics of media more than questions of content or broader cultural influences". [Mittell \(2015\)](#) proposes ten aspects of complex television and identifies components that define it. They are as follows: beginnings, authorship, characters, comprehension, evaluation, serial melodrama, orienting paratexts, transmedia storytelling, and ends. In this study, the researcher will take the first component among the ten, which is beginning, a parameter which defines the elements present in the pilot episode of any complex TV series. By investigating the presence of these elements in *Suzhal - The Vortex*, the researcher will try to find out if complex TV has reached the Tamil OTT series or not.

### **4. ANALYSIS**

#### **4.1. DISCUSSION OF THE PILOT**

[Mittell \(2015\)](#) states that a pilot gives viewers a glimpse of what a series will be like on a regular basis and offers a tremendous amount of narrative exposition to help viewers get accustomed to an often-intricate story universe. It must quickly establish a cast of characters such that their personalities and interactions are immediately obvious, but in sufficiently unique ways to avoid coming off as stereotypical or overly familiar copies of typical characters. While arguing that a series would not be just another typical example of what audiences have already seen, it must identify the program's genre in order to map viewers' expectations.

Each new series must be both recognizable and distinctive. Thus, pilot episodes are both the most unusual episodes of commercial television and the most traditional method of pitching television programmes to networks and audiences [Mittell \(2015\)](#).

#### **4.2. INSPIRATIONAL AND EDUCATIONAL POETICS OF PILOTS**

[Mittell \(2015\)](#) contends that the main purpose of a television pilot is to instruct us on how to watch the series and, in doing so, to pique our interest. As a result, successful pilots are both educational and inspirational. The series' pilots must introduce viewers to the underlying conventions that will be followed, laying out its narrative techniques so that we can get a feel for its storytelling approach. We can comprehend much of a pilot's capacity to inform and inspire by studying the opening moments of a show because such storytelling techniques are frequently offered in the first minutes, offering an immediate invitation to watch the series in a specific way.

Mittell establishes that a pilot

- 1) should set up the direction of narrative thrust
- 2) should teach the audience how to watch the upcoming serial
- 3) should inspire them to commit to serial consumption

The researcher will analyze the pilot episode of Suzhal- The Vortex and find out if these parameters are present in the series.

Suzhal - The Vortex follows the search for a teenage girl who disappears from her hometown during a ten day long festival Mayana kollai. The eight episodes are spaced over the ten days of the festival, with the girl going missing on day one.

The researcher will focus closely on the formal mechanics and structure of the pilot in order to comprehend the educational and motivational strategies used. By doing so, we can detail the techniques used to set the episode as a microcosm of the series as a whole, an illustration of the larger purpose of pilots, and a window into the ways that a potential new viewer might make sense of this serialized beginning. An exploration of the episode's narrative techniques can help us better comprehend the intricate storytelling that Suzhal - The Vortex explores so compellingly.

The first episode 'Hoisting the flag' sets up multiple plot lines and various characters and sets up their dynamics with each other. The episode begins with an ongoing protest by the factory workers of the small town of Sambaloor against the Vaddee cement factory owner, Trilok Vadde. This is a common narrative strategy called the inciting incident. This is a technique used in screenplay writing where a story commences by featuring an action from the middle. By doing so, the story demands participation of the audience right away without giving them much time to ease their way into the story, which is an approach unlike traditional TV serial writing. It understands the audience is not passive and gives them the role of being an active participant, which is a fundamental requirement for a complex TV audience. The protest sequence introduces one of the many plot lines of the serial that is the issue surrounding the factory. It also introduces the characters Union leader Shanmugam, and workers Guna, Dayalan, Arivu, on one side, pitted against Inspector Regina Thomas, Sub Inspector Sakkarai, and factory owner Trilok Vadde on the other side. The animosity between the two groups are clearly established as well.

The next few scenes introduce the audience to the family of Shanmugam and Regina Thomas respectively. The audience gets to know the relationship issue



brewing between Shanmugam and his younger daughter Nila over her poor academic performance. Meanwhile, Regina and her husband are booking a new bike for their son with bribe money they have taken from Trilok. The next scene shows Sakkarai getting engaged to Lakshmi, a bride Regina chose for him. An important scene follows the engagement. We see Regina along with her fellow police officers drinking alcohol and engaged in a conversation. Each of their worldviews and personal beliefs are expressed. While Regina talks about how police officers slowly get corrupted over the years after joining the force, the protagonist Sakkarai clearly says that he joined the force only for the power and respect that comes with it. He also praises himself for being smart enough to have Trilok under his influence and for taking bribes from him regularly. This characteristic of Sakkarai is again an important aspect of Complex TV. Anti-hero or morally ambiguous characters who are neither good, nor evil, but constantly blurring the boundary between the two are a key element of Complex TV. Complex narrative needs complex characters. This gives an opportunity for the writers to navigate the subtleties of character progression and character development.

The sequence is followed by Sakkarai patrolling the festivities. He notices something strange about the temple priest being in the procession, but he mentions it only as a passing comment while talking to his fiancée Lakshmi. This is the first planting incident which is going to pay off later at the resolution of the story. The preparatory tool "plant" aids in tying the threads of a screenplay together. A dialogue, a gesture of character, a mannerism, a prop, a costume, or a mix of these can all be considered.

This plant is mentioned repeatedly as the story progresses to keep the audience's memory of it fresh. There is typically a "payoff" on this plot point near the conclusion of the story, when the circumstances of the characters and the audience have changed and the gesture, prop, or whatever takes on a new significance.

Suzhal - The Vortex is filled with these kinds of planting and payoff incidents which require the audience to remember them and connect the dots at later parts of the story to arrive at a larger picture. This again is a tool which makes narrative complex and demands the audience to pay more attention since if they miss all these clues, they may not understand the story.

The next sequence shows a fire accident that takes place at Vadde cement factory. The police station gets repeated calls and when Sakkarai reaches the spot at the middle of the night, the factory is engulfed in flames with Shanmugam standing in front of it. This is immediately followed by a sequence which shows Nila, Shanmugam's daughter, go missing. These two incidents - the fire accident and the abduction, are important plot point incidents which create a narrative thrust and trajectory for the two major plot lines of Suzhal - The Vortex. They establish several dramatic questions - Who could have caused the fire? Did Sakkarai see Shanmugam standing in front of the factory which is ablaze? Shanmugam had declared during the factory protest that he would burn the factory to the ground if his demands were not met. Or is this an elaborate ploy by Trilok Vadded to frame Shanmugam? Or could it be Trilok's father who was responsible for the fire? Where could have Nila gone? Has she run away because her father fought with her? Has she been abducted by Trilok or his father because they think Shanmugam caused the fire accident? These questions set up the direction of narrative thrust of the series. These two incidents are placed 25 minutes into the pilot episode marking the halfway point into the pilot episode. From this point onwards, the momentum starts to pick up. The rest of the series unravels the mystery of where is Nila?

What happened to her? Who caused the fire accident? and etc. These questions carefully created in the narrative of the pilot episode will inspire the audience to commit to serial consumption. Now the audience would be curious and because of their investment into the characters and their dynamics they would continue to watch the series moving to following episodes.

Traditionally after the narrative reaches a substantial build-up through intense action, it is required to give some breathing space to the audience so that the story can settle down. This narrative tool of building up tension and followed by settling down the narration is called preparation and aftermath. After the action packed back to back mysteries, the beginning of the second half of the pilot episode takes its time to revisit characters and reveal some more attributes about them. The episode settles down to a slow paced exposition. The following sequences focus on giving context to all the incidents that transpired thus far. It delves deeper into the back stories of each character, their relationship dynamics and consequently, makes the audience predict which characters are capable of which crimes.

Shanmugam's sister-in-law, calls Shanmugam's wife to appraise her about Nila disappearance. It is explained that Shanmugam's wife has separated from her family and is currently living in an ashram. We were also introduced to Nila's elder sister Nandhini, who works in Coimbatore. The police suspects Shanmugam of causing the fire at the factory since multiple witnesses attest to seeing his bike parked near the factory before it went up in flames. The police arrive at Shanmugam's house and take him into custody. As they drive to the police station, the policemen converse about how Nandhini too had run away from the family to work in an IT company in Coimbatore. These conversations about their backstory establish that Shanmugam's family could be a dysfunctional family. But we do not yet know what could have caused this. It is also hinted that there are personal disagreements between Regina and Shanmugam which occurred in the past.

Following the sequence that offers an insight into the backstories of the show's main characters, the story returns to pursue the plot. Sakkarai goes in search of CCTV footage to corroborate Shanmugam's involvement with the accident. Simultaneously, the episode cuts to the festival procession of goddess Angalammai, which is part of the 10 day festivities at the small town. The Angalammai procession is paralleled with a girl walking through the procession and reaching the police station. It is revealed then that it is Nandhini, Nila's sister and Shanmugam's elder daughter. This parallel editing comparing Nandhini with the Goddess, along with the background score and suspense in revealing the character's face, punctuates the idea that Nandhini is one of the main characters in the story. She is presented as someone who is going to bring out the truth. As the pilot ends, a new character is hinted at and introduced in a grand manner, suggesting there is much to come in the following episodes. Audiences are now further interested in following the story to its completion.

The resolution of the episode deals with giving some answers to the questions that were set up at the midpoint of the episode. We see Nandhini making a scene at the police station demanding that the police file a complaint immediately for her missing sister. Then, we see Sakkarai along with his colleagues checking the CCTV footage of the night when the fire accident happened. He notices a girl walking along the road in the footage and the scene cuts to the present where Sakkarai visits the road seen in the surveillance video and looks around. As he examines the surroundings, the continuation of the CCTV footage is shown to the audience, where Nila is seen standing at a bus stop. The scene cuts back to the present where Sakkarai finds Nila's school identity card lying at the roadside of the road junction. This cuts

back to CCTV footage where a minivan stops to a halt next to Nila and pulls her in before it speeds away. The episode offers a clue about the circumstances around Nila's abduction but leaves the audience with more questions about who could have been responsible and where she could be, and whether she is alive or dead. This acts as a cliffhanger, an essential aspect of complex TV which serves as a hook for the audience to continue watching the next episode.

### 4.3. FINDINGS

As [Mittell \(2015\)](#) asserts, a pilot episodes of any complex TV series

- 1) should set up the direction of narrative thrust
- 2) should teach the audience how to watch the upcoming serial
- 3) should inspire them to commit to serial consumption.

Suzhal - The Vortex's pilot episode distinctly set up the direction of the narrative thrust by presenting two major plot threads about Nila going missing and Vadde's cement factory burning down in a fire accident. Since at the outset, the contrasting nature of Shanmugam group and the police and their nexus with the factory owner is made evident, it is made clear that someone from these two groups must have committed these crimes.

What Suzhal - The Vortex additionally does is the show structures the whole story around the Mayana kollai festival for goddess Angalammai, which provides the writers with an additional background to bring in thematic interpretations and symbolic meanings. The goddess of the town emerges to destroy evil. Will the characters Nandhini and Nila find justice for the crimes committed against them? Will they slay the demons as goddess Angalammai would in the following ten days of the festival?

Suzhal - The Vortex falls under the crime thriller genre and in the pilot episode, the formal narrative strategies and style of a crime thriller has been introduced to the audience. Therefore, they are made aware of what to expect in the following episodes. Narrative strategies like red herrings, a literary device that is intentionally used by a writer to deceive the reader or viewer, are incorporated. Though they can exist in other genres, these misleading hints are most frequently used in mystery stories to confuse audiences. The story in the pilot episode has been constructed to make us think that the perpetrator of the crimes could be Vadde, the owner of the factory. This is achieved by showing him as a bad-tempered person with no morals and values. The audience actively assumes it could be him by connecting the dots. However, as the story progresses, in later episodes it is revealed that this is only a ploy.

Similarly, a variety of plantings are introduced in the episode like, the temple priest leading the first day procession while holding a skull, Shanmugam's bike being parked at the side gate of the factory before the fire accident, Regina's son leaving Sambaloor for a trip to Kodaikanal on the same day of Nila's disappearance. All these incidents trigger the audience's imagination and make them predict and expect certain outcomes. The payoff for all these plantings are shown in later episodes. This is consistent with [Mittell \(2015\)](#) claims the pilot episode of Suzhal - The Vortex teaches the audience how to watch the upcoming serial.

The dramatic questions that arise at the midpoint of the story and the cliffhanger at the end of the episode surely inspire the audience to commit to serial consumption.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The internet as a technology has indeed provided a unique platform for television series which is beyond the limitations of a network telecast. With the access to it providing a veritable cornucopia of endless shows, audiences have acquired the ability to watch any content anytime from anywhere. Since all of the episodes are always available, the need to keep the story simple or the compulsion to begin and conclude any story within one episode has become obsolete. VOD services have given filmmakers and storytellers the possibility to tell longform stories through which they can explore characters and storylines in-depth. Even Though this has been the new norm in the American streaming services, it was not clear whether the Indian television shows appropriated these elements. Through this study of Tamil OTT series Suzhal - The Vortex, it is evident that the poetics of complex TV series has arrived at Tamil OTT services as well.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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