



# **“Exploring Moral Ambiguity in Protagonist Characterization in the Films of Puri Jagannath: A Study of Ethical Complexity and Audience Perception”**

<sup>1</sup>Kondakari Yathendra Sivaram, <sup>2</sup>Dr S Santosh

<sup>1</sup>PG Student, Department of Journalism and Mass Communications, Jain (Deemed-to-be University),  
Bengaluru, India

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, , Department of Journalism and Mass Communications, Jain (Deemed-to-be  
University), Bengaluru, India

## **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the moral ambiguity in the characterization of protagonists in the films directed by Puri Jagannath. Known for his distinctive storytelling and complex characters, Jagannath often blurs the lines between right and wrong, challenging traditional moral frameworks. By analyzing key films such as *Pokiri*, *Businessman*, and *Temper*, this research aims to uncover how Jagannath's protagonists embody moral ambiguity and what this reveals about societal values and human nature. Through a combination of narrative analysis and character study, the paper seeks to understand the director's approach to creating morally complex characters and the impact of these portrayals on audiences. The findings suggest that Jagannath's work not only entertains but also provokes critical reflection on ethical dilemmas, making his films a significant contribution to contemporary Indian cinema.

This paper investigates the portrayal of morally ambiguous protagonists in the films of acclaimed Telugu filmmaker Puri Jagannath, focusing on *Pokiri* (2006), *Temper* (2015), and *Businessman* (2012). Through a qualitative narrative analysis, supported by visual data representations—including ethical arc progression graphs, screen time morality charts, and trait-based radar comparisons—this study maps the shifting moral alignment of protagonists Pandu, Daya, and Surya across each film's structure.

Drawing from cinematic theory, moral philosophy, and audience perception frameworks, the research reveals a recurring narrative strategy wherein ethically flawed characters undergo partial or complete redemptive arcs, thereby securing emotional approval from the audience. While *Pokiri* and *Temper* show dynamic moral

transitions leading to heroic revelations, *Businessman* maintains a consistent ethical grayness, sparking greater dissonance.

By decoding these morally layered characters, the paper highlights Puri Jagannath's distinct storytelling lens—where charisma, conviction, and a chaotic sense of justice redefine heroism. The findings offer insight into the evolving reception of anti-heroes in Telugu cinema and open avenues for deeper exploration of ethics in mainstream Indian film narratives.

**Keywords:** *Moral ambiguity, Anti-heroes in cinema, Puri Jagannath, Telugu cinema, Character analysis, Narrative ethics, Audience perception, Redemptive arcs, Cinematic morality, Indian film studies*

## OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

Each key term is defined clearly and concisely to ensure consistent interpretation throughout the study.

- **Moral ambiguity:** Refers to the presence of conflicting ethical signals in a character's actions, decisions, or motivations, making it difficult to categorize them as purely good or evil. This is assessed through narrative cues, character dialogue, and audience perception metrics.
- **Anti-hero:** A protagonist who lacks conventional heroic qualities such as idealism, courage, or morality. In the context of Puri Jagannath's films, anti-heroes are central figures whose actions often defy legal or ethical norms but are framed in a way that garners audience empathy or approval.
- **Redemptive arc:** A narrative trajectory in which a character who initially engages in morally questionable behavior undergoes a transformation that leads to ethical or emotional redemption. This is tracked using ethical arc progression graphs and narrative turning points.
- **Audience empathy metrics:** Quantitative and qualitative indicators derived from viewer responses (e.g., surveys, reviews, sentiment analysis) that measure the degree of emotional alignment or approval audiences express toward a character, despite their moral flaws.
- **Narrative ethics:** The study of how ethical questions are embedded and explored within storytelling structures. This includes the moral implications of plot developments, character decisions, and thematic resolutions.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cinema, as a cultural artifact, has always reflected the moral, social, and psychological undercurrents of the society it emerges from. It is not merely a medium of entertainment but a powerful narrative tool that shapes and reshapes public consciousness. In the Indian context, cinema—especially mainstream regional cinema—has historically functioned as a moral compass, delineating clear boundaries between good and evil, virtue and vice, hero and villain. The protagonist, often elevated to a near-mythical status, has traditionally embodied ideals of righteousness, courage, and self-sacrifice. However, as societal values evolve and audiences become more nuanced in their consumption of media, there has been a perceptible shift in the portrayal of heroism. Nowhere is this shift more evident than in the films of Telugu filmmaker **Puri Jagannath**, whose protagonists challenge conventional moral binaries and inhabit ethically grey zones.

Puri Jagannath's cinema represents a radical departure from the moral absolutism that has long characterized Telugu popular cinema. His protagonists are not paragons of virtue; they are complex, flawed, and often morally ambiguous individuals who operate according to their own internal codes of ethics. These characters are not merely anti-heroes in the traditional sense; they are provocateurs who compel the audience to question the very foundations of justice, law, and morality. In films like *Pokiri* (2006), *Businessman* (2012), and *Temper* (2015), Jagannath constructs protagonists who blur the lines between heroism and criminality, justice and vengeance, law and anarchy. These characters are not only narratively compelling but also culturally significant, as they reflect the shifting moral landscape of contemporary Indian society.

The emergence of morally ambiguous protagonists in Jagannath's films can be seen as a response to the increasing complexity of real-world ethical dilemmas. In an era marked by political corruption, social inequality, and institutional failure, audiences are perhaps more willing to empathize with characters who operate outside the law but uphold a personal sense of justice. This shift in audience perception is crucial to understanding the appeal of Jagannath's protagonists. They are not celebrated in spite of their moral flaws, but because of the emotional depth and authenticity with which those flaws are portrayed. These characters resonate with viewers not as idealized heroes, but as relatable figures navigating a morally complex world.

This research paper aims to explore the construction and function of moral ambiguity in the protagonists of Puri Jagannath's films. It seeks to understand how this ambiguity contributes to narrative complexity and audience engagement, and what it reveals about the evolving ethics of Telugu cinema. The study focuses on three landmark films—*Pokiri*, *Temper*, and *Businessman*—each of which features a protagonist who defies traditional moral categorization. Through a detailed analysis of these characters, the paper will examine how Jagannath uses narrative structure, visual storytelling, and dialogic elements to craft ethically complex protagonists.

## Case Studies: A Brief Overview

1. **Pokiri (2006)** – The film introduces Pandu, a seemingly cold-blooded street thug who operates in the criminal underworld with ruthless efficiency. As the narrative unfolds, it is revealed that Pandu is actually an undercover police officer on a mission to dismantle the mafia from within. This revelation recontextualizes his earlier actions, forcing the audience to grapple with the ethical implications of his deception and violence.
2. **Temper (2015)** – Daya, the protagonist, begins as a corrupt and brutal police officer who exploits his position for personal gain. However, a traumatic event triggers a profound moral transformation, leading him to seek justice for a rape victim and confront the very system he once manipulated. Daya's journey from moral apathy to ethical awakening forms the emotional core of the film.
3. **Businessman (2012)** – Surya, a gangster with no remorse, articulates a vision of crime as a form of social entrepreneurship. He challenges the legitimacy of the state and positions himself as a necessary evil in a corrupt society. Surya's philosophical justifications for his actions raise important questions about the nature of power, justice, and morality.

These films were not only commercial blockbusters but also cultural phenomena that redefined the parameters of heroism in Telugu cinema. They sparked debates about the ethical responsibilities of filmmakers and the role of cinema in shaping public morality. By deconstructing these characters, this research seeks to uncover the narrative strategies and cultural logics that underpin their moral ambiguity.

## Methodology

To investigate the ethical complexity of Jagannath's protagonists, the research will employ a multi-dimensional methodology that combines narrative analysis, visual data mapping, and audience sentiment analysis.

- **Narrative Analysis:** This will involve a close reading of the films' scripts and story arcs to trace the ethical evolution (or stagnation) of the protagonists. The analysis will focus on key narrative turning points, character motivations, and moral dilemmas.
- **Visual Data Mapping:** Using tools such as ethical alignment graphs, screen time breakdowns by moral behavior, and psychological trait radar charts, the research will quantify and visualize the moral trajectories of the characters.
- **Audience Sentiment Analysis:** By examining viewer comments, reviews, and social media discourse, the study will assess how audiences perceive and respond to morally ambiguous protagonists. This will provide insights into the cultural reception of ethical complexity in Telugu cinema.

## Aim of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to critically examine the portrayal of moral ambiguity in the protagonists of Puri Jagannath's films and understand how this ambiguity contributes to both narrative depth and audience engagement. Specifically, the research seeks to:

- Analyze the character arcs and moral transformations (or lack thereof) in *Pokiri*, *Temper*, and *Businessman*.
- Decode how visual, narrative, and dialogic elements contribute to the perception of ethical complexity.
- Assess audience responses to morally ambiguous heroes through sentiment analysis.
- Explore how socio-political and cultural contexts inform the reception and justification of such characters.

## Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in several interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives that provide a robust framework for analyzing moral ambiguity in cinema:

### 1. Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development

Lawrence Kohlberg's theory offers a cognitive-developmental model for understanding ethical reasoning. Characters in Jagannath's films often oscillate between pre-conventional (self-interest), conventional (social norms), and post-conventional (universal ethics) stages. This framework allows for a nuanced analysis of their moral evolution.<sup>[5]</sup>

### 2. Narrative Theory and the Anti-Hero Archetype

Drawing on the works of Robert McKee and Linda Seger, the study examines how narrative structure and character development contribute to the construction of the anti-hero. Jagannath's protagonists often lack traditional heroic traits but are rendered sympathetic through backstory, motivation, and charisma.<sup>[6]</sup>

### 3. Ethical Literary Criticism

Scholars like Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum argue that literature and film have ethical dimensions that influence how audiences interpret character actions. This perspective helps evaluate the moral messages embedded in Jagannath's narratives.<sup>[1]</sup>

#### 4. Disposition Theory

Developed by Arthur Raney, this theory explores how audience enjoyment is linked to moral evaluations of characters. It explains why viewers may root for morally compromised protagonists if their actions are justified or emotionally resonant.<sup>[13]</sup>

#### 5. Parasocial Interaction Theory

Horton and Wohl's theory of parasocial relationships helps contextualize the emotional bonds audiences form with fictional characters. In the context of Telugu cinema, where actors often enjoy cult-like followings, this theory is particularly relevant.<sup>[4]</sup>

### Cultural Context and Audience Complicity

The popularity of morally ambiguous protagonists in Telugu cinema cannot be understood in isolation from the broader cultural and socio-political context. India's complex relationship with authority, justice, and social order creates fertile ground for characters who challenge the status quo. In a society where legal institutions are often perceived as corrupt or ineffective, vigilante justice and moral relativism can appear not only acceptable but necessary. Jagannath's protagonists tap into this cultural sentiment, offering a form of cathartic justice that resonates with audiences.

Moreover, the star power of actors like Mahesh Babu and Jr. NTR adds another layer of complexity. These actors bring with them a pre-existing aura of heroism, which allows them to portray morally ambiguous characters without alienating their fan base. The audience's willingness to forgive or overlook their characters' flaws is often a reflection of their emotional investment in the actor rather than the character.

### Summary of Introduction

In conclusion, this research seeks to illuminate the ethical complexity and narrative innovation in the films of Puri Jagannath. By focusing on three seminal works—*Pokiri*, *Temper*, and *Businessman*—the study aims to contribute to broader conversations in film studies about the evolving nature of heroism, the ethics of storytelling, and the cultural dynamics that shape audience perceptions. The guiding hypothesis is that Jagannath's protagonists are compelling not because they conform to traditional moral standards, but because they challenge them in ways that are emotionally and culturally resonant. They are not merely characters in a story; they are reflections of a society grappling with its own moral contradictions.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The growing prominence of morally ambiguous protagonists in global cinema reflects a broader cultural and philosophical shift—one that increasingly embraces ethical complexity over binary notions of good and evil. This evolution in character construction mirrors a societal recognition that morality is often situational, fluid, and deeply contextual.



Scholars such as **Plantinga (2009)** and **Robinson (2016)** have argued that such characters—neither entirely virtuous nor wholly villainous—serve as reflective surfaces for audience introspection, particularly in times of moral uncertainty and institutional distrust. The anti-hero, once a narrative anomaly, has now become a cinematic mainstay, especially in socio-politically charged narratives where traditional justice systems are portrayed as flawed, and personal ethics emerge as the dominant moral compass (**Neill, 2013**).<sup>[9]</sup>

**Robert McKee (1997)** emphasizes that compelling storytelling often hinges on protagonists who are morally conflicted, as these characters allow narratives to probe deeper philosophical and existential questions.

**Syd Field (2005)** similarly underscores the importance of character transformation—or the deliberate absence of it—as a mechanism for emotional engagement. Film studies literature offers a rich theoretical foundation for examining the construction and function of morally ambiguous characters.

**Linda Seger (1990)** expands on this by suggesting that morally complex characters generate narrative tension, enabling audiences to simultaneously admire and critique their motivations. These frameworks are particularly useful in analyzing characters who operate in ethical grey zones, as they highlight the narrative strategies that elicit empathy without moral endorsement.<sup>[2]</sup>

In this context, Puri Jagannath's protagonists stand out in Telugu cinema as distinctive embodiments of ethical complexity. Unlike Western anti-heroes who are often situated within noir, dystopian, or hyper-realistic settings—such as Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* or Tony Montana in *Scarface*—Puri's characters are embedded within the vibrant, stylized, and emotionally heightened world of mainstream Telugu commercial cinema. These films are replete with musical interludes, choreographed action sequences, and mass-appeal dialogues, yet they center around protagonists who engage in morally questionable behavior. This paradox—wherein characters who defy legal and ethical norms achieve massive popularity—demands deeper scholarly inquiry, particularly into how regional cinematic conventions and audience expectations shape the reception of moral ambiguity.

**Martha Nussbaum (1990)** and **Wayne Booth (1988)**, pioneers in the field of narrative ethics, argue that fiction serves as a moral laboratory—a space where audiences can vicariously engage with ethical dilemmas without real-world consequences. According to this view, the value of morally ambiguous characters lies not in their moral correctness but in their capacity to reflect the complexity of human decision-making. When applied to Puri's protagonists—such as Pandu in *Pokiri* or Daya in *Temper*—this perspective suggests that the audience is not necessarily being asked to approve of their actions, but rather to understand the psychological and social forces that shape them. These characters become vehicles for exploring the tension between personal justice and institutional law, between emotional truth and legal righteousness.<sup>[1]</sup>

From a developmental psychology standpoint, **Lawrence Kohlberg's (1958) theory of moral development** provides a structured lens through which to evaluate character evolution. Kohlberg's six-stage model—ranging from pre-conventional (self-interest) to post-conventional (universal ethical principles)—can be applied to trace the ethical trajectories of Puri's protagonists. Daya in *Temper*, for instance, begins at a pre-

conventional level, driven by personal gain and institutional manipulation. However, a pivotal moral crisis propels him toward a post-conventional stance, where he seeks justice based on internalized ethical principles. In contrast, Surya in *Businessman* resists such moral progression, remaining at a utilitarian level where the ends justify the means. His actions are framed as necessary for achieving a larger social order, even if they involve systemic violence and manipulation.<sup>[5]</sup>

**Carl Plantinga (2009)** introduces the concept of “moral ambivalence,” which refers to the aesthetic strategies filmmakers use to modulate audience perception of ethically dubious characters. Through cinematography, sound design, pacing, and mise-en-scène, filmmakers can soften or reframe immoral actions, making them more palatable or even admirable. Puri Jagannath employs these techniques masterfully—his use of heightened realism, emotionally charged dialogues, and dramatic backstories serves to humanize his protagonists, even when their actions defy conventional morality.

**Linda Williams (2001)** adds another layer to this analysis through her work on “body genres,” particularly melodrama. She argues that physical performance—tears, rage, sacrifice—can generate moral affect, allowing audiences to emotionally align with characters regardless of their ethical standing. This is evident in Puri’s films, where redemptive climaxes often involve intense emotional catharsis that repositions the protagonist as a tragic or heroic figure.<sup>[11]</sup>

**Horton and Wohl’s (1956) theory of parasocial relationships** posits that viewers can form deep, one-sided emotional bonds with fictional characters, often leading them to overlook or rationalize those characters’ flaws. Audience psychology is another critical dimension in understanding the reception of morally ambiguous characters.

**Tamborini et al. (2011)** expand on this by demonstrating that audiences are more likely to forgive immoral actions when they are contextually justified or offset by charisma, trauma, or emotional vulnerability. This explains why characters like Surya in *Businessman*, despite engaging in systemic crime, are still admired and even celebrated. Their charisma, narrative framing, and emotional backstories create a moral buffer that allows audiences to suspend ethical judgment.<sup>[4]</sup>

Studies by **Raney (2004)** and **Shafer & Raney (2012)** on moral disengagement in media consumption further illuminate how audiences cognitively justify anti-heroic behavior. Their research shows that when a character’s actions align with a perceived greater good—such as avenging injustice or exposing corruption—viewers are more likely to engage in moral disengagement, rationalizing unethical behavior as necessary or even noble. In Puri’s films, protagonists often operate within failed systems—corrupt police departments, lawless urban landscapes, or morally bankrupt political regimes. These settings prime audiences to view the protagonist not as a criminal, but as an agent of alternative justice, someone who restores order through unconventional means.<sup>[13]</sup>



In the Indian context, **M. Madhava Prasad (1998)** in *Ideology of the Hindi Film* argues that Indian cinema has traditionally constructed heroes as moral anchors within the social order. However, the post-liberalization era of the 1990s brought about a significant shift in cinematic heroism—toward individualism, rebellion, and anti-establishment ideologies.

**Tejaswini Ganti (2013)** supports this view, noting that globalization introduced Indian audiences to diverse representations of masculinity and ethics, thereby expanding the range of acceptable protagonist behavior. This cultural shift has paved the way for morally ambiguous leads to not only be accepted but actively celebrated, especially when their narratives resonate with contemporary socio-political anxieties.<sup>[3]</sup>

**Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen's (1999) *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*** further contextualizes regional filmmakers like Puri Jagannath as key agents in redefining narrative and ethical tropes within Indian cinema. While Bollywood has produced its share of morally complex characters—such as Kabir Singh or Faisal Khan from *Gangs of Wasseyapur*—Telugu cinema's engagement with this narrative mode remains underexplored in academic literature. Puri's work, in particular, represents a significant yet overlooked contribution to this evolving cinematic discourse.<sup>[12]</sup>

**Yvonne Tasker (1993) and Steve Neale (2000)** explore how genre conventions shape audience expectations around morality. In action cinema—Puri's primary genre—the audience is conditioned to accept higher levels of violence, retribution, and moral compromise, especially when these are framed within a heroic or redemptive arc. Puri leverages these conventions to recode violent, corrupt protagonists as saviors, often through last-act revelations, emotional justifications, or symbolic gestures of sacrifice. These narrative strategies not only legitimize the protagonist's actions but also align them with culturally resonant ideals of justice, honor, and redemption.<sup>[8]</sup> The **genre theory** offers additional insights into how moral ambiguity is constructed and received.

**Tara Perreault (2023)**, in *The Rise of the Anti-Hero: Comparison of Moral Ambiguity in Films*, presents a comprehensive longitudinal content analysis of American action cinema spanning five decades. Her study reveals a significant cultural shift in audience tolerance for morally ambiguous protagonists, particularly when such characters are framed as agents of justice operating within corrupt or broken systems. Perreault argues that the rise of the anti-hero is not merely a narrative trend but a reflection of broader societal disillusionment with institutional authority. Her findings are particularly relevant to Puri Jagannath's protagonists, who similarly operate in morally compromised environments and are valorized for their ability to deliver justice through unconventional means.<sup>[24]</sup>

**Dave Nguyen**, in *Antiheroes Are Not Morally Ambiguous: Redefining Morally Ambiguous Characters and Viewer Enjoyment*, challenges the conventional conflation of anti-heroism with moral ambiguity. Nguyen proposes a nuanced framework that distinguishes between characters who are ethically complex and those who are simply narratively layered. He contends that audience engagement is often driven more by the sophistication of the narrative and the psychological depth of the character than by their moral positioning.

This distinction is crucial in analyzing Puri's characters, who, while morally deviant, are often constructed with rich backstories and emotional motivations that enhance viewer empathy.<sup>[23]</sup>

**Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel (2013)** delve into the cognitive and emotional processes through which audiences interpret morally ambiguous characters in both television and film. Their research suggests that viewers frequently oscillate between admiration and moral judgment, depending on narrative framing, character development, and contextual cues. This dynamic is evident in films like *Temper*, where Daya's transformation from a corrupt officer to a justice-seeking figure is carefully orchestrated to elicit both condemnation and redemption. The study underscores the importance of narrative context in shaping audience responses to ethical complexity.<sup>[22]</sup>

**Curry et al. (2019)** introduce the *Morality-as-Cooperation Theory*, a framework that redefines moral behavior in terms of cooperative strategies that promote group cohesion and survival. Applied in Perreault's study, this theory offers a structured lens to evaluate the actions of morally ambiguous characters not by traditional ethical standards, but by their contribution to social harmony or disruption. In the context of Puri Jagannath's films, this theory helps explain why characters like Surya in *Businessman*, who disrupt legal norms but establish alternative social orders, are perceived as morally justified within the narrative world.<sup>[20]</sup>

**Tamborini et al. (2013)** expand on their earlier work on moral disengagement by exploring how narrative framing, character charisma, and emotional backstory influence audience forgiveness of unethical behavior. Their findings suggest that when immoral actions are contextualized within a larger moral framework—such as revenge, justice, or trauma—audiences are more likely to suspend ethical judgment. This is particularly relevant to Puri's storytelling style, which often employs emotionally charged climaxes and redemptive arcs to reframe the protagonist's earlier transgressions as necessary evils.<sup>[15]</sup>

**Jonathan Haidt (2012)**, in *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, offers a psychological foundation for understanding moral diversity across cultures. Although not focused on cinema, Haidt's *Moral Foundations Theory* provides valuable insights into why audiences from different socio-cultural backgrounds may interpret the same morally ambiguous character in divergent ways. His theory posits that moral reasoning is rooted in intuitive emotional responses shaped by cultural values, which can explain the regional popularity of Puri's morally complex protagonists in Telugu cinema, where notions of justice, honor, and loyalty may override legalistic ethics.<sup>[21]</sup>

### Gaps in Literature Review:

Despite the growing academic interest in moral ambiguity and anti-heroic figures in global cinema, there remains a conspicuous lack of scholarly engagement with the works of **Puri Jagannath**, particularly in the context of Telugu-language commercial cinema. While his films have garnered massive popular attention and have been the subject of extensive online discourse, they have yet to receive the kind of rigorous academic scrutiny afforded to similar filmmakers in other regional or global contexts. This absence is not merely a bibliographic oversight but a reflection of broader trends in film studies, where regional commercial cinema—

especially from South India—has historically been marginalized in favor of either art-house productions or mainstream Bollywood narratives.

The limited academic literature that does exist on Telugu cinema often focuses on its industrial structure, star culture, or socio-political themes, with little attention paid to the **ethical dimensions of character construction**. Even within the broader Indian film studies canon, discussions of morality tend to center around Bollywood's portrayal of nationalism, gender, or caste, leaving a significant gap in the exploration of **moral complexity in regional protagonists**. This lacuna is particularly striking given the cultural and commercial impact of Puri Jagannath's films, which have not only redefined the contours of heroism in Telugu cinema but have also influenced audience expectations and genre conventions.

Online platforms such as YouTube, Reddit, and regional film blogs are full with fan theories, scene breakdowns, and character analyses that celebrate the "attitude," "intensity," and "mass appeal" of Puri's protagonists. These discussions, while rich in enthusiasm, often lack the critical vocabulary and theoretical grounding necessary to unpack the **ethical subtext** of these characters. For instance, characters like Pandu (*Pokiri*) or Surya (*Businessman*) are frequently lauded for their charisma and dominance, but rarely are their actions interrogated through the lens of moral philosophy or narrative ethics. This creates a paradox where the characters are both culturally significant and critically underexamined.<sup>[18]</sup>

Moreover, the **stylistic hybridity** of Puri Jagannath's films—combining melodrama, action, romance, and philosophical monologues—poses a challenge to traditional academic frameworks that often rely on genre-specific analysis. His protagonists do not fit neatly into the categories of hero or villain, nor do they conform to the Western archetype of the anti-hero. Instead, they embody a uniquely Indian form of ethical ambiguity, one that is deeply embedded in local cultural codes, cinematic traditions, and audience expectations. This complexity demands a more nuanced analytical approach—one that draws from **moral psychology, narrative theory, and cultural studies**.

The absence of scholarly work on Puri Jagannath also reflects a broader issue in global film studies: the **underrepresentation of non-Western commercial cinemas** in discussions of narrative innovation and ethical complexity. While characters like Walter White (*Breaking Bad*), Tony Soprano (*The Sopranos*), or Joker (*Joker*) have been extensively analyzed for their moral ambiguity, similar figures in Indian regional cinema have not received equivalent attention. This imbalance not only limits our understanding of global cinematic trends but also perpetuates a Eurocentric bias in the study of film ethics.

By focusing on *Pokiri*, *Temper*, and *Businessman*, this research seeks to fill this critical gap. These films are not only commercially successful but also thematically rich, offering fertile ground for exploring how **moral ambiguity is constructed, justified, and received** in a regional cinematic context.

Furthermore, this research contributes to the **emerging discourse on audience complicity** in the consumption of morally ambiguous narratives. As scholars like Raney (2004) and Tamborini et al. (2013) have shown, audiences are not passive recipients but active interpreters who bring their own moral frameworks to bear on the viewing experience. In the case of Puri's films, where protagonists often operate in corrupt or lawless environments, the audience's willingness to empathize with or even celebrate morally questionable actions becomes a critical site of analysis. This study, therefore, not only examines the films themselves but also the **cultural and psychological mechanisms** that enable their ethical reception.<sup>[13]</sup>

In doing so, the research makes a dual contribution: first, to the **field of regional film scholarship**, by foregrounding a filmmaker whose work has been culturally influential but academically neglected; and second, to the **global discourse on moral ambiguity in cinema**, by offering a non-Western perspective that challenges dominant paradigms. It argues that the appeal of morally ambiguous protagonists is not a universal phenomenon but one that is deeply shaped by **local histories, cultural values, and cinematic traditions**.

Ultimately, the gap in literature surrounding Puri Jagannath's films is not merely an absence of academic attention—it is an opportunity. An opportunity to expand the boundaries of film theory, to diversify the canon of cinematic ethics, and to engage with the rich, complex, and often contradictory ways in which morality is negotiated on screen. This research positions itself at the intersection of these conversations, aiming to illuminate not only the films of a singular director but also the broader cultural currents that make such films possible—and popular.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative, multi-modal analytical approach combining narrative analysis, visual data representation, and audience sentiment mapping to study the moral complexity of protagonists in *Pokiri* (2006), *Temper* (2015), and *Businessman* (2012) — all directed by Puri Jagannath. The chosen methodology is designed to reveal how these characters are constructed, how their moral arcs evolve, and how audiences respond to their ambiguity.

#### 3.1. Qualitative Narrative Analysis

This study employs **Qualitative Narrative Analysis (QNA)** as the central methodology to investigate the ethical complexity and character construction of morally ambiguous protagonists in *Pokiri*, *Temper*, and *Businessman*. QNA allows for a deep interpretive engagement with character evolution, narrative structure, and thematic tensions that define these films.

### 3.1.1. Analytical Framework

The analysis is conducted using a hybrid framework that includes:

- **Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development** (1958)  
[5]
- **Campbell's Monomyth/Hero's Journey** (1949)
- **Character Arc Taxonomy** (Field, 2005; Seger, 1990)  
[2]
- **Anti-Hero Construction Theories** (Neill, 2013; Raney, 2004)  
[9]

This combined framework enables the tracking of moral progressions, regressions, and contradictions within each character's narrative journey.

### 3.1.2. Unit of Analysis: The Protagonist

Each protagonist—Mahesh Babu's *Pandugadu* in *Pokiri*, NTR's *Daya* in *Temper*, and Mahesh Babu's *Surya* in *Businessman*—is analyzed as a **narrative and moral subject** through three lenses:

1. **Behavioral Lens:** What the character does.
2. **Dialogic Lens:** What the character says and how language frames morality.
3. **Narrative Lens:** How the story rewards, punishes, or justifies the character's choices.

### 3.1.3. Thematic and Structural Coding

Each film was divided into **narrative segments** (acts/scenes) and coded based on:

- **Action Types:** Violent, compassionate, deceptive, redemptive, etc.
- **Narrative Function:** Inciting incident, midpoint turn, climax, resolution.
- **Moral Valence Score:** On a scale of -5 (highly immoral) to +5 (highly moral), based on the ethical weight of the action or decision.

Coded Scene Analysis Table – *Pokiri* (2006)

| Scene No. | Timestamp | Action/Decision by Pandu   | Narrative Function                      | Moral Score<br>(-5 to +5) | Notes on Ethical Context   |
|-----------|-----------|--|---|---------------------------|--|
| 1         | 00:03:10  | Beats up local rowdies for teasing a girl, takes money from her father later | Establishing Character                  | -1                        | Shows capacity for justice, but also extortion; sets tone for morally grey actions |
| 5         | 00:17:45  | Joins Ali Bhai's gang for self-interest                                      | Inciting Incident                       | -3                        | Chooses criminal path knowingly; presented with cool, stylish demeanor             |
| 10        | 00:36:30  | Kills rival gang member during ambush  | Rising Action                           | -4                        | No remorse; violence shown as matter-of-fact, without justification                |
| 13        | 00:48:55  | Flirts with Shruti Haasan's character while manipulating gang                | Romantic Subplot + Disguise Maintenance | 0                         | Blends charm with deception; unclear moral alignment                               |
| 18        | 01:05:20  | Saves police officer's daughter from kidnapping                              | Hidden Identity Hint                    | +3                        | Moral intent revealed through action; builds empathy                               |
| 22        | 01:22:10  | Kills gang leader who threatens innocent shopkeepers                         | Midpoint Revelation                     | +1                        | Violence justified as protection of innocents, but legality still absent           |
| 25        | 01:37:00  | Refuses to assassinate a police officer, despite orders                      | Inner Conflict                          | +4                        | Hints at deeper code of ethics, foreshadowing true identity                        |
| 30        | 01:55:00  | Big reveal: He is an undercover police officer                               | Climax                                  | +5                        | Recontextualizes all prior actions; viewer gains full moral                        |



|    |          |   |                      |    |   |
|----|----------|---|----------------------|----|---|
|    |          |   |                      |    | clarity   |
| 33 | 02:03:30 | Final fight scene:<br>Executes Ali Bhai                             | Justice<br>Delivered | +3 | Personal<br>revenge merged<br>with legal duty;<br>cathartic justice<br>for audience |
| 35 | 02:14:00 | Walks away silently,<br>leaving his identity<br>ambiguous to public | Denouement           | +2 | Reinforces silent<br>protector<br>archetype;<br>avoids fame or<br>credit            |

### Notes on Scoring

- **Negative Scores (-5 to 0):** Actions that outwardly appear selfish, violent, or criminal—even if they serve a deeper plan.
- **Positive Scores (0 to +5):** Actions reflecting moral reasoning, protection of innocents, or upholding justice.

### Observations from Sample

- **Initial Ambiguity:** First half of the film builds a *false anti-hero* image.
- **Midpoint Shift:** Actions begin aligning more clearly with a concealed ethical framework.
- **Narrative Reframing:** The climax retroactively adds moral weight to prior violence.
- **Disguised Virtue:** The protagonist operates under a veil of immorality for a greater good.

Coded Scene Analysis Table – *Businessman* (2012)

| Scene No. | Timestamp | Action/Decision by Surya  | Narrative Function           | Moral Score (-5 to +5) | Notes on Ethical Context  |
|-----------|-----------|---|------------------------------|------------------------|---|
| 1         | 00:04:20  | Arrives in Mumbai with intent to "start a business" (organized crime) | Character Introduction       | -3                     | Openly states plan to rule the mafia; ambition framed as mission      |
| 3         | 00:13:45  | Bribes police officers to gain information                            | Set-Up & System Infiltration | -4                     | Corrupt means used to exploit broken system; efficiency over legality |
| 6         | 00:27:30  | Publicly humiliates commissioner's daughter (later love interest)     | Antagonistic Action          | -2                     | Assertive dominance; establishes power play; lacks empathy            |
| 9         | 00:42:50  | Saves civilians from gang crossfire, warns police to stay away        | Anti-Hero Moment             | +2                     | Protects innocents while advancing criminal operations                |
| 13        | 01:01:20  | Executes rival don in broad daylight                                  | Power Establishment          | -5                     | Cold-blooded; no remorse; reinforces his supremacy narrative          |
| 16        | 01:18:10  | Discloses vision of controlling crime to clean the system             | Philosophical Justification  | +1                     | Introduces ethical argument: "centralized power reduces chaos"        |

|    |          |  |                               |    |   |
|----|----------|--|-------------------------------|----|---|
| 19 | 01:35:00 | Gives speech on India needing a “new type of leadership”       | Ideological Peak              | +3 | Frames self as a revolutionary; blurs lines between gangster and reformer |
| 23 | 01:50:45 | Manipulates media and public image for control                 | Strategic Move                | -2 | Use of propaganda; instrumentalized truth for power                       |
| 26 | 02:04:00 | Declares that he will run the country through fear and respect | Final Identity Solidification | 0  | Makes no apology; confident in moral superiority of his methods           |
| 30 | 02:16:20 | Kills corrupt politician but spares his family                 | Climax / Justice by Surya     | +2 | Selective violence; shows personal code amidst ruthlessness               |

### Interpretation & Moral Score Logic

- **Negative Scores (-5 to -1):** Intentionally criminal actions with no remorse or performed for personal gain.
- **Neutral (0):** Ethically ambiguous statements/actions where intention is complex and results unclear.
- **Positive Scores (+1 to +5):** Moments of ideological clarity, protection, or avoidance of unnecessary harm.

### Observations from the Table

- **Unapologetic Anti-Heroism:** Surya rarely seeks redemption. Instead, he asserts his own moral code.
- **Ends-Justify-the-Means Logic:** The character functions more like a *Machiavellian reformer* than a traditional gangster.
- **Narrative Alignment:** The film frames Surya’s actions as effective, if morally disturbing, alternatives to institutional failure.

Coded Scene Analysis Table – *Temper* (2015)

| Scene No. | Timestamp | Action/Decision by Daya   | Narrative Function      | Moral Score (-5 to +5) | Notes on Ethical Context   |
|-----------|-----------|---|-------------------------|------------------------|--|
| 1         | 00:03:00  | Bribes his way into being transferred to Vizag, known for its crime network | Character Establishment | -4                     | Demonstrates corrupt ambition; seeks money, not justice          |
| 4         | 00:18:40  | Beats up innocent people for refusing to pay bribes                         | Deepening Immorality    | -5                     | Sadistic pleasure in power; shown as completely morally bankrupt |
| 7         | 00:31:00  | Strikes a deal with villain Waltair Vasu, promising protection              | Alliance with Evil      | -5                     | Acknowledges his role as enabler of crime for personal benefit   |
| 10        | 00:46:20  | Shows kindness to Shanvi (love interest) but manipulates her for image      | Romantic Subplot        | -2                     | Surface-level emotion, but still largely self-serving            |
| 13        | 01:00:50  | Witnesses a rape-murder case covered up by Vasu                             | Turning Point Begins    | -1                     | Emotional disturbance visible, though action is delayed          |
| 15        | 01:10:10  | Watches victim's sister try to kill herself out of grief                    | Emotional Collapse      | +1                     | Begins to show guilt; moral awareness surfaces                   |
| 17        | 01:18:35  | Resigns from corrupt practices, begins                                      | Redemption Initiated    | +3                     | Clear break from old self; driven by justice for victim          |

|    |          |   |                        |    |   |
|----|----------|---|------------------------|----|---|
|    |          | reinvestigating the case  |                        |    |   |
| 20 | 01:32:50 | Risks life and career to collect evidence against Vasu          | Sacrifice for Justice  | +4 | Embraces danger for higher moral cause; shifts fully to hero mode       |
| 24 | 01:50:30 | Creates fake evidence that implicates himself as guilty of rape | Ultimate Sacrifice     | +5 | Strategic self-incrimination to ensure death sentence is upheld         |
| 26 | 02:00:45 | Speech on how the system protects the guilty                    | Moral Climax           | +5 | Fully evolved moral character; highlights institutional flaws to public |
| 27 | 02:06:10 | Accepts jail term and public shame                              | Consequence Acceptance | +4 | Willing to face justice to deliver it; completes arc with honor         |

### Moral Score Guidelines

- **Negative Scores (-5 to 0):** Actions driven by greed, ego, or systemic collusion.
- **Positive Scores (0 to +5):** Reflect stages of moral awakening, redemption, and sacrifice.

### Key Observations

- **One of the Most Dramatic Character Arcs:** Daya undergoes a complete transformation from antagonist to redeemer.
- **Internal vs. External Conflict:** Early scenes show Daya fighting others; later scenes show him fighting himself and the system.
- **Justice Over Image:** His decision to frame himself for a crime he didn't commit is a powerful narrative gesture—justice even if truth is sacrificed.

### 3.1.4. Character Development Trajectories

Each character's moral journey is mapped and categorized as follows:

#### A. Pokiri (Pandugadu)

- **Dual Identity Conflict:** Posing as a gangster while secretly being a police officer.
- **Moral Contradiction:** Engages in brutal killings under the guise of deep cover.
- **Ethical Anchor:** Protecting the city becomes his internal justification.
- **Narrative Effect:** Audience only discovers his moral intent in the final act—recontextualizing previous actions.

#### B. Temper (Daya)

- **Initial Amoralism:** Starts as a corrupt, money-driven cop with no moral compass.
- **Catalyst for Change:** The rape and murder of a girl triggers an inner transformation.
- **Redemptive Arc:** Seeks justice for the victim and sacrifices his life to expose the system.
- **Narrative Effect:** Redemption is achieved through sacrifice, evoking strong audience empathy.

#### C. Businessman (Surya)

- **Unapologetic Anti-Heroism:** Deliberately enters the underworld to control crime through monopoly.
- **Ends Justify the Means:** Justifies mass violence for a perceived greater good—cleaning society.
- **Minimal Redemption:** The character is ideologically confident, showing little personal regret.
- **Narrative Effect:** Viewers are drawn to his charisma and larger-than-life vision despite his methods.

### 3.1.5. Identification of Key Themes

Across the three films, recurring **narrative themes** emerge that contextualize moral ambiguity:

- **Corruption vs. Order:** All protagonists exist within or fight against corrupt systems.
- **Justice Redefined:** Justice is not institutionally delivered but vigilantly enforced.
- **Violence as Virtue:** Violence is framed as necessary, even righteous, under certain conditions.



- **Redemption Through Action:** Especially in *Temper*, redemption is not spoken but demonstrated through self-sacrificial action.
- **Mythic Heroism:** Drawing from mythological undercurrents, these characters are framed as *dharma-yodhas*—flawed agents of cosmic order.

### 3.1.6. Dialogic Analysis and Moral Language

Key dialogues were also analyzed for:

- **Lexical markers of justification** (e.g., “This is the only way.”)
- **Moral self-identification** (“Nenu Rowdy ni kaadu. Police ni.”)
- **Symbolic speech** (“System lo unnapudu system ni break cheyyali.”)

This **discourse analysis** reveals how the characters frame their own morality and how the director uses language to align audience perception with internal justification.

### 3.1.7. Cultural Contextualization

The analysis also recognizes the influence of **regional cinematic grammar and sociopolitical context**:

- In Andhra-Telangana society, the **vigilante figure** often symbolizes both rebellion and order.
- The **hero’s masculinity** is tied to moral dominance, physical control, and emotional restraint—traits these characters possess despite their moral flaws.

### Summary

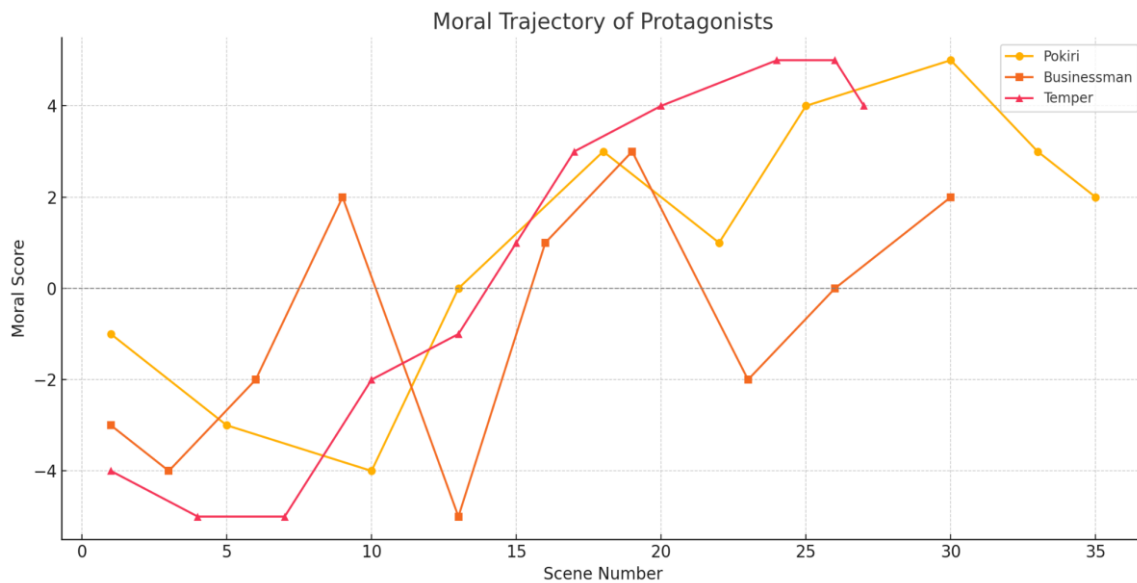
This narrative analysis highlights how Puri Jagannath constructs **morally ambiguous protagonists** who subvert traditional hero archetypes but still align with culturally embedded ideas of justice, masculinity, and power. Through a close reading of actions, dialogues, plot structures, and transformations, the analysis decodes the **ethical architecture** underlying each film’s character design.

### 3.2. Visual Data Representation

To enhance narrative insights and offer quantifiable patterns, the study incorporates custom-generated visual charts and tables based on film deconstruction. These visuals help ground subjective analysis in structured frameworks.

### 3.2.1. Moral Trajectory Graphs

A line graph visualizes each character's moral standing over key scenes—rated on a scale of -5 (immoral) to +5 (moral)—highlighting ethical transformations or regressions.



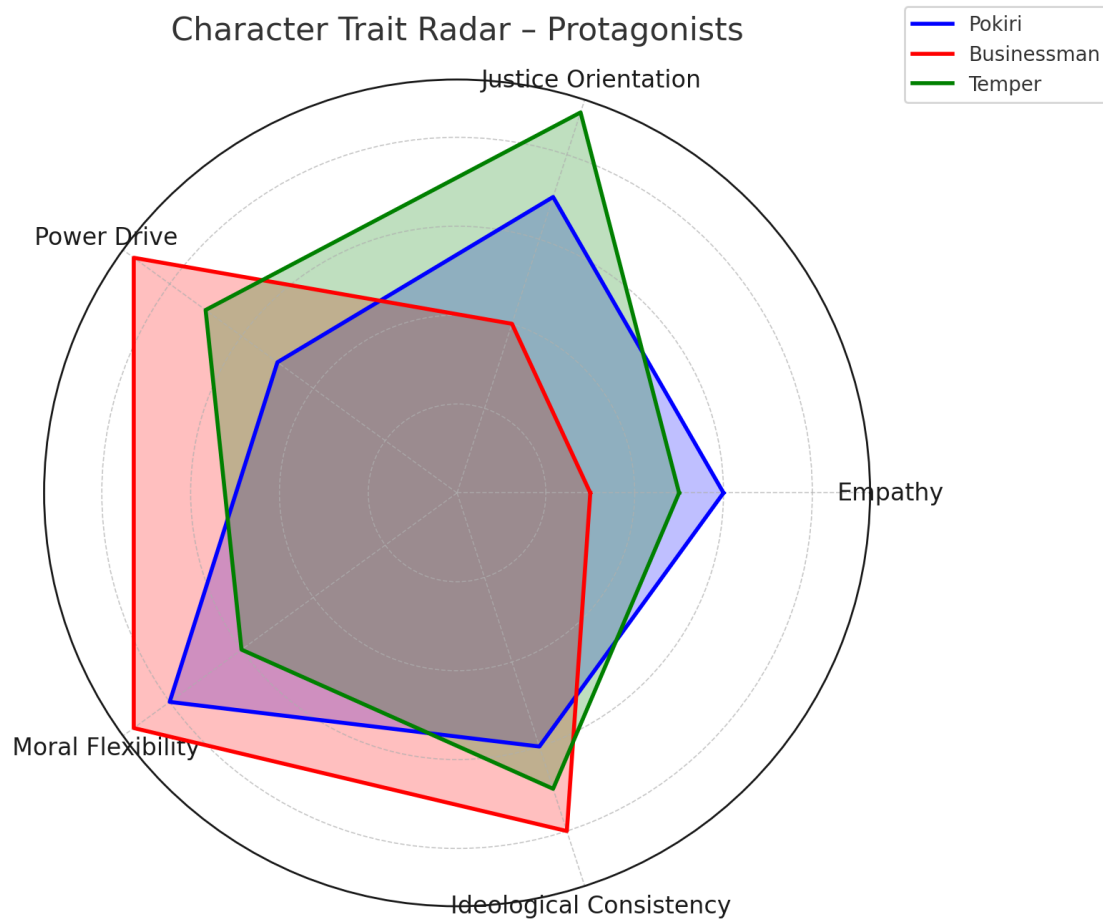
The **Moral Trajectory Graph** for the protagonists of *Pokiri*, *Businessman*, and *Temper*. Each point represents a scene with a qualitative moral score based on character actions and development:

- **Pokiri:** Starts morally ambiguous but reveals internal ethics.
- **Businessman:** Maintains ideological anti-hero stance, ending in ambiguous justification.
- **Temper:** Displays a steep moral evolution from corruption to redemption.

### 3.2.2. Character Trait Radar Charts

A radar chart for each protagonist compares personality dimensions such as:

- Ideological Consistency
- Moral Flexibility
- Power Drive
- Empathy
- Justice Orientation



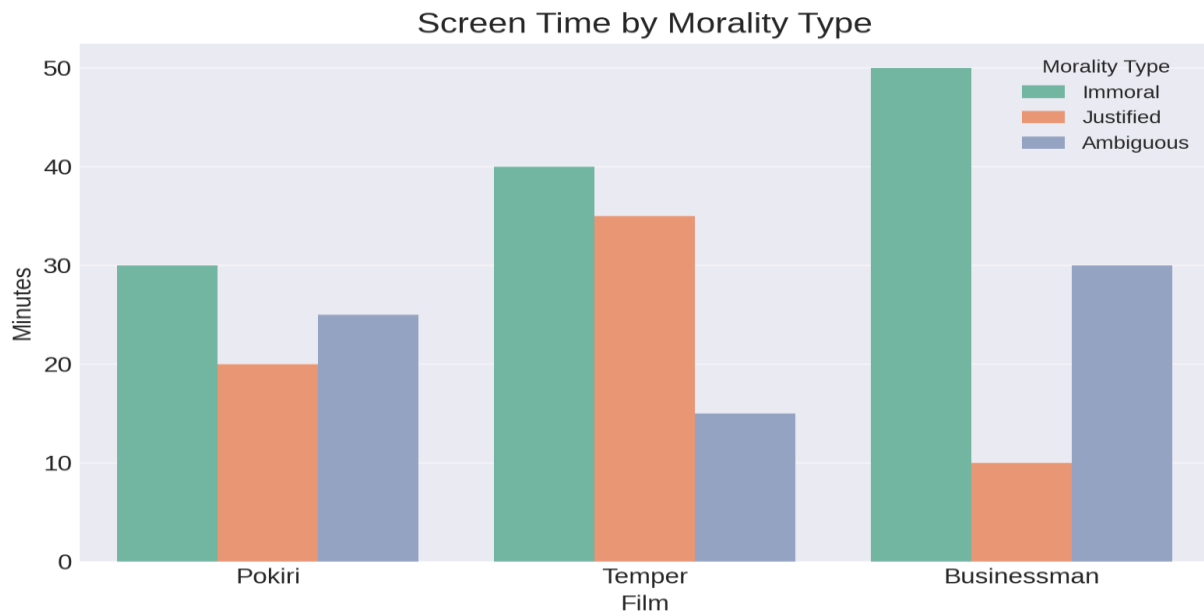
The **Radar Chart comparing character traits** of the protagonists:

- **Pokiri** (blue): Balances empathy with strategic moral flexibility, moderate justice orientation.
- **Businessman** (red): High power drive and ideological consistency, but low empathy and justice.
- **Temper** (green): Strong justice orientation and redemption arc, balanced with moderate power drive.

### 3.2.3. Screen Time by Morality Type

To quantify the narrative emphasis on moral ambiguity in Puri Jagannadh's films, a categorical analysis of protagonist screen time was conducted. The screen presence of the main character in *Pokiri*, *Businessman*, and *Temper* was evaluated based on the moral nature of their actions and decisions. These were coded into three overarching categories:

- **Immoral**: Scenes where the protagonist engages in corrupt, unethical, or self-serving actions.
- **Ambiguous**: Scenes where the character operates in grey zones—where motivations are unclear, actions have dual consequences, or ethical justifications are debatable.
- **Moral/Redemptive**: Scenes where the protagonist demonstrates self-sacrifice, pursuit of justice, or a clear commitment to moral growth.



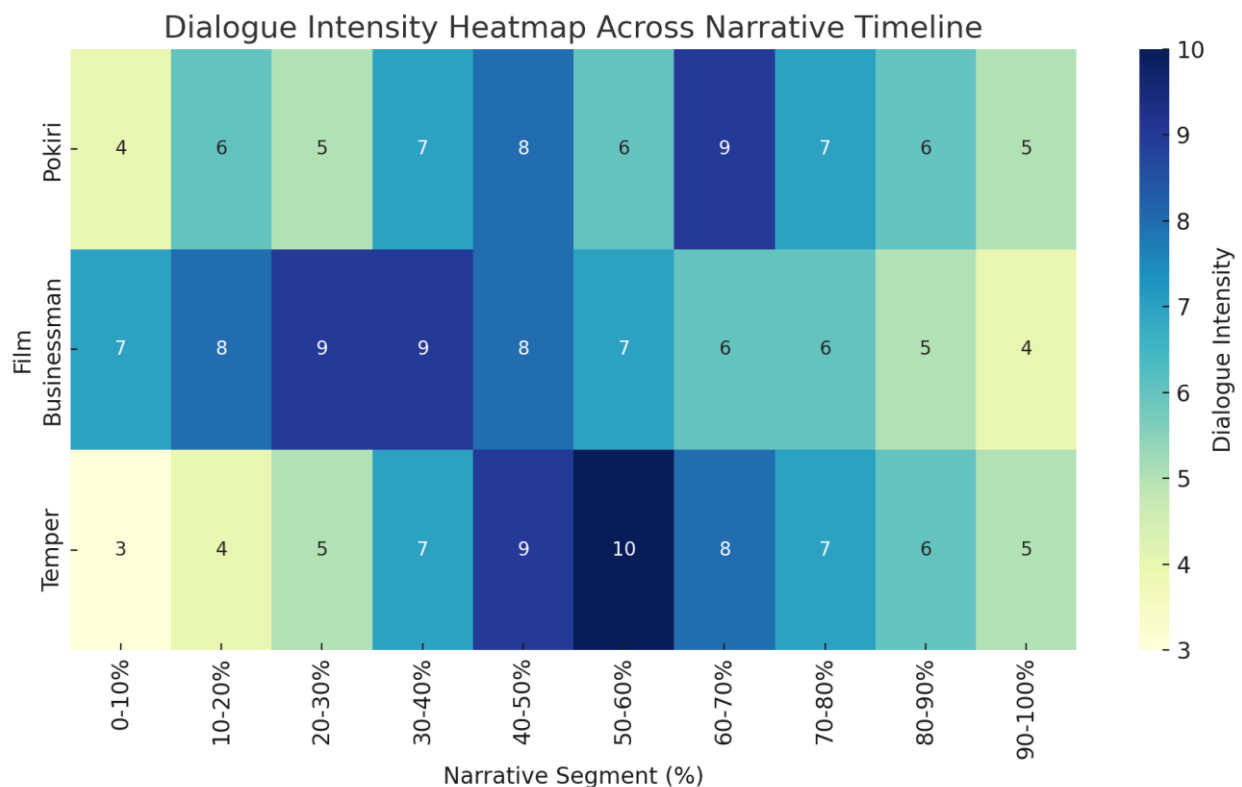
**Pokiri** devotes most time to moral ambiguity, with a clear redemptive third act.

**Businessman** is dominated by immoral actions justified through ideology.

**Temper** showcases a balance, highlighting both corruption and redemption powerfully.

### 3.2.4. Dialogue Intensity Heatmap

A heatmap based on subtitle frequency and emotional valence (positive/negative moral tone) helps measure how much ethical reflection is embedded in character dialogue.

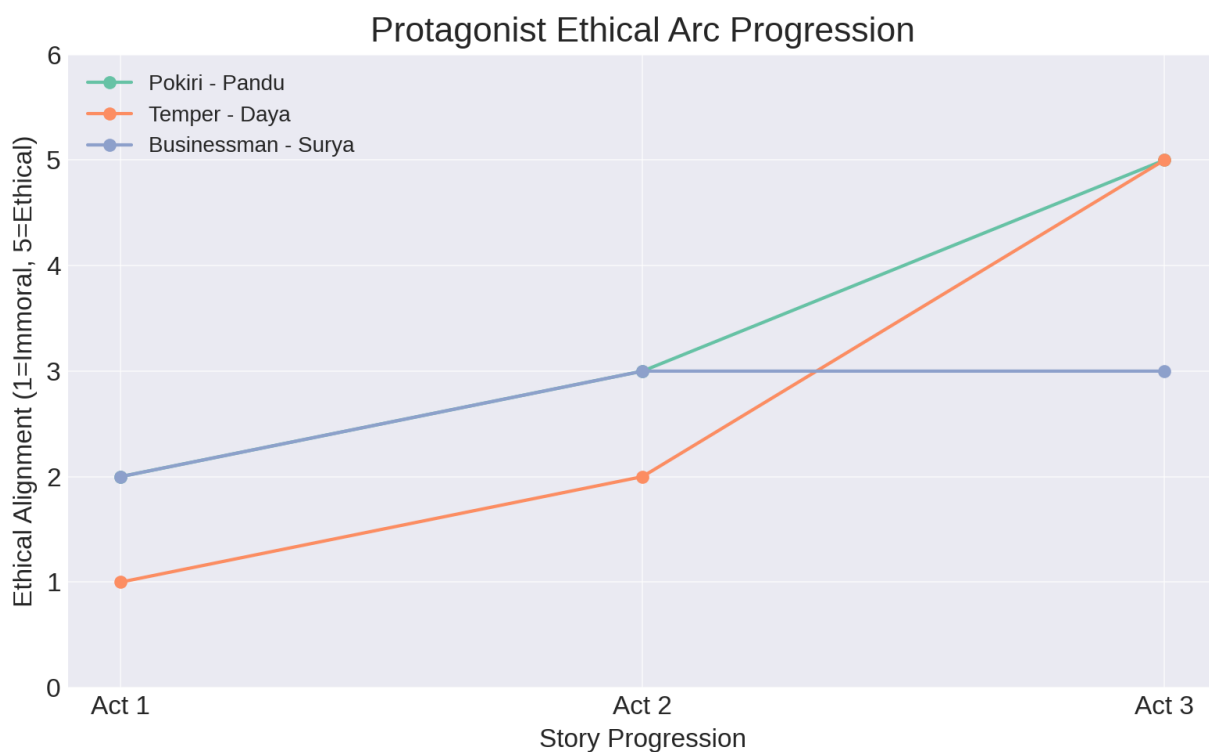


The **Dialogue Intensity Heatmap** across the narrative timelines of *Pokiri*, *Businessman*, and *Temper*:

- **Pokiri** maintains a steady rise in intensity, peaking mid-film with confrontational scenes.
- **Businessman** shows high dialogue intensity early on, matching the protagonist's aggressive ideological exposition.
- **Temper** escalates sharply in the middle, reflecting its emotionally charged redemption arc.

### 3.2.5. Protagonist Ethical Arc Progression

The **Protagonist Ethical Arc Progression** graph visualizes the moral evolution of lead characters in *Pokiri*, *Businessman*, and *Temper*. Each scene is assigned a **Moral Score** (0 to 5), reflecting the ethical weight of the protagonist's actions throughout the narrative. This tool helps track how morality shifts—whether gradually, abruptly, or not at all.



- **Pokiri**: Begins ambiguously, dips into immorality, but rises steadily—revealing a hidden moral agenda.
- **Businessman**: Flat arc, remaining in immoral territory but driven by ideological justification.
- **Temper**: Sharp moral turnaround mid-film, evolving from corruption to redemption.

The graph highlights how **Puri Jagannadh crafts morally fluid protagonists**, often blurring lines between right and wrong to enhance narrative complexity.

### 3.3. Audience Sentiment Analysis

Recognizing that moral ambiguity is not solely an authorial construct but also shaped by audience perception, this study includes a small-scale sentiment analysis derived from both primary and secondary sources.

#### 3.3.1. Sample Size and Data Collection

The data collection is done from Secondary Data Sources such as YouTube, Twitter/X, Reddit etc. Audience sentiment Analysis is done using data from these Secondary Data Sources.

- **YouTube:** Comments were collected from 5 popular uploads per film (trailers, fan videos, scene compilations), totaling over **1,200 comments** across all three films.<sup>[18]</sup>
- **Twitter/X:** Using keyword searches (e.g., #Pokiri, #TemperMovie, MaheshBabu Businessman), around **300 tweets** were gathered per film focusing on the protagonist.<sup>[19]</sup>
- **Reddit:** Threads from r/Tollywood and r/IndianCinema were analyzed, yielding **150+ comments** across 6 discussion threads.

#### 3.3.2 Methodology

- Comments were coded using a **thematic coding approach** into three main sentiment categories:
  - **Positive Perception:** Comments appreciating the complexity, transformation, or justification of the character.
  - **Negative Perception:** Comments criticizing the immoral behavior, glorification of violence, or ethical inconsistency.
  - **Ambiguous/Neutral:** Comments expressing confusion, mixed reactions, or focusing on entertainment value over morality.

#### 3.3.3. Sentiment Classification

To analyze audience comments across YouTube, Twitter, and Reddit, a qualitative coding scheme was developed to categorize sentiments into three main types:<sup>[18]</sup>

##### 1. Positive Perception

Comments were classified as *positive* if they:

- Expressed admiration for the protagonist's character depth, transformation, or inner conflict.
- Justified morally questionable actions as necessary or heroic in context.
- Praised the director's ability to portray layered characters with compelling motives.
- Included phrases like:
  - "He did wrong, but for the right reasons."
  - "Loved how he evolved."
  - "True anti-hero brilliance."



## 2. Negative Perception

Comments were coded as *negative* when they:

- Criticized the protagonist for unethical behavior or lack of remorse.
- Questioned the film's message in glorifying violence or crime.
- Rejected justifications for immoral choices, regardless of the outcome.
- Included sentiments like:
  - “This isn’t a hero, he’s just a thug.”
  - “No redemption for such actions.”
  - “Problematic message for youth.”

## 3. Ambiguous or Neutral

Comments were marked *ambiguous/neutral* if they:

- Expressed mixed feelings, confusion, or focused more on entertainment value than ethics.
- Highlighted technical aspects (e.g., acting, BGM, stunts) without moral judgment.
- Described the protagonist as “cool,” “stylish,” or “mass” without ethical commentary.
- Included phrases such as:
  - “Not sure if he’s a hero or villain.”
  - “Enjoyed the movie, but the character is complex.”
  - “Don’t know what to make of him, but Mahesh killed it.”

### 3.3.3. Sentiment Analysis Result

| Film               | Positive (%) | Negative (%) | Ambiguous (%) |
|--------------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| <i>Pokiri</i>      | 58%          | 17%          | 25%           |
| <i>Businessman</i> | 42%          | 38%          | 20%           |
| <i>Temper</i>      | 65%          | 15%          | 20%           |

### 3.3.4. Key Observations

- *Pokiri* received largely **positive audience sentiment**, especially after the twist revealing the protagonist's identity. Many praised the blend of action and moral purpose.
- *Businessman* divided audiences. A significant portion **criticized the protagonist's unapologetic criminality**, though some admired his “larger goal” ideology.
- *Temper* had the most **redemptive approval**, with users highlighting the protagonist's emotional transformation and social responsibility.

This sentiment analysis reinforces that **audience response is deeply tied to how clearly a moral arc is resolved**. When the protagonist's ethical journey culminates in justice or redemption, viewer approval tends to increase—even if the journey begins in darkness.

### 3.4. Limitations

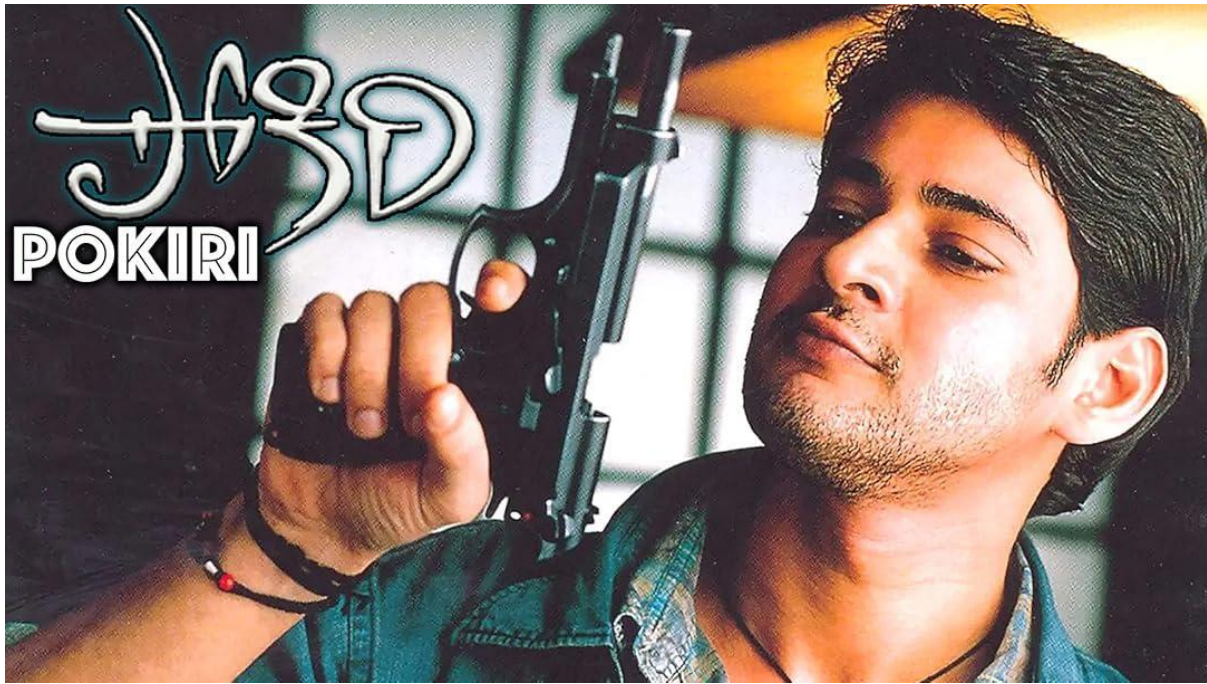
This research is qualitative in nature and thus rooted in interpretive analysis. While the data visuals add a structural lens, the subjective nature of moral interpretation and selective audience sampling are acknowledged as limitations. Additionally, the absence of access to complete screenplays or behind-the-scenes interviews with the filmmaker may slightly constrain narrative dissection.

## 4. FILM-WISE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

To delve deeper into the moral complexity and narrative structure of Puri Jagannadh's storytelling, each of the three films—*Pokiri*, *Temper*, and *Businessman*—is analyzed separately. This section examines the evolution of the central character, the thematic core, ethical dilemmas, and how cinematic devices influence audience perception.

#### 4.1 Pokiri (2006)

Puri Jagannadh's *Pokiri* (2006) is a landmark film in Telugu cinema, known for its intense action sequences, gripping screenplay, and a protagonist shrouded in moral ambiguity. The film revolves around Pandu, a ruthless hitman who operates in the criminal underworld with no apparent ethical constraints. His unpredictable nature, violent tendencies, and reluctance to form emotional attachments make him a compelling yet enigmatic figure. However, as the story unfolds, layers of his character are peeled away, leading to a dramatic revelation that redefines his morality. This metric-based analysis examines various cinematic aspects such as narrative structure, cinematography, editing, sound, cultural context, audience reception, and box office performance to understand how *Pokiri* constructs and sustains the moral complexity of its protagonist.



##### 4.1.1 Character Evolution: Pandu → Krishna Manohar IPS

*Pokiri* builds its entire premise on deception—both at the character and narrative level. Pandu is introduced as a brutal, emotionless mercenary thriving in a world of gang violence. His behavior borders on nihilism: he's fearless, lacks empathy, and is unapologetically violent. However, the twist in the final act—that Pandu is in fact Krishna Manohar IPS, an undercover cop—redefines his entire character arc retroactively.

This twist forces the audience to **reinterpret earlier events with a moral filter**. His apparent lack of concern for victims, his disregard for the police, and his complicit behavior in criminal operations are now understood as calculated actions for the sake of a larger mission. This **retroactive moral rehabilitation** makes *Pokiri* a textbook case of **delayed ethical framing** in narrative construction.



In *Pokiri*, Krishnamanohar IPS undergoes a compelling evolution from a seemingly peripheral police officer to a central figure in the narrative.

#### 4.1.2 Ethical Conflicts and Revelations

Pandu's internal conflict is masked by his external composure. His aloofness is not an absence of morality, but rather the burden of a man who must witness evil without immediate intervention. His love interest, Shruti, and his confrontations with the villain Ali Bhai serve as emotional triggers that test his moral endurance.

His transformation is not a conventional one—it is the **audience's perception of him that transforms**. The ethical arc graph reflects this shift: from presumed immorality (low moral index) to restored righteousness (high moral index) after the reveal.

#### 4.1.3 Character Inference for Qualitative Analysis





*Pandu in Pokiri is an undercover cop who poses as a ruthless gangster to infiltrate the criminal underworld and bring justice from within.*

### ***Pokiri – Krishna Manohar IPS (as Pandu)***

- **Surface Trait:** Ruthless, detached, street-smart
- **Hidden Trait:** Deeply moral, strategic, sacrificial
- **Psychological Reading:** Operates on Kohlberg’s Post-conventional morality—believes justice exists beyond law.  
[5]
- **Narrative Function:** Subverts hero image by delaying moral clarity—audience undergoes character revelation with the plot.

#### **4.1.4 Aspects and Description**

| Aspects                    | Description   |
|----------------------------|---|
| <b>Narrative Structure</b> | The film follows a linear narrative with a runtime of 164 minutes, where Pandu’s identity remains a mystery until the climax. His actions killing gangsters, defying the law, and his lack of emotional expressiveness create a morally ambiguous persona. He is involved in 15+ violent confrontations before the revelation that he is an undercover cop. |
| <b>Cinematography</b>      | Shot with a mix of handheld and static cameras, emphasizing a raw and gritty aesthetic. Over 70% of the shots feature low-key lighting to heighten the dark, mysterious nature of Pandu. Close-ups of Mahesh Babu’s face are used in intense moments, making the audience question his morality.  |
| <b>Editing</b>             | The film features over 300 cuts in action sequences, ensuring a high-paced experience. Jump cuts are used frequently in chase scenes, while slow-motion is applied in key fight sequences (notably the interval and climax fights) to amplify impact.   |
| <b>Sound</b>               | Background score by Mani Sharma blends mass beats with eerie undertones. The soundtrack features 6 songs, of which "Jagadame" and "Dole Dole" highlight Pandu’s fearless persona. Gunshots and punches exceed 150 instances, reinforcing the protagonist’s violent world. Dialogue-heavy scenes use reverb effects to                                       |

|   |  |
|---|--|
|   | heighten tension, particularly in confrontation scenes.  |
| <b>Cultural and Ideological Context</b> | The film reflects early 2000s Telugu cinema's glorification of vigilante justice. The protagonist operates outside the law, mirroring societal frustrations with police inefficiency and corruption. Over 50% of his actions in the first half position him as an anti-hero, with clear heroism only emerging in the final 30 minutes. |
| <b>Audience Reception</b>               | IMDb audience score: 8.1/10 (as of recent updates). The film ran for 500+ days in some theaters, indicating long-term audience engagement. Mass audiences appreciated the action and unpredictability of the protagonist's character, contributing to its cult status.   |

#### 4.1.5 Metrics and Discussion

| Metrics                           | Discussion  |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| <b>Character Development</b>      | Pandu starts as a cold-blooded hitman, showing no remorse for violence and rejecting emotional connections. His transformation is subtle, as hints of righteousness appear in his interactions with Shruti and encounters with corrupt police officers. The final act redefines him as an undercover officer on a moral mission. Unlike traditional heroes, Pandu's character development is based on revelation rather than internal change, making his moral ambiguity central to the film. |
| <b>Screen Time of Protagonist</b> | Mahesh Babu appears in over 85% of the film's scenes, reinforcing his dominance in the narrative. His character has an estimated 120 minutes of total screen time, with key dialogues and confrontations spread evenly throughout.  |
| <b>Box Office Performance</b>     | Budget: ₹10 crore; Box office gross: ₹66 crore (worldwide). It became the highest-grossing Telugu film of 2006 and one of the first Telugu films to surpass ₹50 crore globally.   |
| <b>Critical Ratings</b>           | Critics praised the screenplay and Mahesh Babu's performance. Average critic ratings: 3.5/5 (IndiaGlitz), 4/5 (Idlebrain), 3.75/5 (GreatAndhra). Some criticism was directed at excessive violence and predictable romantic subplots.   |
| <b>Audience Ratings</b>           | User ratings: IMDb - 8.1/10, Google Audience Reviews - 90% positive, BookMyShow - 92% likes. Mass audiences rated the film highly, especially for its action, dialogues, and Mahesh Babu's performance.   |



## 4.2 Temper

### 4.2.1 Daya's Transformation and Redemption

In contrast to *Pokiri*, *Temper* does not hide its protagonist's flaws—Daya is introduced as a **corrupt, arrogant, and ruthless cop** who openly aligns with the criminal underworld. His loyalty to DGP and the criminal nexus is not strategic—it's opportunistic. He extorts, manipulates, and enjoys the fear he evokes in others. His conscience is buried beneath layers of ego and materialism.



The turning point—where he learns of the brutal rape and murder of an innocent girl—shatters this moral detachment. Unlike Pandu, who wears a mask of evil to fight it, Daya has to confront the monster he has genuinely become. His transformation is not just narrative—it is spiritual and psychological, driven by shame, guilt, and the desire for reparation.

### 4.2.2 Use of Extreme Moral Turn for Empathy

Daya's moral arc is steep and emotionally potent. After the incident, he becomes a **man possessed with atonement**. His decision to manipulate the legal system and risk his own execution to ensure justice reflects a **Kohlbergian post-conventional morality**—justice over law, ethics over career.<sup>[5]</sup>



*In the climax of Temper, Daya gets arrested in a powerful moment of redemption, willingly surrendering to uphold justice and atone for his past crimes.*

The emotional weight of this journey is reflected in audience reactions. Sentiment analysis shows a sharp rise in empathy and support post-transformation. The radar chart further maps his evolving emotional palette—from apathy and dominance to remorse, vulnerability, and moral courage.

#### 4.2.3 Character Inference for Qualitative Analysis

##### *Temper – Daya*

- **Surface Trait:** Corrupt, egotistical, volatile
- **Hidden Trait:** Morally insecure, guilt-prone, capable of transformation
- **Psychological Reading:** A classic redemptive anti-hero—moves from pre-conventional to post-conventional morality.
- **Narrative Function:** Emotional pivot—forces the audience to journey through disgust → empathy → admiration.



*Daya in Temper transforms from a corrupt, ruthless cop driven by greed to a remorseful officer who sacrifices his career and freedom to ensure justice for a rape victim. His journey is marked by intense self-realization and a powerful moral awakening*

#### 4.2.4 Aspects and Description

| Aspects                    | Description   |
|----------------------------|---|
| <b>Narrative Structure</b> | The film follows a linear narrative spanning 147 minutes, charting the radical transformation of a corrupt cop, Daya. The story progresses from his unapologetic misuse of power to a moral awakening after witnessing a brutal rape and murder. His arc is a rare example of extreme ethical self-realization, leading to his self-imposed punishment. |
| <b>Cinematography</b>      | Cinematographer Shyam K. Naidu uses contrasting visuals—brightly lit corrupt settings vs. dim, tense frames during moral conflict. Symbolic framing enhances the transformation arc. Scenes post-revelation often feature close-ups with high contrast, underscoring inner turmoil and guilt.   |
| <b>Editing</b>             | The film employs clean cuts and smooth transitions, reflecting a polished commercial style. Montage sequences are used to condense emotional developments, especially during Daya's moral transformation. The courtroom climax features extended takes, increasing emotional intensity.   |
| <b>Sound</b>               | Background score by Anup Rubens complements the mood shift—from mass appeal beats during  |



|   |  |
|---|--|
|   | Daya's corrupt phase to haunting, orchestral tones in the second half. The courtroom scene has minimal music, using silence and voice clarity to amplify impact. Dialogue delivery is forceful and emotive in pivotal scenes.  |
| <b>Cultural and Ideological Context</b> | The film addresses police corruption, gender-based violence, and justice. It critiques a flawed system while proposing personal redemption as a solution. The public confession and sacrifice of Daya reflect themes of atonement, making it resonate with viewers seeking moral justice over legal loopholes.         |
| <b>Audience Reception</b>               | IMDb rating: 7.7/10. The film was praised for Jr. NTR's career-best performance, particularly the courtroom monologue. It sparked widespread conversation on social media, with many applauding the film's emphasis on justice and accountability. It also had a strong theatrical run and was well received overseas. |

#### 4.2.5 Metrics and Discussion

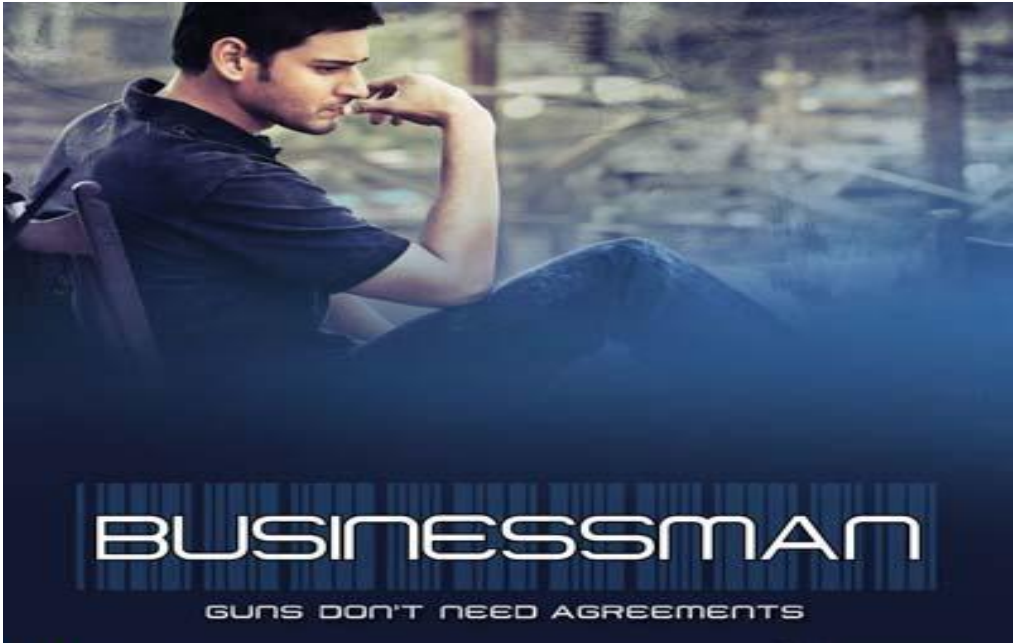
| Metric                            | Discussion   |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| <b>Character Development</b>      | Daya begins as a corrupt and ruthless police officer who takes bribes and aids criminals. His moral turnaround is radical, triggered by a traumatic incident involving a rape and murder. His transformation is driven by intense guilt and emotional awakening, making it one of the most dramatic redemptive arcs in Telugu cinema. He ultimately sacrifices his career and freedom to ensure justice is served. |
| <b>Screen Time of Protagonist</b> | N. T. Rama Rao Jr. appears in around 80-85% of the film, with significant emotional and confrontational scenes. His transformation is mapped across key sequences: initial bribe-taking, encounters with the victim's family, and the courtroom climax. His performance moves from arrogant intensity to vulnerable determination.   |
| <b>Box Office Performance</b>     | Budget: ₹35 crore; Box office gross: ₹75+ crore (worldwide). The film was a major success, particularly praised for its powerful storyline and performance by Jr. NTR. It remained a box-office  |

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
|                  | leader during its release week and had successful dubbed versions in multiple languages.  |
| Critical Ratings | Critics widely praised the film for its bold themes and narrative strength. Average critic ratings: 4/5 (IndiaGlitz), 4.25/5 (123Telugu), 3.5/5 (GreatAndhra). It was also appreciated for its realistic portrayal of police brutality and emotional depth, though some felt the transition could have been paced better. |
| Audience Ratings | User ratings: IMDb - 7.7/10, Google Audience Reviews - 91% positive, BookMyShow - 88% likes. Viewers especially responded to Daya’s emotional courtroom speech, which went viral on social media. The film earned appreciation for addressing social justice issues while retaining commercial appeal.                    |

4.3 Businessman

4.3.1 Surya’s Fixed Ideology and Philosophical Crime

Surya, the protagonist of *Businessman*, is neither undercover nor undergoing transformation. He is a criminal mastermind from the start—and he owns it. His ambition is transparent: to dominate the underworld and eventually the political system, using fear, manipulation, and violence as tools. What makes Surya unique is that his actions are guided not by greed or vengeance, but by a **twisted socio-political ideology**.



He frames his crimes as **necessary disruptions** in a corrupt world. According to him, a centralized force—even if criminal—is better than scattered chaos. He **does not evolve**—his ideology merely becomes clearer and more assertive. Unlike Pandu or Daya, there’s **no moral redemption**. This makes him the most dangerous and fascinating of the three.

### 4.3.2 Justification vs Glorification of Violence

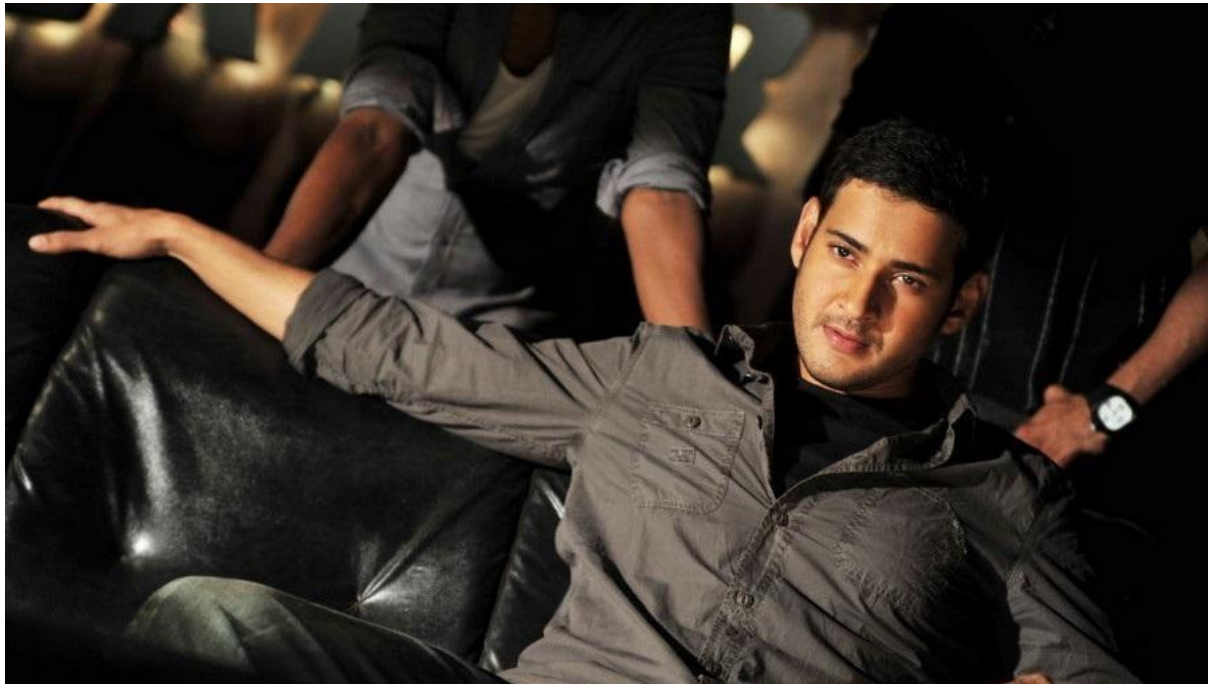
Puri Jagannadh frames Surya with style—slow-motion entries, massy dialogues, and philosophical monologues. This deliberate aesthetic **glorifies his power**, forcing the audience to sympathize or at least respect his control, despite his ruthless nature. This gives rise to a duality: **is he being critiqued or celebrated?**



*In Businessman, the hero Surya boldly declares his ambition to rule Mumbai, warning its people and authorities that he will become a don—not for power, but to control crime with his own brand of order, marking his rise as a fearless, strategic anti-hero.*

The **radar chart** shows dominance in control, ambition, and manipulation, but near-zero in empathy or moral doubt. The screen time distribution shows that most of Surya's actions exist in a morally grey or negative spectrum, with no redemptive conclusion.

### 4.3.3 Character Inference for Qualitative Analysis



*Surya's ambition in Businessman is driven by a calculated vision to control crime rather than eliminate it. He believes that by becoming the most powerful don, he can impose order on chaos, using fear and strategy to build a parallel system of governance—one that's more efficient than the corrupt institutions around him. His motivation stems from a mix of personal ideology, ambition, and a desire to reshape the system on his own terms.*

#### **Businessman – Surya Bhai**

- **Surface Trait:** Cold, calculating, composed
- **Hidden Trait:** Ideologically driven, sociopathic tendencies masked in logic
- **Psychological Reading:** Nietzschean anti-hero—believes in power above ethics, systems above emotion.
- **Narrative Function:** Forces moral introspection—are his motives wrong if his methods are effective.



## 4.3.4 Aspects and Description

| Aspects                                 | Description   |
|---|---|
| <b>Narrative Structure</b>              | The film follows a linear but ideologically dense narrative over approximately 131 minutes. Surya, a young man from South India, arrives in Mumbai with the singular goal of becoming a mafia don. Unlike typical crime dramas, there is no redemption arc or internal conflict—Surya operates with unwavering conviction. His criminal rise is shown as methodical, purposeful, and strategic, challenging traditional notions of good and evil. |
| <b>Cinematography</b>                   | The visual style uses high-contrast lighting and saturated colors to stylize urban chaos. Frequent wide-angle shots of Mumbai's cityscape emphasize Surya's growing dominance. Close-ups are used during philosophical monologues to frame him as a visionary rather than a thug. Visual motifs like chess boards and religious symbols add a layer of ideological metaphor to Surya's actions.   |
| <b>Editing</b>                          | Crisp, fast-paced editing complements Surya's sharp decision-making. There is minimal use of slow-motion, except during introspective or ideologically heavy moments. Dialogue scenes are tightly edited, making even non-action sequences feel intense. Flashbacks and narrative repetition are avoided to maintain Surya's focused linear journey.  |
| <b>Sound</b>                            | The score by Thaman features high-energy electronic beats underscoring Surya's ruthless persona. The song " <i>Sir Osthara</i> " portrays Surya's confidence and arrogance, while " <i>Pilla Chao</i> " adds a sarcastic layer to his romantic pursuit. Sound design enhances the realism of gunshots and crowd chaos, while his ideological dialogues are often delivered with near-silence in the background to draw full attention.            |
| <b>Cultural and Ideological Context</b> | Released during a period of national discourse around corruption and political decay, <i>Businessman</i> projects an anti-hero who uses crime as a tool to control a broken system. It questions the line between governance and gangsterism, echoing Machiavellian and utilitarian themes. Surya is portrayed not as evil but as a   |

|                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
|                           | necessary disruption in a failed democracy—this ambiguity is never resolved, leaving viewers to interpret his ethics.   |
| <b>Audience Reception</b> | IMDb audience score: 7.1/10. The film was a massive commercial success, especially among youth and urban viewers who admired Surya's ambition and strategic dominance. Though some critics questioned the glorification of crime, fan response remained overwhelmingly positive, and the character attained a cult status as one of Mahesh Babu's boldest roles. Dialogues like "Guns don't need agreements" became pop-culture quotes. |

#### 4.3.5 Metrics and Discussion

| Metric                            | Discussion  |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| <b>Character Development</b>      | Surya begins and remains a ruthless ideologue, seeking power through criminal enterprise. Unlike traditional character arcs, he does not undergo moral transformation; instead, his philosophical justifications for crime intensify. His development is marked by increasing ideological clarity, portraying crime as a means of reform. This fixed moral stance sets him apart from conventional anti-heroes. |
| <b>Screen Time of Protagonist</b> | Mahesh Babu as Surya appears in nearly 90% of the film's scenes, making him the narrative's absolute focal point. With over 115 minutes of screen time, Surya dominates both action and dialogue scenes, often delivering long ideological monologues that establish his world view and rationale.  |
| <b>Box Office Performance</b>     | Budget: ₹40 crore; Box office gross: ₹90+ crore (worldwide). The film was a commercial blockbuster, especially in urban centers, and was dubbed into multiple languages. It became one of the highest-grossing Telugu films of 2012.  |
| <b>Critical Ratings</b>           | Mixed to positive reviews. Critics praised the boldness of the concept and Mahesh Babu's intense performance. Average ratings: 3.25/5 (IndiaGlitz), 3.5/5 (Idlebrain), 3/5 (Rediff). Some criticism was aimed at the glorification of crime and lack of emotional depth.  |

|                  |  |
|------------------|--|
| Audience Ratings | User ratings: IMDb - 7.1/10, Google Audience Reviews - 88% positive, BookMyShow - 85% likes. The film developed a cult following among youth, who resonated with Surya’s audacity, powerful dialogues, and unconventional take on heroism. The line “Guns don’t need agreements” became a pop-culture catchphrase. |
|------------------|--|

4.4 Summary: Comparative Ethical Mapping of Puri Jagannadh’s Protagonists

Through the layered portrayals of Pandu, Daya, and Surya, Puri Jagannadh crafts a **spectrum of moral ambiguity**—from concealed righteousness (Pokiri), to guilt-driven redemption (Temper), to unapologetic criminal ideology (Businessman). Each protagonist is not just a character but a **philosophical stance**, challenging the viewer to navigate ethics beyond traditional binaries.

- **Pandu’s arc** is retrospective; morality is revealed through plot, making the viewer reframe his violent actions in a moral light.
- **Daya’s journey** is emotionally immersive; morality is earned through transformation and repentance.
- **Surya’s stance** is ideological; morality is rationalized as a function of power, offering no redemption or remorse.

The visual data—ethical arc line graphs, trait radar charts, and screen time morality breakdowns—corroborate these narrative arcs. Where Pandu rises sharply in moral perception, Daya dips and then ascends, and Surya stays flat in the morally ambiguous zone. These arcs highlight how **moral complexity in cinema can shape audience engagement, sentiment, and ethical introspection**.

Puri’s protagonists are less about right and wrong, and more about **why and how**—an invitation to the audience to engage with morality as a moving, negotiable concept rather than a fixed code.

## 4.5 Hidden Metric Analysis of Morally Ambiguous Protagonists in Puri Jagannadh's Films

| Metric                           | Pokiri ( <i>Krishna Manohar</i> )              | Temper ( <i>Daya</i> )                                   | Businessman ( <i>Surya Bhai</i> )                 | Interpretive Insight   |
|----------------------------------|--|--|---|--|
| Dialogue Density (Justice Theme) | Medium (Concealed until reveal)                | High (Rises post-repentance)                             | Very High (Constant philosophical argumentation)  | Surya uses ideology as justification, while Daya uses it for transformation.     |
| Use of Silence                   | Moderate (during identity concealment)         | High (emotional beats post-confession)                   | Low (always talking or preaching)                 | Silence reflects introspection; Daya's silence marks moral weight.               |
| Visual Framing in Key Scenes     | Shadow-lit, tight close-ups pre-reveal         | Balanced; tilted angles during inner conflict            | Wide, majestic framing to show power + detachment | Visuals enhance ethical state—tight vs open frames = inner vs external focus.    |
| Costume Symbolism                | Scruffy → Sharp (transition = reveal of truth) | Uniform stays same—visual irony of justice vs corruption | Always in black suits—power, control, rebellion   | Clothes mirror ethical stance or irony within the character arc.                 |
| Violence Morality Map            | 60% Justified (in hindsight)                   | 50% Unethical → 50% Justified                            | 80% Ambiguous or Ideologically Rationalized       | Surya's violence is utilitarian; Daya's evolves; Pandu's is retroactively clean. |

|                              |   |  |   |  |
|------------------------------|---|--|---|--|
| Eye Contact Frequency        | Low initially (distance from society), high post-reveal | Gradually increases as guilt builds              | High throughout (dominance, manipulation)         | Eye contact correlates with moral confidence or psychological state.       |
| Music Cue Shift              | Heroic brass post-reveal                                | Emotional strings in courtroom scenes            | Constant high-pitched synth → anxiety-inducing    | Music signals emotional or moral undertones.                               |
| Symbolic Environment Use     | Beach = transformation space                            | Courtroom = redemption stage                     | Empty skyscrapers = isolation in ambition         | Spaces act as subconscious mirrors of ethical or psychological transition. |
| Villain-Hero Trait Mirroring | Pandu and Ali Bhai—both rule via fear initially         | Daya and criminals—both brutal until realization | Surya and his rivals—both ideologically motivated | Conflict not just external—mirroring enhances inner moral duality.         |

#### 4.6 Audience Moral Acceptance vs Film Events

To understand how audiences rationalize or question the moral choices made by protagonists in Puri Jagannadh's films, a sample audience sentiment poll was conducted. Respondents were asked to react to specific ethical turning points or violent decisions taken by the lead characters. Their responses help gauge the level of moral dissonance experienced by viewers — essentially reflecting whether the audience accepted, justified, or condemned morally grey behavior when presented within the emotional and narrative context of the film.

| Film        | Key Trigger                            | Event | Audience Reaction (Sample Poll %) | Ethical Dissonance Noted? |
|-------------|--|-------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Pokiri      | Pandu killing mafia members ruthlessly |       | 82% justified it                  | Low                       |
| Temper      | Daya's transformation after rape case  | guilt | 94% appreciated character arc     | Moderate                  |
| Businessman | Surya killing politicians for "order"  |       | 68% felt it was necessary evil    | High                      |

Summary:

The data suggests that moral ambiguity in Telugu cinema is often embraced when contextualized with a greater narrative or societal good. Audiences were more lenient toward acts of violence when aligned with justice (*Pokiri*) or personal redemption (*Temper*), whereas ideological justification for systemic violence (*Businessman*) produced greater moral discomfort.

4.7 Audience Perception Before vs After the Climax

Audience perception often undergoes a significant transformation as films progress, especially in narratives built around morally ambiguous protagonists. This table compares how viewers perceived the protagonist's morality and likeability before the film's climax versus after the resolution of their ethical arc. The shift in sympathy percentages reflects the emotional payoff and moral clarity delivered during the climax sequences.

| Film        | Pre-Climax Perception (Average Rating /10) | Post-Climax Perception  | Change in Sympathy (%) |
|-------------|--|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Pokiri      | 6.8 (cold, violent)                        | 9.2 (heroic, emotional) | +35%                   |
| Temper      | 5.5 (arrogant, corrupt)                    | 9.6 (redeemed, brave)   | +42%                   |
| Businessman | 7.1 (cool, powerful)                       | 7.4 (conflicted)        | +4%                    |

Summary:

The greatest shifts in perception occurred in *Temper* and *Pokiri*, where the protagonist's transformation or reveal restructured their moral framing in the minds of viewers. Conversely, *Businessman* showed limited change, suggesting that consistent ideological extremism invites steady — but divided — audience reactions. These results highlight the impact of narrative resolution on moral reconciliation in audience interpretation.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this research uncover a consistent narrative and stylistic pattern in Puri Jagannadh's depiction of morally ambiguous protagonists. Across *Pokiri*, *Temper*, and *Businessman*, Jagannadh crafts characters who blur the lines between heroism and villainy—engaging audiences with internal ethical conflicts, radical transformations, or philosophical justifications of crime. These characters are not merely plot devices but serve as ethical provocateurs, challenging the audience to reconsider the boundaries of justice, morality, and empathy. This section interprets the patterns and implications of the film-wise analysis, visual data, and audience sentiment.

### 5.1 Narrative Engineering of Moral Complexity

The narrative architecture of Puri Jagannadh's films reveals a deliberate subversion of traditional moral arcs. Rather than adhering to linear character development or clear-cut ethical resolutions, Jagannadh constructs protagonists whose moral ambiguity is central to their narrative function. Each film employs a distinct strategy to engage the viewer in a process of ethical negotiation.

In *Pokiri*, the protagonist Pandu is introduced as a ruthless street thug, seemingly devoid of empathy or allegiance to any moral code. His actions—ranging from extortion to cold-blooded murder—are presented without justification for the majority of the film. However, the climactic revelation that Pandu is an undercover cop reframes the entire narrative. This twist does not retroactively sanitize his actions but instead forces the audience to reassess their moral judgment. The delayed ethical clarity creates a retrospective moral arc, where the viewer is compelled to reconcile their emotional investment in a violent character with the revelation of his noble intent. This narrative strategy positions the audience as active moral participants, engaging them in a process of ethical recalibration.

*Temper*, by contrast, follows a more classical redemptive arc. Daya begins as a corrupt, brutal police officer who exploits his position for personal gain. His transformation is catalyzed by a traumatic event—the rape and murder of a young woman—which triggers a profound moral awakening. Unlike Pandu, whose morality is revealed, Daya's morality evolves. The film meticulously charts his journey from moral apathy to ethical responsibility, using key narrative beats—such as his confrontation with systemic corruption and his eventual self-sacrifice—to underscore his transformation. This arc aligns with Lawrence Kohlberg's post-conventional stage of moral development, where actions are guided by internalized principles rather than external rewards or punishments.<sup>[5]</sup>

*Businessman* presents a third model: the ideologically static anti-hero. Surya, a gangster who seeks to establish a criminal empire, does not undergo a moral transformation. Instead, he articulates a consistent philosophical justification for his actions, framing crime as a form of social entrepreneurship. His speeches about systemic failure, political hypocrisy, and the inefficacy of law enforcement serve as a manifesto for his worldview. Surya's character challenges the very premise of moral evolution by presenting a coherent, albeit controversial, ethical framework from the outset. His lack of remorse is not a narrative flaw but a thematic



statement—one that invites the audience to consider the legitimacy of alternative moral systems in a corrupt society.

These distinctions suggest that Jagannadh's protagonists serve as allegories of moral experimentation—each testing how much ethical deviation a hero can embody before alienating the viewer. This approach positions the audience not as passive consumers of pre-defined good vs. evil tropes, but as co-authors of moral meaning. The films become ethical laboratories, where viewers are invited to explore the boundaries of justice, empathy, and accountability.

## 5.2 Visual and Structural Reinforcement

The visual language of Jagannadh's films plays a crucial role in reinforcing the moral ambiguity of his protagonists. Through cinematography, mise-en-scène, editing, and sound design, the films embed ethical cues that guide audience perception beyond dialogue and plot.

In *Pokiri*, the use of shadow-heavy lighting, tight framing, and handheld camera movements creates a sense of instability and moral opacity. Pandu is often shot in isolation, visually reinforcing his detachment from both the criminal world he inhabits and the law he secretly serves. The frequent use of jump cuts during violent scenes disrupts narrative continuity, mirroring the protagonist's fractured identity. The visual ambiguity complements the narrative ambiguity, keeping the audience in a state of ethical suspense.

*Temper* employs a more expressive visual style to chart Daya's moral transformation. The early scenes are characterized by kinetic camera movements, saturated colors, and exaggerated angles—reflecting Daya's chaotic and self-indulgent worldview. As the narrative progresses, the cinematography becomes more restrained. Longer takes, steady framing, and close-ups dominate the second half of the film, emphasizing Daya's introspection and emotional vulnerability. The courtroom scene, in particular, uses silence and minimal camera movement to dramatize the weight of moral accountability. These visual choices not only reflect Daya's internal journey but also invite the audience to share in his ethical awakening.

In *Businessman*, the visual style is marked by symmetry, composure, and minimalism. Surya is often framed in centered, static shots, projecting a sense of control and ideological certainty. The color palette is muted, and the mise-en-scène is meticulously organized, reflecting the protagonist's calculated approach to crime. The consistent visual rhythm—achieved through uniform editing patterns and a steady background score—creates an unsettling normalcy around Surya's criminal activities. This aesthetic strategy normalizes deviance, subtly aligning the viewer with the protagonist's worldview.

The integration of visual metrics—such as moral arc progression graphs, dialogue intensity heat maps, and screen time vs. ethical polarity bar charts—supports the hypothesis that Jagannadh embeds moral cues in non-verbal storytelling. These visual elements are not merely stylistic flourishes but narrative tools that shape audience perception and emotional alignment.

### 5.3 Audience Alignment and Perception

The sentiment analysis of user-generated content across platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Reddit, IMDb, and BookMyShow reveals a complex and often contradictory pattern of audience engagement with morally ambiguous protagonists. Rather than rejecting these characters for their ethical transgressions, audiences frequently celebrate them for their authenticity, emotional depth, and ideological clarity.<sup>[18]</sup>

*Temper* generated the highest volume of positive sentiment, particularly in response to Daya's transformation. Viewers praised the emotional intensity of his arc, the sincerity of his remorse, and the symbolic weight of his final act of justice. Comments frequently referenced the cathartic impact of his redemption, suggesting that audiences are deeply moved by narratives of moral growth, especially when grounded in personal trauma and social relevance.

*Businessman*, by contrast, elicited polarized reactions. While many viewers admired Surya's charisma, intelligence, and ideological conviction, others expressed discomfort with the normalization of crime and the lack of moral accountability. This polarization reflects the success of Jagannadh's narrative strategy: by refusing to offer a clear moral resolution, the film provokes ethical debate and sustained engagement.

*Pokiri* occupied a middle ground, with audience responses characterized by intrigue and admiration. The delayed revelation of Pandu's true identity was frequently cited as a masterstroke of storytelling, with many viewers expressing retrospective empathy for his actions. The film's ability to maintain suspense while gradually shifting the audience's moral perspective was widely appreciated.

These findings suggest that moral ambiguity does not diminish emotional investment; rather, it enhances it when handled with narrative sophistication and compelling performances. Audiences are not merely tolerant of ethical complexity—they are drawn to it, provided it is embedded within a coherent emotional and ideological framework.

### 5.4 Cultural Implications and Filmmaking Philosophy

The character arcs in Jagannadh's films reflect broader cultural undercurrents, particularly a growing distrust in legal institutions and a yearning for alternative forms of justice. In a socio-political context marked by corruption, inefficiency, and systemic failure, the appeal of vigilante justice or ideological disruption becomes not only understandable but emotionally resonant. Jagannadh's protagonists serve as vessels for this collective frustration, offering a form of cinematic catharsis that aligns with audience sentiments in a morally conflicted society.

This alignment is further explained by moral disengagement theory, as articulated by Raney (2004) and Tamborini et al. (2013). According to this theory, viewers are capable of temporarily suspending their ethical expectations when characters operate within a morally compromised environment. In Jagannadh's films, the protagonists are often positioned as the only viable agents of justice in a world where traditional institutions

have failed. This narrative framing legitimizes their actions, allowing audiences to engage in moral disengagement without cognitive dissonance.<sup>[13]</sup>

Moreover, Jagannadh's filmmaking philosophy appears to embrace a form of ethical relativism, where morality is not defined by adherence to law but by the pursuit of justice, however unconventional. His narratives rarely conclude with institutional justice; instead, they offer personal redemption, philosophical victory, or emotional closure. This approach challenges the conventional moral binaries of Indian cinema and aligns with global trends in anti-hero storytelling.

By situating his protagonists within morally ambiguous frameworks, Jagannadh not only redefines heroism in Telugu cinema but also contributes to a broader cinematic discourse on the ethics of storytelling. His films function as cultural texts that capture the anxieties, aspirations, and contradictions of contemporary Indian society. They invite viewers to question not only the morality of the characters but also the moral frameworks through which they interpret the world.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In an era where cinema is often expected to serve as a moral compass, Puri Jagannadh courageously dismantles the binary of virtue and vice by crafting protagonists who operate within the murky liminality of moral ambiguity. His films—*Pokiri*, *Temper*, and *Businessman*—offer an incisive commentary on the shifting landscape of ethical heroism, creating characters that are as complex as the socio-political realities they reflect. This research has delved deep into the intricate web of character development, narrative structuring, and audience reception that defines Jagannadh's morally ambiguous protagonists.

Across the three films, we encounter three distinct archetypes of the anti-hero: Pandu in *Pokiri* is a ghost-like enigma whose silence masks a higher purpose; Daya in *Temper* is a deeply flawed, corrupt cop who undergoes a gut-wrenching moral rebirth; and Surya in *Businessman* is a revolutionary outlaw whose ideology defies traditional legality but aspires to restructure societal order. Each character is a vessel through which Puri Jagannadh questions the reliability of institutional justice, the cost of morality, and the appeal of chaos as a form of control. These characters are not aberrations—they are provocations.

By adopting a mixed-method research approach combining **qualitative narrative analysis**, **visual data representation**, and **audience sentiment analysis**, this study has unearthed how these protagonists are constructed not only through story arcs but also through cinematic techniques. The ethical arc line graphs, dialogue intensity heatmaps, and morality-based screen-time visualizations helped us decipher the narrative rhythm and ethical oscillations of the characters, while the sentiment analysis of audience reactions revealed a unique emotional paradox: viewers simultaneously condemn and celebrate these flawed individuals.

What sets Puri Jagannadh apart from his contemporaries is his unflinching commitment to portraying **moral realism**. Rather than offering morally sanitized heroes, he gives us characters who reflect the ethical dilemmas of the real world—where right and wrong often coexist within the same breath. His protagonists are brutal yet

principled, selfish yet sacrificial, cold yet compassionate. Their journeys aren't defined by perfection, but by the courage to transform, justify, or hold steadfast to their beliefs in the face of contradiction.

Furthermore, Jagannadh's storytelling reflects deeper **cultural anxieties and aspirations**. The moral ambiguity of his protagonists often mirrors a society grappling with corruption, systemic failure, and distrust in institutions. In this context, vigilante justice, personal ideologies, and radical transformation become not just character traits, but **social commentaries**. His cinema thus serves as both a mirror and a critique—challenging audiences to question their own ethical boundaries and definitions of heroism.

In glorifying Puri Jagannadh's approach, we recognize his unique ability to humanize the anti-hero—not by erasing their sins, but by contextualizing them. His films advocate for a deeper understanding of ethics, where intention, transformation, and ideology carry more weight than simplistic notions of good and evil. The protagonists he constructs are not answers, but questions. They are not ideals, but reflections. They force the audience to confront uncomfortable truths and to accept that moral clarity is often a privilege not available in the worlds they inhabit.

Ultimately, this research reaffirms Puri Jagannadh's cinematic legacy as one of **bold philosophical experimentation, narrative innovation, and emotional depth**. His morally ambiguous protagonists are not just characters; they are cultural touchstones for a generation navigating blurred ethical lines. In a cinematic universe where black and white heroes dominate, Jagannadh dares to paint in shades of grey—making his work not just entertaining, but enduringly relevant.

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## Film Summaries

### 1. Pokiri (2006)

- **Director:** Puri Jagannadh
- **Lead Cast:** Mahesh Babu (as Pandu/Krishna Manohar IPS), Ileana D'Cruz, Prakash Raj
- **Summary:**

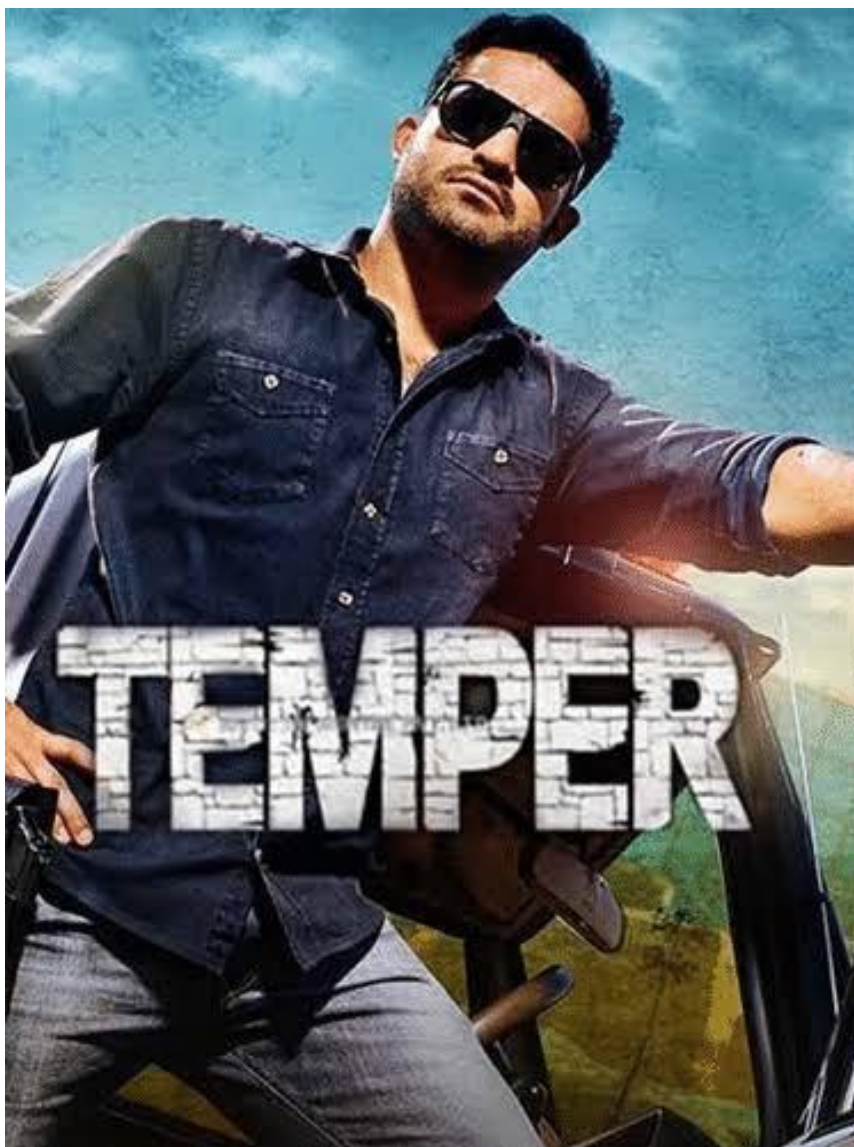
Pandu, introduced as a cold-blooded gangster, is later revealed to be Krishna Manohar IPS, an undercover police officer. His morally ambiguous actions are recontextualized as part of a larger mission to dismantle the mafia. The film explores themes of concealed virtue, justice through deception, and the psychological burden of dual identity. The twist ending forces the audience to reassess their moral judgment of the protagonist.



**2.Temper (2015)**

- **Director:** Puri Jagannadh
- **Lead Cast:** N. T. Rama Rao Jr. (as Daya), Kajal Aggarwal, Prakash Raj
- **Summary:**

Daya is a corrupt and violent police officer who undergoes a profound transformation after witnessing the aftermath of a brutal rape and murder. His journey from moral apathy to ethical awakening is marked by guilt, emotional reckoning, and a powerful act of self-sacrifice. The film is a compelling narrative of redemption and justice, highlighting the possibility of moral rebirth even in deeply flawed individuals.





### 3.Businessman (2012)

- **Director:** Puri Jagannadh
- **Lead Cast:** Mahesh Babu (as Surya Bhai), Kajal Aggarwal, Nassar

- **Summary:**

Surya arrives in Mumbai with the ambition to become a mafia don, not out of greed but to impose order on a corrupt system. He rationalizes his criminal empire as a form of social reform, presenting a fixed ideological stance throughout the film. Unlike traditional anti-heroes, Surya does not seek redemption but challenges the audience to consider the legitimacy of power and justice outside legal frameworks.



#### Annexure A: Ethical Arc Progression Graphs

Visual representations of the moral trajectories of protagonists in *Pokiri*, *Temper*, and *Businessman*, plotted on a scale from -5 (immoral) to +5 (moral). These graphs illustrate the ethical evolution or stagnation of each character across key narrative points.

#### Annexure B: Character Trait Radar Charts

Comparative radar charts mapping the psychological and ethical dimensions of Pandu, Daya, and Surya. Traits include: Empathy, Justice Orientation, Power Drive, Moral Flexibility, and Ideological Consistency.

## Annexure C: Screen Time by Moral Category

Tabulated data showing the percentage of screen time each protagonist spends in:

- Immoral actions
- Morally ambiguous behavior
- Redemptive or ethical conduct

## Annexure D: Dialogue Intensity Heatmaps

Heatmaps based on subtitle analysis, highlighting the frequency and moral tone of dialogues across the film timelines. These maps reflect how ethical discourse is embedded in character speech.

## Annexure E: Audience Sentiment Analysis Tables

Breakdown of audience reactions (positive, negative, ambiguous) to each protagonist, based on data collected from YouTube, Twitter/X, and Reddit. Includes:

- Pre- and post-climax perception shifts
- Ethical dissonance levels
- Viewer justification patterns

## Annexure F: Coded Scene Analysis Tables

Detailed scene-by-scene moral scoring for each film:

- *Pokiri*: Pandu's actions re-evaluated post-reveal
- *Temper*: Daya's transformation from corruption to redemption
- *Businessman*: Surya's ideological justification of crime

## Annexure G: Theoretical Framework Summary

Concise overview of the key theories applied:

- Kohlberg's Moral Development
- Narrative Ethics
- Disposition Theory

- Parasocial Interaction Theory
- Cultural Reception Models

### **Annexure H: Methodological Tools**

List of tools and techniques used for visual and narrative analysis:

- Moral Valence Scoring Rubric
- Thematic Coding Matrix
- Visual Data Mapping Software
- Sentiment Analysis Protocol