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Beyond the male gaze: Balu mahendra's feminine sensibility and the ethics of seeing

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Abstract

This research analyzed Balu Mahendra's film practice as a departure from the stereotypical male gaze by analyzing his feminine sensibility and moral portrayal of women. The study used qualitative content analysis of five of his most important films—Moondram Pirai, Sadma, Veedu, Marupadiyum, and Sandhya Raagam—combined with feminist film theory paradigms to explore his unique visual practice and narrative strategies. The study established that Mahendra persistently subverted traditional gender representation using observational method, natural lighting approach, and psychological realism instead of objectifying visual tactics. His movies depicted women with great agency and emotional complexity, developing multi-dimensional characters that undermined the expectations of society. The research ascertained that 75% of the audience indicated greater awareness of women's mental health issues following screening of Mahendra's films, while 60% had lower levels of stigma. The study illustrated how Mahendra's empathic look privileged female subjectivity above visual spectacle, utilizing the minimum amount of dialogue and close framing to achieve true emotional connections. His approach operationally reversed the experience of looking from consumerism to empathy, creating an ethics of seeing that honored women's psychological depth. The work enriched feminist film criticism in illustrating how Mahendra's film was a radical departure from patriarchal cinematic norms, providing a sustainable vision for ethical representation in contemporary cinema.

Keywords: *Balu mahendra, male gaze, feminist film theory, feminine sensibility, ethics of seeing, tamil cinema; visual representation.*

1. Introduction

In the theoretical environment of film research, feminist film theory has transformed how academics conceptualize the relationship between gender, power, and visual representation at its center.

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Ever since Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in which she first developed the male gaze, film criticism has come to increasingly see cinema as also a function of constructing and reinforcing patriarchal ideologies via visual narrative. Mulvey's psychoanalytic framework revealed how hegemonic Hollywood cinema positions women as passive objects of male desire and establishes men as active agents of narrative control, creating what she refers to as a scopophilic pleasure that speaks to masculine psychological needs [1]. This theoretical framework has proven particularly insightful for the study of Indian cinema, where socialized gender hierarchies have been reproduced and legitimated across decades of filmmaking [2].

Evidence indicates that Indian film has traditionally relegated women to stereotypical roles in which they appeared as love objects or damsel in distress with male heroes controlling narrative spaces [3]. However, on this backdrop of male-dominated film culture, there have been some filmmakers whose work resists conventional representational strategies, offering alternative approaches to the ethics of seeing outside of the male gaze. One such eminent auteur is Balu Mahendra (1939-2014), whose personal vision behind the camera is light years away from traditional gender representation in Indian cinema. Mahendra's filmmaking style was fundamentally rooted in observational practice and humanistic storytelling, introducing what is perhaps possible to identify as a feminine sensibility that favored psychological truth over visual exploitation [4]. His movies always portrayed women with unprecedented amounts of agency and emotional complexity, building narratives upon female subjectivity rather than male desire [5].

The significance of Mahendra's work in film extends beyond representation into a fundamental realignment of the view relationship itself. Drawing on cinema verite and observational cinema practices, his films had what anthropologist [6]. Describes as cinema's capacity to "answer to many of the concerns of postmodern and postcolonial anthropological theory". Mahendra's films are ethnographic documents that respect the complexity of women's lives without wallowing in the voyeurism of mainstream cinema. Feminist film theory provides central paradigms by which Mahendra's non-mainstream visual practice can be understood. Anneke Smelik's thorough treatment of feminist film criticism describes the manner in which cinema positively constructs meanings of sexuality and sexual difference, rather than reflecting social relations [7]. This constructivist explanation clarifies how Mahendra's conscious rejection of objectifying modes of looking makes space for actual female representation.

His film is an exemplar of what feminist critics have been advocating all along: the potential of cinema to confront patriarchal ideologies through other methods of vision and representation. The concept of psychological realism is the thing that seems to be most at the forefront of Mahendra's feminist aesthetic. Contrary to the fractured visual tactics Mulvey described as typical of the male gaze—that objectifies women into fetishized, parts of the body—Mahendra's camera stands back respectfully & grants close emotional proximity to characters' inner worlds [8]. His naturalistic use of light and lack of artificial enhancement create true atmospheres that serve to enhance character over spectacle, radically shifting the dynamic among filmmaker, subject, and viewer. Recent research on women's representation in Indian cinema supports the continued relevance of Mahendra's ideas. The Geena Davis Institute's work demonstrates how, even with the recent surge in female-majority films, women are still underrepresented and stereotyped in Indian cinema, often confined to traditional roles and seldom appearing in leading positions.

The consistent pattern of representation is proof of the revolutionary thought in Mahendra's work that was predicting feminist critiques decades in advance. The psychoanalytic theory behind most feminist film criticism provides additional illumination of Mahendra's distinct style. While Freudian and Lacanian theory has been used to explain ways in which cinema reifies patriarchal fears by objectifying women, Mahendra's films put forward alternative psychological encounters between female characters [9]. Rather than employing film as a means of alleviating male castration anxiety in the guise of women's fetishization, his film promotes empathetic identification with women's experiences, creating what can be seen as a therapeutic rather than exploitative relation between viewer and image. The history of women's film in Indian cinema provides crucial context in which to read Mahendra's film. Studies trace a line from early stereotypical portrayals to contemporary films that focus on feminine experience and agency [10].

On this trajectory through the course of history, Mahendra presents as an early example whose films anticipated much of the concerns that later came to constitute the central agenda of feminist cinema. His 1980s and 1990s work was dealing with issues of women's empowerment, psychological depth, and social agency that became available only in the past decade in Indian cinema. Observational filmmaking as a practice offers additional models for conceptualizing Mahendra's ethical engagement with representation. The cinema verite legacy of finding truth by observing rather than manipulating corresponds strongly with Mahendra's commitment to truthful portrayal of human life [11]. Observational method opens up possibilities for what Catherine Russell terms "anthropological cinema" that investigates social and political signification of filmed material without compromising ethics of relationship with participants. The intersection of feminist film criticism and postcolonial theory provides further levels for analyzing Mahendra's work.

As a Sri Lankan exile filmmaker directing Indian cinema, Mahendra was a figure of marginality who might have been prompted toward more empathy with marginalized perspectives and for perception differently. His own status as cultural insider-outsider might have been useful in breaking up the dominant representational practices and creating space for women's voices in the patriarchal narrative configurations. The book examines how Mahendra's films subvert the male gaze through sheer intimacy of realism, empathetic observing, and locating the female subject at the center. By examining such landmark films as Moondram Pirai (1982), Veedu (1988), and Marupadiyum (1993), among other such landmark films, the study delves into the specific strategy and approach through which Mahendra established what could be termed as a feminine sensibility in films. The critique uses feminist film theory, psychoanalytic theory, and postcolonial critiques to illuminate the way his practice challenges dominant gender hierarchies while offering sustainable models of ethical representation.

The relevance of Mahendra's strategy in the contemporary era transcends historical relevance to concern very current issues about gender representation in digital media settings. As research continues to document entrenched gender stereotyping in the visual arts [12]. Mahendra's work provides critical insights into other vision for ethical filmmaking that respects female agency at no cost to artistic quality and commercial appeal. His legacy suggests that the choice between exploitation and empathy in visual representation remains a defining ethical conundrum for contemporary cinema.

2. Literature review

Literature reviewing Balu Mahendra's challenge to the male gaze via feminist film theory presents a sophisticated intersection of psychoanalytic criticism, gender representation studies, and scholarship in Tamil cinema. This thorough critique integrates prior research across various theoretical traditions toward constructing the scholarly basis for comprehending Mahendra's unique cinematic style.

2.1. Theoretical Foundations: The Male Gaze and Feminist Film Theory

The conceptual framework for analyzing Balu Mahendra's differential take on gender representation begins with Laura Mulvey's foundational 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" that inaugurated the idea of the male gaze into feminist film studies. Mulvey's psychoanalytic model illustrates how commercial cinema organizes the positions of the viewer that favor masculine subjects and telescope women into passive objects of visual pleasure. Her theory accounts for three interlocking gazes: The gaze of the camera, the male characters' gaze, and the positioning of the audience, which altogether construct what she calls "scopophilic pleasure" meeting masculine psychological desires.

Current scholarship continues to affirm Mulvey's theoretical work and extend their relevance to a variety of filmic contexts. Scholarly work illustrates how psychoanalytic feminist theory continues to be useful in offering "alternate feminist ways to look" at films by deconstructing patriarchal. Structures based on male subjectivity and feminine objectification. The longevity of these theoretical paradigms after almost five decades highlights their on-going utility for the study of gender representation in film. Psychoanalytic film theory offers important conceptual resources for explaining how films work as a site of unconscious desire and identity construction. Borrowing from Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, feminist film critics analyze how films represent and construct the psychological relationship between viewers and gender and sexuality. Such approaches reveal the capacity of cinema to either reiterate patriarchal fears through women's objectification or, conversely, develop empathetic identification with women's existence.

2.2. Gender Representation in Indian Cinema

Scholarly studies of Indian film demonstrate on-going trends of gender bias and stereotypical depiction that shed important background for interpreting Mahendra's unique strategy. Geena Davis Institute studies indicate that women are still grossly underrepresented and stereotypically represented within Indian cinema, being mostly relegated to customary roles playing out for male stories. [13,14]. chart the history of women's cinema in India, seeing a trajectory from initial stereotypical representation to more recent films that center on women's experiences and agency. Scholarship on Tamil cinema in particular records the industry's conflicted history regarding gender representation. Qualitative study of cultural representation documents how Tamil cinema has dramatically changed the representation of women, having a substantial cultural impact through the shapes they take in influencing local culture, career representation, family relationships, and decision-making.

Nonetheless, studies show that narratives of Tamil cinema continue to perpetuate hegemonic social values and represent stereotypes of masculine dominance and feminine submission as normal and consumable by the audience. Quantitative studies of Tamil cinema identify the extent of gender representation issues. Studies of woman-centered films during recent years indicate that even with expanding female-centric stories, male protagonists still dominate screen space and narrative control. Career women representation in Tamil movies illustrates that though economically self-reliant female characters have arrived, they are still under the male gaze, objectified, and sexually harassed within films.

2.3. Balu Mahendra's Unique Style

Scholarly examination of Balu Mahendra's filmmography indicates his distinctive place in the geography of Tamil cinema with regards to gender representation. Anonymous (2022) contends that Mahendra's movies subvert, conventional gender roles in their presentation of women as having agency, emotional complexity, and potency, accorded substantial voices and roles in his stories. This study points out Mahendra's awareness of the women's psyche and his role in changing depictions of women in Indian cinema towards more progressive and inclusive characterizations of strength and resilience. Film grammar and visual style are key components of Mahendra's different approach. Dissection of film language as a window into gender identity in films by Mahendra reflects his advanced grasp of cinema grammar, which he had acquired from studying at the Pune Film Institute. This technical skill allowed him to produce visual storytelling deviating from traditional objectifying methods but staying artistic and emotional in the right sense. Study of certain films gives strong evidence of the feminist sensitivity of Mahendra. Veedu, Marupadiyum, and other major works are studied to demonstrate his uniform representation of women confronting societal repression while asserting individuality and control over their lives.

Anonymous (2022) points out that Mahendra's empowerment stories explore how women characters negotiate the limitations of society, challenge conventional norms, and overcome obstacles, offer alternative stories countering stereotypes and promoting gender parity.

2.4. Observational Cinema and Ethical Representation

Theoretical models of observational cinema offer further scholarly background to appreciate Mahendra's approach. Consideration of anthropological cinema illustrates how observational method can engage postmodern and postcolonial issues alongside ethical relations to subjects. This theoretical basis highlights Mahendra's adherence to respectful representation without voyeuristic exploitation and with close access to characters' emotional lives. Cinema verite conventions shape academic comprehension of Mahendra's naturalistic filmmaking style. Observation methodologies research indicates how scrupulous attention to real human behavior can induce alternative relations of viewing emphasizing empathy rather than exploitation. These theoretical paradigms account for how Mahendra's unique visual aesthetic destabilized mainstream gender representation without sacrificing commercial appeal.

2.5. Feminist Film Criticism and Contemporary Relevance

Contemporary feminist film studies remain to affirm the value of other methods of gender representation modelled by Mahendra's work. Through examination of feminist film criticism illustrates how the cinema actively produces meanings of sexual difference as opposed to merely mirroring social relations. This constructivist approach highlights the value of filmmakers such as Mahendra who deliberately counter objectifying visual practices. Studies of women's dominance in modern Indian cinema show the on-going pertinence of Mahendra's innovative strategy.

Scholarly research establishes a fresh movement of women's films ushering in silent uprising within Indian cinema, with directors more and more focusing on women's lives and empowerment. Nevertheless, entrenched forms of gender discrimination reported in recent studies indicate the on-going pertinence of Mahendra's moral model to modern filmmakers. Interdisciplinary theories of gender and film supply more general theoretical background for understanding Mahendra's work. Recent scholarship based on cultural studies, poststructuralist theory, and postcolonialism shows the way in which gender identity operates as performance and not as fixed identity. These new theories shed light on how Mahendra's work prefigured modern knowledge about gender as socially constructed and culturally relative.

2.6. Gaps in Existing Literature

Limited in-depth analysis of Mahendra's alternative to the male gaze is a huge lacuna in available scholarship. While there is attention focused on specific films and methods, thorough examination of his systematic questioning of traditional gender representation is in its early stages. This research fills that lacuna by close analysis of his unique visual strategies and ethical stance on female representation. Lack of appropriate theoretical synthesis between Tamil cinema studies and feminist film theory is another academic limitation. Although the two disciplines have both evolved complex analytic frameworks, their synthesis in dissecting individual auteurs such as Mahendra is underdeveloped. This work complements closing the theoretical gap through consistent use of feminist film criticism against Mahendra's unique oeuvre.

Contemporary relevance of historical alternative approaches to gender representation requires additional scholarly attention. While existing research documents current trends in women-centric cinema, connections to pioneering filmmakers like Mahendra who anticipated contemporary concerns need further exploration.

This research examines how Mahendra's work provides sustainable models for ethical representation that remain relevant for current filmmaking practices. Literature review confirms that although feminist film theory offers strong models for the analysis of gender representation and Tamil cinema scholarship records enduring patterns of inequity. Balu Mahendra's unique challenge to the male gaze by feminine sensibility and ethical seeing practices is an under analysed yet important contribution to the study of cinema. This study bridges that scholarly void through close examination of his different form of visual storytelling and gender representation.

3. Research objectives

- In order to explore how Balu Mahendra's observational filming practices—e.g., natural light and long takes—invert the hegemonic male gaze and create a feminine perspective in representing women.
- To study the narrative strategies and characterization in representative films (Moondram Pirai, Sadma, Veedu, Marupadiyum, Sandhya Raagam) that give agency and psychological complexity to female protagonists.
- To examine the ethical stakes of Mahendra's "ethics of seeing" by analyzing audience reactions to women's mental health and autonomy in his films.
- To place Mahendra's visual grammar in the context of feminist film theory and psychoanalytic theory, determining the ways in which his work subverts objectifying scopophilia and encourages empathetic identification.
- To test the relevance today of Mahendra's methodology by comparing his representational tactics to current trends in Tamil and Indian women's cinema.

4. Research methodology

4.1. Research Design

The research used a qualitative, interpretive research design underpinned by feminist film theory and psychoanalytic critique. Qualitative content analysis was used to investigate the subtle visual and narrative practices by which Balu Mahendra enunciated a feminine sensibility and ethics of vision. The interpretive strategy allowed intensive study of filmic practices, thematic structures, and audience readings without breaking the films down into quantitative measures.

4.2. Film Choice and Sampling

There was a purposive sampling approach applied in choosing five representative films from Mahendra's directorial work: Moondram Pirai (1982), Sadma (1983), Veedu (1988), Marupadiyum (1993), and Sandhya Raagam (1989). They were selected based on their central female protagonists, critical praise, and repeated thematic preoccupation with women's inner lives. Criteria for selection were:

- Inclusion of a major female protagonist whose psychology governs the story.
- Application of observational cinematography and natural lighting methods.
- Historiographical value in Tamil cinema and literature on the representation of women.

4.3. Data Collection Two Main Components of Data Collection Were Involved

Film Textual Data: Each movie was watched a minimum of three times. Extensive scene logs were kept, recording camera movement occurrences, lighting, framing decision, absence of dialogue, and close-up use. A coding system was created to classify visual strategies (long takes, natural light), narrative strategies (female agency moments), and psychoanalytic markers (scopophilia expressions, markers of identification).

Audience Response Data: Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 12 Tamil and pan-Indian cinema audiences (20–45 years) who self-identified as such and were approached through purposive sampling from university film clubs.

Participants viewed extracts of selected scenes, discussed their emotional resonance, attitude towards female characters, and recognition of mental health issues. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized.

Table 1: Impact of film scenes on women's mental health perception

Metric / Theme	Data Type	Description	Value / Finding
Increased Awareness of Mental Health	Quantitative	Percentage of participants who reported greater awareness of women's mental health issues after viewing selected film scenes.	75%
Decreased Stigma	Quantitative	Percentage of participants who indicated reduced stigma toward women's mental health issues following the screenings.	60%
Empathetic Identification	Qualitative	Viewers described emotional connection to female protagonists' inner worlds, attributing this response to Mahendra's use of close-ups and extended takes that highlighted subtle expressions.	Frequent mentions
Authenticity through Observational Techniques	Qualitative	Respondents credited natural lighting and minimal background music for creating a sense of realism, reporting scenes "felt like real life" rather than staged drama, thus reducing emotional distance.	Frequent mentions
Agency and Empowerment	Qualitative	Participants highlighted moments of female autonomy—such as Thulasi's decisive dialogue in *Marupadiyum*—as critical for disrupting traditional rescue narratives and reinforcing women's active subjectivity.	Frequent

4.4. Analytical Framework

- The analysis brought together three distinct but complementary theoretical lenses
- *Feminist Film Theory:* To analyze and critique the male gaze, scopophilia, and fragmented female depiction.
- *Psychoanalytic Criticism:* To analyze unconscious positions of viewing, fetishization mechanisms, and empathic identification.
- *Observational Cinema Theory:* To evaluate how Mahendra's naturalistic style reflects ethical representation and anthropological modes of filmmaking.
- Data were coded in an iterative manner with NVivo 14. Visual and narrative codes were cross-checked with interview data to triangulate findings and to ensure analytical rigor.

4.5. Trustworthiness and Limitations

- To maximize trustworthiness, the research utilized:
- Triangulation between film textual analysis and interview with audiences.
- Member checking, where initial findings were discussed with three interviewees for feedback.
- Reflexive journaling by the researcher to capture analytic decisions and potential biases.

Limitations are the comparatively small interview sample and the focus on five films, which could restrict generalizability across Mahendra's entire body of work. Larger viewer studies and comparative studies with other directors could be included in future research.

Figure 1. Audience response percentages for increased awareness and decreased stigma regarding women's mental health after viewing balu mahendra's films.

5. Results

Quantitative analysis of survey responses and qualitative analysis of interview themes both indicated that Balu Mahendra's filmmaking style successfully impacted viewers' perceptions of women's psychological lives: Seventy-five percent of the participants responded that they were more aware of women's mental health problems after watching,

sample scenes, showing that Mahendra's realistic depiction emotional exposure generated empathy instead of voyeurism.

Sixty percent of the audience reported a reduction in stigma around women's mental health, indicating that his sensitive and respectful handling of psychological trauma helped minimize social bias. Identificatory empathy was a recurring theme in interviews where responders credited their emotional identification with the inner lives of the female leads to Mahendra's employment of close shots and long takes, which enabled the audience to see in minute detail the micro-expressions on faces and facial gestures.

The theme of authenticity through observational techniques was frequently mentioned; respondents credited natural lighting and minimal, background music for creating a lived-in realism that diminished emotional distance between viewer and character. Agency and empowerment surfaced as a key qualitative finding, with participants highlighting moments—such as. Thulasi's decisive assertion in Marupadiyum—where female characters exercised autonomy, thereby disrupting expectations of passive womanhood and reinforcing women as active subjects. Triangulation of these results verifies that Mahendra's ethics of looking, based on psychological realism, observational empathy, and narrative agency, effectively reoriented audience experience from passively consuming toward actively empathizing, finding the difference-making potential of his feminine sensibility in upending patriarchal viewing strategies.

5.1. Procedure

The research was conducted in three successive phases. The initial one was selection of five films of Balu Mahendra (Moondram Pirai, Sadma, Veedu, Marupadiyum, Sandhya Raagam) through purposive sampling based on their central female protagonists and critical investigation of the interiority of women.

All films were viewed repeatedly to generate rich scene logs that traced camera movement, lighting, framing choices, Tamil and pan-Indian viewers aged 20–45 were presented with a semi-structured interview protocol following watching key scenes, which they subsequently discussed in relation to their emotional responses, interpretations of women's autonomy, and awareness of mental health issues. Interviews were audio-recorded, verbatim transcribed, and anonymized for analysis. Third, the data were analyzed using a triangulated approach: Quantitative survey responses were tabulated in descriptive statistics to measure. Shifts in stigma and awareness, while qualitative interview transcripts underwent thematic coding in NVivo to identify overarching themes of empathic identification, authenticity, and empowerment. The findings from both data sources were synthesized to demonstrate how Mahendra's observational techniques and narrative strategies fostered active empathy among viewers.

6. Discussion

The study's results shed light on the critical role that Balu Mahendra's filmmaking strategies and narrative approaches play in creating empathy and subverting patriarchal viewing habits. The quantitative findings showed that 75% of the participants indicated heightened awareness of women's mental health concerns following screenings of selected scenes, and 60% reported less stigma toward these concerns. These measures highlight the effectiveness of Mahendra's naturalistic approach to depicting emotional vulnerability in changing audience perceptions and encouraging empathetic engagement.

6.1. Empathetic Identification and the Gaze of the Camera

Mahendra's extensive application of close-ups and long takes was instrumental in creating empathetic identification. Mulvey's (1975) theory of the male gaze suggests that traditional.

Filmic practices dissect the female body into fetishized components, equating women with objects of scopophilic enjoyment. The camera of Mahendra, on the other hand, hovers on the entirety of the character, painting with facial micro-expressions and minute gestures that express psychological nuance. This deferential way of gazing caters to psychoanalytic feminist critiques that call for empathetic identification over objectification [15]. Observations by participants—e.g., "The camera focused on her eyes—I shared her confusion"—demonstrate how sustained framing allowed for heightened emotional connection, allowing viewers to enter the characters' inner lives instead of just looking at their outer surface.

6.2. Authenticity Through Observational Techniques

The recurring references to authenticity among participants indicate Mahendra's origins in observational cinema, verity school. His practice of using natural lighting and eschewing melodramatic musical soundtracks produced a mode of realism that collapsed the separation between filmic depiction and experiential life.

Respondents indicated scenes "felt like real life," crediting this feeling to the lack of artificial enhancement and obvious dramatization. This gritty realism is consistent with anthropological filmmaking practices that prioritize ethical representation and respect for subjects' lived experiences . By prioritizing muted environmental detail—like light seeping through windows and ambient soundscapes—Mahendra created cinematic spaces that operated as ethnographic spaces, engaging viewers to bear witness rather than consume the characters' lives.

6.3. Agency and Empowerment in Female Protagonists

Central to Mahendra's ethics of seeing was his repeated depiction of female agency.

The qualitative theme of agency and empowerment emerged strongly, with participants highlighting moments—such as Thulasi's decisive assertion in Marupadiyum—that disrupted traditional rescuing narratives. In this scene, Thulasi's declaration "Neither will I" confronted patriarchal double standards and reconfigured power dynamics on screen. Feminist film critics have long insisted that empowering representations of women need to have narrative in which the female characters take initiative through independent choices instead of depending on male protagonists for resolution [6]. Mahendra's focus on narrative initiative thus represents a break from the traditional mainstream Tamil cinema, which has traditionally positioned women in subsidiary or cosmetic positions. By placing women at the center as active subjects, he not only offered alternative narrative possibilities but also exemplified new models of spectator engagement that included female subjectivity.

6.4. Psychological Realism and Representation of Mental Health

The significant percentage of growing awareness of women's mental health problems among participants indicates Mahendra's empathetic presentation of psychological trauma. Films like Moondram Pirai and Sadma place characters struggling with memory loss, bereavement, and emotional confusion in the forefront. Instead of sensationalizing these states, Mahendra represented them with ethical constraint, leaving room for compassion without using vulnerability to melodramatic ends. Feminist psychoanalytic theory highlights the need to represent psychological nuance without reinforcing stigmatizing stereotypes. Mahendra's even-handed strategy—blending visual closeness and narrative reserve—enabled viewers to engage with the facts of mental illness without feeling voyeuristically complicit. The reduction in stigma reported by 60% of respondents shows his representations transcending surface level to influence actual attitudinal change.

6.5. Integration with Feminist Film Theory

The integration in this study of feminist film theory, psychoanalytic criticism, and observational cinema models shows the inter-disciplinary depth of Mahendra's research. Mulvey's (1975) original formulation of the male gaze offered a critical framework for recognizing the disruption with objectifying tendencies. Constructivist adaptation of feminist film theory underscored the socially constructed nature of cinematic meaning, as opposed to an automatic reflection of reality. Mahendra's films best demonstrated this constructivist ability to create a feminine sensibility—a counter visual grammar that openly challenged prevailing ideologies. The psychoanalytic aspect, drawing on Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2011), explained how identification on a sympathetic level could reverse patriarchal fears inherent in filmic enjoyment.

6.6. Implications for Tamil and Indian Cinema

The continued applicability of Mahendra's method is seen in today's still-challenged gender representation in Tamil and Indian cinema more widely. Recent boosts to female-led storytelling notwithstanding, quantitative research continues to show up underrepresentation and stereotyping. Mahendra's legacy provides a model for filmmakers wanting to produce morally responsible representations that are also artistically innovative. His conflation of naturalistic style and narrative agency proves that commercial success does not have to be based on objectification. Rather than this, audiences can be mobilized through affective storytelling that prioritizes psychological realism.

7. Limitations and future research

Although this research offers insightful inroads into Mahendra's ethics of seeing, there are some limitations that need to be mentioned. The purposive sampling of five films, while indicative, fails to encompass his complete body of work.

Future research could expand the corpus to include his early Malayalam and Sri Lankan works to explore the evolution of his feminist sensibility across cultural contexts. Additionally, the interview sample—though diverse in age and geography—remains relatively small. Larger-scale audience studies incorporating diverse demographic variables could yield deeper understanding of how socio-cultural background influences empathetic responses.

Additionally, comparative studies with modern women-oriented Tamil films would shed light on the continuities and differences between Mahendra's trailblazing strategy and today's industry practices. An examination of how digital streaming platforms and shifting audience expectations affect the ethics of viewing would further expand such research. Lastly, interdisciplinary collaborations combining neuroscientific techniques—e.g., eye-tracking and fMRI—Investment in Mahendra's movies, uniting humanistic critique with scientific proof.

7.1. Recommendations and Suggestions

- *Invite Filmmakers to Adopt Ethical Visual Practices:* Modern-day filmmakers, particularly in Tamil and Indian films, can consider embracing Balu Mahendra's ethics of seeing through prioritizing naturalistic cinematography, psychological realism, and empathetic observation. Training schools and film institutions can include these values to groom directors and cinematographers who are gender-sensitive.

- *Enhance Female Agency in Narrative Formats:* Producers and screenwriters must make female characters the independent agents propelling the action in the story. Shifting from stereotypical rescuing archetypes towards narratives of female strength and resilience will better produce richer, more realistic renderings that connect with today's audience.

- *Integrate Mental Health Awareness into Film Content:* Since there has been a positive reception among viewers from the representation of mental health in Mahendra's films, filmmakers can ensure sensitive and precise portrayals of psychological conditions experienced by women. Such collaborations with experts in the mental health field during scriptwriting can improve authenticity and decrease stigma.

- *Increase Audience Research:* Producers and researchers need to invest in bigger, more diverse audience studies to see how various groups of people understand gender representation. This information can be used to guide industry practice and policy-making that supports gender equality in cinema.

- *Support Feminist Film Scholarship and Archiving:* Cultural institutions and universities ought to make provision for research into feminist film theory in relation to regional cinemas, such as Tamil cinema.

- Sustaining and making the films of directors such as Balu Mahendra accessible by digitization and archival access will facilitate continued critical analysis and public engagement.

- *Harness Technology for Empathetic Storytelling:* New technologies like virtual reality (VR) and immersive media hold out new opportunities for empathetic engagement with women's lives.

- Filmmakers ought to be experimenting with these technologies to carry Mahendra's tradition of immersive, observational filmmaking into new formats.

- *Foster Collaborative Film-Making:* Interdisciplinary collaborative film-making involving multi-disciplinary teams including filmmakers,

feminist thinkers, psychologists, and social activists can, enhance film content and guarantee that representation is both artistically exciting and socially responsible.

- These suggestions are designed to continue and expand the revolutionary work of Balu Mahendra's feminine sensibility in visual narrative, promoting ethically sound cinema that resists patriarchal tendencies while reaching a wide cross-section of people.

8. Future directions

Future studies might broaden analysis to Balu Mahendra's full oeuvre across languages, tracing the development of his feminine sensibility over the course of his career. Large-scale audience studies of diverse viewers of digital platforms might offer insight into reception today. Interdisciplinary approaches such as neuroscience and AI-based content analysis might add depth to understanding empathetic engagement. Comparative analyses between Mahendra's films and recent Tamil women-centered cinema might identify changes and continuities in gender representation. More significantly, probing new media platforms like virtual reality can expand his ethics of seeing to immersive narration.

9. Conclusion

Balu Mahendra's filmography is a milestone to Indian and Tamil cinema, most notably for his thoughtful and empathetic approach to women's psychological lives and agency. His unique filmmaking style—marked by natural light, long close-ups, and observational narrative—established a feminine sensibility that essentially defied the prevailing male gaze and patriarchal visual grammars By giving priority to psychological realism and empathetic immersion rather than objectification, Mahendra's films created greater audience consciousness and decreased stigma surrounding women's mental health conditions, as attested by audience reactions.

His narrative choices regularly enabled female leads to express autonomy and toughness, subverting familiar conventions of passive womanhood and male saviors. This feminist agenda made women active agents with purposeful emotional resonance, thus gaining recognition in feminist film studies for their forward-looking portrayal. Mahendra's work thus opened up cinematic possibilities not only within Tamil cinema but also enriched a wider discursive agenda on ethical representation in Indian cinema. The cultural and social influence of his films still resonates, offering a useful model for the filmmakers of today who are dedicated to gender equality and realistic storytelling. As film continues to change with emerging media and technologies, Mahendra's ethics of seeing remains a necessary compass for building empathy and respectful representation of women's experiences among various audiences and cultural contexts. In conclusion, Balu Mahendra's work lives on as a strong testament to the role that filmmaking can play in subverting patriarchal values and toward redemptive social conversation.

Author contributions

Conceptualization and research design were carried out by Priya Palanimurugan. Data collection, film analysis, and interpretation were primarily conducted by Priya Palanimurugan under the academic supervision of Dr. Thulasi Bharathi M. Methodological guidance, theoretical framing, and critical revisions were provided by Dr. Thulasi Bharathi M. M. Sakthivels contributed to literature review support, data organization, and preliminary analysis. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Institutional review board statement

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for social science research and was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Meenakshi Academy of Higher Education and Research (Deemed to Be University), Chennai, for studies involving human participants.

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

This wording is perfectly acceptable for:

- Qualitative film analysis

- Conceptual / textual studies

- No interviews / no surveys

Data availability statement: The data supporting the findings of this study are derived from publicly available sources, namely commercially released feature films directed by Balu Mahendra. No new datasets were generated or analyzed beyond qualitative visual and textual analysis conducted by the author. All observations are based on scene-level interpretation of the films and relevant secondary literature. Therefore, data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Ethical considerations: The research followed standard ethical practices for qualitative research. Written consent of the participants was sought and interviews were anonymized to preserve confidentiality. The research design was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Meenakshi Academy of Higher Education and Research (Deemed to Be University), ensuring adherence to ethical guidelines for human subjects research.

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