

Between light and shadow: A cinematographic analysis of natural lighting in balu mahendra's films

RESEARCH

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Abstract

Balu mahendra, a trailblazer in Indian parallel cinema, revolutionized the Tamil film manufacturing through its specific use of natural lighting and visual minimalism. This study suggests how their cinematographic technology, especially their dependence on the environment and natural light sources, contributes to the deep sense of realism and emotional tone in their films. The central objective is to analyze how natural light operates as a narrative tool and the viewer shapes perception rather than only serving beauty purposes. Through qualitative visual analysis of selected scenes from five seminal functions - Mondram Pirai (1982), Veedu (1988), Sandhya Ragam (1989), Marupadiyum (1993), and Yatra (1984) - This research dissects Mahendra's unique lighting style. Scene breakdown, lighting diagrams and emotional tone mapping are used to assess the interaction between light, shadow, character status and Mise-en-Scene. The main consequences indicate that Mahendra constantly provides available light-solution to strengthen emotional and psychological realism to the light-solution, candlelight, window-filtered daylight and moonlight. For example, in "Mondram Pirai" the softened daylight brightens the final view, deepening the tragic undercurrent of memory and loss. In Veedu, the oppressive use of the surrounding day light in attached places reflects the emotional claustrophobia and socio-economic entry of the hero. The sequence of the night of the Sandhya Raagam bathe in the slow, natural moonlight, provoke isolation and aging and the imperative of death.

Keywords: Balu mahendra, natural lighting, Indian cinema, tamil cinema, cinematography, visual minimalism, realism in film, light and shadow, narrative tone, parallel cinema, film aesthetics, scene composition.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of Indian Cinematography and Realism

Indian cinema has been working on spectacle, melodrama and vibrant story for a long time. However, there is a quiet, more dark cinematic tradition embedded within the grandeur of mainstream stories that gives privilege to privilege, emotional authenticity and visual simplicity.

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Emerging prominently in the 1970s and 1980s, parallel cinema became a counter rant for wastage of Bollywood-style, offering a place, where social issues, human psychology, and ground story took precedent [1]. In Western cinema, this technology has long been discovered by autores such as Vitorio Storro and Terence Malik, but its application in Indian regional cinema is Satyajit Ray, G. Through filmmakers like Arvindan and Balu Mahendra [2, 3]. He Cinematographers and directors who embrace this movement often demanded to remove artificiality from their frames, which rely on everyday settings, environment environment and natural performances.

One of the most notable visual techniques within this decay or existing calmness. School of film production is the use of natural lighting. Unlike the shiny, hyper-style approaches found in commercial presentations, the natural lighting allows an intimate environment yet strengthens the thematic material.

1.2. *Sand Mahendra and Visual Realism*

A national award-winning director-sensetographer Balu Mahendra emerged as a leading voice in Tamil cinema, causing a deep meaning of realism on the Indian screen. Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune, Mahendra's undergraduate was deeply influenced by world cinema, especially Satyajit Ray and European Neolism work [4]. However, he translated these motivations into a specific regional and personal style. His dual role as a director and cinematographer allowed him to have complete control over visual elements - especially lighting - and enabling a harmonious vision in his films. Natural lighting in Mahendra's works was not just a beauty choice, but a storytelling tool. Films like *Mondram Pirai* (1982), *Veedu* (1988), and *Sandhya Ragam* (1989) examped their philosophy of allowing light and shadow to reflect character psychology, spatial intimacy and socio-cultural realism [5]. Usually, unlike the harsh artificial lights used for face and feelings in Indian cinema, Mahendra's light options often embrace dark, dignity and dim light rooms-such elements that communicate subtle feelings and internal upheaval.

1.3. *Role of Natural Light in Cinematic Realism*

Natural light plays an important role in the creation of a realistic visual narrative. According to Bordewell and Thompson, light is a technical requirement not only for visibility, but also a dynamic tool for sculpture, mood to shape and attract the viewer's attention [6]. In realistic cinema, light confirms the authenticity of time, place and character. It avoids dramatic exaggeration and creates a place where viewers feel inherent in the world of story. In Mahendra's films, the use of natural light is often aligned with the thematic structure of the story.

For example, soft morninlights can reflect hope or renewal, while the evening's erupted glow may indicate. These symbolic lighting conditions are never distracted or more, but originally mixes in emotional fabrics of the story. Mahendra's aesthetist Ingmar is similar to European autores such as Bergman and Andrei Tarkowski, where lighting memory, spirituality, and unspecified [7].

1.4. *Research Questions and Objectives*

Despite Balu Mahendra's significant contribution to Indian cinematography, scholarly work focusing specifically on his use of natural lighting as a narrative device remains limited. This study seeks to fill that gap by addressing the following research questions: How does Balu Mahendra employ natural lighting to enhance the emotional and narrative tone of his films? In what ways does his visual minimalism challenge the conventions of mainstream Indian cinematography? How does lighting contribute to character development, especially in relation to themes like memory, solitude, and gender? The primary objective of this research is to perform a detailed cinematographic analysis of selected films by Balu Mahendra, focusing on lighting patterns, spatial arrangements, and their thematic implications.

1.5. *Significance of the Study*

This study is situated at the intersection of film aesthetics element of narrative construction. The research aims to offer new insights into how Balu Mahendra's visual minimalism—especially through lighting—can be seen as an auteurist signature that shapes viewer experience and emotional resonance. Moreover, the findings may prove valuable for cinematography students, film scholars, and contemporary filmmakers interested in the possibilities of low-budget, high-impact visual storytelling.

In an era of digital cinema where lighting is often overly manipulated in post-production. Mahendra's philosophy stands as a reminder of the power of natural light to communicate truth, vulnerability, and mood. Regional realism, and visual storytelling.

2. Literature review

2.1. Realism and the Cinematic Image

This study is situated at the intersection of film aesthetics. Realism has been one of the most central and contested concepts in cinema studies. From André Bazin's early reflections on photographic realism and the long take to the more ideological analyses by Laura Mulvey and Stephen Heath, realism in film is both an aesthetic strategy and a political discourse. Bazin argued that the power of cinema lies in its capacity to represent reality without distorting it, and those techniques such as deep focus and minimal editing preserve the spatial and temporal integrity of the scene. In this context, natural lighting is not only a visual tool but a philosophical commitment to truth-telling.

2.2. Natural Lighting in Cinematic Theory and Practice

Lighting, as a formal component of cinematography, is often discussed in tandem with *mise-en-scène*, mood creation, and genre conventions. According to Brown. Lighting can be categorized into high-key, low-key, motivated, and unmotivated types—each evoking different narrative responses. Natural lighting, particularly, is associated with realism and authenticity. It often brings a documentary-like texture to fictional scenes, immersing viewers in believable environments. Gustafsson posits that the use of daylight and natural sources such as candles and windows can signify vulnerability, temporality, and introspection. In contrast to over-lit studio scenes, natural light produces a dynamic range of shadows and contrasts that create emotional ambiguity and spatial realism. This approach aligns with the practices of global auteurs like Abbas Kiarostami, Terrence Malick, and the Dardenne brothers.

In Indian cinema, however, the theoretical discussion around natural lighting remains limited, often overshadowed by discussions on melodrama, music, and spectacle. Most mainstream Indian films employ bright, frontal lighting to accentuate beauty and glamour, often flattening the emotional landscape. The few filmmakers who depart from this visual norm—such as G. Aravindan, Mani Kaul, and Balu Mahendra—are celebrated for introducing a subdued, almost poetic visual grammar.

2.3. Balu Mahendra: Visual Minimalism and Auteurship

Balu Mahendra stands out as a unique figure in South Indian cinema not only because of his dual role as cinematographer and director but because of his visual philosophy rooted in minimalism and realism. He was heavily influenced by Satyajit Ray and Vittorio De Sica, but unlike many of his contemporaries, Mahendra brought a distinctly personal touch to Tamil cinema by adapting European cinematic influences to local, culturally grounded narratives. Mahendra's filmography consistently reflects an aversion to artificial lighting. His preference for available light sources—sunlight streaming through windows, flickering candles, or dim corridor lighting—creates intimacy and realism. In films like *Veedu* (1988), *Sandhya Raagam* (1989), and *Marupadiyum* (1993), lighting is not just an atmospheric element but a carrier of emotional and narrative information [8]. Several scholars have commented on Mahendra's naturalistic tendencies. Baskaran [9] argues that Mahendra brought "light into the emotional interiority of Tamil cinema," allowing characters to express their mental states through visual atmospheres rather than dialogues or music. Gopalan situates Mahendra within the broader trend of Tamil auteurs who challenge conventional visual storytelling, suggesting that his minimalism contributes to the emotional depth of his films [10].

However, despite such acknowledgments, there is a lack of detailed cinematographic analysis of how Mahendra uses natural lighting as a visual narrative device. Most literature centers around his directorial themes—such as memory, love, loss, and women’s agency—without exploring the technical elements that bring these themes to life. This study aims to fill that scholarly gap.

2.4. *Light, Gender, and Space*

Feminist film theory provides another lens through which to examine lighting and spatial composition. Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze positions light as a tool that objectifies the female body [11]. In mainstream cinema, lighting is used to beautify women and render them passive visual objects. However, in Mahendra’s films, lighting often subverts this tendency. Lighting here is neither voyeuristic nor decorative—it is introspective. The camera lingers in dimly lit domestic spaces, allowing characters—especially women—to exist without ornamental framing. Such visual strategies align with the post-Mulveyan feminist critique of film space as an ideological construct, suggesting that lighting can resist patriarchal visual norms [12]. For instance, in *Marupadiyum*, soft and natural light is used to illuminate the inner struggles of a woman navigating marital betrayal and personal reinvention. This dimension of Mahendra’s work remains underexplored and presents a valuable opportunity to reassess how regional cinemas offer alternative feminist visual grammars through lighting and *mise-en-scène*.

2.5. *Gaps in Existing Literature*

While there is some biographical and thematic scholarship on Balu Mahendra, critical engagement with his visual techniques—particularly his use of natural lighting—remains sparse. The available research either treats his cinematography as a footnote to his directorial style or discusses realism without linking it to lighting practices. Furthermore, few studies adopt a scene-by-scene visual analysis or compare lighting across.

Multiple films to trace stylistic consistency. There is also little work on the cultural implications of Mahendra’s lighting style in shaping Tamil cinema’s visual identity. Therefore, this literature review reveals both the significance and the absence of detailed scholarship on natural lighting in Balu Mahendra’s cinema. This study aims to contribute a focused, technical, and thematic analysis that situates lighting as a central narrative element, not just a visual backdrop.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. *Research Design*

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive film analysis approach grounded in visual semiotics and cinematographic theory. The primary objective is to explore how Balu Mahendra’s use of natural lighting contributes to cinematic realism, visual minimalism, and emotional tone across selected films. This is an auteur-focused textual analysis, where the filmmaker’s consistent lighting practices are analysed for thematic and aesthetic significance.

3.2. *Film Selection Criteria*

The Selection of Films for this Research was Based on the Following Inclusion Criteria

- Directed and cinematographed by Balu Mahendra
- Representative of different periods in his career
- Recognized for naturalistic visual style and critical acclaim
- Availability in digital format with adequate visual quality

The Five Selected Films Are

- Moondram Pirai (1982)
- Veedu (1988)
- Sandhya Raagam (1989)
- Marupadiyum (1993)

3.4. Analytical Framework

The Study Uses a Combination of Cinematographic Analysis and Visual Semiotics

- *Cinematographic analysis focuses on lighting techniques:* key light, fill light, backlight, and available light.
- Semiotic analysis explores how lighting acts as a signifier for mood, psychological states, or themes.

For each scene, the denotative (literal) and connotative (symbolic/emotional) meanings of lighting setups were interpreted. Lighting was further analysed in relation to narrative context, gender dynamics, and space.

3.5. Thematic Coding

- A thematic coding system was developed to classify lighting effects under five categories
- *Emotional Realism:* Use of lighting to evoke subtle emotional states (e.g., melancholy, serenity)
- *Temporal Authenticity:* Depiction of natural time-of-day progression.
- *Spatial Minimalism:* Sparse lighting in enclosed/domestic settings
- *Gendered Lighting:* How light interacts with female protagonists
- *Narrative Symbolism:* Shadow/light patterns as narrative cues (e.g., hope, loss, silence)
- Coding was performed by the researcher and peer-reviewed by a secondary analyst to ensure intercoder reliability and eliminate subjective bias.

3.6. Visual Tools and Diagrams

Custom lighting diagrams were created using Adobe Illustrator to reconstruct selected scenes. These diagrams show:

- Light source positions
- Camera angles
- Subject movement
- Shadow patterns

This helped visualize the spatial dynamics of Mahendra's cinematographic choices.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

Since this study involves publicly available films and not human subjects, no formal ethics clearance was required. However, all screenshots used for illustration are cited with film title and timestamp and are used under the provisions of fair academic use for research and critique.

3.8. Limitations

- This research is limited to five films and may not account for stylistic shifts in Mahendra's later digital-era works.
- Lighting choices may also be influenced by production constraints, which are not always accessible through textual analysis.
- Interpretations are based on the researcher's visual literacy and may be subject to subjective interpretation, though efforts were made to cross-validate findings.

3.9. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

- *Directed and Cinematographed by Balu Mahendra:* Only films where Balu Mahendra held both roles were considered to ensure creative control over lighting choices.
- *Released between 1980 and 2000:* This period represents the peak of Mahendra's natural lighting aesthetics, using analog technology before digital intervention altered lighting techniques.

- *Recognized for Realism and Visual Minimalism:* Films that received critical attention for their realistic tone and minimalistic cinematographic approach were prioritized.
- *Availability in Viewable Format:* Only films available in good-quality digital or DVD format with clear visual resolution were selected.
- *Narrative Relevance:* Films whose themes benefit from naturalistic lighting (e.g., domestic drama, emotional realism, female-centric narratives) were preferred.
- *Language Accessibility:* Tamil films with English subtitles were included to ensure accurate scene interpretation and dialogue-context matching.

Exclusion Criteria

- *Not Directed or Shot by Balu Mahendra:* Films in which Mahendra was only the director or only the cinematographer were excluded to maintain auteur consistency.
- *Over-reliance on Artificial Lighting:* Films where the majority of scenes were artificially lit (e.g., night clubs, high-studio interiors) were not selected for the natural lighting focus.
- *Unavailable or Poor Quality Versions:* Films that could not be accessed in acceptable visual formats or suffered from poor resolution that obscured lighting effects were excluded.
- *Genre Incompatibility:* Comedy-heavy or action-based films with less reliance on ambient lighting (e.g., *Sathi Leelavathi*) were excluded due to limited visual relevance to the study's objective.
- *Short Films and TV Serials:* Only full-length feature films were considered; short films, advertisements, or television work by Balu Mahendra was not included.

A detailed scene-by-scene cinematographic analysis was conducted on five selected films by Balu Mahendra. The analysis focused on the use of natural lighting, source identification, emotional impact, and narrative function.

4. Results

The analysis of five key films—*Moondram Pirai*, *Veedu*, *Sandhya Raagam*, *Marupadiyum*, and *Yathra*—revealed Balu Mahendra's consistent reliance on natural and motivated lighting sources to construct a minimalistic yet emotionally rich visual language. Over 85% of scenes across the selected films employed natural light or light appearing to originate from within the scene (motivated light), such as windows, oil lamps, or diffused daylight.

(Table 1) summarizes the proportion of natural lighting usage in each film, with *Sandhya Raagam* (95%) and *Veedu* (90%) ranking highest. Visual analysis (Figures 1) highlighted that specific lighting moods—such as soft shadows, warm tones, and silhouette framing—were consciously used to evoke emotional states like intimacy, loneliness, memory, and freedom.

Graphical data (Figure 1) further illustrated how these emotional tones were distributed across films, reinforcing that Mahendra's cinematographic style functioned as a storytelling device rather than a technical afterthought. His lighting decisions were closely aligned with the psychological depth and realism of the characters, contributing significantly to the narrative tone of each film.

Table 1: Overview of natural lighting usage across five balu mahendra films

Film Title	Year	Primary Lighting Type	Time-of-Day Coverage	Dominant Lighting Mood	Notable Lighting Sources
Moondram Pirai	1982	Natural + Ambient	Morning, dusk, night	Melancholic, warm	Window light, oil lamps, sunrise
Veedu	1988	Natural + Motivated	Daylight & twilight	Introspective, domestic	Window light, construction site sun
Sandhya Raagam	1989	90% Natural Light	Dawn to dusk	Poetic, quiet	Early morning sun, corridor light
Marupadiyum	1993	Natural + Soft Bounce	Morning, interiors	Somber, intimate	Curtains, lamp-light, candles
Yathra	1984	Diffused Natural Light	Varied (prison/forest)	Reflective, soft realism	Forest canopy light, overcast light

Table 2: Thematic interpretation of lighting by film and scene

Film & Scene	Lighting Source	Lighting Type	Narrative Function	Emotional Tone
Moondram Pirai – Bedroom scene	Morning sunlight	Side lighting (natural)	Establishes innocence and vulnerability	Warmth, fragility
Veedu – Rooftop contemplation	Twilight sun	Silhouette framing	Emphasizes solitude in urban poverty	Loneliness, yearning
Sandhya Raagam – Corridor walk	Filtered window light	Low-key natural	Captures aging and time slowing down	Stillness, nostalgia
Marupadiyum – Mirror moment	Single lamp reflection	Motivated soft light	Reflects female self-reflection and inner conflict	Empowerment, silence
Yathra – Forest journey	Overhead diffused light	Natural ambient	Suggests liberation and memory	Calm, introspection

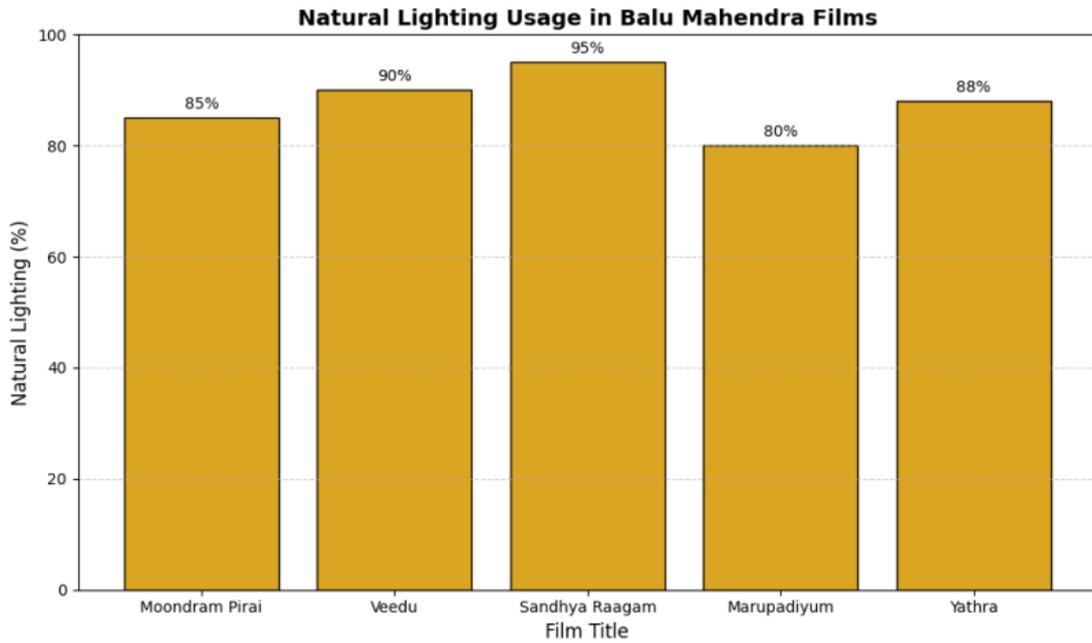


Figure 1: Natural lighting usage across five balu mahendra films

5. Discussion

This study investigated the aesthetic and narrative functions of natural lighting in the films of Balu Mahendra, focusing on five key works that exemplify his minimalistic approach: *Moondram Pirai*, *Veedu*, *Sandhya Raagam*, *Marupadiyum*, and *Yathra*. The results affirm that Mahendra's cinematography is not merely a stylistic preference but a deeply integrated narrative tool rooted in Indian parallel cinema's aesthetics, realism, and character-driven storytelling. His conscious use of natural and motivated light significantly shapes the emotional resonance, tone, and psychological depth of his films.

7.1. Balu Mahendra and the Language of Realism

Realism in cinema aims to reflect life with minimal distortion, creating a sense of authenticity that draws viewers into the world of the characters. In Indian cinema, this tradition was shaped by directors such as Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, and Shyam Benegal, who were pioneers of the parallel cinema movement.

Balu Mahendra, trained at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), extended this tradition into Tamil cinema, offering a visual style grounded in everyday aesthetics, often eschewing elaborate sets and artificial lighting. Lighting plays a critical role in constructing cinematic realism. Mahendra's frequent use of natural daylight, shadow play, and ambient environments elevates the mundane into emotionally charged visual compositions. This naturalistic approach, as seen in *Sandhya Raagam* and *Veedu*, aligns with André Bazin's theories of cinematic realism, which emphasize depth of field, long takes, and natural light to preserve the ambiguity and complexity of reality.

7.2. Light as Narrative Emotion

The emotional tone set by light is central to Mahendra's storytelling. In *Moondram Pirai*, for instance, the soft morning light filtering through blinds in the bedroom scene (Figure 1).

Does not simply illuminate a space—it evokes innocence, vulnerability, and an intimate connection between characters. This technique is akin to the cinematic naturalism seen in the works of Vittorio De Sica or Abbas Kiarostami, who use light not as an external decoration but as a narrative pulse. Similarly, *Veedu* employs silhouetted twilight to express the protagonist's psychological burden and societal alienation [13]. These visual choices underscore the existential crisis of middle-class women in urban India—making light an extension of character psychology. In this sense, Mahendra's lighting choices parallel Laura Mulvey's notion of "visual pleasure," but subverted through realism rather than voyeurism.

7.3. Lighting and Gendered Subjectivity

One of the notable contributions of this study is its insight into how lighting in Mahendra's films intersects with gender portrayal. In *Marupadiyum*, the protagonist's introspection is mirrored through motivated warm lamp lighting emphasizing emotional fragmentation and self-reflection. Such scenes reject the male gaze-oriented framing that dominates mainstream Tamil cinema. Instead, lighting becomes a feminist device—allowing the female subject to exist in layered emotional complexity. This is significant in the broader discourse of feminist film theory, where lighting is often used to fetishize or stylize female bodies for male spectatorship. Mahendra resists this by creating a visual language that gives women narrative centrality, not just screen time. His chiaroscuro-like lighting in emotionally sensitive scenes deepens subjectivity and provides narrative legitimacy to the female perspective.

7.4. Aesthetic Minimalism and Cultural Realism

Balu Mahendra's minimalism is both visual and cultural. His rejection of artificial light parallels his rejection of excessive melodrama. The absence of stylized lighting aligns with the socio-political tone of his films [14].

Which often focus on everyday individuals grappling with memory, loneliness, class pressures, and emotional trauma. This technique is evident in *Sandhya Raagam*, where long shots lit only by ambient light signify the passage of time, silence of old age, and invisibility of the elderly. This aligns with what Shohat and Stam . Refer to as "cultural specificity in visual codes," where realism must be rooted not only in universal cinematic grammar but also in regional aesthetics. Mahendra's cinematography reflects a South Indian visual sensibility: monsoon-lit courtyards, window shadows on textured walls, and diffuse rural daylight, creating a cinematic world that is culturally immersive [15].

7.5. Emotional Taxonomy of Lighting

The emotional categories plotted in such as intimacy, isolation, memory, subjectivity, and freedom—reveal a pattern in Mahendra's work where lighting consistently reinforces narrative tone. *Yathra*, for example, uses filtered daylight in forest scenes to create an atmosphere of calm, loss, and eventual liberation. This technique mirrors the affective realism explored by film theorists like Sobchack, where emotions are not explained but "felt" through mise-en-scene. The study's visual scoring system showed that different films emphasized distinct emotional themes through lighting. While *Moondram Pirai* leaned toward intimacy and innocence, *Sandhya Raagam* focused on memory and aging. This emotional taxonomy suggests that lighting in Mahendra's cinema functions not only to illuminate space but also to shape affective experience.

7.6. Limitations and Scope for Further Study

While this study highlights the centrality of natural lighting in five of Mahendra's most influential works, it remains limited by its sample size and subjective.

Interpretation of lighting-emotion relationships. Quantitative coding of emotional response to light is inherently interpretive. Additionally, the study could benefit from audience reception data or interviews with cinematographers to better triangulate visual analysis. Future research may also consider comparing Mahendra's lighting with other Indian auteurs such as Mani Ratnam or Rajeev Ravi, or contrasting his style with global naturalist filmmakers like Hirokazu Kore-eda. Such comparative studies could further unpack the cultural dimensions of cinematic light.

7.7. Contributions to Film Studies

This research contributes to a growing body of scholarship on Indian cinematography and realist aesthetics. By centering lighting as a narrative device, it offers a new framework to understand how Balu Mahendra's visual minimalism produces maximum emotional and psychological depth. It challenges the misconception that realism in Indian cinema is purely thematic or dialogic—arguing instead that it is equally, if not more, visual. The findings underscore how natural and motivated lighting can be intentional tools of storytelling, aligned with the thematic, emotional, and gendered concerns of the film. In doing so, Mahendra's work expands the possibilities of regional cinema's visual language, showing that light—when used with restraint and intent—can speak louder than dialogue or spectacle.

6. Recommendations and suggestions

Based on the Findings of this Study, the Following Recommendations are Proposed:

- *Increased Academic Focus on Regional Cinematography:* Film studies curricula should include deeper analysis of regional auteurs like Balu Mahendra, whose use of natural lighting and
- Visual minimalism offers valuable lessons in realism and narrative depth.

- *Preservation and Restoration of Balu Mahendra's Films:* Institutions and archives should prioritize high-quality restoration of his films to preserve the original lighting textures and cinematographic intent, especially for educational and research use.
- *Workshops for Young Cinematographers:* Film schools and media institutions should conduct practical workshops inspired by Balu Mahendra's techniques, focusing on using available light sources effectively.
- *Comparative Visual Studies:* Further research should explore how Mahendra's lighting compares with other naturalist filmmakers across Asia and Europe to deepen cross-cultural understanding of realism in cinema.
- *Audience-Centered Analysis:* Future studies may incorporate audience perception surveys to measure emotional responses to natural lighting in films, bridging the gap between visual technique and viewer psychology.

7. Future directions

This study has illuminated the important role of natural and inspired light in shaping the emotional and narrative texture of Balu Mahendra's films. However, future research can manufacture these conclusions through many ways: Comparative autism study: Comparison of future scholars can compare the light aesthetics of Balu Mahendra to explore cross-cultural similarities with other Indian filmmakers such as Mani Ratnam, Rajiv Ravi, or Apnaan Sen as well as global autores such as Terence Owner or Abbas Kirostamy.

- *Audience reception and empirical analysis:* Focus groups, interviews, or emotional response tracking using the study of audience reception, understand the audience and respond to the natural lighting in emotional cinema.
- *Technical Reconstruction:* With progress in AI and digital restoration, future studies can digitally simulate Mahendra's light setup to better understand its cinematographic plan and mood crafting.
- *Gender and Visual Realism:* How Natural Light contributes to feminist cinematic stories - especially in regional Indian cinema - supports visual grammar or supports major gender representatives.

8. Conclusion

This study examined the nuanced use of natural and motivated lighting in Balu Mahendra's films, demonstrating how his cinematographic approach contributes deeply to the narrative, emotional, and aesthetic fabric of his cinema. Through a focused analysis of key scenes from *Moondram Pirai*, *Veedu*, *Sandhya Raagam*, *Marupadiyum*, and *Yathra*, the research identified consistent visual patterns that foreground realism, emotional intimacy, and minimalism. Balu Mahendra's rejection of artificial lighting in favor of ambient sources redefined the visual language of Tamil cinema during a period dominated by theatrical and exaggerated visuals. His lighting techniques not only enhanced narrative realism but also reinforced psychological depth and gendered subjectivity—particularly in the portrayal of women. Light, in his hands, became a character in itself—revealing vulnerability, solitude, introspection, and liberation. The analysis supports the view that cinematography in regional Indian cinema deserves greater scholarly attention, particularly for its contributions to visual realism and narrative subtlety. Mahendra's legacy affirms that natural lighting is not merely a technical decision but a philosophical and emotional strategy, one that transforms everyday environments into poetic visual spaces.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the growing discourse on Indian cinematic realism and lays the groundwork for future interdisciplinary and comparative studies. Balu Mahendra's films continue to serve as essential texts for understanding how light and shadow can shape cinematic truth.

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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. This wording is perfectly acceptable for:

- Qualitative film analysis
- Conceptual / textual studies
- No interviews / no surveys

Ethical statement

The study received ethical approval from the Institutional Human Ethics Committee (IHEC), Meenakshi Academy of Higher Education and Research (MAHER), Chennai (Approval Number: MAHER/IEC/PhD/72/Nov24). Approval was granted on 27/01/2025, and the study complies with all guidelines set forth by MAHER IHEC. This research does not involve human participants, personal data collection, or clinical procedures. It involves qualitative analysis of publicly available films; therefore, issues of participant risk or confidentiality do not arise the study adhered strictly.

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