


REALISM REVISITED: AN INTERVIEW-BASED STUDY OF GENDER POLITICS IN BALU MAHENDRA'S CINEMA THROUGH GEN Z LENSES

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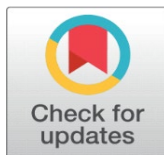
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ABSTRACT

Realism occupied an important place in Tamil cinema, especially as a counter-movement to dramatic and commercial film traditions. Among its leading practitioners, Balu Mahendra was widely recognized for his naturalistic cinematography, intimate storytelling, and emotionally nuanced female characters. His films were often celebrated for their aesthetic minimalism and psychological depth. However, while their realism was critically acclaimed, limited research examined how contemporary youth audiences interpreted their gender politics through a feminist framework. In particular, a gap existed in reception-based studies exploring how Generation Z audiences re-evaluated these narratives in the context of modern gender discourses. The study adopted a qualitative, interview-based research design involving 40 Gen Z participants aged 18-27. Following the selected film screenings, semi-structured interviews were conducted, and responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed a significant generational reinterpretation of realism. While participants appreciated the emotional authenticity and visual subtlety of the films, they also identified examples of patriarchal undertones, sacrificial femininity, and the male gaze embedded within the narratives. The study revealed that realism was not ideologically neutral but was open to critical feminist rereading. By integrating audience reception theory with feminist film studies, this research contributed to expanding contemporary discourse in film and gender studies.

Keywords: Realism, Gender Politics, Gen Z, Feminist Film Theory, Audience Reception



1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Realism has occupied a distinctive and transformative position in Tamil cinema, particularly from the late 1970s onward, when filmmakers began to move away from theatrical melodrama and formula-driven commercial narratives. Influenced by Italian Neorealism and Indian parallel cinema movements, realism in Tamil films emphasized natural lighting, everyday locations, subdued performances, and psychologically layered storytelling. Scholars such as [Bazin \(1967\)](#) argued that realism in cinema functioned as a moral and aesthetic commitment to representing life with minimal manipulation, privileging ambiguity over spectacle. In the Indian context, realism became a vehicle for social commentary, foregrounding middle-class anxieties, gender relations, and domestic tensions [Dissanayake and Gokulsing \(2013\)](#). Within this realist tradition, Balu Mahendra emerged as a pioneering figure whose visual grammar significantly reshaped Tamil cinematic language. Trained in cinematography, he brought a photographic sensitivity to filmmaking, privileging natural light, intimate framing, and emotional restraint. Films such as *Moondram Pirai*, *Veedu*, and *Marupadiyum* exemplified his commitment to interior realism and female-centric narratives. Critics often praised his nuanced portrayal of women as emotionally complex individuals rather than caricatured stereotypes [Sivathamby \(2005\)](#). His cinema replaced dramatic exaggeration with silence, gaze, and everyday gestures, creating what many scholars described as “emotional realism.” However, realism as an aesthetic practice does not automatically guarantee ideological neutrality. Feminist film theorists such as [Mulvey \(1975\)](#) argued that cinematic realism could subtly reproduce patriarchal structures through narrative positioning and visual framing. Even when films appeared progressive, the underlying gaze and narrative resolution often reinforced traditional gender hierarchies. Therefore, realism must be examined not merely as style but as a cultural discourse embedded within social power structures [Hall \(1997\)](#). While earlier scholarship celebrated Balu Mahendra's humanistic approach, contemporary generational shifts in gender awareness invite renewed examination. Generation Z—shaped by digital activism, intersectional feminism, and media literacy—approaches cinema with critical awareness of representation politics [Twenge \(2017\)](#). Thus, revisiting realist cinema through Gen Z lenses becomes necessary to understand how meanings evolve across generations.

1.2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Although realist cinema is frequently perceived as authentic and unbiased, the assumption that realism equates to ideological neutrality remains problematic. Realist portrayals may naturalize gender hierarchies by presenting them as everyday reality rather than as constructed norms. [Althusser \(1971\)](#) theory of ideological state apparatuses suggests that cultural texts, including cinema, reproduce dominant ideologies subtly through normalization. In this sense, realism may mask patriarchal power relations under the guise of authenticity. The problem addressed in this study emerged from the tension between critical acclaim and contemporary reinterpretation. While Balu Mahendra's films were historically appreciated for dignified female representation, little research examined whether young viewers today interpret these portrayals differently. Gen Z audiences, exposed to discourses on consent, agency, body politics, and equality, may question narrative patterns previously considered progressive. Therefore, the central problem investigated was whether realist portrayals in Tamil cinema, particularly in Balu Mahendra's films, function as ideologically neutral representations or whether they embed subtle patriarchal assumptions that contemporary viewers critically identify.

1.3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study was guided by the following research questions:

How does Gen Z perceive realism in Balu Mahendra's films?

How are female characters interpreted through contemporary feminist lenses?

Does realism function as a masking device for patriarchal structures?

These questions were grounded in reception theory, which posits that meaning is not fixed within the text but constructed by audiences within cultural contexts [Hall \(1980\)](#). Gen Z viewers may decode cinematic texts differently from earlier generations due to evolving gender consciousness. By focusing on interpretative processes rather than textual analysis alone, this research sought to bridge aesthetic evaluation with ideological critique.

1.4. OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this study was to analyze gender politics embedded in selected films directed by Balu Mahendra. Through qualitative interviews with 40 Gen Z participants, the research aimed to examine interpretative patterns regarding female agency, silence, sacrifice, and emotional labour. A secondary objective was to evaluate realism not merely as an aesthetic strategy but as an ideological device. Feminist scholars have long argued that representation shapes perception [Butler \(1990\)](#). Thus, examining whether audiences perceive realism as progressive or regressive contributes to understanding cinema's cultural power. Additionally, the study aimed to explore generational shifts in cinematic meaning-making. [Mannheim \(1952\)](#) theory of generations suggests that shared socio-historical experiences influence interpretative frameworks. Gen Z, shaped by social media discourse and global feminist movements, may reinterpret cinematic realism through new ethical and political standards.

1.5. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study held significance on multiple academic fronts. First, it expanded feminist film scholarship by integrating South Indian realist cinema into broader theoretical debates. While much feminist film theory developed in Western contexts, applying it to Tamil cinema enriched cross-cultural discourse [Mulvey \(1975\)](#), [hooks \(1992\)](#). Second, the research introduced an audience-based reinterpretation model. Rather than analysing films solely through textual critique, it foregrounded lived audience responses. This reception-oriented methodology aligned with contemporary cultural studies approaches that emphasize negotiated and oppositional readings [Hall \(1980\)](#). Third, the study connected generational theory with cinema studies by investigating how Gen Z's ideological orientation influenced film interpretation. Such interdisciplinary engagement bridged film studies, sociology, and gender theory. Finally, the findings contributed pedagogically by encouraging critical media literacy. Understanding that realism may carry ideological weight empowers viewers to question normalized gender roles within seemingly authentic narratives. By revisiting Balu Mahendra's cinema through Gen Z perspectives, the study demonstrated that cinematic meaning is dynamic, historically situated, and open to feminist re-reading.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. REALISM IN INDIAN CINEMA

Realism has historically functioned as both an aesthetic and ideological movement within global cinema. The theoretical foundations of realism are often traced to the work of André Bazin, who argued that cinema's primary moral responsibility lay in faithfully representing reality. [Bazin \(1967\)](#) emphasized long takes, deep focus, and minimal editing as techniques that preserved spatial and temporal continuity, allowing audiences interpretative freedom. For Bazin, realism was not merely stylistic but ethical—grounded in respect for the ambiguity of life. In the Indian context, realism evolved through parallel cinema movements in the 1950s and 1970s, influenced by Italian Neorealism and directors such as Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen. Indian realism diverged from mainstream melodrama by focusing on middle-class struggles, rural poverty, and socio-political issues [Dissanayake and Gokulsing \(2013\)](#). Unlike commercial cinema, which privileged spectacle and musical excess, realist films sought authenticity in location shooting, restrained acting, and socially relevant themes. Tamil cinema adopted realist elements later but adapted them to regional cultural sensibilities. Rather than rejecting melodrama entirely, Tamil realist filmmakers blended emotional intensity with everyday realism. This hybrid mode allowed for subtle critiques of domestic life, gender expectations, and economic precarity. However, scholars caution that realism does not guarantee ideological neutrality. Cultural studies theorists argue that realism may naturalize social hierarchies by presenting them as “common sense” [Hall \(1997\)](#). Thus, Indian realism must be examined not only as aesthetic innovation but also as a cultural discourse embedded within power structures.

2.2. GENDER REPRESENTATION IN TAMIL CINEMA

Gender representation in Tamil cinema has evolved across decades, reflecting changing socio-cultural values. Early mainstream films often portrayed women within rigid archetypes: the self-sacrificing mother, the virtuous wife, or the romantic heroine. These representations aligned with dominant patriarchal norms that positioned women as moral custodians of family honour [Sivathamby \(2005\)](#). During the 1980s and 1990s, filmmakers attempted more complex

portrayals of female subjectivity. Women were depicted as emotionally layered individuals facing social constraints. Yet, even progressive narratives frequently maintained traditional frameworks, resolving conflicts through marriage, sacrifice, or moral compromise. Feminist scholars argue that Tamil cinema, while occasionally foregrounding female suffering, often aestheticized that suffering in ways that reinforced gender hierarchies [Lakshmi \(2019\)](#). Contemporary scholarship highlights how visual framing, costume, and narrative closure contribute to subtle gender messaging. The camera frequently positions women as objects of emotional or visual contemplation rather than autonomous agents. Despite narrative centrality, female characters are often defined relationally—through father, husband, or lover. Therefore, examining gender representation requires attention to both textual narrative and cinematic technique. In recent years, digital platforms and feminist activism have encouraged younger audiences to critically reassess earlier films. Generation Z viewers, exposed to conversations about consent, agency, and body politics, may interpret traditional portrayals differently from earlier generations. This generational shift makes reception-based studies increasingly important.

2.3. FEMINIST FILM THEORY

Feminist film theory provides critical tools for analyzing how cinema constructs gendered meaning. One of the most influential contributions came from Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975). Mulvey introduced the concept of the “male gaze,” arguing that classical cinema positioned women as objects of visual pleasure for a presumed heterosexual male spectator. Through camera movement, framing, and narrative alignment, female characters were often rendered passive spectacles rather than active subjects. The male gaze framework is particularly relevant when analyzing realist cinema. Even when films avoid overt glamour or sensationalism, subtle visual codes—lingering shots, fragmented body framing, or emotional vulnerability—may reproduce objectifying perspectives. Feminist scholars expanded Mulvey’s argument by exploring intersectionality, spectatorship, and female agency [hooks \(1992\)](#). Thus, feminist film theory does not simply accuse cinema of bias; it interrogates the mechanisms through which visual pleasure and narrative closure sustain patriarchal norms. Another crucial theoretical framework emerges from Louis Althusser and his concept of ideological state apparatuses (1971). Althusser argued that cultural institutions, including media and cinema, reproduce dominant ideologies by shaping individual consciousness. Applied to cinema, this theory suggests that films function as ideological apparatuses that naturalize social roles, including gender hierarchies. Realism, by appearing authentic, may reinforce ideology more effectively than overt propaganda because it disguises construction as reality.

Combining Mulvey and Althusser allows for a nuanced analysis: cinema can simultaneously generate emotional identification and ideological conditioning. Therefore, examining how audiences decode these representations becomes essential. Reception theory, particularly [Hall \(1980\)](#) encoding/decoding model, emphasizes that viewers may accept, negotiate, or oppose dominant meanings. This theoretical intersection forms the conceptual backbone for analyzing Gen Z interpretations of realist cinema.

2.4. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON BALU MAHENDRA

Scholarly engagement with Balu Mahendra has primarily focused on his narrative aesthetics and visual style. Critics frequently describe his cinema as poetic realism, marked by natural lighting, minimal background score, and emotionally restrained performances. Films such as *Moondram Pirai* and *Veedu* have been analyzed for their intimate portrayal of human vulnerability and middle-class anxieties. Researchers highlight his background in cinematography as central to his stylistic innovation. Long takes, ambient sound, and domestic interiors created an immersive realism that contrasted sharply with mainstream Tamil cinema’s theatrical excess. This aesthetic approach earned him critical acclaim for authenticity and emotional depth. Regarding gender, scholars often argue that Balu Mahendra depicted women with empathy and complexity. In *Marupadiyum*, for instance, the female protagonist navigates betrayal and self-discovery, challenging conventional marital norms. Such narratives positioned women as moral and emotional centres within domestic spaces. However, some critics observe that even these portrayals revolve around suffering and resilience rather than structural empowerment. The emphasis on silent endurance may romanticize female sacrifice rather than dismantle patriarchal expectations. Most existing studies rely heavily on textual analysis and auteur theory, praising Balu Mahendra’s humanism. Few investigations incorporate audience reception data, especially from contemporary young

viewers. Thus, while his narrative aesthetics and emotional realism are well-documented, the ideological implications of his realism remain underexplored in empirical research.

2.5. RESEARCH GAP

The review of literature reveals two major gaps. First, there is limited interview-based research examining how Generation Z audiences interpret gender politics in Tamil realist cinema. Most prior studies adopt textual or theoretical approaches without empirical audience engagement. Given the dynamic nature of cultural meaning, relying solely on textual analysis overlooks how contemporary viewers negotiate representation. Second, there is a lack of intervention-oriented feminist reinterpretation. Few studies assess whether exposure to critical frameworks influences audience perception. Realism is often assumed to be progressive due to its authenticity, yet its ideological layers remain insufficiently interrogated through structured audience research. Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by conducting qualitative interviews with Gen Z participants, exploring how they decode realism and gender representation in Balu Mahendra's films. By combining feminist theory, ideological critique, and reception analysis, the research contributes to a more holistic understanding of realism as both aesthetic practice and ideological discourse.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design to investigate how Generation Z audiences interpreted realism and gender politics in the films of Balu Mahendra. A qualitative framework was selected because the research aimed to explore subjective meanings, interpretative patterns, and ideological reflections rather than measure quantifiable variables. Since audience perception is shaped by lived experience, cultural awareness, and generational identity, qualitative inquiry allowed for deeper engagement with participants' perspectives. The study employed semi-structured, in-depth interviews as the primary research method. This approach provided both structure and flexibility. A predetermined set of guiding questions ensured consistency across interviews, while open-ended prompts allowed participants to elaborate on emotional reactions, critical reflections, and personal interpretations. The semi-structured format enabled the researcher to probe emerging themes, clarify ambiguities, and explore unexpected responses in greater depth. The exploratory nature of the design was appropriate because limited prior research had examined Gen Z reception of Tamil realist cinema through a feminist lens. Therefore, the study sought to generate interpretative insights rather than test predetermined hypotheses.

3.2. PARTICIPANTS

The study included 40 Generation Z participants aged between 18 and 27 years. All participants were urban college students enrolled in arts, media, literature, or social science programs. Urban students were selected because they were more likely to have exposure to contemporary feminist discourse, digital media debates, and critical media literacy discussions. The gender distribution aimed to ensure diversity of perspectives, including both male and female participants. Participants came from varied socio-economic and educational backgrounds within urban settings, enabling a range of interpretative viewpoints. The selection of Gen Z was intentional, as this cohort had grown up in a digital environment shaped by social media activism, global feminist movements, and increasing conversations around consent and gender equality.

3.3. SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who met specific inclusion criteria. The criteria included: (1) belonging to the Gen Z age category (18–27 years), (2) willingness to participate in film screening sessions, and (3) ability to articulate opinions in interview settings. Participants with prior academic exposure to film studies were included, but those with professional expertise in filmmaking were excluded to maintain focus on general audience reception rather than expert critique. Purposive sampling was considered appropriate because the study required participants capable of reflective discussion. Random sampling was not adopted, as the research aimed for depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization. The sampling strategy ensured that participants were information-rich cases capable of providing meaningful insights into generational interpretation.

3.4. DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

Data were collected using two primary tools: (1) a structured interview guide and (2) organized film screening sessions.

The interview guide consisted of 10–15 open-ended questions designed to explore perceptions of realism, emotional engagement, and gender representation. Questions addressed themes such as:

- How did participants define realism in the films?
- How were female characters perceived?
- Did participants identify moments of agency or victimhood?
- Were certain portrayals interpreted as progressive or patriarchal?

The open-ended structure encouraged participants to elaborate freely, allowing spontaneous reflections and nuanced analysis. Film screening sessions were conducted prior to interviews to ensure that all participants engaged directly with the selected films. The screenings created a shared experiential foundation for discussion. Participants viewed selected scenes or full-length versions of the following films:

- *Moondram Pirai*
- *Veedu*
- *Marupadiyum*

These films were chosen because they represented different dimensions of Balu Mahendra's realism, including psychological vulnerability, middle-class domestic struggle, and female self-discovery. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant permission and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.5. FILMS SELECTED FOR ANALYSIS

The films selected for analysis were chosen based on thematic relevance and critical recognition. *Moondram Pirai* was selected for its portrayal of emotional dependency and vulnerability within a gendered framework. The film provided insight into power dynamics embedded within care, memory loss, and romantic attachment. *Veedu* was included due to its depiction of middle-class economic struggle centered on a female protagonist navigating bureaucratic and patriarchal structures. The film offered an opportunity to examine resilience and structural constraint. *Marupadiyum* was selected for its narrative of marital betrayal and female self-realization. The film allowed exploration of agency, autonomy, and moral positioning within domestic relationships. Together, these films represented varied aspects of realism and gender politics within Balu Mahendra's cinematic oeuvre.

3.6. METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method was selected because it facilitated systematic identification, organization, and interpretation of recurring patterns within qualitative data. Thematic analysis allowed the researcher to move from descriptive coding to interpretative categorization. The analysis followed six stages: data familiarization, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and report writing. Transcripts were read multiple times to ensure immersion in participant responses. The following coding categories were developed based on theoretical frameworks and emerging patterns:

- Emotional realism – references to authenticity, natural acting, and emotional depth.
- Female agency – instances where participants identified autonomy, decision-making, or empowerment.
- Moral positioning – discussions about women as ethical centres or moral guardians.
- Silence and sacrifice – interpretations of quiet endurance and emotional labour.
- Body politics – comments related to gaze, physical framing, or vulnerability.

These categories were refined during analysis to ensure conceptual clarity. Interpretations were grounded in participant narratives rather than imposed assumptions.

3.7. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical integrity was maintained throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were provided with information sheets explaining the purpose of the study, research procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Anonymity was strictly preserved. Participants were assigned pseudonyms during transcription and reporting to ensure confidentiality. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and accessed only for academic purposes. The data were used exclusively for academic research and thesis writing. No personal identifiers were disclosed in publications or presentations. The study adhered to institutional ethical guidelines for research involving human participants.

4. FINDINGS AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The thematic analysis of interviews conducted with 40 Gen Z participants revealed layered and sometimes contradictory interpretations of realism and gender politics in the films of Balu Mahendra. While participants acknowledged the aesthetic brilliance and emotional sensitivity of the films, they simultaneously offered critical reflections shaped by contemporary feminist awareness. Five dominant themes emerged from the data.

4.1. THEME 1: REALISM AS EMOTIONAL AUTHENTICITY

The first and most consistent theme identified across interviews was the perception of realism as emotional authenticity. Participants frequently described the films as “natural,” “raw,” and “intimate.” The use of natural lighting, minimal background score, and every day domestic settings created a sense of lived reality rather than cinematic spectacle. Many respondents stated that the absence of exaggerated dialogue or dramatic performance enhanced emotional immersion. Participants particularly emphasized the emotional depth of characters. In films such as *Veedu*, the portrayal of middle-class struggle was described as relatable and grounded. The protagonist’s anxieties about housing and financial stability resonated strongly with urban youth who recognized similar pressures within contemporary society. The realism was interpreted not merely as visual style but as psychological authenticity. However, some participants noted that emotional realism sometimes intensified the impact of suffering, particularly for female characters. Because situations appeared believable, the emotional weight felt more disturbing than in melodramatic cinema. Thus, realism functioned as a double-edged device—enhancing both empathy and critical discomfort.

4.2. THEME 2: WOMEN AS SILENT SUFFERERS

A prominent theme that emerged was the portrayal of women as silent sufferers. While participants acknowledged that female characters were central to the narrative, many observed that their strength was frequently expressed through endurance rather than resistance. Gen Z participants critiqued what they described as “romanticized sacrifice.” In several interviews, respondents argued that silence, patience, and emotional labour were portrayed as virtuous feminine qualities. In *Moondram Pirai*, for instance, the female character’s vulnerability and dependence were interpreted by some as reinforcing traditional expectations of female fragility.

Female participants, in particular, questioned whether emotional suffering was being aestheticized. They expressed discomfort with narratives that equated resilience with quiet endurance rather than structural empowerment. While earlier critical discourse may have celebrated such portrayals as sensitive or dignified, Gen Z viewers tended to interpret them as symptomatic of patriarchal conditioning. This theme indicated a shift from admiration to interrogation. Rather than rejecting the films outright, participants engaged in nuanced critique, distinguishing between emotional depth and ideological messaging.

4.3. THEME 3: AGENCY VS VICTIMHOOD

The third theme revealed conflicting interpretations regarding female agency. Participants demonstrated divided opinions depending on the specific film context. In *Marupadiyum*, many respondents identified moments of empowerment. The protagonist’s decision to redefine her identity after marital betrayal was seen as progressive and self-assertive. Participants appreciated the depiction of a woman navigating emotional trauma while ultimately

reclaiming autonomy. This narrative was interpreted as aligning with contemporary feminist ideals of self-respect and independence. In contrast, responses to *Moondram Pirai* were more conflicted. While some participants interpreted the female character's vulnerability as a tragic consequence of circumstance, others perceived it as reinforcing dependency and infantilization. The power imbalance embedded in caregiving dynamics generated discomfort among viewers sensitive to issues of consent and autonomy. Thus, agency was not interpreted uniformly across films. Instead, it was negotiated within narrative context. Gen Z participants demonstrated capacity for layered reading—recognizing both progressive elements and problematic undertones. This thematic tension reflected broader debates within feminist film criticism about representation versus empowerment.

4.4. THEME 4: MALE GAZE AND VISUAL FRAMING

Another significant theme that emerged was recognition of subtle objectification through visual framing. Although Balu Mahendra's cinema avoided overt glamour typical of commercial films, participants noted instances where camera positioning appeared aligned with a masculine observational perspective. Some respondents observed lingering shots and intimate framing that emphasized female vulnerability. While these techniques contributed to emotional realism, they also prompted questions about spectatorship. Participants trained in media literacy identified how visual focus sometimes directed audience sympathy through a male character's viewpoint. Interestingly, not all participants interpreted these moments as problematic. Some argued that vulnerability was central to narrative realism rather than objectification. However, the mere presence of debate indicated heightened awareness among Gen Z viewers regarding visual politics. The recognition of subtle gaze dynamics suggested that realism did not eliminate ideological framing. Instead, it often concealed it within aesthetic naturalism. This insight aligned with feminist theoretical concerns about how cinema constructs spectatorship unconsciously.

4.5. THEME 5: GENERATIONAL SHIFT IN INTERPRETATION

The final theme highlighted a clear generational shift in interpretation. Many participants explicitly compared their perspectives with those of older family members or critics who admired the films without questioning gender dynamics.

Gen Z respondents described their reading as shaped by conversations about consent, mental health, emotional labour, and gender equality. Scenes previously interpreted as romantic were re-evaluated through consent-based frameworks. Emotional dependency, once considered poetic, was scrutinized for power imbalance. Participants emphasized that appreciation and critique could coexist. They expressed admiration for cinematic craft while rejecting certain ideological assumptions. This dual stance reflected a broader generational pattern of critical consumption—valuing art yet interrogating its politics. The findings demonstrated that meaning was not static but historically situated. Realism that once appeared progressive was reinterpreted within contemporary ethical standards. This generational reinterpretation did not dismiss Balu Mahendra's contribution but expanded it into new critical territory.

Table 1

Table 1 Summary of Thematic Findings (N = 40)					
S.No	Theme	Description of Theme	No. of Participants (n=40)	Percentage(%)	Interpretation Pattern
1	Realism as Emotional Authenticity	Appreciation of natural lighting, minimalism, emotional depth	34	85%	Strong aesthetic admiration
2	Women as Silent Sufferers	Recognition of sacrificial femininity and emotional endurance	29	72.5%	Critical reflection on gender norms
3	Agency vs Victimhood	Mixed responses on empowerment and dependency	26	65%	Negotiated interpretation
4	Male Gaze & Visual Framing	Identification of subtle objectification and male perspective	22	55%	Emerging feminist awareness
5	Generational Shift in Interpretation	Comparison between older admiration and Gen Z critique	31	77.5%	Conscious generational re-reading

Table 2

Table 2 Film-wise Interpretation Pattern			
Film	Dominant Audience Response	Key Gender Observation	Overall Perception
<i>Moondram Pirai</i>	Emotional but troubling	Vulnerability, dependency concerns	Critically appreciated
<i>Veedu</i>	Relatable realism	Structural struggle, quiet resilience	Strong positive response
<i>Marupadiyum</i>	Empowering narrative	Assertion of female autonomy	Progressive reading

Table 3

Table 3 Coding Category Frequency		
Coding Category	Frequency (Mentions)	Thematic Significance
Emotional Realism	112	Core aesthetic strength
Female Agency	78	Conditional empowerment
Moral Positioning	64	Women as ethical anchors
Silence & Sacrifice	89	Feminist critique trigger
Body Politics	51	Subtle gaze awareness

Figure 1

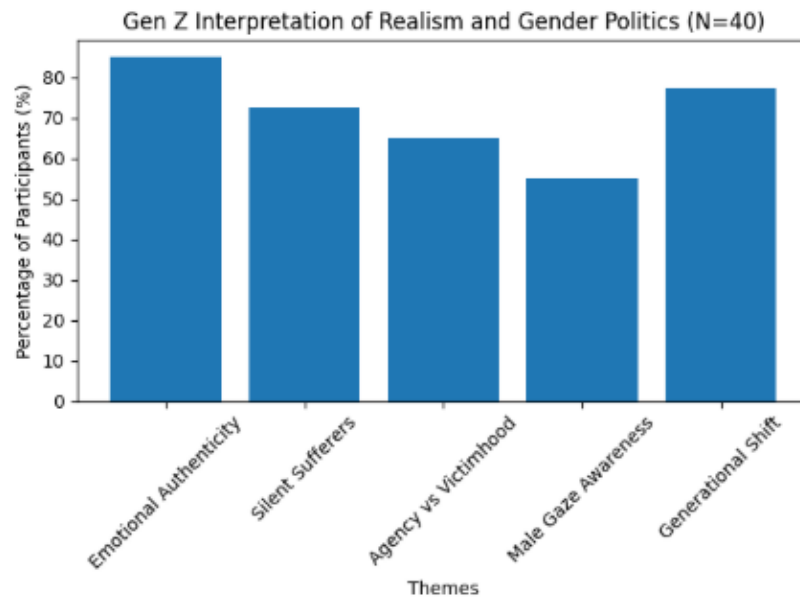


Figure 1 Distribution of Gen Z Participants' Thematic Responses on Realism and Gender Politics in Balu Mahendra's Cinema (N = 40)

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrated that realism in the films of Balu Mahendra was not received as a neutral aesthetic form but as a layered cultural construction open to generational reinterpretation. By situating audience responses within feminist and ideological frameworks, this discussion re-examined realism, gender representation, and spectatorship through contemporary theoretical lenses.

5.1. RE-READING REALISM: REALISM AS IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION

Traditional film criticism frequently celebrated realism as an authentic reflection of life. Drawing from André Bazin's ontological theory, realism was understood as cinema's moral commitment to preserving ambiguity and minimizing

manipulation [Bazin \(1967\)](#) However, the present findings suggested that realism functioned not merely as style but as ideological construction. Participants' responses indicated that emotional authenticity intensified identification while simultaneously normalizing certain gender hierarchies. This supports Louis [Althusser \(1971\)](#) argument that cultural forms operate as ideological state apparatuses. Cinema does not simply depict reality; it reproduces dominant norms by presenting them as natural. When female endurance, sacrifice, or silence was portrayed within everyday domestic realism, they appeared socially inevitable rather than structurally conditioned. Moreover, Stuart [Hall \(1980\)](#) encoding/decoding model provides a framework for understanding how realism carries encoded meanings that audiences may negotiate or oppose. While earlier generations may have adopted dominant readings that celebrated emotional subtlety, Gen Z participants engaged in negotiated readings that appreciated craft while questioning ideology. Thus, realism emerged as a powerful discursive tool: its claim to authenticity masked its constructed nature. The study affirmed that cinematic realism is historically situated and ideologically embedded rather than transparently reflective.

5.2. FEMINIST REINTERPRETATION: FROM MORAL WOMAN TO AUTONOMOUS SUBJECT

A significant shift identified in the findings was the movement from perceiving women as moral centres to evaluating them as autonomous subjects. Earlier scholarship on Tamil cinema often described female characters as ethical anchors within domestic narratives [Sivathamby \(2005\)](#). Women mediated conflict, upheld family values, and embodied resilience. Such portrayals were frequently interpreted as dignified and respectful. However, feminist film theory challenges the conflation of morality with passivity. Laura [Mulvey \(1975\)](#) argued that classical cinema structured women as objects of narrative containment rather than agents of transformation. Although Balu Mahendra's films offered psychological depth, the present study showed that Gen Z viewers scrutinized whether such depth translated into structural agency. Participants' responses to films like *Marupadiyum* indicated appreciation for moments where female characters asserted independence. Conversely, portrayals in *Moondram Pirai* prompted discomfort when vulnerability appeared linked to dependency or infantilization. This reinterpretation aligns with Judith [Butler \(1990\)](#) theory of gender performativity, which suggests that gender roles are socially constructed rather than naturally ordained. Gen Z viewers appeared attuned to these constructions, questioning whether cinematic realism reinforced normative femininity under the guise of authenticity. The transition from "moral woman" to "autonomous subject" reflected broader feminist discourse that prioritizes consent, agency, and self-definition over sacrificial virtue. Thus, the discussion demonstrated that reinterpretation did not reject realism but recontextualized it within evolving feminist ethics.

5.3. GEN Z AS CRITICAL VIEWERS: MEDIA LITERACY AND DIGITAL FEMINISM

One of the most striking findings was the critical sophistication displayed by Gen Z participants. Unlike passive spectatorship models proposed in early film theory, contemporary audiences demonstrated active decoding practices. This aligns with [Hall \(1980\)](#) assertion that viewers negotiate meaning within cultural contexts. Generation Z's interpretative patterns were shaped significantly by digital media environments. [Twenge \(2017\)](#) described Gen Z as "digitally native," growing up amidst social media activism, online discourse, and global feminist campaigns. Exposure to movements such as #MeToo and widespread conversations about consent has heightened awareness regarding gendered power relations. Media literacy education also played a role in shaping interpretative frameworks. Participants frequently referenced camera angles, narrative structure, and framing techniques when discussing subtle objectification. This analytical awareness suggests that contemporary viewers possess tools to deconstruct cinematic representation. [bell hooks \(1992\)](#) argued that oppositional gaze emerges when marginalized viewers critically interrogate dominant visual culture. Although hooks' work focused primarily on race and gender in Western cinema, the concept resonates here. Gen Z audiences enacted a form of oppositional or negotiated gaze—valuing aesthetic realism while resisting patriarchal coding. Thus, Gen Z functioned not merely as viewers but as interpretative agents whose readings were shaped by digital feminism and critical pedagogy. Their responses underscored the dynamic relationship between cultural production and audience consciousness.

5.4. THE POLITICS OF SILENCE: SILENCE AS STRENGTH VS SUPPRESSION

The theme of silence generated particularly nuanced discussion. Historically, silence in cinema has been associated with emotional restraint, dignity, and moral depth. In Balu Mahendra's films, quiet gestures and unspoken suffering

contributed to aesthetic realism. However, feminist scholarship encourages interrogation of silence as political construct. Silence can signify both resilience and systemic suppression. Participants' interpretations reflected this duality. Some viewed silent endurance as emotional maturity and inner strength. Others interpreted it as normalization of emotional labour disproportionately assigned to women. Foucault (1978) theory of discourse suggests that what remains unsaid can be as significant as spoken narratives. Within realist cinema, silence may conceal power asymmetries by aestheticizing them. When female characters internalized suffering without protest, realism risked presenting suppression as natural temperament. Gen Z participants tended to evaluate silence through consent-based and equality-oriented frameworks. Emotional repression was no longer automatically equated with virtue. Instead, it was assessed in relation to structural agency and voice. Therefore, the politics of silence emerged as central to feminist reinterpretation. Realism amplified the power of silence, but contemporary audiences questioned its ideological implications.

6. CONCLUSION

This study concluded that the realism employed in the films of Balu Mahendra was aesthetically powerful yet ideologically layered. While his cinematic style was widely appreciated for its visual naturalism, emotional restraint, and psychological depth, the findings demonstrated that realism did not function as a neutral mirror of reality. Instead, it operated as a constructed narrative framework embedded within cultural assumptions about gender, morality, and domestic roles. The subtlety of realist technique intensified emotional authenticity, but it also normalized certain patriarchal patterns by presenting them as everyday life. The interview-based analysis revealed that Generation Z audiences engaged with these films critically rather than passively. Although participants admired the artistic craftsmanship and emotional sincerity, they questioned portrayals of silent suffering, sacrificial femininity, and relational dependency. Female characters were reinterpreted not merely as moral centres but as subjects whose agency required evaluation through contemporary feminist standards. This generational reading reflected broader shifts shaped by digital feminism, consent discourse, and increased media literacy. Importantly, the qualitative methodology highlighted a transformation in cinematic meaning-making across generations. The study demonstrated that film texts are not static; their interpretations evolve according to socio-cultural context and audience consciousness. By foregrounding reception rather than solely textual analysis, the research emphasized the dynamic interaction between cinema and viewers. Finally, the study suggested the integration of feminist media literacy within film pedagogy. Encouraging critical engagement with realist cinema can foster analytical awareness of how aesthetics intersect with ideology. Such pedagogical approaches would enable students to appreciate artistic achievement while simultaneously interrogating embedded power structures.

7. IMPLICATIONS

7.1. ACADEMIC IMPLICATIONS

This study contributed significantly to academic discourse by expanding the application of reception theory within the context of Indian cinema. While much scholarship on Tamil films has traditionally focused on textual analysis, auteur studies, or ideological critique, this research foregrounded audience interpretation as a central analytical lens. By examining how Gen Z viewers interpreted the films of Balu Mahendra, the study demonstrated that cinematic meaning is not fixed within the text but dynamically constructed through generational consciousness. The research also enriched feminist film scholarship in South Asian contexts. Although feminist film theory has been widely applied to Western cinema, its systematic integration into Tamil realist cinema remains limited. By combining reception theory, feminist critique, and generational analysis, the study broadened interdisciplinary engagement between film studies, gender studies, and cultural sociology. It highlighted the importance of examining realism not only as an aesthetic category but also as a cultural discourse embedded within ideological frameworks. Furthermore, the study provided empirical evidence supporting Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model within regional cinema contexts. The negotiated and oppositional readings offered by Gen Z participants confirmed that contemporary audiences actively reinterpret classic films in light of evolving social values. This finding encouraged scholars to reconsider canonical works through contemporary reception-based methodologies rather than relying solely on historical critical acclaim.

7.2. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study suggested important implications for curriculum design in film and gender studies programs. Integrating feminist media literacy into academic syllabi can encourage students to critically engage with cinematic realism rather than consume it unreflectively. Courses that include films by directors such as Balu Mahendra can benefit from structured discussions that analyze narrative framing, gender representation, and ideological positioning. Incorporating reception-based assignments—such as reflective screenings, focus group discussions, and thematic analysis exercises—can enhance students' interpretative skills. Such pedagogical practices promote analytical thinking by encouraging learners to distinguish between aesthetic admiration and ideological critique. The study demonstrated that young audiences are capable of nuanced engagement when provided with theoretical tools. Additionally, interdisciplinary modules combining cinema studies with sociology, psychology, and gender theory can deepen understanding of how media shapes identity and social norms. Encouraging critical dialogue around themes such as silence, agency, and emotional labour may foster greater awareness of how representation influences perception. Thus, the integration of feminist media literacy into film pedagogy can contribute to socially conscious and critically informed scholarship.

7.3. FUTURE RESEARCH

The study opened several avenues for future research. First, comparative analysis with contemporary Tamil filmmakers would provide valuable insight into how gender representation has evolved across generations. Examining directors influenced by or reacting against Balu Mahendra's realism could reveal shifts in narrative agency, consent representation, and visual framing practices. Such comparative research would illuminate whether contemporary cinema addresses the critiques raised by Gen Z audiences. Second, a quantitative validation study could strengthen and generalize the present findings. While the qualitative design offered depth and interpretative richness, a larger survey-based study using structured questionnaires could measure patterns across broader demographic groups. Statistical analysis might assess correlations between gender, media literacy exposure, and interpretative stance toward realism. Finally, future research could adopt a mixed-method approach combining textual analysis, audience surveys, and experimental intervention models. For instance, researchers could examine whether exposure to feminist film theory prior to screening alters interpretative outcomes. Such studies would further explore how ideology, education, and generational identity interact within cinematic meaning-making. Overall, the implications of this research extended beyond a single filmmaker. They underscored the necessity of examining realism as historically situated, ideologically layered, and continuously reinterpreted by evolving audiences.

8. AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

Priya Palanimurugan contributed to the writing of the manuscript. All co-authors contributed to the conceptualization, review, editing, and final approval of the manuscript.

9. TRANSPARENCY STATEMENT

The authors confirm that this manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study being reported, and no important aspects of the work have been omitted.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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