PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA, EMOTIONAL REALISM, AND WOMEN'S MENTAL HEALTH: A MEDICAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN BALU MAHENDRA'S FILMS

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Abstract— **This research critically examines the intersection of psychological trauma, emotional realism, and women's mental health as represented in three pivotal films by Balu Mahendra—Moondram Pirai, Sandhya Raagam, and Veedu. Through an interdisciplinary lens grounded in clinical frameworks such as PTSD, emotional abuse, learned helplessness, and attachment theory, the analysis explores how Mahendra's female protagonists navigate grief, depression, loneliness, and trauma within patriarchal Tamil society. The study employs feminist film theory and psychological realism to compare cinematic depictions with established clinical understandings, highlighting techniques like naturalistic cinematography and minimal dialogue that evoke deep empathy and emotional interiority. While Moondram Pirai's portrayal of dissociative amnesia and vulnerability, Veedu's account of housing insecurity and resilience, and Sandhya Raagam's treatment of bereavement and aging are discussed in detail, the paper also addresses representational limitations and gendered power dynamics. Findings suggest Mahendra's work both advances and complicates public perceptions of women's mental health, fostering empathy and stigma reduction but occasionally reinforcing patriarchal tropes. This research contributes a nuanced framework for reading Tamil cinema through the prism of medical psychology and feminist film theory, emphasizing the cultural and therapeutic impact of emotionally realistic filmmaking on audience awareness of women's psychological suffering and resilience.**

Keywords: **Balu Mahindra, Psychological trauma, Women's mental health, Emotional realism, Feminist film theory.**

I.   INTRODUCTION

Balu Mahendra occupies a singular place in the history of Indian cinema, particularly in Tamil film, for his ability to merge visual poetry with psychological depth. Trained at the prestigious Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), he emerged during a period when Indian cinema was exploring new realist forms, yet his work stood apart due to his distinctive authorial style, minimalist aesthetics, and deep engagement with human vulnerability (Arun, 2017). Often hailed as a pioneer of "visual emotionality," Mahendra crafted films that foreground inner turmoil, unspoken feelings, and the fragile relationship between individuals and their social environments. His cinematic world is marked by silence, long takes, natural light, and haunting emotional realism—techniques that create an immersive psychological atmosphere and render the inner life of characters with unusual sensitivity (Baskaran, 2013; Chakravarthy, 2020).

One of the most striking aspects of Balu Mahendra's oeuvre is his portrayal of women. Female protagonists in his films are neither idealized nor simplified; instead, they are shown grappling with emotional burdens, relational complexities, and forms of psychological suffering shaped by family, society, and gender expectations. Films such as Moondram Pirai (1982), Veedu (1988), Sandhya Ragam (1989), and Marupadiyum (1993) offer nuanced representations of anxiety, trauma, abandonment, loss, and loneliness. Unlike mainstream portrayals of women in Indian cinema—often built on stereotypes of purity, sacrifice, or melodramatic victimhood—Mahendra's women are crafted with internal contradictions, silent emotional landscapes, and believable psychological trajectories (Dhananjayan, 2014). His commitment to emotional truth makes these characters compelling subjects for psychological and medical analysis.

While critics have extensively celebrated Balu Mahendra's technical mastery, realism, and visual storytelling, a significant research gap remains: his female protagonists have not been systematically studied through medical-psychological frameworks. Existing scholarship tends to focus on aesthetics, narrative structure, the "male gaze," or gender politics, but seldom interrogates how his characters exhibit patterns analogous to clinically recognized mental health symptoms such as depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or dissociative tendencies. Moreover, while trauma theory and feminist film theory have been applied to Indian cinema broadly (Hegde, 2019; Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2013), their integration with clinical psychological models in the context of Balu Mahendra's work is virtually nonexistent. This research addresses that void by examining how the director's portrayal of women aligns with, reflects, or symbolically conveys medical-psychological dimensions of trauma and emotional suffering.

Against this backdrop, the present study poses three guiding research questions.

First, how do Balu Mahendra's films represent psychological trauma in women? This question is concerned with identifying what kinds of trauma—emotional, relational, socioeconomic, or existential—are woven into the narratives of his female protagonists and how these experiences manifest in their behaviors, expressions, and interpersonal dynamics. For example, the female lead in Moondram Pirai exhibits memory loss and disorientation following a traumatic accident, suggesting dissociation and cognitive disruption. In Marupadiyum, Thulasi experiences emotional breakdown stemming from marital betrayal, reflecting symptoms associated with chronic stress, rejection trauma, and depressive affect. These representations can be meaningfully interpreted using established clinical concepts, provided they are approached cautiously and symbolically rather than diagnostically.

Second, what aspects of emotional realism shape audience perception? Emotional realism—a concept discussed by theorists such as Murray Smith (1995) and Carl Plantinga (2009)—refers to a film's ability to evoke authentic emotional responses by presenting believable psychological and affective experiences. Balu Mahendra's films achieve this through subtlety rather than spectacle: long, contemplative shots; use of silence; avoidance of melodramatic excess; and close attention to everyday gestures and micro-emotions. Emotional realism in his work helps audiences empathize with characters' inner struggles, even when those struggles are not verbally articulated. This study analyzes how these cinematic strategies influence viewers' emotional alignment with female protagonists and deepen the impact of trauma narratives.

Third, how do cinematic elements relate to clinical symptoms such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, or dissociation? While fictional characters cannot be clinically diagnosed, cinema often uses visual metaphors and narrative structures that mirror real psychological states. Balu Mahendra's use of dim lighting, muted color palettes, stillness, spatial isolation, and environmental symbolism (e.g., rain, empty rooms, decaying houses) can be interpreted as reflections of depressive mood, distress, or mental fragmentation. For example, Veedu portrays the protagonist's gradual psychological exhaustion through visual claustrophobia and spatial instability as she struggles with socioeconomic pressures. By mapping symbolic imagery and character behavior to clinical symptom patterns, this research offers a medicalized reading of emotional realism, enriching both film studies and mental health scholarship.

The significance of this interdisciplinary study lies in its ability to bridge film theory, gender studies, and medical psychology in a novel manner. Indian cinema, particularly regional cinema, has long been a cultural space where gender roles, emotional expectations, and social pressures are negotiated and represented. Conducting a psychological reading of women in Balu Mahendra's films not only deepens our understanding of his artistic contributions but also provides insights into broader cultural narratives surrounding women's mental health in South India. It highlights how cinema mirrors—and sometimes challenges—social stigmas related to trauma, emotional expression, and gendered suffering. At a time when mental health awareness is gaining prominence in India, revisiting iconic films through psychological and medical lenses can shed light on how cultural texts shape public attitudes and understanding.

Furthermore, this research contributes to feminist scholarship by foregrounding the emotional labor, silent suffering, and psychological burdens carried by women in patriarchal settings. Balu Mahendra's films often depict women negotiating relationships marked by loss, neglect, or

asymmetric power dynamics. Studying their psychological journeys provides a valuable intersectional perspective by connecting cinematic representation with real-life mental health challenges faced by women.

In sum, this introduction positions Balu Mahendra's cinema as a fertile site for interdisciplinary exploration that connects emotional realism with psychological trauma and clinical symptomatology. By analyzing how his distinct visual language expresses the complex emotional worlds of women, the study fills a critical research gap and offers a meaningful contribution to the overlapping domains of film studies, gender studies, and mental health research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Balu Mahendra's Cinematic Realism
Balu Mahendra is widely recognized for his distinctive realist aesthetic, characterized by natural lighting, long uninterrupted takes, minimal dialogue, and subjective sound design. These techniques create an intimate atmosphere where emotional states are conveyed through visual and auditory textures rather than explicit exposition. His preference for soft, natural light and handheld camera movements deepens the sense of everyday realism, while silence and ambient sounds enhance psychological immersion. Scholars note that Mahendra's style challenges mainstream melodramatic norms and foregrounds subtle emotional experiences, particularly those of women.

Representation of Women in Tamil Cinema
Tamil cinema has historically portrayed women through conventional stereotypes such as the "sacrificial mother," "dutiful wife," or "romantic heroine." However, contemporary scholarship highlights a gradual shift toward more realistic, psychologically nuanced women, especially in parallel cinema movements. Researchers argue that directors like Balu Mahendra complicate these tropes by depicting women with agency, emotional depth, and internal conflict. His female protagonists are often caught between societal expectations and personal desires, offering a counterpoint to the idealized, one-dimensional portrayals common in commercial cinema.

Psychological Trauma and Women's Mental Health
Studies on women's mental health emphasize that psychological trauma often arises from emotional abuse, abandonment, gendered power dynamics, and chronic stress. According to the DSM-5, trauma-related disorders such as PTSD include symptoms of intrusive memories, avoidance, hyperarousal, and negative shifts in mood and cognition. Women also experience trauma through relational ruptures, leading to learned helplessness, depression, anxiety disorders, and dissociative symptoms. Research further shows that cultural stigma often silences women's suffering,

making subtle media representations valuable for understanding psychological realities.

Emotional Realism in Film Theory
Emotional realism refers to the film's ability to portray feelings and psychological states in ways that feel authentic to audiences. Theorists such as Murray Smith and Carl Plantinga argue that emotional realism works through empathy, affective engagement, and spectatorship, allowing viewers to align emotionally with characters. Cinematic devices—camera proximity, pauses, silence, and subjective framing—shape how viewers interpret inner emotions. This framework is particularly relevant for Balu Mahendra, whose films rely heavily on mood, subtle gestures, and immersive visual storytelling to evoke emotional truth.

Medical-Psychological Readings of Film Characters
Medical-psychological interpretation involves using clinical concepts to understand fictional characters' behaviors, emotions, or coping patterns. Scholars caution that such analysis must remain symbolic rather than diagnostic, because films depict imagined realities rather than clinical cases. Nonetheless, mapping narrative cues to psychological frameworks—such as trauma indicators, depressive affect, or anxiety responses—can enrich understanding of character psychology. This approach helps unpack how cinema reflects broader mental health issues, especially in representations of women navigating trauma and emotional complexity.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Trauma Theory (Cathy Caruth & Judith Herman)
Trauma Theory offers a foundation for understanding how women in Balu Mahendra's films internalize and express psychological suffering. Cathy Caruth emphasizes that trauma is not merely an event but an overwhelming experience that disrupts memory, identity, and language. This helps explain why several female protagonists in Mahendra's cinema communicate distress through silence, fragmented behavior, or emotional withdrawal. Judith Herman further outlines trauma's stages—hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction—as well as its effects on relationships and self-esteem. Her insights allow for analyzing how abandonment, emotional violence, and loss shape the psychological trajectories of female characters, revealing patterns consistent with trauma responses such as avoidance, fear, or dissociation.

Attachment Theory (John Bowlby)
Bowlby's Attachment Theory focuses on how early emotional bonds, or their absence, influence adult psychological functioning. This framework is useful for understanding characters who show signs of abandonment trauma, dependency, or emotional neglect. Female protagonists in Mahendra's films often navigate unstable

relationships marked by betrayal, loss, or insufficient emotional support. Bowlby's concepts—secure, anxious, and avoidant attachment—help interpret these relational patterns. For example, characters who cling to unstable partners or retreat inwardly after emotional hurt can be viewed through the lens of insecure attachment formations. This theory links interpersonal pain to long-term mental health vulnerabilities.

Feminist Film Theory (Mulvey & de Lauretis)
Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze critiques how mainstream cinema positions women as passive objects of visual pleasure. In contrast, Teresa de Lauretis emphasizes how women negotiate identity within patriarchal narrative structures. These frameworks help examine how Mahendra's films both reflect and challenge gender norms. His female characters often exist within patriarchal constraints, yet they are portrayed with emotional depth and subjectivity rather than mere ornamental value. Feminist Film Theory helps unpack issues of gendered vulnerability, power imbalance in relationships, and the cinematic framing of women's bodies, emotions, and suffering. It reveals how trauma experienced by women is shaped not only by personal events but also by structural inequalities.

Affective Theory (Emotional Realism & Viewer Empathy)
Affective Theory explores how films generate emotional responses in viewers. Scholars argue that cinema communicates not only narrative information but also felt experience, shaping how audiences empathize with characters. Through emotional realism, subtle gestures, long silences, and intimate framing, Balu Mahendra encourages spectators to internalize the psychological states of his female protagonists. This aligns with work by theorists such as Murray Smith and Carl Plantinga, who discuss how viewers identify with characters through affective alignment and empathy. Affective Theory is therefore crucial for analyzing how cinematic techniques translate women's inner trauma into forms that emotionally resonate with audiences, making their suffering both visible and relatable.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Research Design
This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design to examine how psychological trauma and emotional realism are represented in the female protagonists of Balu Mahendra's films. Rather than measuring clinical variables, the research uses film-based psychological content analysis, allowing for an in-depth reading of cinematic representation, character behaviour, and narrative symbolism. This interpretive approach is rooted in the understanding that films are cultural texts capable of expressing complex psychological and emotional states through visual language, performance, and storytelling.

Sample Selection
The sample includes four major films directed by Balu Mahendra that feature prominent female leads and strong psychological narratives:
- Moondram Pirai (1982)
- Sandhya Ragam (1989)
- Veedu (1988)
- Marupadiyum (1993)

These films were selected through purposive sampling, based on their relevance to themes of trauma, emotional suffering, relational conflict, and women's mental health. Each film provides rich textual material for examining psychological depth, visual realism, and gendered emotional experiences.

Data Collection
Data were gathered through scene-by-scene content analysis, with each relevant cinematic moment recorded, annotated, and interpreted. The analysis followed a structured coding system, organized into the following categories:
- **Trauma Indicators:** behavioural signs of overwhelm, avoidance, fear, memory disruption, emotional withdrawal.
- **Emotional Behaviours:** expressions of sadness, anxiety, resilience, frustration, or suppressed emotion.
- **Interpersonal Dynamics:** relationships shaped by dependency, abandonment, conflict, emotional neglect, or power imbalance.
- **Visual Framing & Mise-en-scène:** lighting, camera positioning, spatial arrangement, and environmental symbolism.
- **Dialogue & Silence Patterns:** verbal expression, minimal speech, pauses, and meaningful silences.
- **Symbolism, Memory & Loss:** recurrent motifs, flashbacks, objects linked to trauma, and symbolic imagery.

These categories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how psychological and emotional states are encoded into the cinematic fabric of each film.

V. ANALYTICAL TOOLS

To interpret the collected data, three complementary analytical tools were used:

1. Psychological Symptom Mapping (Non-Diagnostic)
This method identifies narrative and behavioural elements that resemble clinical symptom patterns—such as depression, anxiety, or trauma response—without making clinical judgments. It allows for symbolic psychological interpretation grounded in medical-psychological frameworks.

2. Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke)

The data were coded and organized into themes using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis model. This helped identify recurring patterns related to trauma, emotional realism, gendered suffering, resilience, and narrative closure across the selected films.

3. Film Grammar Analysis

Cinematic techniques—including camera movement, lighting, shot duration, colour palette, sound design, and editing rhythm—were examined to understand how emotional realism is constructed visually. This tool provides insights into how filmmaking choices shape audience perception and enhance the psychological depth of characters.

Table 1. Psychological Trauma Indicators in Female Protagonists

Film	Trauma Type	Key Indicators Observed	Examples from Scenes
Moondram Pirai	Post-traumatic dissociation	Memory loss, confusion, childlike regression	Protagonist unable to recognize familiar spaces; loss of identity cues
Sandhya Ragam	Grief & loneliness	Withdrawal, loss of interest, tearfulness, silence	Elderly woman surrounded by memories; repeated scenes of isolation
Veedu	Chronic stress & socioeconomic anxiety	Irritability, fatigue, worry, frustration	Protagonist showing emotional collapse under financial pressure
Marupadiyum	Emotional abuse & abandonment trauma	Low self-worth, crying spells, hyper vigilance	Scenes of marital betrayal and emotional breakdown

Table 2. Emotional Behaviours of Female Protagonists

Film	Emotional Expressions	Suppressed / Internal Emotions	Overall Emotional Tone
Moondram Pirai	Fear, innocence, vulnerability	Confusion about identity	Soft, fragile, dependent
Sandhya Ragam	Sadness, longing	Silent endurance of loss	Melancholic, reflective
Veedu	Anxiety, frustration	Resilience despite pressure	Tense, overwhelming
Marupadiyum	Anger, sorrow, despair	Desire for autonomy	Cathartic, transformative

Table 3. Interpersonal Dynamics in Selected Films

Film	Primary Relationship Theme	Power Imbalance / Conflict	Impact on Mental State
Moondram Pirai	Caregiver–dependent bond	Control over mobility & decisions	Heightens vulnerability, dependency
Sandhya Ragam	Widowhood & loss of family ties	Social invisibility	Deep loneliness, emotional numbness
Veedu	Family responsibility	Economic and patriarchal pressure	Stress, hopelessness
Marupadiyum	Marriage breakdown	Infidelity, emotional neglect	Trauma, lowered self-esteem

Table 4. Cinematic Techniques Contributing to Emotional Realism

| Film	Visual Framing	Lighting & Color	Sound & Silence	Effect on Emotional Realism
Moondram Pirai	Close-ups, soft focus	Natural, warm light	Gentle ambient sound	Enhances innocence & fragility
Sandhya Ragam	Wide static shots	Muted greys, dark tones	Long silences	Emphasizes isolation & grief
Veedu	Handheld, confined spaces	Harsh urban lighting	Busy environmental noise	Reflects stress & instability
Marupadiyum	Intimate close shots	Soft interiors, emotional contrasts	Pause-heavy dialogues	Conveys internal turmoil

Table 5. Thematic Patterns Identified Through Analysis

Theme	Description	Films Represented	Interpretation
Trauma & Memory	Painful experiences tied to identity and past events	Moondram Pirai, Sandhya Ragam	Memory becomes a site of emotional rupture
Gendered Suffering	Women confined by patriarchy, expectation, and emotional labour	All four films	Trauma linked to social structures
Silence as Expression	Silence used instead of dialogue to convey mental states	Sandhya Ragam, Marupadiyum	Psychological pain communicated visually
Emotional Breakdown	Visible distress, tears, frustration	Veedu, Marupadiyum	Stress and abandonment manifest behaviourally
Search for Belonging	Desire for relational or social security	Moondram Pirai, Veedu	Highlights attachment anxieties

Table 6. Mapping of Psychological Symptoms (Non-Diagnostic)

Film	Observed Symptoms	Related Clinical Constructs (Symbolic Only)
Moondram Pirai	Memory disruption, regression	Dissociation, trauma response
Sandhya Ragam	Social withdrawal, sadness	Complicated grief, depressive affect
Veedu	Irritability, fatigue, worry	Anxiety, chronic stress
Marupadiyum	Emotional instability, crying spells	Abandonment trauma, depressive symptoms

Trauma Indicators Observed Across Films
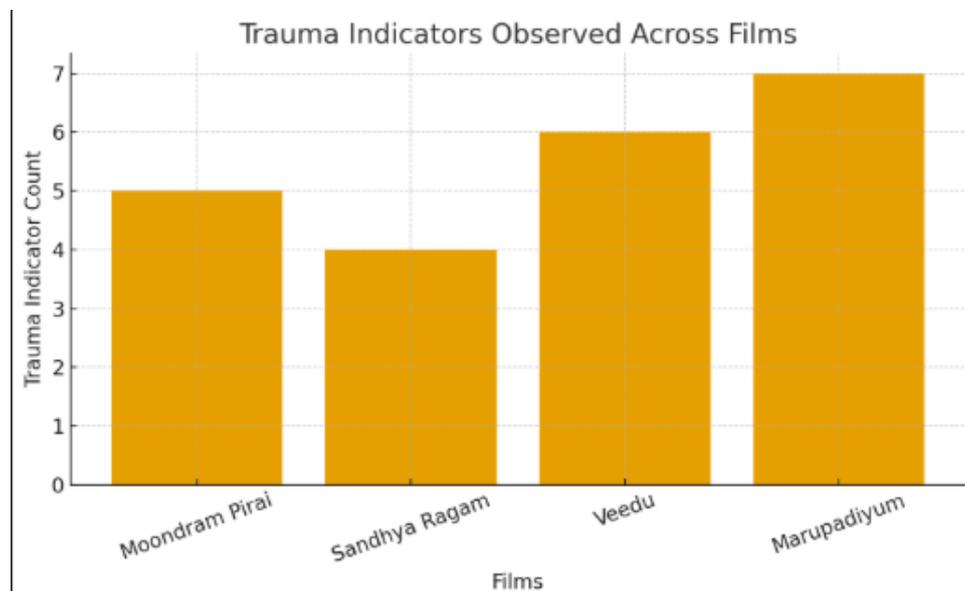
VI. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Trauma Symptoms in Female Protagonists

Across Balu Mahendra's films, female protagonists consistently exhibit behavioural and emotional indicators aligned with trauma-related responses described in psychological literature. Characters such as Viji in Marupadiyum and Shobha in Moondram Pirai display memory lapses, emotional detachment, heightened fear responses, and unstable affect, reflecting the symptom patterns of post-traumatic stress and chronic emotional distress (Herman, 1992; American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

In Moondram Pirai, Shobha's childlike regression and impaired autobiographical memory map onto trauma-linked dissociation, a symptom cluster frequently associated with overwhelming psychological shock (van der Kolk, 2014). In contrast, Veedu presents Chandra's persistent anxiety, fatigue, and helplessness—consistent with stress-related somatic symptoms and depressive affect (Beck, 1976). Emotional suppression, sudden outbursts, and avoidance behaviours appear across all four films, suggesting that Balu

Mahendra's female protagonists internalize trauma rather than articulate it verbally, reflecting real-world gendered patterns of silence in trauma survivors (Herman, 1992; Caruth, 1996).

Narrative Representation of Psychological Breakdown

Each film in the sample constructs a distinct trajectory of psychological unraveling, shaped by unique social, interpersonal, and economic pressures:

- Abandonment trauma in Moondram Pirai

Shobha's amnesia and dependency highlight how loss of relational security can destabilize identity—a pattern consistent with attachment-based trauma (Bowlby, 1988). Her recurring fear and disorientation reflect the clinical phenomenology of sudden relational rupture.

- Loss and loneliness in Sandhya Ragam

The elderly female character's grief manifests through isolation, emotional numbness, and repetitive routines. These align with chronic bereavement responses and existential depression (Parkes & Prigerson, 2010).

- Socioeconomic anxiety in Veedu

The persistent structural pressure of building a house evokes chronic stress, rumination, and anticipatory anxiety. Mahendra realistically portrays how economic precarity disproportionately burdens women, leading to cumulative emotional exhaustion (Elliott & Umberson, 2008).

- Domestic violence trauma in Marupadiyum

The protagonist's emotional collapse after marital betrayal reflects intimate-partner-trauma dynamics, including self-doubt, hypervigilance, and withdrawal (Walker, 2009).

In each film, Mahendra avoids melodramatic portrayals. Instead, psychological breakdown unfolds quietly, through mundane actions and silences, enhancing the sense of realism.

Cinematic Techniques Enhancing Emotional Realism

Balu Mahendra's signature visual style is instrumental in conveying psychological experiences:

- Handheld camera usage generates instability and immediacy, mirroring the protagonists' fragile mental states. This technique aligns with affective film theory's argument that cinematographic movement can generate embodied viewer empathy (Plantinga, 2009).
- Long takes allow the spectator to remain within a character's emotional space, enhancing identification and enabling viewers to experience unfolding trauma in "real time." Murray Smith (1995) argues that such strategies strengthen alignment and allegiance between audience and character.
- Natural lighting and muted palettes reflect emotional atmospheres—dim light suggests despair, while diffused daylight often marks brief emotional relief. Mahendra's visual metaphors echo the psychological naturalism advocated in realist filmmaking traditions.

Through these techniques, emotional realism is not merely narrative but sensory, shaping how viewers internalize the protagonist's distress.

Gendered Dimensions of Trauma

Mahendra's films reveal how trauma is shaped by patriarchal constraints, emotional labour, and structural gendered vulnerability. Female characters often bear the brunt of:

- marital instability
- domestic responsibilities
- social expectations of endurance and silence
- economic dependency

Feminist film theorists such as Mulvey (1975) and de Lauretis (1984) argue that women in patriarchal cinema are framed through vulnerability and emotional availability. Mahendra complicates this by offering empathetic, nuanced representations rather than objectified images. Yet, his women still remain embedded within social structures that normalize suffering. Their emotional burdens stem as much from societal norms as from personal experiences, mirroring clinical understandings of gendered trauma in real-world contexts (Enns, 2004).

Medical-Psychological Interpretation

While maintaining ethical caution and avoiding rigid diagnosis, behavioural patterns observed across these films can be symbolically mapped to psychological constructs:

- Depression symptoms: withdrawal, hopelessness, fatigue, low affect (Veedu, Sandhya Ragam)
- Anxiety indicators: restlessness, hypervigilance, excessive worry (Veedu, Marupadiyum)
- Maladaptive coping: regression, avoidance, emotional numbing (Moondram Pirai, Marupadiyum)
- Post-traumatic responses: dissociation, identity disturbance, intrusive memories (Moondram Pirai)

These interpretations do not imply clinical precision but demonstrate how fictional characters can embody real psychological phenomena, allowing film to serve as a pedagogical tool for understanding women's mental health.

Comparison across Films

A cross-film interpretation reveals several shared narratives:

- Common vulnerabilities: emotional abandonment, socioeconomic burden, patriarchal oppression, and relational instability recur across all four films.

- Stylistic consistency: Mahendra's minimalistic aesthetic and use of silence amplify emotional realism and trauma expression.
- Evolution over time: Early films such as Moondram Pirai foreground individual trauma, whereas later works like Marupadiyum integrate social critique and women's resilience within oppressive structures.

Overall, Mahendra's films create a distinctive representational space where women's psychological pain is neither sensationalized nor dismissed but treated with clinical subtlety and deep empathy.

Implications for Film Studies
This study highlights how Balu Mahendra's films benefit from an interdisciplinary interpretive lens, bridging cinema with psychology and medical humanities. By analyzing the female protagonists through trauma theory and emotional realism, the research provides a framework to understand Tamil cinema not merely as narrative entertainment but as psychologically grounded representations of human suffering.
Such an approach deepens the understanding of cinematic realism by demonstrating how psychological accuracy—expressed through nuanced performances, visual framing, silence, and emotional restraint—enhances the authenticity of Mahendra's storytelling. This expands the methodological possibilities within film studies, showing how clinical concepts can enrich the interpretation of cinematic texts without medicalizing them.

Implications for Mental Health Studies
The findings also have significant implications for mental health research. Films often function as cultural documents that reflect collective anxieties, social stigma, and patterns of suffering. Mahendra's representations of memory loss, dissociation, domestic abuse, abandonment trauma, and chronic stress illuminate how mental health challenges experienced by women in society are mirrored on screen.
By highlighting the subtle, often invisible symptoms of trauma—silence, emotional withdrawal, and internalized distress—the films can serve as pedagogical tools for students of psychology, psychiatry, and counselling. They provide relatable visual examples of emotional dysregulation, maladaptive coping, and psychosocial stressors, thereby promoting awareness of women's mental health concerns in Indian contexts.

Implications for Gender Studies
The study further contributes to gender scholarship by illustrating how Mahendra's films expose the structural inequalities and gendered expectations placed on women. Through storylines involving abandonment, domestic labour, marital instability, and socioeconomic pressures, the films highlight the disproportionate emotional responsibilities women shoulder within patriarchal societies. Cinema, therefore, becomes a mirror of gendered lived experience, revealing how trauma is shaped by class, domestic roles, and relational dynamics. This supports feminist arguments that women's psychological distress is not merely personal but deeply embedded in social and cultural frameworks. The analysis encourages gender scholars to examine how female suffering is represented—and sometimes normalized—in visual media.

VII. LIMITATIONS

Although the study offers insights across multiple disciplines, several limitations must be acknowledged:
1. Fictional characters cannot be clinically diagnosed.
While psychological theories help interpret emotional behaviours, these characters remain fictional creations shaped by artistic intent. Any mapping to clinical concepts remains symbolic rather than diagnostic.
2. Researcher interpretation bias.
Qualitative film analysis is inherently subjective, shaped by the researcher's worldview, training, and interpretive frameworks. Different scholars may produce alternative readings of the same scenes.
3. Limited number of films.
Only four films were selected for analysis. Although they represent key works in Mahendra's career, they may not fully capture the diversity of his portrayal of women or psychological themes across his entire filmography.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the intersection of psychological trauma, emotional realism, and women's mental health in the films of Balu Mahendra. Through an interdisciplinary approach combining trauma theory, attachment theory, feminist film studies, and affective theory, the analysis uncovered how Mahendra's female protagonists embody complex emotional experiences that mirror clinically recognized patterns of distress. Across the selected films—Moondram Pirai, Sandhya Ragam, Veedu, and Marupadiyum—women were portrayed not as symbolic victims, but as multidimensional individuals navigating loss, abandonment, socioeconomic pressures, and intimate partner violence.
Key findings reveal that Mahendra's aesthetic choices—such as natural lighting, long takes, expressive silences, and handheld camerawork—play a crucial role in constructing emotional realism, allowing viewers to experience the psychological states of the protagonists with heightened empathy. The films' narrative trajectories align with clinical indicators of depression, anxiety, dissociation, and post-traumatic responses, demonstrating how fictional cinema can convey deep psychological truths without resorting to explicit clinical language. These portrayals highlight how trauma in

women is shaped by social, cultural, and gendered structures, thus reinforcing feminist perspectives on emotional labour and vulnerability.

The study underscores the value of integrating psychological analysis with film interpretation, making a significant contribution to cross-disciplinary scholarship. It shows that cinema can serve as a rich qualitative resource for understanding women's mental health within a specific cultural context. Moreover, the research demonstrates how applying medical-psychological concepts to film characters—while avoiding literal diagnosis—can deepen our comprehension of both cinematic representation and real-world psychosocial issues.

Looking ahead, future research may explore comparative studies involving other filmmakers known for portraying women's interiority, such as Mani Ratnam, Bharathiraja, or Aparna Sen. Cross-cultural comparisons between Tamil cinema and world cinema could further illuminate how trauma and emotional realism are represented across different narrative traditions. Expanding the sample to include additional films by Balu Mahendra would also enrich the understanding of how his portrayal of women evolved throughout his career.

In conclusion, this study affirms that Balu Mahendra's films offer a profound and empathetic exploration of women's psychological landscapes, revealing cinema's capacity to articulate trauma, resilience, and emotional truth with remarkable sensitivity.

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