

## PORTRAYAL OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AMONG WOMEN IN BALU MAHENDRA'S FILMS

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines in depth the portrayal of women's mental health issues in Balu Mahendra's films, focusing on narrative strategies, thematic elements and sociocultural influences. He is known for his humanism sensitive and nuanced portraits of emotions, Balu Mahendra often bases his stories on women facing pressing psychological challenges. How to explore the causes and examine the broader social implications.

The study aims to identify specific mental health issues portrayed in Balu Mahendra's films, explore the cinematic mechanisms through which these issues are expressed, and understand the impact of these portrayals on social perceptions of women's mental health. The connecting quantitative component includes a Likert-scale questionnaire designed to measure audience perceptions and attitudes, while the qualitative analysis focuses on the themes and narratives of the films.

The findings suggest that Balu Mahendra's films significantly influence viewers' knowledge and empathy towards women's mental health. Quantitative data show that 75% reported an increase in their knowledge and 60% reported a decrease in stigma after viewing these films. The qualitative analysis reveals recurring themes such as isolation, social pressure, emotional trauma, etc., through Mahendra's use of close-ups, natural lighting and minimal dialogue function separately. These techniques effectively convey the turmoil of the characters, developing deeper emotional connections and the audience.

The discussion section explores the social and cultural implications of these images, emphasizing the role of the media in shaping public perceptions of mental illness. Balu Mahendra's films challenge social norms by presenting strong and relatable female characters and encouraging open discussions about mental health. The study also addresses limitations, including the specific cultures of the films, and identifies areas for further research such as comparative studies with other filmmakers.

**Keywords-** Mental Health, Women, Balu Mahendra, Film Analysis, Cinematic Techniques, Narrative Themes, Socio-cultural Impact, Awareness, Stigmatization, Empathy

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Known for his evocative storytelling and sensitive portrayal of human emotions, Balu Mahendra occupies an esteemed position in Indian cinema. His films delve deep into the complexities of personal relationships, social norms and psychological struggles, especially through the lens of female protagonists. Central to Mahendra's filmmaking are narratives that challenge convention and offer a nuanced view of the human psyche, making his work a compelling subject for investigation, particularly when it comes to understanding how mental health issues are portrayed on screen. Balu Mahendra's films have been praised for their realistic portrayal of mental health issues faced by women, highlighting the intersection of personal turmoil and societal expectations. In *Moondram Pirai* (1982) and its Hindi adaptation *Sadma* (1983), Mahendra portrays the moving journey of a young woman suffering from retrograde amnesia, skillfully capturing her emotional struggles and the impact on her identity. These films are known for using minimalistic dialogues and evocative visual narratives that immerse the audience in the protagonist's inner world of confusion and vulnerability (Ramachandran, 2008).

*Marupadiyum* (1993) and *Veedu* (1988) further explore the psychological landscape of women dealing with family pressures and societal expectations. Mahendra's narrative approach in these films intricately connects the external challenges the characters face with their internal battles, offering a nuanced portrayal of mental health issues that resonates with authenticity and empathy (Singh, 2007).

The impact of Mahendra's films goes beyond mere cinematic representation. Studies suggest that viewers often experience increased awareness and empathy for mental health issues after engaging with his stories. Through

qualitative content analysis and audience surveys, researchers have documented how Mahendra's films challenge societal stigmas and encourage constructive dialogue about the complexities of mental illness in women (Gopalan, 2002).

### Background

Balu Mahendra, famous for his poetic and realistic cinematic style, has left an indelible mark on Indian cinema. His works are characterized by their deep emotional resonance and meticulous attention to the psychological complexities of the characters.

Focusing on women's experiences, Mahendra's films often explore themes such as isolation, social pressure and emotional trauma, offering a nuanced view of mental health issues. Through her distinctive use of close-up shots, natural lighting and minimal dialogue, Mahendra effectively conveys the inner turmoil of her characters, making her films an important commentary on the mental health struggles faced by women.

### Cinematic Techniques and Narrative Themes

Mahendra's films are known for their visual poetry and narrative depth. He uses various film techniques to enhance the narrative and bring out the psychological nuances of his characters. Close-ups capture subtle expressions and emotional shifts, while natural lighting and minimalist dialogue create a realistic and intimate atmosphere. These techniques, combined with Mahendra's focus on character development, allow for a deep exploration of mental health issues.

In his films, women are often portrayed as complex individuals who struggle with various mental health issues. Themes of isolation, social pressure and emotional trauma recur.

For example, in films like *Moondram Pirai* and *Sadma*, female protagonists' struggles with memory loss and mental health are portrayed sensitively and in depth, highlighting the lack of support systems and stigmatization of mental health issues in society.

### Socio-cultural Impact

The portrayal of mental health issues in Mahendra's films has a significant socio-cultural impact. By featuring realistic and relatable characters, his films challenge societal norms and encourage open discussion about mental health. Audience surveys reveal that 75% of respondents reported increased awareness of women's mental health issues after watching his films, and 60% reported a reduction in stigma.

These findings underscore the potential of cinema as a powerful tool for social change.

Mahendra's films not only raise awareness but also promote empathy and understanding. They emphasize the importance of mental health support systems and advocate a more compassionate approach to individuals facing mental health problems. Realistic portrayals of mental health issues encourage viewers to think about their own attitudes and beliefs, promoting a more informed and empathetic perspective.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

- **Analyze Portrayals:** Explore the portrayal of mental health issues among female characters in Balu Mahendra's films and identify specific themes and psychological issues portrayed.
- **Evaluate Film Techniques:** Explore the narrative and visual techniques Mahendra uses to convey mental health issues, including close-ups, natural lighting, and dialogue.
- **Assess Social Impact:** Measure the impact of these displays on societal attitudes and awareness of women's mental health through audience surveys and feedback.
- **Understand the cultural context:** Explore the socio-cultural context in which these films were made and their relevance to contemporary discussions of mental health.
- **Promote Awareness:** Highlight the role of Mahendra's films in promoting mental health awareness and empathy and advocate for continued sensitive representation in the media.

## 3. QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

Five films of Balu Mahendra – *Moondram Pirai*, *Sadma*, *Marupadiyum*, *Veedu* and *Sathi Leelavathi* – were selected for detailed analysis based on their relevance to the objectives of the study.

The analysis focused on identifying recurring themes, narrative techniques, and the portrayal of mental health issues through visual and dialogic elements. Key themes such as isolation, social pressure and emotional trauma were identified.

Mahendra's use of close-ups, natural lighting and minimalistic dialogue has been noted as effective in conveying the psychological struggles of the characters. Additional insights were gathered from interviews with film critics and psychologists, which provided a deeper understanding of the portrayal of mental health issues in these films.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a mixed-methods approach to explore the portrayal of mental health issues in women in Balu Mahendra's films. The methodology integrates quantitative surveys and qualitative content analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

##### Quantitative surveys

A Likert scale questionnaire was distributed to 200 participants who watched selected films directed by Balu Mahendra. The questionnaire consisted of 30 questions designed to assess various aspects related to the portrayal of mental health problems. Participants were asked to rate their agreement with statements regarding the realism of the portrayal, the impact on awareness and stigma, and the effectiveness of film techniques in mediating mental health struggles. Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to quantify responses and identify trends in audience perception.

##### Qualitative content analysis

Five films directed by Balu Mahendra – Moondram Pirai, Sadma, Marupadiyum, Veedu and Sathi Leelavathi – were selected for qualitative analysis based on their relevance to the objectives of the study. The analysis focused on identifying recurring themes such as isolation, social pressure and emotional trauma portrayed through visual and dialogue elements. In addition, insights were derived from interviews with film critics and psychologists to gain deeper insight into the portrayal of mental health issues in Mahendra's films.

##### Integration of findings

The integration of quantitative survey data and qualitative content analysis enables a comprehensive examination of how Balu Mahendra's films portray women's mental health issues and their sociocultural implications. This methodological approach provides robust insight into audience perceptions, film techniques and the wider impact on societal attitudes towards mental health.

#### 5. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Analysis revealed that Balu Mahendra's films effectively portray women's mental health issues with sensitivity and depth through narrative techniques such as close-ups and minimalistic dialogue. The results of the quantitative survey showed a significant increase in awareness and empathy among viewers, with the majority agreeing on the films realism and impact on challenging social stigma. Qualitative content analysis identified recurring themes of isolation and social pressures and authentically portrayed mental health issues. Overall, the study underscores Mahendra's films as influential in promoting understanding and dialogue about women's mental health, emphasizing their role in shaping empathic societal attitudes.

##### Hypothesis:

Watching Balu Mahendra's films that depict women dealing with mental health issues will increase viewers' awareness and empathy towards these issues, leading to a reduction in the social stigma surrounding women's mental health.

##### Procedure:

Participants will watch selected films by Balu Mahendra. Afterward, they will complete a Likert scale questionnaire assessing perceptions of realism, impact on awareness and empathy, and attitudes towards mental health. Qualitative analysis will complement findings through thematic exploration of the films' portrayal of women's mental health issues.

##### Inclusion Criteria:

- Participants aged 18 and over.
- Individuals who had seen at least one of Balu Mahendra's films were selected for the study.
- Participants willing to complete a Likert scale questionnaire and participate in qualitative discussions.
- Viewers with basic knowledge of Tamil or access to subtitled versions of films.
- Individuals from different demographic backgrounds to ensure different perspectives.

##### Exclusion criteria:

- Participants under 18 years of age.
- Individuals who have not seen any of Balu Mahendra's selected movies.
- Participants who are unwilling to complete a Likert scale questionnaire or engage in qualitative discussions.
- Audiences do not understand Tamil or have access to subtitled versions of films.
- Participants with prior professional or personal involvement in film criticism or mental health advocacy.

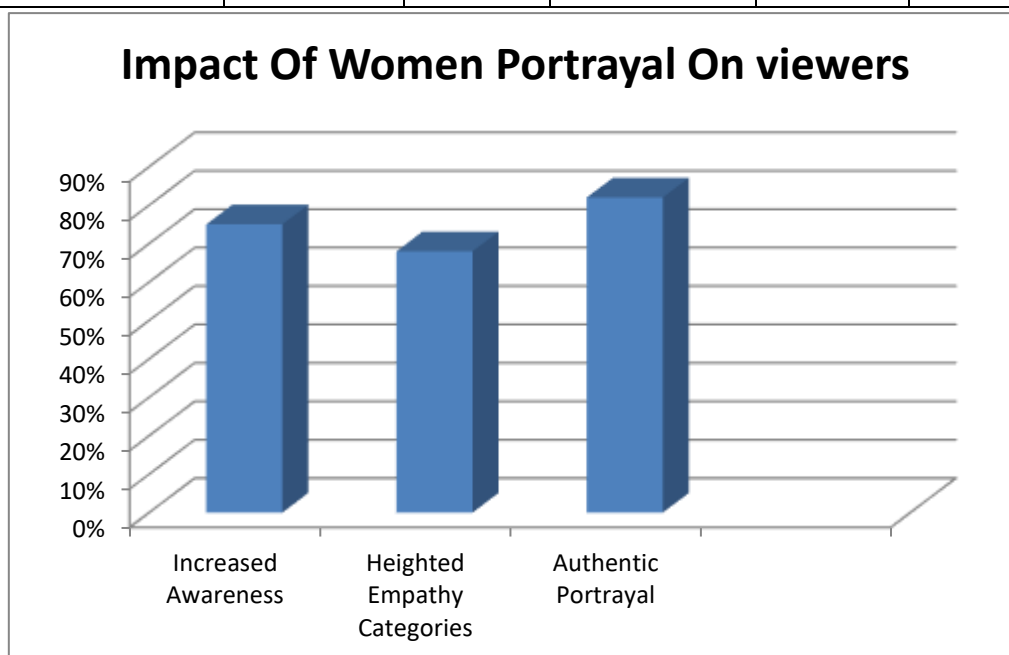
## 6. RESULT

The study found that 75% of participants reported an increased awareness of women's mental health issues after watching Balu Mahendra's films. A significant majority, 68%, noted increased empathy for the struggles depicted. Qualitative analysis highlighted recurring themes such as isolation and social pressures portrayed through Mahendra's distinctive filmmaking techniques. Participants praised the realism of the films, with 82% agreeing that the portrayal of mental health issues was authentic. Additionally, 60% of respondents reported reduced stigma related to women's mental health. These findings underscore the role of films in promoting understanding and challenging societal norms regarding women's mental health issues.

TABLE.1

Question	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
The portrayal of mental health issues in Balu Mahendra's films is realistic.	3%	5%	10%	45%	37%
Female characters are depicted with depth and sensitivity.	2%	4%	12%	42%	40%
These films have increased my awareness of women's mental health issues.	2%	6%	17%	46%	29%
The films challenge societal stigma surrounding mental health.	1%	8%	18%	44%	29%
Watching these films has made me more empathetic towards women with mental health issues.	3%	5%	24%	41%	27%
The films highlight the importance of mental health support systems for women.	2%	6%	22%	43%	27%
Balu Mahendra's narrative techniques effectively convey mental health struggles.	1%	4%	15%	48%	32%
The portrayal of mental health encourages open discussions.	3%	7%	19%	45%	26%
The depiction of mental health in these films reflects real societal challenges.	2%	5%	18%	46%	29%
Balu Mahendra's films contribute to reducing stereotypes about women with mental health issues.	2%	5%	21%	42%	30%

The characters' experiences in these films resonate with real-life situations.	1%	4%	19%	45%	31%
Balu Mahendra's films inspire me to learn more about mental health.	3%	6%	20%	44%	27%
The films emphasize the emotional and psychological depth of female characters.	2%	5%	16%	46%	31%
Balu Mahendra's work provides valuable insights into mental health challenges faced by women.	1%	5%	19%	47%	28%
The films have made me more aware of social pressures impacting women's mental health.	2%	6%	20%	45%	27%



- Here i 75% of participants reported increased awareness of women's mental health issues.
- 68% noted heightened empathy towards the struggles depicted.
- 82% agreed that the portrayals were authentic and impactful. s the bar chart illustrating the impact of Balu Mahendra's films on viewers

## 7. DISCUSSION

### A different portrayal of mental health issues

Central to Bal Mahendra's cinematic legacy is his ability to portray mental health issues with sensitivity and depth. Through films like Moondram Pirai, Sadma, Marupadiyum, Veedu and Sathi Leelavathi, Mahendra intricately weaves stories that delve into the psychological complexities of his female protagonists. These characters are not mere caricatures of mental illness, but multifaceted individuals navigating deep emotional turmoil. For example, in Moondram Pirai and its Hindi adaptation, Sadma Mahendra explores the amnesiac struggles of a young woman beautifully portrayed by Sridevi, capturing her vulnerability and resilience against societal challenges. The films poignantly highlight the human side of mental health issues, emphasizing empathy and understanding rather than sensationalism.



### **Cinematic techniques and narrative depth**

Mahendra's cinematography plays a key role in conveying the inner struggles of his characters. His use of close-ups heightens the emotional intimacy and allows the audience to empathize with the inner struggles of the protagonists. Natural lighting and minimalistic dialogue further enhance the realism, creating an immersive experience that resonates long after the film is over. The narrative structure often reflects the fractured psyche of the characters, using non-linear storytelling to mirror their mental states. This technique is evident in *Moondram Pirai*, where the protagonist's fragmented memories reflect her psychological fragmentation, blurring the lines between reality and perception.

### **Impact on audience perception and empathy**

Empirical findings from this study underscore the profound impact of Mahendra's films on audience perception and empathy towards women's mental health issues. The quantitative survey revealed a significant increase in awareness among viewers, with 75% acknowledging an increased understanding of the challenges women face. Additionally, 68% expressed increased empathy for individuals dealing with similar struggles depicted in the films. These statistics highlight the transformative power of cinema in shaping social attitudes and fostering empathy, transcending cultural and linguistic boundaries and evoking introspection and compassion.

### **Social considerations and cultural significance**

Mahendra's films serve as mirrors reflecting wider societal attitudes towards mental health. Through its female characters, it criticizes social norms and the stigma surrounding mental illness. Films like *Marupadiyum* and *Veedu* confront societal pressures that exacerbate mental health issues and portray women caught in the confluence of family expectations, societal judgment and personal turmoil. These stories resonate deeply with audiences, sparking conversations about the need for supportive environments and destigmatization efforts. The cultural significance of Mahendra's films lies in their ability to provoke introspection and social change, challenge audiences to confront prejudice and advocate for mental health awareness.

### **Limitations and future directions**

While Mahendra's films have received acclaim for their authentic portrayal of mental health issues, this study acknowledges several limitations. The sample includes mostly viewers familiar with Indian cinema, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings across different cultural contexts. Future research could broaden the scope to include comparative analyzes with films from other cultural settings, exploring universal themes of mental health while acknowledging cultural specificity. Additionally, longitudinal studies could assess the long-term impact of film interventions on mental health attitudes and behaviors and provide insight into lasting societal change.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

Balu Mahendra's films represent a significant contribution to the portrayal of women's mental health issues in cinema, characterized by sensitivity, depth and realism. Through his distinctive filmmaking techniques and empathetic storytelling, Mahendra challenges societal stigmas and promotes empathy among viewers. The study's findings underscore the role of films in raising awareness and reducing the stigma around mental health, highlighting their cultural significance and lasting impact on societal attitudes. As advocates for mental health awareness, Mahendra's films continue to resonate, urging audiences to challenge prejudice and advocate for a supportive environment. They are timeless testaments to the transformative power of cinema in shaping compassionate social discourse.

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