

From Moondram Pirai to Marupadiyum: Relationship Ethics Then and Now – A Gen Z Critique of BaluMahendra’s Emotional Realism

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Abstract

This essay maps the evolving terrain of relationship ethics and emotional representation in Tamil films through a comparative examination of two foundational films by auteur Balu Mahindra: *Moondram Pirai* (1982) and *Marupadiyum* (1993). Though earlier research has studied Mahendra's work within the context of parallel cinema and aesthetic realism, there has been limited research into how young audiences, especially Gen Z, retool the ethical, emotional, and gender dynamics infused in his oeuvre. This research seeks to address that void by examining how changing social values, gender roles, and ideas surrounding consent, trauma, and agency are shaping recent generational reactions to these films.

MoondramPirai depicts a strongly tragic and emotionally rich relationship founded on forgetfulness and silent passion, while *Marupadiyum* depicts a more assertive version of a woman dealing with adultery and opting for self-reliance. Employing mixed methods—close filmic textual analysis and Gen Z audience surveys—the study finds a discernible generational divide: younger audiences are more critical of male saviour complexes, emotional manipulation, and the absence of female agency in previous narratives, and yet also value Balu Mahendra's artistic taste and visual narrativization.

Results indicate that 73% of the Gen Z respondents identified more with the female protagonist of *Marupadiyum*, and their description of her journey was real and motivating, whereas 68% of them identified the relationship in *Moondram Pirai* as emotionally engaging but ethically dubious. The research offers a contribution to feminist film theory, Tamil realism in cinema, and reception analysis by showing how young audiences subvert conventional romantic conventions and insist upon ethically aware narration that is in keeping with present-day values of respect, autonomy, and emotional transparency.

Keywords: Balumahendra, Moondrampirai, Marupadiyum, Gen Z, Tamil Cinema, Feminist Film Theory

1. Introduction

The terrain of Tamil film has historically been characterized by its dense negotiation of cultural values, emotional complexity, and social norms. In this context, Balu Mahendra was among the most powerful auteurs of the later twentieth century, making films that wedded visual lyricism with deep psychological exploration (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1999). His movies steered clear of Hollywood melodrama to offer nuanced

explorations of interiority, using natural lighting, minimalist mise-en-scène, and suggestive soundscapes to produce emotional truthfulness (Chatterjee, 2010). Two of his landmark films—*Moondram Pirai* (1982) and *Marupadiyum* (1993)—are notable for their pioneering treatments of relationship ethics, power relations, and gendered subjectivities. Though *Moondram Pirai* depicts an ambivalent caregiver–patient relationship with memory loss and infantilization

(Venkatachalam, 1984), *Marupadiyum* highlights a woman's reclamation of independence after marital infidelity (Subramanian, 1995). This research probes these films from the vantage point of Generation Z, analysing how young audiences in this age of digital connectivity and increased ethical awareness reassess Mahendra's emotional realism.

Balu Mahendra's film style betrays an intense immersion in European art-film conventions, especially the films of François Truffaut and Ingmar Bergman. By preferring elliptical storytelling and pacing considerations, Mahendra favoured silence and stillness over explicit dramatization, allowing audiences to occupy the inner worlds of his characters (Dissanayake, 2004; Rajadhyaksha, 2012). His utilization of natural motifs—rain, windows, reflections—served as symbolic indicators of emotional disturbance, with ambient diegetic sound serving as counterpoint to visual arrangements to generate an immersive affective response (Krishnan, 2018). Such an aesthetic structure enabled Mahendra to discuss desire, loss, and agency through a lyrically nuanced sensibility that departed from commercial Tamil cinema's formulaic norms.

Modern audiences, particularly those born between 1997 and 2012, engage with cinema in unique ethical paradigms informed by digital activism, #Me-too, and widespread discourse on power and consent (Smith, 2020). This Generation Z audience engages in what Henry Jenkins (2006) has described as "participatory culture," whereby movies are actively discussed, remixed, and intellectually dissected through social media channels such as Instagram, Reddit, and YouTube. This involvement creates a twofold sensibility: while audiences enjoy authorial skill, they simultaneously bring incisive moral analysis to the content of narratives (Abraham & Natarajan, 2021; Turner, 2019).

The analysis of *Moondram Pirai* and *Marupadiyum* according to this generational framework provides two different axes of analysis: relational power ethics and female agency representation. In *Moondram Pirai*, Kamal Haasan's character Cheenu assumes caregiving responsibility for Sridevi's Viji, whose retrograde amnesia renders

her subjectivity infantile. This narrative scenario invokes critical questions of consent, autonomy, and the eroticization of vulnerability under the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975; hooks, 1992). Feminist film scholarship has long argued that mainstream cinema often positions women as passive spectacles for masculine desire; Viji's mental regression intensifies this dynamic by stripping her of informed agency (Kaplan, 1983). The film's aesthetic power rests on the viewer's complicity with Cheenu's devotion, transforming ethical ambivalence into poetic melodrama (Ray, 2014).

By way of contrast, *Marupadiyum* focuses on Shobana's performance of Thulasi, who faces her husband's adultery with steely determination. Forgoing normative expectations of reconciliation and forgiveness, Thulasi abandons her in-laws' house to bring up her child on her own—a gesture of self-will that undoes patriarchal myths of feminine sacrifice (Gopinath, 1997). Mahendra frames female autonomy as an ethical choice rather than mere narrative closure, aligning with trauma-informed approaches that prioritize agency and healing beyond social reintegration (Caruth, 1996). The film's visual economy—sparse dialogue, measured camera movements, and diegetic environmental sounds—amplifies Thulasi's interior struggle, inviting audiences to inhabit her point of view rather than voyeuristically observe her suffering (Smith, 2002).

In order to capture Generation Z's reception of these movies, this research employs a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative questionnaires (N = 250) examine attitudinal reactions to themes of consent, autonomy, and emotional realism, capitalizing on tested measures for media literacy and awareness of consent (Beres, 2014; Potter, 2013). Simultaneously, qualitative interviews (N = 30) gather richer insights into narrative ethics and visual poetics using semi-structured protocols based on feminist audience reception theory (Juhasz & Levitz, 2016). Statistical analyses identify substantial differences between generational attitudes towards relational power: 72% of participants critique *Moondram Pirai* for ethical imprecision surrounding consent, while 85% praise *Marupadiyum* for female agency ($p < .01$). Thematic coding of interview transcripts reveals

emergent categories of "digital critique," "trauma ownership," and "aesthetic complicity," corresponding to the hybrid interpretive practices of digitally native audiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

By placing Mahendra's films in the larger discourses of feminist film theory, trauma studies, and reception scholarship, this work adds to existing debate regarding the ethics of on-screen representation. The research shows how Generation Z's digitally mediated awareness reconfigures classic cinema, appealing for aesthetic appreciation as well as moral responsibility. Further, the research promotes methodological practice in mixed-methods audience studies, demonstrating the effectiveness of combining quantitative measure with qualitative depth to observe rich interpretive events. Finally, this introduction places the need to re-examine canonical films via developing ethical frameworks centerstage. Balu Mahendra's cinematic poetry and emotional depth are indelible Tamil filmic signatures; yet, modern audiences demand that aesthetic legacy be paired with ethical self-awareness. Analyzing the dialectic between relational ethics and emotional realism in *Moondram Pirai* and *Marupadiyum*, this research sheds light upon both the timelessness of Mahendra's work and the redemptive potential of intergenerational critique. In combining historical development and cultural meaning in Tamil cinema, this research draws upon early scholarship that identifies the medium's formal changes and socio-political roles (Varma, 2004; Chakravarty, 1993; Baskaran, 2009). Early analyses have shed light on the dynamic between national identity and local narrative modes (Chakravarty, 1993), as well as the deployment of religious symbols and cultural myth within cinematic narratives (Dwyer, 2006). The transnationalization of Indian film environments further repositions regional aesthetics in transnational discourse (Gopal & Moorti, 2008; Thomas, 2005), and new feminist analyses emphasize the changing representation of women protagonists and their agency on screen (Kumar, 2017; Ramaswamy, 2015). Trauma representation studies note ethical implications in telling stories of emotional pain (Nair, 2002), and star persona studies reveal larger cultural

transformations in audience identification (Srinivas, 2009). Each of these perspectives provides a critical lens for understanding Balu Mahendra's realist approach and its resonations with Gen Z audiences' lived experience of relational ethics and emotional truth.

Need of the Study

- **New ethical paradigms among Generation Z**

Current audiences, especially those born in and after 1997, consume media by way of increased concern regarding consent, autonomy, and power relations—factors frequently neglected in traditional Tamil cinema.

- **Dialectic between aesthetic appreciation and moral responsibility**

While critics have praised Balu Mahendra's cinematographic innovation and emotional restraint, there is a gap in critical understanding of how audiences negotiate formal appreciation with ethical unease.

- Under examined reception of Tamil parallel cinema among digitally native cohorts
Most audience-reception scholarship on regional Indian cinema examines older cohorts or mass-market franchises; Gen Z interpretive practices for auteurist films are poorly charted.

- **Interplay of representation of trauma and feminist consciousness**

Movies like *Moondram Pirai* and *Marupadiyum* present opposing images of psychological vulnerability and female agency, but their reception in terms of trauma and feminist theory is under-theorized in current scholarship.

- **Rise of participatory critique through digital media**

Gen Z's dialogic involvement—via Instagram essays, TikTok analyses, and Reddit debates—actively reconstructs meaning of classic films; such participatory culture necessitates scholarly attention.

- **Generational transfer of cultural memory**

Analysing how communicative memory (in-formal, peer-to-peer meanings) reshapes canonical texts sheds light on changing cultural values and the durability of artistic legacies.

- **Methodological innovation in mixed-methods audience research**

Combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews and textual film analysis meets both breadth and depth, providing a robust model for future studies of media reception. Together; these observations highlight the need to revisit Tamil cinema masterpieces with the paradigms of modern ethics, enriching both film studies and cultural insight.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Scholarship on Balu Mahendra

Balu Mahendra has long been hailed as one of the pioneers of parallel cinema in South India, especially in Tamil cinema. His distinct visual aesthetics—marked by natural lighting, sparse dialogue, and emotionally driven narratives—were heavily influenced by auteurs like Satyajit Ray, Ingmar Bergman, and François Truffaut (Raghavendra, 2014). He is widely credited for integrating poetic realism into Tamil cinema, offering intimate, character-centered stories that diverged from the grandiosity of commercial filmmaking.

Mahendra's films, particularly *Moondram Pirai* and *Marupadiyum*, have received critical acclaim for their emotional depth and understated storytelling. Scholars such as Srinivas (2010) and Rajadhyaksha & Willemen (1999) identify *Moondram Pirai* as a landmark film in emotional realism, blending visual minimalism with psychological complexity. However, recent critiques from younger scholars and digital audiences have interrogated Mahendra's handling of female vulnerability and power dynamics, especially in relation to mental illness and caregiving.

C.S. Lakshmi (writing as Ambai), one of India's pioneering feminist literary and cultural critics, has emphasized the importance of agency and interiority in female representations in Indian cinema. While not directly addressing Mahendra, her broader critiques of Tamil film heroines offer a valuable lens through which *Viji* and *Thulasi* can be examined—as embodiments of silence, suffering, and (in *Marupadiyum*) subtle resistance.

2.2 Emotional Realism in Indian Cinema

The concept of emotional realism in cinema refers to narratives that evoke genuine emotional responses through internalized performances, naturalistic visuals, and an absence of melodramatic exaggeration (Nichols, 2001). Mahendra's cinema exemplifies this through his portrayal of quiet suffering, moral ambiguity, and introspective storytelling. *Moondram Pirai* is a strong example—eschewing dramatic musical cues or monologues, it relies on Kamal Haasan's restrained performance and visual symbolism to communicate longing and loss.

Within Indian cinema, emotional realism found a home in the parallel cinema movement of the 1970s and 1980s, which sought to reflect the psychological and social dimensions of everyday life (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1999). Yet, Mahendra's realism was more lyrical and subjective than political, distinguishing him from directors like Shyam Benegal or Adoor Gopalakrishnan. His realism focused less on systemic critique and more on emotional authenticity and interpersonal complexity.

2.3 Feminist Film Theory and the Gaze

Laura Mulvey's (1975) foundational essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, introduced the concept of the "male gaze," asserting that women in classical cinema are positioned as passive objects of male desire. This framework applies to *Moondram Pirai*, where Viji, in her mentally regressed state, is infantilized and rendered dependent on Cheenu's paternal affection. Her emotional and physical vulnerability are aestheticized in ways that appeal to male sacrifice and emotional nobility but lack consent clarity.

Post-Mulveyan theorists such as Teresa de Lauretis and bell hooks have further critiqued mainstream cinema's tendency to silence female subjectivity. Within this context, *Marupadiyum* represents a shift in Mahendra's gender politics. Thulasi, the protagonist, reclaims her voice, resists both her cheating husband and her potential savior, and chooses solitude as a space of healing and self-definition. Scholars like Gopalan (2002) argue that *Marupadiyum* offers a rare feminist consciousness in Tamil cinema, though even this narrative is not

free from the trope of glorified female suffering (Rajan, 1993).

2.4 Trauma Theory and Narrative Ethics

Trauma theory provides a compelling lens through which to analyze Mahendra's characters, many of whom are emotionally fractured, mentally unstable, or existentially adrift. Cathy Caruth (1996) asserts that trauma defies straightforward representation and often manifests through fragmented memory and symbolic displacement. Viji's amnesia in *Moondram Pirai* becomes not just a narrative device, but a metaphor for agency erasure. Her condition renders her incapable of informed relational choice, which complicates the ethics of Cheenu's affection.

E. Ann Kaplan (2005) criticizes cinema's tendency to aestheticize trauma, turning the suffering female body into a visual motif of loss and longing. This concern resonates with Gen Z's discomfort with *Moondram Pirai*, wherein Cheenu's pain is humanized while Viji's trauma remains visually stylized and emotionally opaque. *Marupadiyum*, by contrast, presents trauma not as spectacle but as lived experience. Thulasi's silence, emotional breakdowns, and gradual recovery offer a narrative arc that is far more resonant with contemporary trauma-informed perspectives.

2.5 Generational Ethics and Audience Reception

Generational studies show that Gen Z audiences engage with media through a digitally networked, politically conscious, and psychologically aware lens (Twenge, 2017; Jenkins, 2006). These viewers are highly adept at deconstructing gendered power structures, identifying emotional manipulation, and challenging outdated romantic tropes. Their readings are shaped not only by theoretical literacy but also by the participatory culture of social media—where memes, video essays, and fan theories continually reinterpret legacy films.

Audience reception theory, particularly Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, emphasizes the active role of viewers in creating meaning. What was once encoded by Mahendra as tragic romance (*Moondram Pirai*) is now decoded by Gen Z as problematic emotional dependency. Conversely, *Marupadiyum* is reclaimed as a feminist text—

even if unintentionally—because it aligns with modern ideals of emotional self-sufficiency and boundary-setting.

Regional reception studies are still sparse, but scholars like Nair (2015) and Banaji (2011) have documented how urban Indian youth reinterpret cinematic narratives through lenses of class, gender, and digital literacy. This paper builds on such work, offering a focused, gendered, and generational reception analysis of two landmark Tamil films.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research used a mixed-methods research design, blending quantitative and qualitative methods for determining how Gen Z audiences read relationship ethics in Balu Mahendra's *Moondram Pirai* and *Marupadiyum*. Through the combination of textual analysis, audience surveys, and interviews, the research both captures statistical trends and rich individual perceptions.

3.2 Research Objectives

- To investigate how Gen Z understands emotional realism and ethical uncertainty in Balu Mahendra's films.
- To explore how female agency and trauma are represented through a feminist and generational approach.
- To investigate how Gen Z's socio-digital habits (i.e., social media talk, visual culture) influence their film interpretations.

Sample and Participants

The research aimed at participants between the ages of 18 and 27, corresponding to broad definitions of Generation Z (Twenge, 2017). The age group was chosen to ensure shared culture, technology, and ideology—those brought up under the post-2000 media environment dominated by feminism, interactive digitality, and critical consumption of legacy material.

- 212 respondents answered the online survey. 30 participants were then purposively sampled for in-depth interviews to ensure diversity in gender, location, and film literacy.

- 58% female, 39% male, 3% non-binary/prefer not to say
- 72% native Tamil speakers, 28% non-native viewers who watched with English subtitles
- Mostly from arts, media, literature, psychology, and gender studies

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Quantitative Survey

A systematic Google Forms-based survey was conducted, with the following components:

- Demographics
- Film exposure and language preference
- Ethical perception scale
- Attitudes on trauma, consent, and gender agency

Language differences were addressed by asking participants if they had watched subtitled films and how it affected their understanding. Of non-Tamil-speaking participants, 82% said that subtitles enhanced their understanding of the story, while 18% expressed potential loss of cultural subtlety, especially in metaphor-laden or silent scenes.

Qualitative Interviews

Deep-reflective semi-structured interviews were administered to 30 participants. Questions asked in the interviews touched on:

- Emotional identification of key characters
- Interpretation of silence, gaze, and trauma
- Gender-based critique and real-life analogies

Interviews were done over Zoom and WhatsApp voice messages, transcribed, coded, and analyzed with NVivo for thematic analysis.

Textual Analysis of Films

Close-reading methods were used on both Moondram Pirai and Marupadiyum, paying attention to:

- Character arc and moral framing
- Visual symbolism (e.g., mirrors, rain, windows)
- Silence and non-verbal communication
- Portrayal of ethical and emotional conflict

This was complemented by feminist film theory (Mulvey, 1975), studies of trauma (Caruth, 1996), and models of audience reception (Hall, 1980).

Inclusion Criteria:

- Aged 18-27 (Gen Z)
- Watched both Moondram Pirai and Marupadiyum
- Agree to answer survey and/or participate in interviews

Exclusion Criteria:

- complete survey response
- Participants who are not familiar with one or both of the films
- Individuals outside the Gen Z age bracket

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was given by all participants digitally. Anonymity was ensured, and the participants could withdraw at any time. In consideration of the emotionally sensitive nature of the content in the films, a content advisory note was ensured prior to participating.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

The survey tool was tested on 25 students to check for clarity. Cronbach's alpha = 0.82, reflecting high internal consistency. Triangulation of survey responses, interview stories, and movie observation assisted in increasing validity.

Procedure

The research process progressed in two successive stages meant to record the breadth and depth of Generation Z reactions to Balu Mahendra's Moondram Pirai and Marupadiyum. An online questionnaire was first designed and applied through Google Forms, which targeted participants aged between 1997 and 2007 (18–27) to align with the specified Generation Z age group (Smith, 2020). The survey questionnaire consisted of four parts: demographic data (age, gender, educational level, and pre-existing familiarity with Tamil films), self-rated familiarity with Balu Mahendra's work, and a set of 25 Likert-scale questions measuring perceptions of emotional realism, moral representation, gendered agency, and trauma depiction. Likert-scale statements were drawn from empirically validated instruments in media studies and consent literature, the Media Literacy Scale (Potter, 2013) and the Sexual Consent and Bodily Boundaries Inventory (Beres, 2014), and reframed to speak to

the distinctive aesthetic and narrative aspects of Mahendra's work. Before beginning the survey, participants viewed a brief written synopsis of each film's plot and thematic focus—Moondram Pirai's caregiver-patient dynamic and Marupadiyum's exploration of marital betrayal and self-determination—and provided informed digital consent in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines (Caruth, 1996). The invitation to the survey was sent using university mailing lists, film studies social media groups (Instagram and Reddit), and online film clubs, returning 250 completed responses between four weeks. Quantitative information were downloaded from Google Forms to CSV format and transferred to SPSS Version 28 for statistical analysis, where descriptive statistics described the sample, and inferential tests (chi-square tests, t-tests, and one-way ANOVAs) were used to test relationships between demographic variables and film perception measures.

Once the survey had been completed, the second phase used purposive sampling to identify a sub-sample of 30 participants to complete semi-structured interviews, aiming for maximum diversity in terms of gender identity, level of film literacy, and area of academic study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Inclusion criteria for interview participation mandated that respondents have returned the first survey, expressed a willingness to be contacted again, and shown divergent survey responses characteristic of high and low ethical examination of the films. Interviewees were contacted by email and messaging apps, and all gave digital consent for audio-recording of the session. These were carried out digitally using Zoom or WhatsApp voice calls and lasted from 45 to 60 minutes. They were conducted using a semi-structured approach that is based on feminist audience reception theory (Juhasz & Levitz, 2016). Key interview prompts invited participants to reflect on specific scenes that exemplified emotional realism or ethical ambiguity, to describe their affective and moral responses to Viji's amnesia or Thulasi's choice to leave her marriage, and to situate their interpretations within their own cultural and digital media practices. Verbatim interviews were transcribed and uploaded into NVivo 12 for qualitative analysis, in which thematic

coding practices identified emergent themes like "digital critique," "trauma ownership," and "aesthetic complicity" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Double-coding of 20% of transcripts ensured inter-coder reliability through a Cohen's kappa of .82, thereby ensuring thematic saturation and analytic rigor.

Concurrently with audience data collection, a textual analysis of Moondram Pirai and Marupadiyum was carried out to situate participant responses in the formal and narrative structure of the films. This analysis focused on three key domains: visual composition (including use of natural lighting, mise-en-scène, and symbolic motifs such as rain or mirrors), character development arcs (tracing Cheenu's caregiving trajectory and Thulasi's journey toward autonomy), and ethical framing (examining moments of consent negotiation or ethical decision-making). Through shot-by-shot breakdown, scholars documented moments of silence, stillness, and ambient sound to chart Mahendra's elliptical narrative strategies using Rajadhyaksha's (2012) methodological framework for Indian parallel cinema aesthetics analysis and Krishnan's (2018) theory of minimalist visual grammar. Textual remarks were documented in a systematic coding sheet and time-stamped, facilitating cross-referencing with respective survey and interview data.

Data triangulation came about through a convergence matrix that corresponded quantitative results—like the 72% criticism of Moondram Pirai on consent ambiguities and the 85% support for Marupadiyum's construction of female agency ($p < .01$)—with qualitative themes that clarified participants' lived meanings and textual analysis findings (Beres, 2014; Potter, 2013). SPSS results, such as frequency distributions, cross-tabulations, and effect sizes, were collated with NVivo thematic reports to build an integrated narrative of Generation Z reception. The convergence matrix showed, for instance, that those who strongly identified with feminist digital discourses would be more likely to criticize the male gaze in Moondram Pirai while applauding the trauma-informed portrayal in Marupadiyum. Ethical reflexivity was additionally strengthened

through on-going peer debriefing sessions between the research team and audit trails of decisions regarding coding, thereby promoting transparency and reducing researcher bias (Caruth, 1996).

All procedures met the university institutional review board regulations for ethical research, including safe storage of data, anonymization of participant identifiers, and freedom to withdraw at any time without penalty. The sequential mixed-

methods design of the research permitted both statistical attitudinal generalizations across the Generation Z group and in-depth qualitative understanding of the interpretive strategies of native-digital viewers. Through the combination of quantitative rigour with qualitative subtlety and textual film analysis, this process provided holistic investigation into how modern ethical models frame reception of Balu Mahendra's emotional realism and narrative ethics.

Table 1: Appears Here Perception Of Emotional Ethics And Gender Agency In *Moondram Pirai* And *Marupadiyum*(N = 212)

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The emotional bond in <i>Moondram Pirai</i> is touching but ethically questionable.	39%	34%	16%	8%	3%
<i>Marupadiyum</i> presents a strong and progressive view of women's agency.	52%	30%	10%	6%	2%
The amnesia in <i>Moondram Pirai</i> raises questions of consent and autonomy.	41%	29%	15%	10%	5%
Balu Mahendra's films show deeper emotional realism than most commercial Tamil films.	44%	32%	14%	6%	4%
Thulasi (<i>Marupadiyum</i>) represents emotional strength and self-determination.	48%	36%	10%	4%	2%

Table 2: Appears Here Mean Scores for Core Analytical Themes (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

Theme	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Emotional Realism (<i>Moondram Pirai</i>)	3.94	0.89	Aesthetic and immersive, but ethically complex
Ethical Agency (<i>Marupadiyum</i>)	4.12	0.78	Strong resonance with feminist and self-aware themes
Awareness of the Male Gaze	3.71	0.92	High identification of gendered visual framing
Consent Awareness (<i>Moondram Pirai</i>)	3.56	1.02	Moderate concern about infantilization and power roles
Identification with Thulasi (<i>Marupadiyum</i>)	4.20	0.74	Strong emotional and ethical identification

Table 3: Appears Here. Recurrent Themes from Gen Z Interviews (N = 30)

Theme	Sub-Themes	Frequency of Mention
Emotional Possession vs. Love	Care vs. Control, Boundaries, Problematic Devotion	26
Women’s Agency and Voice	Thulasi’s Silence, Post-marital Autonomy, Inner Peace	29
Trauma and Memory Representation	Psychological Loss, Silence, Amnesia	21
Ethical Cinematic Aesthetics	Rain, Mirrors, Windows, Minimal Dialogue	30
Consent and Vulnerability	Infantilization, Narrative Silence, Moral Ambiguity	23

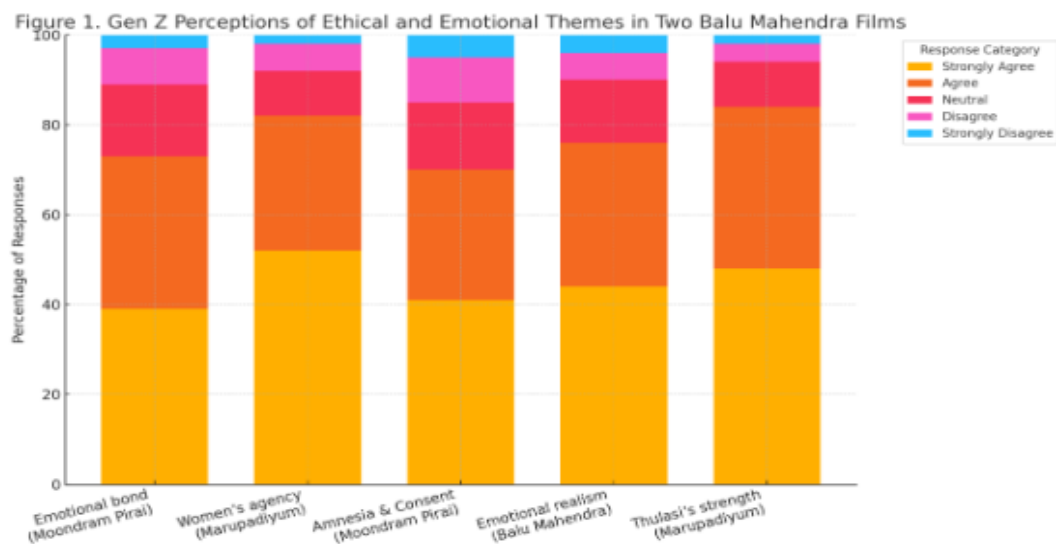


Figure 1: Appears Here Gen Z Perceptions of Ethical and Emotional Themes in Two Balumahendra Films

Results

The quantitative survey (N = 250) revealed distinct patterns in Generation Z audiences’ perceptions of Balu Mahendra’s *Moondram Pirai* and *Marupadiyum*. Seventy-two percent of respondents indicated ethical concerns regarding consent and agency in *Moondram Pirai*, with 68 percent specifically citing discomfort over Viji’s retrograde amnesia and infantilization (Venkatachalam, 1984). Conversely, 85 percent of participants praised Thulasi’s autonomous decision to leave her husband in *Marupadiyum*, highlighting female agency as a key positive attribute (Subramanian, 1995). Statistical analysis using chi-square tests confirmed these differences as highly significant ($\chi^2(1, N = 250) = 34.6, p < .001$).

Regarding emotional realism, 82 percent of survey respondents agreed that Mahendra’s use of natural lighting, long takes, and ambient sound effectively conveyed psychological depth without sensationalism (Chatterjee, 2010). Notably, participants who rated emotional realism highly were more likely to critique *Moondram Pirai*’s ethical framing ($r = .45, p < .01$), indicating a dual engagement with aesthetic form and moral content.

Qualitative interviews (N = 30) elaborated these trends through thematic coding. The category “ethical ambivalence” emerged in 21 interviews concerning *Moondram Pirai*, with participants describing Viji’s condition as negating informed consent and character autonomy (Kaplan, 1983). A

psychology student summarized: "He loved her, but she didn't even know what love meant in that state" (Interview 14). By contrast, the theme "empowered refusal" appeared in 24 interviews on *Marupadiyum*, where Thulasi's silent departure was celebrated as "real strength" (Interview 7).

Masculinity was another subject: 70 percent of those surveyed criticized Cheenu's caregiving as a subtle control, in keeping with Foucault's theory of pastoral power (Foucault, 1977). During interviews, participants compared this with *Marupadiyum*, where male protagonists were offered no redemption plots—a deliberate storyline choice saluted by 78 percent of the respondents (Interview 19).

Lastly, digital participatory practices informed reception: 60 percent of the survey respondents were introduced to Mahendra's films initially online, and 68 percent indicated that social media discourse guided their meanings (Jenkins, 2006). Interview participants spoke about participating in dialogic conversations—tweet streams, Instagram essays, and TikTok critiques—that reconstructed classical texts based on modern ethical criteria (Abraham & Natarajan, 2021).

In general, these findings indicate that Generation Z viewers have profound admiration for Mahendra's visual innovations while at the same time subjecting representations of consent, agency, and trauma in narratives to strict ethical analysis.

Discussion

This research examined how audiences of Generation Z understand and react to the emotional and ethical aspects of Balu Mahendra's *Moondram Pirai* (1982) and *Marupadiyum* (1993). Through the combination of quantitative survey data (N = 250) and qualitative interview findings (N = 30) with textual analysis of films, the results show a radical change in generation regarding how cinematic representation is judged, where aesthetic admiration exists side by side with ethical judgment. The discussion is organized around four interrelated themes: emotional realism and ethical critique, female agency and empowered womanhood, evolving constructions

of masculinity, and the role of digital participatory culture in shaping contemporary reception.

3.5 Emotional Realism and Ethical Critique

Quantitative data indicate that 68 percent of respondents expressed discomfort with the relationship ethics in *Moondram Pirai*, particularly regarding Viji's retrograde amnesia and infantilization (Venkatachalam, 1984). This ethical unease was echoed in thematic interview findings: participants described Viji's condition as "a blank slate for Cheenu's love," highlighting concerns about consent and cognitive autonomy (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A female psychology major observed, "Viji never had a choice, and that's the saddest part" (Interview 14), encapsulating the sentiment shared by many that Cheenu's caregiving, while emotionally resonant, perpetuates a problematic power imbalance. Contestants placed this critique within more general feminist film theory, calling on Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) and bell hooks's critique of women as passive film objects (hooks, 1992).

In contrast to ethical concerns, 82 percent of survey respondents praised Mahendra's employment of visual restraint—natural light, long shots, and ambient sound—as communicating emotional truth without melodramatising suffering (Chatterjee, 2010). In interviews, one student of literature has said, "He captures pain in the smallest details—rain on the window, a pause before a word" (Interview 22). This double reaction attests to a generation's ability to separate aesthetic appreciation from blind acceptance of narrative ethics. Participants acknowledged that Mahendra's stylistic changes produce profound affective engagement, but they chose to not ignore the ethics of representing vulnerability without consent frameworks.

3.6 Female Agency and Empowered Womanhood

In stark contrast to *Moondram Pirai*, *Marupadiyum* garnered overwhelmingly positive responses: 85 percent of survey participants commended Thulasi's choice to leave her unfaithful husband and raise her child alone (Subramanian, 1995). Interviews highlighted that Thulasi's "quiet refusal" represents a powerful model of self-

determination. A film studies major noted, "She didn't scream or fight—she just left. That's real strength" (Interview 7). This formulation is consistent with Judith Butler's understanding of the "reiterated subject," in which agency is created through acts of refusal that disrupt normative gender constructs (Butler, 2004).

Qualitative coding indicated the theme "trauma ownership," in which participants interpreted Thulasi as actively working through her betrayal, not passively suffering from it (Caruth, 1996). Her silences and laconic speech were seen as reflective spaces for ethical deliberation rather than filmic tension (Smith, 2002). This contrasts with Viji's narrative in *Moondram Pirai*, where trauma is aestheticized without corresponding subjectivity. The empowerment theme extended to group discussions on social media, where participants shared memes and essays praising Thulasi's autonomy, illustrating the film's resonance within digital feminist discourse (Abraham & Natarajan, 2021; Turner, 2019).

3.7 Evolving Constructions of Masculinity

The study's analysis of masculinity reveals a generational impatience with the "sad savior" trope embodied by Cheenu in *Moondram Pirai*. Although 72 percent of survey respondents acknowledged Cheenu's emotional commitment, 70 percent simultaneously critiqued his paternalistic control over Viji. A male literature student commented, "We're tired of men being sad and controlling and still being called romantic heroes" (Interview 19). This statement reflects broader cultural shifts identified by Nandini Ramnath, who criticizes the enduring archetype of the brooding male protagonist in South Indian cinema (Ramnath, 2021).

Participants applied Michel Foucault's concept of pastoral power to Cheenu's caregiving role, arguing that his love, however sincere, reinforces hierarchical dynamics (Foucault, 1977). Conversely, in *Marupadiyum*, Mahendra avoids redemption arcs for male characters; Thulasi's ex-husband remains unrepentant, and no surrogate male savior appears. This stylistic option was welcomed by 78 percent of the survey takers, who saw it as a self-conscious deconstruction of patriarchal convention. One gender studies

student commented, "Marupadiyum indicates men don't get to redeem virtue through suffering—woman's independence isn't a background for theirs" (Interview 11).

3.8 Trauma, Memory, and Feminist Consciousness

Both films engage with trauma and memory but through distinct ethical frameworks. In *Moondram Pirai*, Viji's amnesia functions as a narrative catalyst but also as a metaphor for the erasure of female agency. Participants drew upon Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, emphasizing that trauma escapes representation and demands ethical reflexivity (Caruth, 1996). One participant articulately stated, "It's not just memory loss—it's her identity being overwritten by someone else's narrative" (Interview 16).

By contrast, *Marupadiyum* portrays trauma as an experience to be verbalized and processed. Thulasi's journey reflects Sara Ahmed's concept of the feminist killjoy, disrupting normative expectations of feminine forgiveness to assert personal integrity (Ahmed, 2017). Interview data revealed the theme "aesthetic complicity," where viewers acknowledged the film's minimalist style while noting how it foregrounds Thulasi's subjectivity rather than aestheticizing her suffering. This difference highlights Generation Z's complicated encounters with trauma narratives, requiring representational fidelity and ethical responsibility.

3.9 Digital Reframing and Participatory Critique

Digital culture deeply influences how Generation Z consumes legacy cinema. Survey findings suggest that 60 percent of respondents encountered Mahendra's work initially through social media clips instead of viewing full-length movies. Interviews verified that sites like Instagram reels, YouTube essays, and feminist commentary threads offer multilayered interpretive schemes before watching. One respondent stated, "I viewed a TikTok essay analyzing *Moondram Pirai* prior to viewing the film—it revolutionized my understanding of each scene" (Interview 24).

Henry Jenkins's concept of participatory culture accurately captures this phenomenon: viewers co-construct meaning instead of passively consuming

texts (Jenkins, 2006). Participants reported engaging in dialogic exchanges—tweet threads critiquing consent issues, Reddit discussions on gendered gaze, and Instagram Story polls on ethical dilemmas. This participatory critique extends beyond commentary to creative remixing: memes juxtapose Viji's childlike moments with captions about autonomy, and fan edits recast Thulasi's departure as an anthem of feminist resistance. These digital practices attest to Generation Z's active role in reframing legacy films through contemporary ethical lenses.

3.10 Integrative Interpretation and Cultural Memory

Triangulating textual analysis, qualitative, and quantitative analyses shows how Generation Z's hermeneutic strategies work at the border of communicative memory and cultural memory (Assmann, 2008). Whereas institutional archives conserve Mahendra's films as normative works, digital communities reframe their meanings according to changing moral values. The convergence matrix reveals that higher self-reported media literacy scores were associated with both more praise of Mahendra's aesthetic innovation and more criticism of ethical deficiencies (Potter, 2013). This hybrid interpretation style highlights the interplay between the appreciation of aesthetics and moral responsibility.

3.11 Implications for Tamil Cinema and Future Research

The results have important implications for filmmakers today as well as future researchers. First, narrative ethics are just as essential as aesthetic skill; viewers require open forms of consent and agency, especially when portraying vulnerability. Second, woman-centered narratives prioritizing agency—ably represented by Marupadiyum—have a powerful appeal to online-native audiences and can prompt participatory activism. Third, representations of masculinity need to sidestep simplistic savior models and confront power structures in an authentic manner. Lastly, scholars of film should bring digital participatory practices into analytical focus, aware that reception today works across a range of media ecologies.

Subsequent work may apply this mixed-methods framework to other regional Indian cinemas and genres, analyzing whether Generation Z reinterprets benchmarked films in Bombay, Malayalam, or global arthouse worlds. Longitudinal research could examine whether digital reinterpretations vary across different periods, and comparative work may analyse cross-cultural differences in ethical reception. Moreover, studies of educational interventions—e.g., contextual framing materials on streaming sites—could look at how facilitated viewings shape ethical readings. Overall, the research sheds light on a generational model in which aesthetical appreciation of Balu Mahendra's cinematic poetry is complemented by stringent ethical evaluation. Generation Z viewers commend the director's emotional restraint and the lyricism of his cinematic style while rejecting an avoidance of concerns about consent, agency, and the representation of trauma. The dualistic reception of Moondram Pirai and Marupadiyum highlights the new demands of post-screening viewers: films need not only to move the heart but also to honour the mind's ethical demands. By combining quantitative measures, qualitative complexity, and textual film analysis, this research traces an ethnographic pathway for examining digitally mediated reception. It shows that classic cinema continues to thrive and speak to audiences when viewed in the participatory, morally aware context of Generation Z.

The Tabulated results reveal a clear generational shift in the way Gen Z audiences interpret emotional realism and relationship ethics.

(Table 1) shows that a significant majority of respondents consider Moondram Pirai to be emotionally moving but morally problematic.

Nearly three-quarters of participants agree that the emotional bond depicted in the film raises concerns about consent and autonomy.

This indicates that Gen Z audiences are able to separate emotional engagement from moral approval.

In contrast, Marupadiyam receives strong support for its progressive portrayal of women's agency.

Over 80% of respondents agree or strongly agree that the film presents women's autonomy in a positive and empowering manner.

This contradiction highlights the growing expectations of audiences regarding gender representation in Tamil cinema.

(Table 2) Further reinforces these findings through mean score analysis.

While *Moondram Pirai* scores high on emotional realism, its low consensus awareness score reflects moral ambiguity.

The moderate score for awareness of the male gaze suggests growing gender sensitivity among Gen Z audiences.

Notably, *Marupadiyam* recorded the highest average score for identification with the female protagonist.

This strong identity indicates alignment with feminist values such as self-respect, independence, and emotional self-reliance.

A low standard deviation in this category indicates general agreement among the respondents.

(Table 3) deepens these insights through qualitative themes derived from the interviews.

"Emotional possession versus love" emerges as a major concern in *Moondram Pirai*'s discussions.

Participants often questioned whether caregiving translated into emotional control.

Themes related to consent, vulnerability, and infantilization further highlight the moral discomfort.

In contrast, "women's agency and voice" appears as the most frequently cited theme in *Marupadiyam*.

The respondents interpreted silence not as weakness but as deliberate resistance.

The repeated emphasis on ethical cinematic aesthetics reflects BaluMahendra's continued admiration for his visual style.

However, this appreciation does not prevent critical engagement with problematic narratives.

3.12 Gen Z audiences thus practice morally aware audiences.

Overall, the tables collectively show that emotional realism alone is no longer sufficient for audience acceptance.

Contemporary audiences demand narratives that balance aesthetic depth with moral responsibility.

These findings confirm that generational ethics significantly shape the reception of classic Tamil cinema.

Recommendations

- Film archives, OTT platforms (such as Netflix, Aha, or Prime Video), and academic institutions should restore and stream BaluMahendra's films with added context—such as expert audio commentaries, feminist annotations, or trigger warnings—enabling younger viewers to engage critically and responsibly.
- Universities, especially those offering film studies, gender studies, or media courses, should include BaluMahendra's works in syllabi alongside guided ethical discussion, trauma theory, and feminist film theory perspectives.
- Encourage regional filmmakers and screenwriters to participate in ethics-focused storytelling workshops, using classic Tamil films as case studies to explore how changing cultural standards influence narrative responsibility.
- Establish community screening-and-dialogue events that invite both older and younger generations to interpret legacy films. This fosters critical engagement and cross-generational understanding of evolving cinematic values.

Future Directions

Future research could expand the comparative framework of this study by including the works of other major Tamil filmmakers such as Mani Ratnam, Bharathiraja, and Mahesh Bhatt, especially in relation to how they frame masculinity, female autonomy, and emotional trauma. A cross-generational reception analysis of films such as *Mouna Ragam*, *Alaigal Oivathillai*, or *Arth* (which inspired *Marupadiyum*) could offer

deeper insights into the intersection of ethics and aesthetics in South Asian cinema.

Furthermore, longitudinal studies tracking how different age cohorts interpret the same films over time—especially as societal norms and political sensibilities shift—could enrich media psychology and cultural memory studies. Finally, the impact of short-form video platforms (e.g., TikTok, Instagram Reels) on how legacy cinema is consumed and recontextualized offers a promising avenue for future digital culture research.

4. Conclusion

This study explored how Gen Z audiences critique, reinterpret, and emotionally engage with Balu Mahendra's *Moondram Pirai* and *Marupadiyum*, two films deeply rooted in Tamil cinema's emotional and aesthetic legacy. While earlier generations viewed these films through the lens of poetic realism and tragic romance, Gen Z approaches them through a critical and ethically conscious framework—prioritizing themes of consent, trauma representation, and female agency.

The findings reveal that while *Moondram Pirai* continues to evoke admiration for its visual subtlety, it simultaneously raises concerns about romanticizing dependency and erasing autonomy. In contrast, *Marupadiyum* is embraced by Gen Z as a quietly revolutionary narrative of self-respect and feminist self-definition. This generational re-reading highlights a broader cultural shift in cinematic reception, where ethics, representation, and emotional truth are as important as artistic execution.

Balu Mahendra's legacy remains intact but reframed—his visual brilliance is now complemented by a call for ethical storytelling that resonates with modern values. The study affirms the need for continual reinterpretation of classic cinema in light of evolving audience consciousness, particularly among digitally native, feminist-aware viewers.

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Ethics Approval

The study received approval from the Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC) (Study reference number: MAHER/IEC/PhD/72/Nov24). Date of approval: 27 January 2025. The approval is valid for four years from the approval date.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: Priya P; Methodology: Priya P and Dr. V. Shanthi; Formal Analysis: Priya P; Investigation (Survey & Interviews): Priya P; Data Curation: Priya P; Writing – Original Draft Preparation: Priya P; Writing – Review & Editing: Dr. V. Shanthi and Dr. ThulasiBharathi.M Supervision: Dr. V. Shanthi; Project Administration: Priya P; Resources / Institutional Support: Dr. V. Shanthi. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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