



"Realism and Narrative Minimalism in Mullum Malarum: A Qualitative Study of J. Mahendran's Realistic Filmmaking Approach"

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Abstract

The 1978 Tamil film *Mullum Malarum*, directed by J. Mahendran, marked a significant shift in Tamil cinema by introducing a realistic narrative style that challenged the dominant melodramatic conventions of the period. This study examines the film's realism and narrative minimalism through a qualitative textual analysis of selected scenes, sequences, and mise-en-scène. Drawing upon realist film theory and auteur criticism, the research investigates how Mahendran constructs authentic representations of rural life, human emotions, and social relationships. The study focuses on characterization, visual storytelling, dialogue patterns, and cinematic space to understand the director's realistic filmmaking approach. Findings reveal that the film employs natural performances, location-based shooting, minimal dialogue, and visually driven storytelling to create emotional depth and authenticity. The narrative avoids conventional heroism and dramatic excess, presenting characters with psychological complexity and moral ambiguity. The research argues that *Mullum Malarum* played a transformative role in redefining Tamil cinematic aesthetics and influenced subsequent generations of filmmakers. By examining the film's narrative structure and visual language, the study contributes to the understanding of realism as a significant artistic movement in Tamil cinema and highlights Mahendran's enduring contribution to Indian film culture.

Keywords: Realism; Narrative Minimalism; Tamil Cinema; Mahendran; Mise-en-scène; Visual Storytelling; Characterization

1. INTRODUCTION

Tamil cinema of the 1970s was largely characterized by melodramatic narratives, exaggerated performances, elaborate dialogues, and formulaic storytelling. Against this backdrop, J. Mahendran's *Mullum Malarum* (1978) emerged as a landmark film that redefined cinematic realism in Tamil cinema. Adapted from a novel by Uma Chandran, the film centers on Kaali, a winch operator whose intense affection for his sister shapes the emotional core of the narrative. Rather than relying on conventional dramatic devices, Mahendran employs subtle characterization, natural dialogue, and visual storytelling to depict everyday life and human relationships.

The film's significance lies in its departure from established cinematic norms and its emphasis on authenticity. Real locations, restrained performances, and carefully composed visual frames contribute to the film's realistic texture. The narrative unfolds through ordinary events and emotional interactions, allowing viewers to engage deeply with the characters' psychological experiences. This study examines

how realism functions within the film's narrative structure and visual design. By analyzing key scenes and cinematic techniques, the research explores the ways in which Mahendran transformed Tamil film aesthetics and established a new model of storytelling that continues to influence contemporary filmmakers.

2. Review of Literature

Studies on Tamil cinema frequently identify *Mullum Malarum* as a turning point in the evolution of realistic filmmaking. Film scholars have argued that Mahendran challenged mainstream conventions by prioritizing character psychology and visual narration over spectacle and melodrama. Baskaran (2009) notes that Mahendran introduced a literary sensibility to Tamil cinema, emphasizing realism and emotional authenticity.

The concept of cinematic realism has been extensively discussed by André Bazin, who argued that realism allows audiences to engage with reality through long takes, natural settings, and unobtrusive cinematic techniques. Bazin's theoretical framework provides an important foundation for understanding Mahendran's filmmaking style. Similarly, Bordwell and Thompson emphasize that narrative realism emerges through believable characters, causal storytelling, and coherent spatial representation.

Research on Mahendran's films highlights his preference for visual communication over explanatory dialogue. Scholars observe that *Mullum Malarum* employs silence, facial expressions, and environmental details to convey emotional meaning. Studies also note the film's realistic portrayal of rural working-class life and its rejection of stereotypical heroic representations.

Several analyses focus on Rajinikanth's performance as Kaali, arguing that the character differs significantly from conventional star personas. Instead of portraying an invincible hero, the film presents a flawed and emotionally vulnerable individual. Existing scholarship also examines the role of cinematography and location shooting in establishing realism.

Despite these contributions, limited research has specifically explored the interaction between narrative minimalism, *mise-en-scène*, and realism in *Mullum Malarum*. This study addresses that gap by integrating narrative analysis with visual analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of Mahendran's cinematic approach. The research contributes to broader discussions on realism in Indian cinema and the development of alternative narrative practices within Tamil film culture.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on textual and visual analysis. The primary source of data is the film *Mullum Malarum* (1978). Selected scenes and sequences were examined to identify recurring themes related to realism, narrative structure, characterization, and visual storytelling.

The research employs thematic analysis to interpret narrative patterns and character interactions. Additionally, *mise-en-scène* analysis is used to examine visual elements such as setting, costume, lighting, framing, and actor positioning. These components are analyzed to understand how realism is constructed through cinematic techniques.

The study is informed by realist film theory and auteur theory. Realist film theory provides a framework for examining authenticity and representation, while auteur theory helps evaluate Mahendran's distinctive artistic style. Data analysis focuses on three categories: narrative minimalism, characterization, and visual realism.

Key sequences were selected based on their significance to the development of the narrative and their representation of everyday life. Observations from these scenes were categorized and interpreted in relation to existing scholarship on realism and Tamil cinema. Through qualitative interpretation, the study seeks to understand how Mahendran's filmmaking practices contribute to the film's enduring cultural and aesthetic significance.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Scene 1: Introduction of Kaali

Narrative Function: Establishes Kaali's personality.

Observation: Kaali is introduced as a hardworking winch operator rather than through a heroic entrance.

Mise-en-scène:

- Industrial work environment
- Natural lighting
- Practical costumes
- Realistic worker interactions

Interpretation: Realism is achieved through ordinary settings and believable behavior.

Scene 2: Kaali–Valli Relationship

Narrative Function: Establishes emotional core of the film.

Observation: Affection is communicated through actions rather than dramatic dialogue.

Mise-en-scène:

- Domestic spaces
- Simple costumes
- Natural body language
- Minimal background score

Interpretation: Emotional authenticity emerges from everyday interactions.

Scene 3: Conflict with Authority

Narrative Function: Reveals Kaali's pride and vulnerability.

Observation: Conflict develops organically from workplace tensions.

Mise-en-scène:

- Functional workplace setting
- Medium and long shots
- Realistic dialogue

Interpretation: Social conflict is portrayed without melodramatic exaggeration.

Scene 4: Climax and Emotional Resolution

Narrative Function: Character transformation.

Observation: Resolution occurs through acceptance rather than revenge.

Mise-en-scène:

- Restrained performances
- Symbolic use of space
- Natural emotional expression

Interpretation: Human growth replaces conventional cinematic triumph.

4. Findings

1. The film rejects melodramatic conventions prevalent in 1970s Tamil cinema.
2. Narrative progression is driven by character psychology rather than plot twists.
3. Visual storytelling is prioritized over dialogue exposition.
4. Real locations enhance authenticity and social realism.
5. Kaali is presented as a complex and flawed protagonist.
6. Mise-en-scène significantly contributes to emotional realism.
7. Everyday experiences become central narrative subjects.
8. Mahendran's auteur style is evident in narrative restraint and visual simplicity.

5. Suggestions

1. Future studies may compare *Mullum Malarum* with later realist Tamil films.
2. Audience reception studies can explore changing interpretations of realism.
3. Comparative research may examine realism across Indian regional cinemas.
4. Further studies may investigate Mahendran's influence on contemporary filmmakers.
5. Digital restoration and archival initiatives should preserve classic realist films.

6. Conclusion

Mullum Malarum remains one of the most influential works in Tamil cinema because of its commitment to realism and narrative minimalism. Through authentic characterization, visual storytelling, and restrained cinematic techniques, Mahendran challenged the dominant melodramatic traditions of his time. The film demonstrates that powerful emotional experiences can emerge from ordinary human relationships and everyday situations. Its realistic portrayal of working-class life, combined with psychological depth and visual sophistication, established a new direction for Tamil filmmaking. The analysis of scenes, sequences, and mise-en-scène reveals that realism in the film is not merely a stylistic choice but a narrative philosophy that shapes every aspect of the cinematic experience. By foregrounding authenticity and human complexity, Mahendran created a timeless work that continues to inspire filmmakers and scholars. The film's enduring relevance confirms its status as a landmark achievement in Indian cinema and an important case study in realist film aesthetics.

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