

## Nature As A Mnemonic Archive: Environmental Memory And Trauma In Tharun Moorthy's Thudarum

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### Abstract

*This paper discusses the interplay of environmental memory and trauma in the notable Malayalam film titled Thudarum (2025). Set against the backdrop of the emotional turmoil which a family undergoes, the movie depicts the moral disintegration of the protagonist, Benz on the death of his adopted son, Pavi. Also, the paper strives to uncover the significance of nature and its influence on human culture and it attempts to demonstrate nature as a witness to and a storehouse of personal and cultural trauma. By using the lens of trauma theory and environmental humanities, the paper examines how nature acts as a mute witness and storehouse of buried truths through its silences, landscapes and eventual disruptions. A unique symbolic layering of characters juxtaposed with animals is another notable element. By aptly employing the natural motifs and symbolic elements, the study posits Thudarum as an ideal cinematic exploration wherein trauma is archived not merely in human memory, but in the textures and palettes of nature as well.*

**Keywords:** nature, culture, memory, trauma.

### Introduction

Nature and culture have always been inseparable since the beginning. Demonstration of this dichotomy is quite recurrent in forms of art, specifically movies where the visual palette is given utmost importance. As far as Malayalam movies are concerned, plot and characterization are given predominance coupled with natural imagery and symbolism. Thudarum (2025) by Tharun Moorthy is a thrilling revenge story which is brilliantly crafted to offer a plethora of literary discussions.

### Trauma in Thudarum

The film offers ample instances to trace trauma in the narrative. One of the major areas wherein trauma can be located is in the character Lalitha, wife of Benz. She lost her husband in an accident and Benz marries her accepting Pavi. Pavi himself comments on the vastness of Benz's mind as that of a sea full of love, in the movie. Lalitha confronts double trauma by losing her son and later the fake accusation against her husband as the murderer of her son. The atrocities faced by her and her daughter at the hands of Inspector George is undoubtedly traumatic, yet her sheer belief in her husband as a saviour enarms her to face all the tests of time. Her trauma is displayed largely non-verbal, especially by her stare.

While discussing the traumatic underpinning of the characters in the movie, Benz is more of a tragic figure, even after accomplishing in what he wants to do with the actual culprits, he loses his family. Initially, he suffers all alone and the weight of guilt transforms him into the lone one, elephant like potential to destroy the institutional amnesia and establish justice. Alongside Benz and Lalitha, Mary- the discreet lady love of Pavi, who is the only daughter of George, undergoes traumatic experiences since her childhood. Her father is the ultimate dictator of her choices. He lost her mother due to her father's brutal actions. The only solace in her life was Pavi, who becomes the victim of honour killing. Interestingly, a wide range of characters in the movies undergo emotional and physical trauma in connection with the unexpected landslide. The trauma occurred prior to the landslide in the emotional landscapes of the characters found expression after the actual landslide. Nature and culture is in unison in the context of experiencing and unfolding trauma at differing levels.

### Environmental Memory in Thudarum

The Forest acts as a witness of the heinous act of burying the corpse of Pavi, where a certain degree of surety is established by the culprits who are cops namely George and Benny. The mnemonic space of the forest operates as mere setting which urges the nature to reveal the concealed. Benz, being the father of Pavi was forced to turn a blind eye in the act of burial quite unaware of the fact that his son is the victim. His helplessness and ignorance in being a part of this crime eventually paved the way for his moral disorientation and trauma. He tries to pacify himself by taking a shower, to wash off all the sins. But no water could sanctify his moral burden. Powers of nature and its retaliation is shown as a glimpse in the form of a traditional art form, which foreshadows the impending natural calamity. Nature is presented as an omniscient entity which is capable of remembering all the torments inflicted upon it. "Environmental memory is embedded in the land, in living bodies and in the material traces of those who have suffered or resisted the effects of slow violence" (Nixon,06).

Culture attempts to utilize nature in the burial of a body and memory, while nature refuses to forget in the form of a landslide, where the movie takes a turn. This fact of nature being transparent and being natural is a curious fact to be discussed. The landslide becomes a symbolic outbreak of the buried trauma which culture thought to be forever forgotten. Cathy Caruth opines "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on." (04) The residues of the past trauma haunt the present. The stillness of the forest expresses the environmental trauma which is parallel to the impending trauma faced by the central character Benz.

Weather and the overall atmosphere of the movie is in line with the development of the plot. Rain contributes as a witness in identifying the corpse by tracing his wallet which was thrown by Benz himself earlier to hide the involvement in the burial from his wife, Lalitha. "Nature itself becomes a witness to trauma, not as a passive backdrop, but as a participant in a shared ecology of suffering" (Rigby, 48). Benz gets to know that the victim is his son when it rains heavily, which is juxtaposed with his internal grief and loss. The foggy landscape in the very first scene where Benz is introduced is a signal to the impending confusions and blurred occurrences pervading in the whole cinematic landscape. Low light and the bleak tone are incorporated not just to stand out in terms of aesthetics, but to reflect the emotional climate using all these palettes of rain, fog and low light.

Nature holds emotional and cultural weight in its lap. The forest is associated with livelihood, family, loss and grief. It perceives the ethical dilemma of the central character and how he acts over his ethical and rational taboos. It is a site of the concealed and the revealed. "To deny nature its narrative is to erase memory; to listen to nature's silence is to begin the process of ethical recovery" (Plumwood,87). Benz goes back to nature after killing the culprits and he washes off his hands in the forest stream. Considering these motifs, nature is not merely a landscape alone, but a terrain where cultural meanings and historical relics can be excavated.

### Animal Symbolism

The film aptly employs animal symbolism in tying the human nature with the natural world. Benz is often juxtaposed with the animal elephant and the emotions of family bonding is well portrayed in the film by displaying a herd, leading a peaceful life in the pastures. Similarly, the family of the protagonist is also presented in such a way to bring a parallel between animals and human beings. He is a carefree, yet responsible father of the family who transforms to a morally burdened figure when the plot progresses. Elephants are often associated with memory, loyalty, strength and endurance. Similarly, Benz, who has proved his strength in his past life when he was in Madras with a stunt master, rightly justifies the reason behind his physical power in confronting the cops, especially George and Benny. Benz bears the weight of morality and guilt and his actions are slow yet thoughtful. He comes and retaliates the loss like a wild tusker. Another curious animal symbolism can be found in the character George, who is the authority of the police station, functions as that of a snake or a predator. He is the very representative of rational and cunning bureaucratic system. His manipulation of the state of affairs for the sake of his personal vengeance stands parallel to the snake-like attitude, pretending to be the protector. He denies justice by disrupting the ethical ecology of the film. Institutional amnesia is another element which is underlying in the plot, especially when the cops join and fight against an innocent family without exhibiting any trace of humanity. The characters of George and Benny symbolize the general tendency of the power centres to hush unpleasant truths in order to establish order.

### Conclusion

In the movie *Thudarum*, nature is portrayed not as a mere backdrop, but as a sensitive archive of trauma. Unlike the conventional understanding of trauma as psychological and physical, this movie showcases trauma has other aspects like spatial and ecological. If psychological and physical traumas are inscribed on bodies and minds, spatial and ecological traumas are inscribed on landscapes, forests, rain etc. The forest is a symbolic terrain where the buried trauma resurfaces in the form of a landslide. Elements like rain and silence in the movie can be considered as the non-verbal demonstration of sorrow as well. In a nutshell, this paper is an amalgamation of disciplines like trauma and memory studies, ecocriticism and film studies in a cinematic perspective. *Thudarum*, in its mute, force underscores the fact that trauma is not just felt within oneself, but experienced around oneself, particularly in nature. Be it pain, people or place, to have the sensitivity to comprehend trauma is a matter of listening to the silenced.

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