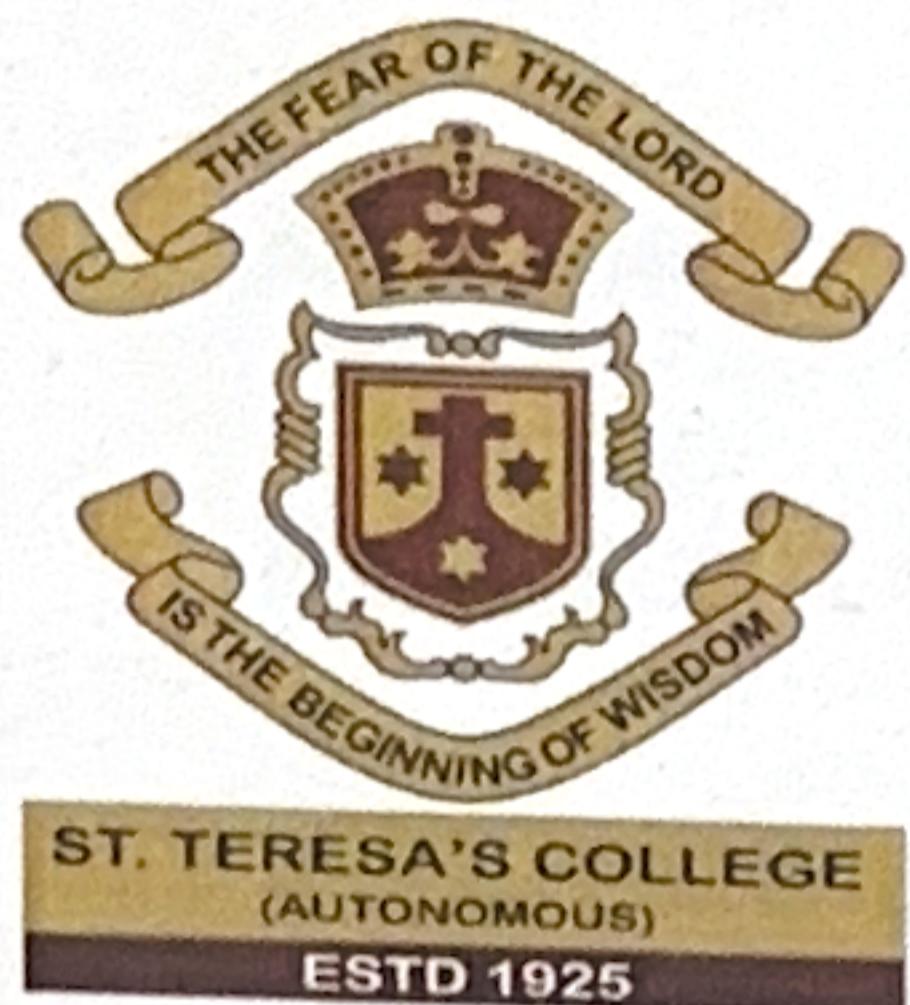


FRAMES OF THE PAST: NOSTALGIA AND MEMORY IN CONTEMPORARY
INDIAN CINEMA SHAPING CULTURAL IDENTITY



Project submitted to St. Teresa's College (Autonomous) in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of BACHELOR OF ARTS in English Language and Literature

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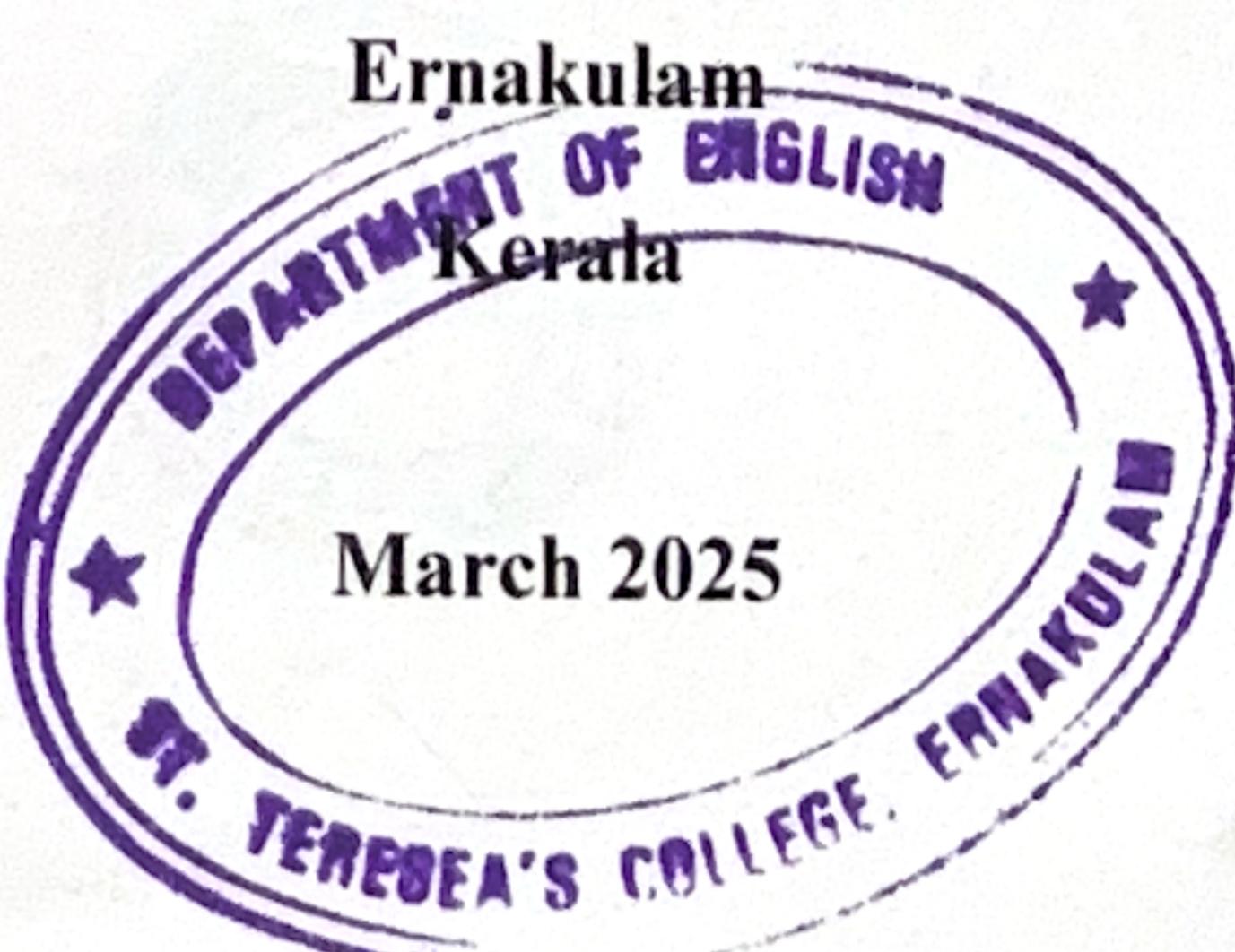
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Author Name	ANNA BINOV
Course of Study	B.A. ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERATURE
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Department	English & Centre For Research
Acceptable Maximum Limit	20
Submitted By	library@teresas.ac.in
Paper Title	FRAMES OF THE PAST: NOSTALGIA AND MEMORY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN CINEMA SHAPING CULTURAL IDENTITY.
Similarity	3% AI - 16%
Paper ID	3404381
Total Pages	30
Submission Date	2025-03-15 14:18:58

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I hereby declare that this project titled “Frames of the past: Nostalgia and Memory in Contemporary Indian Cinema Shaping Cultural Identity” is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Ms. Athira Babu, Assistant Professor, Department of English.



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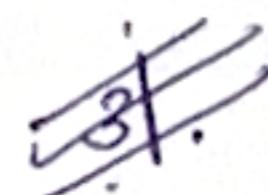
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CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that this project entitled "Frames of the past: Nostalgia and Memory in Contemporary Indian Cinema Shaping Cultural Identity." by Anna Binoy is a record of bona fide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.



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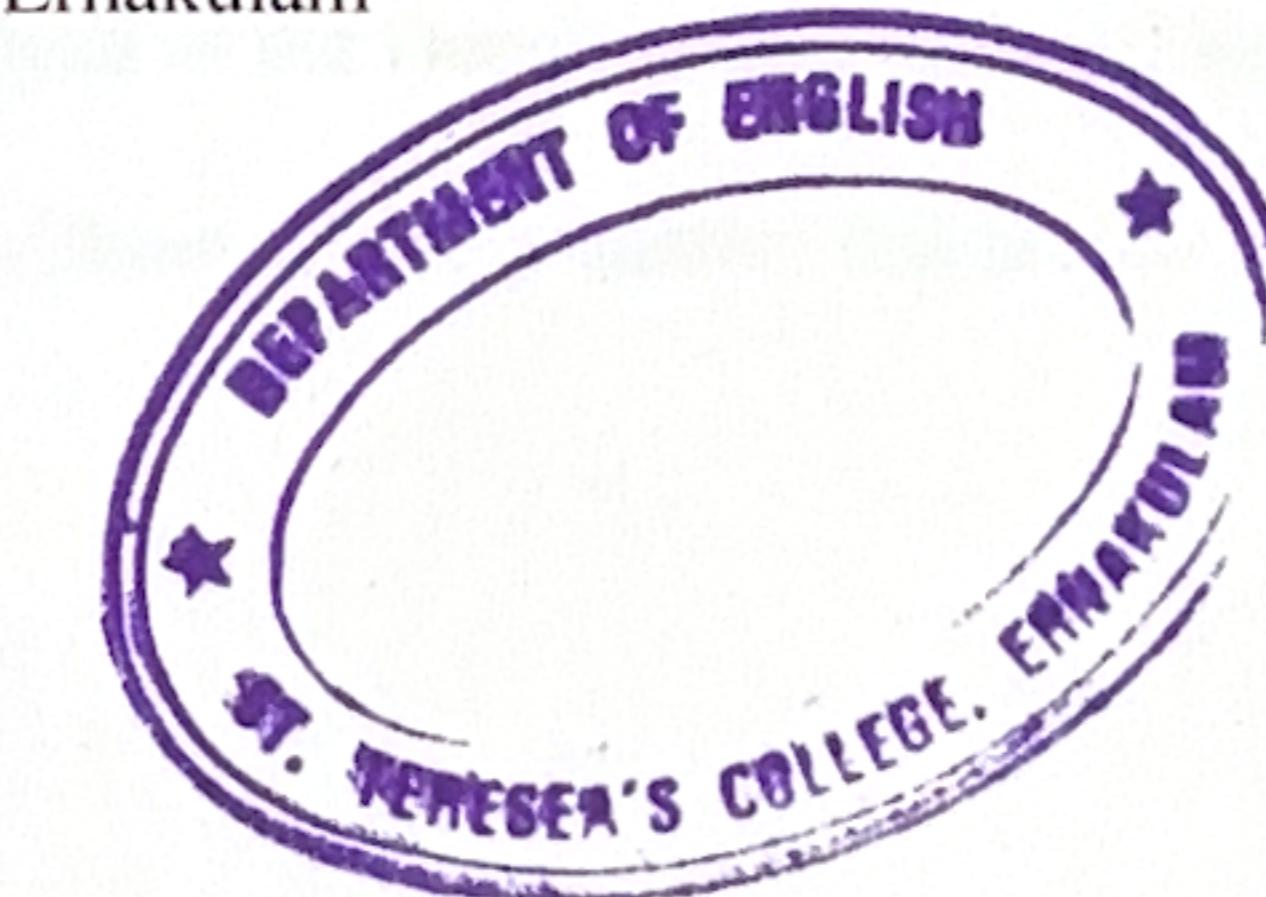
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March2025



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I take this opportunity to thank God Almighty for showering his abundant blessings and grace upon me during the course of my project.

I would like to place on record my sincere gratitude to Rev. Sr. Nilima (CSST), Manager and Provincial Superior, St Teresa's College(Autonomous), Ernakulam, and Dr Alphonsa Vijaya Joseph, Principal, St Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam for their continued support throughout the course of my study in this institution.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to my supervisor Ms. Athira Babu for guiding my thoughts in the right direction and for helping me to express them in the best possible manner.

I extend my sincere gratitude to the Head of the Department, Dr. Preeti Kumar, and all the other teachers of the department without whose guidance this project could never have been completed.

“Frames of the past: Nostalgia and Memory in Contemporary Indian Cinema Shaping Cultural Identity”

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Humans use memory to establish their identity while creating a connection between what was and what is existing today. This study delves into the intricate connection between memory and cultural identity through an analysis of the Indian film Meiyazhagan. Meiyazhagan depicts the character's fight with memory loss while creating a story about rediscovery along with understanding how memory can shift fluidly. The film creates understanding of identity restoration through the display of both individual memories and societal collective memories. Memory functions through both strength and vulnerability as the protagonist uses it to find his origins and recover his identity. Through its status as a memory archive the film records and reshapes past events to help form contemporary identities as the world continues its path toward modernization. Research should study how movies create connections between trauma experiences and nostalgia while dealing with globalized processes as they establish themselves as essential cultural items in current society.

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Introduction

Memory is the foundation of human identity. Our memory tells us who we are, where we are from, and where we belong. A person's life consists of the memories one has built in the past. Without memory, the existence of the whole human race comes into question. Our memory shapes our understanding of our life and past events.

The study of memory, both personal and collective, is key to understanding our society and culture. It is possible to learn how culture and cultural identity are formed through memory studies. Memory studies help us examine how a society remembers its past through cultural practices, literature, media, and art. Personal memory is unique to each individual and is shaped by their actions, emotions, societal influences, and the way they choose to remember events. Collective memory, on the other hand, brings communities together; it consists of shared emotions and experiences that create a collective identity. Memory plays a vital role in shaping both personal and collective identities.

The following theoretical framework and the analysis of the movie *Meiyazhagan* aim to demonstrate the ways in which memory builds human identity. The role of memory in the contemporary world is well portrayed in the film. This study examines *Meiyazhagan* to analyse how memory influences cultural identity in the modern era.

Cinema and memory are closely connected. Movies help preserve memories and are influenced by and shaped by memory. Like other media that preserve memory, cinema is important for documentation. Films record historical events,

cultural practices, and social norms to keep the past alive. Movies does not simply capture memories; they also inspire change in society. While movies show social norms, they also challenge stereotypes. This isn't just in documentaries and short films, but also in mainstream cinema. Through storytelling and various film techniques, movies portray memories.

In Indian cinema, memory does more than just tell a story; it helps shape the cultural identity of the audience. The movie *Meiyazhagan* looks at memory and how it affects individual identity. It uses nostalgia to show how shared memories influence personal identity.

The film doesn't just focus on remembering but also on forgetting. It explores themes of suffering and trauma, examining how memory is shaped by both recalling and suppressing experiences in the unconscious mind.

The protagonist, who returns to his hometown after being forced to migrate, experiences a rush of emotions. His journey into the past takes him through familiar paths, but he faces hardships along the way. The film portrays how Arulmozhi encounters a mental block, he is unable to remember a deeply affectionate person from his past. His fragile memory highlights the interplay between trauma and recollection in the human mind. The memory of the forgotten relative becomes key to reclaiming his lost identity. As he rediscovers his past, collective memory plays a crucial role in guiding him back to his sense of self. The film illustrates the fluid nature of memory and its fundamental role in shaping identity.

This study examines the portrayal of memory in Indian cinema across two chapters. The first chapter outlines the theoretical framework that underpins the

discussion, while the second chapter applies these theories to an analysis of the film *Meiyazhagan*. Following an in-depth exploration of memory as depicted in the movie, the study concludes with a summary of the argument.

Chapter 1

Theoretical Framework – Memory Studies

Without memory, there is no culture. Without memory, there would be no civilization, no society, no future.

Memory is what makes a human being who they are, erasing their memories is equivalent to erasing their whole existence on earth. Without the past or the memory of past the functioning of the human race becomes impossible.

Memory studies is a multidisciplinary field of research that investigates how memory both individual and collective is formed across time and cultures. It focuses on the ways of society, it remembers and honor their pasts, as well as the cultural, political, and social forces that create those memories. Memory studies draws from disciplines like history, sociology, psychology, anthropology, literature, and media studies.

Memory has fascinated philosophers for centuries. Plato and Aristotle studied it over 2,000 years ago. Scientists have explored how the brain stores memories. They have also studied how memory connects to learning. Memory studies shows that emotions can strengthen memories. Forgetting is also an important process in memory formation. Scientists and thinkers continue to uncover new details about memory.

Personal memory consists of a personal emotions and personal experiences. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* by John Locke, he introduces the idea that identity is constructed through personal memory. He says that a person remains the same over time because he remembers his past, not just because of his body and soul. What creates an individual is their ability to recall or remember the past of their life. This idea receives the name memory theory of personal identity. He says that self-awareness and consciousness is crucial in the construction of personal identity. Locke's

theory implies that as long as a person knows or remembers an event from his life, he remains the same person who had originally experienced it. Modern neuroscience and psychology suggest that identity is deeply linked to memory. Patients with severe amnesia often struggle with their sense of self, supporting Locke's argument that memory is central to personal identity. Locke's theory had been challenged and questioned by many thinkers. Even when criticisms exist, memory remains one of the strongest indicators of what creates self.

For, since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that which makes everyone to be what he calls self, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things; in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational being; and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person. (Locke 335)

This quote proves that personal identity is interlinked with memory and personal awareness.

Episodic memory is a unique form of long-term memory, enabling individuals to recall specific events and personal experiences from their past. Introduced by Endel Tulving in 1972, this concept was differentiated from semantic memory, which is responsible for storing general facts and knowledge. Unlike semantic memory, episodic memory is deeply personal, rich in emotions, and tied to particular moments, locations, and feelings, making every memory distinctly individual.

This type of memory involves remembering day-to-day events that people can consciously describe or reflect upon. It encompasses personal past experiences

connected to specific times and places. By allowing individuals to reminisce about their life events, episodic memory plays a vital role in shaping one's personal identity and sense of self.

Episodic memory plays a crucial role in shaping personal identity by allowing individuals to recall life experiences that define who they are. It helps create a continuous sense of self by linking past events to the present.

The collective memory theory by Maurice Halbwachs argues that memory is not just an individual, psychological function. Memory is a function that is fundamentally shaped by social structures. His theory is based on the idea that people remember within social frameworks. He says that families, society, class structure, institutions and national identities provides context to our memories. Halbwachs developed this theory in response to concrete psychological explanations. He believes that even individual memory or recollections are influenced by social dynamics. He argues that memory is the recreation of past events in the present.

“In each epoch memory reconstructs an image of the past that is in accord with the predominant thoughts of the society” (Halbwachs 40). Halbwachs primary thesis is that human memory can only function within the bounds of collective context. Halbwachs rejected the idea that memory is solely created in the mind of individuals but is created through social interactions. He says that we remember through our interaction with others. Our memories are altered by the groups we belong to. Memory exists within social context. The frameworks that create memory is provided by society. Languages, culture, tradition, religious practices etc provide a framework in the creation of memory. Memory is not concrete, but is constantly evolving. It is reshaped over the time to create the memory as it exists today. Groups may alter

memory to serve in their favor. Collective memory is very subjective, it is carried through the personal memory of each individual. Halbwachs states that physical spaces as well as the environment plays a major role in the shaping and triggering of collective memory, ancestral home, temples, cultural spaces etc triggers your memory. Halbwachs theory of collective memory is crucial for understanding how societies remember, forget, and reinterpret the past. His theory proves helpful in analysing literary and cultural works, especially in the context of cultural identity and shared memory.

Cultural memory is a form of collective memory shared by a group of people who share a culture. The theory posits that memory is not just an individual experience but part of a collective domain. It helps us in the shaping of our understanding of the past. The theory is built upon Maurice Halbwachs concept of collective memory. But it is extended by emphasizing the role of cultural artifacts, institutions, and traditions in the preservation of memory. Jan Assman, a renowned German cultural theorist, has made significant contributions to our understanding of culture. He argues that culture is essential to human societies, shaping identities, behaviors, and worldviews. Cultural theory helps us analyse how meaning is created and sustained within societies.

Assman's work on cultural memory theory delves into how societies remember, preserve, and transmit their past across generations. Building on Halbwachs' theory, he distinguishes between communicative memory and cultural memory. Communicative memory is short-term, lasting only a few generations. In contrast, cultural memory is long-lasting, preserved for centuries through texts, media, traditions, cultural activities, and rituals. Examples of this include the collective

memory of the fight for independence and religious yet historical texts like the Ramayana.

In essence, Assman's work highlights the vital role that cultural memory plays in maintaining and transmitting the heritage and identity of societies over time.

Cultural memory plays a key role in shaping collective identity. Cultural memory actively plays in the remembering and forgetting of cultures which eventually builds individual identity. Cultural memory it lasts for centuries and plays a significant role in shaping historical consciousness and identity. Cultural memory is very selective, it remembers and forgets according to the social needs of the contemporary society.

By studying cultural memory, scholars understand how societies and communities interpret historical events. It reveals how certain narratives are emphasized while others are forgotten. This process devises collective identities by defining what is remembered and how it is remembered. Cultural memory helps explain how nations establish their heritage through myths, traditions, and public commemorations. By look at these patterns, we gain knowledge into how memory influences cultural identity and historical consciousness.

Embodied memory and cultural memory are strongly related, both shapes how societies preserve and transmit the past. Embodied memory refers to the way experiences are stored and brought back through the body, rather than just the mind. Embodied memory is the idea that memories live in the body, not just in the mind. It shows that we recall experiences through physical sensations, gestures, and movements. Memory is not only a mental process but also a deeply physical one. Our

bodies hold traces of the past through habits, reflexes, and emotions. A familiar scent, a repeated gesture, or a ritual can bring back past experiences without conscious thought. This concept is studied in fields like phenomenology and cultural studies. Researchers explore how bodily memory shapes identity, culture, and even trauma responses.

Traumatic memory is a theory that explores how the brain encodes, recalls and stores memories of distressing life experiences. Unlike other memories, traumatic memories remain unprocessed and very fragmented. These memories are intrusive and intense. The theory is based on neuroscience, psychology, and psychoanalysis. It explains how trauma impacts individuals. It also explores its effects on societies.

Pierre Janet a French psychologist studied trauma and its effect on memory. Janet proposes that trauma overwhelms the mind and memory doesn't process as usual. Memory becomes split off from conscience. This explains why trauma survivors feel cut off from their past. Trauma disrupts the process of memory assimilating life events into a person's existing knowledge of self and past life events.

Sigmund Freud developed one of the most earliest theories on trauma and how it effects memory. Freud argues that the mind pushes traumatic or painful memories into the unconscious to protect itself from emotional pain. There repressed emotion does not disappear but remains hidden. The suppressed memory in our unconscious mind often come out as slips of tongue, fragments and dreams. It influences our thoughts and behaviour in unconscious ways. Freud observes that trauma survivor usually repeat aspects of their trauma unconsciously. Trauma alters the way human brain works, how it processes and stores memory.

The relationship between memory and objects is explored in several theoretical frameworks. Halbwachs in his *On collective memory* argues that memory is formed by social frameworks and external objects. He argues that physical objects act as anchors in helping recall the past. Pierre Nora also explores how societies preserve memories through places, monuments etc.

Marcel Proust introduced the concept of involuntary memory, emphasizing how sensory experiences connected to objects can revive forgotten moments from the past. Simple sensations like a taste, scent, or texture have the power to uncover deeply buried memories. Personal items, such as worn-out clothing or old letters, carry emotional imprints of bygone days, while historical monuments and artifacts safeguard collective memories for the generations ahead. These objects serve as silent witnesses, holding and transferring memories through time.

In some cases, objects can act as triggers for distressing memories, bringing back painful experiences tied to sensory and emotional associations. Items linked to traumatic events like a particular photograph, scent, place, or piece of clothing can reignite vivid and unsettling memories.

Memory holds a pivotal role in shaping personal identity. Both personal and collective memories contribute equally to the construction of identity. By revisiting life experiences, shared histories, cultural values, and traditions, individuals gain a stronger sense of self and belonging. On a personal level, episodic memory enables individuals to reflect on their past, forming a narrative that shapes their unique identity. Simultaneously, interacting with a group influences personal identity through shared or collective memories, creating a sense of cultural or community identity.

Jacques Le Goff, a prominent voice in memory studies, highlights memory's role in forging identities. He emphasizes how institutions, education systems, and documented histories play a crucial role in shaping memory. He views memory as a dynamic force constantly evolving mirroring the way our identities are actively constructed over time.

According to him societies are also very selective in this process. Societies chooses what to forget and remember. They preserve and transmit certain memories while discarding others. He examined how historical narratives, archival records, and cultural traditions shape identity over time. These factors influence how communities interpret their past and construct their present.

Memory is the foundation of both personal and cultural identity. It allows individuals to know who they are and for societies to preserve who they are. Memory serves as a link the past to the present. As strong as memory is, memory is not fixed. Time, trauma and other influences can cause major deviations in memory. Despite this memory plays a crucial role in defining identity. It helps people to understand their space in the world.

Chapter -2

Memory Study on *Meiyazhagan*

Meiyazhagan is a 2024 Indian Tamil-language drama directed by C. Prem Kumar, featuring Karthi and Arvind Swamy in lead roles. The film delves into themes of memory, identity, and the enduring bonds of family. In the vast landscape of Indian cinema, *Meiyazhagan* is a film that explores the power of memory and how it shapes a person's identity. A film that unfolds like a half-remembered dream, it weaves together the fragile threads of recollection and longing. It blurs the boundaries between the past and present. Through its beautiful visuals and quiet moments, *Meiyazhagan* makes us think about how memories define who we are. It shows how people hold on to the past, sometimes for comfort and sometimes to make sense of their present. The film creates a deep emotional connection with the audience, making us reflect on our own memories and the role they play in our lives.

In 1996, Arulmozhi Varman, fondly called Arul, leaves his ancestral home in Thanjavur after it is divided among relatives which leaves him scarred. With a heavy and broken heart. Him and his family, relocates to Madras, marking the beginning of a new chapter in their lives. The incident causes Arul's family members to become his greatest enemies since he develops deep hatred toward them. He and his family experienced severe losses because of his extended relatives involved in the situation. The memories and all the individuals he needed to abandon remain vivid in his thoughts throughout his shift. His life experiences displacement which the incident represents.

The year 2018 brings an invitation from Bhuvaneshwari to celebrate her Needamangalam wedding with Arul. He first wanted to decline the invitation yet his sister's persistent love pursued him to show up. Bhuvaneshwari's wedding invitation ends up becoming an extended stay than expected. The visit to Thanjavur pulls him back to his adolescent residence where he experiences a wave of recollections from the past. During his visit he realizes he wants to find lasting real estate for his family in Chennai. Hema answers his phone call and he tells her about his wish to purchase their existing rented home that serves as residence to himself his wife and daughter.

During the wedding festivities, Arul encounters a cheerful relative who greets him with warmth, calling him "Athaan" Though the man's affection is unmistakable, Arul struggles to recall who he is. The nameless man rejects multiple attempts from Arul to learn his identity and refuses to break contact for a moment including following him to the bathroom. Throughout the night the mystery man stays beside Arul while he provides assistance whenever needed. Disappointed by his deteriorating memory Arul hesitates to find out the identity of the man who accompanies him.

During the final phase of festivities the unidentified family member lets Arul miss his transportation which leads to the eventual invitation to stay at his residence. Rejection follows Arul's refusal of the relative's offer to stay overnight until he discovers no available accommodation leading him to the relative's home. Nandhini interrupts their discussion to present him to her pregnant condition.

As the night grows dark they talk about their childhood memories, and at one point, the relative proudly shows Arul an old bicycle one that once belonged to Arul's

family, now carefully preserved, then later the take on to a ride to the nearest dam in the cycle , both talking endlessly, soaked in their memories happily. The gesture fills Arul with guilt for having forgotten someone who remembers him so well.

The next morning, unable to bear the guilt of not remembering and the weight of his emotions, Arul runs away at dawn without saying goodbye. He reaches Chennai, he details his wife Hema about the happenings back in Tanjavoor and the encounter with the relative, his remorse grows heavier and heavier. He pushes forward with plans to buy their rented home but is faced with a financial shortfall. Just when hope seemed to die, an unexpected help of hand comes from the very relative he had failed to recognize.

Arul after receiving the heartwarming act, finally gathers the courage with the support of his daughter to ask his name over a phone call. It shatters his heart for a second but then he comes to terms with it and instead of answering outright, he playfully drops hints, he takes Arul through a small journey reminiscing their childhood. Piece by piece, the memories fall into place until Arul recalls a childhood nickname “Potato”. The unnamed relative unravels inn Aruls mind as Meiyazhagan , a beloved child from his past. Meiyazhagan was the son of a man who used to work for his father. Meiyazhagan was among the children he used to play with and read stories to. Aruls heart flourishes with his memories with Meiyazhagan.

Overcome with emotion, Arul rushes back to Needamangalam. He waits in front of his house, knocking and calling out, and nobody responding. Then he calls out the name he once forgot. “Meiyazhagan!”

A door swings open, revealing a smile that needs no introduction. In that moment, past and present merge, binding them once more.

Personal memory

Arulmozhi's identity is deeply tied to his memories, both real and imagined. His past is not just something he recalls it actively shapes his actions and desires. He remembers events through a mix of accuracy and nostalgia, which influences how he navigates the present.

Arulmozhis character is established in the first scene where Arulmozhi drenched in his own tears lies on a raised floor near the temple. The temple shrine had closed, as he was laying there an elephant wakes him up (2:36:10-2:35:30) .His familiarity with the elephant and its mahout, and the conversation between them where the mahout recalls the time when both the elephant and Arul used to be small and acknowledges that both of them have grown so much, this shows us that Arul has been living there all his childhood and now he has to leave. The scene depicts Aruls attachment to his hometown the pain of displacement. This scene moves forward to a song “*poren naa pore*” by Govind Vasantha. A song which clearly expresses the circumstance of his leaving and the agony.

Poraen naa poraen verum kooda poraen
Poratha kodungaalam vazhi naan poraen

Oodi aadi velayanda oora pirinjaen
Paatan poottan katti kaatha veeta pirinjaen (2:34:18-2:33:48)

Which translates to;

I'm leaving I'm leaving, as a mere skeleton I'm leaving

Towards the agonizing path I leave

Where my childhood's free spirit danced in eternal joy

From the home my ancestors build and protected I stand separated

Arul's identity is regained through a clear revelation and external validation.

Arul realises that his identity is a very fluid and ambiguous. Along the commemoration of his past he seeks to build a stable future for him and his family, he plans to buy a house as they were renting one until now, he doesn't want what had happened to his to ever repeat in his family ever again. He understands the pain of displacement and detachment.

Episodic Memory

Arul's journey of remembrance is a slow one, he remembers his life in the past through fragments, through small glimpses. He was initially forced to remember, the whole act of remembering doesn't occur very easily, he was forced to confront his past and his identity. The journey was a one that involved pain, loss and the realisation. It was a journey that occurred very accidentally but one that was very much in need. It was him making sense of his past. Each memory acts as a missing piece in a puzzle that forms his identity, he had to struggle and go through emotional turbulence in order to finally put the pieces in place. Each memory was a missing piece, the piece that finally put it all together was Meiyazhagan. Arul recognising

Meiyagazhan was his mind finally falling into place and he regains a sense of self and identity.

Collective memory

In *Meiyazhagan*, culture is not just a backdrop but an active force that shapes individual and collective identity. Through Arul's journey, the film explores how cultural memory, traditions, and kinship define who we are, even when we drift away from them. The movie suggests that identity is not a static concept but something shaped by our connection or disconnection from cultural roots. Arul's return to Thanjavur acts as a portal to his past, stirring memories of a life once deeply connected with tradition, family, and a shared history.

In Maurice Halbwachs *On collective memory* he argues that memory is not just an individual, psychological function. Memory is a function that is fundamentally shaped by social structures. . He believes that even individual memory or recollections are influenced by social dynamics. He argues that memory is the recreation of past events in the present.

From the other telephone the relative hears the crying voice as the person he cared dearly turns out to have deceived him about knowing him. He feels a combination of confusion as well as sadness. The conversation between Arul and the relative causes both men to develop tears in their eyes. The relative who displays inner composure decides to give his forgiveness. The speaker diversifies his tone following the difficult news delivery thus teasing his identity. The relative conceals his true identity before playing several psychological tricks on Arul that awake old memories. Through this conversation Arul receives back the lost identity he was

seeking. Through his interactions Arul recovers his lost culture and identity because his relative shares personal memories of his early years.

Arul is reminded the name “potato” which is what the relative was called in his childhood. The fragments of memory gradually lead Arul through a time travel to his childhood Thanjavur where he experiences visits to familiar locations and reconnects with his people along with their storied past. He drops tears as a result of this overwhelming happiness. The day brings him to Needamangalam where he catches an ordinary bus to visit his family member. When he reaches the door of his house he knocks several times yet nobody answers which indicates the property stands vacant. Practically everyone in the audience experiences deep psychological distress. Although Arul desperately knocks the door refuses to open. The door opens with Meiyazhagan standing there crying tears of happiness because he had been waiting for Arul. He eagerly waited for the specific moment when his name would be announced for him to emerge without hesitation.

Arul finally gets the closure he was yearning for. Meiyazhagan uses his name to help Arul recover his forgotten memories. The process of collective memory becomes visible as it develops identity through these observations. The trip toward Needamangalam serves to help Arul recover his forgotten memories. The past emerges in his mind because he had forgotten about it after his earlier experiences.

Cultural memory

The movie *Meiyazhagan* represents the forgotten culture of Tamil Nadu, encapsulating customs, rituals, familial bonds, emotional ties, and Tamil identity. The film begins with the ringing of temple bells at dusk and an old folk song playing in

the background. The folk song serves as an introduction, inviting the audience into Tamil culture and setting the movie's tone. The phrase "Love is god, love is fulfillment, love is hidden, love is the ultimate truth" (2:36:43-2:36:37), written in Tamil on the screen, introduces the core theme of love. Love within *Meiyazhagan* presents a deep relationship between memory experiences as well as the flow of time and the deep longing feelings between characters. Love in the film avoids idealization because it shows mainly pain alongside breakup drama and persistent desires for the departed. Through its main character we see the film present an association between love and identity development because our loved things create the foundation of who we become.

In the moment when Arul loses track of his relative the film showcases the process of Cultural Loss through a literal forgetfulness that drives People Away from their identity. His relative feels this universal fear about cultural existence disappearing when he discovers that Arul has forgotten him. When Arul reveals his failure to remember his relative it causes him anguish because the disappearance of memories leads to cultural breakdowns. The data reveals the uncertainty of both memory and identity because profound relationships eventually vanish when memory disappears.

The movie demonstrates that complete memory removal transforms someone into a non-existence for the affected person since it was the same process Arul experienced with his culture. The presented pain in this film avoids exaggeration since it manifests as persistent degradation from decades until centuries when communities vanish through forgetfulness.

The pain Arul experiences signifies multiple losses which consist of culture together with his ability to understand himself and his loss of identity and his guilty feelings about the situation.

His displacement from his ancestral home started this detachment, but he unknowingly let the pain take over to the point where he didn't want to look back at what he had lost.

Forgetting, in this context, is not just about losing memories; it's about emotional detachment and feeling like a stranger to one's own past. Arul's long absence has caused a break in his identity. The movie suggests that identity is not just about who we believe we are, but also about culture and the role of memory in shaping that belief.

Arul's journey is not just personal, it is also a reflection of his cultural consciousness. The memories of the places, people, tradition shapes his identity. In the movie Arul's self is formed through acceptance, him accepting his past, his realisation of what makes him who he is now is what builds the foundation for the rediscovery of his identity. His acceptance of his past, his pain creates his sense of self. For Arul acceptance was liberation. His recollection of his memory was his path to regaining his identity.

Memory and objects

The film shows how places, objects, and rituals hold cultural memory, shaping an individual's identity even in their absence. His old home, the bicycle preserved by Meiyazhagan, the temple he had visited when he was young and the familial warmth he experiences remind him of who he was before life in Chennai distanced him from

these ties. Seeing the bicycle, carefully maintained, makes Arul realize that while he had moved on, someone else had continued to cherish the fragments of their shared history. The emotional weight of nostalgia shows that identity is not just about who we are in the present but also about where we come from.

His actions after meeting his sister demonstrate the acuteness of his separation pain from his relatives. Upon spotting his loved one he becomes emotional and bestows all her favorite possessions upon her. He kneels next to her to put the anklet which he selected for her on her ankle although both of them break down crying. The simple gesture works to restore their previous relationship which had gotten separated. Their broken past converges with their present life in that moment so he experiences a recovery of his lost identity. Personal items along with familiar gestures create in people memories of the past. Bodily memory impacts how we form our identity and creates an essential part of our cultural background and produces trauma reactions which researchers actively investigate.

The scene follows as the relative and Arul proceed to the wedding party to enjoy food from the celebration. The food Arul eats leads him to his past because the cultural flavour enables his memory to access its past while helping him remember his identity that has faced chaos. The emotional connection between our current self and past experiences is held through food. The drama point to the way through which cultural identity becomes tangible when people experience typical everyday moments. Taste alone manages to invoke deep feelings of belonging even if memory becomes powerless.

Traumatic memory

Arul's struggle to remember things, customs, rituals, people, all that once he was not only familiar with but soulfully attached to, shows the detachment that occurs to people whose memory has faded through physical absence. His constant thought of going back is his fear of what his lost memories might bring up again, the pain and suffering.

According to Freud the traumatic memories we had are suppressed into our unconscious. Here the protagonist is afraid whether the traumatic memories might come back. Pierre Janet a French psychologist studied trauma and its effect on memory. Janet proposes that trauma overwhelms the mind and memory doesn't process as usual. Memory becomes split off from conscience. This explains why trauma survivors feel cut off from their past.

Throughout the movie the protagonist is trying to find out who the unnamed relative is, he tries getting away from him and asking people, but the relative follows him like a child. Arul does not get a chance to ask anyone else and asking the relative himself is out of question, the loss of his memory that too about a person so affectionate to him brought a load of guilt on his shoulder. Till the ending of the movie the name of the relative is not mentioned. Arul even when he had to stay in his home didn't realize who the person with him was. Arul's guilt had skyrocketed when the unnamed relative starts bringing up their memories together, the memories felt so close to him but something out of reach. This is yet another scene where the way trauma affects memory is very evident. Trauma blurs the protagonist's memory. The scene in which Arul's old cycle is presented to him as a souvenir by the unnamed relative brings back to him a piece of his childhood. It made his memory less blurry and his identity more clear. This interaction reinforces the idea that memory and identity are not just personal but collective. The unnamed relatives attempt to rekindle

their bond through stories shows how cultural memory is preserved through oral traditions and shared experiences.

Arul's daughter dials up a number and gives the phone to him, he takes the call not knowing who it is. He had vented out to his family, the discomfort he has been feeling after treating his relative like that, he had regretted what he did and wanted to come clean, this was his daughter's way of helping him. When Arul makes the call on the other line the relative gets excited to talk to him, Arul had given him a wrong number on which he had been trying for long. Arul confesses to him about what he had done. He said that he gave him the wrong number consciously, he did that because he doesn't know who the relative is, he expresses his guilt of having forgotten him and not asking him earlier who he was. He says that he had tried asking other people about him but it was unsuccessful. He shivers as he confesses to him. This shows the tear that had happened in his memory, how the trauma has affected his memory, his fear in finding out what was.

Arul's journey in *Meiyazhagan* is a quiet confrontation with memory. His identity is not simply recalled but pieced together through sensory and emotional triggers. Returning to his ancestral home stirs fragmented recollections of familiar scents, the taste of childhood meals, and distant voices. Each becomes a portal to his past. But his rediscovery is not seamless. Gaps, absences, and the weight of loss shape his experience, forcing him to face what was once forgotten. In the end, he does not reclaim a fixed identity. Instead, he embraces a more fluid self, shaped by both memory and the present.

Personal memory shapes Arul's sense of self, though nostalgia alters how he recalls the past. Episodic memory forces him to confront his identity through scattered

glimpses, each acting as a missing puzzle piece. These fragments come together when he recognizes Meiyazhagan. Collective memory, rooted in kinship and heritage, shows that identity is not just personal but shaped by shared histories. Cultural memory, tied to places, objects, and rituals, reminds him of a life he had distanced himself from. Even forgotten traditions continue to influence who he is. Traumatic memory highlights the pain of displacement and the emotional detachment caused by forgetting. Arul's journey is not just about remembering—it is about acceptance and reconciliation. His identity is shaped by an ongoing negotiation between memory and the present. In the end, he does not just rediscover himself; he reclaims a lost world shaped by love, longing, and the power of remembrance.

Conclusion

Memory is what that defines us, shapes us, and connect us to our histories, it is not merely a record of the past. Without memory the world will be clueless, there would be no culture, community and there will be no sense of self. Memory shapes how we perceive the world around us. Without memory there will be no continuity in life, we would know our life as only fleeting moments. Memory is the foundation of our identities.

Memory isn't just a theme in Indian cinema, it's the thread that weaves stories into something deeply personal, something that lingers in the heart long after the film ends. Cinema is an archive of memories. Movies express memories through narratives, through technical tools, aesthetics and other elements.

In Indian cinema, memory is central to identity, whether it's personal or communal. In contemporary Indian cinema memory is used as way to speak to the audience, a way to indulge them in nostalgia. What makes Indian cinema's portrayal of memory so unique is that it's not just about individuals. It's about collective experiences family histories, cultural traditions, and even historical traumas that live on in people's minds.

The movie paints a picture of how identity is non- existent without memory. Memory is what makes us human. It connects us to those who came before us and shapes the legacies we leave behind.

Future research can explore how films use memory to shape identity, especially in stories of displacement and return. Cinema plays a crucial role in preserving and reconstructing cultural heritage, particularly in the face of modernization, migration, and globalization. Studies can examine how films depict

trauma-induced amnesia and the emotional weight of rediscovering forgotten pasts. Another area of focus could be nostalgia how it reshapes both personal and collective memory, sometimes offering comfort while also distorting the past.

Through its story *Meiyazhagan* conveys the protagonist's entire life narrative to the audience. The movie demonstrates that memories represent our most fundamental life substance while dictating our direction. Each experience and emotional response from your past has developed into your current self. Through its plot the film emphasizes that memory functions closely with identity.

The lead character of the movie experiences frequent memory loss about his history which triggers doubts about his personal connection to both his identity and life path. Through collective memories about *Meiyazhagan* he returns to mental clarity. The collective memory restores recognition of his former self and reintroduces him to his cultural background as well as reconnect him to his environment.

Following the discovery of his true past Arul achieves a better understanding of his identity whereby he regains himself. Identity exists as a flexible concept in his awareness and he accepts that past experiences matter equally to current circumstances.

Future research on *Meiyazhagan* can explore its deep connection between memory and identity, especially in the context of displacement. The film offers insight into the emotional and psychological impact of being separated from one's homeland. Scholars could also examine how sensory triggers like food, music, and familiar landscapes help revive lost memories and shape a sense of self.

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