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## **Affective Memories: A Study of *Meiyazhagan* and *Three of Us***

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**Abstract:** The very world of human beings is made up of activities, events, and occasions which finally lead to memories. This article explores the roles of memory and emotion in the Indian films *Meiyazhagan* and *Three of Us*, drawing on Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative memory (1984, 2004) and Sara Ahmed's affect theory (2004). The article argues that both films depict memory not as a static recollection of the past but as an embodied, stimulating narrative practice. *Three of Us* presents memory as fragile and disintegrating, yet emotionally propagative, while *Meiyazhagan* portrays memory as embedded in traditional family practices, rituals and practices. The narrative structures of both the films and the aesthetic choices reflect how emotions evoke an access to the past and shape the identity of the protagonists through both personal and collective memory.

**Keywords:** Memory, affect, forgetting, emotions, Indian/Hindi movies.



## Introduction

Memory in cinema, as a subject, did not find much representation until very recently. Subjects and issues such as homosexuality, casteism, and gender violence hardly got the scope of representation in the silver screen, as mainstream Indian movies from their inception had mostly focused on linear plots with romantic storylines. In Indian cinema, memory frequently serves as a means of negotiating tradition and modernity, the rural and urban experience and individual identity in the context of collective cultural experience. Memory depicted as a personal subject in its representation and depiction in cinema is a field where personal experiences of love, loss and emotions interact and intersect. When analysing memory in cinema, what was relevant to highlight were the two dominant ways cinema interacted with memory. First was the way cinema was used as a site for storing and archiving memory and history. Second, cinema drafted memory and or historical remnants through its inherent nature of re-presentation. This involved informed selection of aspects of reality. What this paper seeks to highlight is the way in which memory becomes a relevant subject in the depiction and identity formation of the protagonists in two recent OTT releases. Two recent films—*Meiyazhagan* (dir C. Vidyasagar, 2024) and *Three of Us* (dir Avinash Arun, 2023)—offer subtle, contemplative thoughts on memory and its emotional qualities. This article explores how these films treat memory as a narrative and affective process, using an amalgamated theoretical framework that combines Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity and memory with Sara Ahmed's affect theory.

Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* (1984) and *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004) are foundational texts in understanding how individuals shape their identities through the stories they tell about the past. Memory, for Ricoeur, is not a passive process of recalling but an active process of interpretation and configuration. As he writes, "To be forgotten is to die twice" (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 412). Also in this context, it is important to understand that memory can't exist without forgetting. In this formulation, memory is not only crucial for maintaining temporal continuity of the self but also central to interpersonal and ethical relationships. Ricoeur emphasises the 'emplotment' of memory, meaning how fragments of the past are arranged into meaningful sequences that shape self-understanding. Importantly, memory in his framework is mediated by language, culture, and narrative form, making it both individual and collective. Sara Ahmed's affect theory, especially in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), conceptualises emotions not only as



internal or psychological states but as relational and performative. Emotions, she argues, “do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 8). She introduces the idea of “emotional economies,” where feelings become attached to particular objects, people, and histories through repetition and cultural discourse. Ahmed’s theory analyses memory as emotionally “felt” in the body and in space. Memories are often recalled not through coherent understanding but through affective triggers such as smells, gestures, and locations that induce powerful feelings. Paul Ricoeur conceptualises memory as inherently narrative, emphasising its role in self-construction and identity formation through time. Ahmed, on the other hand, highlights the sociality and materiality of emotion, viewing feelings as dynamic forces that circulate and “stick” to bodies, objects and histories. The convergence of these theories provides a rich analytical lens to interpret how memory in *Meiyazhagan* and *Three of Us* becomes embodied, relational, and emotionally charged. In both *Meiyazhagan* and *Three of Us*, such emotional indications are central to how memory is rendered and experienced.

### **Memory and Remembering: Recollection of the Past**

Memories in movies are used as tools to create a beautiful storyline, bridging the past and the present. Cinema’s long-standing and intimate relationship with memory is revealed in cinema’s adoption of terms associated with memory, such as *flashback* and *fade*. It usually describes cinematic dissolves between a film narrative’s present and its past. The common usage of these terms has rendered them commonplace, suggesting an apparently automatic, involuntary, and mechanical relationship between cinema and memory. Theories of cinema’s relation to memory have hinged, too, on metapsychological accounts of the cinema as a mechanical, technical, and ideological apparatus geared to the production of particular spectator positions and on the involuntary and automatic aspects of both cinema spectatorship and memory. But the question of cinema’s relation to memory remains open and has been theorised within three distinct paradigms. First, Memory has been conceived of by analogy with cinema. Second, in a reverse move, the cinema, especially specific types of film, has been understood to be equivalent to modes of memory. Third, and more recently, in theories of cinema/memory, the relations between cinema and memory emerge as more porous and more deeply interpenetrating than is allowed for by the two previous formulations.



*Three of Us* (2023), directed by Avinash Arun on the OTT platform Netflix, sensitively deals with a complex relationship of Shailaja with herself, her husband, and her lost love, Pradeep. It is a story about memory, emotion and personal disintegration. It is a person's journey battling her pre-dementia stage. As her cognitive faculties begin to decline, she seeks to recover fragments of her personal history and reconnect with her past through a return to place. Diagnosed with dementia, Shailaja Desai, a court clerk and her husband embark on a journey to Vengurla, a Konkan village in Maharashtra, where she spent a part of her childhood. Her childhood was affected by the devastating incident of the loss of her sibling in a freak accident in a well. When she visited her childhood home in the village, presently inhabited by other people, the water well brought back a lot of memories. Overwhelmed by emotions, she recalled the childhood incident, which was probably one of the reasons her family left the village. Before her condition worsens, Shailaja took a final ride through her childhood with her husband and her childhood love. Her return to her village centres around reliving her past through feelings arising out of the traumatic loss of her sibling and departure from her childhood love, Pradeep.

The film uses visual motifs such as slow pans across empty schoolrooms, fading photographs, and long silences to emphasise the emotional charge of absence. When she visited her childhood home, now occupied by a new family, she entered the house with a big smile. As she gazes at the walls, walking through the rooms, she relives her childhood. She tells the lady, "There... used to be a room here. ... What about the guava tree? It was over there", pointing exactly to the garden. While walking down memory lane, she relived both the painful and happy moments. In Ricoeur's terms, the narrative becomes a process of the self, even as its coherence unravels. The viewer is invited to witness the affective remnants of memory, what remains when narrative continuity collapses. While walking through her classroom, school friends Shailaja, Pradeep and Gauri recollect several memories attached to that very classroom. The simple incident of a boy being locked in his classroom was scary then, but now, while they are recollecting that very incident, they laugh. Shailaja's childhood romance with Pradeep remained unfulfilled when her family suddenly left the village to settle in Mumbai. Shailaja's interaction with Pradeep exemplifies what Ahmed calls "sticky" emotions—feelings that attach themselves to people and persist despite temporal distance. Their conversations are halting and tinged with unspoken longing. Memory here is not fully accessible, but is felt in the body, in the awkward pauses, in



the landscapes that bear witness to their shared past. The moments of togetherness on the Ferris wheel, when Pradeep asks her why she did not come back sooner, Shailaja replies that she never got time, and she was going on with the hustle and bustle and business of her life since then. Now, after several years, she received an inner call to slow down. The moment she was in Vengurla, reliving her past, she thought that she was probably meant to be here. Pradeep's surprise reaction at her return led Shailaja to remark that due to her dementia, she would forget her village visit. Pradeep assured her that he would always remember her. The Ferris wheel was symbolic of the wheel of time moving forward and completing its cyclical turns. Shailaja's story becomes a narrative of emotional reclamation rather than factual recovery. The film's refusal to resolve memory into a coherent arc reflects Ricoeur's understanding of memory as partial and interpretive. At the same time, its affective intensity affirms Ahmed's idea that emotions are not epiphenomena but fundamental to how memory is structured and lived.

In the movie *Meiyazhagan* (2024) on Netflix, an interplay of the past and the present is delineated. The movie begins with the protagonist leaving his childhood home. The walls, the roofs and even the keys have memories associated with them. The movie takes a leap from 1996 to 2018, a leap of 22 years, where we witness the male protagonist to have grown up to be a man from a young boy. The young boy who had to leave his hometown with his family back in 1996 due to a property dispute with his uncle is a grown-up man now. The very first background song that is played in the movie speaks of the pain of being uprooted from one's hometown: 'I'm leaving! I'm leaving. As a mere skeleton, I'm leaving! ... where my childhood's free spirit danced in eternal joy! / From my hometown, I stand separated!' Arul a.k.a Arunmozhi Varman takes a last walk around his ancestral house before departing from the town. Arul felt lost while walking through his home for the last time, recalling the memories attached to it. *Meiyazhagan*'s recollections are triggered by sensory stimuli: the texture of earth, the sound of temple bells, and the smell of food being cooked. These affective cues ground memory in the body, echoing Ahmed's (2004) emphasis on the materiality of feeling. The village landscape itself becomes a mnemonic device—a palimpsest of remembered actions and shared histories. The film begins with an elephant in a temple that gently knocks the head of the young Arul, wanting to spend the last few hours in the temple. He was overcome with grief at the way he and his family were forced to leave their home. The film subtly uses the metaphor of an elephant's memory to suggest that while



Arul may have difficulty remembering and recollecting childhood memories, certain memories and experiences are deeply ingrained within him, waiting to be rediscovered.

When he is forced to attend a cousin's wedding in 2018, we see Arul, a married man, reluctant to go back to his hometown, and he plans to return that very day with the hope of finding closure. When Arul arrives at his hometown, Needamangalam, to attend his cousin's wedding, he immediately realises that the town, which was once his own home, has become a new alien city where he has to live in a lodge as a guest. While travelling through the town, Arul tries to relive his old days in his hometown, but is unable to relive those memories. He even passes by his childhood home, overwhelmed by emotions.

However, the trauma of having to leave his home and hometown by force had compelled him to temporarily forget important happenings of his childhood. His first recollection of memories related to people of his young age comes when he meets his friend Latha, who sadly regrets not getting married to him, stating, "everyone wanted me to. My father was worried about how I would manage in Chennai and refused the proposal", which again brings in sad memories for both characters. Childhood memories take the forefront the moment a stranger (to Arulmozhi Varman), Meiyazhagan, meets him at the wedding. Meiyazhagan starts giving Arul several clues to help him remember him. The memories they had created years ago when he visited his home in Thanjavur in the summer of 1994. Meiyazhagan recollected simple daily incidents, such as his liking towards buying new shirts because of their smell, his father's inability to afford slippers as they were financially weaker than others, and their family being cornered because of their financial condition expressed the pent-up emotions in him as he grew up. His face lit up as he recounted how everyone in Arul's family behaved with him. He said, "...But your father was never like that, Athaan. I used to like him a lot from when I was little... he used to address me with respect...you all never gave importance to money." This small gesture of accepting and treating a child well, irrespective of his family's financial background, had left an impact on him that he recollected as his happy memories. The most beautiful memory of Meiyazhagan was about the cycle of Arulmozhi a.k.a his 'Athaan' "When you were in school, you had a Raleigh bicycle, do you remember?... After that, you bought a blue colour TVS Champ. Do you know what happened to that cycle after that?... It had an Undertaker sticker on the Mudguard at the back." In this process of recollection of memories, Arul was reminded of his days, and he seemed to relive those days when he couldn't just buy the



sticker but said, “I had saved up money over a period of time and bought it at the Amudha fancy store. WWF. Undertaker!”

Throughout the conversation, we see how Meiyazhagan kept recollecting his memories associated with Arul and how Arul, on the other hand, failed to even recall the name of Meiyazhagan, and this led to a guilty conscience, which finally led him to run away from the house at midnight. In this context, we can refer to Paul Ricoeur’s concept of active forgetting. This involves intentionally attempting to forget or suppress certain memories. It can be a conscious decision to ignore or reframe past events for various reasons, such as political expediency or personal trauma. Ricoeur suggests that while active forgetting can be a tool for social and political manipulation, it can also be a necessary step in the process of forgiveness and reconciliation. He views forgetting as a vital part of the relationship between memory and history. He argues that forgetting allows for a more balanced and nuanced understanding of the past, preventing memory from becoming a source of endless conflict or resentment. By acknowledging and even accepting certain forms of forgetting, society can move towards a more forgiving and constructive relationship with its past. In the case of individual memory, the same can be said. The trauma of forcefully leaving the home was resolved by actively forgetting all the memories associated with the home, including the relatives and friends. The metaphor of the elephant's memory used at the very beginning of the film was probably a comment on this active forgetting of both the happy and unhappy memories of the protagonist.

Memories created by Meiyazhagan are emotionally charged, nostalgic moments steeped in earthy realism, revealing how even the simplest of things can carry the weight of destiny and dreams. At the end, Arulmozhi accepts his inability to remember Meiyazhagan’s name and asks him to forgive him for lying to him about this. He goes further to ask him to remind him about his identity, so here Meiyazhagan humbly helps him to recall the fond memories he had with Arul. He even adds that the 1994 summer vacation was special for him, as there were a lot of things that the two brothers did for the first time. They travelled for the first time outside Needamangalam, took an “outstation bus”, and went to visit Arul’s family at Thanjavur. The bonding between the two lies in the past, where both were close to each other, where Arul, as an elder brother, took that small kid everywhere he went, played with the other kids, as well taught them new things. Meizayhagan tells him that Arul named all eight kids after vegetables, and they were given the task of



repeating the quantity of that very vegetable which they were named after, so that they would not forget what and how much they were supposed to buy. The moment Arul recalled that Medhiyazhagan was named cabbage and his elder brother was potato the flashback of a young Meiyazhagan sleeping on Arulmohzi's lap comes to his mind and this brings in lots of fond memories filled with emotions which compels him to rush to his 'potato' Meiyazhagan as he had no time to reunite with his brother with whom he formed so many beautiful memories. Through those flashbacks, we witness innocent laughter, a slice of childhood's carefree joy, capturing the purity of bonds which are never deleted from one's memories. Nostalgia, or the pain for the lost time and the longing to relive fond memories, becomes both refuge and resistance in a world that trades real connection for curated urban sophistication.

### **Memory and the Present: Fragmentation and Continuity**

Both films delve into the nature of memory and its impact on the present. For both protagonists, forgetting becomes very important as a part of remembering. Shailaja, in the pre-dementia stage, is unable to forget the trauma of her childhood, the guilt associated with not being able to save her sibling. Through her journey, she never tries to justify herself, though we feel she has a guilty conscience for leaving Pradeep without bidding him a proper goodbye, and we feel the pain that she expresses in the last scene to the old lady of losing her sister in an accident while playing tug of war near the well in her house in her childhood. Many bits of her childhood memories revisited her mind as she came back to her village.

Both movies emphasise the importance of human relationships and the bonds that bind individuals together. Both films evoke similar strong emotions and explore the complexities of the human experience. Time has passed for both protagonists as both relive their childhood memories, their growing-up years. In Paul Ricoeur's philosophy, time, memory, and identity are intricately linked, forming the basis of his concept of narrative identity. Ricoeur emphasises that time is crucial for understanding personal identity, as it highlights the question of whether a person is the same over different periods. Memory, in turn, is essential for constructing a sense of self and making sense of past experiences. Ricoeur argues that narratives, which are shaped by time and memory, provide a framework for understanding individual and collective identity.

In both movies, memory is not a concrete arc but fragmented pieces which shape the character's identity. Shailaja and Arul present fragments of their memory. This structure of recollection aligns with Paul Ricoeur's



theory of narrative memory, where memory is not a static archive but a process of employment that gives shape to identity. Shailaja and Arul's fragmented memories are not random; they are narrativised through recollections, creating an associative structure where each becomes an object and a person becomes a mnemonic node in the larger narrative of displacement, loss, unfulfilled desire and resilience.

Continuity of the present is an active process of being in both characters. The past might have had its effect and shaped the characters' lives. The stickiness is exhibited in the form of objects, people, etc, but life continues for both the characters. A fragment of their past definitely shaped their present, but the present would continue.

### **Conclusion**

The past, nostalgia and trauma are not used in these films to bring in a change in the characters. The journey of remembrance of not only what is remembered but how it is remembered, sometimes pleasantly and sometimes painfully, and these different shades of memory become a character in both these movies.

Memories made in the past through several incidents became a road to travel back to relive those days again.

The importance of memory and the impact of forgetting one's past is sensitively dealt with and discussed through the movies, which makes one realise how important memories are in a person's life. The films' narrative structures and aesthetic choices reflect how emotions evoke an access to the past and shape the identity of the protagonists through both personal and collective memory.

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