

Fall to Rise Again: Resilience and Post-traumatic Growth in the Malayalam Film *Uyare*

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Abstract

This article attempts to critically examine the representation of the patterns of resilience and post-traumatic growth in the South Indian Malayalam film *Uyare*, which portrays the trajectory of the life of an acid attack survivor in a predominantly patriarchal society. The paper analyses how the film offers a novel perspective on trauma by foregrounding the possibility of positive changes in the life of the survivor after confronting instances of gruesome violence. The paper posits that unlike many other Indian films on gender violence and acid attacks that focus on the suffering and helplessness of the victims in the face of brutal violence, this film explores an uncharted territory by examining and emphasising resilience and agency. The paper attempts to illustrate how the film *Uyare* explores a novel way of conceptualising responses to trauma by foregrounding the possibility of Post-traumatic Growth. The paper uses the method of textual analysis for the critical analysis of the representation of trauma and post-traumatic growth in the film. The paper argues that the film *Uyare* deconstructs conventional trauma narratives rooted in stasis and helplessness by acknowledging the possibility of recovery and growth.

Keywords: Trauma, Post-traumatic Growth, Acid Attack, Resilience, Recovery

Introduction

Women are subject to multiple forms of oppression and marginalisation in different parts of the world. Out of the various modes of violence, acid attacks are distinctly severe because of their intensity and lasting impact. In most cases, the trigger of an acid attack may be personal motives such as revenge, protecting honour, disappointments in affairs and outright jealousy (Salmani et al., 2024). Numerous instances of the weaponisation of acid to settle scores against former partners have been widely reported in India (Mohapatra, 2016; Salmani et al., 2024; Kaur & Byard, 2023). Acid attacks, owing to their intensity and abruptness, may lead to the traumatising of their victims (Verma & Gill, 2022).

Many filmmakers have attempted to explore the lives of acid attack survivors (Sharma, 2024). Unlike many other films on the topic, such as the Bollywood movie *Chhapaak*, which focuses on suffering and victimhood, the Malayalam film *Uyare* explores the themes of resilience and post-traumatic growth. The paper highlights the different ways in which the film *Uyare* deconstructs and problematises conventional victimhood narratives rooted in helplessness and stasis by emphasising the possibilities of healing,

resilience, and post-traumatic growth. The paper examines how this film engages with trauma, recovery, and post-traumatic growth using the method of textual analysis.

Cultural Trauma Theory conceives trauma as a wound in the psyche of individuals who are exposed to instances of intense violence. The impact of trauma is so severe that it may alter the way an individual understands oneself and the world around one. Traumatic experiences may hurt the self-esteem of the affected individuals, straining their ties with the social fabric. Cathy Caruth (2016), a pioneer in the field of trauma studies, defines trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (p. 2). Trauma may be manifested as "repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event" (Caruth, 1995, p. 4). She points out that the emotional and psychological suffering of the victims of trauma was first medically acknowledged by the American Psychological Association in 1980. The paradigm of cultural trauma studies emerged later, drawing impetus from the developments in the field of social and medical sciences. Caruth (1995) points out that trauma can be triggered not just by war and natural calamities but by instances like rape and abuse as well (p. 2). She adds that trauma is a shattering experience that "brings us to the limits of our understanding" (Caruth, 1995, p. 3), leading to a profound epistemological challenge. Caruth (1995) argues that "psychoanalysis and medically oriented psychiatry, sociology, history, and even literature all seem to be called upon to explain, to cure, or to show why it is that we can no longer simply explain or simply cure" (p. 4).

Judith Herman (2015) introduced a new approach to trauma that explores the possibility of healing aided partly by narrative reconstructions of the event in a positive setting. She holds that "the central dialectic of psychological trauma" is "the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud" (p. 1). She points out that a conducive social context may facilitate a victim to renegotiate and reinvent one's life after encountering trauma. She adds that "this social context is created by relationships with friends, lovers, and family. For the larger society, the social context is created by political movements that give voice to the disempowered" (p. 6).

Recent developments in the field of trauma studies have foregrounded the possibility of growth after encountering trauma. The affirmative changes in attitude, outlook, and worldview seen in some, if not all, victims of trauma are referred to as Post-traumatic Growth. Tedeschi et al. (2018) define PTG in their book *Post-traumatic Growth: Theory, Research, and Applications* as "positive psychological changes experienced as a result of the struggle with trauma or highly challenging situations" (p. 1). Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) view Post-traumatic growth (PTG) as the "positive impact of negative events" (p. 455). PTG often manifests as "changes in self-perception, changes in interpersonal relationships, and a changed philosophy of life" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, p. 456). Some trauma survivors may eventually experience emotional growth and develop a newfound feeling of agency and strength. These empowering changes in perception about oneself and others are another feature of PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, p. 456). Some survivors, as a result of their post-traumatic growth, may learn "from their victimisation that they must make decisions in their own best interests, including protecting themselves from abuse in their relationships" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, p. 457). PTG facilitates the development of "a new philosophy of life which may be manifested as the emergence of a better perspective on life, changes in their priorities which are often positive, and a reevaluation of their religious and spiritual practices which often solidify their religious affiliations" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, p. 457).

Bakaitytė et al. (2021) are of the view that PTG may be "understood as a process and an outcome" (p. 36). The process of PTG is "not only positive, it requires suffering and struggle through traumatic experience until some positive changes can be reached" (Bakaitytė et al., 2021, p. 37). The positive changes after an encounter with trauma may not "necessarily eliminate emotional distress which is often experienced by post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS)" (Bakaitytė et al., 2021, p. 37). PTG occurs when the event is "significant to a person's life story" and it "challenges or disrupts core beliefs" of the survivor (Bakaitytė et al., 2021, p. 37).

Films are considered to be "cultural containers" that store and replay traumatic energies and "process and transform these energies into even more complex cultural material" (Elm et al., 2014, p. 10). Elm et al. (2014) argue that "traumatic and filmic languages can be telescoped" (p. 8). Throughout the world, cinema has been increasingly used to tell stories of trauma from multiple vantage points. Lately, filmmakers from Kerala have also attempted to explore trauma and its various layers and multiple manifestations through films belonging to genres such as horror, melodrama, and even thrillers.

Review of Literature

Many researchers have already explored how Malayalam cinema addresses psychological issues such as trauma. Ratnakaran et al. (2015) argue that "Malayalam cinema is a rich source of films portraying psychiatric disorders". Their significant observation is that these films' representation of the psychological state is not always accurate and appropriate. Aiyappan and Stephen (2021) have attempted to study the representation of trauma in horror comedies in Malayalam and highlight their gendered dimension. Prasad and Balakrishnan (2023) have analysed the representation of the psyche of the people of Kerala in Malayalam cinema. The paper addresses the techniques used in Malayalam cinema to depict the psyche of Malayalees. Ratnakaran et al. (2015) have attempted a comprehensive study of the diverse treatment of mental health topics in Malayalam cinema. Chathoth (2016) has extensively studied how Malayalam filmmakers have tried to portray the mindscapes of Malayalees in their films in his book *Reel to Real: The Mind through the Lens of Malayalam Cinema*.

After a thorough literature review, it is revealed that significant attempts have been made to study the representation of various psychological states, including trauma, in Malayalam cinema. However, very few attempts have been made to explore the delineation of post-traumatic growth in Malayalam cinema. This paper, therefore, addresses a significant gap in the studies of Malayalam cinema.

Malayalam filmmakers have attempted to explore trauma, but most of these films focus on melancholy and status. Very few films address the different layers and multiple manifestations of post-traumatic growth. Hence, this study is limited to one Malayalam film, *Uyare*, that has addressed the issue of trauma and PTG from a novel perspective.

Methodology

The paper uses textual analysis to showcase how dialogue and visuals are employed in the film to depict the protagonist's journey from victimhood to eventual growth. This method allows a layered exploration of the narrative and the visual components.

Uyare [Up Above] is a critically acclaimed Malayalam thriller film released in 2019 that records the trajectory of the life of an acid attack survivor, Pallavi Raveendran. The film vividly portrays her encounter with trauma and its various consequences. The film celebrates her indomitable will, which enabled her to thrive even after multiple failures and disappointments in her personal and professional life.

The film has a cyclical structure, and the non-linear plot line shifts across time and space and weaves a picture of the compelling mindscape of the protagonist. Pallavi had a difficult childhood after the death of her mother at a young age. Since she had no siblings at home, she struggled to meet her emotional needs for love, especially when her father was away on official duties. When she was fifteen, she had to stay in the school hostel for ten days because her father was attending an official function in Hyderabad. The trauma emanating from the death of her mother, coupled with her feeling of loneliness, made her physically vulnerable and emotionally distraught. She wet the bed one day while staying in the hostel and became a target of derision and constant ridicule on the campus. This emotional torture emotionally overwhelmed her. The only person who offered her support during that period of crisis was a tenth-grade student, Govind, who offered her words of solace and emotional support. Since he was the only person who empathised with her, she felt emotionally attached to him, and the relationship gradually turned romantic.

Pallavi was a spirited girl with high ambitions even in her childhood. Because she was an NCC cadet, she had the opportunity to fly in aircraft. During her flight to Delhi, she interacted with the captain and became interested in flying. During her college days, her bond with Govind became deeper. Because of his possessiveness and patriarchal attitude, Govind often disagreed with Pallavi and even tried to interfere with her choices. She found it challenging to satisfy Govind's emotional and psychological needs. Govind's insecurities, stemming partially from his lack of confidence and inability to find a suitable career, often manifested as rude outbursts and persistent and petulant demands. The relationship strained when Govind started questioning Pallavi's life choices and independence. Her father, Raveendran, offered her financial and emotional support, assisted her in fulfilling her aspirations and enrolled her in a flying academy.

Pallavi decided to join the Aviation Academy in Mumbai, disregarding Govind's objection. Govind started doubting himself, and his insecurities emerged as he confronted the reality that his lover was about to achieve something beyond his reach. His pestering phone calls and irritable behaviour strained the relationship further. She told Govind that she was not interested in continuing the relationship. Govind, out of anger and frustration, decided to destroy her personal and professional life by hurling acid on her face. Because of the severity of the attack, her face was disfigured, and her eyesight was partially lost. Even though she recovered gradually, her application for a pilot licence was rejected because of her partial vision.

Pallavi felt that the legal system failed her when the lower court granted bail to Govind, citing a lack of conclusive evidence. Despite her disappointment, she decided to continue the legal fight by filing an appeal in the higher court. Her friend Sarika and her father Raveendran stood by her in her moments of physical and emotional turmoil. Sarika introduced her to an NGO working for acid attack survivors. The counselling and therapy sessions there and her companionship with other victims expedited her recovery. She realised that she must accept reality as it is and decided to remove the scarf which she hitherto used to hide the scars and marks on her face.

Her accidental meeting with Vishal of Cloud 9 Airways was another turning point in her life. After a brief conversation with her, Vishal realised her potential and announced his decision to appoint an acid attack survivor as an air hostess. Her initial inhibitions about taking up the job vanished when an empathetic passenger hugged her. Vishal invited Pallavi to his birthday party and confessed his love, but Pallavi insisted she wanted him as a friend.

Govind flew on the same flight and emotionally blackmailed her to withdraw the court case against him. She lost her temper when he argued that the court case would ruin his future and threw the cold water on

his face. Govind registered a complaint against her, and there was pressure on her to apologise to him, but she made it very clear that she would react the same way if Govind behaved similarly. Vishal was forced to issue her notice regarding the termination of the contract since the video of her throwing water at Govind had gone viral. The next day, while she was on her notice period, the pilot in the aeroplane had a medical emergency, and the co-pilot had no confidence to take over. A confident Pallavi went to the cockpit, took control, and landed the plane safely.

The film *Uyare* depicts trauma and post-traumatic growth very evocatively. It is to be noted that at the moment of trauma, "the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force.....When the force is that of other human beings, we speak of atrocities. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning" (Herman, 2015, p. 24). In the film, Pallavi was rendered helpless when acid was hurled at her face. As a result of the exposure to that act of atrocity, she was overwhelmed, and her faith in herself and those around her was shaken. She felt she had lost control of her life and become unfit to establish connections. Her trauma had severely damaged her capacity to act and to adapt.

Pallavi was traumatised by the acid attack, and she showed many symptoms of trauma. Some of the symptoms of trauma seen in Pallavi were increased anxiety and numbness, which manifested as her refusal to look at the mirror and to face others. Her sense of depression emanating from her trauma limited her interaction with her relatives and friends. Her difficulty in managing extreme emotions, such as anger, is also a symptom of trauma. She had intrusive thoughts about Govind, which added to the intensity of her pain. The patterns of her sleep and her daily routine were also affected by the traumatic experience. She tried to withdraw from her circle and showed many withdrawal symptoms such as a tendency to avoid people and places. She also experienced fatigue, nausea and disrupted sleep rhythm, which are some of the physical symptoms of trauma.

The film foregrounds healing and recovery after exposure to traumatogenic events. Along with Pallavi's indomitable willpower and perseverance, her father's and friend Sarika's psychological and emotional support also played a significant role in her recovery. Her interaction with other acid attack victims helped her reevaluate her priorities and to renegotiate her positions. The support systems she had in place created a condition conducive to healing and expedited her recovery.

Pallavi emerges stronger after her traumatic experience, and she shows many symptoms of post-traumatic growth. In her pre-traumatic phase, she had limited preoccupations, and her circle was limited to that of her father, lover and friends. After the traumatic encounter, she realigns her priorities and gradually develops a renewed appreciation for the different layers of life. She can formulate deep bondings with the other victims of violence she encountered at the office of the NGO for acid attack survivors. She hated herself and her appearance initially, as revealed by her reluctance to look at the mirror and the continuous use of a scarf to hide her scarred face. Eventually, she realises that external appearance does not define her individual and boldly accepts the new reality. She can find and appreciate the beauty of life and starts savouring each moment in her life. She also develops a new sense of morality, as illustrated by her willingness to reach out to the other acid attack survivors.

Another vital feature of PTG is that the survivors develop more meaningful relationships based on mutual trust with other individuals whose defining features may be love, empathy, care and compassion (Tedeschi, 2023, p. 328). It was after her encounter with the trauma that Pallavi was able to rediscover her deep filial ties with her father, which was initially strained on account of her feeling of dejection and being left alone after the demise of her mother. She gradually repairs her relationship with her father and shares

her life story with him, and she realises that communication in itself can be cathartic. As a result, she becomes more open and direct in her communication. Her relationship with Vishal is built on mutual trust. She is able to articulate her stand to Vishal when he expresses his love for her without offending him or hurting his sentiments. Since she willingly embraces her vulnerability and precarity, her communication becomes more direct and open. Her relationship with her friends, like Sarika, deepens since she has realised the value of social support in one's life.

The survivors who experience PTG are able to discover an array of possibilities that they had not even realised (Badecka, 2023, p. 98). They may also find their potential and talents not utilised recently. Pallavi realised that she had excellent interpersonal skills and that she could thrive in the role of an air hostess. She also learns she must not surrender her individuality and agency to please others. She develops a new sense of priorities. In her pre-traumatic phase, her romantic relationship determined her life choices and priorities. Nevertheless, in the post-traumatic phase, she is able to decide on the nature of her relationship with Vishal. She has set her goals and refuses to change or alter them to make others happy, as illustrated by her refusal to tender an apology to the board since she felt that what she did was morally right.

The survivors of trauma who experience post-traumatic growth may be willing to explore new opportunities (Badecka, 2023, p. 98). Pallavi was able to find a new meaning and a new purpose for her life. She was happy to work for the other victims of trauma. Her confidence level increases, and she decides to explore different career options if the airline company terminates her contract. She stays focused on her growth and moves ahead, ignoring distractions. When her father informs her that Govind has attempted suicide, she does not lose her composure. The calm acceptance of reality is another symptom of PTG.

It is also observed that those who experience PTG may develop their strength (Safin & Teptyuk, 2024, p. 43). They come to appreciate their skills and attempt to discover their potential, boosting their confidence and resilience (Badecka, 2023, p. 99). Pallavi was emotionally reliant on Govind in the initial phase, as illustrated by the different instances in the film in which he was able to manipulate her. The traumatic memory of bed-wetting at the age of fourteen had dented her self-confidence. It made her unable to make important decisions initially. The experience of facing a significant life-threatening difficulty and coming out of it equips Pallavi to face other potential dangers and challenges in the offing. She comes out of those traumatic memories and realises her strengths and limitations. She refuses to compromise to make others happy. When Vishal informed her that her position at the airline might be terminated if she refused to issue an apology letter, she stood her ground because she was confident that she had the skill set to find better avenues. She holds that her choices matter and cherishes the newfound sense of agency and confidence. This newfound strength equipped her to take control of the aircraft when the pilot was incapacitated mid-air. Her flying the flight is a powerful and evocative metaphor for her ability to conquer new heights. Since she has reoriented her perspectives after reevaluating her priorities, she emerges as a stronger woman at the end of the film. This renewed strength enables her to fly high, explore uncharted territories, and claim new heights, as illustrated by her successful flying and landing of an aircraft despite the challenging circumstances.

Conclusion

This paper offers a detailed account of Pallavi's life trajectory from a diachronic perspective. The study shows that in her pre-trauma phase, she was ambitious but emotionally vulnerable, and in her traumatised

condition, she was weak and helpless. However, in her post-traumatic phase, she became confident and empowered.

The film deconstructs popular assumptions about trauma survivors by foregrounding their resilience and strength rather than their weakness and stasis. The exploration of such themes through a highly popular medium such as cinema can influence and change society's attitude toward trauma survivors. It is also to be noted that this film neither sensationalises nor romanticises the story of loss, grief and eventual survival; instead, it offers a nuanced portrayal of the complex human experiences related to grief, trauma and survival. The role of societal factors, such as the presence of support systems in expediting healing and recovery, is also explored in this film.

The paper emphasises that the film deconstructs the patterns of trauma in conventional victimhood narratives rooted in weakness and melancholy by foregrounding the possibility of recovery and growth after having experienced severely distressing and traumatising experiences. Thus, this film enriches the emerging discourses on trauma, resilience and post-traumatic growth. Films like *Uyare* have immense societal implications because the perspectives that they offer can facilitate a change in society's attitude towards trauma victims and survivors.

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