



## The Burden of Climate Precarity: Exploring Climate Change as a Gendered Experience in *Ullozhukk*

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### Abstract

This article explores the experience of solastalgia, climate-induced distress and displacement, through Christo Tomy's *Ullozhukk*, a Malayalam film set in Kuttanad, Kerala, a region that has endured recurring floods for decades. Despite the devastating 2018 floods that exposed Kerala's vulnerability to climate change, little attention has been given to the long-term psychological toll of such disasters. *Ullozhukk* stands apart as a film that weaves the emotional burden of floods into its narrative, not merely as an external catastrophe but as an intimate, ever-present force that shapes the lives of its characters.

The film's central figures, Leelamma and Anju, embody the weight of structural oppression as women trapped within both patriarchal constraints and an unforgiving landscape. The home, meant to be a site of safety, becomes a space of stagnation, flooded not only by rising waters but by silence, secrets, and unfulfilled agency. Anju, who has endured marital violence, finds herself suffocated by both the floodwaters and the rigid structures that deny her autonomy. Meanwhile, Leelamma, bound by tradition, clings to the illusion of stability even as her world is washed away. Their predicament reflects the condition of solastalgia, a term introduced by Glenn Albrecht to describe the pain of witnessing one's home environment become uninhabitable.

The film's use of temporality, sound, and visual grammar reinforces this theme. The near-constant presence of rain and water serves as an auditory

reminder of impending loss, while the slow, measured pace of interactions mirrors the paralysis of those trapped within an eroding landscape. Time appears to stand still, delaying grief and resolution, much like the cyclical nature of floods that continue to displace lives without meaningful intervention.

By analyzing *Ullozhukk* within the broader framework of climate trauma, gendered displacement, and structural neglect, this article underscores how environmental devastation is not just a physical event but a lived psychological reality. The film does not frame floods as extraordinary disasters but as an entrenched condition, one that its inhabitants endure in silence, shaping their fears, choices, and, ultimately, their sense of belonging. In doing so, *Ullozhukk* offers a deeply affecting exploration of solastalgia, demanding a more urgent reckoning with the human cost of ecological crisis.

Keywords: climate trauma, Kerala flood, Malayalam cinema, women and environment.

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## Introduction

Kerala, is one among the smallest states in India, which is known for its diverse topography comprising forest area, hilly region, coastal region and plains. The delicate environmental features of the state make it vulnerable to natural calamities like flood, landslides, droughts, tsunami and cyclones. (Ali and George<sup>111</sup>) There are ample studies conducted on the environmental disasters pertaining to these landscapes to draw attention from the public as well as from the government. Floods have always been a reality of Alleppey district in Kerala, especially in Kuttanad region of the district. Legendary Malayalam writer Thakazhi Shivanshankara Pillai had addressed the intensity of floods in Kuttanad in his short story *Vellapokkathil* which was published in the year 1935. The short story accounts for the fact that floods in Kuttanad have been a recurring phenomenon for decades and how the inhabitants of the place dealt the monsoon with fear and anguish. Despite the fact that floods in Kuttanad during the monsoon season continued to be a tragic reality, there were barely any records of it, particularly in artistic form, until the devastating flood of 2018.

The state has been experiencing severe climate catastrophes during monsoons consecutively for the past eight years. The flood of 2018 in Kerala was an unprecedented disaster which shockingly revealed a diverse range of climate crises and their consequences to the people. (Hunt and Menon). Though the people and the government failed to gauge the magnitude of the calamity beforehand, the disaster management strategies were coordinated efficiently by the state government, fishing community and organizations like *Kudumbasree*. (Ali and George). Data reveals that Kerala continues to experience big floods as well as flash floods during monsoons.

In Malayalam cinema, there is a dearth of works that disseminate the solastalgia that residents endure as a result of floods. Jude Anthony's *2018* is a realist take on the incidents that take place during the floods of 2018. It renders how people from different walks of life experienced the flood and its pernicious effects on their life and property. Apart from the aforementioned *2018*, it is Christo Tomy's *Ullozhukk*, a gripping family drama that succeeded in faithfully narrating the anxieties and distress induced by flood as a searingly present subplot. The film is a potential site to

explore the impact of environmental deterioration on women. The precarious disposition of the story is both internal as well as external, depicting a plethora of turmoil within and outside of their immediate physical situation. The story is set against the background of Kuttanad, a delicate territory in the Alleppey district which has been experiencing flash floods and major floods throughout monsoons as the land is low and deep from the sea level.

### Climate change and vulnerable gender

Environmental degradation and climate change has already occupied the centre stage of academic research across the globe, it discursively swifts through many intersectionality to provide a nuanced understanding of the precarious situation the world is confronting.

Gender studies in general and feminist discourses in particular have identified climate change as an oppressive phenomenon which further urges to examine vulnerability as a significant theme in deciphering the circumstance of marginalized genders, especially women. The impact of climate change in the global south has been extensively researched, with a focus on how women and other vulnerable groups experience unparalleled trauma as a result of abuse, institutional violence, and gender-based violence amid such transitions. (Desai and Mandal 139)

Resultantly, there is an urge to juxtapose climate change with gender studies to analyse how structural injustice encountered by women gets exacerbated during the precarious times of environmental degradation. (Dankleman; Denton; Terry).

The deterioration of their immediate habitat due to climate change destabilizes the inner peace of the individuals causing irreconcilable troubles in their existence. Therefore, climate change causes physical as

well as psychological damage to the inhabitants in an affected landscape rendering a complex living condition. The development of environmental humanities led to the exploration of concepts like solastalgia, eco anxiety, ecological grief and others to fathom the ways with which human beings experience and respond to climate change.

### The space: Losing home and hope in *Ullozhukk*

Tomy's *Ullozhukk* exemplifies the sensibility of contemporary Malayalam film, which accurately captured the flood and rain in Kuttanad, and the solastalgia that the people endure.

*Ullozhukk* has multifarious layers where it predominantly centers around the life of Leelamma and her daughter in law Anju, with immense undercurrents in their relationship. *Ullozhukk* literally translates as 'undercurrent', metaphorically signifying the fluidity of life which floats to unbridled realities every now and then. Leelamma and Anju are women of two generations who experience similar anxieties and distress due to their denied agencies. Research conducted on mothers as caregivers in south Asia highlights the transformation of intimate spaces as gendered spaces, Leelamma and Anju are very much part of such a patriarchal system which they name as 'home'. (Yeoh et al. 1714). Anju and Leelamma are entrapped in a space which has been offering them soul stirring experiences which are non-negotiable because of their caregiver position in the structure of capitalist patriarchy. (Devasahayam and Brooks). These experiences spiral down to absolute tyranny when the natural landscape around them floods and these women, who already have restricted mobility, find it challenging to move around their own "home." (Stone et. al. 228). While theorizing Solastalgia Glenn Albrecht notes that "solastalgia is a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at 'home'." (45). Therefore, they invariably experience the entangled

atmosphere around them due to both internal and external factors urging for a study that highlight the poignant life of these two women,

The mysterious temperament of Anju and Leelamma circles around the lies and secrets they have buried within themselves which haunts their consciousness at every fraction of seconds. In order for Anju to accept Thomaskutty's marriage proposal, Leelamma conceals her son's deadly sickness from both Anju and her family. Anju has concealed the fact that she is expecting her boyfriend's child, not Thomaskutty's, from Leelamma. It is at the crucial emotional juncture when Thomaskutty dies and their home floods, Anju and Leelamma get to uncover their secrets but only to trap themselves more into the desolate space of 'home'. The anxiety induced by the flood is overpowered by the inner turmoil of the central characters Anju and Leelamma, however the narration signals robust undercurrents of solastalgia as rural women suffer more during climate change. (Dominelli 8). Thomaskutty's dead body becomes a matter of major dilemma during the flood, as the family finds it difficult to bury the dead body in their family church. The film encapsulates the significance of climate change as a gendered experience by foregrounding Leelamma's obligation towards customs and traditions irrespective of her marginalized life as a widow trapped in a flooded home. There are studies that show that women in Asia have cultural constraints that prevent them from generating pragmatic responses during climate change leaving them defenseless hence the most impacted. (Arora Jonsson 745)

The island undergoes an unwanted transformation during the flood, which makes the life of the islanders in distress. They are aware that one rainy day can result in flooding for days and their homes are hardly equipped to withstand the unprecedented floods. Leelamma casually expresses her worry in raising a child in a flooded space and the need to have a room that can possibly prevent the entry of water into it.

There are few scenes in the movie which are conveyed through the minor characters focusing on how ostracized the islanders are during the flood. This alienation is further emphasized in the scenes that depict Anju's ability to use a ferry. Leelamma's daughter Sheba is reluctant to stay back home for a few days considering the irritability caused by floods. Therefore, she relentlessly persuades leelamma to leave the place forever but leelamma who is trapped in the patriarchal home is unaware of how to use her agency. Anju on the other hand keeps chanting her desire to leave home, not because of the flood but because of the loveless construct she is struck with. The home is equated as an island devoid of affection. In an uninhabitable environment of heavy downpour and flash floods Leelamma has tricked herself to believe that her home is a secure and happy space but Anju's perspective is lucid and she responds truthfully towards her inner turmoil.

Ever since her marriage she has been in conflict with a sense of belonging. Tomy focuses on the calm backwaters during the marriage scene to narrate the calmness that Anju forcibly projects towards the outside world. Thomaskutty's death and her realization that she has been cheated by the patriarchal structure, forces her to admit the distress that she has been fostering within. She chants, "I will leave soon" throughout the film as a form of protest towards the systemic oppression that she confronts. This dialogue represents the quintessential nature of solastalgia; the sense of irritability marking the juxtaposition of both the physical and psychological trauma experienced by her. It signifies how deftly the film mutually enhances the traumatic episode of living within a loveless home in an uninhabitable landscape. He underscores that the flooded environment in which she is entrapped is making it excruciating for her to liberate from the trauma of 'home' and 'honour'. Her existence as a pregnant woman out of wedlock in a flooded environment is choreographed with doubly restricted

movement. She walks very slowly and carefully through the water for solitude, to contact her secret boyfriend, to stay away from the eyes of Leelamma, to disconnect from her own parents and other family members.

A loveless flooded home stands as the embodiment of solastalgia in the narration oozing episodes of intense drama through slow paced dialogues and soul stirring performances. There is an inherent metaphorical engagement in the film, specifically when Anju is thrown into the pit of dilemma. In a scene where Leelamma pursues her to stay, they are placed amidst a flooded plane and the shot distinctively echoes the helplessness of the character both within and outside. (43.06).

The strong visual narrative depicts the physical and psychological impediments confronted by Anju as a pregnant woman in a flooded home, who is consistently raging against the dying life around her. Her slow and calculated movements through flooded water appears simultaneously scary and daring. These scenes associate a certain kind of victimhood, of solastalgia as well as structural gendered oppression, where it's hard to fixate a person, place or situation as a perpetrator. While decolonizing trauma studies Michel Rothberg underlined about the significance of rebuilding the traditional rubrics of trauma studies to incorporate the trauma experienced by people through structural violence, systemic oppression, climate catastrophe and other insidious injustices. (Rothberg)

#### **Gender based violence and climate change**

Studies on gender-based violence during climate change inform the magnitude of the oppression faced by socially, economically, politically and geographically vulnerable groups in the new world of climate precarity. (Skoufias 2012; Islam and Winkel 2017). Caridade et. al observes that according to the World Health Organization (2015) "women are a group of greater vulnerability, experiencing an increase in the rate of sexual and domestic

violence with serious and harmful consequences to their reproductive and sexual health during any type of disaster, either natural or not." (169). *Ullozhuk* has explicitly and implicitly portrayed the impact of gender-based violence suffered by Anju. As a victim of marital rape and emotional abuse her traumatic memory resurfaces occasionally. The re-experiencing of intimate partner violence through flashbacks and nightmares is a symptom of post-traumatic stress (PTSD), many research highlights the link between marital rape and PTSD in victims. (Culbertson and Dehle; Riggs et.al). The film has depicted Anju's sexual dissatisfaction and the abuse she underwent from her husband before the flood. When the home gets flooded, even in the absence of her perpetrator she appears to be living through a psychologically challenging environment. The emotional dysregulation of Anju is manifested in the nightmare scene, where pregnant Anju dreams about her child getting killed by Thomaskutty amidst heavy rainfall and flood. The horrific image of a bleeding pregnant woman getting abused in a flooded home impart a glimpse into the dreadfulness of gender-based violence during climate change. Though the scene is metaphorical in nature, it outcries the significance of one's immediate habitat in healing journey.

#### **Stillness and Silence in *Ullozhukk***

One of the distinct features of the film is the frozen time; the uncertainty caused by flood impart a temporal rupture in the narration. Anju and Leelamma perceive the shakiness of the situation in two different manners but essentially the 'time' stays stagnant impeding their attempts to navigate through their trauma. As Anju decides to leave home and begin a new life with her boyfriend, Leelamma postpone Thomaskutty's funeral, taking the flood as an excuse. Thus, the time Anju spent anticipating her emancipation from the home becomes the time of flood. Feminist studies observe that the flood in South Asia has dismantled communication, mobility and the desire for a

stress-free future especially in women (Sultana 376). Anju yearns for a 'future' which liberates her from anxieties but her 'present' is irreversibly damaged. Anju, who grapples between the burden of present and anticipation of future renders the universality of temporal interplay ingrained in the experience of solastalgia. The permanence of an idle time and stagnation of life events makes the lived experience unbearable and excruciating. It amplifies people's anxiousness and stress, rendering them defenseless both within and externally. One of the defining features of solastalgia and the structural difference between solastalgia and nostalgia is rooted in the perception of time. Tomy employs redundancy as a tool in crafting the frames to depict the stillness of the time. The only attempt consciously employed in the narration to prevent the forthcoming monotony is in staging the characters within home. None of the scenes appear similar but the stillness of the space is effectively screamed through dialogues of similar tonality, restrained voicing in dialogue delivery and the sound of rainfall, flood and weeping. Tomy has intertwined the space and emotions within the frozen time to pitch in the unmoved temporality of a flooded environment. Contrary to the scope of the medium (film) which excelled in encapsulating the 'movement' in its very style, Tomy, explores the puzzling temporal dimension which remains still, by freezing frames to enhance the quality of captivity the characters are in. As Garrett Stewart (1999) opines "that paradoxical case of real motion without real movements that merely takes the condition of cinema to its limit" is exemplified in Tomy's picturization of *Ullozhukk* (p.50) Thereby imparting a new perspective to the narrative, characters as well the spectators.

The vitality of water and its presence is running subcutaneously as a significant voice apart from the silence and murmurs of Anju and Leelamma. (48.03) The sound of torrential downpour and movement of waves in flood are

almost always present in the backdrop of any conversation in the film. The background music of the film invokes a sense of irritability to escalate the emotions of the characters who are stuck in a place which they are forced to identify as home. In the political discourse, especially of nondominant groups, silence is viewed as a state of victimhood as well as protest. (Hatzisavvidou 512) In the patriarchal premise of *Ullozhukk*, the silence meanders around the idea of passivity and protest. Leelamma talks a lot but her topics quintessentially falls into the category of family, husband, children, marriage and others which try to obliterate the retaliating silence of Anju.

### Conclusion

The film integrates a broad range of shots to draw attention to the large body of water surrounding Kuttanad, thereby thrusting on its plausibility as a flood prone region. Tomy segues into the distress caused by flood from the dysfunctionality of the family through visual grammar rather than through dialogues. He pronounces that the flood augments the crisis these women confront on a daily basis but flood is not what their major concern is. It signifies that most of the inhabitants thriving in Kuttanad have been experiencing flooding for decades and the inconvenience it causes have become a part of their routine. Tomy places pregnant Anju and physically weak leelamma in the flooded home with a dead body to subtly express how the environment around them affects their emotional and physical spaces. In the cinematic language Tomy intertwines their physical experience of flood with their emotional experience of guilt and shame, as Leelamma weeps like rainfall, Anju floods in the conundrum of situations.

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