



Daughter of a Dying World: Struggle Against Environmental and Cultural Erasure

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Abstract: *A film frequently depicts a brutal war environment more accurately than any other genre. This paper analyses Gamora's traumatic experience of genocide in the sci-fi Marvel Cinematic Universe through the theoretical frameworks of ecocriticism and trauma studies, concentrating on how systemic violence and forced cultural assimilation shape individual identity, focusing on the respective films: Avengers: Infinity War (2018) and Avengers: End Game (2019). Gamora is abducted as a child by Thanos and is raised in an environment that normalises genocide as a method of balance, conditioning her into an instrument of destruction. However, her eventual rebellion against Thanos reflects the struggle of survivors of cultural erasure and authoritarian control, making her a compelling figure for examining the long-term effects of environmental violence.*

This paper also engages with eco-trauma theory, arguing that Gamora's existence is influenced by ecological destruction that mirrors historical patterns of genocide and environmental exploitation. In this context, eco-trauma theory explores the psychological and cultural effects of environmental destruction, displacement, and ecological violence on individuals and communities. It connects environmental crises, such as the destruction of alien communities and even planets, climate change, and war-driven devastation as showcased in the MCU, to trauma studies, emphasising how both the physical environment and human psychology are intertwined. Her attempts to reclaim agency by joining the Guardians of the Galaxy and opposing Thanos illustrate the resistance of the oppressed against the hegemonic systems. Ultimately, this study positions Gamora as a symbol of survivor identity, questioning whether one can entirely escape the ideological and environmental forces that shaped them.

Keywords: *Environmental Genocide, Psychological Trauma, Ecocriticism, Cultural Studies, Film Studies.*

1. Introduction

Cinema has long served as a powerful medium for exploring the psychological, social, and cultural consequences of war and genocide. While historical films often depict real-world conflicts with stark realism, the science fiction (sci-fi) genre offers a unique lens through which these themes can be examined in metaphorical and speculative ways. Sci-fi films create fictionalised war environments, alien genocides, and dystopian futures to critique contemporary political, environmental, and ethical concerns. This genre enables audiences to grapple with complex themes, such as mass destruction, authoritarianism, and systemic oppression—while maintaining narrative distance through futuristic or fantastical settings.

The portrayal of genocide in sci-fi films often serves as a reflection of historical atrocities, with fictional alien races and intergalactic conflicts mirroring real-world colonial violence, ethnic cleansing, and forced assimilation. In *Countering the Erasure of Cultural Identity in War and Peace*, Kravchuk gives two definitions of cultural erasure by genocide; "Cultural cleansing is increasingly used as a weapon of war... to deny the existence of a different cultural identity and erase its historical roots, values, heritage, literature, traditions, and language" (Kravchuk 1) and "The intentional destruction of cultural heritage during armed conflict could amount to cultural cleansing or erasure and other violations of cultural rights (Kravchuk 3). Herein, we search for two types of destruction, one of people and the other of heritage under the lens of trauma, genocide and environment. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is particularly notable for its engagement with these themes, incorporating large-scale destruction, environmental devastation, and ideological



warfare into its narratives. Among the many characters affected by these catastrophic events, Gamora emerges as a compelling figure for examining the trauma of genocide forced assimilation, and resistance to hegemonic control.

The MCU is one of the most globally recognised cinematic universes, weaving together interconnected narratives that span multiple films and characters. While superhero films are often associated with themes of heroism and justice, the MCU's incorporation of war-torn worlds, oppressive regimes, and mass extinction events allows for a deeper engagement with trauma and survival. Thanos, one of the most significant antagonists in the franchise, personifies the philosophical and physical aspects of genocide, presenting mass destruction as a form of balance and sustainability. His systematic elimination of half the universe's population in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and the lasting consequences of his actions in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) provide a rich context for examining war, trauma, and environmental devastation.

In this vast cinematic landscape, Gamora stands out as a genocide survivor and an individual struggling with the psychological effects of her forced assimilation into Thanos' ideology. Unlike many characters in the MCU, whose arcs focus on heroism or vengeance, Gamora's journey is defined by survival, resistance, and the search for self-identity. This makes her narrative a vital case study for analysing the long-term psychological and cultural consequences of environmental trauma and systemic violence.

Gamora's Backstory and Psychological Conditioning

Gamora's backstory is one of extreme violence and cultural displacement. As a child, she witnesses the annihilation of her home planet, Zen-Whoberi, at the hands of Thanos, who systematically wipes out half the population in the name of universal balance. Instead of being killed, Gamora is abducted, trained, and conditioned to become one of Thanos' most feared warriors. This process of forced assimilation, wherein an individual is stripped of their cultural roots and moulded into a weapon for an oppressive regime, mirrors real-world historical patterns of colonial violence, Indigenous erasure, and ideological indoctrination. Through the lens of eco-trauma theory, Gamora's existence is shaped by her suffering and the destruction of entire ecosystems and civilisations. The genocide of her people is not merely an act of war—it is an environmental catastrophe that erases her homeland, culture, and sense of belonging. Her eventual rebellion against Thanos represents the struggle of survivors of systemic violence to reclaim their autonomy and resist the ideological forces that shaped them. This paper addresses these themes with aims to contribute to the growing field of ecocriticism, trauma studies, and cinematic analysis by demonstrating how sci-fi narratives can serve as metaphors for historical and contemporary global crises.

Eco-Trauma and Environmental Destruction

This study engages with three key theoretical frameworks of Eco-Trauma Theory, drawing from Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, trauma Studies incorporating Cathy Caruth's work on trauma and memory, exploring how survivors of genocide and forced assimilation cope with the psychological scars of their past and ecocriticism connecting Gamora's backstory to broader environmental concerns, considering how the MCU presents planetary destruction as a form of ecological violence that parallels real-world climate disasters and war-induced displacement. By applying these frameworks, this study seeks to position Gamora's narrative within a larger discourse on the environmental and psychological costs of systemic violence.

The Psychological Effects of Forced Assimilation

Nixon's argument underscores that the victims of slow violence—often the poor, Indigenous communities, and those living in ecologically vulnerable regions—lack the visibility and political power needed to challenge these injustices effectively. Therefore, the writer-activist's task is not just to document these struggles but to amplify them, forcing a reconfiguration of how we perceive violence, environmental harm, and justice (Nixon 54). This is visible in the striking visual and atmospheric depiction of Zen-Whoberi's destruction. The once-thriving planet is reduced to a dust-filled war zone, where remnants of its civilisation lie in ruins. The air is thick with grey smoke, a result of burning structures and relentless gunfire, while charred debris scatters across the land. The smoke darkens the sky and the looming silhouettes of Thanos' warships, whose searchlights sweep across the crumbling cityscape, illuminating piles of bodies and burning remnants of homes (Russo 42:05 – 42:45).



While Gamora's association with Thanos is evident in *Guardians of the Galaxy*, her true origins and past trauma remain hidden until *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018). The directors, Anthony and Joe Russo place this pivotal flashback sequence at a critical moment, right after Captain America responds to Vision's question with the word "Home" (41:21). This transition shifts the audience from the present timeline to the tragic past of Zen-Whoberi, Gamora's home planet, immersing them in the harrowing scene of genocide. Amid this war-torn dystopia, a young Gamora hides with her mother in a shack, a makeshift shelter composed of twisted metal, shattered glass, and remnants of personal belongings discarded in haste. Her mother, desperate to keep her safe, presses a trembling hand over Gamora's mouth, muffling her daughter's cries as soldiers storm the area. The moment is suffocating, the sheer silence within the shack contrasting with the chaos and destruction outside. However, their fragile sense of concealment is shattered in an instant—a soldier discovers them, dragging Gamora's mother out into the open and forcing her to kneel among others who await execution. The kneeling figures, lined up like cattle awaiting slaughter, tremble as Thanos' elite soldiers raise their weapons (Russo 42:59).

Meanwhile, Thanos himself surveys the massacre with detached calculation, his eyes scanning the terrified survivors as if evaluating their worth. It is here that he notices young Gamora standing alone amidst the rubble, her green skin and fierce gaze marking her as distinct. The towering Titan approaches, leading her away from the bloodbath onto a fractured pedestrian walkway, where he produces a two-sided knife—a weapon that can balance perfectly on one finger. Thanos hands it to her, instructing her to concentrate on maintaining its balance. This act, seemingly an innocent lesson, is, in fact, a sinister metaphor for his philosophy: balance, for Thanos, is achieved through mass extermination (Russo 43:00-44:50).

As Gamora fixates on the knife, trying to steady it, the execution begins behind her. The sounds of gunfire explode through the silence, and the camera captures her tiny hands trembling as she instinctively tries to turn her head toward the horrifying scene. But Thanos halts her movement, placing his massive hand on her face. His words, chilling and unwavering, instruct her to remain focused—to never allow distractions, even in the face of death. The moment solidifies Gamora's psychological conditioning, instilling in her a form of forced detachment that she will struggle with for the rest of her life (Russo 43:00-44:50). Nixon defines slow violence as "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all." (Nixon 14). Unlike immediate acts of violence, which demand urgent attention, slow violence operates invisibly, unfolding over years, even generations, making it difficult to recognise, represent, or resist. The same goes for Gamora, as for years, she served Thanos without even a thought of taking revenge, while Thanos made her a living, never-failing human weapon. As Nixon says, "It is the creeping toxicity of industrial waste, the long-term effects of climate change, and the displacement of communities due to environmental degradation—phenomena that devastate lives but often fail to provoke the same urgency as spectacular, visible violence" (Nixon 60). The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) first introduced Gamora to audiences in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014). She was presented as the adopted daughter of Thanos, alongside her sister Nebula, through an introduction by Ronan—an ally of Thanos. Initially, Gamora appears as a ruthless warrior on a mission to retrieve the Orb for Thanos, a task that sets her on a collision course with Star-Lord (Gunn 14:00-17:00). However, her first significant character interaction takes place on Xandar, where she is caught in a fight, causing public destruction. The Nova Corps apprehend her, and the audience learns through the dialogue of Xandar's security forces that Gamora is regarded as a living weapon, crafted and conditioned by Thanos to be a never-failing soldier (Gunn 21:00-22:00).

The important fact to observe here is that Gamora has every bit of the pathetic genocide of Zen-Whoberi in her mind all these years, yet she kept serving Thanos instead of seeking an opportunity to avenge, showcases the effect of trauma, which, according to Caruth, is not recognisable initially. "In Caruth's opinion, the melancholy of traumatic events is averted by the notion that they happen "too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known." After a while, the events go on, revealing disasters like changes in attitude and modifications in the ecosystem. So Caruth asserted that the motive of trauma does not incorporate the deleterious events, but it incorporates the confusion of "unassimilated nature" from which everyone was unaware initially" (Caruth 142). So, it is with Gamora being too confused about her psychological pain.

Rob Nixon finds much of the challenge lies in the representation of "stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects" (Scott). Nixon focuses on those who shape these narratives: the writer-activists. Literature, he argues, becomes a crucial medium in exposing the structural and systemic violence inflicted on vulnerable populations, particularly those in postcolonial societies. He highlights authors who have championed the



environmental struggles of marginalised communities, particularly in the Global South, including Arundhati Roy, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Abdulrahman Munif, and Jamaica Kincaid. Much like Nixon, these figures resist the liberal tendency to position violence as something external to the law. Rather than portraying law as a force that restrains violence, they expose its deep complicity in perpetuating structural and environmental injustices. (Nixon 14). For instance, Ken Saro-Wiwa's activism against oil exploitation in the Niger Delta reveals how multinational corporations and governments collaborate in ecological destruction while suppressing resistance through legal and extralegal means. Similarly, Arundhati Roy's critiques of large-scale dam projects in India illustrate how state policies displace indigenous and rural populations in the name of progress, leaving environmental devastation in their wake (Scott). Herein, Thanos, author of Zen-Whoberi's Genocide, does not fail to amplify and shape the narrative for Gamora as he explains the necessity of genocide to balance the universe. Thanos clearly enjoys Gamora's psychological trauma and conflict until she joins the Guardian of the Galaxy team to avenge the genocide of her planet.

The next scene shifts back to the present, aboard the Guardians' spaceship, where Gamora holds the same two-sided knife—but this time, her grip is not one of curiosity but one of resolve and readiness (Russo 44:45). "The most pinching and secret portion of traumatic incidents is that they continue to be reversed in a cycle and continuously afflicting the sufferer for permanent torture." (Tahir 247). The way she now handles the knife reflects her internal conflict; it is no longer a lesson in balance, but a weapon she is prepared to use in self-defence (Russo 44:45). The juxtaposition between her childhood memory and her present reality intensifies her struggle with her past and the looming threat of Thanos' return. "Caruth defined trauma as a torment that discusses and tries to express harsh and secret reality which could not be approached in other cases... Caruth analysed how the familiar and unfamiliar realities about traumatic incidents amalgamate the psychoanalytic theory of trauma and migration." (Caruth 16).

In *Infinity War* (2018), Gamora's trauma manifests in a moment of desperate urgency. She pleads with Quill (Star-Lord), expressing that if Thanos ever captures her, he must kill her, for she carries critical information that he cannot obtain (Russo 45:20-46:07). This secret is later revealed to be the location of the Soul Stone, a powerful artefact that demands the sacrifice of one's greatest love in order to be claimed. The tragic irony is that Thanos, despite his calculated and ruthless nature, does love Gamora in his warped way. When they arrive at Vormir, the realisation dawns on her: she is the sacrifice.

In the paper "Trauma of Migration and Environment," Alina Tahir describes nature aptly, saying, "Nature is portrayed in the form of destruction. Nature is one of the important compartments of human life that can never be denied. Nature performs the task of protecting humans by creating different protective layers around this planet, e.g., the ozone layer. These layers guard humans from all kinds of disasters, harm and damage. The existence of humans and other living things is at risk without nature." (Tahir 246). The environment of Zen-Whoberi during this genocide is crucial to understanding Gamora's trauma. Every element—the grey, lifeless terrain, the systematic arrangement of victims in execution lines, the unrelenting sweep of warships, and the cold efficiency of Thanos' soldiers—mirrors historical patterns of totalitarian destruction and ethnic cleansing. The very act of arranging survivors into an orderly queue before execution speaks to Thanos' methodical, mechanised approach to genocide, making sure no resistance remains (Russo 42:05-44:06). The act clearly created trauma in the psychology of baby Gamora as she seeks her mother and instead finds Thanos. The portrayed environment in these few seconds of the film registers the green-grey light shade in the audience's psyche and speaks about the end of greenery or nature and the beginning of Thanos' grey rule for the pursuit of balance. "The problem of trauma is not simply a problem of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival." (Tahir 246). A survival instinct occurred from the trauma that confused Gamora for years in the path of revenge until she met her fellow Avengers. The blue laser fire of alien weaponry flashes chaotically, lighting up the night like an unholy spectacle of mass death. The loss of nature, the annihilation of a homeland, and the destruction of an entire civilisation are deeply embedded in Gamora's psyche, linking her trauma to both personal and environmental devastation (Russo 42:05-44:06). "Trauma cannot be indicated in the most abusive event in survivor's bygone recollection. But, it finds in the passage that it's actually blended in the environment, the manner it was particularly not acknowledged in the initial phase—returns to peruse the sufferer of trauma afterwards" (Tahir 247). In the case of Gamora, she finds clearly her notion of trauma in Vormir when Thanos reveals his greatest plan to sacrifice her to get the soul stone. The identical environment of Vormir and almost destroyed Zen-Whoberi with all dead and a ghost from the past surviving to remind the present visitors of the process of another destruction gives Gamora her trauma memory back.



Cultural Erasure as a Tool of Genocide

Gamora's violent abduction, forced conditioning, and years of psychological manipulation culminate in a deeply twisted parental bond with Thanos. Despite her defiance, she remains entangled in a relationship that is simultaneously abusive and tinged with a twisted form of affection. This tragic dynamic reaches its most devastating point in Vormir, where Thanos, in pursuit of the Soul Stone, must sacrifice something he truly loves. As he gazes upon Gamora, his philosophy of balance becomes grotesquely literal—power, in his mind, demands an equivalent loss. Without hesitation, he throws her off the cliff, not out of malice, but from the conviction that her death is essential for universal equilibrium (Russo 01:25:06-01:30:20). This act underscores the paradox of Thanos' ideology: love and genocide become inextricably linked, as he justifies an unspeakable atrocity in the name of a supposed higher purpose.

Thanos' actions reflect a historical pattern among tyrannical figures who claim to act in the service of the greater good while committing unimaginable violence. He weaponises love, turning it into a justification for destruction, an element not commonly seen in literature or film. In contrast, works like *No Greater Love: How My Family Survived the Genocide in Rwanda* by Tharcisse Seminega illustrate how love functions as a force of survival rather than destruction. Seminega's memoir presents a strikingly different perspective—rather than love being sacrificed for power, it serves as a shield against annihilation. The book explores familial and communal bonds, chronicling how his wife, children, and rescuers found strength in unity, even in the face of overwhelming horror (Mara E32-34). Yet, no comparable example exists in literature or cinema where love is deliberately sacrificed to fulfil a genocidal vision. Thanos' act on Vormir remains unique—a chilling inversion of love's typical role in narratives of survival. His philosophy strips love of its redemptive power, transforming it instead into a tool for destruction, making his brand of tyranny all the more insidious.

Cultural erasure is a deliberate and systematic act that extends beyond the destruction of tangible heritage; it is a method of obliterating identity, memory, and resistance. Defined as the removal of historical narratives, suppression of language, and forced assimilation, cultural erasure can amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, solidifying the genocidal intent of those who wield it as a tool of oppression (Kravchuk 20). It is not merely about the loss of monuments or traditions but also about the erasure of what makes a people distinct. As one proponent of the UN Genocide Convention stated, "It was possible to wipe out a human group, as such, by destroying its cultural heritage, while allowing the individual members of the group to survive" (Sautman 4).

The consequences of cultural erasure manifest in three critical dimensions: trauma, environmental destruction, and genocide. Trauma is deeply tied to the systematic obliteration of identity, as survivors of such erasure struggle to navigate a world where their history has been rewritten or erased entirely. Ethnocide, or the denial of an ethnic group's right to preserve and transmit its culture, represents one of the most extreme violations of human rights (Sautman 10). This process is seen in practices such as removing archives, confiscating historical texts, and militarising education (Kravchuk 14). When these erasures occur, they not only displace individuals physically but also fracture their psychological and cultural continuity, leading to long-lasting trauma and identity crises.

2. Conclusion

The environmental dimension of cultural erasure is evident in the destruction of indigenous lands, sacred sites, and entire ecosystems, all of which are integral to a community's identity. The MCU's portrayal of Zen-Whoberi's destruction in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) serves as a sci-fi allegory for real-world ecological genocide, where entire landscapes and populations are wiped out under the guise of balance and progress. As Rob Nixon argues, "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" is often the most insidious form of oppression (Nixon 2). Thanos' conquest of Gamora's homeworld mirrors the devastating real-world consequences of environmental destruction imposed upon marginalised communities. Yet, Gamora's arc in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) offers a counter-narrative to cultural erasure—resistance and self-reclamation. Her decision to break free from Thanos' control and actively fight against him embodies the struggle of survivors who refuse to be defined by their past oppression. As Susan Brison states, "Survivors do not simply recover a prior self but must construct a new identity out of the shattered remnants of their past" (Brison 40). Gamora is no longer a product of Thanos' ideology but an individual forging her own path, proving that cultural genocide does not have to be the end of identity—it can also be the beginning of resistance.

In essence, cultural erasure functions as a precursor to both psychological and environmental devastation, reinforcing systems of genocide that extend far beyond physical annihilation. By examining both historical and fictionalised narratives, we see that genocide is not only about killing people—it is about erasing their existence from history.



However, stories like Gamora's remind us that even in the face of cultural obliteration, survivors can resist, rebuild, and reclaim their place in the world.

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