
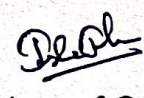





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I hereby declare that this project title "Dancing with Demons: Exploring Trauma in *Black Swan*" is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Dr. Jisha John, Assistant Professor, Department of English.



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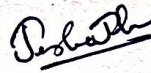
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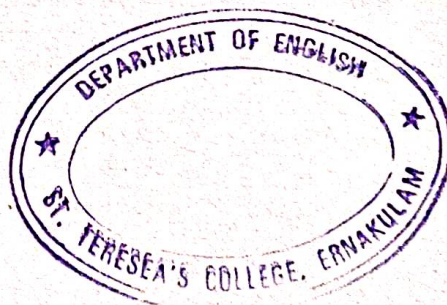
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I take this opportunity to thank God Almighty for showering his abundant blessings and grace upon me during the course of my project.

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

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

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DANCING WITH DEMONS: EXPLORING TRAUMA IN *BLACK SWAN*



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

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DANCING WITH DEMONS: EXPLORING TRAUMA IN BLACK SWAN

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The research paper analyses the concept of trauma, its representation in film and its effects on individuals and society through an analysis of the 2010 movie Black Swan. The movie is a psychological thriller set in New York City that tells the story of a professional ballerina struggling with the pressures of competitive dancing. The film is directed by Darren Aronofsky and includes themes and sequences from Tchaikovsky's ballet Swan Lake. Chapter one titled "Trauma Theory: An Introduction", outlines Trauma theory, its main concepts and its relation with literature. Chapter two titled "The Psychological Depths of Black Swan", looks at how the film could be analysed as an exploration of Freudian psychoanalytic theory and the themes of mental illness. Chapter three titled "Trauma and the Pursuit of Perfection in Black Swan", explores how past trauma can influence perfectionistic tendencies and interpersonal relationships. The conclusion sums the findings of the study.

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Introduction

Trauma is something that is omnipresent. It has taken almost everyone in its grip and all of us will experience trauma at some point in our lives. Trauma is very powerful and overwhelming. It's important to learn how to take care of trauma so that one is prepared for its challenges. Although people have been talking about trauma from various angles there has been no concentrated discussion on this particular topic. Trauma is the response to the deeply disturbing events that overwhelm a person's ability to cope. It also destroys a person's sense of the self and the person gradually disintegrates. An individual is gradually disconnected with themselves. One will be shocked to an extent where the only emotion that they will experience will be fear. Trauma is again an emotional response to a terrible event.

Black Swan (2010) is an American psychological horror film directed by Darren Aronofsky. In the movie Nina Sayers is filmed performing the ballet turn repeatedly after her teacher pointed out that she needed to work on it. She is seen spinning in her room, trying to complete the turn perfectly with desperation. Even after hours of rehearsal, Nina needs to perfect every single detail of this turn in order to truly embrace the character she has been given. She tries it multiple times before giving up and collapsing, clutching her painfully twisted ankle. It shows that pain and perfection goes hand in hand. Crying to herself, Nina holds her injured ankle thinking how she will attain the perfect body. This is an example in which the lead character in the movie *Black Swan* strives for perfection. Nina is a gifted but unstable ballerina who is on the verge of stardom. When her director and a seductive rival push her to the brink, Nina loses control of reality and falls into a nightmare. Nina is required to portray the helpless and delicate White Swan but also the dark, seductive Black Swan. Nina has to step into the role of the White Swan and reveal her darkest secrets of resentment, aggression and passion, emotions that would ultimately bring about her own downfall. The

movie shows how Nina becomes so emotionally invested in her role that she suffers from OCD-like mental disorders. Nina's transformation is so complete that, in the end, she takes on the features of a black swan, including webbed feet, bird-like legs and the development of feathers and wings.

Trauma studies are primarily concerned with three main topics: psychological trauma, its representation in language, and memory's function in forming personal and cultural identities. Although the term 'trauma' is sometimes criticised, it generally refers to an extremely upsetting event that has a significant impact on how one organises their emotions and perceives the outer world. When trauma studies initially emerged in the 1990s, they were based on Freudian theory, which anticipated an intense experience that defied words and even completely broke the definition of the word.

The aim of this project is to analyse the above mentioned movie on the basis of trauma theory, through concepts put forward by Sigmund Freud. Sigmund Freud was an Austrian psychologist and neurologist most recognised for having invented psychoanalysis. His contributions to psychology are indisputable despite the fact that many modern psychologists have disputed and challenged his views regarding the nature of the human mind and therapeutic approaches to treating mental illness. His theories have had a huge impact because they offer a completely new understanding of the nature of the human psyche. Researchers and students of psychology still read his numerous case studies which detail the conditions and course of therapy of his many patients. Even though altered and criticised by his contemporaries, psychoanalysis is still a prominent area of psychology. Freud's views on traumatic experience and memory define the psychological ideas that govern the area.

In the 1990s, there was a flood of scholarly work exploring the idea of trauma and its representation in literature and society, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman leading. With the first wave of critique, the idea of trauma as an unrepresentable occurrence that exposed the contradictions inherent in language and experience gained popularity. This research paper also uses Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (1996). which focuses on a specific interpretation of Freud's trauma theories in order to advance a more general post structural concern about the boundaries of language and history.

This project tries to analyse the film by reading it against the above mentioned theories. Chapter one titled "Trauma Theory: an Introduction", outlines Trauma theory, its main concepts, different fields and its relation with literature. Traumatic theory studies how traumatic events affect people and societies on a psychological and emotional level. It looks at how trauma affects identities, actions and perceptions as well as how people deal with and recover from traumatic events. It arrives at a conclusion that traumatic events have deep and enduring effect on people and communities, influencing their beliefs and actions. This chapter also looks at the contributions of Sigmund Freud through his works of psychoanalysis and understanding how trauma influences the human psyche.

Chapter two titled "The psychological Depths of *Black Swan*", briefly sketches the summary of the film *Black Swan* and attempts to analyse the film within the framework of the theories discussed in chapter one. It also looks into the psychological aspects of the movie. *Black Swan* is an American psychological horror film, released in 2010, directed by Darren Aronofsky, screenplay by Mark Heyman, John McLaughlin, and Andres Heinz, based on a story by Heinz. The film explores topics of aspiration, rivalry and the psychological toll that comes with aiming for excellence in the competitive world of ballet.

Chapter three titled “Trauma and the Pursuit of Perfection in *Black Swan*”, covers the representation of trauma, elements of Freudian psychology, the relation between history and trauma, all of which points to the disturbing, destructive nature of trauma and the long lasting effects it can have on an individual and societies. It also analyses how the protagonist’s obsession with being perfect eventually leads to her trauma, several mental disorders and even self destruction.

Chapter 1

Trauma Theory: An Introduction

The word 'trauma' comes from the Greek trauma (τραύμα) meaning trauma wound, alteration of trōma; akin to Greek titrōskein = to wound, tetrainein = to pierce. Although the Greeks used the term only for injury inflicted on the body, in medical and psychiatric literature, the term 'trauma' is acknowledged as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. Sigmund Freud is amazed at the strange ways in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have experienced it. According to Freud the primary reason for these repetitions is because it wasn't initiated by the individual rather is a result of others actions that the individual has no control on. Trauma theory talks about the wounds that are imposed in the mental framework of a person and how these wounds are definitive and important in crafting the psychological perspective of the person.

There is also collective trauma, where the focus is on a whole community of people whose attitude is marked by a certain trauma. Historical events like holocaust leave something like collective trauma. Almost all genocides that happened in history and are still happening leave collective traumas in the minds of people. It is possible to look at trauma from a more collective perspective. There's a whole idea of generational trauma or inter generational trauma. It is the person's individual experience that leads to trauma and also in a way that connects to a broader experience of trauma which is shared and suffered by a community. The community can be a marginalised community, a religious community or a sexual community.

Trauma theory can be used to understand literature in fact there is this whole canon of literature like trauma literature. One can identify texts from Afro-American origin, texts written by slaves, texts written by dalit women or dalit men or autobiographies of

underprivileged people. When one looks at trauma theory in its entirety, how does it work culturally, what are the major stakes that trauma theory has when it comes to understanding culture, what are the implications that trauma theory gives us. Trauma is spread across a few variables like memory, history and cultural identity. These are a few major variables on which trauma invests itself. One's trauma is about one's memory, one's trauma is also about one's history and one's trauma is also about one's cultural identity. There is a way in which trauma becomes a bigger term in which a person's identity is consumed by history. Their history and their memory collide at the sight of their trauma. At the point where history and memory clash, there is a cultural stake and the production of any art form fall under the scope of analysis by trauma theory.

There are different ways in which individuals and societies respond to trauma and there are different kinds of trauma like war, disasters, personal crisis which are responsible for bringing out a trauma. How an individual registers his/her reaction against those events will define what kind of trauma is provoked in the cultural self of that person. Trauma theorists are particularly interested in acts of 'testimony'. Testimony is the survivor's attempt to place themselves on record after a traumatic event. It offers a way for a traumatic event to be understood and resolved. Studies are not only looking at trauma from a medical perspective, something that has taken into account is also from a narrative perspective. Cathy Caruth in her book, *Unclaimed Experience* defines trauma as "the wound of the mind - the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world - is not, like the wound of the body, is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and the repetitive actions of the survivor". Caruth talks about trauma as an unclaimed experience, something one person doesn't wanna claim, something they don't wanna take ownership of, but it is still there as a part of their system. In other words, Caruth describes a mental wound

that causes traumatic amnesia that's usually followed by the traumatic experience. In case of traumatic amnesia, the victim cannot comprehend the experience at the time and is not able to speak about it. They often struggle to comprehend it in the moment and may find it difficult to articulate or speak about it afterward. This underlines the great impact and challenge of processing such events. Until it somehow returns into their consciousness through dreams or other repetitive activities that urge them to recall the traumatic event. The unresolved trauma reoccurs in the conscious mind of individuals compelling them to revisit the traumatic event. These involuntary events show the persistent and haunting nature of traumatic experiences.

Caruth's works rely on the studies of Sigmund Freud (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Moses and Monotheism*). The repetition of the catastrophic events is what Freud calls "traumatic neurosis". Freud draws parallels between literature and psychoanalysis and exploring trauma as more than just pathology. He turns to literature to explain trauma because like psychoanalysis, literature is also interested in the relation between the knowing and not knowing. It is not just a pathology or illness, it's always a story of a wound that cries out loud trying to inform us about the reality or truth. It's not just the incident that seems to haunt the victim but also the sudden and shocking occurrence of the incident. The element of surprise and the impact of the unexpected happenings contribute significantly to the haunting quality of the experience. Caruth uses the example of the train accident where the person walks away unharmed only to suffer symptoms of shock weeks later. The core of all the traumatic narratives often comes up with a question "Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?" This inquiry helps us to look into the complex dynamics of trauma and its consequences. Freud's theory is not only written about trauma, but also written in the midst of it.

In the last twenty years, as a result of increased war experiences and unfortunate events, physicians and psychiatrists have begun to reconstruct their views about physical and

mental experience, including the responses to a wide variety of other experiences, such as rape, child abuse, auto and industrial accidents, and so on, that are now often understood in terms of the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder. Caruth, in her book *Unclaimed Experience* says that the rethinking of the reference is not aimed at eliminating the history but relocating it in our understanding. The question of history is raised in one of the very first works on trauma, Sigmund Freud's history of the Jews entitled *Moses and Monotheism* (1939).

The concept of trauma, introduced by Freud and Pierre Janet, presents a complex challenge, involving not just pathology but also a profound mystery regarding the psyche's connection to reality. Trauma is generally defined as the reaction to unexpected, overwhelming violent events, often resurfacing through flashbacks, nightmares, and repetitive phenomena. Traumatic experiences, apart from the psychological suffering, introduce a paradox, that is a direct witnessing of violence and can paradoxically manifest as the absolute inability to understand it. The immediacy of the event may ironically manifest as a sense of delayed understanding. The repetitive nature of traumatic events, unavailable to consciousness but repeatedly intruding into one's awareness, hints at a broader connection to the event that goes beyond mere observation or understanding. It hints at a deeper, intricate relationship with the experience.

Cathy Caruth studies a dream told by Freud—the dream of a father who has lost his child and who dreams about this child in the night that follows the child's death. Lacan's observation about the core of Freud's dream in relation to traumatic repetition aligns with Freud's later concept in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Lacan suggests that the core of this is Freud's theory of recurring trauma, and especially the traumatic nightmares that, as Freud says, “wake the dreamer up in another fright.” Lacan's reinterpretation shifts the focus from a father sleeping in response to an external death to the father's traumatic awakening,

emphasising how the identity of the father, as a subject, becomes intertwined with the death he has survived. This perspective deepens the exploration of the dream, revealing the connection between personal identity and the experience of trauma.

In Chapter 7 of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), Freud introduces a dream that intriguingly connects his dream theory with external reality, particularly focusing on themes of death, catastrophe, and loss. The dream is as follows:

A father had been watching beside his child's sick-bed for days and nights on end.

After the child had died, he went into the next room to lie down, but left the door open so that he could see from his bedroom into the room in which his child's body was laid out, with tall candles standing round it. An old man had been engaged to keep watch over it, and sat beside the body murmuring prayers. After a few hours' sleep, the father had a dream that his child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him reproachfully: "Father, don't you see I'm burning?" He woke up, noticed a bright glare of light from the next room, hurried into it and found that the old watchman had dropped off to sleep and that the wrappings and one of the arms of his beloved child's dead body had been burned by a lighted candle that had fallen on them. (Freud, 162)

The explanation of this dream is simple enough. The open door allowed a glaring light to disturb the sleeping man, prompting him to conclude that a candle had fallen and caused fire near the body. Perhaps, even before falling asleep, he had concerns about the old man's ability to fulfil his duty. The child's uttered words comprised phrases from his past, tied to significant events in the father's mind, highlighting connection between the child's expressions and the father's memories. Freud notes that in this particular dream, the significant aspect is its direct connection to an external catastrophic reality, not inner

wishes. The dream's emotional impact arises from its straightforward connection to the father's seeing of his child's body burning during sleep.

Lacan's emphasis on awakening suggests a shift from Freud's fictional dream world to a focus on the reality of the external world. Lacan suggests that the father's awakening to death isn't a simple shift in knowledge or perception, but a more complex process in response to the dream. According to him it is a paradoxical attempt to respond, in awakening, to a call that can only be heard within sleep. Throughout his career, Sigmund Freud had a strong interest in anxiety studies. As his views about psychoanalysis developed, his way of thinking about the subject also changed. By the end of his life, anxiety had become central to his theory of how mind develops and operates.

First phase: the toxic theory- "Anxiety arises from a transformation of the accumulated tension." (Freud). At this early stage he didn't think anxiety had anything to do with thoughts or ideas, but he did observe that it was intimately related to sexuality, defining it as transformed sexual excitation.

At this time, Freud thought of this sexual excitation (or 'libido' as he called it) as a hypothetical substance that might compare to something like testosterone. Freud argued that when the path to satisfaction is blocked, the resulting build-up of unsatisfied libido takes on a toxic character, finding an outlet in anxiety. As he would later put it, "neurotic anxiety arises out of libido, and is thus related to it in the same kind of way as vinegar is to wine." (Freud).

Second phase: anxiety as a result of repression- "Anxiety arises out of libido by the process of repression." (Freud). As he developed his theory of repression, Freud's views on anxiety changed. Freud claimed that the process of becoming social beings requires us to give up some of our sexual impulses.

Final phase: anxiety as a signal- "The ego is the actual seat of anxiety" (Freud). Freud began to introduce a new and very different theory of anxiety. He made an important division

between a more primary automatic anxiety, triggered by a traumatic situation in which the helpless ego is overwhelmed, and signal anxiety, which can be activated in the ego response to situations of danger as a kind of warning that a traumatic situation is approaching, so that defensive measures can be put into place to avoid it. This final phase gives anxiety a much more central place in the workings of the psyche instead of being a kind of side-effect of repression.

In psychoanalytic theory, a defense mechanism is an unconscious psychological operation that functions to protect a person from anxiety-producing thoughts and feelings related to internal conflicts. Defense mechanisms are unconscious psychological processes employed to defend against feelings of anxiety and unacceptable impulses at the level of consciousness. These processes include: repression, the exclusion of unacceptable desires and ideas from consciousness, though in certain circumstances they may resurface in a disguised or distorted form; identification, the incorporation of some aspects of an object into oneself, employed by the ego and superego to fortify the personality by attracting libido (sexual energy) away from objects and toward themselves; rationalisation, the justification of one's behaviour by using apparently logical reasons that are acceptable to the ego, thereby further suppressing awareness of the unconscious motivations; and sublimation, the process of channelling libido into "socially useful" disciplines, such as artistic, cultural, and intellectual pursuits, which indirectly provide gratification for the original drives. According to this theory, healthy people use different defense mechanisms throughout life. A defense mechanism only becomes pathological when it's continued use leads to defective behaviour such that the physical or mental health of the individual is negatively affected. Among the purposes of ego defense mechanisms is to protect the mind/self/ego from anxiety or social sanctions or to provide a refuge from a situation with which one cannot currently cope.

Terms like PTSD have become commonly used in society these days. Many people can be seen talking about PTSD but PTSD was not understood as reality before mid 20th century and even now there are debates about what exactly can be called PTSD. These are words that are extremely debatable and these are ideas that fall under psychoanalysis in one sense. Traumatic events are always represented in literature, media, art etc.... There are so many testimonies that have come from histories of traumatic events. There are writings out of holocaust, genocides, there are write ups from survivors of personal attacks, survivors of personal trauma. Sometimes these representations happen through a third person. Representations is very important to look at when talking about trauma. The witnessing of a trauma is meant to bring some kind of difference to the ethics of a society and that's why trauma studies are basically a part of study of ethics. Trauma studies are not psychological in the strict sense, it is also a part of literary studies, it's a part of sociology studies. Trauma is a word that is useful in many different fields. Talking about healing and recovery, looking into social media, the ideas of therapy, healing and self care are ideas very common in social media. An over popularisation of this vocabulary blurs the difference between being sad and being traumatic. The distinction of situations where therapy is required and it's not is being blurred. Trauma is a very specific idea, not every bad experience is trauma. Trauma theory is definitely a theory used to understand representation.

When looking at the very psychological relationship between an experience of trauma and its representation in literature. Trauma is a very special kind of psychological experience which is obviously negative. It is a disruption of the normal psychic structure of human being. There is micro neural psychological cerebral quality of interruption where the brain is interrupted. The functioning brain becomes interrupted because of a shock, brain damage, trauma, blunt violence etcand that interruption is strictly psychic and psychological. Literature as a medium gives us the platform to look at the constant dialogue between the

micro, individual orders of trauma and the macro, collective orders of trauma. Any work of literature is a cultural product. It represents a particular culture, it represents a particular culture experience. A large part of trauma literature deals with holocaust. There are endless films and novels on holocaust.

Moving on there is a very interesting case of trauma, pseudo trauma. It is unreal trauma which is performed but never quite experienced. Traumatophile is someone who enjoys being traumatic, someone who doesn't wanna let go and hold on to the trauma. The entire idea of trauma becomes pseudo performance. It becomes very performative in quality. It's more of a performance than experience. Here trauma is not much of an authentic experience.

In the broad sense, trauma theory delves into the ways in which traumatic events are processed through literary texts. It tries to understand the different ways by which these events are demonstrated, processed and repressed. Trauma theory is not only interested in how writers might attempt to deal with their own personal traumas through their writings, but also the way in which fictional characters attempt to do so. A traumatic event leaves the survivor not being emotionally able to distinguish between what he or she believed in before the event and what he or she believes in, which often leaves them confused and disturbed. An instant encounter with death or the chance of it happening frequently triggers the survivor. This can be very upsetting to them psychologically.

Chapter 2

The Psychological Depths of *Black Swan*

The dark drama *Black Swan* is built around the psychological illness of the protagonist, Nina Sayers, beautifully and disturbingly portrayed by Natalie Portman. Nina's disordered relationship with her mother Erica, played by Barbara Hershey, sets the stage for Nina's psychological breakdown. Natalie Portman's performance adds depth to the portrayal of Nina's fall into a psychological breakdown.

The complicated portrayal of Nina Sayers' psychological struggles and her complex relationship with her mother, Erica, forms the core of the dark drama in *Black Swan*. The film efficiently uses these elements to create a narrative that explores the psychological toll of pursuing perfection in the demanding world of ballet. The movie is fueled by the three main aspects of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. The film takes us through Nina's transformation, presenting all three parts, the id, ego and superego.

Erica is narcissistic, spending all of her time painting pictures of herself and completely violating Nina's space and well-being. It contributes to the tension and dysfunction in the movie. The toxic relationship between Nina and her mother in *Black Swan* connects with and intensifies Nina's psychological struggles. The film skillfully uses this dynamic to delve into the complexities of mental health, portraying how external pressures and dysfunctional relationships can contribute to a character's unravelling. It adds depth and nuance to the overall exploration of the psychological challenges faced by the protagonist.

The movie starts with the words "I had the craziest dream last night....."(00:03:55). Throughout the movie the audience is taken back and forth between actual events and those that have been evoked in the mind of Nina, the protagonist. The movie revolves around Nina, driven by an obsession to secure the lead role in Swan Lake as a way to compensate for her

mother's past failure to attain the role due to Nina's birth. Nina's mother aims to preserve Nina's innocence and maintains a distance from anything related to sexual desire. Nina remains obedient to her mother's wishes, doing anything to fulfil the dream they share. One scene particularly shows their problematic relationship when Erica offers Nina the first piece of a cake she bought to celebrate Nina getting the lead and Nina refuses to have it. Angered by that, her mother takes the entire cake and threatens to throw it in the garbage.

In her pursuit of the Swan Queen role, Nina approaches Leroy the director of the play, convincing him that she could play the Black Swan perfectly. Despite Leroy's initial refusal, her unconventional make-up catches his attention leading him to kiss her, however, when Nina bites his lips, she leaves him with a sense of guilt. As the announcement for the Swan Queen role is posted, Nina, who has completely given up on her hopes, believes her colleague Veronica has secured the part. However, to her surprise, it was revealed that Nina is the one who has been chosen for the role. In playing the Swan Lake dance, Nina feels that the black swan is the reflection of her alter ego, and the white swan, the reflection of her real condition. This begins when the director of the play describes the story of the Swan Lake: "Virginal girl, pure and sweet, trapped in the body of a swan. She desires freedom, but only true love can break the spell. Her wish is nearly granted in the form of a prince. But before he can declare his love, her lustful twin, the black swan tricks and seduces him. Devastated, the white swan leaps off a cliff, killing herself, and in death finds freedom" (00:09:05).

Nina fights to win the starring role in Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake, a character that needs to express both the good White Swan, and the evil Black Swan. After winning the part, stress mounts on Nina. She has unwanted sexual advances from her artistic director, growing conflict at home from her mother as she tries to establish her independence, jealousy from other ballerinas in the production, and the pressure to become the Black Swan, a part with which has difficulty connecting. Throughout the movie Nina discovers scratches and bleeding

on her body seemingly from self-injury. However, it is difficult to tell which injuries are real and which are not throughout the film as she starts having hallucinations. Nina starts experiencing psychotic episodes as her tension and anxiety increase. She starts experiencing visual hallucinations including physical trauma and transformation of her own and other people's figures. This indicates severe mental distress. The film explores the line between reality and hallucination leading to the shocking ending where the protagonist embraces her dark alter ego, the black swan. The blurring between reality and hallucination adds a psychological thriller element to the story.

Black Swan is a complex film with several themes. The movie prominently explores the duality of human nature, as seen in the characters of the White Swan and the Black Swan. This duality is also reflected in Nina's own personality as she struggles to adjust her innocence with her darker, more passionate side. The juxtaposition of the White Swan and the Black Swan mirrors the internal conflict within Nina. The quest for perfection is a central theme. Nina's relentless pursuit of perfection in her ballet role represents the extreme lengths to which people can go to achieve their goals. Nina's relentless dedication to perfecting her craft illustrates the demanding nature of the quest for excellence and the impact it has on one's mental and emotional well-being. As mentioned earlier, the film explores mental illness, portraying the effects of anxiety, paranoia and depression. The film blurs the line between reality and hallucination, leading the audience to question what is real and what is a product of Nina's deteriorating mental state. This ambiguity keeps the audience on edge, adding a psychological depth to the narrative.

Exploring a character's upbringing and experiences is a common approach in understanding the psychological aspects. It contributes to the manifestation of Nina's anxiety. Her mother's regulations from the early years are what led to her anxiety and protection mechanisms. Her mother was a failed ballerina in the past, who couldn't continue her ballet

career because she was pregnant with her daughter Nina. Nina's mother often warns her not to repeat her own mistakes. What her mother wants her to be is a sweet little girl who obeys her. Nina always tries to make her mother happy and does whatever she wants. She tries to pay for the failure and disappointment of her mother. She makes an effort to make up for her mother's mistakes. Because of this Nina is forced to repress her needs and sexual desires, causing Nina anxiety. This repression makes her character not fully developed. Nina's mother notices the scratches on her back later in the film while she is helping her with getting dressed. She attempts to persuade her mother that it's just a rash, but she gets upset and tells her that she hasn't done this since she was a little child. She believed Nina was done with this. She grabs her and leads her to the bathroom where she uses scissors to cut her nails. While doing this, she cuts her finger by accident and apologises, but she keeps cutting her nails.

Nina has a headache and wakes up late the day of her big performance. When she realises she's running late, her mother informs her that she called the ballet company and informed them that Nina wasn't feeling well and wouldn't be able to perform today. Enraged, Nina gets off the bed. She heads for the door but her mother has locked the door and removed the door knob. Nina turns around and yells for her mother to open the door. Erica informs her that the role has taken over and she isn't feeling well. Retrieving her mother from the chair, Nina holds onto her shattered hand. Nina pulls the door knob from under the couch and approaches the door while her mother sobs and holds her hurt hand. When her mother reaches out to her and asks her about her sweet daughter, Nina responds in a rude, evil tone, "she's gone"(01:26:20), and walks out of the room.

After the first act, when Nina enters her dressing room, she sees Lily, her colleague and her main rival, sitting at her dressing table putting on make-up. Nina yells at her to get out of her room. Lily mocks Nina, saying perhaps she should dance the Black Swan's dance as Nina is not fit to dance it, and they begin to fight. Nina pushes Lily into a destroyed

full-length mirror and it breaks into pieces. As the fight intensifies, Nina stabs Lily in the stomach with a piece of mirror but in her unhinged and delusional mind, Nina had stabbed herself imagining it was Lily. Despite her wound, she gets dressed for her final act as the White Swan. In the final scene of the last act, the White Swan climbs up to the top of a large structure to end its life. Nina does this with grace. When the curtain falls, Leroy and a group of ballerinas gather around her, congratulating her. Nina doesn't speak, but instead just smiles and listens to the praise. Lily was the first to notice the immense blood stain forming on Nina's costume. Someone calls for help, and Thomas frantically asks her, "What did you do?" Nina calmly and quietly utters, "I felt it. Perfect"(01:42:31). The crowd continues to applaud as the screen slowly fades.

The film's ending is open to interpretation to the audience, questioning whether it actually happened or was just an illusion of the protagonist, Nina. One of the climatic moments of the film is when Nina has finally "let go" and has successfully personified the Black Swan, both in body and mind. It's the different elements like acting, costume, lighting, props and setting that contribute to the depiction of the central theme of the film. Nina pushes her limits from all angles. Throughout the film Nina finds it difficult to distinguish between reality and psychosis. The symptoms begin as she starts having visual hallucinations. She sees an eerie version of herself from time to time and sees her stuffed animals and her mother's paintings mocking her.

Chapter 3

Trauma and the Pursuit of Perfection in *Black Swan*

The movie connects with the trauma theory, offering a psychological narrative that explores the impact of past trauma on the protagonist, Nina. Nina's past trauma, primarily rooted in her complex relationship with her overbearing mother, surfaces throughout the film. It goes through every aspect of her life and is intensely portrayed in the film. From the beginning of the movie, where the audience is introduced to Nina's unhealthy relationship with her mother, to the final moments of her journey, her mother's impact is noticeable. Nina's psychological problems are made worse by her overbearing mother who has unreasonable demands. Her mother's constant invasion of her privacy and her obsession with managing every aspect of Nina's life is the basis of conflict. Nina's pursuit of perfection serves as a coping mechanism, driven by her desire to escape the pain of her past. Trauma manifests in Nina's hallucinations. The pressure to embody both the White Swan's innocence and the Black Swan's passion challenges her internal struggles.



Fig 1: White Swan (*Black Swan* 01:29:20)



Fig 2: Black Swan (*Black Swan* 01:36:43)

There are many scenes in this film that strengthen the argument of Nina's reflection of herself to the dance through the unreal situations caused by Nina's anxiety, such as: when the black feathers grow on Nina's skin, her fingers stick to each other so as to resemble a duck's fingers, her eyes' colour turning into red, her legs resemble as swan's legs, and etc.

By using Freudian psychoanalysis, this project analyses Nina's experience with anxiety and her defense mechanism. According to Freud, defense mechanism is the mechanism to reduce the tense impulses caused by anxiety. It's the process that decreases the tense impulses brought on by anxiety. Defense mechanism is also unconscious psychological strategies brought into play by various entities to cope with reality and to maintain self-images. There are so many types of Freudian defense mechanism: denial, repression, asceticism, isolation, displacement, projection, reaction formation, removal, introjection, identification with the attacker, rationalisation, and sublimation. Certainly, the roots of Nina's

anxiety and defense mechanisms could be traced back to the strict rules imposed by her mother during childhood. One can say Nina's constant quest in pursuing perfection in ballet is a coping mechanism. It's influenced by her need to get her mother's favour and get away from the past.

Understanding a character's psychological qualities sometimes involves looking into their experiences and upbringing. It plays a part in the development of Nina's anxiety. Her anxiety and defense mechanisms are a result of her mother's regulations on her from an early age. Throughout the film Nina finds it difficult to distinguish between reality and psychosis. The symptoms begin as she starts having visual hallucinations. She sees an eerie version of herself from time to time and sees her stuffed animals and her mother's paintings mocking her. These are the repetitive catastrophic events that Freud talks about that occur to those who have experienced trauma. Freud also says that these repetitions are distinctive because it wasn't initiated by the individual but are a result of others actions. In Nina's case the person who causes trauma is obviously her mother. The way her mother brought her up, the way her relationship with her mother has changed, all these contribute to Nina's trauma. These wounds inflicted upon the mind of a person are important in developing the psychological perspective of the person.

One of the major variables which trauma invests itself in is history. There is also a way in which trauma becomes a bigger term in which a person's identity is consumed by their history. This is evident in the film in how Nina's mother acts towards her. In the film Nina never realises or acknowledges her mental illness or the trauma she's experienced or is experiencing. As Cathy Caruth says trauma is something one person doesn't wanna claim but it's still there in their system. Nina thinks she's completely sane and refuses to get any kind of help. She is seen even sacrificing her physical well being in order to become the perfect ballet. A mental wound causes traumatic amnesia where the survivor finds it difficult to talk

about or comprehend their experience. Despite not being able to talk about it, for Nina, she doesn't have many friends and she definitely finds it uncomfortable to talk to her overly protective mother. Nina is working really hard but she's not feeling quite herself. Suddenly in the mirror, it seems like her movements are not happening in real time. Mirrors are used to show off the internal struggles Nina faces. It's not clear exactly what's happening. There are so many factors contributing to why she might be experiencing this. She has this overbearing mother, this competitive frenemy. The movie also hints at her eating disorder. One doesn't think clearly when their brain is not fed or nourished. There is a level of obsession that can be almost psychotic. There's a level of anxiety that almost seems delusional.

Conclusion

The New York Times called the movie “on point, on top, on pain” (Dargis). The reviews after the release of the movie followed a similar pattern to the themes. Many people claim it as eerie, intense and thrilling. Ballet’s terrifying revelation of the “docile body” draws a comparison to the White Swan and establishes a link with real life people. Moviegoers’ subconscious emotions are aroused by the exposing of idea of freedom in pursuing one’s own goals. The film’s impact on the audience and its nightmare-like nature were mentioned in several reviews. One of film’s most captivating aspects is the incorporation of the rebel Black Swan.

Black Swan successfully employs the protagonist’s fall into insanity to illustrate the complex nature of trauma. It portrays the intricating effects of trauma on the human psyche, the themes of obsession, perfectionism, the blurring between reality and hallucination, all rooted from traumatic experiences. *Black Swan* is a powerful reminder of the long lasting effects of trauma and the extent people would go in order to conquer their inner demons.

The movie represents Nina as a character who has been severely damaged by her history right from the beginning. Her troubled relationship with her mother, Erica, adds to the challenges she faces to excel in her career. One of the most striking aspects of Nina’s trauma is its impact on her perception of herself and others. The film looks deeper into the concept of trauma by examining the body as a source of psychological and emotional distress. Nina’s metamorphosis into the Black Swan was an emotionally and physically demanding process that was characterised by self harm and self inflicted wounds. In the final scene of the movie, Nina fully embraces her darker side, marking the peak of her suffering.

The movie shows how Nina’s portrayal of the Black Swan destroys her. It slowly destroys the good girl Nina as she starts suffering from OCD, anorexia, bulimia etc.... In literal sense the psychological and physical difficulties one could face help the character

reach artistic perfection. In director Darren Aronofsky's words "the film can be perceived as a poetic metaphor for the birth of an artist, that is, as a visual representation of Nina's psychic odyssey toward achieving artistic perfection and of the price to be paid for it." In a series of horrifying scenes that alternate between reality and Nina's delusion, Nina is ordered to study seduction, passion and violence. This process unhinges Nina. Her previously troubled relationship with her mother explodes into aggressive fights and violence. Nina is shown torturing herself compulsively in a desperate attempt to become the Black Swan.

The movie tries to tell us how an individual's perspective is highly impacted by their history. Trauma can lead to various mental health issues anxiety, depression and PTSD. Individuals may experience nightmares, intrusive thoughts, flashbacks as they struggle to cope up with their experiences. It can also have physiological effects on the body and can even lead to self harm and in severe cases, suicidal thoughts. The worst part of it is that the survivors find it extremely hard to comprehend or seek help. They are unable to talk about it in most situations. The impact of trauma is far reaching and can have long lasting effects on an individual's well-being. It is extremely important to seek professional help in such situations.

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