



Exploring the portrayal of Female Leads in Psychological thrillers through Psychoanalytic Theory

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Abstract : The representation of women, which is pretty controversial at times, plays a significant part in the film and has a range of effects on the audience. Psychological thrillers, as a sub-genre of thrillers, delve into the mental and emotional states of unstable individuals to explore their psychology. The cinematic portrayal of a character endows it with an altered shape and a symbolic form, which can evoke fear in society while often disregarding the factors influencing their behaviour. Consequently, character development in this genre appears to face more stringent scrutiny than other character types. Filmmakers employ various techniques, such as tense music, dramatic storylines, jump-scare moments, and so on, to instill unease and tension in their viewers.

In examining two films, "Gone Girl" (2014) and "Black Swan" (2009), this paper questions the dominance of established norms of judgment, particularly concerning female characters. The research aims to evaluate and analyse the behavioural patterns of female leads through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, providing readers with deeper insights into the psyche of these characters and why they act the way they do. Analytical and interpretative methodologies will be applied in this qualitative research. The psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud will be considered to analyse the characters within a more comprehensive theoretical framework. The paper will also discuss how these portrayals impact society and why it is essential for filmmakers to continuously challenge gender stereotypes and promote a more positive representation of women within this genre.

IndexTerms- psychoanalysis, trauma, psychological thrillers, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, mental health, female victimisation, stereotypical representation, abuse, violence, mental disorders.

INTRODUCTION

"I was fine until I woke up one day and started thinking about everything I was doing wrong. And then the thinking became obsessive. And then the obsessive thinking became debilitating."

Lisa, in the movie "Girl on the Edge"

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLERS IN CINEMA

Psychological thrillers explore the psychology of unstable characters, merging elements of horror and thriller genres. Notable filmmakers like Alfred Hitchcock, David Fincher, and Christopher Nolan have played a pivotal role in shaping this genre. Alfred Hitchcock's "The Lodger" (1926) is considered the precursor of psychological thrillers, and subsequent films such as "Psycho" (1960) and "The Silence of the Lambs" (1991) furthered the genre's evolution.

CHARACTERISTICS AND CONVENTIONS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLERS

Psychological thrillers captivate audiences by immersing them in gripping narratives. These films transcend traditional thrillers by delving deep into characters' inner worlds, exposing their delusions, insecurities, and trauma. They offer viewers relatable yet intense experiences, fostering a sense of catharsis. These movies masterfully employ mystery and suspense, exploring themes like morality, dysfunctional relationships, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Through the use of shadows and low-key lighting, they vividly portray the characters' inner turmoil. Common conventions persist, such as antagonists dressed in dark attire symbolising mystery and danger, while protagonists often wear bright colours. Mirrors play a symbolic role, reflecting a character's inner conflicts and darker aspects. The "femme fatale" archetype, a seductive and manipulative woman, has faced criticism for perpetuating negative stereotypes about women's cunning and sexuality.

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLERS

In many psychological thrillers, female protagonists find themselves trapped in their darkest moments, often reduced to objectified ideals. Over time, they are labeled as "psychopaths" or "insane," emerging unsettling trends and are unwelcome by both the characters in the story

and the audience. These women, despite unexpected twists and gripping plots, are portrayed as broken, damaged, and vulnerable, reinforcing real-world stereotypes about female vulnerability. This depiction can perpetuate the belief that women's mental conditions are a source of fear and shame, further deepening gender-specific misconceptions about mental health. Being labeled as a 'psychopath' or 'conspirator' doesn't empower them; instead, they often endure sexual harassment and objectification. Their attire is used to lure male characters, highlighting the objectification of the female body. These characters are judged for their reported behaviour, but their roles don't reflect reality. Even when the story is from their perspective, they remain the targets, trapped in a state of weakness and oppression, their actions attributed to claustrophobia. In most psychological thrillers, female characters are denied a free voice. They experience both external and internal silencing, obstructing a deeper exploration of their complex psyches. To create more balanced narratives, it's essential to challenge these stereotypes and portray female characters as multi-dimensional, empowered individuals.

THE IMPACT OF FEMALE REPRESENTATION ON THE AUDIENCE

Psychological thrillers wield significant influence over their audiences, prompting personal and societal impact. These films have the power to provoke deep emotional responses, challenging viewers' perspectives on themes like power, control, mental health, violence, and morality. By using suspenseful music, dramatic narratives, and jump-scare moments, psychological thrillers elicit fear and anxiety, leading to both psychological and physiological reactions such as increased heart rate and heightened alertness. Their unreliable narrators, unexpected plot twists, and morally complex characters make viewers question their own beliefs and judgments. Viewers often identify with these characters, internalising their choices, which can affect their real-life decisions and actions.

In the realm of cinema, women's representation has evolved, but stereotypes persist, reinforcing rigid gender norms. These portrayals normalise violence against women, confine genders to traditional roles, and emphasise male superiority in relationships. Thrillers and horror films may feature more women, but their representation often revolves around vulnerability and oppression. This victimisation, while engaging, limits the audience's awareness of the underlying motives and experiences of female characters, focusing solely on action and narrative.

Women in psychological thrillers are frequently depicted as weak, dependent on men for protection, perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes. These portrayals also emphasise emotional instability and trauma among women, reinforcing unfavourable stereotypes. Such representations normalise and sensationalise misogyny without addressing the underlying issues. Psychological thrillers wield potent influence, prompting viewers to reevaluate their beliefs and judgments, even as they persist in presenting women in stereotypical and potentially damaging ways.

PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

With the Lumiere brothers' first presentation of their film in Paris and Sigmund Freud publishing his psychoanalysis papers, both psychoanalysis and cinema were born at the same time, that is, in 1895. Over the past decade, psychoanalysis has become a very popular phenomenon in cinema.

Psychoanalysis is a personality theory that involves the study of the unconscious mind. Sigmund Freud developed the idea that the id, ego, and superego are the three different components of the human mind, and through the interaction between these components, human behaviour is formed.

Id: represents the unconscious part of the human mind. It doesn't give much thought to what is right and wrong and acts according to the pleasure principle.

Ego: represents the conscious part of the human mind. With proper reasoning and logic, it acts according to the reality principle.

Superego: represents and makes social and moral judgements and acts in an ethical constraint according to realistic and moral principles.

Freud believes that human desires are controlled by both the ego and the superego, and the repressed desires emerge in dreams or works of literature. He explained this theory with an iceberg. Just like most of the iceberg is submerged in water, similarly, human thoughts lie hidden. He relates the tip of the iceberg to the conscious mind, which is on the surface. Just underneath that is the preconscious mind, and hidden deeper down is the unconscious mind.

TRAUMA

Trauma, whether physical or emotional, is a profound response to distressing and harrowing events. Sigmund Freud suggests that experiences like sexual assault, domestic violence, and harassment can lead to psychological issues and trauma. These experiences shape an individual's emotional and behavioural responses, often as coping mechanisms for past traumas. Freud's psychoanalytic theory enables us to understand characters from a deeper perspective. It reveals that their actions aren't just a result of inherent tendencies but are rooted in a "dark" and "disturbing" past, influenced by factors like trauma, abuse, disorders, and insecurities. These experiences can lead to situational vulnerabilities marked by sudden emotional flashbacks. This paper analyses "female leads" or "victim turned attacker" roles in various movies. Researchers will explore whether these often termed "madwomen" should be primarily seen as 'victims' or 'conspirators.' Additionally, we identify behavioural patterns shared among these characters, offering insights into the intricate interplay of trauma, personal history, and situational factors that shape their actions.

DEFENCE MECHANISMS

The three mental entities are always at odds with one another since they each have distinct objectives. The ego occasionally mobilises a variety of defence mechanisms to avoid or stop psychological breakdown when conflict threatens functioning. These defence mechanisms include repression, denial, projection, displacement, regression, and sublimation.

1. **Repression:** In order to do this, unpleasant or painful memories, ideas, or urges must be pushed into the unconscious. Repression is frequently seen as the cornerstone of other defence strategies.
2. **Denial:** Refusing to acknowledge or accept unpleasant or painful elements of reality falls under this category. For instance, despite abundant evidence to the contrary, a person can refuse to consider the prospect that they may have a problem with drug misuse.
3. **Projection:** This entails blaming someone else for one's own ideas, emotions, or impulses. A person who is furious with their relationship, for instance, can claim that their partner is also angry with them.
4. **Displacement:** This entails rerouting one's emotional urges or impulses away from their initial objective and onto a more secure or acceptable aim. A person who is upset with their job, for instance, could vent their anger on their spouse instead.
5. **Regression:** In order to prevent unpleasant emotions of guilt or worry, this includes coming up with a reasonable, but frequently false, justification for one's behaviour or sentiments. For instance, a test cheater can claim that they were "forced" to do so because the test was too challenging.
6. **Sublimation:** One must direct their emotional urges or drives into more socially acceptable channels in order to achieve this. For instance, a person with violent tendencies may flourish as a professional athlete by channelling their desire and energy to do so.

METHODOLOGY

The present study will employ qualitative research techniques where analytic and interpretative methods are used. The psychoanalysis of female characters and how they are portrayed in these two films will be the main focus of this paper. The psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud shall be taken into account for analysis on the basis of a broader theoretical framework. Here, emphasis will be placed on carefully interpreting primary data, and the films will be examined through a more comprehensive lens of the theory. The paper uses the 8th edition of the MLA style book.

PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY IN GONE GIRL

Based on the same-named Gillian Flynn's novel, in 2014, David Fincher's psychological thriller "Gone Girl" was released with huge success in creating something that will stick with the viewer for a long time with vividly unforgettable imagery and an unsettling soundscape. Dealing with the themes of marriage, childhood trauma, gender roles, and the portrayal of women, the movie featuring Tyler Perry, Ben Affleck, Rosamund Pike, and Neil Patrick Harris made over \$369 million and has had a significant pop cultural impact.

The plot centres on the search for Amy Dunne, the rich and complicated female protagonist defying conventional gender norms, after she vanishes, and an ensuing inquiry is followed to find out her whereabouts. Amy's past, the secret she and her husband Nick keep from each other, and her marriage, which is ripped apart by lies, violence, and betrayal, are all explored in the film. She is shown as a complex and multifaceted figure, defying conventional gender expectations and showing how her psychological problems and anxieties make her a more intriguing character. Whereas the reasons and explanations behind her narcissistic and cunning personality or deceitful demeanour are not highlighted or discussed in the film. The narrative alternates between Nick and Amy's points of view, giving the viewers a chance to see the events from two very distinct angles. However, in the case of Nick, his character is given an incredibly authentic and convincing voice that shadows the voice of Amy.

Sigmund Freud, in his psychoanalytic theory, emphasised that unresolved childhood conflicts or tensions frequently result in mental issues later in life. Applying this theory to Amy's persona, one can see a few glimpses of her upbringing, which was marked by a lack of emotional support and an overbearing, controlling mother.

"My parents died when I was a teenager."

The effect of her childhood trauma on personality formation can be supported by certain theories that explain how she develops as a character.

"I wasn't born a sociopath; I was made into one. My parents didn't give a damn about me. They just used me for their own benefit."

These experiences have a significant influence on Amy's personality, which results in problems with relationships, trust, and emotional control. The complexity of human nature is examined, especially in light of unresolved problems from childhood such as fear of abandonment.

"I had to learn at a young age that I couldn't trust anyone." "Not even my own parents."

With these dialogues, it is very well visible that she has a deep-seated mistrust of others, even her partner and parents, and a feeling of solitude resulting from her upbringing. She also hints that her parents used her for their own benefit and neglected her emotionally, which contributed to her sociopathic tendencies.

"Growing up, I was never good enough for my parents. They always expected more from me, and when I didn't meet their expectations, they punished me. They made me feel like I was never enough."

Due to her parents' narcissistic tendencies, she felt perpetually insecure and worthless, especially due to them writing the book "Amazing Amy," revolving around her life, where they made her character more like the perfect daughter, they expected her to be.

"I can't fail to notice that whenever I screw something up, Amy (Amazing Amy) does it right."

Additionally, they pointed out all her faults and how she could never live up to "Amazing Amy's image."

"I was brought up to be charming, not sincere. I was taught to trade on my looks and to always have a man to support me. I was raised to be a 'cool girl,' to never complain, to never show weakness."

Because of this, Amy possesses traits of narcissism and sociopathy, and she acts interpersonally in manipulative and controlling ways. She may have done this because it was the only way to get her needs met when she was a kid, and she might also believe no one will stay with her.

"I had to keep moving, keep changing, or else I'd be trapped again. Back in that house."

She is presented as a woman who has been sculpted and moulded by societal and familial expectations, which have left her feeling imprisoned and dissatisfied.

A child's early interactions and relationships with their parents influence their behaviour and social conduct as adults. Amy's parents were a significant source of stress throughout the film. Her mother was emotionally aloof, and her father was domineering and manipulative. Amy's inability to establish healthy relationships with them and her urge to manipulate and control people around her have been influenced by this childhood experience. In the film, Amy's id fuels the need and desire for power and manipulation, but her ego gives her the ability to justify her behaviour as necessary for her own survival. And she was able to commit terrible actions without feeling guilty since her superego was suppressed. The imbalance of her id, ego, and superego contributes to her personality disorder, which is the result of her attempts to defend herself against the repression she experienced as a child.

According to psychoanalytic theory, humans employ defence mechanisms to shield themselves from unpleasant or painful feelings. In the movie, Amy's intricate scheme to fake her own death and accuse her husband of killing her is seen as a self-defence technique to shield herself from the fear of being abandoned by Nick, especially after knowing about his extramarital affair. Nick ignores her and cheats on her; he compels her to leave everything she is familiar with and move to his hometown to adjust to a new life and community. Even after several attempts, she fails to catch his attention, and he never appears to think about her feelings at all. Because Nick's dishonesty and indifference have been happening gradually, Amy finds it much more emotionally upsetting. The connection between the two continuously deteriorates throughout the film as both Amy and Nick exhibit actions that are harmful to themselves and each other. Such behaviour clearly indicates how trauma from childhood affects the way an individual interacts, especially in intimate relationships. The entire situation makes Amy a victim, which is rarely discussed by any researcher or film critic, and his behaviour is normalised and celebrated.

One of the most iconic scenes in the film is the bottle scene, where Amy causes self-harm in an effort to blame Desi, her ex-boyfriend, for raping her. The incident serves as a powerful example of how childhood trauma affects personality development. Amy's desire to hurt herself in order to win and practise control over others is a blatant example of her inability to control her emotions and her tendency to use extreme tactics to achieve her goals.

PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY IN BLACK SWAN

Released in 2010, Black Swan is a psychological thriller directed by Darren Aronofsky, starring Natalie Portman, Vincent Cassel, Mila Kunis, Barbara Hershey, and Winona Ryder. The film narrates the story of Nina Sayers, a young and gifted ballet dancer who wins the lead role in a brand-new Swan Lake production. The dual roles of the naive White Swan and the seductive Black Swan become an obsession for Nina as the plot develops. The pressure from her mother, a former ballet dancer who is living vicariously through her daughter, and her director, Thomas Leroy, who pushes her to embody the sensuality of the Black Swan, feeds Nina's obsession with perfection. She finds herself increasingly alone and obsessed by her need to be a perfectionist.

As the tension increases, Nina starts to have hallucinations and delusions that manifest as a doppelgänger that stands in for her suppressed desires and fears. She also starts to examine her own sexuality and ambitions, especially in relation to Lily, a competitive dancer who effortlessly exudes the Black Swan. As her addiction grows more intense, Nina's mental health starts to worsen, and her relationships with those around her start to suffer. The distinction between reality and imagination is muddled as her hallucinations and delusions increase in frequency and intensity. As she immerses herself more and more in the twin roles of the Swan, she starts to lose her sense of self and reality.

Nina's physical and emotional condition deteriorates as the performance day draws near, and she starts to see the doppelgänger more regularly. She stabs the doppelgänger with a shard of glass out of sheer desperation, only to find out it was Lily. In a final act of defiance, Nina enters the stage and performs brilliantly as both the White Swan and the Black Swan, but as the curtain falls, she passes out from her wounds. The movie closes with Nina's body being removed and her mother finding the Swan's feathers in her daughter's chamber. The final image is a close-up of Nina's face, which conveys a sense of calm and serenity, suggesting that she may have found solace in dying. The main ideas of Freud's theory may be used to conduct a thorough analysis of the movie, which tackles topics like obsession, perfectionism, sexuality, identity, mental health, and the transforming potential of art.

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory emphasises on the role of unconscious mind in shaping human actions, behaviours and experiences. To gain a greater understanding of the protagonist's inner tensions and struggles, several significant concepts from Freud's theory are applied. The behaviour and choices of Nina, who is a gifted and perfectionist ballerina are examined using the approach.

Nina is a classic reflection of ego driven Id which is regarded as the instinctive and primordial part of the psyche. This is demonstrated by her obsession with doing things flawlessly as well as by the way she acts destructively and obsessively towards both her work and the other characters in the movie. She continuously seeks acceptance in the film, which is another characteristic of the Id, as can be seen. Additionally, Nina's doppelgänger, who personifies her suppressed desires and fears, serves as a representation of her id. In Nina's dreams and hallucinations, the doppelgänger tempts her with the liberation and sensuality she has been denying herself.

The conflict between Nina's id, ego, and superego, which make up her mind, led to her current mental condition. The id is the unconscious portion of her mind, driven by instincts and urges from the animal kingdom, while the ego is the conscious portion of her mind, in charge of her perception of reality. Her sense of morality and sense of right and wrong are functions of her superego, which is a component of her mind. These three aspects of Nina's personality interplay intricately as she tries to achieve perfection for her performance in the Swan Lake ballet.

"I just want to be perfect."

This dialogue is repeated by Nina several times throughout the movie. It captures her passionate pursuit of perfection, which is an expression of her id. She has a deep-seated need to feel loved and recognised, which motivates her to strive to be the ideal dancer.

"I'm not her, I'm you."

Are another such dialogues spoke by Nina's doppelgänger who represents her Id. The doppelgänger tempts Nina to embrace her own desires and anxiousness by luring her with the freedom and sensuality that she has been holding back from herself.

Nina's personality also exhibits a strong superego. This may be evident in her persistent search for errors and weaknesses, as well as her sense of remorse when she commits an error. Her urge to be flawless and her ongoing pursuit of perfection are further manifestations of the superego. Id and superego are intermediated by the third component of the mind, the ego. When Nina is able to balance her sense of perfectionism with her desire to win over her mentor, Vincent Cassel, who plays the role of the ego, we can see the ego in action. When she is able to advance from being a decent dancer to a great one, this is demonstrated.

The impact of her mother's domineering and perfection-obsessed upbringing, her rivalrous friends, and her struggle with her sexuality are all depicted in the film. The psychoanalytic theory of Freud provides an explanation for Nina's actions, particularly her fears and the guilt she feels.

"I'm not sure I can do this."

Nina shares with her mother that she has concerns about her ability to play the demanding part of the Black Swan. Her anxiety over failing is a reflection of her internal struggle between the need to accept her flaws and weaknesses and her yearning for perfection.

Nina's sentiments for her mother are explained by the Oedipus complex, a Freudian theory. A deep emotional enmeshment and a sense of competition define Nina's relationship with her mother. Nina's mother, a former ballerina who is now living vicariously through her daughter, places a lot of pressure on her to be successful. This pressure might be seen as Nina's own unconscious attempt to gain her mother's acceptance and love. Oedipal dramas happen when a youngster forms a close bond with a parent who is also of the same sex out of unconscious sexual yearning. This is relevant to Nina and her mother, who continually compares Nina to other dancers and tries to run her life. Nina thus feels like she will never live up to her mother's expectations, which causes her to feel guilty and anxious.

Another Freudian idea that applies to Nina's character is the Electra complex. This happens when a little girl wants her father to give her the same emotional attention, she gives her mother. Since Nina's father isn't present for the entire movie, she longs for his approval and resents her mother's focus. She becomes even more anxious as a result of her envy. Her mother has such a powerful hold on her that she occasionally even recognises her face in the mirror, indicating that she has internalised her mother's demands to the point that they have become a part of her own identity. This internal struggle is an accurate reflection of the intricate interplay between the conscious and unconscious mind, which is at the heart of Freud's theory.

"I can't, I can't, I can't. It's too much, I can't."

When Nina is unable to handle the pressure and abuse, she is receiving, she cries out in a moment of desperation. Her remarks are an accurate reflection of the trauma, psychological discomfort, and sense of helplessness she is going through as a result of being abused.

Nina's actions show numerous of these defence strategies. She uses projection, for instance, by assigning her own impulses and desires to her doppelgänger, and she practises repression by driving her desires and anxieties into the unconscious. She also utilises sublimation when she directs her tremendous need for perfection into her ballet performance, as well as rationalisation when she provides justifications for her unpredictable behaviour. Given that Nina's attempts to suppress her darker urges and feelings lead to a psychiatric collapse, Freud's idea of "repression" is also involved. The idea of self-denial is also explored here through Nina's internal struggles to embrace her own identity. As the sensuous and free-spirited Black Swan, Nina fights to embody the character throughout the movie since doing so forces her to face her own wants and insecurities. Because she is unable to accept this aspect of herself fully, she begins to feel more and more alone and alienated, which eventually causes her to collapse psychologically.

Nina's physical appearance, which is pale and slender throughout the movie, is a reflection of how she suppresses her own needs and feelings. Her efforts to embody the ideal representation of a dancer may be understood as a type of self-punishment for her own wants and flaws. This is seen in her self-starvation and perfectionism. As her subconscious desires and fears start to manifest as her doppelgänger and hallucinations, her repression ultimately causes her to experience a mental breakdown.

"I had the craziest dream last night about a girl who was turned into a swan, but her prince falls for the wrong girl and she kills herself."

The portrayal of Nina as a psycho in "Black Swan" is a potent remark on the psychological costs associated with the high stakes of the ballet world of competition and the idea of perfectionism. Closely looking at the psychoanalytic aspects, victimisation of a human is more prevalent. The extreme torture and pressure Nina experiences as a professional ballet dancer should be considered as her fault. Nina is pushed to the limit by her director, other performers, and even her own mother throughout the movie since they all want perfection from her. With a past of mental health problems and self-harm, Nina's character is revealed to be extremely flimsy and weak. Her director exploits his authority over her to dominate and manipulate her, subjecting her to humiliating training, harsh criticism, and even sexual harassment. Because Nina is unable to break free from the cycle of assault and perfectionist tendencies that surrounds her, her mental health declines and her grasp on reality becomes shakier, ultimately resulting in her tragic death.

CONCLUSION

In the realm of cinema, psychological thrillers serve as mirrors to the intricate workings of the human mind, illuminating shifts in behaviour and the diverse facets of personality, including disorders. However, the portrayal of women in these films has too often perpetuated the notion that female mental states are a source of fear and shame, fuelling stereotypes and affecting audience attitudes. These films not only shed light on the challenges and societal constraints faced by women but also challenge prevailing gender norms. A different perspective reveals that they offer valuable insights into human behaviour and the complexities of the human psyche by exploring the psychological motifs of their characters.

In the 21st century, institutionalised religion and morality often serve as filters through which mental health issues are viewed. Some of these films misrepresent or romanticise mental health disorders and traditional concepts of rationality for the sake of plot twists. They reinforce misconceptions about women's susceptibility to emotional breakdowns, perpetuating the exploitative mythologizing of such disorders for amusement. Yet, women-centered psychological thrillers also hold the potential to empower and cultivate resilience, offering a deeper understanding of gender dynamics and relationships. They present female leads as strong and resilient characters who can overcome adversity and seize control of their lives. In conclusion, these films serve as both cautionary tales and instruments of empathy, driving home the consequences of destructive behaviour and encouraging compassion for those who have faced similar challenges. They provide a unique platform for empowerment and growth, contributing to a richer tapestry of narratives in the cinematic world.

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