



Distorted Reflections: Gender and Horror in ‘Black Swan’

Sarada Sengupta¹, Dr Anindita Chowdhury²

¹PG Student, Department of English, Kristu Jayanti College (Autonomous), Bangalore

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Kristu Jayanti College (Autonomous), Bangalore

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Abstract— In *Black Swan*, the themes of gender and horror are intricately woven into the fabric of the narrative. The film delves into the psychological nuances of its protagonist, Nina, as she navigates the demands of her art and the pressures of perfection. The exploration of gender identity and the inherent horror within the competitive world of ballet converge to create a compelling and thought-provoking cinematic experience. This paper aims to dissect the manifestations of gender dynamics and horror elements within the film, shedding light on their significance in shaping the narrative and character development. The analysis will encompass the contemporary ballet, femininity, Irigarayan horror, character interactions, and overarching themes that contribute to the film’s exploration of gender and horror. By examining these aspects, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances present in “*Black Swan*” while also showcasing the film’s prowess in challenging traditional tropes and expectations within the realm of both gender representation and horror storytelling.



Keywords— gender, horror, *Black Swan*, femininity, perfection.

I. INTRODUCTION

“Ballet is woman” quoted by George Balanchine, the Father of American Ballet.

A social construct and a fundamental aspect of ballet, gender roles shape the art form’s traditions. In classical ballet, gender roles are distinctly defined. While boys attend a separate “men’s class,” concentrating on specific male-oriented techniques, the girls focus on mastering pointework. The pas de deux is the focal point of classical ballet. Conventionally, it showcases a male and a female dancer collaborating, with each presenting individual solos and reuniting for a final coda. The man’s primary role involves providing support and showcasing the ballerina when they perform together on stage.

Dress codes further emphasize gender distinctions too. Tutus, tiaras, and flowing skirts with tights and leotards for female dancers to enhance their grace and femininity and don tights and doublets for male dancers to highlight their masculinity.

However, contemporary ballet is witnessing a gradual transformation in the way gender is perceived and

expressed. Chase Johnsey was the first man to perform in a female role which is a potential threat for additional challenges faced by women in an already biased world. The evolution of female dancers taking on powerful and dynamic roles and male dancers exploring more fluid and expressive movements represents a more inclusive and diverse approach, acknowledging that artistic talent is not confined to gender lines.

Dancers who identify as non-binary or transgender are gaining visibility and advocating for greater acceptance and representation within the ballet world. It carries explicit gay themes indicating the breaking down of rigid traditions which tend to create new opportunities for men rather than women.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Olivia’s “Becoming the Monstrous-Feminine: Sex, death and transcendence in Darren Aronofsky’s *Black Swan*” delves into the notions of the gaze and female subjectivity, drawing attention to the intricate nature of defining womanhood in contrast to masculinity. It is shown clear

that the gaze is an important role of the film, serving as a potent symbol that captures the power and danger of the monstrous-feminine.

"Debating Black Swan: Gender and Horror" by Mark Fisher and Amber Jacobs contends that the film's narrative, centered around Nina's transformation from the innocent White Swan to the seductive Black Swan, serves as a metaphor for the pressures and anxieties associated with conforming to rigid gender stereotypes. Fisher and Jacobs highlight how the film's use of psychological horror intensifies these anxieties, providing a vivid portrayal of Nina's inner psyche and the distress caused by societal expectations.

OBJECTIVES

To examine how *Black Swan* utilizes horror as a medium to vividly depict the emotional turmoil resulting from rigid gender stereotypes.

To investigate the central theme of the interplay between gender and horror in *Black Swan*, focusing on the protagonist Nina Sayers' journey and struggle with gender identity.

III. METHODS

The research employs a qualitative method approach to examine the thematic elements and narrative techniques of Darren Aronofsky's film *Black Swan* (2010). This methodology was chosen due to its suitability for analyzing complex narrative structures and visual storytelling in cinematic works. The study sample consists of film critics' reviews, academic analyses, and social media platforms. A systematic search was conducted using keywords to identify relevant sources for inclusion in the analysis. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, focusing on Lacanian and Irigarayan theories.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Black Swan delves deeply into the concept of female sexuality within the ballet realm. The ballet world enforces strict gender norms: women are traditionally expected to embody grace, fragility, and beauty. Nina epitomizes these ideals as she strives for perfection in her performance as the delicate White Swan. Her journey towards self-discovery and sexual awakening is linked to her transformation into the darker and more seductive role of the Black Swan and it shows that it can be a force that is both empowering and, at times, destructive.

The overarching theme of artistic sacrifice and the toll it takes on the pursuit of perfection delves within the context of gender. Nina's relentless pursuit of becoming the perfect

ballerina entails significant personal sacrifice, physical strain, and emotional upheaval. Her obsession with achieving artistic excellence within the ballet world is portrayed as a double-edged sword, as it pushes her to the brink of her sanity. This narrative serves as a broader commentary on how women in the arts often face societal and self-imposed pressures to achieve unattainable standards of perfection. The rivalry between Nina and her fellow dancer, Lily, also underscores the challenges and conflicts that women may encounter when pursuing their passions and careers, as they navigate the complex interplay of support and competition within a highly demanding and competitive environment.

The character of Thomas Leroy embodies the traditional male authority figures within the ballet world. He exerts control over Nina's professional life and serves as the gatekeeper to her success. This raises questions about the influence that men often have in shaping the careers and destinies of female artists, reinforcing the notion that the ballet world, like many other fields, is often controlled and defined by men.

Nina's relationship with her mother adds a layer of complexity to the gender dynamics in the film. Erica's own failed dreams of becoming a ballerina project onto Nina which creates a tumultuous mother-daughter relationship highlighting the maternal expectations and pressures. This can also be examined through a Lacanian lens, illustrating the Oedipal complex and the struggle for individuation where Erica represents an overbearing force inhibiting Nina's development.

Horror need not solely rely on supernatural or external threats to evoke fear, it can emerge from anxieties and struggles an individual faces in life. In context of horror, Luce Irigaray, a feminist, philosopher, and psychoanalyst, addresses issues related to gender, sexuality, and the body. Her ideas delve into the 'horror' of how women's identities and experiences have been marginalized or suppressed within patriarchal structures. The need for women to establish their own subjectivity and language parallel Nina's struggle for self-expression and autonomy.

"Irigarayan horror" could refer to the existential and psychological horror experienced by women as a result of patriarchal oppression, objectification, and the erasure of their voices and experiences. The horror isn't merely confined to hallucinations or jump scares but resides in Nina's existential crisis—a struggle for agency and self-recognition within a society that dictates her identity based on predefined gender roles.

Ballet, with its reputation for elegance, beauty, and grace, may not be the first genre associated with horror. A notable aspect of horror ballet is its ability to create an

atmosphere of tension and suspense. Productions like "Giselle" and "Frankenstein", classic ghostly ballets, use haunting music, shadowy lighting, and chilling choreography to build an unsettling ambiance that keeps the audience on edge. Character transformations are a recurring motif in horror ballet too. These transformations underscore the theme of duality, highlighting the struggle between light and darkness within the human psyche. For example, in "Dracula," the protagonist undergoes a dramatic shift from human to vampire, emphasizing the contrast between good and evil. This narrative device serves as a reflection of the internal battles that all individuals face and offers a poignant perspective on the dualities within the human experience.

Horror ballet offers an opportunity to appreciate the range and depth of human emotion and experience, showcasing the versatility of this classical art form. *Black Swan* skillfully weaves elements of horror into its narrative. The psychological torment that Nina undergoes as she strives for perfection in her role as the Swan Queen, she descends into madness grappling with hallucinations, paranoia, and the blurred lines between reality and delusion. The audience is drawn into her deteriorating mental state, creating an atmosphere of profound psychological terror. The film masterfully uses the mind as a canvas for horror, immersing viewers in a nightmarish journey through the human psyche.

It delves into the realm of body horror, a subgenre that focuses on the physical transformation and disintegration of the human body. Echoing Irigaray's ideas, it encompasses the horror of the female body being controlled, and commodified within patriarchal systems. The film portrays the horror of how Nina's body is objectified and controlled within the ballet world.

Nina's obsessive pursuit of perfection leads to self-destructive behaviors, self-mutilation, and gruesome bodily changes. The theme of paranoia and unreliable narration also heightens the horror element. The audience is kept in a constant state of unease, just as Nina herself is uncertain of what is real and what a product of her fractured mind is. Nina's sexual awakening and liberation is yet another dimension of ballet horror and her sexual experiences, while liberating, are also fraught with vulnerability and terror.

The ballet world itself is a source of horror. One key aspect of the ballet world as a horror setting is the intensity and pressure that dancers experience. The relentless pursuit of perfection, combined with the need to meet stringent standards and outperform peers, creates an atmosphere of horror. The physical and emotional toll, as well as the constant fear of failure, can be likened to the

emotional torment often depicted in horror narratives. Dancers become trapped in a world where their pursuit of excellence becomes an obsession, leading to a descent into psychological horror. The ballet world's inherent competitiveness and rivalries among dancers can be magnified and portrayed as psychological horror. In this scenario, characters scheme, manipulate, and compete intensely for coveted roles. The ballet setting becomes a battleground for these rivalries, amplifying the horror element.

Dancers may undergo a nightmarish shift, with their bodies bending, twisting, and evolving in a manner that defies the conventional standards of beauty and poise. Self-mutilation, another hallmark of body horror, can be depicted through ballet as well. A dancer's graceful and expressive movements may take a disturbing turn as they inflict harm upon themselves. The integration of body horror into ballet subverts the established standards of beauty. The body, once celebrated for its beauty, becomes a canvas for exploring the darker aspects of existence, challenging viewers to grapple with the coexistence of beauty and horror.

As Nina obsessively strives for perfection in her role as the Swan Queen, her body undergoes a deeply disturbing metamorphosis. The film masterfully captures the torment of her feet, which become covered in painful blisters and deformities from dancing en pointe. Her anxiety and obsession drive her to engage in acts of self-harm, such as scratching her back. These acts of self-mutilation become increasingly horrifying as the story unfolds, creating a visceral representation of her descent into psychological and physical torment underscoring the disturbing nature of her internal struggle.

Black Swan uses mirrors as a recurring motif to create an eerie and distorted reflection of Nina's self, which aligns with Lacan's mirror stage. These reflections reveal fractured identities, nightmarish doppelgängers, and a disintegration of her sense of self. Where perfection is idealized, she struggles to define herself which is rooted in a sense of lack, an inherent void or incompleteness within her, creating a void she feels she must fill. This element of distorted reflection adds depth to the horror, symbolizing her fractured psyche and the surreal, nightmarish quality of her transformation. Her transformation of the body from grace to grotesquery serves as a powerful metaphor for the sacrifice and suffering demanded in the quest for excellence in the ballet world. Her perception of self is fragmented and rooted in external validation, similar to Lacan's idea of the "Ideal-I," a self-image shaped by societal ideals and expectations.

Desire is a relationship between being and a feeling of being lacking. This feeling of being lacking is the proper way to describe it. It is not the lack of something, but rather the lack of being that causes the being to exist. Nina's identity formation becomes a crucial aspect in her desires. Her desire to embody the dual role symbolizes her quest to fill this void within her identity. Her desire for perfection, recognition, and artistic excellence is driven by this fundamental lack. Her descent into madness represents the overwhelming nature of unfulfilled desires and the struggle to reconcile the void within herself.

V. CONCLUSION

The film *Black Swan* used horror as a medium to give a vivid sense of the emotional turmoil one might face as a result of being forced to adhere to rigid gender stereotypes. Psychological horror adds to the anxieties associated with gender. These horrors explore into the inner psyche examining how cultural standards and expectations can appear as psychological distress. Gender representation in horror films is intertwined with broader cultural discussions. Horror, as a genre, reflects societal concerns and uncertainties, often mirroring the anxieties tied to changing gender roles and identities. The interplay between gender and horror is a central theme in the film *Black Swan*. The protagonist, Nina Sayers, is a ballerina whose journey embodies a struggle with gender identity. Her transformation from the innocent White Swan to the seductive Black Swan reflects her discovery of various aspects of femininity. The White Swan represents purity, innocence, and fragility, while the Black Swan symbolizes sensuality, rebellion, and assertiveness. This transformation blurs the lines between reality and her self-perception, reflecting the psychological horrors associated with gender identity conflicts.

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