

**Sexuality, Insanity and Violence: An Analysis of the Politics of Gender in
Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan***

Rafia Moienuddin Qaisar
PhD Scholar
Department of English
Aligarh Muslim University
Aligarh (UP), India

Abstract:

Black Swan (2010), directed by Darren Aronofsky was a runaway success, bagging five academy awards, including a best actress Oscar for Natalie Portman. The movie traces a young ballerina, Nina Myers, transformation from a naive, innocuous, sexually repressed and infantilized virgin – an archetypal white swan, to a malignant, lascivious, passionate, seductive, lustful, sensuous woman – the quintessential black swan. The metamorphosis that occurs in Nina's persona, and Aronofsky's handling of her character, is both problematic and questionable. This gains all the more momentum given the critical acclaim the movie has garnered. The female lead, Natalie Portman, calls it a feminist venture. I would however, argue that *Black Swan* is a highly disturbing film; not just because of the excessive violence and self-mutilation shown in the visual hallucinations of the protagonist, but also due to the sexist portrayal of the female characters and themes related to femininity. Far from being a feminist construction, *Black Swan* reflects a predominant antifeminist streak. It is a movie, structured through a male perspective and which re-establishes and re-appropriates the stereotypical norms and clichés associated with gender and sexuality.

Key Words: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Visual Pleasure, Male Gaze, Horror, Misogyny

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Cinema has gradually evolved into a ubiquitous form of art. It acts as a potent tool for implementing change and reflecting the mutable states of the society during different periods of time. Therefore it is on the cinematic screen that the gender biases of an inherently misogynistic society can be most seen to manifest themselves. A study of the language of the cinema and of the representation or misrepresentation of the female characters reveals the dominance of the masculine over the feminine and exposes the convoluted web of gender politics into play.

The life of the protagonist in the film *Black Swan* is governed by the soul motto of securing the lead in the coveted production, *Swan Lake*. Nina is informed by the lead choreographer, Thomas Leroy, that she is tailor made for the role of the white swan, which requires technical perfection, grace and delicacy, but lacks the passion required to portray the erotically desirable, sensually potent and sexually empowered black swan. What Nina then seems to need is a “letting go” and “loosening up” of the self; a coming of age; a breaking off, of the smothering bond between her and her over-bearing Freudian mother. In other words, Nina who had for so long been trapped under the influence of the maternal superego and been turned into a frigid desexualized being now needs to step into the phallic order and embrace her heterosexual desires.

Feminist film critic Laura Mulvey points out that Western cinema has been centered on the politics of gender stratification. It works through the gratification of the male gaze. She argues that a female is reduced to a mere “sexual spectacle”, to be appraised, fantasized, chastised and objectified by her socially dominant counterpart (342-243). This becomes evident right at the beginning of the film, when Thomas announces an opening of the slot for the female lead in the production, *Swan Lake*; resulting in an ugly rivalry and an aggressive vying for the spot amongst the ballerinas. Women are presented as irrational, petty, despotic objects,

competing for a “man’s” attention and approval, who is (but of course) the rational and composed over viewer of the eccentric female antagonism. The superior position occupied by him becomes even more evident in the scene, where he stands at the top of the stairs (an elevated position), and from there towers over and above the young, petite, lithe and awestruck ballerinas, desperately trying to impress him and gain his approval. Thomas, as the hegemonic male, commands complete attention, even while he continually patronizes, sexually objectifies and evaluates the dancers. He exemplifies the “bearer of the look” (Mulvey 346). The scene itself can be classified as an archetypal patriarchal construct, which upholds and propels the masculinized paradigms and relations of human sexuality.

Mulvey writes: “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (344). The woman display a certain image, conscious that their femininity is being exhibited and used to stimulate an aroused reaction from the male audiences. In this regard the mirrors play an important role in the movie. It is through them that Nina self-constructs an image of herself, not just for the viewers, but also for herself. Ironically she over constructs it and therefore ends up giving a contrived and unnatural performance. The camera, too by giving vivid, voyeuristic shots, in close ups and through different angles, of Thomas groping and touching Nina’s body, performs the function of teasing the male gaze and perhaps eliciting an even more erotic response.

Also problematic in the movie, is the lesbian encounter between Lily and Nina. Its depiction is praiseworthy, since it works to increase the visibility of homosexual relations in a mainstream Hollywood film, challenges the conventional ideas related to human sexuality and confronts the taboos attached with sexual transgressions; however, what undermines the radical nature of this encounter is its furtiveness and also the fact that it appears to be a projecting of male fantasy onto female figures – a fantasy realized through a tryst between a pair of beautiful lesbian women. Further the fact that Lily mocks Nina about it the next day calling it a “les-y wet dream”, once again re-appropriates the regressive idea of lesbianism as something abnormal, unnatural and queer. The unreal, ambiguous and hallucinatory nature of the encounter fuels the fantasy element for the males and also equates gayism with mental illness. This led feminist critics like Campbell and Carilli to label *Black Swan* as a “deeply homophobic and sexist film”.

Black Swan highlights the extensive policing and severe expectations to which women’s bodies are subjected to because they seem to pose a threat in a world dominated by patriarchal ideologies. The women themselves, having internalized the patriarchal norms of a claustrophobic misogynistic society, are active participants in this process of transmuting their bodies from their natural state, to conform to the dictates of the masculine world around them. This self-objectification to which they subject themselves is even more problematic than the one they are

subjected to. The mirrors present in Nina's home, in the studio and various other reflecting surfaces, can be seen as means to self-monitor and self-objectify. An example of the denial of the feminine body to rejoice in its natural grace and beauty is seen in the tragic and pathetic case of Beth, played by Winona Ryder. The film displays contempt for her as she has grown "old" and is unable to play the role of an audience magnet any more. She is mocked as being "menopausal", even though she is only in her 30s. Beth's existence is shown to be one-dimensional. The only sphere from where she can derive any source of self-worth is that of the ballerina world, but she is replaced in favor of a fresher face. Unable to handle her retirement she throws herself in front of a bus and ends up at the hospital in a mutilated condition. From Nina's role-model, she gets transformed into a psychotic monstrous image of her hallucinations. Thus, in *Black Swan* we see, "a cultural, symbolical world with opportunities, very narrowly defined, to obtain heroism, within a context of meaning conferring, presumably death denying world view" (Goldenberg 112).

The only person in the movie who is able to transcend the narrowness of this world and its rigorous norms is Lily – a confident, sensual and passionate woman, comfortable with her sexuality. From the moment Lily enters the movie, she poses a very tangible threat to Nina. Her arrival coincides with the gradual unraveling of Nina's mind and her succumbing to her violent and destructive paranoia. Lily is the quintessential black swan – the evil lustful twin of the white swan. Lily's role in the movie is to portray the "double" or "doppelganger" of Nina. There is a constant submerging of their identities, which reaffirms Aronofsky's belief that sexuality cannot be reduced in dichotomies of black and white; blackness and whiteness, innocence and lust, moral and amoral, continually overlap. A classic example of this can be seen during the sexual encounter between Nina and Lily: when Nina gazes up at Lily, she imagines her transforming into an image of herself – this is a clear indicator of Nina's paranoia and also of her final metamorphosis into her counterpart - the black swan. Nina's dazzling performance as the black Swan, at the end, a feat that earns her a standing ovation and her passionate kissing of Thomas, an act irreconcilable with the white swan, is further proof of the fact that her metamorphosis is complete and absolute.

The difference between Lily and Nina becomes even more evident when we see Lily eating a hamburger without cringing or feeling guilty, while Nina displays an almost despotic fear of food. There are clear indications that she is a bulimic and suffers from anorexia nervosa. Eating disorders of these natures are often prone to result in psychological ailments like schizophrenia and paranoia, as we see in the case of Nina. The society attunes women in such a way that without even realizing it they become victims of an excessively look obsessed culture, which molds them to into narcissistic beings, fixated upon achieving the perfect body. We are continually bombarded with images of skinny, malnourished, starved, emaciated, airbrushed models and they become idols to young women. These appear to be unfortunate symptoms of a

highly misogynistic culture, where women are treated as mere sexed up bodies. What women must realize is that in objectifying themselves, they give up on living fully; an excessive preoccupation with appearance diminishes lived experience. Nina's death in the movie can in fact be interpreted as, "an act of distancing oneself from one's natural body physique to achieve bodily perfection" (Goldenberg 113). But perfection is much more than the physicality of appearances, it's something felt and experienced. Throughout the movie, Nina strives for perfection but this awareness comes to her only at the end when she says, "I felt it. I was perfect".

Another classic trope used in *Black Swan*, is that of the female as a monstrous figure, who suffers a lack. This has been used since time immemorial in Western cinema, in movies like the *Exorcist*, *Gingersnaps* and *Carrie*. It takes its basis and shape from Freud's psychoanalytic theory related to gender differentiation. Freud posits that the female identity is created at the moment she realizes that she lacks a phallic symbol. She thus finds this difference to be a "ground of her inferiority", one that according to Freud, she is never able to recover from. For the boy on the other hand, the absence of a penis in a creature so similar to him, solicits horror, and the girl becomes synonymous to a monstrous figure, embodying the threat of castration. Over the years many feminist critics, have repudiated and challenged the Freudian theories, for the reductive stance they take on women³. A woman's identity cannot be considered to be constructed and centered on a masculine symbol and prerogative. *Black Swan* instead of questioning or problematizing the Freudian analysis reaffirms it. Nina's body is constructed as a source of horror, simply because of its feminine form. Diane Mortimer writes that in *Black Swan*, "the breaking of bodies can be read as a portrayal of the fear of castration that threatens boys when they view the young girl as a figure who has lost her penis" (5). Since the beginning of the movie, even before she becomes a prima ballerina, Nina is shown to be at odds with her body. There is repeated bleeding and breaking of many of the phallic body parts – toes are broken, fingers crack, legs shatter - and there is incessant scratching and vomiting.

Barbara Creed, in *The Monstrous Feminine*, had theorized that from being a passive symbol of castration, women can get transformed into self-empowering agents posing the threat of castration - a tendency displayed by Reagan in *Exorcist*. In *Black Swan* however, any such subtext seems to be absent. When Nina stabs herself at the end and is seen removing a shard of glass from her intestine, she does turn into a castrating agent, if we take the shard of glass to signify a castrated phallus, however rather than castrating the patriarchal male, Thomas, whose masculinity should have been the focus of inquiry, she castrates herself - a woman - thereby denying any opportunity of female redemption. Nina also displays symptoms of penis envy; the objects she steals from Beth's room – a lipstick and a filer - have an uncanny resemblance to the phallic symbol. They once again reemphasize her desire for a penis.

Nina's death at the end can be read in symbolic terms as a punishment for transgressing the conventional hetero-normative paradigms of the society - she is unable to conform to the domestic and reproductive ideals, traditionally ascribed to women by the patriarchal world; she represses her sensuality and completes her sexual transgression by desiring a homosexual relation rather than a heterosexual one. She is punished then for not "using her genitals in conventional ways" (Ritzenhoff and Randall 129). Sexual revolutions that have empowered woman and endowed them with rights to select their sexual preferences and life partner, are completely lacking in Nina's case.

I have, in this paper attempted to highlight some problematic aspects of *Black Swan*, and analyze them from a feminist perspective. Whether it is through the characterization of Thomas, the typical patriarch, the depiction of lesbian relations, portrayal of female characters, or even the ending, the film raises serious questions and apprehensions in the viewer's mind. It seems to uphold some very regressive, masculinized and redundant notions, associated to femininity. The issue gains greater resonance owing to the critical acclaim and popular support that the film has enjoyed all over. Does this imply that mainstream Hollywood cinema has become apathetic to the feminine and other hitherto marginalized sections of the society? Though it seems early to come to this dire conclusion and yet, the problem requires some serious retrospection and evaluation.

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