

Self and Subjectivity of Bruce Wayne in Christopher Nolan's The Dark Knight Trilogy**Madhurantika Sunil**

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Abstract

Cinema as a medium of expression encapsulates within itself the shades of life, the bright and dull colours. It has the representation of abundance of emotions, sentiments, and feelings, it is this that makes it close to life. Thus, not only becoming the source of entertainment, but also a place for catharsis. Cinema engages questions concerning subjectivity by the conventional method of characterization. The character becomes the tool to communicate the different facets of self and subjectivity. The present paper takes *The Dark Knight trilogy* by Christopher Nolan as the basis to understand self and subjectivity of Bruce Wayne. It is about the idea to recount the journey of a young boy to a man who has learned from the experiences of his life. In due process imbibed the values and virtues that make him Bruce Wayne. The idea is to explore the arc of Batman as another side of Bruce Wayne, in the frame that the virtues learned by Bruce Wayne finds its expression in Batman. The paper implies philosophical ideas of existentialism and psychoanalysis to elucidate the trope of self and subjectivity implicitly embedded in *The Dark Knight trilogy*.

Keywords: Self, Subjectivity, The Dark Knight trilogy, Existentialism, Psychoanalysis.**Introduction**

“What films reflect are not so much explicit credos as psychological dispositions- those deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness”.

- Siegfried Kracauer

The world of cinema is a landscape that paints the picture of life on the big screen. It has appeal to each and every individual's senses of seeing, hearing, and feeling, thereby making

its space in the collective unconscious of the civilization. The cinema is blessed with an abundance of emotions, sentiments, and feelings, becomes a source of entertainment as well as catharsis. The characters in the films work as a replica of the reality of the journey of self and subjectivity of an individual in the world, thus making them innately connected with a sense of unity. The films can catch the psychological as well as existential truth of lives being led by people makes it closer to its audience.

Now, the question arises that how one understands the idea of the psychological and existential truth of life. For this, one would need to look into the theories of psychoanalysis and existentialism. The school of thought of psychoanalysis founded by Freud and added in its epistemic texture through the works of Jacques Lacan, Carl Gustav Jung etc., explores the inner realities of the psyche, probing into the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious layers of mind, that plays an important role in the formation of the Individual. The philosophy of Existentialism that has its roots in Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer's writings, found its prominence at the events of two apocalyptic wars that not only changed the geography but also had a profound effect on the intellectual thought process. Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* and Sartre's declaration of "*Existence Precedes Essence*" stood for that man is the maker of his destiny. The major ideas of this philosophy deal with Humankind's meaninglessness, purposelessness, anger, angst, basically suggesting how to deal with them.

Christopher Nolan, one of the most successful directors in the Hollywood in the 21st Century. He has to his credit films like: - *Memento* (2000), *Prestige* (2006), *Inception* (2010), *Interstellar* (2014), *The Dark Knight Trilogy*, etc. Nolan as a director is appreciated for providing a reboot to the DC comic Batman Franchise and turning it into one of the most successful superhero films. All three films of the trilogy, namely, *Batman Begins* (BB) in 2005, *The Dark Knight* (TDK) in 2008, and *The Dark Knight Rises* (TDKR) in 2012. BB charts the world of young Bruce Wayne aged eight to his becoming Batman. TDK sketches the epitome of the identity of Batman, paints the struggles and pros and cons of the masked crusader. TDKR the concluding film of the trilogy tells the story of "Symbol" that Bruce Wayne eventually is successful in carving through his Batman.

The "caped crusader" (TDK 21:14), "A silent Guardian" (TDK 2:24:19), "The Dark Knight" (TDK 2:24:25) has been understood in terms of a moral character, a personality that takes on the criminal world head on without any fear. An eccentric billionaire, who has access to

advanced technological tools, that have become part of his identity, so much so that it has been argued in terms of a cyborg, an outstanding example of a postmodern self, that has its human values intertwined with mechanical tools to form an “authentic” identity.

The Present research tries to bring together the phenomenon of the growth of Bruce Wayne through the three films, elucidating the struggles, learning the skills of combat, realizing the meaning of Justice, how it is different from Revenge, falling, failing only to stand up again, eventually to see the light beyond the cave.

Batman Begins:

A young Bruce with his parents Dr Thomas Wayne and Martha Wayne, living in Wayne Manor is a happy child without any worries. One fine day, while playing with his friend Rachael, he falls in an open shaft, which is deep, he is in dark, encounters Bats, that instil sense of fear in him. This sequence in the film allows the audience to have a glimpse of the psyche of a child, who is not wishing to be alone and in dark, only for the reason that he cannot see anything. It is a common understanding that what one is not able to see fears it the most. This instillation of fear in Bruce makes him awry of Bats. In the opera scene where the actors are dressed as Bats, he is reminded of his fear, wishing to escape, and he comes out of the show with his parents in the dark alley. Here, in this alley his parents are murdered in cold blood by the hands of Joe Chill, Bruce is devastated, and goes through a psychological trauma, that turns his life completely. Bruce feels guilty, as he says to Alfred, “it is my fault. If I had not got scared all this would have never happened. It was because of me. I killed my parents.” (BB 16:35-16:40)

As time passes by, he learns to bury his guilt under the garb of anger and is focused on taking revenge. The defence mechanism of ‘Repression’ is used by Bruce, wherein he represses his emotion of guilt through the emotion of anger. His desire for revenge comes from his sense of justice which is about blood for blood. He plans to murder his parent’s killer, but he is denied that as Joe Chill is shot by someone else, leaving him in an abyss and with a sense of restlessness. In the entire process of growing up, he had his purpose of life as revenge, but that purpose is gone, he is left bewildered, confused, and life seems to have lost its meaning for him. This leads him to an existential crisis, and to again have the purpose of his existence,

he moves into the world of criminals, to understand them better, to take them head on, and to make the world a better place. In the absence of the original target, he shifts his target to the crime mob, and this in psychological terms is known as displacement. Suppasit Kiatpattanaom defines displacement as, “ is the process where one redirects his or her impulse towards a more possible target because the original target is either unreachable or unavailable.” (Kiatpattanaom, 24)

After years of wondering, he meets his master Henry Ducard, from the League of Shadows, an organization that has the rule to do what is necessary to curb evil. Ducard becomes his spiritual guru, father as well as master, he trains him in martial arts, teaches him to utilize his anger in a better way, and more or less turns him into a human weapon against crime. He becomes the role model for Bruce. Bruce initially thought to follow the League but parts his way with them upon learning that they are to destroy Gotham, his hometown. He vows to protect the city and its people, upon his return to the city, he takes on the mask of BATMAN, the caped crusader.

Bruce’s choice to become Batman in a way defines who he is; his essence as well as his sense of self. This goes on to echo the existential idea, that man defines his existence through his actions. Further, the film *Batman Begins* has an iconic line, “It’s not who you are underneath that matters. It’s what you do that defines you” (BB 1:11:09 – 1:11:13) resonating with the existential thought process. Bruce in the form of batman fights the crime in the city of Gotham, his ally in the persona of batman is darkness, he takes help of the theatricality and deception to make his enemies feel fear. The people of Gotham see him as their hero. This is only the beginning of dual lives, Bruce Wayne, in the daytime is an eccentric billionaire and a playboy; a whimsical individual who is in wine and women. In the night, he is a vigilante [as often referred to as in the film] who takes on the criminal world without a second thought. This dual identity results in a divided self, that has its pros and cons. The great love of his life, Ms. Rachel Dawes, makes it clear, that she cannot love both Bruce as well as Batman, and they can only be together when Bruce would no longer need Batman.

The Dark Knight:

The second installment of the trilogy portrays the ultimate challenge to Bruce Wayne as Batman in the form of his nemesis, the villain Joker. Both Batman and Joker play mind games, still Joker is beyond comprehension, he is someone with no origin, no backstory, no reason whatsoever, that is why he is Joker in the first place. What about Joker then, he has identified himself as the force of chaos and anarchy for the city of Gotham in contrast to Bruce Wayne's mantle of Batman that is for peace and harmony. These are two opposing forces, laws in physics suggest opposites attract, indeed Joker and Batman do attract, to the extent that Joker says, "You Complete me", "what would I do without you. You and I, we are destined to do this forever."(TDK 2:14:08) The attraction proves to be fatal, as it causes many casualties. Rachael dies, with her the hope of Bruce's normal life dies too and he becomes a recluse. Harvey Dent, "The White Knight" (TDK17:56), becomes a fallen character, the villain "Two- faced"(TDK), and goes on a killing rampage, leaving everything to the idea of chance. With Harvey's Fall, Bruce's way out from the persona of Batman comes to a close. The city of Gotham has to be saved, hope must sustain, and thereby Batman decides to take the fall in place of Dent. Thus, the prophecy mentioned by Dent, "Either You die as a Hero or live long enough to see Yourself become a Villain" (TDK 20:54 – 20:57) is expressed in Harvey's death who receives the caricature of Hero, and Batman breathing embodies Villain. Thus, Bruce delves into a leap of faith, for the sake of the people of Gotham and embraces the inauthentic self.

The Dark Knight Rises:

It has been eight years since the deaths of Rachael and Harvey, and Bruce has closed himself down in his room in his Wayne manor. He is in deep grief and is an individual without any will. Previously, Batman had taken the fall for Dent, and blamed it on himself, thus leading the cops to hunt him down and to escape he became underground. Batman suffered a setback, but Bruce Wayne did too, not only in the form of Racheal and Harvey but also his company Wayne enterprise that is running into losses.

The theft done by Selina Kyle, a cat burglar[wherein she had stolen, his fingerprints as well the pearl necklace that belonged to his mother] compels him to renew contact with the

outside world. This renewed contact, leads him to a mercenary Bane who has been planning the destruction of Gotham city in the sewers. He realises, that he needs to be Batman again, and thus moves to put on the suit. Alfred, his butler, his confidante, is not happy about his decision. He says, “And you can just strap up your leg and put your mask on. But that doesn’t make You what You were.” (TDKR 40:31-40:36) An important statement that hints that Bruce has aged in the last eight years, does not have that agility of his youth, thereby, he cannot be what he was. This leads the audience to understand that the formation of the Self is a continuous process, that happens because of the choices that one makes, and this element of choice is an integral part of existential philosophy.

Bruce chooses to be Batman again and to go outside and fight, only to fail as the head to head combat with Bane results in a fatal loss. Bane breaks his back and imprisons him in a prison identified as Lazarus Pit, a living hell on earth. There, he says that he will not let Bruce die until and unless the city of Gotham is destroyed, everyday there is a live telecast in his prison cell of the degeneration of his beloved city, that breaks him emotionally, psychologically as well as spiritually. It is in this deep darkness, that he finds his will again, to rise, he recuperates, and comes out of the prison alive and well. Bane is shocked, “I broke you. How Have You come Back?” (TDKR 2:16:49-2:16:52) This comeback is of a new Bruce Wayne, who is ready to sacrifice everything, even his life, and happily embrace death. He defeats Bane, saves the city from the nuclear bomb, by taking it outside the city with his life at stake, he supposedly dies in that mission. Simon De Beauvoir in her *The Ethics of Ambiguity* writes, “The death of an individual is not a failure if it is integrated into a project which surpasses the limits of life” (Beauvoir, 40)

Conclusion:

Through the three films, it can be said that the self of Bruce Wayne, had been fragmented, fractured. One fragment of which is of a broken child, who had lost his parents, an orphan. The child has the feelings of anger, regret, as well as sorrow. Another fragment of a young man, who wished for a normal life with the love of his life. Another fragment of an alternate self, i.e. of Batman, a symbol of justice, a man burdened with responsibilities who takes on himself to clean his beloved city, to get rid of the organized crime. The process of subjectivity in case of Bruce Wayne is dominated by the environment in Gotham city, his close friends, Alfred, James Gordon, Rachel Dawes, and Harvey Dent. Even the enemies of

batman, played an important role in the construction of self of Bruce Wayne. Ra's Al Ghul, Joker, and Bane, all of these villains appear as mirror opposites of Wayne's ideals, and virtues. They work as a foil to his character, thus forming a holistic picture.

In the end credits, of the final film TDKR, Bruce Wayne is alive and begins a new life with Selina Kyle, as they are seen in the café in Florence, Italy. It is interesting to note that Bruce Wayne is officially dead, as it is shown his gravestone, and Commissioner Gordon reading the last lines of Charles Dicken's novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known." (TDKR 2:32:18-2:32:35) These lines express the freedom of Bruce Wayne from the identities of Batman as well as of an eccentric billionaire. He is now no more a subject of press and media attention in any form. He is now Bruce Wayne with an ordinary life that he always had desired for himself.

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