



Necrophobia and Thanatophobia in *Luca*: A Psychoanalytical Reading

Aarcha J Prakash

Assistant Professor on Contract, Department of English, Sree Narayana College, Kollam

aarchajprakash99@gmail.com

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22077125>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Received: 25-06-2026

Accepted: 19-07-2026

Published: 20-08-2026

Keywords:

Psychoanalysis, Luca, Necrophobia, Thanatophobia, Freud, Malayalam Cinema, Trauma, Art Therapy

ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of necrophobia and thanatophobia in the Malayalam film *Luca* (2019), directed by Arun Bose, through the lens of Freudian psychoanalytic theory. The film presents the psychological struggles of its protagonist, Luca, whose childhood trauma shapes his persistent fear of death and dead bodies. Employing qualitative textual analysis, the study explores how repression, displacement, and unconscious conflicts influence the protagonist's behaviour and emotional responses. The research argues that Luca's artistic expression functions as a therapeutic mechanism, enabling him to cope with traumatic memories and psychological distress. Furthermore, the study highlights the significance of cinema as a medium for representing complex mental health issues and creating public awareness of anxiety disorders. By integrating psychoanalytic concepts with film analysis, the paper demonstrates that *Luca* provides a nuanced portrayal of trauma, death anxiety, and emotional healing, thereby contributing to contemporary Malayalam cinema's engagement with psychological themes.

Introduction

Cinema has evolved into one of the most influential forms of artistic and cultural expression, reflecting the psychological, social, and emotional complexities of human life. Contemporary films increasingly explore

Disclaimer: The opinions, interpretations, conclusions, recommendations, analyses, and statements expressed in this research article are solely those of the author(s) and do not reflect the views, policies, or positions of the Publisher, Chief Editor, Editors, Editorial Board, Reviewers, or their affiliated institutions. The author(s) are solely responsible for ensuring the originality, authenticity, and integrity of the manuscript and for ensuring that it is free from plagiarism, AI-generated content, copyright infringement, data falsification, and any other form of academic misconduct.



mental health and psychological disorders, allowing audiences to understand emotional experiences through visual storytelling. Among Indian regional cinemas, Malayalam cinema has gained recognition for presenting realistic narratives that address complex human emotions and psychological conflicts.

Arun Bose's *Luca* (2019) is a significant contribution to this trend. The film narrates the story of Luca, a gifted artist whose life is shaped by traumatic childhood experiences that result in severe necrophobia and thanatophobia. These psychological conditions influence his relationships, artistic creativity, and perception of life and death. Rather than portraying mental illness as mere spectacle, the film presents trauma with emotional depth and psychological realism.

This article employs Freudian psychoanalytic theory to examine the protagonist's unconscious conflicts, repression, displacement, and anxiety. Freud argues that unresolved childhood trauma often manifests in adulthood through irrational fears and neurotic behaviour. Luca's persistent fear of death and dead bodies illustrates these psychoanalytic mechanisms while simultaneously demonstrating the therapeutic role of artistic expression.

The study aims to analyse how Luca represents death anxiety and psychological trauma through cinematic techniques and character development. It also investigates the role of art as a coping mechanism that enables the protagonist to negotiate emotional suffering. Ultimately, this research contributes to film studies by demonstrating how Malayalam cinema effectively integrates psychoanalytic concepts into narrative cinema and raises awareness about mental health through artistic representation.

Literature Review

Psychoanalytic film criticism has become one of the most influential approaches in contemporary film studies. Drawing upon the theories of Sigmund Freud, psychoanalytic criticism examines the unconscious motivations of characters and the symbolic meanings embedded within cinematic narratives. Freud proposed that unresolved childhood experiences shape adult personality through mechanisms such as repression, displacement, and anxiety. These concepts have been widely applied to literary and cinematic texts to explain the psychological behaviour of fictional characters.

Previous studies on psychological representations in cinema have demonstrated that films can effectively portray anxiety disorders, trauma, and emotional conflicts while simultaneously educating audiences about mental health. Malayalam cinema, in particular, has increasingly explored themes of psychological distress, identity, memory, and trauma through realistic storytelling. Films such as *Manichithrathazhu*, *Athiran*, and



Memories have attracted scholarly attention for their depiction of mental illness and psychological complexity.

Although Luca has received critical appreciation for its visual aesthetics, narrative structure, and artistic symbolism, limited scholarly attention has been given to its psychoanalytic dimensions. Existing reviews primarily discuss the film's cinematography, romance, and suspense, while its representation of necrophobia and thanatophobia remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by examining the protagonist's psychological condition through Freudian psychoanalysis and demonstrating how artistic expression functions as a therapeutic response to trauma.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on textual analysis. The primary source of analysis is the Malayalam film Luca (2019), directed by Arun Bose. The research interprets the narrative, characterization, dialogues, visual symbolism, and cinematic techniques through the framework of Freudian psychoanalytic theory.

The study particularly focuses on Freud's concepts of repression, displacement, unconscious conflict, anxiety, and defence mechanisms. These theoretical concepts are employed to analyse the protagonist's fear of death (thanatophobia) and fear of dead bodies (necrophobia). In addition, the study examines the therapeutic role of artistic creativity in reducing psychological trauma.

Secondary sources include books and scholarly works on psychoanalysis, film theory, abnormal psychology, and art therapy. Relevant journal articles and critical reviews are also consulted to contextualize the discussion within existing scholarship. By combining psychoanalytic theory with qualitative film analysis, the study investigates how Luca represents trauma, psychological healing, and death anxiety within contemporary Malayalam cinema.

Analysis and Discussion

Psychoanalytic Representation of Trauma

The central psychological conflict in Luca originates from childhood trauma. Freud maintained that unresolved traumatic experiences are repressed into the unconscious, where they continue to influence behaviour throughout life. Luca's traumatic memories of witnessing his father's suicide and later losing his mother become the foundation of his psychological instability. Rather than confronting these painful experiences directly, his mind represses them, allowing them to reappear through irrational fears associated



with death. This process illustrates Freud's theory that repressed memories often manifest in symbolic forms, producing anxiety disorders and neurotic behaviour.

The film effectively demonstrates how early emotional deprivation affects adult personality. Luca grows up without parental care and emotional security, leaving him psychologically vulnerable. His fear of death is therefore not merely a reaction to mortality but an expression of unresolved emotional suffering rooted in childhood loss.

Necrophobia and Thanatophobia

The film distinguishes between two interconnected psychological conditions: necrophobia and thanatophobia. Necrophobia refers to an irrational fear of corpses, funerals, cemeteries, and objects associated with death, whereas thanatophobia denotes an intense fear of one's own mortality and non-existence.

Several scenes portray Luca's panic attacks when confronted with dead bodies, dead animals, or memories of death. His reactions include trembling, nausea, suffocation, and emotional withdrawal, all of which correspond to recognised symptoms of anxiety disorders. The recurrence of these symptoms demonstrates that his fears are unconscious responses rather than rational decisions.

Thanatophobia appears throughout the narrative as Luca constantly anticipates death. His fear extends beyond physical death to the possibility of losing meaning, relationships, and identity. Thus, the film presents death anxiety as a persistent psychological burden that governs the protagonist's everyday existence.

Defence Mechanisms and the Unconscious

Freud argued that the ego protects itself from psychological pain through defence mechanisms. Among these, repression and displacement are particularly evident in Luca. Instead of confronting the actual trauma of losing his parents, Luca unconsciously transfers his fear to external objects associated with death. Consequently, ordinary encounters involving death trigger intense emotional reactions.

The unconscious mind therefore governs much of Luca's behaviour. His anger, isolation, and impulsive actions are not signs of moral weakness but manifestations of unresolved internal conflict. The film successfully illustrates how unconscious psychological processes influence conscious behaviour, thereby validating psychoanalytic interpretations of human personality.



Art as Psychological Healing

One of the film's most distinctive features is its portrayal of artistic creativity as therapy. Luca transforms discarded materials into meaningful works of art, symbolising his attempt to reconstruct a fractured emotional life. Art becomes both an escape from trauma and a means of expressing emotions that cannot easily be verbalised.

From the perspective of art therapy, creative expression facilitates emotional release and psychological healing. Luca's paintings, sculptures, and installations function as representations of his unconscious fears while simultaneously allowing him to process them. His artistic identity therefore becomes inseparable from his psychological recovery.

The film also suggests that healing requires interpersonal relationships. Niharika's emotional support enables Luca to confront aspects of his trauma that he could not face alone. Their relationship demonstrates that empathy, understanding, and affection complement artistic expression in promoting psychological resilience.

Symbolism and Cinematic Representation

The visual language of Luca significantly enhances its psychological narrative. Dark colour palettes, abandoned spaces, fragmented imagery, and recycled artistic installations symbolise the protagonist's fractured mental state. The recurring motifs of paintings, photographs, and graffiti represent memory, identity, and emotional resistance.

The narrative structure, presented through flashbacks and diary entries, mirrors the fragmented nature of traumatic memory. Rather than following a linear sequence, the story unfolds gradually, reflecting the way unconscious memories emerge into conscious awareness. Such cinematic techniques reinforce the psychoanalytic framework of the film.

Contribution to Malayalam Cinema

Luca represents an important development in contemporary Malayalam cinema by addressing psychological disorders with sensitivity and realism. Unlike conventional portrayals that sensationalise mental illness, the film humanises its protagonist and emphasises the relationship between trauma, creativity, and healing.

The integration of psychoanalytic theory within a mainstream narrative demonstrates cinema's potential to educate audiences about mental health while maintaining artistic excellence. Consequently, Luca



contributes to broader discussions on trauma, anxiety disorders, emotional resilience, and the therapeutic value of art.

Conclusion

Luca presents a compelling cinematic exploration of necrophobia and thanatophobia through the life of its protagonist, whose traumatic childhood experiences continue to shape his psychological reality. By employing Freudian psychoanalytic theory, this study demonstrates that Luca's fear of death and dead bodies is not an isolated mental condition but the consequence of unresolved childhood trauma, repression, and unconscious conflict. The film effectively illustrates how anxiety disorders influence human behaviour, relationships, and personal identity.

The analysis further establishes that artistic creativity functions as a therapeutic mechanism through which Luca confronts and negotiates his psychological suffering. His paintings, sculptures, and installations symbolize emotional expression and resilience, reflecting the healing potential of art therapy. Similarly, the emotional support provided by Niharika highlights the importance of empathy and interpersonal relationships in overcoming trauma.

Beyond its psychological depth, Luca contributes significantly to contemporary Malayalam cinema by portraying mental health issues with realism and sensitivity. The film encourages audiences to recognise psychological disorders as conditions requiring understanding rather than social stigma. Consequently, Luca demonstrates that cinema can serve as both an artistic medium and a powerful instrument for promoting mental health awareness.

Future research may examine similar psychological representations in contemporary Indian cinema through interdisciplinary approaches involving psychoanalysis, trauma studies, and cultural studies. Such research would further enrich film scholarship while expanding discussions on mental health in visual culture.

References

1. Barry, P. (2017). *Beginning theory: An introduction to literary and cultural theory* (4th ed.). Manchester University Press.
2. Bose, A. (Director). (2019). *Luca* [Film]. Stories & Thoughts Productions.
3. Bourne, E. J. (2011). *The anxiety and phobia workbook* (5th ed.). New Harbinger Publications.
4. Buckland, W., & Branigan, E. (Eds.). (2014). *The Routledge encyclopedia of film theory*. Routledge.



5. Butcher, J. N., Hooley, J. M., & Mineka, S. (2019). *Abnormal psychology*. Pearson India.
6. Freud, S. (1955). Thoughts for the times on war and death. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 14). Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1915)
7. Peurifoy, R. Z. (2005). *Anxiety, phobia and panic*. Grand Central Life & Style.
8. Slayton, S. C., D'Archer, J., & Kaplan, F. (2010). Outcome studies on the efficacy of art therapy: A review of findings. *Art Therapy*, 27(3), 108–118.
9. Hanson, Robin. “Fear of Death and Muddled Thinking – It Is So Much Worse Than You Think”. N.p. Aug. 2005. Web. 01 Dec. 2019.
10. Peurifoy, Reneau Z. *Anxiety, Phobia, and Panic*. California: Grand Central Life & Style; Revised Edition, 2005. Print.
11. R, Manoj Kumar. “Luca movie review: A spiritual resistance against death”. *The Indian Express*. N.p. 30 June 2019. Web. 9 Dec 2019.
12. Slayton, Sarah.C, Jeanne D’Archer, Frances Kaplan. “Outcome Studies on the Efficacy of Art Therapy: A Review of Findings. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*”. N.p. 22 Apr. 2011. Web. 27 Nov. 2019.