

Literature as a Reflection and Critique: A study of Psychological and Scientific Aspects in Blake Crouch's Dark Matter

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Abstract—Literature is an extension of psychology when it comes to character analysis, reflection of self, stream of consciousness and element of being.

This paper studies the impact of our thoughts and actions on our sub-conscious mind focusing on Blake Crouch's best-selling novel "Dark Matter". Analyzing it in the aspects of our mind and its reflection on the world around us. Through the novel's fluid narrative, it explores the themes of identity and the self, nature of reality, choices and their consequences. "Dark Matter" serves as the lens that allows us to see inside our mind and how the keys of our emotions open equally radiant doors of life. The novel ushers you to think how our mind functions and how it affects the roots of our actions.

The paper aims to reveal the scientific and psychological anecdotes from "Dark Matter" with its relevance to the contemporary times and present a visionary and uniformly constructed study on human actions driven by emotions and thoughts but most importantly what goes behind it.

Index Terms—Human Mind, Stream of Consciousness, Dark Matter, Identity, Reflection of self

I. INTRODUCTION

Psychological aspects started to dwell in literature with the beginning of post-modernism. One of the most famous works that gave the style a head start was, "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" (1886) by R.L Stevenson, it brought the psychological and doppelganger fiction beautifully in front of the readers and since then the psychological aspects became quite popular and constructed their own space in the world of literature.

The contemporary psychological literature differentiates from the subject of psychology via a thin line. Literature delivers you the psychological aspects

through characters, plots, events and situations with the outcome each aspect brings rather than stating upon a fact as it is. Additionally, contemporary texts examine the psychological consequences of technology, rapid social change, and existential uncertainty. Overall, contemporary literature treats psychological experience as both a mirror of societal anxieties and a critique of the conditions shaping the modern mind.

In literature, reflection means that the work of literature represents or reflects the realities of life whereas critique comes where literature questions, challenges or criticizes the very realities it reflects. "Nobel laureate Roger Penrose has been theorizing for decades about connections between human consciousness, the winnowing of infinity down to the one reality we perceive, and the most enduring mysteries of quantum mechanics. "The physics that's coming out now does support, more and more, that reality is a creation of our mind. Reality does not exist independently from observation, from awareness. Biocentric beings create reality," Crouch says. "A lot of this stuff was far less en vogue when I was writing the book. It's bananas. It's so mind-melting when you really think about it." (Breznican, 2024).

Dark Matter (2016) by Blake Crouch mixes high-concept science with raw, human emotion fear, longing, love, and the desperate need to belong. In the middle of all the chaos and alternate realities, Dark Matter becomes a story about what truly makes us who we are, and what we're willing to fight for when everything familiar slips away.

Blake crouch's Dark Matter engages with all the psychological dimensions that are central to the contemporary literature while reflecting the modern mind and at the same time critiquing the pressures

shaping it. Through the plot of its multiverse premise, the novel reflects fragmented identity, existential uncertainty and brain fog that facilitates the present-day psychological experiences. The novel critiques the thought of limitless potential, advancing technology and the constant pursuit of a different version of yourself by revealing how such aspects can demolish the self and destruct emotional grounding. *Dark Matter* does not extensively relate with the scientific speculation but gently brushes upon it with its story. At its core, it uses the narrative of parallel realities to highlight mental strain, anxiety, dilemma and search of meaning that defines the contemporary consciousness. As a result, it makes the novel a powerful literary work where psychological reflection and critique converge.

Dark Matter has attracted attention for its scientific imagination and multiverse narrative but it does not emphasize on the representation of the modern psyche and that is where the research gap arises. The novel does not connect to the larger literary movement that reflects the mental fragmentation and existential crisis in depth while also insufficiently paying attention to identity and selfhood across multiverse. This paper addresses this gap by analyzing *Dark Matter* as a work of psychological reflection and critique while critically analyzing it in the broader context of contemporary literature that foregrounds the complexities and vulnerabilities of the human mind.

II. SELFHOOD, CHOICE AND ANXIETY: A STUDY OF DARK MATTER

Selfhood enters when the novel interrogates the instability of modern self by presenting multiple versions of the protagonist “Jason Dessen”. Every version of him is different on the basis of choice he has made in his different life. Through the ambiguity of choice, Jason’s identity becomes unstable and he struggles to ascertain which version of Jason is the real one. When Jason is thrown into a world which does not belong to him but to a different version of him, he experiences confusion, displacement and loss of self, even though the world belonged to a slightly different version of himself and not to an entirely different person. The confrontation with alternate selves forces him to himself and who he is at the core. The plot finds him questioning his profession, his desires, his values and emotional attachment. All the elements that make

you, you. This repeated confrontation with alternate selves destabilizes his understanding of who he fundamentally is, pushing him into a conflict between the life he remembers and the possibilities embodied by his other versions. The novel therefore situates selfhood within a shifting, unstable space, where Jason must continuously renegotiate his identity in relation to the lives he might have lived.

Choices also depict an element of decision and possibility in the novel. The plot is rooted in a single pivotal choice that Jason made years ago, which his other versions did not, of choosing his family life over his high-profile scientific career. In the novel, the multiverse is generated by countless versions of choices that he could have made which branches into a new reality. The antagonist in the novel is essentially another version of Jason who has made different choices and now wants to reclaim what he has lost but the protagonist Jason has not. It delivers us the sense of how our mental peace is also related to the choices we make which might appear rational to us today but might appear in stark contrast in the proximate future. As he moves through these worlds of different choices, Jason is forced to confront the magnitude of his choices, recognizing how each one generates profound consequences for who he becomes. The antagonist of the story, another Jason from a different reality, embodies the path not taken, illustrating the competing weight of desire, regret, and ambition tied to the act of choosing. Through these shifting realities, choice becomes both a narrative engine and a psychological arena where competing versions of Jason struggle for the life they believe should be theirs.

Anxiety is an expression of our mundane life nowadays and so it proves to be the same for our protagonist when his world starts to crumble down under the weight of his multiple selves with multidimensional personalities. Jason’s journey generates a psychological tension that is rooted in uncertainty, dislocation and the threat posed by other Jasons competing for the same life. It delivers a sense of abandonment, a sense of being attacked by your very own self. Each new reality he enters intensifies this emotional strain, as the familiar turns uncertain and the comfortable becomes threatening. The presence of multiple Jasons competing for the same family and identity escalates this tension, transforming anxiety from a private psychological state into a pervasive sense of danger. Jason’s uncertainty about

which world is truly his own and whether he can return to it creates sustained psychological turmoil, heightening the urgency of his journey. The novel thus sustains a continuous atmosphere of anxiety as Jason navigates unstable worlds, unpredictable threats, and the looming fear of being erased by another version of himself.

III. A DUAL STUDY: REFLECTION AND CRITIQUE

- Reflection

The novel reflects various aspects through the plot. The contemporary fiction often roots itself in the lived experience of a fractured, confused and constantly evolving self. In our narrative, the protagonist, acts as a mirror to the reader's own mind. The tension between who we are and who we wish to be, and who the society wants us to become. The reflection function emerges through the protagonist's introspection, internal monologues and constant reframing of personal identity. Gradually, the character becomes the stage on which the plot unfolds the conflicts, the conflict between authenticity and performance, between self-construction and self-destruction, between desire and resignation. "Since Galileo's time, the physical sciences have leaped forward, explaining the workings of things from the tiniest quarks to the largest galaxy clusters. But explaining attributes that reside "only in consciousness"—the red of a sunset, say, or the bitter taste of a lemon—has proved far more difficult. Neuroscientists have identified a number of neural correlates of consciousness—brain states associated with specific mental states—but have not explained how matter forms minds in the first place. As philosopher Colin McGinn put it in a 1989 paper, "Somehow, we feel, the water of the physical brain is turned into the wine of consciousness." Philosopher David Chalmers dubbed this issue the "hard problem" of consciousness." (Falk 2023)

The element of estrangement intensifies the reflection. By creating a distance between the protagonist from familiar social role, relationship or moral framework the narrative serves a clearer view of the human condition. The idea of identity reflected in the novel indicates that identity is not predetermined, rather, a painful process of negotiation with the world and with one's own impulses. The reflection in the novel is not

merely a portrayal of character's psychological state but also a mirror that serves as a reflection of reader's own mind, the uncertainties and their attempts to stitch meanings in a universe that feels unanchored and flimsy.

Choice also is an anchoring point of the novel's reflection. It plays an overwhelming role in how human choices play in shaping one's existence. It presents choice not as a series of decisions that advance the plot but also as the very substance that drives our living. Characters are ushered into situations where they must decide and make a choice, not because the narrative demands it, but because it is the basis of existence. The novel mirrors the existential premise that freedom is both a privilege and a burden. The protagonist reflects that the uncomfortable truth that humans carry and cannot escape is the responsibility of choosing even when every available path seems equally uncertain. The novel portrays the weight of decision making as an intrinsic feature of life. The reflection illuminates tension between aspiration and consequence, action and regret, desire and duty.

A feeling of anxiety permeates the novel. It appears as a fundamental condition of being a human. The novel reflects anxiety as an ever-present undercurrent, one that arise from confrontation with nothingness, mortality and ambiguity of choice. The protagonist often recognizes that anxiety stems from the awareness of absolute freedom and lack of predetermined purpose. Blake Crouch presents this narrative by providing a rich imagery of cityscapes. A silent street, unattended phone booth, flickering lights in a subway and no people around. These instances reveal how anxiety covers the mundane, demonstrating that existential dread does not always announce itself dramatically. The reflection resonates with the readers because it captures the diffused pervasive nature of anxiety that many of us experience at some point. Anxiety is about meaning, direction and expectations, and the unknown.

Anxiety is also reflected as an emotion of catalyst for self-awareness. When the characters confront their fears, doubts or the possibility of leading an unexamined life, they move closer to the authenticity, the reality. The novel mirrors the notions that anxiety helps awaken one's senses and shouldn't be treated as an enemy to be eradicated.

- Critique

Beyond reflection, the novel also functions as critique. It interrogates external systems shaping human life and their effect of the human psychology. Through the protagonist's struggles with his identity, the narrative implicitly critiques the social structures that constrain the individuality. These structures can be rigid norms, institutional pressures or moralities of society, that demand conformity from an individual at the expense of their authenticity. The novel critiques how these forces push an individual in a mold, thereby limiting the capacity for genuine self-exploration.

The critique becomes evident when the protagonist encounters institutions, be it familiar, political, corporate, religious or technological, that demand obedience or compliance. The narrative exposes how such institutions regulate the behavior of the protagonist, through guilt or social reward, subtly shaping individuals into roles that feel alien to their inner selves. By depicting the protagonist's discomfort or defiance, the novel also critiques the elements where the society has imposed fixed narratives upon individuals who might otherwise find their own meaning, that their own pace.

The novel also proceeds to critique the assumption that humans are rational beings capable of controlling their destinies through reason. Existential narratives frequently show characters whose attempts to rely on logic fail in the face of emotional complexity, absurd situations, or the unpredictability of life. By presenting characters who cling onto the rational explanations in the novel yet remain unsettled, the novel critiques society's overvaluation of logic as the primary tool for navigating existence. It reveals how reason often collapses when confronted with the irrationality of emotions. The protagonist's struggle thus critiques the cultural emphasis, exposing its limitations and pointing toward the deeper, often irrational foundations of human behavior.

While critiquing the importance of choice, the novel also critiques the idea of freedom while exposing the illusions and contradictions. The characters may appear free but are bound by the invisible constraints, like social conditioning, economic structures and psychological fears. The novel moves on to critique the simplistic assumption that freedom merely involves the absence of external constraint and furthermore portrays freedom as a complex interplay between inner capacity and outer conditions. It also

critiques the contemporary obsession with self-determination by showing how too much freedom, too many choices can produce paralysis rather than empowerment. The abundance of options becomes a source of anxiety rather than empowerment. The critique becomes visible when the character attempts to live authentically but encounters contradictions within themselves a desire for freedom alongside a need for belonging, or an aspiration to transcend norms while still depending on them for meaning. These tensions reveal that authenticity is not a straightforward moral imperative but a complex and often unattainable ideal.

By portraying authenticity as elusive, the novel critiques both existential philosophies sometimes romanticized view of selfhood and contemporary culture's obsession with self-expression. It suggests that the notion of a unified, coherent identity may itself be a myth a comforting story that masks the chaotic, multifaceted nature of human experience. At its core, the existential novel critiques the absurdity of modern life the disconnect between human longing for meaning and the indifferent, often incoherent world in which individuals live. This critique emerges through depictions of alienation: from society, from one's labor, from relationships, or even from one's own emotions.

The novel critiques how modern society, with its emphasis on productivity, efficiency, and success, alienates individuals from their inner lives. Characters who feel estranged from their daily routines or social environments embody a broader critique of capitalist, bureaucratic, or technologically driven societies that prioritize function over human meaning. Their disorientation becomes a critique of how modern systems reduce individuals to roles, numbers, or instruments rather than recognizing them as complex human beings. In portraying the absurd the mismatch between human needs and the world's indifference the novel critiques the belief that life offers stable meanings or clear purposes. Instead, it exposes the chaos and unpredictability beneath the surface of ordinary existence. This critique does not necessarily advocate nihilism; rather, it challenges readers to reconsider the assumptions that structure their understanding of meaning, purpose, and value.

IV. DARK MATTER: A DOPPELGÄNGER FICTION

Doppelgänger fiction is a kind of storytelling where a character comes face-to-face with another version of themselves, someone who looks like them, thinks like them, and feels strangely familiar yet deeply unsettling. “The term of doppelgänger is deeply rooted in the earliest western literature especially in literary, philosophical, and scientific theories.” (Al-Khazaali, 708) This double isn’t just another person—it often represents the side of the character they try to ignore: their fears, their regrets, their ambitions, or the life they might have lived if they had made different choices. Meeting this “other self” shakes the character’s sense of who they are, forcing them to question what makes their identity stable or unique. Sometimes the double becomes a threat, trying to take their place or live the life they believe they deserve. While older stories used ghosts or supernatural elements to create these double, modern versions often use science or alternate realities to do the same thing. But at its heart, doppelgänger fiction remains a deeply human exploration of one simple, unsettling question: what if you met the version of yourself, you’ve always hidden or never allowed to exist?

In classical Doppelgänger Fiction like Dostoevsky’s *The Double*, Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, or Poe’s “*William Wilson*” the double represents the split within the self. He is, the shadow self, the repressed self, the morally deviant self, the unrealized or feared potential self

Dark Matter uses the multiverse to externalize this split. Jason Dessen’s doubles exist not metaphorically but as fully autonomous agents living out paths he might have taken. They are generated by choice: every decision spawns another Jason. Thus, the novel literalizes the psychological premise of the doppelgänger genre you contain multiple selves by turning possibility into physical reality.

Just like in classical doppelgänger narratives, the confrontation forces Jason to face what he has suppressed. The menacing versions of Jason (especially the one who invades his home life) represent: Ambition he let go of, Desires he refused, Darker impulses masked by family life, Resentment toward the path he chose.

This parallels the traditional motif of the double embodying the protagonist’s “unlived life,” a mirror held up to the self that destabilizes identity.

V. SCHRÖDINGER’S THEORY IN DARK MATTER

Schrödinger’s cat is one of the most famous thought experiments in quantum physics, designed by Erwin Schrödinger in 1935 to illustrate the strange and counterintuitive nature of quantum superposition. In the experiment, a cat is placed inside a sealed box with a radioactive atom, a Geiger counter, a vial of poison, and a hammer. If the atom decays, the counter triggers the hammer to break the vial and kill the cat; if it does not decay, the cat lives. Since radioactive decay is a probabilistic quantum event, the cat is considered to be both alive and dead at the same time existing in a superposition of states until an observer opens the box and forces the system into one definite outcome. What makes the idea unsettling is not just the scientific strangeness of a cat being alive and dead simultaneously, but the philosophical implication that reality itself depends on observation. There is no singular truth until someone looks. The universe, at least at the quantum level, seems to hold several potential versions of reality at once, all equally valid, all equally waiting for a moment of choice.

Blake Crouch’s *Dark Matter* takes this thought experiment and turns it into a narrative engine, a thematic foundation, and an emotional core. The novel is, in essence, a Schrödinger’s box stretched into an entire multiverse. Instead of a cat that is both alive and dead, we have a man whose life has branched into countless parallel versions of itself. Instead of an indecisive quantum atom, we have the human capacity for choice messy, emotional, uncertain, and full of regret. Crouch’s multiverse is not just a playful use of scientific theory. It is a dramatization of the central paradox of Schrödinger’s cat: that multiple outcomes of a single event do not cancel each other out but coexist simultaneously until an observer chooses one. The novel imagines what would happen if a human life worked the same way, if all the paths a person could have taken existed side by side, equally real, equally accessible, and equally terrifying. Jason Dessen, the protagonist, becomes the living embodiment of the experiment. At one point in his life, he faced a choice: continue pursuing his brilliant scientific career or

choose the quieter life of family, stability, and love. In our everyday world, that decision was final. One option lived; the other died. But in the world of Dark Matter, both choices the ambitious scientist and the devoted family man exist simultaneously, just as alive-and-dead coexist in Schrödinger's sealed box. Each version of Jason is a "cat" whose fate depends on which world is being observed.

"The idea here is that nonconscious processing utilizes quantum computing and is highly parallel in nature, while the conscious moments are like the outcomes of the preceding quantum computing. This model has been attacked on several grounds. First, it seems not to fit well with the traditional chemical models of brain functioning that until now seem to describe processes underlying mental events rather satisfactorily. Secondly, the proposal that coherent quantum events do play a fundamental role in the warm and wet environment of the brain has met a lot of opposition" (Bierman et al., 2006) What makes the novel so striking is how it transforms a scientific concept into an emotional and psychological experience. Schrödinger's cat is usually treated as an abstract paradox, something confined to textbooks or physics lectures. Crouch brings it into the realm of human feeling. Jason is not just navigating alternate universes; he is navigating alternate versions of himself versions shaped by choices he made and choices he never dared to make. If Schrödinger's cat captures the idea that reality can remain undecided, Dark Matter captures the idea that identity can be just as uncertain. We walk through life believing we are one person, living one story, but the novel suggests that beneath this sense of stability lies a superposition of possible selves, each representing a different dream, desire, or fear. The multiverse box created by Jason 2 is the literal space where these identities coexist. Inside the box, the boundary between outcomes dissolves. The Jason who stayed with Daniela and raised a child exists alongside the Jason who pursued scientific fame. The Jason who compromised his ambitions exists beside the Jason who resents that compromise. All of them are simultaneously true, just as the cat is simultaneously alive and dead. The box serves as the narrative equivalent of Schrödinger's sealed chamber: it holds all possibilities at once, suspended in uncertainty, waiting for a moment of observation or a moment of choice to collapse them into a single path.

In this sense, the theory of Schrödinger's cat also explains the psychological tension that drives Jason's journey. When he first enters the box, the worlds he encounters reflect the fragility of identity. He steps into versions of Chicago that should feel familiar but are subtly wrong: buildings are different, people behave differently, his home is not his home, and the man he is supposed to be in that world is a stranger to him. These shifts mirror the moment before the Schrödinger box is opened when reality is blurred, overlapping, indecisive. Jason becomes lost not simply in space but in possibility. The unsettling disorientation he experiences is precisely what the thought experiment emphasizes: that before observation settles things, existence can hold multiple truths that cannot be neatly separated. Jason's fear and confusion arise from being thrust into a state of superposition himself. He is not one Jason or another Jason; he is all Jasons, all at once, until he manages to find or choose the version of himself, he wants to be. This is why the emotional stakes of the novel feel so grounded despite the scientific premise. It takes the abstraction of quantum superposition and translates it into something intensely human the fear of losing oneself, of becoming unmoored, of discovering that the line between who you are and who you could have been is thinner than you imagined.

VI. CONCLUSION

Dark Matter demonstrates how contemporary literature continues to explore the psychological tensions of modern life while also questioning the cultural forces that create them. Through its focus on identity, choice, and anxiety, the novel reflects the pressures individuals face in a world overflowing with possibilities. Jason Dessen's encounters with alternate versions of himself mirror the modern struggle to maintain a stable sense of self amid constant comparison, ambition, and self-doubt. The multiverse becomes a metaphor for the emotional weight of imagining every life one could have lived.

At the same time, the novel critiques the modern obsession with optimization and the belief that more choices naturally lead to greater fulfillment. By showing the disintegration that follows limitless alternatives, Crouch exposes the psychological cost of always seeking a "better" version of life. Meaning, the

novel suggests, arises not from infinite possibilities but from the choices one commits to.

Overall, Dark Matter stands as both a reflection of contemporary psychological anxieties and a critique of the cultural ideals that intensify them.

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