

The Uncanny and Dystopian Fiction: A Psychoanalytical Reading of Ling Ma's *Severance*

Amna Naveed¹, Namra Najam², Khadija Aamir³

¹M.Phil Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Lahore, Lahore, Pakistan.

²Lecturer, Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Lahore, Lahore, Pakistan.

³Lecturer, Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Lahore, Lahore, Pakistan.

Correspondence: khadija.aamir@ell.uol.edu.pk³

ABSTRACT

Aim of the study: This research examines the expression of the Freudian uncanny in Ling Ma's novel, *Severance* and the study reveals how the novel blurs the boundary between the familiar and the strange. Candace Chen, serves as a metaphor for the issues of alienation, emotional detachment, and obsessive repetition, all of which are common in late capitalist civilizations. This study broadens our understanding of how futuristic fiction can serve as a mirror for internal human struggles.

Methodology: This research uses a qualitative analytical method to investigate the Freudian idea of the uncanny in Ling Ma's *Severance*. This analysis's primary goal is to show how unconscious urges, suppressed memories, and the resurgence of the suppressed materialize in the futuristic dystopia of *Severance*, where psychological alienation is examined against the backdrop of social breakdown and the pandemic.

Findings: By using Freudian Psychoanalysis and his theory of the uncanny, this research has proved how *Severance* deconstructs traditional conventions and narratives of the dystopian fiction and unveils deeper psychological aspects hidden under the masks of routines, memory, and identity. *Severance*. Instead of using spectacular violence or intense narrative, Ma offers a quiet horror of the stillness and repetition along with internalized collapse. The novel rejects the idea of having a great hero. It replaces it with a psychological realism that centers not on action but on numbness, emotional alienation, and subtle horrors of daily life in the modern world.

Conclusion: This study concludes that *Severance* subverts dystopian and zombie genre conventions by prioritizing psychological realism over spectacle. Through the uncanny, Ling Ma exposes how modern subjects internalize trauma and alienation, suggesting that the true dystopia lies not in societal collapse but in the persistence of emotionally hollow routines.

Keywords: Trauma, Repression, Literary Psychoanalysis, Identity, The Uncanny, *Severance*, Routine, Emotional Survival, Unconscious Fear.

Article History

Received:
October 16, 2025

Revised:
November 28, 2025

Accepted:
December 03, 2025

Online:
December 06, 2025

1. INTRODUCTION

A dystopian novel is a work of fiction that revolves around a society with severe flaws, cruelty, injustice, or horror; however, it is usually presented as ideal or systematic in the real world. It is also a subgenre of Speculative Fiction that typically explores the life of an ordinary person in an imagined society where living is a mere chore and life is unpleasant and oppressive. These kinds of narratives usually serve as a critical reflection of the world we live in and the possible consequences of current social psychological issues unfolding in real time.

Dystopia, as a distinct genre, emerged in the 20th century; however, its intellectual roots are deeper than that. In 1516, Thomas More introduced the term "Utopia," which means a place that is imagined and not real, where everything is perfect. Nothing needs to be changed in order to get praise from ordinary people or society. In contrast, the authors began to consider the failures of Utopian and dystopian writings that emerged (Claeys, 2017). Later in the 18th and 19th centuries, when urbanization, colonialism, and industrial revolutions were at their peak, early dark dystopian works emerged. For instance, Samuel Butler's famous novel *Erewhon* initially appears to be a utopia, but upon its conclusion, the narrator's utopian fantasies are stripped away. It mainly talks about the evolution of man and society and the possible horrors of machines in this world as they are feared to become self-aware. It is more precisely a satire on the Utopian world and Utopian novels (Butler, 2006/1872).

Dystopian texts typically portray all the social norms or unpleasant happenings going on in society to highlight how certain things are causing discomfort and chaos, resulting in the destruction of the peace and comfort of society. Themes that are frequently explored in such novels are dictatorship, loss of free will, environmental disaster, social decay, or significant socioeconomic imbalance. Free will is usually given up for the guise of safety or security in a dystopian world, where governments may utilize fear, surveillance, and propaganda to manipulate their population. The world always presents an uneven picture psychological issues unfolding in real time.

Pandemics have had a noteworthy and enduring impact on humans throughout history, reshaping civilizations in different ways. Every pandemic since the very start has changed societal economies and has impacted politics, religion and cultural beliefs—from the Plague of Athens in 430 BCE and the Black Death in the 14th century, to the Spanish Flu in 1918. Almost one-third of Europe's population died during the Black Death (1347–1351), which is one of the most catastrophic pandemics in history. Pandemics have been affecting the literature on a larger level from the very beginning by influencing the writing styles, mood, and themes written at different points in time and for different pandemics. Authors have also used pandemics as a subject and a metaphor to examine the collapse of society, human fall, misery, virtue, and the fragility of society. These pandemics have left a profound impact on literary traditions, continually inspiring profound thoughts about life, death, and the human condition. Pandemics also influenced various literary genres and forms, including the frame narrative, psychological realism, and apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction.

Due to recent pandemics, apocalyptic and dystopian writing has recently seen a rebirth, specifically with the emergence of COVID-19 and HIV/AIDS. To enhance the effects of such pandemics, fictional pandemics are used in contemporary works, such as in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* and Ling Ma's *Severance*, to examine modern living, capitalism, and our relationship with memory and technology, aiming to portray societal collapse

Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny, which refers to something that is both familiar and unfamiliar, is profoundly echoed in Ling Ma's dystopian portrayal of life in *Severance*. Ma's portrayal of the infected functions as a resurgence of the suppressed from a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective; the terror is not the pandemic per se, but rather its disturbing revelation of capitalist routine as already dead. It is implied that the infection of habit comes before the actual disease, as evidenced by the main character, Candace, who continues to go to work long after the city has fallen.

1.1 Research Objectives

- To examine the idea of the Freudian uncanny (das Unheimliche) and how it relates to dystopian and futuristic literature.
- To examine how suppressed desires and unconscious trauma denial are symbolized by Candace's needs to continue her work routine despite society's breakdown.
- To examine, using Freudian psychoanalytic theory as a framework, the psychological effects of capitalism and contemporary workplace culture in *Severance*.
- To investigate, using a psychoanalytic framework, how early loss, migration, and capitalist upbringing influence Candace's identity development and emotional detachment.

1.2 Research Questions

- How does Ling Ma's *Severance* exemplify the Freudian concept of the uncanny through Candace Chen's behavior and experiences?
- How does Freudian psychoanalytical analysis of Candace Chen's behaviors and inner problems help us better grasp the novel's themes of identity, trauma, and alienation?
- How does the story challenge or subvert typical dystopian or zombie genre clichés through a psychological lens?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Aaron Bady, in his work for the Los Angeles Review of Books (2018), offers an urbane interpretation of Ling Ma's *Severance*, presenting it as a profound reflection on the fallacy and fiction of contemporary workplace culture. According to Bady, Ling Ma's novel reveals the emptiness and farcicality at the core of capitalist systems by disassembling the idealized concepts of labor and productivity. He also observes that Ma masterfully depicts a world in which people are unable to escape the cycles of pointless corporate conformity, even when the world is facing a deadly disaster. *Severance* undermines predictable post-apocalyptic narratives by avoiding traditional great violence or survivalist fantasies to show a slow collapse. In the end, Bady praises *Severance* for its grimly humorous but heartbreaking portrayal of a world in which following routines out of habit and brainwashing is more important to survive than fighting for one's life.

Samantha Hunt (2018) also highlights the uncanny and subtle atmosphere of Ling Ma's *Severance* in her review for The New York Times. She claims that the novel's depiction of the apocalypse is surprisingly calm, showing a disturbing calmness amid the disaster taking place. She further points out that Ling Ma's *Severance* embraces a more muted strategy, depicting the breakdown of society as a routine, even bureaucratic process, in contrast to traditional apocalyptic narratives which usually rely on outside horrors. She also praises Ma for illustrating how the world ends with the ruthless stubbornness of routine rather than with a bang or sudden disaster. She contends that the main character, Candace, is a prime example of this unsettling normalcy since she keeps working.

In her work for *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, Christine Marks (2021) highlights how the novel deftly addresses the psychological and emotional aspects of cultural alienation by examining *Severance* through the prism of immigrant identity and diasporic experience. As a Chinese-American heroine, Marks contends that Candace is not only surviving a physical apocalypse but also a cultural and personal one that is closely linked to her experience as an immigrant and her sense of alienation from both her birthplace and her new nation. Marks claims that Ma explores how immigrants are frequently compelled to distance themselves from their cultural heritage in order to thrive in a society that demands assimilation by using the apocalypse as a metaphor. Candace's fragmented sense of self and her tense relationship to her history in China and her present in America are set against the backdrop of *Severance's* social

collapse. According to Marks, the fevered state that engulfs the world represents the psychological and emotional toll of this cultural loss, where the only way to deal with the ingrained isolation and pressure to fit in is through the repetitive routines of everyday life. In this light, *Severance* becomes not just a story about the end of the world, but also a moving examination of the immigrant community's apocalypse as they grapple with the complexities of memory, identity, and belonging.

Although many academics have analyzed *Severance* from various perspectives, including post-capitalist critique, immigration narratives, feminist dystopia, and pandemic trauma, this research adopts a distinct approach by employing a Freudian psychoanalytical framework with a particular emphasis on the concept of the uncanny. The novel's sociopolitical themes— Candace's identification as a second-generation Chinese-American, the critique of consumerism and late capitalism, and the satirical depiction of corporate culture—are the focus of much of the existing literature available on *Severance*. This research, on the other hand, turns the attention inward, toward the narrative's psychological aspects, investigating how Ling Ma employs the uncanny through eerie familiarity, subliminal concerns, and unsettling repetitions.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative analytical method to investigate the Freudian idea of the uncanny in Ling Ma's *Severance*. It studies the book closely and uses Freudian psychoanalysis to analyze it, paying particular attention to how the eerie functions about the themes, characters, and narrative structure. This analysis's primary goal is to show how unconscious urges, suppressed memories, and the resurgence of the suppressed materialize in the futuristic dystopia of *Severance*, where psychological alienation is examined against the backdrop of social breakdown and the pandemic. It also demonstrates how the uncanny is entwined with themes of labor, consumerism, and globalized crises by highlighting instances where the familiar becomes unusual and where people experience disturbances in their routines or sense of self.

In order to place the findings within the context of the body of current literature, this study will also include pertinent secondary materials, such as psychoanalytic theory and recent critical essays on *Severance*. It will cite academics who have used psychoanalysis or Freudian ideas in other literary works. However, the main goal will be to draw attention to how special the uncanny is in this particular piece. It will attempt to extend further the comprehension of how *Severance* interrelates with both the individual psyche and the shared unconscious in its critique of contemporary life by examining the psychological states of the characters and the sociological undercurrents presented in the book. This approach also enables a multi-layered reading that enhances the text's psychological delicacies while simultaneously considering its broader sociopolitical consequences.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Uncanny Echoes of Routine and Repression in Ling Ma's Severance

The Uncanny, introduced a unique psychoanalytic concept that resonates in modern literature to this day. The uncanny feeling occurs when something familiar turns into something extraordinary and creepy, emerging due to our repressed fears, desires, or unresolved conflicts and traumas. In Ling Ma's *Severance*, the protagonist, Candace, goes through a pandemic and experiences the world of disruption and routine, which aligns directly with Freud's psychoanalysis and the uncanny. As the story unfolds, Candace is revealed to be a symbolic product of the modern world, as she is alienated and fragmented, and is also constantly driven by a repetitive compulsion to keep the dead world going—"I went to work every day, even when I was technically the only one left." (Ma, 2018, p. 71) This analysis examines how Ling Ma has crafted the character of Candace that completely aligns with Freud's uncanny, particularly through her fragmented identity, repetitive routine, relationship with the past, and the normalization of the dystopian world.

The fundamental point of Freud's uncanny is the repetition compulsion. Candace clings to her routine and keeps going to work while continuing blogging. After the pandemic, Candace does not take any action or bring any change to her life; instead, she continues going to her office even when the whole city is almost empty, "I still went to work every day, even when there was no one to report to," (Ma, 2018, p. 67), she narrates, in a voice void of irony. Such activity is comparable to the automatism of fevered individuals who zombie their old patterns. This behavior of Candace also represents the uncanny doubling, which shows that she is alive and dead, or is conscious or unconscious, blurring the line between opposites at the same time. The main aspects through which Freud identifies the uncanny are fate, uncontrollable repetition, and déjà vu. Candace continuously wanders in her city, New York, and keeps taking pictures of the ruins, documenting and reliving a dead world. As mentioned in the novel, she owned a photography blog account, *NY Ghost*, which showcases her obsession with preserving the world's ruins.

The doubles (or *Doppelgänger*) are another central aspect of Freud's expression of the uncanny. Candace struggles throughout the novel with her identity as a "model worker" and her developing

sense that it is a façade. Even before the pandemic, Candace worked extra diligently and robotically, ignoring the growing signs of her body's collapse. "I was sleeping less, eating less. My eye twitched uncontrollably. But I still went to work." (Ma, 2018, p. 67) Also, the former self of Candace is a haunting double. Her memories of her childhood in Fuzhou, her mother (an immigrant), and her ex-lover, Jonathan, often reappear, not as nostalgic mementos but as phantoms that haunt her in her present life. Candace's pregnancy in the novel serves as something uncanny and doubles as she was the one person before; however, her life is another life inside of her. "I was the only one left, but I was not alone." (Ma, 2018, p. 282) According to Sigmund Freud, experiences such as the womb, the creation of new life, and birth can evoke the uncanny (something familiar yet strange at the same time), as they bring repressed feelings back that are linked to one's childhood, parenthood, or identity.

Shen fever itself in the novel symbolizes the uncanniness. Victims of Shen fever do not become violent or kill each other; instead, they keep on doing their daily routine tasks like folding their laundry, setting the dinner table over and over, or brushing their teeth. It not only symbolizes the criticism of the capitalistic work culture, but also portrays the Freudian concept of the death drive, which shows the compulsion to repeat even when it is destroying or killing. "They performed their tasks with rote memorization, as if in a trance, as if asleep." (Ma, 2018, p. Candace, even though a survivor, also performs these rituals, such as roaming around the city, taking photographs of the ruins, and going to her office, doing everything she used to do before, but has lost the meaning of it all after the pandemic. The blurred line between the fevered who keep doing their routine tasks over and over, and Candace, a survivor who also continues to do the same routine tasks, brings out the uncanniness in the story.

At the end of the novel, the fragmentation remains unresolved in Candace's psychological behavior. She decides to leave the survival group led by Bob and part ways for good. (Ma, 2018, p. 275) However, she is still pregnant, still fragmented, wandering, and haunted by her past. The unresolved ending of *Severance* suggests that the uncanny can never be conquered entirely, as it emerges again and again at uncertain moments, not to be resolved but to be endured. The survival of Candace is not proven to be heroic in the novel, but somewhat melancholic, marked by the new erosion of identity.

She is just one of us, a subject of the uncanny: an attempt to live under the burden of the dead weight of the past that was. Candace represents many people living modern life, trying to cope with it day by day by continuing their routines and carrying the weight of their past traumas, fears, and anxieties. Just like her, many people try to live their lives by forgetting or repressing their sense of loss, or by suppressing their worries, such as losing a job or a loved one, by continuing with their daily routines. It is a way for them to feel like everything is just as it was before and nothing has changed. When, in fact, they are suppressing their emotions, which will eventually manifest in a distorted way.

4.2 Understanding Identity and Trauma in *Severance* through Freudian Theory

In the novel *Severance*, the pandemic appears not as violent, and people affected by the virus, the zombies, did not attack anyone or kill each other; instead, they were haunted by the stillness and the repetition of their routine. Through the character of Candace Chen, Ling Ma has portrayed a woman who is both emotionally and psychologically empty, yet externally collapsing. To fully understand the emotional and thematic character of Candace Chen, Freudian psychoanalysis offers a valuable perspective. The various terms employed by Freud in his theory, such as repression, doubling, melancholia, the unconscious, repetition compulsion, and the uncanny, provide a robust framework for analyzing Candace's inner psychological conflicts and behaviors, thereby grasping the significant themes of the novel, including identity, trauma, and alienation. Candace does not play the role of a pandemic survivor alone; in *Severance*, she also symbolizes the subject of modernity and a capitalistic world fractured by migration, alienation, fragmentation, and emotional disconnection. "I moved through the motions of my life as if it were still mine, as if I still belonged to it." (Ma, 2018, p. 67)

Through the Freudian uncanny, we can easily find how unconscious mechanisms like repression and denial have shaped her psyche by analyzing her routine, fragmented cultural belonging, and inability to confront grief. The underlying psychological patterns of Candace's passivity, as well as the seeming solitude, can be understood through Freud's theory. This theory examines the underlying causes of the world's confusion, which persists even after the end of the world, and when it fails to make sense.

In *Severance*, Candace's identity is heavily shaped by external expectations that make it fragile and performative. Different aspects of her personality, such as her detachment from her cultural roots, her adherence to corporate cultures, and the flatness of her emotions, reflect a personality or identity formed by repression, an ego that suppresses the desire to present a functioning façade. Candace's life before the pandemic was all about routine and obedience. "Routine was comforting to me. It made me feel in control." (Ma, 2018, p. 67)

Candace's obsession with routine reflects a sense of identity loss and repression. Candace does not act as herself; she performs her daily routine tasks endlessly. She quietly follows the rules set by the capitalist world, avoids confrontation, and fails to find meaning in life and her identity. As Candace moved from China to America, her cultural identity was also fragmented. Candace feels alienated from her parents, her homeland, and her current environment. Freud mentioned that these kinds of conflicts, which are related to family and childhood, can be the leading cause of repression. Candace, at different moments and uncertain times, recalls her mother's traditional remedies, yet simultaneously distances herself from them. The unease in her memories of her childhood experiences, especially the scenes of being corrected or disciplined, or being displaced, perhaps indicates that her culture of origin has been repressed and replaced by the cultural adaptation of being assimilated yet invisible. "I learned to be quiet, to blend in, to mimic, and to follow." (Ma, 2018, p. 95) Freud's idea of the return of the repressed helps us understand Candace's confusion in the post-apocalyptic world, where her unconscious emotions resurface in distorted form. Through her dreams, silence, and continuous documentation via her blog NY Ghost, her unconscious emotions return with stripped away routine and missing familiar structures. She turns into a ghost not only to the world, but for herself as well.

In his essay *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), Freud distinguishes between a healthy form of grieving and melancholia. Melancholia occurs when the subject, who has experienced a significant loss, internalizes the pain and buries the grief within themselves. (Freud, 1917/1957, p. 246). The person with melancholia does not move on from the loss; instead, he becomes emotionally numb and uninterested in life. Candace portrays the characteristics of being a melancholic throughout the novel. Even though her parents have died, and her boyfriend has left her, she does not actively mourn them or utter any sad words. The absence of people close to her heart is met with a sense of emotional flatness.

In psychoanalysis, trauma is not only defined as something bad that has happened in the past, but it is also known as the unhealed wound that has not been healed yet and still bleeds in the present. Thus, it is something that has happened in the past, but it still influences how the human mind works and how the person behaves in certain life events.

Candace's trauma does not refer only to the loss of her parents or the loss of her boyfriend, but also to the feeling of belonging nowhere, or being an immigrant child who was forced to forget his roots and perform in a completely different world. The memories from her childhood include the lonely apartment where she and her parents used to live in Utah, her mother's failed attempts to keep the cultural practices alive in an alienated world, and her father's silence, which recurs in fragments rather than a linear structure. "I remembered the apartment in Salt Lake City, how quiet it was, how my father barely spoke, how my mother folded plastic bags into triangles." (Ma, 2018, p. 192)

Candace Chen is not portrayed as a traditional hero in the novel *Severance*. She does not fight the monsters, win the wars, or uncover universal truths in the novel; she wanders around the quiet city, repeats her routines, and survives. It sounds like something very flat and bland that has no meaning at all, but if the novel is read through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis, we can discern the deeper meanings hidden within it. Her continuous routine is because of repression. Her detachment from society and even from herself is a symptom of melancholia.

She is alienated because of her cultural dislocation, identity fragmentation between two different cultures, and childhood trauma. Her resemblance to the infected is also symbolic of how the world has ended, even before a deadly pandemic, due to mechanical routines and psychic stasis. Through Freud's concepts, such as the uncanny, repression, unconsciousness, and melancholia, the novel *Severance* was analyzed in an emotionally and deeply profound manner. The novel reveals what it is like to live in a world where people act like machines, capitalism is at its peak, competition is everywhere, and meaning is lost, rather than just telling a story of a character surviving the pandemic. "You could say I live a life of structure, of routine, and if you wanted to stretch it, you could even say discipline, but what is the point?" (Ma, 2018, p. 72)

With the help of the theories developed by Freud, we can clearly understand that Candace is not ill; she exhibits symptoms of living in the modern world. She suffers like the entire world has given in to rituals, defenses, and denial. Ma provides an extreme critique of the modern world, suggesting that even before the apocalypse, we were already the ghosts of our losses and endless routines, and alienated from ourselves. We also learn how the sense of identity can be fragmented, how traumatized fluency can be oppressive, and how alienation can be a lifestyle. Freud assists us in revealing these repressed truths, not that he is trying to cure Candace, but as he tries to recognize in her a reflection of our psychic traumas.

4.3 Beyond Apocalypse: Psychological Subversion of Dystopian Conventions in Severance

Ling Ma's *Severance* is unique and distinct in contemporary literature, as it diverges from the traditional style used in pandemic fiction, avoiding discussions of external disasters and conflicts. *Severance* opposes the idea of conventional dystopian zombie-based stories, which typically focus on external threats and surface-level disasters, often revolving around a massive monster and various zombies attempting to bite humans. Rather than centralizing the novel on mere survival and a particular hero who, with great willpower, wins in the end, *Severance* portrays a slow breakdown of society and its systems through a virus called Shen fever. Through a psychological lens, the novel reveals both societal and inner collapse, exploring themes of identity, meaning, and human connection. This analysis reveals how, by utilizing Freud's concept of the uncanny, *Severance* does not fall under the category of typical pandemic fiction and subverts this genre's clichés by employing various elements, such as routine, memory, trauma, alienation, and repression, to evoke psychological horror. "I just kept going to work. I took the F train to Bryant Park. I passed through the revolving doors, rode the elevator up, and sat at my desk, turned on my computer." (Ma, 2018, p. 67)

In typical dystopian fiction, the storyline mainly relies on the visual and structure-based disasters. It can be some war, monster chasing people, zombies biting, panicked crowds, complete societal collapse, military forces in action, and a viral outbreak. Ling Ma removes this distinct feature from the novel *Severance*. The Shen Fever in the novel is not violent or explosive. People infected with the fever get infected slowly, fall into an unstoppable routine, repeating the same task countless times,

tasks that are familiar but have become horrifying because of mindless repetition like setting the table for a family that does not exist anymore, brushing the teeth simultaneously, and going out for work when there is no one working in the office. Shen fever does not harm you physically; it causes you to repeat things unconsciously. The infected people do not get violent or attack others; they become slaves of their habits and keep doing the same tasks until their bodies collapse. “The fevered were creatures of habit, mimicking old routines and gestures, going through the motions of daily life, indefinitely.” (Ma, 2018, p. 159)

Another significant aspect of the novel *Severance* is its treatment of routine, which subverts the typical dystopian and zombie fiction. In most of the dystopian and zombie fiction, the loss of routine signifies danger and freedom. Societal collapse is often used as an opportunity to break through societal structures and reinvent more meaningful and easier ways to live. Characters usually abandon their old routines and get into new ones. In contrast, *Severance* portrays the routines as lasting longer even when the social structures have collapsed, and this persistence of old routines, even when they hold no meaning, is truly uncanny.

By focusing on emotional alienation rather than political situations and physical danger, *Severance* drifts away from the standard form of dystopian fiction. Typical dystopian novels usually focus on governmental control, military enforcement, and the restriction of freedom. However, in *Severance*, there is no totalitarian authority. The world is crumbling very quietly, and there is no villain or monster to be seen. The actual horror lies inside the characters, like Candace, who feels emotionally alienated and exhausted even before the pandemic. “Even before the End, I was feeling a kind of exhaustion. Not sleepiness, but the deeper kind. The kind that was soul-deep.” (Ma, 2018, p. 55) Through Freud’s ideas of psychoanalysis, we can unveil how repression, repetition, cultural displacement, and denial shape our behaviors and experiences. In the case of Candace Chen, it is clear that she was not able to mourn her parents properly and repressed the grief, resulting in emotional withdrawal and attachment to an obsessive routine.

Another method *Severance* uses to distinguish itself from the typical dystopian fiction is its depiction of the survival group led by Bob. These kinds of survival groups are glorified in most of the other

pandemic fiction as mini representations of newly built societies that are more reliable, easygoing, and democratic. In contrast, Bob’s survival group is different as it mimics the corporate structures with strict routines. It also exiles the people who disagree with Bob’s rules and refuse to conform to his authority. It does not make him a villain, as his obsession with power in the world, where everything has ended or is going to end soon, makes him more insane than malicious. The survival group’s rules and structures portray the same order and routine that made the world a place of living zombies from the very beginning. “Bob said it was important to maintain structure, to preserve what had once worked.” (Ma, 2018, p. 187) This point proves how trauma can make people seek authoritarian solutions in order to survive. When everything in the world has become uncertain, Bob offers the members of his survival group a structure, predictability, and discipline that feels comforting. According to Ling Ma, People’s emotional vulnerability, which causes them to cling to meaningless structures, is more dangerous than a cruel, oppressive, and morally corrupt ruling system.

In traditional zombie fiction or dystopia, it always comes to an end with catharsis, a revolt, an escape, or confrontation. *Severance* denies such rules as well. The novel does not end with a great victory or clarity, but with vagueness. Candace’s future is uncertain. There is no cure, and there is no new world where she can live her life freely. There will be no new civilization or chances to learn from the past and live a new

life in the future. Instead of physical survival and well-being, Ma focuses on emotional survival over narrative closure. The lack of catharsis is not meaningless, but serves a psychological purpose in the novel. Unresolved traumas and vagueness are important themes in trauma studies. In this kind of novel, characters do not always get closure or victory; they carry their traumas and losses with them. Candace also, at the end of the novel, does not get any closure and carries her traumas, repressed emotions, and alienation along with her. She is not healed, but she is aware of everything. "I was aware of how little I felt. I was aware that I should be feeling more, that I should be reacting more." (Ma, 2018, p. 192)

A hero's journey is a must-have in the traditional dystopian genre that talks about an ordinary person becoming something big, a leader, a survivor, or a revolutionary figure. The whole journey of the protagonist includes a call to action, a moral dilemma, a turning point, and finally a triumph or tragedy. *Severance* completely denies this idea of narrative through the character of Candace, who never fully transforms. Candace is not portrayed as a leader with great qualities or a fighter who saved the world with his actions. She is passive, observant, and emotionally detached from reality. She is more likely to be a witness than a warrior in the novel. This way of Candace's portrayal is significant psychologically. Candace represents an individual from the contemporary world who is caught between survival and meaninglessness. According to Freud, the psyche is mainly guided by a tension between the death drive and the life drive (Thanatos and Eros). Candace's psyche is also conflicted between these two drives. She is hovering between both in her numbed state. She does not destroy herself, but she also refuses to grow or find meaning in life. Her refusal to take control of her life and her inability to break through her psychological conflicts reflect her psyche, which has been numbed by trauma, depression, and postmodern identity fragmentation. "I let things happen. I rarely intervened. It felt like the most reasonable way to live." (Ma, 2018, p. 69) Ling Ma offers a protagonist who drifts away from her struggles and survives, not heroically or out of strength, but because she does not know how not to survive, instead of a satisfying and perfect development or the heroic transformation of the protagonist. This psychological realism is rare in dystopian fiction and serves as a criticism of the narrative expectations we bring to this genre.

Severance also challenges the conventions of dystopian fiction through its emotional tone, use of irony, and emotional detachment as a defense mechanism. Traditional dystopias are usually emotionally intense. Different emotions like fear, terror, depression, and loss are conveyed through dramatic prose. In contrast to that, *Severance* uses a numb, flat, detached, and deadpan narrative voice. Throughout the novel, Candace uses very few emotions to describe horrifying events like wandering in the abandoned city and finding the dead bodies of the fevered. "I found them in the kitchen, seated at the table as if they were about to eat. They had starved to death, I guessed. I moved on." (Ma, 2018, p. 159)

Thus, the psychoanalytical exploration of the novel *Severance* through the lens of Freud's uncanny uncovers deeply embedded psychological patterns influenced by capitalism, loss of identity, emotional detachment, and alienation. Through the deep analysis of Candace Chen's behaviors, decisions, and emotional alienation, her compulsive adherence to routine, we uncover how Ling Ma's narrative

challenges the traditional dystopian and zombie tropes. She uses internal horror to seek the attention of the readers; instead of using abusive horror monsters or instant disasters, she uses the quiet horror of routines and psychological tensions. *Severance* challenges its readers to confront the societal collapse and how it leads to the surface through mental and emotional disintegration. It talks about how identity becomes connected with labor, how trauma is suppressed through repetition compulsion, and how emotional numbness becomes a survival mechanism. In this way, *Severance* not only unveils the hidden and haunting truths of the human psyche under pressure, where even in an ending world, the compulsion to be obedient, productive, and persistent clings to an individual until the very end, but also provides us with a deep criticism of the external systems and structures of control.

5. CONCLUSION

In the novel *Severance*, Ling Ma portrays a dystopian fiction that defies traditional dystopian fiction narrative expectations and interrogates the human psyche in the presence of a universal pandemic and societal collapse. By using Freudian Psychoanalysis and his theory of the uncanny, this research has proved how *Severance* deconstructs traditional conventions and narratives of the dystopian fiction and unveils deeper psychological aspects hidden under the masks of routines, memory, and identity. The uncanny in this novel is not unfolded through the use of monsters, violence, and bloodshed; it emerges from the quietness and horror of routine, memory, and repressed emotions and desires. It emerges from the meaninglessness of the lives people are living in the contemporary and capitalist world. The thin line between the normal and the abnormal, fevered and the healthy, past and the present, and self and the other forms the psychological intensity in the novel that makes it a unique and distinct modern dystopian fiction.

Through Candace Chen's behaviors and principles, we were able to exemplify the Freudian concept of the uncanny. Candace's relationship with routine, her cultural displacement, and her suppressed emotions about her trauma and alienation play a vital role in shaping the narrative of this novel. As Freud's concept of uncanny focuses on the blurring of boundaries between the strange and familiar, healthy or unhealthy, and known and unknown, Ling Ma uses the character of Candace to highlight this blurring within the novel.

By portraying Candace's behaviors, which are very close to the fevered people's behavior, we can see a blurring of the line between fevered and unfevered. There is a thin line between the behavior of Candace before and after the pandemic, as they continue to follow the same pace and routine they have been following in the contemporary world. Candace continues her work even after the pandemic. She is driven not by a necessity but by her unconscious compulsion to repeat. Her behavior in the novel reflects Freud's idea of *Wiederholungszwang*, which means repetition compulsion, caused by unresolved trauma and unconscious desires.

Ling Ma's narrative is different from other plague literature because she does not treat the apocalypse as a site of renewal or deconstruction of societal structures, a common theme in dystopian fiction. Instead, she focuses on how psychological phenomena like repression, trauma, and emotional alienation control the survival instinct in late capitalism. Candace does not become a heroine at the end of the novel; she becomes an epitome of how trauma lingers not only in your memories but also in habits, routines, and language. This makes *Severance* a dystopian fiction, along with a psychological study of the fragmentation of selfhood. Ling Ma refuses to follow the traditional conventions of dystopian fiction in her debut novel, *Severance*. Instead of using spectacular violence or intense narrative, Ma offers a quiet horror of the stillness and repetition along with internalized collapse. The novel rejects the idea of having a great hero. It replaces it with a psychological realism that centers not on action but on numbness, emotional alienation, and subtle horrors of daily life in the modern world.

5.1 Future Recommendations

Future researchers may explore this novel, *Severance*, using alternative psychological theories other than Freudian psychoanalysis and the uncanny, such as Lacanian psychoanalysis or trauma theory, to further unveil the conflicts and complexities of Candace Chen's inner world. A comparative study between *Severance* and other post-pandemic novels like Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* or Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* can help offer even deeper insights into how psychological distress is experienced or represented through different cultures and narratives. The interaction of race and gender or Asian American identity within the novel's psychoanalytic themes can also be investigated by future scholars.

Acknowledgements

None.

Conflict of Interest

Authors declared NO conflict of interest.

Funding Source

The authors received NO funding to conduct this study.

ORCID iDs

Amna Naveed¹  <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8066-6184>

Namra Najam²  <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7341-1457>

Khadija Aamir³  <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-9083-2375>

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness*. Duke University Press.
- Barth, M. (2020). *Severance* is the novel of our current moment—but not for the reasons you think. *Lit Hub*. <https://lithub.com/severance-is-the-novel-of-our-current-moment-but-not-for-the-reasons-you-think/>
- Butler, S. (1872/2008). *Erewhon*. Oxford University Press.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023). *Past pandemics*.
- Franceschini, I. (2021). Zombies of capital: On reading Ling Ma's *Severance*. *Made in China Journal*. <https://madeinchinajournal.com/2021/12/06/zombies-of-capital-on-reading-ling-mas-severance/>
- Claeys, G. (2017). *Dystopia: A natural history*. Oxford University Press
- Encyclopaedia Britannica. (n.d.). Pandemic. In Encyclopaedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/science/pandemic-disease>
- Freud Museum London. (2019). *The uncanny*. <https://www.freud.org.uk/2019/09/18/the-uncanny/>
- Freud, S. (1920). *Beyond the pleasure principle* (J. Strachey, Trans.). Norton. (Original work published 1920)
- Freud, S. (1989). *Civilization and Its Discontents* (J. Strachey, Trans.). W. W. Norton & Company. (Original work published 1930)
- Freud, S. (2003). *The uncanny* (D. McLintock, Trans.). Penguin Books. (Original work published 1919)
- Hunt, S. (2018). Endorsement of Ling Ma's *Severance* [Blurb on book cover]. In L. Ma, *Severance* (pp. cover). Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Jameson, F. (2005). *Archaeologies of the future: The desire called utopia and other science fictions*. Verso.
- Ling Ma. (2018). *Severance*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

- Marks, C. (2022). Contesting imagined communities: Minor feelings, opacity, and spectrality in Ling Ma's *Severance*. *Amerikastudien / American Studies: A Quarterly*, 67(4), 489–502. DOI: [10.33675/AMST/2022/4/9](https://doi.org/10.33675/AMST/2022/4/9)
- Merced, M. (2018). The uncanny: A biopsychosocial perspective. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 71(1), 39–49. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.20180004>
- More, T. (1516/2003). *Utopia* (P. Turner, Trans.). Penguin Classics.
- Snowden, F. M. (2019). *Epidemics and society: From the Black Death to the present*. Yale University Press.
- Wang, Y. (2020). *Severance* and the rituals of late capitalism. *The Yale Review*. <https://yalereview.org/article/severance-ling-ma-pandemic>