ISSN 2455-393X

Journal of the English Literator Society

Volume 12 Issue 2, March 2026 | www.jels.in

Research Article

Collective Guilt and Moral Disengagement in Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer*: A Social, Psychological Interpretation of Cinematic Responsibility

Blesslin Femi J

Research Scholar, Department of English, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Sagunthala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Avadi, Chennai, India;
blesslinfemi@gmail.com

P. Revathi

Research Supervisor, Associate Professor, Department of English, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Sagunthala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Avadi, Chennai, India;
revathip@veltech.edu.in | https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5536-677X

Published online: 5 March 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18861889

ABSTRACT

The research deals with Christopher Nolan's film *Oppenheimer* (2023) as a cultural space where the film has been thought of as a mediator of historical collective guilt and moral disengagement, as a medium to consider the concepts of collective guilt and moral disengagement through the lens of two social psychological models present in the film Oppenheimer.' The research paper emphasises the film as a means of dramatising the inner struggles of J. Robert Oppenheimer, while also echoing the negotiation with societies that confront trauma and complicity in the era of mass destruction. This study relies on textual analyses of cinematic practices and discourse analyses of critical reviews and audience reception. For example, it demonstrates how *Oppenheimer* filmmakers highlight the theme of collective guilt, while also presenting the audience with strategies of moral disengagement and revealing the Janus-faced nature of the media's role as both remembrancers and rationalizers. Therefore, by making the film and previous cultural products create a thematic axis around nuclear anxiety and relating the problems of the film and previous cultural products to current global challenges like climate change and artificial intelligence, the paper explores how the

film's strength lies in its ability to reactivate social psychological controversies around innovation, authority, and morality in society. As such, the study will contribute to the emerging field of inquiry in the social sciences and the humanities: media memory studies and cultural trauma studies.

KEYWORDS: Collective guilt, Moral disengagement, Dilemma, Trauma, and Social Psychology

FULL PAPER

Introduction

The select film *Oppenheimer* by the renowned Christopher Nolan, released in 2023, is a breathtaking film biography of the famous father of the atomic bomb. The cultural phenomenon has revived discussions of world history, morality, ethics, and the psychology of technological innovation. This is not just a film that holds viewers' attention; it is meant to be a 'shared reflection' on its themes of trauma, complicity, and ethical responsibility. The film has been analysed in this study under the lenses of Social Psychology, namely 'Collective guilt' and 'Moral disengagement.' In summary, the study has suggested that the film dramatises and navigates the 'paradox of modern technological responsibility.' On the other hand, the film tells a story deeply engaged with the powerful emotional force of collective guilt through its themes of the devastating potential of scientific innovation and the traumatic nature of nuclear catastrophe. However, the 'paradox' is significant to the filmography of '*Oppenheimer*' because of its global status as a cultural phenomenon.' The film directed by Nolan is not just an 'arthouse' film but a blockbuster film that has grossed almost a billion dollars and won many accolades.

Research Objectives

1. To analyse how *Oppenheimer* (2023) frames moral responsibility through the interplay of collective guilt and moral disengagement.
2. To examine cinematic strategies that mediate moral responsibility in historical narratives.
3. To explore how the absence of graphical representations of destruction affects moral engagement.

The research explores these questions:

1. How does Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* frame moral responsibility for historical trauma?
2. What narrative and cinematic strategies does the film employ to emphasise collective guilt?
3. In what ways does the absence of graphic depictions of destruction affect moral engagement?
4. How does the film connect the historical context of the atomic bomb with contemporary crises?

Literature Review

Recent research has intensified the comprehension of the dynamics of collective guilt and redefined interrelational and ethical responsibility in post-traumatic societies. Li et al. (2022) analysed Chinese youngsters' responses to historical injustices, emphasising the interplay of national identity and global ethical responsibility. This centres on the motto that collective guilt is not just a passive emotion but can motivate preventive action in the world. These scholarly works portray guilt as a retrospective feeling that is a forward-oriented moral stance, one that focuses on preventing future crises. According to Caprara et al. (2022), media texts aim to exercise normalising effects on social disengagement. Tian & Wang (2022) also emphasise the use of the moral disengagement strategy by leaders and nations to reframe historical events as inevitable. Nonetheless, all these studies depict the pervasiveness of the moral disengagement strategy in diverse social contexts, making it applicable to cinematic studies.

Much existing research specifically examines the concept of psychological perspective, an extension of which gained popularity only recently. Hirsch (2012) also uses the concept of postmemory in visual culture; however, he emphasises the involvement of later generations in dealing with the traumas they could not live through themselves. However, collective guilt and moral disengagement tend to remain understudied issues in the context of cultural texts such as films. In addition, the above research reveals that cinema can promote both remembrance and disengagement, yet this duality has received little exploration. By addressing these issues through the lens of collective guilt and moral disengagement in the film Oppenheimer, the research aims to contribute to the interdisciplinary field of study that includes social psychology and cultural memory. The research shows that cinematic texts like Oppenheimer are not just reflections of the past but also spaces in which the psychological aspects of guilt and disengagement are negotiated.

Methodology

The methodological framework that will be used in conducting the research is that of a qualitative research design, particularly a textual analysis that involves aspects of discourse analysis, focusing on critical reception, audience reception, with the research subject being the film and its positioning within cultural text, and observed as a circulating discourse, wherein collective guilt and moral disengagement are constructed, articulated, and contested (Silverman, 2020). The analytical framework integrates theoretical perspectives on collective guilt, which is tied to individual wrongdoing, arising from one's identification with an in-group perceived as responsible for harm, even if the individual personally played no part in it. Similarly, Albert Bandura (1999) proposed the concept of moral disengagement to explain how individuals and collectives disengage from self-regulatory moral standards when indulging in harmful behaviour. There are eight mechanisms he identifies: moral justification, euphemistic labelling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregard of consequences, dehumanisation, and attribution of blame. The study highlights narrative form, in which the organisation of temporality and perspective in relation to a moral dilemma is analysed, and the positioning of audiences. In addition, the ethical framing through which audiences are positioned in relation to historical responsibility and memory. Moreover, the study focuses on the film's reliance on Oppenheimer's subjectivity, the avoidance of direct representations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the ambiguity between scientific innovation and moral ambiguity.

The central codes of the research include guilt attribution, moral justification, the displacement of responsibility, and the representation of trauma. In addition, critical reviews published in English between 2023 and 2024 are collected. This research study relies on publicly available cultural texts, such as the selected film, published criticism, and a publicly accessible online discussion, and does not involve direct recruitment of participants. Thus, the methodological design offers an intense framework for exploring *Oppenheimer* as both a cinematic text and a cultural discourse. By analysing its textual strategies and its critical and popular reception, the paper contributes to understanding the processes through which collective guilt is evoked or suppressed and moral disengagement is articulated within contemporary cultural memory. On the other hand, for textual analysis, the film is examined, focusing on scenes that represent moral responsibilities, such as Oppenheimer's private reflections, courtroom hearings, and interactions with political and military figures.

Findings and Discussion

The research study analyses how Christopher Nolan's Oppenheimer (2023) dramatises one of the most intense moral ruptures in modern history, in which the invention and deployment of the atomic bomb are depicted. The move serves as a meditation on collective guilt, a core construct in social psychology that refers to the

moral emotion people feel when their group is responsible for harm against another group. The study portrays J. Robert Oppenheimer as both an architect of destruction and a man haunted by its aftermath. The analysis focuses on how guilt is placed not as an individual burden but as a shared and collective legacy. In addition, the film offers the universality of nuclear responsibility; it simultaneously limits the visibility of victims and localises guilt in the conscience of only one man. The following sub-sections analyse how narrative strategies, audience reception, and social psychological theory intersect to evoke and contain collective guilt in the select work. The research portrays that *Oppenheimer* emphasises collective guilt significantly by centring the atomic bomb not just as a technical innovation but as a moral catastrophe—the director's positioning of Oppenheimer in a liminal space between personal responsibility and collective culpability. The protagonist's personal moral crisis is framed by his participation in the Manhattan Project and the political fallout that followed. In one of the early scenes, Oppenheimer resonates: "In the end, we brought a new reality into the world…and now it belongs to everyone." (Oppenheimer, 2023, 01:12:34). This points to a moral recognition that moves beyond personal culpability and, to some extent, speaks to issues of collective responsibility. Accordingly, by emphasizing the intervention of the critical atomic bomb, which is "belonging to everyone," it raises the idea of the collective responsibility represented by this subject's nuclear legacy. Furthermore, on another note, this study emphasises this evocation as a form of mediation on Oppenheimer's struggle. This raises the idea of collective guilt, which refers to moral emotions that arise when individuals perceive their group's involvement in moral transgressions. This is perceived as a new reality, not just a product of science but also touching on morality in general. Oppenheimer is portrayed as both an isolated genius and a cog in a vast military-industrial machine. During his confrontation with President Truman after bombing Hiroshima, he regrets, "Mr. President, I feel I have blood on my hands" (01.48.11). Truman called him a 'crybaby', shifting responsibility away from the scientist toward political leadership, a move that resonates with the diffusion-of-responsibility effect. The present study observes this dual framing. Richard Brody (2023) in The New Yorker writes, "Nolan's Oppenheimer is both the father of the bomb and its sacrificial son, condemned to carry the weight of a collective crime'. Likewise, the director transforms collective guilt into personal tragedy, asking people to judge the conscience of one man rather than the collective conscience of nations. The study focuses on the film's deliberate avoidance of representation of the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In Contrast, the director employs indirect representation of sound design, silence, and character reaction to centre its aftermath. It is portrayed in one of the scenes: after the Trinity Test, the cinematic strategy cuts away from the destruction to Oppenheimer's silent contemplation. In addition, the film's visual grammar abruptly shifts, where celebration at Los Alamos dissolves into eerie silence, and the protagonist begins to

envision the cheering crowd morphing into grotesque victims. A woman's face peels away in blinding light, and the soundscape distorts into a suffocating void. This avoidance preserves moral seriousness by avoiding sensationalization, yet it also limits the audience's capacity to empathise directly with the Japanese people. The paper discloses that the cinematic strategy repeats the dynamics of the collective guilt in recognition of shared responsibility while limiting its affective force. Conversely, avoiding this protects moral seriousness by avoiding sensationalism; it restricts direct engagement with audiences about collective harm. It epitomises how selected films emphasise guilt while containing it through the evasion of confrontation with its consequences, a tension so crucial to the research study.

The analyses of collective guilt in this selected film are not portrayed as an explosive catharsis but rather as moral tension held within. It could be observed within the shared responsibility, somehow contained within aesthetic boundaries that halt moral catharsis. The last encounter the protagonist had with Albert Einstein serves as a symbol, as he recalls it and sees it as a warning, with the repercussions of their actions reflecting on subsequent generations. The ending portrayed in *Oppenheimer*, "I believe we did" (02:57:20), by reference to having commenced a chain reaction that could lead to the annihilation of the world, somewhat serves as a form of perpetual collective guilt. Furthermore, this form of guilt could be observed with greater universality, no longer 'American' guilt but rather 'human' guilt. Conversely, this universality regarding the guilt felt could be somewhat 'double-edged.' This is, wherein this guilt is somewhat diffused. This collective guilt is aestheticized through haunting imagery and moral dialogue, but it stops short of advocating for accountability or restitution.

Cinematic Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement

The textual analysis of this study reveals that the film *Oppenheimer* employs cinematic strategies that center on Bandura's (1999) mechanisms of moral disengagement, including responsibility displacement, euphemistic labeling, and disregard for consequences. It is revealed that Displacement happens when people attribute decisions to authority figures, thereby evading personal responsibility. Bandura (1999) posits this as a 'cognitive restructuring' that minimizes personal agency (p. 183). The study examines the displacement of responsibility in the film during the courtroom scene of the AEC security hearings, where Oppenheimer is grilled about his political affiliation rather than his moral culpability. The individualisation of moral responsibility, where Oppenheimer becomes the vessel for the moral burden of nuclear destruction, rather than the collective people, such as the government, military, or scientific community, who created and contributed to it. The study analyses how the film literalizes this process by making Oppenheimer the central moral figure while sidelining structural accountability. This aligns with the cinematic form of mechanisms of disengagement, in which moral focus is directed towards the protagonist's psyche

rather than systemic culpability. The research examines the recurrent usage of technical language, such as 'the gadget' and 'a necessary evil', to describe the atomic bomb. This highlights Bandura's (199) euphemistic labelling as a mechanism that sanitises harm. It is represented in film, where the protagonist's colleague remarks," We created a weapon that will end wars before they start" (Oppenheimer, 2023, 01:35:22). This focuses on the moral responsibility of utilitarian justification, thereby enabling disengagement.

The significant focus of the study is the deliberate avoidance of depicting the tragic scenes and sufferings of the civilians. The motion picture never portrayed Hiroshima or Nagasaki. In contrast, it creates a sense of destruction through sound design, blinding light, and the protagonist's subjective hallucinations – an imaginary depiction of charred bodies in the celebratory gym scene (02:09:12). This is considered psychological distance, where audiences are shielded from explicit, tragic scenes. This avoidance, seen in both the Trinity Test and the aftermath of Hiroshima sequences, aligns with collective memory, in which the creation of psychological distance is also involved. Audience reception in Japan confirmed this avoidance. Thus, the cinematic omission of events becomes a disengagement strategy: Consequences are felt abstractly but never confronted fully.

An advantageous comparison lessens the culpability by contrasting harmful acts with even worse alternatives. Bandura (1999) reveals that actors perceive their actions as benign compared with hypothetical greater evils (p. 195). In the selected film, there are arguments that the atomic bomb ended the war so early, saving numerous American and Japanese lives. During their crucial meeting, officials state: "If we do not use it, we will lose more soldiers in Okinawa and beyond" (Oppenheimer, 01:47:09). Oppenheimer tries to deploy this rationale: "Better our hands than theirs" (Oppenheimer, 00:41: 52), insisting that U.S control is morally higher than Nazi or Soviet possession. Moreover, The Time of India (2023) notes, "Nolan's script often echoes wartime arguments that framed Hiroshima not as an atrocity but as mercy- an advantageous comparison that continues to divide public memory." The comparison casts annihilation as a lesser evil, thereby softening the moral blow.

Attribution of blame redirects or shifts responsibility from one to another. Bandura (1999) argues that this allows actors to portray themselves as reluctant participants (p.199). Here, Oppenheimer and officials mostly tries to justify their work by blaming historical inevitability: "The Nazis would have don't it if we had not" (Oppenheimer, 00.41:42). Likewise, Political Figures blame scientists: Truman tells Oppenheimer, "You think anyone in Hiroshima gives a damn who built the bomb? They care who dropped it" (Oppenheimer, 02:32:18). Similarly, even Kitty Oppenheimer confront her husband: "You do not get to commit sin, and then ask all of us to feel sorry for you when there are consequences" (Oppenheimer, 02:28: 02).

However, blame shifts from Oppenheimer alone to collector group such as family, community, nation and humanity. One of the critics states that " Oppenheimer does not show us Hiroshima and Nagasaki. That is an act of rigour, not erasure." Likewise, "In one of the movie's most powerful and contested sequences. It is revealed that the film potentially shifts the blame inward toward Oppenheimer, as personal guilt, and away from structural actors or the mass consequences of the aftermath.

Dehumanisation strips away victims of individuality, depicting them as faceless, nameless masses. In the narrative, Japanese civilians, residents of Hiroshima, and their families were completely avoided. Contrastingly, it emphasises Oppenheimer's tormented science. The victims of this artificial tragedy become invisible, reducing them to numbers or abstractions. The Japan Times (2023) states, "By denying Japanese faces and voices, Nolan risks replicating the very dehumanisation that nuclear violence enacted." Diffusion of accountability spreads responsibility more widely across many actors, reducing each individual's sense of responsibility. Bandura (1999) observes that shared involvement among people dilutes moral pressure (p.185). The crucial element of the Manhattan Project in this film is that thousands of scientists, engineers, soldiers, and administrators worked at Los Alamos, Oak Ridge, and Hanford. In their group discussions, they constantly shared decision-making: "It is not on any one of us. We are all part of history now (Oppenheimer, 00:55:34). In addition, Groves posits, "It is not your job to decide whether the bomb gets used. That is the president's call" (Oppenheimer, 2023, 00:57:43). This proves that the hierarchical structures redistribute responsibility, enabling people to minimise personal guilt. Through this social psychological analysis, it is revealed that such diffusion reduces moral self-sanctions (Bandura, 1999). In addition, the visual staging underscores this element with crowded labs, group applause, and collective assemblies, such as group applause after the Trinity Test. Thus, the selected film highlights collaboration, diffusing responsibility for consequences. The paradox is analysed in the select narrative, where Oppenheimer internalises heightened guilt, while others in the chain of command externalise or deny it. This element dramatises the uneven distribution of collective guilt, which is psychologically concentrated in people who acknowledge it, while denied by others who distance themselves from such things.

The research's discourse analysis explains that audiences significantly negotiate between moral engagement and disengagement, producing a plurality that mirrors the movie's own ambivalent state. The study analyses many viewers' articulation of a sense of collective moral responsibility. In Contrast, numerous audience responses reflect disengagement strategies embedded in the selected film, such as justifying the atomic bomb as a wartime necessity, personalising responsibility, or framing the events as inevitable. Thus, the research exemplifies the dynamic in which Oppenheimer stages a moral negotiation in which collective guilt and moral disengagement coexist.

Conclusion

This present research study offers a compelling and pertinent exploration of Christopher Nolan's Oppenheimer as a cinematic engagement with two entwined Social Psychological constructs of Guilt and Moral Disengagement, while also analysing how society deals with its traumatic past. This present research has engaged the realms of Film Studies, Social Psychology, and Cultural Analysis in a very intense and significant manner, which reflects on the way cinema serves less as a mode of artistic expression and more as a psychological space in which society reflects and dialogues on its roles and reminisces about its traumas—only to later dis- and forget—collective Guilt. The significant findings of the present research study in Film Analysis clearly prove that in Nolan's *Oppenheimer*, cinema has engaged with Guilt not as Catharsis but more as Moral Tension. These significant cinematic aesthetic elements—absence of depiction of the victims, segmented temporality, subjectivity—have engaged the viewer in a very paradoxical way, in which they lead to an overwhelming moral introspection, but at the same time dislocate the viewer from the actual victims of nuclear bombing in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. At the same time, the avoidance of aesthetic elements also underscores moral disengagement in Guilt.

The research illustrates two forms of diffusion of responsibility and further supports Bandura's theory on moral disengagement, particularly responsibility displacement, euphemistic labelling, and advantageous comparison. Furthermore, the paper includes the analysis of the critics' and audience's movie comments, where some express a sense of guilt, and others rationalise it through justifying the needs of the war and scientific advancements. This demonstrates the duality that parallels the moral ambiguity of the movie itself, yet again affirming the importance of this discussion concerning the coexistence of collective guilt and moral engagement in mediated memories. Thus, it is safe to conclude that this movie may be considered a mirror of society, resonating with humanity's pendulum-swing between being reminded of its complicity and avoiding it altogether in the wake of its historical engagements. Considering this research further, it is also apparent that it offers excellent pathways for comparative research that explores how other groundbreaking historical films engage in similar psychological debates.

Works cited

Bandura, Albert. "Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities." *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1999, pp. 193–209, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0303_3.

---. "Selective Moral Disengagement in the Exercise of Moral Agency." *Journal of Moral Education*, vol. 31, no. 2, June 2002, pp. 101–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/0305724022014322.

Brody, Richard. "'Oppenheimer' Is Ultimately a History Channel Movie with Fancy Editing." *The New Yorker*, 26 July 2023, www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row/oppenheimer-is-ultimately-a-history-channel-movie-with-fancy-editing.

Caprara, Gian Vittorio, et al. "The Contribution of Moral Disengagement in Mediating Individual Tendencies toward Aggression and Violence." *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 50, no. 1, Jan. 2014, pp. 71–85, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0034488.

Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. Columbia University Press, 2012.

Oppenheimer. Directed by Christopher Nolan, Universal Pictures, 2023.

Silverman, David. "Interpreting Qualitative Data." *ResearchGate*, Nov. 2011, www.researchgate.net/publication/237068011_Interpreting_Qualitative_Data.