

Black (2005) - The Story of Michelle: An Unconventional Trajectory

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Abstract: -

The film begins with Michelle McNully, a 40-year-old woman with visual and auditory impairments reuniting with her long-lost mentor Debraj Sahai by a stroke of destiny, in the same place where they first got acquainted, years ago. But to her dismay, the elderly man has now contracted Alzheimer's, and had no memory of her. The sequence then rewinds to her childhood days, leaving the audience to witness the roller-coaster of Michelle's life and become part of her journey through multiple voids and failures, simple joys, tiny victories, finally culminating in a gigantic triumph against impending trials and obstacles.

Despite her accomplishments, she finds herself unable to reconcile with the feelings of isolation and loneliness, and pines for love and companionship. In the course of the film, she is seen taking a courageous stance while attempting an exploration of her sexual identity, which though eventually stifled by societal constrictions, serves a greater purpose of dispelling the myths around Disability and Sexuality.

The plot is replete with evidences wherein society, with its array of patriarchal limitations strategically robs a woman of her agency in exercising free choice, either by coercing her into an undesired coupledness or completely nullifying her desires for conjugation.

This paper is an attempt to shed light on Michelle's internal fantasy world by getting to the roots of an unresolved oedipal dilemma, a fiercely ambivalent relationship between the McNully siblings, her desperate efforts to communicate with a world that doesn't quite lend a listening ear, followed by an initially platonic portrayal of the relationship with the Teacher who turns out to be the substitute oedipal figure and eventually the very object of desire in her life. We will further try and see through the follies of patriarchy in her circumstances that serve to corrode her sense of self-worth, in turn barring her from seeking fulfilment in all spheres of life.

Date of Submission: 05-11-2021

Date of Acceptance: 20-11-2021

In Michelle's story, her teacher symbolically represents an embodied superego, being the sole agent attempting to inculcate a measure of societal ideals into her persona. In other words, his presence introduces the triadic structure in the life of the protagonist as he aims to aid the process of individuation, helping her gradually move away from the sensuous dyadic lingo, or the all-pervasive psychobiological model of infantile attachment to a more cognitive one. His methods though are considerably regressive, devoid of much empathetic or experientially shared processes, but rather inclined towards a rigid, authoritarian and imposing approach, motivated by what Ernest Jones in 1913 referred to as the "god complex" i.e. his own fantasies of omnipotence, omniscience and similar grandiose beliefs about the self as he claims to be the "magician" in Michelle's life.

Michelle on the other hand grows up to be a woman having a mind of her own, willing to take charge and live a life of dignity and independence, backed by knowledge, wisdom and skill. Despite her struggles, she retains a striking sense of humour and her zest for life is contagious! She stumbles time and again on the winding road to success and yet her resilience and grit are exemplary as she refuses to move her ground even in the face of repeated failure, eventually being able to prove her mettle once she graduates from college.

While the development of phantasy in young children typically occurs in a multi-sensory manner through the introjection and projection of idealized aspects of one's surroundings, for those with deficient audio-visual functioning, tactual stimulation understandably stands out as the primary modality used to 'reach out'. Contrary to an established notion, it then ceases to be a pathological fixation in the pre-ego state but represents a rather complex and rigorous mechanism aiming at a flexible adaptation and an evolved response to the outside world.

Moreover, owing to the severely patriarchal nature of its origin, the triadic world builds on a rather rigid matrix sans much regard for individual differences. Michelle's father, Paul McNully despite representing the "authority of the phallus" fails to become the symbol of protection and dependability in her life, leaving her to look out for the same in her "T".

The opening monologue conveys a deep sense of seclusion from the world around, one that brings forth the unspoken agony of being unheard, unseen.

"Yeh meri duniya hai..yahan kuch dikhayi nahi deta..kuch sunayi nahi deta" (This is my world..here, one can neither see, nor hear anything)

In the words of an inspirational scholar working exclusively on the domain of Disability, "The internalisation that one carries in an Indian culture accustoms them to seeing their disability as a personal quest and tragedy to be borne alone...". This inevitably highlights a significant lack of social support while conveying a lingering sense of dejection at being unable to trust one's psychosocial reality with his/her shortcomings.

At this point, the audience would feel compelled to take notice of the almost conspicuous absence of friendships in Michelle's life. Restricted social exposure beyond familial boundaries coupled with an incapacity to engage in active exploratory activities, due to her physical limitations could be an accounting factor in this regard. Added to this is a disillusion that comes with several failed attempts to identify with peers who often do not share the same reality, leading to a disconnect.

Once the audience is introduced to Mr. Sahai, the ensuing dialogue with Mrs. Nair makes it clear that he has faced some sort of rejection on the work front. His frustrated libidinal investment is therefore redirected to the self, giving rise to a falsely inflated ego structure: A phenomenon that Freud referred to as Secondary Narcissism. His engagement with Michelle at least initially is thus no more than a search for narcissistic glory, an attempt to invert the power dynamics, a mechanism to regain control. Michelle therefore in a way gets unsuspectingly victimized in the flux.

The stereotyped depiction of women characters in our traditional folklores and literature also has a major contribution in victimizing women as they tend to reinforce problematic gender stereotypes often subjugating them to perpetually assume a depressive position of passive endurance and self-sacrifice. They're socially and culturally conditioned to repudiate active claims to pleasure while imbibing maternal qualities of care, nurturance and generosity along with a disavowal of assertive and aggressive impulses.

Women like Michelle are therefore, forced to contend with society's ambivalent responses to the nature of their challenges, alternating between contemptuous remarks or gazes arousing marked discomfiture and overly altruistic approaches.

The seeds of rift between the siblings Sairra and Michelle seem to have been sown by experiences of 'sibling trauma': a coinage by eminent psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell, which is characterized by a threat of loss of uniqueness usually experienced by the older sibling when a second child is born to the parents, who is then considered a rival for parental affection. In this story however, the threat was felt more strongly by Sairra, the younger sibling since the parents had been more attentive to Michelle's needs on account of her condition, while displaying a good measure of neglect towards the other child.

In such a situation, a mindful review of parenting practices stands desirable and necessary. Building a positive, uplifting environment while taking care to create a space for exclusive dialogue with each child would be helpful in buffering the experience of unnecessary conflict and unbridled aggression amongst siblings, which in the movie lead Sairra to harbour an unconscious death wish against her sister by exploiting the very nature of her impairment, which she perceived to be the root cause of frustration :

Sairra: *Beech raat mein usko jagati aur poochti, Paani peena hai? (I'd wake her up in the middle of the night, and ask 'Want to drink water?')*

Michelle *sir hila ke haan bolti thi, aur mein sir ghumake so jati thi (Michelle would shake her head to say yes...and I'd turn around and go to sleep) She'd wait for me all night.*

This is a clear evidence exhibiting the displacement of aggressive impulses from parental authority figures to a far less threatening object: A disabled sibling. At the same time, we see her getting Michelle ready before her own engagement social. This could possibly reflect her identification with the sister as an extension of her mother's self along with a realization that she would perhaps stand a better chance to be the mother's favourite child by taking good care of her sister.

At the end of this exchange though, Sairra is also seen giving Michelle a piece of her mind:

"I know this could upset you...you may be feeling that you'd never fall in love..I hope you will, I really do..But, until then, Please don't spoil my evening!"

Sairra therefore becomes the unconscious bearer of a patriarchal mindset, rather crassly pointing out Michelle's assumed inability to sustain a mutually reciprocal conjugal relationship with an intimate romantic partner, implicating a forced lifelong singledom. Here in turn, lies the success of Patriarchy, in purposefully de-sexualizing a woman with a difference, while cyclically contributing to the subsequent erosion of intra-familial bonds of friendship.

Michelle looks up to her Teacher for inspiration, support and guidance as well as for paternal affection. Over the years, a dyadic space is re-created between them characterized by mutual respect and understanding, wherein Michelle begins to desire Sahai as her exclusive love object. She is thus brought face to face with the complexities of interpersonal attraction, accompanied as it is by a whole host of conflicting emotions, for the very first time.

She yearns a secure attachment with a partner who would be in a position to provide some amount of containment both for her own intra psychic conflicts, doubts, insecurities, fears, desires, fantasies as well as the entire weight of a stigmatized existence which at times can become too overwhelming to bear alone. Moreover, Sahai being the only person she could bring herself to trust and rely on for a support which the larger world had miserably failed to provide, was in retrospect a rather obvious object choice.

Mr Sahai brashly reinforces a long-held societal myth when he tells Michelle that she wouldn't ever in life be entitled to sexual love on account of her disability. In doing so, he unwittingly re-marginalizes her existence as part of a community: Thus, making it seem like she had asked for more than her fair share from life, which demanded an apology.

Mr. Sahai unconsciously enacts his repressed power motive while responding to Michelle's sexual advances in a manner as though he was doing her a favour that nobody else would. In doing so however, he encounters a moral conflict and decides to flee from the situation.

Interestingly, the stark similarities in age and temperamental eccentricities, may leave the analyst wondering as to whether Michelle's romantic interest in Sahai could be a reflection of her oedipal longings for her father, possibly trying to heal from a childhood trauma of emotional abandonment, but unconsciously falling into the trap of chasing yet another unavailable love object.

Though traces of the onset of dementia were present in his behaviour beforehand, this incident was clearly the trigger to a complete retreat from external reality for Sahai, eventually leading him to succumb to the disease.

Since human beings possess an inherent drive towards an integrated sense of being, a narrative identity is extremely important in providing them with a sense of cohesion (Binder, 2007). For Sahai however, involuntarily losing touch with an anxiety-ridden part of this narrative in fact serves to preserve a certain measure of wholeness to his otherwise fragmented, distraught self defending it against further discomfort.

The movie ends on a happy note as Michelle and her Teacher revel in the accomplishment of a shared dream, while Michelle tries to teach him some functional speech, helping him retrace his steps through the darkness that his world now entails, back to light. This is invariably indicative of Michelle's insurmountable ego capacity to sublimate, move beyond individualistic aims and commit to a larger cause, despite the clear absence of a conducive environment.

The narrative though inspiring, leaves us with a lurking sense of despair at the undue glorification of self-denying attributes in women even after having to prove themselves on multiple fronts. Michelle is forced to strike a compromise in the end by completely negating her personal needs for pleasure, comfort and emotional containment, despite strong endeavours on her part to outgrow the burden of social impositions, to rightfully claim an experience of romantic love and physical intimacy, wanting to live life on her own terms.

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XXXXXX. "Black (2005) - The Story of Michelle: An Unconventional Trajectory." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 26(11), 2021, pp. 11-13.