

Black Boys Look Blue in Moonlight; Queering the Black Identity in the Film Moonlight

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Abstract: The depiction of homosexuality has seen a great change over the past few decades. The shift has been in a positive direction where sensible portrayals have been made. However, the mainstream cinema has often dealt with white homosexuality at its centre with the black characters being ignored or sidelined. There are only a few films which have made the effort to portray Black lives realistically. Barry Jenkins' Oscar winning film, '*Moonlight*' (2016) is significant in this aspect. The film depicts both the beauty and the precarity of Black lives. The film also addresses the homophobic tendency prevalent within the Black community. The film talks about the issue of normative masculinity and the difficulty faced by young boys to live up to the societal expectations. The insightful representations of Black gay identity are absolutely necessary, especially in the sense that such representations would give room to healthy discussions about homosexuality in the Black community. Moreover, it gives a space for coming out of the closet and embracing one's true identity and feeling proud about it. It also becomes essential because of its crucial function of helping to comprehend the complex and difficult network entwining homosexuality, homophobia and Black Americans. These efforts would prove to be beneficial in a society that is diverse and multi cultural.

Keywords: Homosexuality, Black, Homophobia, Identity, Constructionism, Essentialism, Masculinity, Culture, Power, Precarity, Livability.

“Gay visibility has never really been an issue in the movies. Gays have always been visible. It's how they have been visible that has remained offensive for almost a century.” (*The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movie*)

The American film historian, Vito Russo's observation is definitely true of the gay representation in films and can also be applied to the portrayal of Black identity on screen. The earlier movies portraying homosexual characters as sad and suicidal or unstable and psychopathic are disturbing and to a greater extent are exaggerated and lack veracity. During the past few decades the films involving gay characters have undergone a vast change in terms of characterization and content. The tropes of 'the closet' and 'coming out' have become central metaphors in Western Culture, particularly American as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out in the *'Epistemology of the Closet'*. The development of cinema on queer people continues, with films becoming increasingly complex and sophisticated in their representation of queer lives. There are increasingly truer to life portrayals of gay relationships in the contemporary cinema. The movies like *'Milk'* (2008), *'Carol'* (2015), *'Call Me by Your Name'* (2017), *'Do You Take This Man'* (2017) are examples. These movies assume the role of advocates for normalizing homosexual relationships rather than making them sensuous or merely spectacle worthy.

However, it is saddening to note that gay activism has generally tried to focus on white men. The highly discussed movie *'Brokeback Mountain'* (2005) is an example of this sort of perception. The representation of Black gay male in art and more specifically in films remains a politically volatile undertaking. The confusion remains over whether a Black gay man's primary identification ought to be with a fellow African American (heterosexual) or with other gay people (predominantly white). Henceforth, the film *'Moonlight'* directed by Barry Jenkins is significant as it not only speaks about homosexuality and the apparent homophobia that is related to it but also of the intersectionality of race, culture and identity. The film is significant in the sense that it portrays a Black gay man as the protagonist.

The film is based on Tarell Alvin McCraney's unpublished semi-autobiographical play *'In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue'*. The film holds a special position as it is the first film with its entire cast being Blacks and also the first ever LGBTQ related film to receive an Oscar. *Moonlight's* wide acclaim and its subsequent success at the Oscar reflect the occasional recognition of the social and cultural dimensions of the Black people by the wider public. The film disturbs the white, dominant heterosexual society and culture which is upheld as the norm. The film portrays the growth of a black man through the three stages of his life- childhood, adolescence and adulthood. The film beautifully delineates the ecstasy, pain and beauty of falling in love as experienced by the protagonist while struggling with his own sexuality. The film unfolds in the form of three chapters that provide three different identities to the protagonist- 'Little', 'Chiron' and 'Black'. With each chapter he moves towards attaining maturity and a better understanding of himself

and his surroundings. The emotions of love and companionship find new dimensions in his life.

The film set in Liberty City, Miami is about Chiron who is derogatorily referred to as 'Little', owing to his meekness and aloof nature. Chiron's family comprises only of his mother, Paula who fails to provide him the love, care and security of a family. Paula's frustration due to her impoverished social circumstances leads her to drug addiction and eventually into abusive relationships. Her irritability finds an outlet in the abuse she inflicts upon her son. Chiron finds it very difficult to thrive in a harsh society dominated by the narrow standards about what it means to be a 'man'. The struggle to attain the glorified status of being a 'man' has always been a universal one. Societal institutions like family, education, religion, books, and media are keen on projecting an otherwise unattainable masculinity of being strong and devoid of any emotions. Chiron struggles with his identity when he gets placed against these set standards of masculinity and is expected to abide by the popular norm of being an aggressive male. The pressure that young Black boys are put to becomes clear in the words of Trevante Rhodes, the actor who played the role of grown up Chiron:

Growing up, you're told that being a black man, you have to be better than your counterparts. You have to be stronger, more masculine and the most dominant force in the room at all times. So that automatically puts up that block and you don't think it's possible to have any kind of vulnerability about you. (*The Guardian*)

Chiron befriends Juan, a Cuban drug dealer. He considers Juan to be his confidante and caretaker. Juan, along with his girlfriend Teresa gives him asylum whenever he flees from his house. Juan comes across as a facilitator who provides comfort, care and solace to Chiron. Chiron finds a mother figure in Teresa.

Chiron's life is at a very crucial juncture as he develops a special bond with his close friend Kevin. Chiron comes across as an emotional and sensitive boy who is far beyond the clutches of the oppressive society and does not wish to fit into the roles dictated by the society. On the other hand Kevin is symbolic of all those who fall prey to the so called morality and double standards of the society. Kevin forsakes his true desires and feelings just to be accepted by the hypocritical society. The scene where the two boys exchange a kiss on the beach under the moonlight is intense and deep. Unfortunately, Chiron's life takes an unprecedented turn when Kevin, the one whom he trusted the most turns him down. Kevin takes part in the 'hazing' ritual upon the school bully, Terrel's invitation. Kevin knocks down Chiron in front of the entire school despite the fact that Chiron is his friend.

The incident hints at the power dynamics that is at work. Kevin becomes a mere puppet in the hands of the society that holds control over each and every individual to such an extent that one's choice of clothing, food, lifestyle and above all one's sexuality and identity are decided by the society. Chiron gets completely disheartened and breaks down at the principal's office. His words to the principal "you don't even know" sets a disturbing tone as it seems to be directed towards the audience who pretend to be ignorant of the situation of people like Chiron.

The society merely remains as mute spectators about the issues of bullying and the use of sexually charged insults towards those who are vulnerable by any means. Terrel seems to be only an agent of discrimination whereas the entire society stands guilty of breeding people like him and entertaining notions of aggressive and toxic masculinity being the norm. The traumatic incident changes Chiron as a person as he takes revenge on Terrel by hitting him with a chair. The scene is amusing, a surprise act of revenge from a character whom the audience has experienced as sensitive and sweet. The scene is crucial for the Black gay men who have experienced something of the similar kind. The scene comes across as a possibility of being both a Black and a gay man at the same time and to be able to exact revenge against the perpetrators who find sadistic pleasure in bullying, humiliating and cornering those perceived as the 'other'. The popular victim-perpetrator narrative gets tarnished here as the Black boy has stood up for his rights and identity and henceforth has moved away from the status of being a victim. However, it also highlights the grim reality of pushing one into a zone where one does not want to venture into. Chiron never wanted to be an aggressive person but the societal agency, which acts through the fellow student Terrel in the film, has forced him to assume the role of a hooligan. Chiron grows up to assimilate all the external features that attribute to the popular notion of masculinity- toned down muscular body, wears grills on teeth. Following the footsteps of his mentor, he becomes a prominent drug dealer in Atlanta.

The film '*Moonlight*' is about one discovering one's true self. There is a reference in the film to Black boys looking blue in the moonlight by Juan. The colour blue highlights peace and tranquility and the moment of being with one's true self. The moonlight is symbolic of being the actual self and not what society dictates. Chiron and Kevin's intimate moment occurs on a beach under moonlight. Being under the moonlight indicates the importance of owning and being oneself. Each and every shot in the film is purposeful as it adds to the narrative of the film.

But director Barry Jenkins' genius return to cinema, which is based off Tarell Alvin McCraney's play *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, seems to put an extra weight on

shades of blue. It paints the school walls where Chiron is bullied within. It's the color of the moonlight that illuminates his dreams. It's the color scheme of his broken home. Blue is both Chiron's imprisonment and salvation. (*Spin*)

The ocean breeze indicates a sense of peace and tranquility. While Chiron drives to meet Kevin, the image of children playing on the beach under moonlight is shown. The scene is significant as the image of the beach; ocean breeze and moonlight are symbolic of tranquility and liberty. The image of children is symbolic as childhood is always portrayed as less complicated and the worries about the judgmental society do not haunt one.

The film clearly manifests that sexuality is something on which the dynamics of power is exercised. Michel Foucault in his '*History of Sexuality*' (1977-1986) theorized sexuality as located within the structures and discourses of power.

What we think of as our sexual identity-heterosexual or homosexual-is, Foucault argues, a category of knowledge only understandable within a specific culture, paying attention to the common sets of assumptions and conceptual parameters that underpin particular arguments, diagnoses and characterizations of sexual behaviours and practices. In other words Foucault argued for a constructionist view of sexuality, that is, a view that sexuality is produced within and through our ways of thinking and talking about sex. This approach is commonly termed 'Foucauldian Constructionism'. (*Studying Sexualities*, 22)

He did not accept the notion of sexuality as a biological construct. Foucault firmly believed that sexual identity was the product of cultural discourses and is prone to vary from one community to the other. He argues that notions of homosexuality or heterosexuality is merely a set of knowledge constructed within a community and thereby ought to be understood by that specific culture alone. In '*Moonlight*', Chiron's final image of possessing a rough and hard masculinity is the notion of an ideal sexuality that has been constructed by the society which he adopts to be in tune with the society where he lives. Chiron grows up to realize that his safety and well being resides in accepting a sexual identity that is propagated as the norm in his neighbourhood. Thus, the overtly masculine image is a mere façade to escape the harsh censure of the society in which he resides. This constructionism as Foucault suggests is in stark contrast to essentialism which argues that identity is innate, inherent or an essence.

However, it must be noted that Foucault does not argue that one learns one's sexuality from one's own culture. Foucault identifies that sexual acts signify differently in different

cultures and the identity constructed by these acts will also vary according to the cultural context.

In Ancient Mediterranean cultures, for example, sexual identification was not divided into 'heterosexual and homosexual' as it is in contemporary Western culture. In Ancient Greece, an adult Greek male could have sexual relations with anyone, provided his sexual partner was his social inferior and provided he maintained the active role during sexual penetration. The objects of the adult Greek male's attention were therefore his 'social inferiors'; women, slaves and boys. (*Studying Sexualities*, 24)

There are many contemporary societies that do not view same-sex inclination as a sin or sexual aberration. In the contemporary Latin American culture sexuality is not defined in terms of the sex of the partner but the way the sexual act is performed. In Chicano culture if a man plays an active role during the sexual act then he is labelled as heterosexual irrespective of whether his partner is male/female and only the man who is passive during the sexual activity is labelled as homosexual.

The contemporary Western Culture identifies all sexual acts between men as acts of homosexuality and henceforth men try to avoid such labelling by resorting to aggressiveness in the form of wrestling or extreme physicality. The feminist scholar Pumla Dineo Gqola in her book '*Rape: A South African Nightmare*' talks about how violence and aggression are considered to be desirable traits in men. In the film, '*Moonlight*', the scenes of wrestling among the boys and the one between Chiron and Kevin are symbolic in this sense. The famous British author and critic Mary Mackintosh, in her popular essay '*The Homosexual Role*' (1968), states that the idea of the purity of the society is reinforced by labelling some as deviant or criminal. The label thus becomes a form of social control that assumes some people to be naturally deviant. The society in which Chiron resides tries to utilize this agency of social control upon him. His interests, feelings, forms of expression and articulation and freedom of mobility are curbed by putting a check upon them. His visits to Teresa's house get stopped as he is showered upon with sexually charged abuses on account of his relationship with Teresa. He avoids being free and interactive with his peers out of the fear of being subjected to humiliation. He does not exercise his free will to interact with his peer group. The constant fear of being labelled a 'faggot' as his mother called him remains deep within the boy. The society wilfully closed its eyes towards Chiron and sat back to become mute spectators to the kind of injustice being meted out to him. The pressure of the societal expectations imposed upon him eventually affects the boy deeply. He ends up being someone else, an identity produced and propagated by the

oppressive hyper-masculine society around him. He symbolizes Judith Butler's categorization of life as precarious and livable.

In "*Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics*", a 2009 article, Butler outlines that the normative framework of gender operates to condition life and enhance the precarity of certain lives who are unrecognisable within dominant scripts of living and being gender. (Critical Legal Thinking)

The gay activist and historian Jeffrey Weeks too argues that sex attains meaning only in social relations. The power relations acting upon the structure of sexuality limit the possibilities of choice and autonomy as evident in the character of Chiron. Kevin too comes across as a symbol of the effect of power relations acting upon 'individual' beings. He cleverly abstains from confessing his true desire or self which rewards him with a 'livable life'. His statement that the song 'Hey Stranger' brought Chiron's memories to him can be taken as his confession. The song has romantic connotations to it which hints at the 'romantic' nature of his relationship with Chiron, far from being mere companionship. The moments that he spent with Chiron at the beach and in his apartment involves him caressing and comforting Chiron. These moments clearly suggest the depth of the bond that the two shared with each other. Unfortunately, Kevin could not admit his desires and stand up for himself. Hence, it can be stated that just as Chiron transformed into a totally different individual than what he personally identifies himself to be Kevin too ended up being different from his own true self. The concept of 'coming out of the closet' as proposed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her highly influential work 'Epistemology of the Closet' (1990) becomes relevant here.

The closet is a figure of speech for the self-imposed silence a person maintains around their sexual orientations. People are in the closet if they don't 'confess' their homosexuality or they hide it by 'passing' as heterosexual. Throughout her writings, the closet is an important symbol of the 'open secret' of sexuality pervading Western culture and everyday life, and it is this symbolic resonance of the closet which makes Sedgwick's work so useful to analysis of popular texts. (*Studying Sexualities*:50)

The discourse of homosexuality as a shameful secret produced the concept of 'closet'. The idea of being closeted is not necessarily a choice as in the case of Chiron who scarcely knew anything about being homosexual as a young boy. However, the mannerisms, clothing, and attitude strips one of one's false pretensions and reveals the true identity as in the case of Kevin towards the end of the film. The people like Kevin prefer to hide their desires and preferences out of the fear of shame and humiliation.

In '*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*' (1990) Judith Butler talks about gender as a performative construct. She writes, 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (1999:33). The gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality' (136). Thus, 'gender' becomes a series of acts within specific discourses of law, medicine, religion, and family and so on. Like Foucault, she proposes that gender is not natural or innate, but the effect of discourses that are controlled by power structures.

Chiron gets mocked and bullied by his peers as they feel, that he does not fulfill the pre-requisites demanded by his gender role. The 'effeminate' mannerisms and tight jeans worn by Chiron earn him the sarcasm of the people around him. Even his mother calls him 'faggot', a derogatory term used for gay people. Chiron gets portrayed as the 'other' or the deviant only because he does not perform the premeditated gender roles. The act of performativity begins with one's birth itself with the declaration of one's sex. Thereafter, the parents, religion, educational institutions, peer groups, media and the society start to function in a particular way so that the child is interpellated into the dominant and normative gender regime.

Kevin performs truly according to the set norms of his gender. He comes across as the 'cool' guy who gets detention as he is caught in a sexually intimate situation with a girl. He willingly takes part in hazing and is ready to knock down anybody, even his own friend. The notion of performativity works in the case of Kevin and helps him to escape humiliation and mental agony and thereby guarantees him 'livability' as Butler suggests. Butler, in her sequel '*Bodies that Matter*', stresses that 'performativity must not be understood as a singular or deliberate "act", but rather as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names' (1993:2). For the notion of heterosexuality to be normative and natural it is necessary that gender remains as a concept of binary opposites-masculinity/femininity and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desires.

Juan represents a greater part of the youth of the Black American community who have turned to illegal activities like drug peddling and other criminal offences. The neighbourhood in which Chiron resides clearly indicates the dilemma of the majority of the Black communities around the world, especially in Miami. The destitute and impoverished surroundings create more people like Juan and Chiron. Juan's words come across as an enlightenment to Chiron, "At some point, you gotta decide for yourself who

you gone be. Can't let nobody make that decision for you.”(21:01) Juan tries to make Chiron realize the significance of being true to oneself. The colour ‘blue’ relates to the idea of being free, far from the restricting boundaries of the society around. The advice given by Juan is significant as it finds resonance with the marginalized people who are struggling to make a space for themselves in the society and also groping with the issue of identity crisis. The words of Juan also serve as an attack on the mentality of the community of isolating and torturing someone who falls out of its order.

The film becomes noteworthy owing to the fact that the Blacks in the contemporary American society have to live in a constant threat of losing their belongings, land and in a wider sense identity. It also highlights the incarceration of Black gay people in the contemporary society. The act of ‘coming out of the closet’ seems to be much more difficult in the case of the Blacks due to the fear of the intense censure and humiliation. For a white man, he has to be conscious of his sexual preference alone but for a Black man he has to take into account his racial status as well. The prominent films dealing with the theme of homosexuality have always focused on the whites and their subsequent dilemma. Even if the Black characters are shown to be homosexuals, they are not usually treated with the same depth and seriousness as seen in the case of white gay men. The passion and love between Black gay men seldom get represented on the screen in a faithful manner. The film ‘*Moonlight*’ succeeds to do so. The passionate encounters between Chiron and Kevin on the beach and the subsequent one in Kevin’s apartment are symbolic of this. The film shows the essence of Black humanity in a beautiful manner and also the precarious nature of Black lives.

Jenkins, through his film, portrays the Black boyhood as a precious one as opposed to the popular norm of revering white boyhood. This is symbolized in the scene where Chiron drives to Kevin’s place and the image of a group of Black children playing on the beach gets projected on the screen foregrounding Chiron’s car. This clearly hints at the effort, made by the director to project the innocence of the Black kids which get ultimately lost in white society. It also subverts the popular notion of Black boys being disruptive and prone to violence. The idea of the naïve white boy, less susceptible to societal scorn and abuse is strongly questioned by Jenkins. The distorted family background, the impoverished conditions of the house and an unapologetic drug addict mother contribute to make Chiron’s life utterly miserable. Paula knows that she cannot do anything for her son and it becomes clear in her lamentation, “You don’t love me no more. You’re my only, and I’m your only.”(58:10) She comes across as the representative of the Black women who are doubly marginalized because of their gender and race. She is disheartened at the realization

that her son will not fit into the normative gender role as prescribed by the society. The alienation between the son and the mother mainly emerges because of the sexual deviance of Chiron. If the society had been more welcoming, Paula would have felt at ease with Chiron's identity. The film can be perceived as a tribute to all the Black gay men who have been struggling with their identities and also opens up a space for all the young Black boys out there who are perplexed over their sexual identity and place in the society.

The reconciliation between Chiron and his mother towards the end of the film does not completely account for a very normal mother-child relationship but one can have hope that things will be better between the two. The director tries to subvert the notion of familial bonds in the Black families as portrayed by the conventional white dominant historiography and culture. It has always been a question of ambiguity about the family structure prevalent in the Black community. The western society has always denied the presence of emotions of companionship, love, compassion and familial bonding in the Black community. Jenkins becomes successful in the portrayal of the Blacks as human beings with feelings as common to any other individual.

The film also addresses the homophobic tendency prevalent within the Black community. The story emerges, grows and evolves within the Black community which highlights the need to confront the reality of Black gay men in its entirety.

Finally, *Moonlight* is an all-black world, devoid of respectability politics. While it tells the story of ambiguous sexuality, it does so with unambiguous blackness and shame. Similarly, seeing black kids beat each other up in *Moonlight* is not a call to abandon black masculinity as insufficient to cope with black homosexuality, but to wrestle with the reality of the black gay men in its totality. (*The Guardian*)

Often films deny faithful reflection of Blacks which in a sense is an act of violence of their identity and selfhood. The film places the Blacks at the centre of the narrative who are otherwise seen around the fringes of the mainstream historiography, culture and society. The Black gay man at the centre of a popular narrative cinema not only calls for a revival in the set standards of the society but also encourages millions of Black men who live eclipsed by the weightage of their colour and sexuality.

The film projects the humanity and complexity interwoven in the Black experience. Jenkins tries to normalize the Blacks who are perceived as the 'social abject' by the white mainstream western society through the representation of the Black people as emotional, vulnerable and at the same time possessing the qualities of goodness, virtues, morals and

the passion to live one's life in a dignified manner. It is true that films have been made earlier with Black characters at its centre but those films focused on two types of portrayals. The first type include Black characters who are aspiring and facilitate upward mobility in the society while the other focused on the struggling, miserable lives who could never make it to the heights. But '*Moonlight*' does not fall into either of the two categories. The film apart from portraying a true episode of Black community also shows what it means to be the 'other' within one's own community. Thus, Chiron has to fight the outside world but also has his own people standing against him.

The insightful representations of Black gay identity are absolutely necessary, especially in the sense that such representations would give room to healthy discussions about homosexuality in the Black community. Moreover, it gives a space for coming out of the closet and embracing one's true identity and feeling pride in it. It becomes also essential because of its crucial function to help to comprehend the complex and difficult network entwining homosexuality, homophobia and Black Americans. These efforts would prove to be beneficial in a society that is diverse and multi cultural like the American society.

The films like '*Moonlight*' serve a greater purpose of removing the dichotomization seen within the gay community, a divide between the white gay man and his Black counterpart. The film doesn't show the 'coming out' experience of the protagonist but nevertheless shows the growth of a young naïve boy into the realization of his own sexuality. He finally embraces his sexual orientation at the end of the film and accepts his true self without any inhibition or shame. The film also holds an optimistic tone as Chiron finds refuge in his once lost love Kevin which sends a ray of hope to the millions of Chirons out there in the world, particularly in the Black community. Such films that end on a predominantly positive note of reconciliation and reunion suggest the fact that homosexuals can lead happy, healthy and productive lives. The presumable 'happy ending' of the film tends to challenge the negative representational patterns mentioned by Russo in his work.

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