

Intersections between the 20th and 21st century: Portrayal of 'background players of color' in Western cinema

Simran Chhabra

The near end of the American Revolution (1775-1783) marked the birth of the African American slavery in North America, particularly in the United States of America, thereby producing a volatile racial climate that followed for centuries. Scholars have suggested that rape or acts of sexual violence can metaphorically serve for enslavement, thus applying to both men and women. The socio-psychological culture of sexual violence led to the portrayal of the majority black men as 'Tom' like in the mainstream American cinema. As Aliyah I. Abdur Rahman argued, "The vulnerability of all enslaved black persons to nearly every conceivable violation produced a collective 'raped' subjectivity."

In 1915, D.W. Griffith produced a motion picture called *The Birth of a Nation* that brought about a drastic transformation in Hollywood. A landmark film in the history of American cinema, *The Birth of a Nation* is a disturbing, overtly racist three - hour heavy watch. Throughout the screenplay, Griffith presented the black men as savages and hypersexualized beings through the characters of Gus and Silas Lynch. On the other hand, the white men were portrayed in yet another stereotypical heroic individual fashion with the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) as the saviors of the white race from the scourge of Black barbarians who were set free, post the 1861-1865 civil war. Even though Griffith's film continues to be widely celebrated it tends to appear as a piece of unabashed racist propaganda. Propaganda as a means of convincing the audiences of something being honest was used by Griffith in his portrayal of the Southern blacks as villains, violent rapists, and threats to the social order. The film has been advertised as an accurate presentation of the events at the time but the originally dark-skinned individuals played very minor roles in the film. Majority of the black protagonists including the Senator's mulatto mistress, Silas Lynch - the mulatto politician brought to power in the South and the faithful freed slaves, were all played by white actors who wore 'blackface'. Blackface: a type of face makeup largely used in the minstrel shows of the nineteenth century, consisted of actors applying burnt cork, shoe polish or other products whilst showing their lips and other features prominently to perfectly imitate the presumptions about African American physical appearance.

The film bravely explored the controversial concept of inter-racial sex and inter-racial marriage but the climactic finale involving the suppression of the blacks by the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) gratified America's sexual fears about the rise of the belligerent, strong and predatory black men. The positive imagery of the African Americans was completely ignored throughout the 193 minutes running time of the film. Griffith not only provided an extremist depiction of the black men but he did the same for the black women like, the presentation of the conniving mulatto mistress who seduced Stoneman. *The Birth of a Nation* as a political melodrama overhyped the fear of the lines that black men could cross over only to assault women, especially white women. Silas Lynch, a mulatto leader with a name that ironically aligned with his actions that led to his eventful fate, was consistently shown as an animal who was out to get Elsie, a virtuous white woman. This melodramatic direction of Lynch is one of the most disgraceful and repugnant elements of the film. The final scene of the film shows two love couples, Ben and Elsie, and Phil and Margaret on their honeymoons signifying that there

were a newfound peace and love between the North and the South. However, the other aspect of the ending wherein a group of happy people in togas are shown with an image of Jesus Christ superimposed on top of them hinted towards the metaphorical correlation between this harmony of the North-South and Christianity. It appears that Griffith associated the KKK's victory with Christianity implying that their mission was divinely motivated in a way which seems to be completely imbecile because Christianity has never argued for slavery, violence or racial oppression.

A couple of decades later, Melvin Van Peebles, wrote, directed, produced and starred in the film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. Regarded as one of the first Blaxploitation films, Peebles work from the seventies found itself to be the cornerstone of black cinema. It is right into the opening scene of the film that the film credits 'the Black community', thereby indicating the cinematic depiction of an entire race. Blaxploitation is a term that stands for a less exploitative depiction of black characters in a motion picture. However, the African American protagonist, Sweetback's portrayal is done in a contradictory fashion. A few minutes into the film and the audiences find themselves viewing the inhumane utilization of Sweetback as a form of commodity, a piece of meat than a man. An eight-year-old, Sweetback, is a young African American boy with ringworms on his head, who eats greedily and is weirdly admired by the black women, is subject to a grave form of sexual exploitation at a very tender age, consequentially presenting the protagonist as a complex character with a very limited history. Shot absurdly, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* is a film that showed only snippets of Sweetback's life, most of which involved his sexual encounters with different women. A large portion of the screenplay showed him on a constant run which is also metaphorical to the central plot of the film. Although his run is linked with his escape from immediate conviction by the white police force, Sweetback's run on a larger level hinted more towards his escape from white oppression.

The lack of written script was tried to compensate for by Peebles, through the addition of a soundtrack from Earth, Wind, and Fire. *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* is a poignant take on the larger indelible impact that sexual exploitation has on a young child, irrespective of the child's skin tone. This is particularly observed in Sweetback's encounter with Beetle, the man who got him into his brothel, exploited him as a sex symbol and eventually sacrificed him for a crime he did not commit only due to the coercion exercised by the men in blue. In the entire scene, Sweetback is seen not uttering a single word to Beetle but his plain, vanilla-like expression with a fixed stare conveys the injustice he has faced at the hands of Beetle. Despite the victorious ending of the film, Sweetback is a passive, submissive and a typecast black character who encounters brutal violence yet does not harm anyone with a gun. His continual running, complemented by the aforementioned score and cutting is a cinematic take by Melvin Van Peebles on the film's underlying racial scheme: a sexually abused black man who was framed for a crime and found himself to be at the whim of the whites, yet for the first time, a black staged prisoner managed to get away. The title credit says, "This film is dedicated to all the Brothers and Sisters who had enough of the Man," thereby explaining the maligned racial depictions in the rest of the film. A politically motivated film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* largely portrayed the caricatures as white, oppressive and racially motivated who coincidentally happened to be the Los Angeles police department.

An Academy Award winner for best picture, best actor in a supporting role and best writing adapted screenplay, *Moonlight* is a 2016 coming-of-age drama film focusing on its black protagonist, Chiron's journey from a young African American boy into a grown man. *Moonlight* is a daring attempt by Barry Jenkins to discuss the sensitive topic of hyper-masculinity: an exaggeration of stereotypical masculine behavior, and the double-edged struggles of black men to conform to the vastly accepted societal norms of both, race/ethnicity and homoerotic sexual orientation. *Moonlight*

stands for the principle that ‘safety outweighs identity’. A portrayal of narrative circumstances revolving around Chiron’s life, the film still carves its niche in the viewer’s heart and mind because of its universality. At the core of the film are human pain and human growth which is what strikes the chord with the audience. The opening sequence of the film is a 360-degree shot that allows the audiences to submerge themselves into *Moonlight’s* little fabricated world. A few minutes into the film and one witnesses Juan and Chiron’s first interaction which involves not only the two individuals but also one out of the two key elements of the film i.e. silence. Silence in *Moonlight* is largely symbolic of the silence that black men often endure because of the confinement of masculinity that gender norms impose. Another key element in the film is water. Chiron seems to have a very scintillating relationship with water. It starts with Juan, a local drug dealer played by Mahershala Ali, teaching Chiron how to swim in the ocean, to Chiron putting his face into ice-cold water when he encounters a brawl in his high-school and doing the same as the film skips and takes the viewers a decade later in his life to the final scene when Chiron and Kevin sit under the moonlight, on a beach and Chiron finally lets his guard down to comfortably be his self. These multiple snippets largely signify the peace and calm that water brought Chiron, which unfortunately his world lacked.

A social commentary on cultural restrictions, *Moonlight* from a broader perspective unconsciously talks about cultural repression. At an internal level, this film focuses on Chiron’s repression as an African American individual who has homoerotic preferences. The idea that queerness, by and large, boils down to nothing but a mere sexual encounter has been blatantly dismissed in this film. This primarily sets *Moonlight* apart from the others. Along with Chiron’s struggles, the film also explores the unsaid trials and tribulations Kevin had to overcome. Kevin is presented as Chiron’s best friend and sublimely as his love interest in the 115-minute watch. Even though, he betrays Chiron due to a high-school bully, thereby affecting their tenacious friendship, yet the viewers can never completely detest Kevin because he is the perfect example of the kind of person who was desperate enough to fit into the box of accepted and respectable masculinity and went till extremist lengths to do the same. In the wake of his desperation, he gives up on his best friend and his identity, nonetheless, the latter part of the film signifies the painful projections of his acceptance of his sexual identity. An overall intersection of race, class and sexuality, *Moonlight* with its brilliantly executed cinematography by James Laxton leaves an everlasting impact on the viewer’s mind. The scenes shot in the house from the first chapter: ‘Little’, are more poetic than mundane. The placement of the camera was such that as a viewer one could feel the sense of underlying privacy in the house. When drawing a parallel, *Moonlight’s* style of filming seemed a similar site to that of *Imitation of Life (1959)*. In the latter, the audiences would never see Laura Meredith directly at an eye to eye level and she was always dramatically framed. The simple shots like Chiron moving his hands out of the car window and against the wind, the boiling of water on the stove, the dripping of soap; signaled to the audiences that Chiron was a quiet, shy kid but he held a rich inner life. These daily life scenes invite the viewers to look both, at and beneath the surface of the life that an outcast kid like Chiron led. Navigating his way through a world of drugs, toxic nuances of masculinity and sexual identity, *Moonlight* does not progress as per standard continuity and rather jumps from one scene to another, rarely rendering itself as a smooth film. However, the juxtaposition of Chiron and Kevin from when they were young and at a football field, alongside the ending scene when they walk towards the car, feels like a metaphoric comment by Jenkins on how both the men with their respective takes on their homosexuality have knowingly or unknowingly interchanged their roles.

All the aforementioned North American screenplays and various others have created an incessant impact on the audiences in their unique ways, nonetheless, they all disappoint on one common front which is, the unappreciative portrayal and the unequal screen space shared by women of color. This is observed to be true for all the major motion pictures that focus on the lives of African American individuals like, *Detroit*. Based on the Detroit riots of 1967, the film largely focuses on the

happenings of the Algiers Motel. There are debates about the inaccurate presentation of the facts but the most major counter-reaction to the film is the ‘no role’ of black women approach adopted by Katherine Bigelow. This representation misinforms the viewers about African American females and their role in society at the time. During the Detroit riots, black women were heavily involved in the community service and provided aid to the afflicted members of the society. However, Bigelow sidelined them completely during the 144 minutes running time of *Detroit*. Similarly, in *Moonlight*, Chiron is cared for and fostered into a grown man by Teresa, a black woman. Overall, a heart-touching film but *Moonlight* also disappoints on this forefront. Despite the life-changing role that Teresa played and the warmth, comfort and the motherly love she provided for Chiron, Jenkins gives Teresa a minimal screen space and she is mostly given a casual mention in the background than being presented in the foreground. A few other screenplays like *People Vs Orenthal James Simpson* also highlighted a pattern that forced the black women to choose between being sympathetic towards one of their own or a white woman. In the words of Linda Williams, these women were forced to choose between ‘racial victimization’ and ‘gender victimization’. The black women were typecast as emotional beings who were allowed to have a voice of their own yet were perceived as irrational individuals, thereby pressuring them to choose either being a member of the African American race or being a woman but under no circumstances allowing them to have a piece of both the pies.

Largely the African American individuals have had a long and complex history in western cinema. With the early films of the twentieth century, a nostalgic and idealized vision about the antebellum South was depicted to the audiences. Keeping in line with the dominant yet demeaning stereotypical images of black men and women, they were majorly depicted as child-like, hypersexualized and criminal. Their roles in the mainstream cinema were also by and large restricted to that of servants (butlers and mammies) who were unswervingly devoted and loyal towards their masters, thereby upholding the expected social order. Slowly till the 1930s, the face of the black community in the western motion pictures started to evolve primarily due to the establishment of a few black-owned film companies that aimed to have an all-colored cast production providing for a fair share of screen space. By the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the North American cinema has seemed to move towards a positive direction with a coequal representation of the blacks, nevertheless, these portrayals continue to fight against the contested and complexed history of the controversial and stereotypical representation of the African American community.

Bibliography:

- McPherson J. N.d. *A Defining Time in our Nation's History*. Available from: <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/brief-overview-american-civil-war> [Accessed 11 August 2019]
- Filmsite. N.d. *The Birth of a Nation (1915)*. Available from: <https://www.filmsite.org/birt.html> [Accessed 11 August 2019]
- Shmoop. N.d. *The Birth of a Nation (1915)*. Available from: <https://www.shmoop.com/birth-of-a-nation/> [Accessed 11 August 2019]
- Taylor, R. (2004) *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. Available from: <http://www.notcoming.com/reviews/sweetback/> [Accessed 11 August 2019]
- Foster, T.A. N.d. *The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery*. Published by University of Texas Press. *Journal of The History of Sexuality*. Available from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/41305880?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents [Accessed 11 August 2019]
- Duke university Libraries. N.d. *From Blackface to Blaxploitation: Representations of African Americans in Film*. Available from: <http://exhibits.library.duke.edu/exhibits/show/africanamericansinfilm> [Accessed 11 August 2019]
- Staff. (2019) *I'm tired of watching white men get away with sexual violence against Black men*. Available from: <http://blackyouthproject.com/im-tired-of-watching-white-men-get-away-with-sexual-violence-against-black-men/> [Accessed 11 August 2019]