

Engagement of western cinema produced in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968) with race politics

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The 1950s was a critical yet transformative decade in the history of the United States of America. The Civil Rights Movement had gained full momentum and the African American community had banded together to obtain an equal status in the white-dominated American society. Simultaneously, Hollywood underwent a period of slow progression from blackface performances and *Gone with the Wind* to eventually casting African American actors as protagonists in mainstream cinema. Both the films, *Imitation of life* (1959) and *The Defiant ones* (1958) dealt with the heated issue of racial politics in their unique ways whilst contradicting one another in the portrayal of their 'poles apart' black characters.

Imitation of Life appears to be a compendium of the social attitudes and practices of the twentieth century America against both: women and people of color. Quite early on in the film, we see the two girls, Susie, and Sarah Jane, quarrelling over a white and a brown doll. This seemed to be Douglas Sirk's artistic take on 'Brown v. Board of Education' case (a case that was tried four years prior to the film's release) and 'The Clark Dolls' testimony. A little further in the screenplay, the two girls are also seen questioning their mothers about Jesus Christ's race and Sarah Jane promptly responds to it by saying, 'he was like me, white.' Despite such profound questions being raised by the kids which could have been compelling conversation starters for the American audiences at the time, it feels that the subject of race is explored superficially in the film. *Imitation of Life* does challenge the conventional gender roles by portraying Laura Meredith as a successful actress but as a viewer one is never quite certain about how the director wants the viewers to feel about her ambitions. This is because Sirk consistently depicts Laura Meredith as a 'puppet' and her emotions are always accounted for a 'staged drama' as if she is constantly playing pretend. In the words of her own daughter, Susie, she is always faking and shifting people as if they were "pawns on the stage" leading the spectators to believe that Laura is extremely narcissistic and making them question who is the real Laura Meredith?

Sirk also employs melodramatic techniques throughout the film: whether it is nudging the viewers to commiserate with Steve by specifically highlighting the multiple rejections that he faces in his relationship with Laura or the characters of Sarah Jane and Laura Meredith,

who are mostly shot through different frames like the fireplace or from the gap between the staircase railings, in a wide-angle view. The audiences however partially perceive Steve as a cold-blooded, wooden character who is observed smirking in the final scene after Annie's funeral and who only wants his lady love, Laura to sacrifice her ambitions for a more domestic role. Moreover, astoundingly, the film does not disapprove of racism as seen by Martin, Sarah Jane's boyfriend, who physically assaults her after he discovers that she is black. Upon learning this, none of the characters around Sarah are seen condemning the gruesome act. Instead, she is blamed yet again for pretending to pass as white. Lastly, Annie, the saintly black maid who slips perfectly into Laura's unrealistic expectations of "the one who eats like a bird and does not complain if she cannot get time off," is the one that makes *Imitation of Life* the typical American film trope that it is, wherein Annie as a character is never shown individualistically but only as a support for the white folks of the film.

In comparison to the above, *The Defiant Ones* seemed more authentic despite the viewer's knowledge that it is a concocted fabrication by Stanley Kramer. Due credit for the same extends to Sam Leavitt, who executed monochrome cinematography brilliantly. *The Defiant Ones*, a black-white buddy film, candidly addresses the use of the racial slurs in the American society at the time and Noah Cullen, the black protagonist, explicitly explains to John Joker Jackson, the white male protagonist, the feelings that his community holds towards words like 'boy' and the 'N' word. Often an ignored concept, this film manages to shed light on the concept of being 'too white' especially when Noah tells John that, "your white face shines like a moon." Following this, the manner in which Cullen puts mud over Joker's face, particularly allows the audiences to understand the 'ahead of its time' gender identities in the film. The transition from the time when Joker retorted to Cullen, "I didn't keep you from drowning. I kept you from pulling me into the swamp," to the moment, when regardless of Joker being shot, he willingly dove and crossed the mud swamp to save Cullen, highlights the homoerotic feelings that both the men shared.

Kramer in *The Defiant Ones* melodramatically utilizes the term 'Charlie Potatoes' to convey the dreams of the male actors in the film. In the end however, the failure of Cullen and Joker to catch the train that was their ultimate ticket to freedom, metaphorically signifies the tenacious emotional journey conjoined with the physical one that both of them have gone through, individually and as a team. Overall, the film gives the audiences a potent insight into the concept of 'differential treatment based on your skin tone' and how it was deeply embedded even amongst the young impressionable minds. For instance, when Billy saw both the men he automatically sought protection and help from Joker even though Noah was his

actual savior, due to their differing skin colors. Additionally, the scene with the lynch mob wherein Joker immediately tries saving himself by saying, “don’t you understand, you can’t lynch me. I am a white man” portrayed how there is an in-built superiority complex amongst the white characters portrayed in the movie.

Although both the films aim to lay emphasis on the status quo by showing the lives of African Americans of the twentieth century, as the audience one comparatively feels a greater inclination towards *The Defiant Ones* due to its clichéd but honest form of storytelling. *Imitation of Life* leaves the viewers perplexed by defending a century-long racist pattern in the most stereotypical Hollywood fashion by stating that, ‘this film is not racist because the white female lead has always sympathized with her devoted black servant friend and has treated her well’. On the other hand, in *The Defiant Ones* closing wherein Cullen and Joker are seen sharing a kiss through the cigarette they smoked followed by them being caught by the sheriff, defies the traditional American notions of both, heterosexual romance and masculine success, respectively.

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