

***Gender, Race & Identity: An Intersectional Analysis of Queer Representation in the Movie
Moonlight by Barry Jenkins***

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to deploy key identity structures that are mainly gender and race. These constructs intersect with one another on a social spectrum which is presented through the polemics of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, gender performativity, the role of queer communities, family structures, and racial identities. The dissection and analysis are established with the help of the movie ‘Moonlight’ by Barry Jenkins as it proposes intersection on the spectrum of both gender and race. The movie is analyzed intricately with the help of the dimensions discussed initially. The study unveils “hegemonic masculinity” as a precarious construct along with “white supremacy” in movies to extend onto real lives. The ultimate goal of this study is that it informs us of intersectional representation in films today. This movie is chosen to comprehend one mainstream LGBT+ film that is “intersectional” and bring it to comparison with other LGBT+ movies that are mostly clouded by cis-normative white people.

Keywords: Gender, Race, Identity, Intersectionality, Moonlight, LGBT+

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CHAPTER – 1 INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 INTRODUCTION

a) Gender

Gender is defined as a set of defined or undefined roles that are socially constructed and refers to the authority associated with men and women within our families, societies, and cultures. The concept of gender also includes the expectations held about the attributes, aptitudes, and behaviors that are feminine and masculine. Gender roles and expectations are learned over time and it is highly circumstantial.

b) Race

Racial discrimination is continuing to be a major problem for “middle class” blacks and it has often been downplayed as analysts have turned to the various problems of the “lower class”. This is an issue that is not seen much worthy of attention (Feagin, 2011). Discrimination can be defined in social contextual terms as “actions or practices carried out by members of dominant racial or ethnic groups that have a differential and negative impact on members of subordinate racial and ethnic groups”.

c) Identity

Racial identity is very real in a society like ours, as everyone is assigned a racial identity subconsciously. The centrality of racial identity varies across individuals, groups, contexts, and moments in time (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998). Managing and comprehending racial identities through the lens of media can be very daunting (Horowitz, 1985; Smith, 1991; Laitin, 1993). Social construct and self-identity coexist with one another more frequently.

1.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

a) Gender, Race and Identity

On both theoretical and linguistic levels, the terms “sex” and “gender” have separate meanings. The bodily aspect is referred to as *sex*, while the social construct is known as *gender* (Frohard-Dourlent et al., 2017). Gender includes cultural meanings that are associated with behaviour, persona, and gender expressions that are conventionally labeled as feminine or masculine. For a long time, they were used interchangeably, and sex does seem to be a poor proxy for gender (Fausto-Sterling, 2012).

Gender performativity is a central tenet of work by Judith Butler and is based on the idea that gender is socially constructed through the ongoing practice of exchanging dialogues and portraying actions subconsciously ‘to produce the phenomenon that it regulates and constrains’ (Butler, 1990). Butler’s ideology about gender being in layers and the deconstruction of it is complex. The concept of performativity is influenced by traditional and dominant conventions of gender, which exist in particular settings.

Layers to gender and its construction, especially ‘hegemonic masculinity is dominant in the labour market landscape with rigid masculine roles assumed as the societal norm (Acker, 2011). Hegemonic masculinity is centered around the philosophy that a strict power-based hierarchical gender construct exists that is defined by societal norms. In male-dominated sectors, a type of culture prevails owing to what Connell (1987) described as the strength of “patriarchal dividend” that has major consequences. This refers to the advantages that men

obtain when they conform to a hegemonic masculine roles and uphold a patriarchal system of gender (Gregory, 2016; Hearn, 2004).

The term race has a wide array of definitions, commonly used to describe people who possess certain types of morphological characteristics. There are various schools of thought within the identity aspect and the literature tends to emphasize either on a personal or a social front. Racial identity is taken into consideration to be an important category while defining a person's personal identity (Cokley, 2007).

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The relationship between body and gender is a central focus for gender theory. Binary femininities and masculinities are constant interpretations of the reproductive and sexual capacities of a human being which has led to this demeaning comprehension. Gender is a recurring fabrication of human agency, which at an institutional and structural level leads up to constraining the individual's agency (Connell, 1987, pp. 58-65).

Deducting the overview, it is important that we underline the issue concerning gender, race, and identity in intersection.

CHAPTER – 2

METHODOLOGY

2.1 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the research study are as follows:

- a) To investigate the intersections of gender, race, and identity in the movie *Moonlight*.
- b) To examine the polemical representation of the queer community in the film *Moonlight*.

2.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research study endeavoured here will use an ideal criterion for 'qualitative analysis'. An intersectional analysis uses qualitative analysis and is based on a two-fold approach. It requires a shift from a singular foundational perspective to an analysis based on the assumption that an individual's experiences are based on multiple identities that come together. The second aspect under the two-fold approach requires enabling analysis to consider contextual factors. This is based on facts of the topic being analyzed as a key approach (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2001, p. 29).

The term 'intersectionality' was coined by professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to describe how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics intersect and merge with one another. It accurately describes the way people from different backgrounds interact with their individual societies along with the universal society at hand (Coaston, 2009). Intersectionality is a *prism* to bring into consideration relations within discrimination laws that were not being acknowledged by the courts (Crenshaw, 1989).

CHAPTER – 3

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

3.1 Chapter 1: Little

A.

Analysis: Scene 1-20

a. Depiction of: ‘gender identity’, ‘gender expression’ and ‘gender performativity’

Scene 2 of the movie specifically showcases how “Little” alias Chiron, is being chased and bullied by his counterparts because he does not fit in. He is scared and overwhelmed by the people around him with whom he doesn’t relate as much.

Scene 3 and 3A build up a connotative foundation towards gender identity, gender expression and gender performativity. Juan pounds through the door and Little is frightened by an older man’s appearance. Juan asks “What you doin’ in here lil’ man?” Little says nothing, just watches him. Juan again asks, “You don’t talk to strangers huh?”. Juan takes a step forward and Little takes a step back. This portrays Little’s reluctance in this scene as he is unable to trust another man with good intentions.

b. Projection of: the ‘polemics of sexual orientation’

In scene 3A, Little shrinks, backs away and covers his ears. He is frightened of the children bullying him again. We know by now that ‘Little’ is an introvert and likes minding his own business. From the moment they meet, Juan only has Little's best interests at heart, winning Little's trust despite being a drug dealer.

In scene 9, Teresa asks Chiron about his family. Chiron seems uncomfortable but it appears that he does not want to go back to his house. There is still no establishment of Chiron’s sexual orientation openly as struggles with his sexual identity.

c. Representation of: ‘racial identity’ and the projection of ‘ethnic minorities’

The opening sequence is established with Juan coming out of a car. This scene is a single shot which establishes a framework on racial identity being African-American. Juan is a drug dealer. All the characters in the first scene are black and are exchanging dialogues about selling drugs. It is often misunderstood that the majority of black people are involved in ‘drug dealing businesses’ because they are usually seen as “thugs” or “thieves”, but most of the black people are invested in it because they have no other choice. The African-American community is not treated equally to date.

The fact that these characters are living in small spaces and are living off drug dealing tells us that most of the characters in the establishing scene are poverty stricken. In scene one, Juan asks Terrence (business partner), “Business good?”. Terrence replies by saying, “Business good. Everybody cleaned out, it's in the cut if you want it.”. The exchange of dialogues in this scene gives us an overview into the drug dealing world and the obvious nuances of poverty attached to it.

In scene 3A and 3B, Juan appears to have good intentions towards the kid. He takes Little out to eat and offers him to sleep at his place for the night.

The typical stereotype which has been created over the years about the African-American community is broken in the initial scenes.

Interpretation: Scene 1-20

In the first ten scenes, we come across the aspect of racial identity and ethnicity in a major way. All the actors in the establishing scenes are African-Americans and these scenes are an establishing point to portray the already ongoing struggle that the community is facing. The racial identity is universal in this movie. However, a personal complex identity is being explored here through Chiron. His trauma intersecting with his gender speaks volumes about his character as a black gay child.

B.

Analysis: Scene 21-34

a. Depiction of: ‘gender identity’, ‘gender expression’ and ‘gender performativity’

Scene 25 starts with an establishing scene of a few handful of boys standing in a semicircle. We see Kevin in this scene again. Kevin and Chiron are standing together in this circle along with the five other boys. The circle is now forming closer. All their eyes and hands are cast down as they are all comparing their penis sizes. Chiron and Kevin exchange a short glance at each other before looking down. By now Chiron is well aware of his own attraction towards Kevin but he doesn’t know what Kevin feels about him.

As all of these boys start comparing their penis sizes and shapes and it is not long before they started to bully Chiron because of his penis size. This led to the name “Little”. Chiron was made to feel extremely uncomfortable.

b. Projection of: the ‘polemics of sexual orientation’

In scene 33, Chiron and Juan are sitting at the table at Juan’s house. Chiron is silent from the traumatic night he experienced the day before. Juan was worried for Chiron as he had not seen him this distressed over something in a very long time. Out of the blue, Chiron asked Juan, “What’s a faggot?”. He took a deep breath before answering that question. “A faggot is... a word used to make gay people feel bad”. Chiron took his time to process that answer. After a while, Chiron asked, “Am I a faggot?”. “No. You're not a faggot. You can be gay, but... you don't have to let nobody call you a faggot. Not unless... ”. “How do I know?” Chiron asked curiously. “You... you just do. I think”, Juan replied. “You don't have to know right now, you feel me? Not yet”, Juan added. Chiron seemed comfortable and satisfied with the answer but he also appeared to be more wounded and curious.

This entire scene establishes Chiron’s curiosity towards his own sexual orientation. Chiron only wants to know the meaning behind the term “faggot” and resonate with it even if it is an abusive term. He is finally coming to terms with his sexuality and although he is a child, he knows that he is not the same as the others.

c. Representation of: ‘racial identity’ and the projection of ‘ethnic minorities’

It is not a choice but a necessity in many areas for the african-american communities who are poverty stricken to condone businesses that are illegal. In scene 33 A, the continued dialogue between Juan and Chiron speaks a lot about Juan’s *need* to run the drug dealing business even though Chiron’s mother, Paula is involved. Chiron asks Juan, “Do you sell drugs?”. Juan nods yes. Chiron then asks, “And my momma, she do drugs, right?”. Juan replies with a

“yes”. This shatters Chiron completely as this is almost too incomprehensible for him. However, Chiron is mature enough to understand that Juan comes from a poverty stricken background and he had to provide for his family.

Interpretation: Scene 21-34

Chiron is at this juncture where he is able to comprehend his individuality through different social identities. He now understands that his identity is not just moulded out of what his mother must have told him or what his friends call him, but there is a lot more to him than what others perceive him to be. At this stage, he is making a keen effort at understanding his gender. Many suppress their gender identities and sexualities due to the rigid heteronormative structures. However, Chiron seems to be curious about himself and studies his attraction towards Kevin. He converses with Juan about the Black community to understand where Juan comes from. In return, it helps Chiron to understand his racial identity a lot better in respect to other racial identities. He is now able to draw parallels between his racial and gender identity, and bring them together. This ultimately helps him define his individuality and personality in the long run.

3.2 Chapter 2: Chiron

C.

Analysis: Scene 35-54

a. Depiction of: ‘gender identity’, ‘gender expression’ and ‘gender performativity’

In scene 35, there is a significant amount of gender performativity. Chiron is constantly bullied by Terrel in the classroom. Terrel pursues to be aggressive towards Chiron and the other male students follow suit as well. Chiron chooses not to pay heed to Terrel but he breaks after a certain point. The fact that Terrel had pointed out that he was named “Little” after his penis size before, had always made him uncomfortable about his masculinity as compared to the others. Chiron’s masculinity is very fluid, his sensitiveness is seen as a sign of weakness, but he is just an overly empathetic person.

b. Projection of: the ‘polemics of sexual orientation’

In scene 36, Kevin and Chiron again have an exchange of dialogue. However this time they are teenagers. Chiron appears to be troubled by Terrel who is waiting to beat him up. Kevin approaches Chiron from behind and it is visible that Chiron is flustered by his sudden appearance. Kevin starts the conversation by asking Chiron, “What you doing man?”. He asks Chiron this question because he looks troubled and is looking out of the school balcony constantly to avoid fighting with Terrel. Chiron pretends to sound cool but is caught off guard. “You just standing there straight spaced. School been out, nigga, you ain’t goin’ home?” Kevin asks. “What you still doing here?” Chiron asks Kevin to avoid further conversation about himself. “Detention. Aimes caught me with this trick in the stairway”, Kevin replies. “What? With who?” Chiron asks. “Damn you nosy, Chiron”, Kevin replies with a chuckle. Chiron feels embarrassed to have overstepped. Kevin smiles and narrates the incident to Chiron about receiving detention because he was caught having sexual intercourse with another girl. This confuses Chiron and he feels restless about the incident. Chiron feels defeated as he has felt different with Kevin and had expected for something to happen someday.

c. Representation of: ‘racial identity’ and the projection of ‘ethnic minorities’

In scene 35 and 36, it is obvious that the school that Chiron is attending does not exactly carry the decorum of a formal educational institution. These scenes also present us with students who only belong to the African-American community. The language that they are practicing is not exactly formal, rather it is very coarse and local. The school seems to be old and has not been renovated in years together probably due to financial reasons. It is safe to assume that these children belong to a racial minority.

The exchange of dialogue between Terrel and Chiron within the classroom in scene 36 is quite shocking as the teacher does not seem to be surprised or shocked even because this is a routine now. This implies that a significant minority is studying in this school.

Interpretation: Scene 35-54

The scenes 35-44, is building a narrative into Chiron’s personality as a teenager. He is now aware of his gender and sexuality. He understands that he is attracted to Kevin but does not emote it explicitly. These scenes, however, establish Chiron’s identity in terms of his gender. We know that his state of confusion has come to an end, and now he is ready to explore.

The dream sequence implies that Chiron never analysed his sexual orientation until that moment. It was then, that he understood that his attraction towards Kevin was not just about him but was also about Chiron’s queerness.

D.

Analysis: Scene 55-66

a. Depiction of: ‘gender identity’, ‘gender expression’ and ‘gender performativity’

Chiron, in scene 55, is finally realizing his gender and sexuality. He has been pushed into focus due to Kevin and he understands that there is nothing wrong in being gay. He, in fact, embraces his identity in all forms. It awkward between the two of them after the kiss as they have always been childhood friends but Chiron is able to churn out his subconscious and believe that his identity is valid.

In scene 60 A, after the physical fight with Kevin that occurs due to peer pressure, Chiron is completely broken as Kevin was the one who made him believe that there was nothing wrong with him. This was the same Kevin who hit him and made him look inferior in front of the others. However Chiron is aware of his individuality and does not suppress it anymore.

b. Projection of: the ‘polemics of sexual orientation’

Scene 60 is an important projection of gender anxiety. Terrel is someone who is just unable to accept the fact that Chiron is walking around comfortably. He makes sure that Kevin hurts Chiron because he is aware that they share a bond of friendship and this will ultimately break Chiron.

Kevin eventually submits to the peer pressure because he does not want others to know that he is gay or bisexual. Kevin finally makes a run for it and punches Chiron in the face and keeps hinting at him to stay on the ground and not come up. Nevertheless, Chiron stands up every time to see whether Kevin will hurt him again and he does punch him again. After a while, all the other students who are Terrel’s sidekicks start piling up on Chiron and hit him brutally. This is an ultimate projection of how homosexuality is seen as something that is

completely unacceptable in society. Internalized homophobia turns into violence and people who are struggling to process their homosexuality also get affected within this rigid heteronormative system.

c. Representation of: ‘racial identity’ and the projection of ‘ethnic minorities’

In scene 60 A, Principal Williams is trying to extract information out of Chiron about who hit him so brutally. If Chiron took his name, Kevin would land up in juvenile court. The interrogation was very overwhelming for Chiron and he started to break down. This was not surprising to Principal Williams as she assumed that he was going through an issue related to racial discrimination. She said, “Look son, I’m not blaming you, I’m not. I know it’s hard, believe me, I’m not tryna disrespect your struggle. I just need you to know, if you need some help, if you need somebody to talk to... that door right there, it’s always open, you feel me?”

Interpretation: Scene 55-66

Kevin has been a huge benefactor in Chiron’s life to help him comprehend his gender in a proper way. Chiron was always trying to figure out his attraction towards boys. In fact, Chiron never thought of anyone else but Kevin. He finally broke through his shield when he kissed Kevin. However, it was a huge let down for him when Kevin punched him even though it was under the influence of someone else. This shows that Chiron had fully accepted his gender identity but Kevin was yet to process his sexuality fully. The fact that he belongs to a minority and is also gay makes it tougher for him.

3.3 Chapter 3: Black

E.

Analysis: Scene 67-90

a. Depiction of: ‘gender identity’, ‘gender expression’ and ‘gender performativity’

In scene 68 and 69, we see a completely transformed Chiron. It appears that he works out regularly because his body is well built. He has created a stronger persona, more masculine. We do not see what he has been through while he was in a correctional facility. In scene 77, Chiron is sleeping well after a long time when he receives a call in the middle of the night. He assumes that it would be his mother, but it turns out to be someone else. Chiron is a transformed man, hardened by his struggles and his illegitimate businesses. He picks up the call assuming it was Paula but it was Kevin on the line. There are long awkward silences. Chiron had felt like he had known Kevin since forever. The incident was fresh in his head and he couldn’t ever get past it. “I’m... I’m sorry about that... about all that, Chiron. About all that shit what went down, man”, Kevin apologized to Chiron. They gradually started having a normal conversation about life and where they lived. For Chiron, it felt like he had gone back to his past and this was the most himself he had ever been, with Kevin.

In scene 78, we see the version of Chiron that is effeminate, softer, sensitive, introverted and happier. It was Kevin, who had brought out Chiron’s real side into the forefront. In fact, Chiron felt fearless around Kevin about his gender expression.

b. Projection of: the ‘polemics of sexual orientation’

Scenes 77 and 78, give us a brief idea about Chiron's loyalty towards Kevin. Chiron knows that Kevin had wronged him, but his gender and sexuality is the most present and real when he is speaking to Kevin. In scene 77, when Kevin calls up Chiron, it is obvious that he still

holds fondness towards Chiron. Chiron asks Kevin about what he does now to earn a living, and Kevin answers that he is a cook. This makes Chiron laugh as he had never imagined Kevin to be a cook or a chef. In scene 79, Chiron dreams of Kevin in his chef attire, smoking a cigarette. We see a close up of Kevin smoking and stubbing the cigarette, while smirking in a flirtatious way. Chiron stirs slightly while gradually waking up from his bed. He notices a light streaming through the window, and realises that he had just dreamt of Kevin after a long time. Chiron decides then and there, to meet up with Kevin without giving it a second thought. In scene 90, Kevin and Chiron have a conversation after a long time in many years. Kevin seems to turn out just the way Chiron had imagined.

c. Representation of: ‘racial identity’ and the projection of ‘ethnic minorities’

In scene 75, it is established that Chiron has a drug empire. We do not know why he fronts an illegal business despite Juan dying, assumingly while carrying out similar businesses. However, we can assume that Chiron too, had no choice. After he did his time, no one would be ready to hire him because he is a black man who technically went into jail for violence and people definitely stereotype the person and their background. The fact that he does not have a clean record, will not give him much space in a competitive society. In addition, his unstable family background was not easy to comprehend.

Interpretation: Scene 67-90

Chiron has made a keen effort to suppress his past personality. His way of expressing himself is more ‘alpha masculine’ and one would assume that he has transformed majorly. However, when Kevin calls him, we observe that the old Chiron is back and he is still sensitive. The fact that he suppressed his expression for so long, means that he had been traumatized due to the incident that had taken place. The aftermath of it led him to take his externalize by working out and buying materialistic goods for himself.

F

Analysis: Scene 91-99

a. Depiction of: ‘gender identity’, ‘gender expression’ and ‘gender performativity’

In scene 97, Chiron crashes at Kevin’s apartment. It is a small and cozy apartment with bare minimum furniture. Chiron notices a picture of a small boy in the living room who looks very much like a younger version of Kevin. Chiron had expected for Kevin to be impressed by his transformation but he seemed to be disappointed. This was probably because Kevin knew that Chiron was putting up a facade.

b. Projection of: the ‘polemics of sexual orientation’

In scene 95, both Kevin and Chiron are sitting in Chiron’s Chevy Impala. Chiron is driving the car. There is an awkward silence between the two of them for quite some time. Kevin and Chiron eventually start talking about their respective jobs and Kevin vents about how hard it is for him to earn enough to make a living out of it. Chiron listens out to him and empathises with him. There is an awkward silence again between the two and Kevin breaks it again. This time he asks Chiron a more intense question, “So Chiron, you just drove here?”. Chiron answers with a nod. “Where you gon’ stay tonight?”, Kevin asks Chiron. Chiron’s eyes are on Kevin, staring back at the man lost in that question, the space between its posing and this beat the clear answer. It is obvious to both of them that Chiron would be staying at Kevin’s place. In scene 97, after experiencing some unacknowledged tension between both Chiron and Kevin, Chiron has his gaze fixed at Kevin while he is preparing some tea for the two of

them. He knows that if he does not express himself today then he never will. Kevin is the only person who will help Chiron get past his PTSD and depression. “Kevin, You’re the only man who’s ever touched me”, Chiron tells him. “*The only one*”, Chiron restates. Kevin feels his heart dropping and for a moment he is unable to believe that Chiron said these words from his own mouth. “I haven’t really touched anyone else since” Chiron adds.

In scene 98, we see that the two of them are holding onto each other. Chiron is easing up upon Kevin’s chest and tearing up. He is shaking and is unable to speak clearly. Kevin comforts him like a child and gradually they start to re-learn one another.

c. Representation of: ‘racial identity’ and the projection of ‘ethnic minorities’

In scene 93, Kevin expresses as to why he has taken up a job as a chef. He knows that it does not pay as well and it is minimum wage but it helps him suffice. Kevin tells Chiron that he is done with working in the streets (dealing drugs) because he was held up in the county for a while. Kevin realises that life can get hard for black people especially after they have done jail time. He tells Chiron that him having this job and a child is nothing but a blessing.

Chiron on the other hand, when asked about what he does for a living, tells Kevin that he sells drugs. Kevin knows that this is not what Chiron is and he would be better off doing a more respectable job. Chiron feels offended as he expects Kevin to understand his situation, however Kevin is just looking out for him. They converse about the fact that the options are lesser for them as they are minorities.

Interpretation: Scene 91-99

To surmise the last chapter, Chiron is going through a confused stage in life that needed to be acknowledged. He was experiencing PTSD along with his traumatic gender suppression and was facing an identity crisis in regards to his gender and race. Chiron had always been chasing something more in life but he assumed that it was Kevin that he needed. Kevin was a support system in his life who helped him break into his personal identity in regards to both gender and race. Juan was the only paternal figure Chiron had ever known, and he lacked maternal attention as well, driving him to seek advice from the one other person who knew him from childhood.

CHAPTER – 4

CONCLUSION

4.1 CONCLUSION

Moonlight caught the eye of the audience because it carefully dissects the difficulties undergone by the “queer black men” who grew up impoverished and have faced hardships associated with the intersections of race, class, and sexuality. The concept of “Black masculinity” has been emphasized upon as we are able to empathise with the harshness caused by emotional suppression.

The current research study has been tailored to comprehend the intersectional identities within the movie ‘Moonlight’ by Barry Jenkins.

This study has unveiled concepts in regards to gender identity, sexual orientation, gender expression, racial identity, and a combinatorial approach to familial structure. The protagonist, Chiron's racial identity along with his gender and sexual identity has represented the presence of a well-defined community that does not receive as much acknowledgement within this systemic heteronormative society. With regards to queer theory and complexities within media, there are films that have done some amount of justice to that complexity by building onto those layers, but there is scope for more such movies within the mainstream media.

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