

The Moonlit Path: Exploring Intersectionality and Identity

Divided into three separate yet equally brilliant chapters, the film *Moonlight* follows the tumultuous life of Chiron as he traverses through boyhood and into manhood. Growing up in Liberty City, Miami, Chiron feels the need to live up to certain standards and put on a front that is utterly masculine and strong. Chiron faces life-altering questions as he comes face-to-face with his bullies, develops romantic feelings for his old friend Kevin, and confronts his complicated relationship with his mother. Directed by Barry Jenkins, *Moonlight* explores the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality. Additionally, *Moonlight* dares to unearth the effects of being exposed to constant homophobia, violence, and toxic masculinity. Through Chiron's struggles and the equally compelling characters of Juan and Kevin, *Moonlight* powerfully reflects on what it means to be a gay African American male facing scrutiny and conformity, but above all, what it means to be human.

To gain a better understanding of the film, it is important to learn about the inspiration behind it. Released in 2016, *Moonlight* was inspired by and adapted from Tarell Alvin McCraney's autobiographical play, *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*. The film's director, Barry Jenkins, who is also from Liberty City, came across McCraney's play and deeply related to it. Both Jenkins and McCraney had rough childhoods and mothers who struggled with addiction. In writing this film, Jenkins and McCraney wanted to connect to other African American males who experienced similar childhoods but, more importantly, who struggled with their masculinity and sexuality. The depth with which this story is shared truly makes it a remarkable film and a breakthrough for black and queer voices within the entertainment industry.

For so long, the black community and other minorities have been misrepresented or not represented at all within the media. According to Allen & Thornton (1992, as cited in Adams-Bass et al., 2014), “Television images of Black people are frequently controlled and/or created by non-Black entities that present stereotypical characterizations” (p. 386). The USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative (2020) also found that “across 1,300 films from 2007 to 2019, only 6.1% consisted of African American directors” (p.4). Not to mention, the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative (2020) found that in the most popular films of 2019, “the picture of the LGBTQ community that film presents is one of young, White, and male characters rather than the diverse experiences and voices that are actually part of this community” (p.28). Therefore, black and queer voices have gone long unnoticed. *Moonlight* challenges these statistics—it is a story of black identity told by black storytellers—in an effort to shed light on toxic masculinity and share a young boy’s heartfelt coming-of-age story. *Moonlight* gives its characters relatable and meaningful storylines.

Right away, in the first chapter of the film—titled Little—Chiron’s status as an outsider is made clear. Chiron is constantly bullied by his classmates and kids in his neighborhood. He is viewed as small—hence his nickname “Little” —defenseless, quiet, and weak. In the eyes of the other boys, he is the opposite of what it is to be a “man,” mainly because he is unable to prove his “manliness” when the boys gather around to play a violent game called “knock down, stay down.” This game intends to validate their masculinity, in which the boys actively assert dominance over one another. This is an example of toxic masculinity at its core. As Parent et al. (2019) explain, “Toxic masculinity is characterized by a drive to dominate and by endorsement of misogynistic and homophobic views” (p.278). The boys are conditioned to believe that physical prowess and dominance are the epitome of a “real” man. Even worse, this toxic mindset

means forsaking anything that is viewed as feminine because femininity is considered “weak” and “submissive.” That said, being void of emotion is another damaging quality of toxic masculinity; “Real” men mustn’t show any emotion or be vulnerable.

Thankfully, the film challenges toxic masculinity through the profound character of Juan, a drug dealer who welcomes Chiron into his life. When the two first meet, Juan is instantly inviting and comforting—a response foreign to Chiron. After all, Chiron lacks a steady role model in his life—his mother, suffering from addiction, neglects him—and his father is absent. Slowly, Juan begins to fill that role for Chiron and tries to instill a sense of ownership and pride in him.

On the outside, Juan has the perfect perceived image of “real” masculinity. He is visibly strong and has an imposing air about him. In a way, his manliness is consolidated by his living as a drug dealer. Being from Liberty City, considered “the hood” of Miami, drug dealing is the only way out of poverty, and sometimes, even a symbol of survival and domination. Of course, his depiction as a drug dealer can have significant ramifications, depriving him of his humanity and complexity. However, the film purposefully carries out this stereotype to debunk it. Juan transcends the limits and assumptions that exist within the stereotype of a drug dealer—those that paint him to be violent and heartless. In fact, through his relationship with Chiron, Juan demonstrates that he is kind, gentle, and open-minded. He is the first person to be accepting of Chiron and his sexuality. Their bond can be observed in a beautiful beach scene where Juan teaches Chiron how to swim. Symbolically, Juan also teaches Chiron how to navigate life. He tells him at the beach, “At some point, you gotta decide for yourself who you gonna be. You can’t let nobody make that decision for you” (Jenkins, 2016, 21:08). Juan introduces Chiron to a healthier side of masculinity that steps away from harmful behaviors. He also teaches Chiron that

he has authority over his own life. Sadly, the empowering bond between the two ends as Juan passes away.

Although brief, Juan's storyline challenges and turns a stereotype on its head. He distances himself from the sexist and racist implications that follow such a stereotype. Juan demonstrates that there is always more to a person than what meets the eye. In the end, Juan is multifaceted, complex, and *human*. He is shown to feel deep remorse for selling drugs and truly cares for Chiron. Often, people are so quick to judge or make assumptions. *Moonlight* confronts this head-on and teaches viewers how to empathize and understand a person and their story.

As the film progresses, Chiron continues to struggle with his masculinity and sexuality. Better said, he struggles to define his masculinity and his place in the world because of his sexuality. The inner turmoil he feels can be seen in a conversation he has with Kevin at the beach; he says, "I cry so much, sometimes I feel like I'mma just turn into drops" (Jenkins, 2016, 53:16). Chiron is full of emotion, but as the world's expectations cave in on him, he feels the need to suppress it. What follows this conversation is an even more vulnerable and intimate moment between him and Kevin. Later, as an adult, Chiron admits it was the first and only time a man ever touched him. This moment, however, is tainted by a betrayal. In an attempt to prove his "manliness" to the other boys, Kevin is forced by the school bully, Terrell, to beat up Chiron. After the attack, regret is evident in Kevin's face. Kevin has hurt and lost the trust of someone who confided in him. He has sabotaged any chance of having a special and close bond with Chiron. Thus, Kevin, too, is a victim of the detrimental cycle that is toxic masculinity. He lives his life according to others.

As a gay man, Chiron is a constant target of hate because he is the most "stigmatized version of weakness and sissiness" (Siebel Newsom, 2015, 25:16). Chiron poses a threat to other

men and their masculinity. As Michael Kimmel points out (2001, as cited in G. Padva, 2020), “Homophobia is more than the irrational fear of gay men, more than the fear that straights might be perceived as gay men” (p.198). Therefore, the other boys torment Chiron in an attempt to squash any suspicions of their sexuality and, in doing so, prove their manhood.

How Chiron’s gender and sexuality intersect makes it harder for him to accept and embrace his identity. Instead, Chiron tries to hide and bury himself. Not to mention, as a man of color, it is even harder for him to accept his sexuality. In a world that views race and sexuality as separate spheres, it is difficult for his identities as a black man and a gay man to coexist. He has to confront both racism and homophobia. Speaking of which, how his masculinity is defined is also based on a system that increasingly excludes black identity. As S. O’Sullivan (2020) explores, whiteness has become increasingly identified with maleness, so much so that their significance as gendered constructs have begun to go unnoticed (p. 223). In addition to this O’Sullivan (2020) says “The boundaries that constitute hegemonic masculinity in the United States are clearly demarcated along lines of race (whiteness), region (rural/South), and a relatively subordinate, vaguely working-class identity that masquerades as rugged individualism” (p. 223). Thus, Chiron falls victim to systems that are racist, classist, and homophobic. This, in turn, prevents him from living happily and growing into his identity.

Instead, Chiron goes down a darker path. Finally fed up, he responds to his bully in the only way he believes will work: through violence. Chiron attacks Terrell with a chair, for which he is imprisoned. After serving time in prison, Chiron also starts dealing drugs. His performative masculinity becomes apparent at this time. He is buff and puts up somewhat of a cold, unaffected front. As F. Dhaenens and S. De Ridder (2020) state—in examining the music of Frank Ocean—when men try to conform to harmful ideals of masculinity, “they often put on a hypermasculine

performance to hide their vulnerability, love or jealousy” (p. 366). Chiron focuses on his muscularity to detach himself from his overwhelming emotions. Additionally, the change in his physique highlights how he has succumbed to the idea that men must have “perfectly fit” bodies. This is not an uncommon occurrence. In fact, “23% [of boys] believe there is a perfect male body” (5 News, 2016, 0:37). Once again, therein lies the notion that masculinity equates to physicality.

In putting up this hypermasculine performance, Chiron grapples with being his authentic self. When he finally reunites with Kevin, Kevin reveals he is on parole and, similarly, has always struggled with living a calm, free life. Both men, confined to stereotypes and ideals of manhood, have lived unfulfilled lives. The toxic and destructive ideals of masculinity they feel they must adhere to collide with their sexuality and identity. It isn’t until the final scene, in which they share another intimate moment and let their walls down again, that there is hope that they might let go of conformity and set themselves free.

In the end, Chiron is a perfectly imperfect human who wants nothing more than to love and be loved. His desire for love is evident in the reunion he has with his mother, in which he breaks down after she says, “You ain’t gotta love me, but you gon’ know that I love you” (Jenkins, 2016, 1:19:35). Those who have witnessed Chiron’s journey in the film, will know that he craves to belong and find a place in the world that is accepting and kind. *Moonlight* is truly a captivating film that examines the societal expectations that come with one’s race, gender, and sexuality. As well, the film studies the effects of toxic masculinity, homophobia, and violence. This is a one-of-a-kind film that shares and embraces the lives of black individuals. Ultimately, through the characters of Juan, Kevin, and Chiron, the audience learns to be more empathetic, see beyond the surface, and love just a little more.

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