



Communication among the Physically Challenged with Special Reference to the Film Black

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Film like literature reflects life. Be it a romance, an adventure or a horror movie, audience consider films as a source of recreation. Audiences like a change from the usual boring formulae and one such film is Black. It is an unusual and interesting film in idea and visualization. Sanjay Leela Bhansali is among the best talents, Indian Film Industry has produced. Black cannot be described in sheer words.

The McNallys are an Anglo-Indian family in Simla consisting of Paul and his wife, Catherine. They are full of joy when Catherine gives birth to a baby girl, Michelle. But their joy is short-lived when they are told that Michelle cannot see nor hear nor speak. Both Paul and Catherine attempt to bring up Michelle in their own protective way. As a result, Michelle is not exposed to the real world, and grows up to be violent and volatile. Things only get worse when Catherine gives birth to Sara, and Paul considers admitting Michelle in an asylum.

It is here that Debraj Sahai enters their lives. The initial experience of teaching Michelle is a disaster, prompting Michelle's dad to ask Sahai to leave. However, he begs Mrs. McNally to give him another chance, and she does so when her husband is away. Sahai strives to bring some light into Michelle's dark life, and does succeed considerably, and is actually able to impress her dad, so much, that Sahai gets hired to look after her. Through his eager involvement, Michelle blossoms, grows, gives up her violence, and even gets admitted into school for normal children.

Years go by, and Michelle and Sahai share a bond between them - not knowing it is this bond that will only serve to sever their relationship in the near future. After some years, Michelle does not succeed in getting her graduation, and it is time for Sahai to bid adieu as he has health problems. Twelve years later, at the age of forty, Michelle does succeed in graduating in Arts, and it is shortly thereafter that she is re-united with her teacher. Sahai is no longer the same alcoholic, eccentric, but a bent older male, who cannot even remember speech.

The process of communication begins at birth and takes place informally within the family. In Black, when Catherine is informed that her baby is blind, deaf and dumb, she is terribly upset. She immediately clicks her fingers and claps her hands to get the attention of her child but fails. As the baby grows up, she does not get the wholesome love of her parents. She is chained up like a cow and her hair is unkempt.

The only source of comfort that Michelle gets is her mother's embrace. She feels warmth in her hug. On the other extreme, her father is very stubborn and beats her, telling Sahai that he is his big servant and commands him to give up all hopes of training his daughter. This turns out to be wrong, for Michelle is finally selected to join the university.

The entire family is totally anguished of having a child born with disabilities. The physically challenged are not children of a lesser god. They are far more beautiful than the so-called normal people. They appreciate every shade of life. Anita Ghai, a disability activist aptly remarks on how society looks at people with a disability:

My basic contention is that the notion that there is something wrong with people with impairments is problematic. Doesn't a life with disability have value? Should only the so-called normal human beings be the rightful owners of the world? ... In the last 20 years or so, it has been proved that it is social oppression and not the impairment itself that impinges on many of us. (4)

In the beginning, Sahai realizes that the only way to tackle Michelle is to be violent at times and at the same time, show her that he loves and cares for her. Sahai finds the girl interesting but he does not accept certain of her habits. Michelle is taught table manners – she is made to sit on the chair, wear a napkin, and use a spoon and fork at table. His rude behaviour works out in the beginning.

As a teacher who trains the disabled, Sahai is able to understand the odd behaviour of Michelle. Michelle slaps Sahai and even pours cold water on his face when he tries to teach her. In spite of all this, Sahai keeps his cool and continues teaching Michelle. The Director, Sanjay Leela Bhansali states the pitiable plight of Michelle,

Deep down, the disadvantaged are angry with life. They want to see/hear/talk, but are constantly groping in the dark. They are so insecure about communication that there is a whole surrender in it. They get angry over the smallest of things! Imagine the frustrations of not being fully understood... Anger is an important part of their expression. (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0375611/>)

When Sahai encounters problem with Paul, he is determined to continue his new project. He sternly states that Michelle is only blind, deaf and dumb and she is not mentally retarded. He shifts all the things in the house with the help of the servants and makes a study-room, especially for Michelle. He also uses statues to teach her. Sahai takes pain to gain the belief and co-operation of the parents.

Usha Jesudasan, a well-known Journalist and Broadcaster rightly says, "For some, it is easier to turn to violence rather than walk the harder road of non-violence" (4). People like Paul destroy relationships and bring pain on others. But those like Sahai, have a vision that includes and connects everything and everyone with love and compassion. This kind of an all-embracing love is ideal.

Sahai teaches Michelle words of the objects through smell and touch. He brings her a cake and makes her smell it, teaching her the word 'cake' by writing it on her hand. He takes her to a fountain where she hurts her hand as she touches the cactus-plant. She feels, understands and knows what pain is. It is Sahai who soothes the pain by applying balm to it. It is this incident that leads to his first handshake with Michelle.

Michelle is under his control for twenty days, during which, not even her mother is allowed into the room. During this short span, he teaches her alphabets and Michelle learns new words by touching the objects and the statues. In this way, she becomes familiar with the words like bird, ball, water and

napkin. He also places her hands on his mouth and says the word. Michelle carefully observes the movement of the mouth and then repeats the word. In this way, she becomes skilled at many words. Sahai succeeds and Michelle amazingly learns her first word – 'Ma'. But, this is just the beginning. There are several battles to be won. He dreams of Michelle going to a college with students without any disability.

At the University, a professor questions Michelle as to why she wants to study. Her answer through sign language is that she wants to live with dignity, with independence and to be alive. To the definition of knowledge, her reply (sign language) is, "Knowledge is everything. Knowledge is wisdom, spirit, light, courage and sound. Knowledge is Bible. Knowledge is God. Knowledge is my TEACHER!!!"

Sahai constantly says the following to stress that she is not a lesser being.

Sahai: Come... into... the light!

Sahai: Your world is not black!

Sahai: Life's a big ice-cream. Have it before it melts.

Sahai: You will not run away from failures, Michelle!

She enters her new college and she gets her first year books entirely in Braille. Unfortunately, when Michelle enters college, Debraj is in the first stage of Alzheimer's. He slowly forgets people, places and things including all words and their meanings. Michelle faces a problem. She is unable to complete her exam within the allotted time. It is Sahai who encourages and gives her the confidence that she succeeds by typing sixty-two words in two minutes.

Years pass. Michelle is forty and she is about to graduate. The condition of Sahai is worse and he is chained in a hospital. As Michelle delivers her graduation speech, Michelle's father, with a sense of pride tells the person who is seated next to him "That's our daughter!"

Michelle comes to see her teacher in her graduation gown. Sahai is ninety-two years old and is badly affected by Alzheimer's. He touches her, her academic gown, danced with her, takes her to the window and they feel the rain together.

The use of lights gives a picture of Debraj Sahai. He meets her as an eight year old, who doesn't understand anything.

She is violent, confused and unable to comprehend her life. Her world is "BLACK". Debraj leads her from this darkness and confusion into light and hope. He makes her discover her identity which makes her feel human rather than an inferior human being with a disability. He is her teacher, her Guru, the one who leads her from darkness into light. He is the God who made her gallantly utter:

Black for you may be darkness; for me it is a universal truth. Our best ideas come from the darkness of the mind; every new life is created in the darkness of the womb...

Both Michelle and Sahai dance frequently. When they feel happy, they dance. Even at a party, Michelle dances, amuses the audience and gets their applause. Dance is also another essential form of communication that relieves stress and lightens our mood.

Touch is the most basic and urgent mode of Communication for Michelle. As she expresses her thoughts through hand gestures, she holds Sahai's hand. She reaches out desperately and almost entirely through touch. She communicates more often through touch. It makes her feel comfortable and understandable. There is so much honesty in touch. To her, it is the easiest form of Communication and because of this she is heard more. Michelle's mother Mrs. McNally, uses touch to execute her duty excellently and takes much pride in all the small steps that her daughter makes. Her hugs, kisses and tears of joy communicate more than words can do.

Hema Vijay, a freelance writer explicitly states, "The children have to feel the texture of the dots on the Braille System, as the forefinger is extremely sensitive and the brain is stimulated by the feel of the dots" (4). Dot patterns help kids learn Maths and perspective. The visually challenged are able to improve their focus and concentration after working with dots.

Michelle uses different finger positions to show certain feelings – raises her hand to show her readiness to answer a question, holds her thumb up to show approval. She makes the sign against certain parts of the body such as the neck, arm and wrist.

Black is the cathartic tale of a deaf, mute and blind girl who from a world of darkness stepped out with the untiring effort of her teacher, Sahai into a world of light. For such individuals who inhabit a world of infinite black, communication will not start with A-B-C-D like ordinary beings, but with B-L-A-C-K!

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