

When She Was White: The Value of White Skin During Apartheid

A review of the film



Skin

(2009)

Anthony Fabian (Director)



Reviewed by

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As a social psychologist with a keen interest in the psychosocial correlates of racial classification schemes and their impacts, I was intrigued from the moment I learned of the premise upon which the film *Skin*, released in 2009, is based. The film tells the story of Sandra Laing, a woman who, though born of White South African parents in 1955, appeared to be “colored.”

Ms. Laing’s greatest misfortune would turn out to be that she was the victim of a condition known as “polygenic inheritance.” Genetics researchers studying this condition attempt to show how multiple genes in combination with a person’s environment can influence phenotype, or physical appearance. A gene that lies dormant for generations can suddenly appear and influence the appearance of other genes. In this case, two White parents

who knew nothing of an ancestry other than European (i.e., White) produced a child who did not look “White.”

The movie is a fictionalized account of the way that Sandra Laing’s childhood at age 11 was turned upside down. It vividly depicts the way that she would come to epitomize the absurdity and injustice of the South African apartheid system that infected the country for 46 years until its official end in 1994. Until she was 11 Sandra led a normal life as a “White” South African young girl. It was then that the South African government officially classified her as “Black.” Given that the Population Registration Act of 1950 mandated separation of the races, Sandra was no longer permitted to attend the Whites-only school she had previously attended, shop in the stores reserved for Whites, or enjoy the general way of life that she once had.

The bulk of the film is shown as a flashback that occurs when Sandra, now grown with two young adult children of her own, travels to cast her vote presumably for the progressive party whose supporters boast “freedom now” placards. As the flashback unfolds, we see Sandra on the cusp of adolescence with her parents who appear oblivious to the way that her appearance differs from their own and that of her older brother. They love both their children and see nothing unusual about their daughter. For me, this was odd, and I found it hard to believe that they never once discussed this amongst themselves. It was as if they “saw” their daughter with their hearts rather than their eyes.

When Sandra is expelled from the Whites-only boarding school, her parents are forced to confront the reality of their country’s racist caste system. Her expulsion occurs at the same time that the government officially changes her classification appearing on her birth certificate from “White” to “Black.” Her parents approach this challenge differently. Whereas her mother opts to shelter Sandra by making choices that would keep her close to home, her father decides instead to confront the establishment, fighting for reclassification of her status as White.

At 15 Sandra runs away from home with a young Black man named Petrus. But the couple’s happiness together would be postponed as a result of the several months’ long incarceration of Sandra. Her parents, primarily her father, had her arrested and permitted her to remain in jail. She realizes she is pregnant then and, upon being released from jail, she tells her parents, who have come to take her home, that she is with child.

This, it seems, is too much for her father, and Sandra tearfully leaves them, embraces Petrus and his family, and settles down with him in nearby Swaziland. Meanwhile her father, played by the normally consummate actor Sam Neill, is later shown burning every memento, picture, and article of clothing belonging to Sandra that he can. Ironically, her father eventually succeeds in getting Sandra’s status switched back to “White” but that is what she subsequently petitions to change because it is what prevents legal marriage between Petrus and herself. No “White” person was legally permitted to marry a “Black” person.

Sandra, who is played by British actress Sophie Okonedo, encounters more challenges, and after abuse from Petrus leaves with the two children she has with him. Hers

is a difficult life; throughout the film we see the horror and inconsistencies of a racial classification system that puts common sense, compassion, and integrity aside.

The film pulls no punches; while this may be its strength, from a dramaturgical perspective it may also be its greatest shortcoming. There is a sense in which the performances of both Okonedo and Neill are somewhat overdone. Whereas the character Sandra appears overly deferential, with eyes seemingly perpetually cast downward, Sam Neill's character comes across as too cold, emotionless, and angry. Yet neither actor needs to give an exaggerated performance to ensure a reaction. Both characters' roles and dialogue naturally evoke affect from viewers. Importantly, this observation is a minor criticism in an otherwise engaging and informative film about the quality of life during apartheid for one unfortunate family.

This is a film that will be of interest to many different audiences. It has justifiably won a host of film awards. Reviews of the film are consistently positive, and almost all note its significance in showing something of the apartheid system that many non-South Africans know little about, if anything at all. For this reason, the film earns its educational kudos. It represents a useful illustration of the pernicious effects of skin color categorization, the primary way that racial classification schemes operate. The latter has been investigated in social psychology (Maddox & Gray, 2002; Ronquillo et al., 2007), and this film shows some of the deleterious consequences of it in a state-mandated racist society.

I would recommend this film in a host of courses that might have nothing to do with film, theater, or acting. At a very basic level, this film underscores the inherent problems with contemporary racial classification schemes (Sahay & Piran, 1997) while forcing viewers to question the meaning of race.

References

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