

Research Africa Reviews Vol. 3 No. 2, August 2019

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Sheikh Jackson: Director: Amr Salama. Country: Egypt. Languages: Arabic with English subtitles. Actors: Ahmed Elfishawy, Maged Elkedwany and Amhed Malek. Year: 2016. 94 minutes.

Reviewed by: Korka Sall, University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Set in Egypt, the film *Sheikh Jackson* portrays the loss of faith of a devoted imam when his idol, the international pop star, Michael Jackson died of a heart attack at the age of 50. The film is composed in the present life of Khaled, an imam and a flashback to his younger self growing up in the 1990s when he was called Doodle. He is later nicknamed Jackson by his friends and classmates due to his interests in music and his devotion to Michael Jackson.

Khaled, the protagonist, grew up with a macho father, who, throughout his childhood, taught him how to be a man. According to his father, one of the most important characteristics of being a man is being able “not to show any emotions other than anger.” This is shown throughout the film as the father is constantly angry and beating Khaled. Growing up in this environment of toxic masculinity makes Khaled confused about how to manage his feelings. Because his father teaches him to be a man by suppressing any feeling or weaknesses, forcing him to study to become an engineer, and insisting he practice sports, Khaled’s feelings for dance and song and his devotion to the popstar Michael Jackson were suppressed. As a matter of fact, singing and dancing are then considered as not only a feminine thing, according to Khaled’s dad, but also as a behavior that only people going to “hell” can do--according to Islam. It is interesting that Khaled receives two different definition of success; one is to study and be an engineer, which he receives from his dad and the other one his uncle taught him is to become a better person by mastering the Quran and becoming an Imam.

The question of life after death is at the center of Khaled’s interests when he was young. One day at school, he wrote a letter that was considered “perverted” by the principal at his school. That “perverted” letter was written by Khaled to God asking him deep and spiritual questions including, “Why do we live if we are condemned to die?” If Khaled means “someone who lives forever,” why am I supposed to die one day? He said he was mad at God because he was not answering his questions.

The opening scene of *Sheikh Jackson* captivates the viewer: a cemetery with men dressed in white and the main character, Khaled, trying to understand why he can’t cry anymore. The act of crying for the devoted Imam who understands the “sourat” because it is in Arabic was very important to his faith. He cried when his mother passed and cries when he recites the Quran. Considered as an act of femininity in society, crying is however, a necessary component of spirituality and of faith. Thus when Khaled, after hearing about the death of his lifelong idol Michael Jackson, was not able to cry, he was shocked. “My faith is fading away,” is what Khaled told his psychiatrist when he could not focus on prayers. How can a faith fade away? How is it possible for a spiritual guide to lose his faith due to the death of Michael Jackson; due to music? Is it possible for a role model to Muslims to lose his faith? What happens after death? Those are questions that Khaled asked himself and his psychiatrist doctor. To search for these answers, he

tries various coping mechanisms, but none of these things seem to bring peace as evidenced by continuous nightmares and hallucinations.

Although growing up in an_ environment with his father, the moments when we see Khaled happy is when he learns Michael Jackson's songs and performs Jackson's dance moves in his room. His happiness is also evident when he discusses music with a girl he fell in love with and when his mother was around. Later on, when he grew up to be a religious leader, Khaled also seemed happy, but that joy with his wife and daughter was disrupted by the death of Michael Jackson. Interestingly, according to Khaled's dad, Michael Jackson is a "drag-queen" which means he is "neither a man nor a woman". Therefore, he would never accept Khaled's interests in Jackson's music. In this society, a gender binary is strongly defined and there is no possibility of adapting the two. Besides, Michael Jackson has "a uterus and built his grave on the moon" according to Khaled's friend.

What makes Khaled's conflicting feelings develop is his exposure to two different worlds; a world of life's opportunity when he was young and a spiritual world when he became an Imam. His conflicting feelings appear when he leads the prayer and hallucinates about seeing Michael Jackson in the mosque. When he started reciting the Quranic *sourat*, he heard music in the background and saw the people dancing to Michael Jackson's music. He stopped the prayer and started beating one of his fellow Muslims whom he thought was Michael Jackson himself. A battle of life against afterlife, of religion against rationality and success in the world dominates Khaled's experience. The film shows that the past will always catch up to the present especially when a person is unable to reconcile the two. The sentiment of disruption occurs when the same person *Sheikh Jackson* chooses two different paths and it seems that it is impossible to reconcile them.

The ending of *Sheikh Jackson* is captivating, as it shows Sheikh or Khaled, finally reconciling his past with his present. He went to see his father, after living with his uncle for 15 years. He obtains the key of the apartment where he grew up to reconnect his two selves. The old self, the young Khaled who was a big fan of Michael Jackson, with his new self, the devoted Imam dancing the song of Michael Jackson. In this sense, the story of Sheikh Jackson, is the story of reconciliation, a reconciliation of two different worlds; it is a story that helps viewers move beyond binaries and think about possibilities to live life spiritually and also happily and joyfully.

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