

Michael Jackson: The Boy Who Failed to Grow Up

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Abstract – Michael Jackson was a man who made a discourse of his own. He was that dream star whom everyone desired to be. Even though claimed to be an open book, years of trauma and pain lay buried in his unconscious. He experienced a hollowness while being whole. He was a victim of childhood trauma. In order to overcome this trauma the mind develops syndromes. A syndrome is a collection of symptoms that is experienced by some kind of social pattern. The symptoms associated with Michael was that of Peter Pan. One will never forget the effeminate boy Peter Pan, in Never Never Land, who never grew up. This paper is an attempt to analyse Michael Jackson's life as an escapade from his childhood trauma along the lines of Peter Pan Syndrome.

Keywords: Michael Jackson, Childhood Trauma, Peter Pan Syndrome, Projective Identification.

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Michael Joseph Jackson was a cult figure who made the entire world groove with him. His entire life was a public phenomenon and he was one of a kind. The world was taken aback by Jackson's changes and behaviour for which many couldn't find a suitable answer. As Michael filled his life with fame, awards and success, people failed to notice the pain from which he was suffering. The King of Pop was actually the 'King of Pain'. The eccentricities merely covered his deep, traumatic pain which arose from his childhood trauma.

One cannot forget the fact that Jackson was himself a child at heart. He was stuck in his own childhood and was unable to grow up due to his violent isolated upbringing. Adulthood frightened him as the memories of childhood trauma recurred. This condition of Michael can be read along with the mythological character "Puer aeternus" or the eternal boy. In Jungian psychoanalysis Puer aeternus is an example of an archetype. Like all archetypes, the Puer is bi-polar, exhibiting both a positive and a negative aspect. The positive side of Puer appears as the Divine child who symbolizes newness, potential for growth, and hope for the future. He also foreshadows the hero that he sometimes becomes. The negative side is the child-man who refuses to grow up and meet the changes in life head on, waiting instead for his ship to come in and solve all his problems. Both these features point towards Michael himself. No matter how emotionally down he was, he always came up with new songs and entertainment techniques. He hoped for a bright future where memories cannot hurt him. But pain never left Jackson. Instead of facing the problem, he took the help of painkillers and drugs. He was unable

to handle the responsibilities of reality. So he can be called a modern-day Peter Pan.

One is sure to remember this soft, effeminate boy who refused to grow up. Peter Pan is a fictional character created by J.M. Barrie. It was he who showed us the beauty of eternal youth. He symbolizes the essence of youthfulness. The joy. The indefatigable spirit. But there is another side to the coin. As Dan Keily, the psychologist, observes in his work *The Peter Pan Syndrome*:

Peter Pan was a sad, young man. His life was filled with contradictions, conflicts and confusion. His world was hostile and unrelenting. For all his gaiety, he was a deeply troubled boy living in an even more troubling time. He was caught in the abyss between the man he didn't want to become and the boy he could no longer be (23).

One can find a similar case in Jackson too. His world too was filled with contradictions and confusion. He was caught between his stratospheric fame and the loneliness associated with it. The manipulation and entrapment which he felt during his childhood made him deeply sad and as a result Michael was in an endless emotional and social turmoil. This made his behaviour become a bit bizarre. He flew away from reality, got high on pain killers and drugs and opted out of mature responsibilities. It was a typical condition of the Peter Pan Syndrome where one is seen to "fly away to Never Never Land by joining your pals in childish pranks or simply soar away from reality on the wings of your own fantasies" (Keily, 24). This is quite true word by word in Jackson's case. Jackson

named his property, where he lived from 1988 to 2005, Neverland Ranch, after Neverland, the fantasy island on which Peter Pan lives. Michael had built on the ranch numerous statues of children, a floral clock, a petting zoo, a movie theatre, and a private amusement park containing cotton candy stands, two railroads, a Ferris wheel, a carousel, a zipper, an Octopus, a Pirate ship, a Wave Swinger, a roller coaster, a tipi-village and an amusement arcade. This was Jackson's way of clutching to the child inside him. These activities made him feel like the child that he no longer was. According to Keily, Peter Pan is

a man because of his age; a child because of his acts. The man wants your love; the child wants your pity. The man yearns to be close; the child is afraid to be touched. If you look past his pride, you'll see his fear (3).

This was Jackson too. He was that frightened child who hated loneliness and wanted love and affection. He preferred to live in his own fantasy 'Neverland' rather than in reality. He tries hard to camouflage his agony with gaiety and sporting-fun.

But why was Jackson a child at heart? His entire life revolved around this question. The Peter Pan Syndrome has its roots in early childhood. Each symptom of the syndrome is a product of the stresses that the modern society places upon the child. In order to properly analyse Jackson's symptoms one has to delve deep into his childhood. Michael's father Joe Jackson was not one of the loving fathers. He belonged to the kind of the most tyrannical and monstrous fathers in pop history. A former boxer and a failed blues musician, his main skill appeared to be devising innovative methods to make his children's life miserable. From a very young age Michael was subjected to cruel torture in the name of parenting. To start with Joe was a distant parent. As Jermaine Jackson, Michael's brother, recalls in his memoir *You Are Not Alone: Michael through a Brother's Eyes* "None of us can remember him holding us or cuddling or telling us 'I love you'". His disciplinary activities included beatings with a belt buckle or the chord of an electric kettle or making them spend hours carrying cinder blocks from one side of the garden to the other, etc. Michael had ten siblings and as they became the child band Jackson 5, Joe turned their nightmarish life into hell. They were not allowed to play with other children; were made to rehearse for five hours a day after school. Their enthusiasm was motivated by the fact that if they took a wrong step their father would hit them.

Joe's attitude to Michael was quite different when compared to the other members of the Jackson 5. Michael was the band's youngest and most talented member. When Joe learned that his teenage son was self-conscious about the size of his nose, he took to referring to him as 'Big Nose', an insult that haunted him into his adulthood. Michael was lonely

even among the crowd of his family. In his autobiography *Moonwalk*, he writes

There was a park across the street from the Mowtown Studio, and I can remember looking at those kids playing games. I'd just stare at them in wonder –I couldn't imagine such freedom, such a carefree life - and wish more than anything that I had that kind of freedom, that I could walk away and be like them (2).

Even though these words were written by an older Michael, one can feel the emotions of a young boy who has lost his irreplaceable childhood. The words echo the feelings of entrapment.

Michael was clearly traumatised by these childhood events and they had a very clear impact on his later life. Those were the childhood wounds on his mind and they never really healed. As Caruth says

The wound of the mind – the breach in the mind's experience of time, self and the world – is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and the repetitive actions of the survivor (4).

In Michael's life too one can see such repetitions. He himself claimed that he had nightmares about being kidnapped from the window. Such a dream suggests loneliness and it means one is losing his freedom. In the case of Michael, his entire childhood was manipulated by his father Joe and he longed for freedom. The recurrence of the dream shows how internally wounded Jackson was. His deep dissatisfaction with his appearance, his nightmares and his chronic sleep problems, his tendency to remain hyper-complaint, especially with his father, and to remain childlike into adulthood are consistent with the effects of the maltreatment he endured as a child. Another instance of Jackson's trauma is his fear of his father. When speaking about his childhood with Joe, Michael has confessed many times that he ended up being so scared of his dad he'd vomit when he saw him. According to *Psychology Today*, "Somatization is defined as the tendency to experience psychological distress in the form of psychological symptoms". The nausea experienced by Michael can be seen as a psychosomatic symptom of his childhood trauma. The fear of his father rises from the entrapment that he feels. Whenever he saw his father, all the wounded emotions arose causing him to feel nauseous. The more intense the fear became, the more repressed it also became.

The Peter Pan Syndrome doesn't manifest itself until puberty. Through teenage years such traumatic boys develop four symptoms and from ages eighteen through twenty-two, two more symptoms emerge.

These symptoms cement the problem in place and set the stage for a crisis period. During this crisis, the young man must confront and resolve many years of magical thinking and marginal ego development. If he fails in this process, he is likely to be trapped in the Peter Pan Syndrome for an extended period of time (Keily, 26).

This is what happened to Michael Jackson. He failed to confront his symptoms as they reminded him of his troubled childhood. He repressed those emotions unconsciously and feigned a happiness that wasn't his. The four symptoms are irresponsibility, anxiety, loneliness and sex role conflict. Narcissism and chauvinism are the two intermediate symptoms. When one looks into them, what one actually sees is Jackson's life. He was a carefree soul who didn't understand adult responsibilities. Anxiety and loneliness were his companions and troubled him even in his sleep. The sex role conflict faced by Jackson is manifested in the two child molestation cases against him. When the media and the world poured their rage over Jackson, many failed to notice the troubled and frightened child that was inside him.

Michael Jackson's modus operandi for survival was to project his fear to his skin colour and every other aspect that reminded him of his father and the traumatic experiences. This reminds one of Freud's defence mechanism of displacement where "one person or event is represented by another which in some way linked or associated with it, perhaps because of a similar sounding word, or by some form of symbolic substitution" (*The Beginning Theory*, 96). As for Michael, his fear and agony against his father was displaced to his own nose which Joe always pointed out. He developed a nervous tic of constantly touching and covering his nose with his left hand as if sniffing it. He didn't stop with that. What the world then saw was a series of surgical procedures so extreme that he was forced to wear a prosthesis to cover up the results. He did everything possible to distance himself from his father and the explanation of Michael's later eccentricities is that they were a desperate attempt to recapture a childhood that his father had denied him. The endless surgeries, skin bleaching and even his rearing of white children were all part of this major escapade.

But no matter how hard he tried, he was still incarcerated by his childhood memories. Due to this he always felt an emotional connection with children which is again an aspect of the Peter Pan Syndrome.

Peter Pan Syndrome victims are jolly, happy-go-lucky rogues. They have a penchant for uproarious laughter and a pint or two of whatever ale is available, and they are forever seeking to regale themselves with a bevy of lonely wenches (Keily, 32).

Michael enjoyed and identified with them as he was lonely and cut off from them during his childhood due to rehearsals and performances. This emotional connection can be viewed as another survival mechanism adopted by his mind which in medical terms can be called as projective identification. According to the developmental psychologist Melanie Klein, "Projective identification is an unconscious phantasy in which aspects of the self or an internal object are split off and attributed to an external object" (Melanie Klein Trust). In simple terms Projective Identification has three stages: the first is repression where being unable to accept an aspect of oneself, one unconsciously represses it. In the case of Michael, due to the agony and trauma associated with childhood memories, he may have repressed from his consciousness the extent of his need for love, affection and protection. Because of the pain associated with these needs, the mind prohibited them from permeating his consciousness.

The second stage of Projective Identification is viewing this repressed part of oneself as actually being part of another person – in other words, unconsciously projecting it onto the other person. As the forlorn Michael grew up he began unconsciously projecting his repressed emotional needs as a boy onto the boys he met in his adult life which again symbolises the Peter Pan character in him.

Peter Pan was a survivor. When he woke up in Never Never Land consumed with loneliness, he didn't panic. He looked around, saw others suffering an identical fate, and turned potential disaster into victory. He united all the lost boys into a legion, bonded together by their heartfelt commonality—they had all been rejected in the worst way. He sealed the unity by declaring himself captain. And indeed he was. Only a natural-born leader would have the skill and cunning to convert feelings of rejection into a *raison d'être* (Keily, 90).

These boys unconsciously reminded Michael of his former, unhappy, lonely childhood. It is well known that Michael spends a great amount of time associating with children and many considered him as a paedophile. But psychiatrists confirmed that Jackson does not fit into the usual profile of a paedophile. Most paedophiles will keep toys or other such appealing items around to lure children, but they do not usually play with the items much themselves. Yet Michael played with toys and enjoyed them very well. This was because he was not sexually attracted but felt emotionally connected with them, which is the final stage of Projective Identification. Here, one feels an emotional connection, rapport or other forms of relatedness to this other person and unconsciously views this other as part of oneself. Thus Jackson felt

tenderness, affection and protectiveness to these children, which as a child he was brutally denied. In short, Jackson was providing himself a survival medium by giving his former self, which is represented by the boys he befriended, the parental love he missed out on as a child. Hence the aspects associated with such relations were emotional or spiritual and never sexual.

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