

## FILM REVIEW

### Special education

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***Black*: Amitabh Bachchan, Rani Mukherjee, Shernaz Patel.  
Director: Sanjay Leela Bhansali.**

"She is not mentally retarded!" shouts Debraj Sahai (Amitabh Bachchan) when Michelle McNally's father describes his multiple-disabled child as an "animal in human form". *Black* is the story of Michelle, a blind, deaf and mute child, whose Anglo-Indian parents don't know how to reach her in the darkness and silence. The mother (Shernaz Patel) hires Amitabh as a teacher but he must get Michelle educated before his deadline, else the father will lock her away in an institution. Located in the early part of the last century in the picturesque hill station of Shimla, the film moves between the story of Michelle's childhood and her visit to her beloved teacher, now a patient of Alzheimer's disease.

Sanjay Bhansali takes this powerful subject matter and dramatises it using brilliant cinematography, dramatic interiors and twilight outdoor shots which give the film a fairytale-like quality. But the impact is marred by Amitabh's portrayal as a teacher who achieves results through violence. Devraj's voice is harsh and devoid of compassion. He is shown slapping Michelle when she throws a tantrum, and this actually transforms her into a civilised child.

This in a world where professionals work to humanise counselling for the disabled.

Michelle's breakthrough comes when she learns the connection between a sign and its meaning. She is shocked into the discovery by Devraj who pushes her into the water as he signs the word on her palm. It reminded me of sadistic swimming coaches. More striking to me than her realisation was the teacher's violence.

Behaviour modification of the most difficult child can be achieved through compassion and skill, by being warm and firm. It cannot include either loose indulgence or violence and abusive reprimands.

One might argue that the story is set in a time when such brutality was accepted. If that is so, surely the film-maker should not glorify this as an educational method.

It is ironical that such jarring dialogues are contrasted with excellent cinematography, sets and brilliant performances by the child and the adult Michelle (Rani Mukherji). Among the more touching moments is when Michele is interviewed for a seat in the university. The scene depicting the interaction with her friends in the college through sign language makes a powerful point lightly. When the professor provides her notes in Braille, he signs to her: "My duty, my pleasure, my pride," a message of inclusion that resonates across disabilities. "Never ever give up on yourself," say counsellors pointing to the need for motivation. Michele's graduation is testimony to this persistence, of both student and teacher.

Then, the relationship shifts as the teacher descends into a fog of illness. The first sign is when Devraj asks Michele's professor the way out of the room he has just entered. Here we see the first signs of Alzheimer's. It is brought home again when he leaves Michele to buy some ice cream and cannot find his way back to the bench where she is waiting. He calls out to her in terror, forgetting that she cannot hear.

The contrast is built between the black of Michelle's world and the whiteness of the hospital room where Devraj paces back and forth. Here, again, Amitabh gets a raw deal. While the chains seem plausible given the period of the story, his silver hair and general appearance suggest a confused Santa Claus. And his is a very sanitised portrayal of someone apparently suffering from severe Alzheimer's.

Yet, if I was not moved by much of the film a counsellor friend of mine tells me: "I wept when I watched *Black*. My father suffers from Alzheimer's. It hurts me when he doesn't show any sign of recognition when I meet him." So with all its flaws, this is one of the first portrayals of Alzheimer's in a Hindi movie, and somewhat close to the truth.

In the final analysis *Black* is a bold attempt to deal with disabilities and make them public. Rani Mukherji's performance is moving, though at times she takes her gait too seriously. The good teacher is portrayed as a magician but in fact he disappoints, and it is the student who weaves the magic.