

Hero or Anti-hero: A Psychological Analysis of Michael Jackson's Personality

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Abstract: *The object of this study is Michael Jackson, African - American singer, dancer and businessman. His contribution to music, dance and fashion, along with a much-publicized personal life, made him a global figure in popular culture for over four decades. For much of his career, he had an "unparalleled" level of worldwide influence over the younger generation through his musical as well as humanitarian contribution.*

This paper proposes to study Michael Jackson's personality from a psychological perspective, beginning as an underdog and culminating into a legend that cut across chronotopic boundaries. The endeavour would be to study diverse aspects of Jackson's personality. Using Henry Murray's personality theory and applying this to an empirical study of Michael Jackson's personality, I argue that Michael Jackson's multiethnic background becomes a transnationalizing and globalising agent. Michael Jackson succeeded in becoming a cultural icon despite his eccentricities and various other controversies which clouded his persona during his lifetime.

Key Words: *Michael Jackson, Black culture, African-American culture, Music, Psychological, Personality theory, Henry Murray.*

Michael Jackson was not an artist who comes along once in a decade, a generation, or a lifetime. He was an artist who comes along only once, period.

(M. Jackson, Moonwalk intro, i)

The object of this study is Michael Jackson, African - American singer, dancer and businessman. Born in 1958, one of the few artists to have been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame twice, he had the fortune of holding the Guinness World Record for 'The Most Successful Entertainer of All Time'. He became a universal figure owing to his talent, music and dance prowess, highly publicized personal life and controversies that beset him during the peak of his career. For much of his career, he had an "unparalleled" level of worldwide influence over the younger generation through his musical as well as humanitarian contribution. Popularly known as the King of Pop, he has been in the news for his multiple plastic surgeries, the lightening of his skin colour, child molestation charges and various other eccentricities, and has been one of the most controversial and mysterious figures of the entertainment world.

Jackson became a transnational being of hybrid identity ready to take on the global consumer market by conquering the minds of the masses. Jackson's persona has impacted myriad minds. Jackson stands as a cultural icon today. Most of his songs are emblematic of a transformation, a metamorphosis, suggestive of a cleansing process where the artist re-emerges as a new creature signifying a transformation of the world at large. South African R&B artist Loyiso Bala says, "Growing up as a young black kid in a township, you either dreamed of being a freedom fighter or being Michael Jackson. It was as simple as that." (South Africa 18) Many Africans liken Michael Jackson's impact on the masses to that of former President Nelson Mandela. The main reason for such a strong impact was his personality.

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The term personality is used by psychologists to denote a consistent pattern of responses to the world that the environment imposes upon the individual internally and externally. (Kassarjian and Robertson 194) All the physical, mental and emotional characteristics of an individual as an integrated whole, especially as they are presented to others, form what we commonly term as personality. According to Robert B. Ewen, “personality refers to important and relatively stable aspects of behaviour.”(4)

Personality analysis, like art, is subjective in nature. There is no single best recognised definition or theory of personality yet and different psychologists have different definitions and theories regarding personality. “Psychologists themselves cannot arrive at a unifying definition of personality, due in part to its subjective nature.” (Schultz 2) According to Sam Smiley, “It is the form, or overall unity, of an individual’s traits. It includes the complex of characteristics that distinguish one person from all others, and it admits the behavioural potentials of the individual which transcend all his attitudes and actions. . . . Personality is the totality of a human being’s physiological and psychological traits, and therefore it is the epitome of whatever differentiates one human from every other human.” (82-83)

Michael Jackson is best known for his iconic moonwalk. The moonwalk was a factor in what set Jackson apart and clearly in a league of his own in the realm of superstardom. He did not invent the move, but perfected it and made it his own. Moonwalk is so called because it gives the illusion of walking on the moon. It is very difficult to perform but Jackson made it look extremely simple.

Jackson’s moonwalk is metaphorically the journey of his life – seemingly easy but actually very difficult. The actual act of walking on the moon is considerably difficult because of the lack of atmosphere on the moon and almost negligible gravitational pull. But once you walk your footsteps get embedded in its surface and remain there for millions of years because there is no wind on the moon to blow them away. Similarly, Jackson moonwalked to glory and made the Herculean task look effortless. But he worked hard for it and now that he has left his footprints on the history of not only the entertainment world but also on the heart of every single person, they will remain entrenched there forever. Significantly he has titled his autobiography “Moonwalk”.

Many people have great talent but not everyone is able to become the King of Pop, not everyone is able to break records and boundaries and reach out to the whole world. So what was so special about his personality? What was it that made him the genius that he was?

This study would apply Murray’s theory to delineate Michael Jackson’s traits and in the process try to trace the evolution of his personality which is reflected in his professional career. Personality traits can be identified by conducting certain experiments on the person concerned but in this particular case experiments are not possible as the subject of the study is no more. Hence, Jackson’s traits would be identified by the observations drawn from the various sources available.

Murray’s theory of personality, or ‘personology’ as he calls it, focuses upon the individual in all his complexity. Murray emphasizes the interaction of the individual with his environment. This interaction is the result of forces within the individual (needs) and forces from the environment (press). (Murray 4) To begin with it is essential to understand Murray’s thoughts about personality.

The branch of psychology which principally concerns itself with the study of human lives and the factors that influence their course, which investigates individual differences and types of personality, may be termed ‘personology’ instead of the psychology of personality, a clumsy and tautological expression. Personology, then, is the science of men, taken as gross units, and by definition it encompasses ‘psycho-analysis’ (Freud), ‘analytical psychology’ (Jung), ‘individual psychology’ (Adler) and other terms which stand for methods of inquiry or doctrines rather than realms of knowledge. (Murray 4)

Murray’s theory of personality is organized in terms of motives, presses, and needs. Murray describes a need as a “potentiality or readiness to respond in a certain way under certain given circumstances.” Murray suggests that our personalities are a reflection of behaviour controlled by needs. While some needs are temporary and changing, other

needs are more deeply seated in our nature. "Murray states that the existence of a need can be inferred on the basis of: (1) the effect or end result of the behaviour, (2) the particular pattern or mode of behaviour involved, (3) the selective attention and response to a particular class of stimulus objects, (4) the expression of a particular emotion or affect, and (5) the expression of satisfaction when a particular effect is achieved or disappointment when the effect is not achieved (1938, p. 124). Subjective reports regarding feelings, intentions, and goals provide additional criteria." (Hall & Lindzey 172-73)

According to Murray, these psychogenic needs function mostly on the unconscious level, but play a major role in our personality. Murray contended that environmental forces played a significant role in the exhibition of the psychogenic needs. He called the forces "press", referring to the pressure they put on us, forcing us to act. The twenty-seven needs and the forces that press them have stood up to research. Three of these, especially, have been the focus of study: the need for Achievement, Affiliation, and Power. (Murray 87-95)

I will delineate Jackson's personality traits by mainly focusing on these three important psychological needs. The need for achievement is what I consider played a major role in forming his character and personality. A person with a need for achievement displays the following six features or characteristics:

1. To accomplish something difficult.
2. To master, manipulate, or organize physical objects, human beings, or ideas. To do this as rapidly and as independently as possible.
3. To overcome obstacles and attain a high standard.
4. To excel oneself.
5. To rival and surpass others.
6. To increase self-regard by the successful exercise of talent. (Murray 80)

By analysing Michael Jackson's life and career one can come across various factors with the help of which one can come to the conclusion that all the above features are to be found in his personality. One by one I will relate each feature to his character by citing examples from various sources available to justify my claim.

Michael Jackson accomplished more than one difficult task in his life, sometimes rather impossible tasks as well. Jackson's is a rags-to-riches story. Michael Jackson and his family lived the legendary American Dream. The idea of the American Dream is rooted in the fact that every citizen, regardless of his race, caste, creed, colour, and social status can feel that he can achieve a better, richer, and a happier life. Historian James Truslow Adams coined the phrase "American Dream" in his 1931 book *Epic of America*. "Michael confided in John Branca, his legal adviser, his two principal goals: first of all, he said, he wanted to be 'the biggest star in show business'. Secondly, he wanted to be 'the wealthiest'." (Taraborrelli 198) Michael says in *Moonwalk*, "I believe in wishes and in a person's ability to make a wish come true... a wish is more than a wish, it's a goal. It's something your conscious and subconscious can help make reality." (180)

He was born an "underdog" – poor, Black, disadvantaged, scorned by the Whites and not treated as an equal. Such people are the unseen, unnoticed, and unwanted beings who need to do something extraordinary to be noticed and acclaimed. When Michael Jackson began his career blacks were not very welcome in the entertainment industry. The whites did not consider them to be social equals. MTV had an unwritten rule of not playing any songs or videos by black artists. Michael Jackson's *Billie Jean* video went a long way in breaking the colour barrier and helping other black music artists find an entry point into the privileged world. "I've been told over and over again that black people on the covers of magazines don't sell copies," he complained. "Just wait. Someday those magazines are going to be *begging* me for an interview. Maybe I'll give them one. And maybe I won't." (Taraborrelli 191)

After the success of his 'Off The Wall' he said, "I wanted to make an album that would be even bigger. Ever since I was a little boy, I had dreamed of creating the biggest-selling record of all time... I wanted to do something special." (Taraborrelli 180)

As to the second feature under the need for achievement Michael wanted to be looked upon, be respected for his talent and be given the due importance. Chris Brown said, "There isn't an artist out now that hasn't been influenced

or inspired by Michael Jackson...Michael Jackson is as close to perfection as an artist can be.” (2007 MTV Music Video Awards) He wanted to master everything possible, which is why he was an expert on everything related to his field. He knew every tune, every tone; he was an expert on every musical instrument and sometimes mourned over the fact that he couldn't invent a new instrument. He could write lyrics, compose music, that he was an unmatched dancer is indisputable, he choreographed his all his dances whether it was in live performances or in his music videos. “I always want to do music that influences and inspires each generation,” he says. “Let's face it, who wants mortality?” (Bryan Monroe. A Q & A) When he got only one Grammy nomination for his album 'Off the Wall' he was disappointed. He writes, “That experience lit a fire in my soul. All I could think of was the next album and what I would do with it. I wanted to be truly great.” (M. Jackson 176)

His intention was to be able to influence the life of others which is why he always tried to send a message through his music. He sang and penned many songs with the sole intention of bringing peace and harmony into the world. He perfected his messages through his videos which were a perfect medium to spread his messages. People loved him and hence loved to follow his messages too. His 'Earth Song' is the biggest example of his appeal to save nature. Other songs of social importance include 'Heal the World', 'We Are the World', 'Black or White', 'They Don't Really Care About Us', 'Man in the Mirror', 'Children of the World'. He says, “It's been my dream since I was a child to somehow unite people of the world through love and music.” (M. Jackson 252)

He contributed hugely to various charitable funds and had many of his own charitable organisations. He helped the African children and the poverty stricken areas of Africa. Jackson once said:

To me, Walt Disney is a real man. Charlie Chaplin, a real man. Fred Astaire, a real man. Bill Robinson, a real man. Not only did they achieve goals, but look at how much joy they gave other people. People looked up to them. I want people to look up to me, too. They made paths. I want to make one, too. That's what being a man means to me. (Taraborelli 189)

The third feature of overcoming obstacles and attaining high standards stood true for Jackson. According to Murray, “this is an elementary need which may alone prompt any action or be fused with any other need.” (Murray Glossary) His first obstacle was his background of poverty and lack of privileges. To add to it he was a black. He had tough competition and had to perpetually strive to do his best. He says in his autobiography, “You can't do your best when you're doubting yourself. If you don't believe in yourself, who will? Just doing as well as you did last time is not good enough.” (M. Jackson 202) Then came his media image which was self created to a large extent and he got ensnared in his own trap. The biggest black spot on his life were the child molestation allegations against him which almost ruined him. But he did not lose heart and revived himself. His personal life was emotionally unstable. He suffered emotional turmoil in his love life as well as his married life. But despite all this he continued producing works of genius and never allowed his career to suffer.

The next two features to excel oneself and to rival and surpass others were the main factors in making him the sensation he was. He endeavoured to make a better record than all his previous records so that he could excel himself. This is the reason each of his work is as near perfection as it could be. In 'Moonwalk' he says, “I am a perfectionist; I'll work until I drop... I'm really very self-confident when it comes to my work. When I take on a project, I believe in it 100 percent. I really put my soul into it. I'd die for it. That's how I am.” (184)

At one point in his autobiography Michael mentions his great love for the Monopoly game. The term Monopoly is suggestive. He wanted to establish his monopoly over the world of Pop music. He strived to be number one. He once complained to his manager Frank Dileo, “They call Elvis the king. Why don't they call *me* that?” (Taraborelli 374) In Moonwalk he writes, “I can't answer whether or not I like being famous, but I do love achieving goals. I love not only reaching a mark I've set for myself but exceeding it. Doing more than I thought I could, that's a great feeling.” (Taraborelli 272)

All the adoration and respect that Michael earned was due to his exemplary talent and he was not alien to that fact. That was why he tried to make maximum use of his talent. Berry Gordy says about Jackson, “Michael was a born star. He was a classic example of understanding everything...The first time I saw him, I saw this little kid as something special.” (Taraborelli 51) Sidney Lumet, the director of the movie 'The Wiz' in which Michael played the role of a

scarecrow commented on Jackson's genius, "Michael Jackson is the most gifted entertainer to come down the pike since James Dean,' He's a brilliant actor and dancer, probably one of the rarest entertainers I have ever worked with." (Taraborrelli 178)

The need to Affiliation's primary element is to move close and agreeably co-work or respond with a partnered other (an other who looks like the subject or who prefers the subject). Michael Jackson's closest association was with children. He loved children and loved spending time with them. He could relate to children much more than he could relate to adults, they were like his soul mates. According to him children were pure hearted whereas grownups were deceitful. Because his career began when he was only five he never had a normal childhood. This was something which he always regretted and lamented. He never really grew up at heart and the child in him stayed wide awake. Taraborrelli says, "Instead of growing up, Michael actually seemed to be regressing – buying toys, playing childlike games and, for the first time, actually surrounding himself with children." (212)

Michael's brother Jackie called him a 'Man-Child'. "He's a man, but still a kid." (Taraborrelli, 212) Michael missed not having a childhood to such an extent that he decided to enjoy his childhood in his adulthood by building 'Neverland Ranch'. He said that he kept that name from Peter Pan's never never land. There he created an idyllic environment, a place every kid would dream of living in. It was indeed a perfect dreamland, away from all worries and restrictions. Since Michael had a special attachment with children he made lots of child friends and invited them to visit his 'paradise'.

Despite the fact that he was now in his thirties, many people in his circle felt that Michael had never grown up, that he was still an adolescent at heart, playing with his teenage male friends and entertaining handicapped youngsters at his palatial estate... Visiting Disneyland, Disney World and Universal Studios was still his favourite leisure-time activity; fantasy was a major part of his life. (Taraborrelli 427)

According to Murray, a person with the need for power or dominance has a high urge to control his environment and to influence the behaviour of others by suggestion, seduction, persuasion and command. Murray also opines that such a person cannot deal well with frustration and conflict and tends to show strong stress response and high blood pressure. (Murray 151) Jackson said, "I'm going to try to make changes. I'm going to try to change things around someday." (M. Jackson 260) The biggest example of Jackson's effort to establish his control over everything possible is his decision to undergo plastic surgeries. He did not like the way he looked so he decided to get his face changed. He did not want to look like his father and his plastic surgeries helped him to look different from him. "Michael's face had been surgically transformed, confirming the notion for him that his appearance was one thing over which he could absolutely exert control if he wanted to do so." (Taraborrelli 206) talking about the cleft that Michael got in his chin he says, "'I do want to be perfect,' Michael confirmed. 'I look in the mirror, and I just want to change, and be better. I always want to be better, so maybe that's why I wanted the cleft.'" (Taraborrelli 347)

Apart from the plastic surgeries he also chose a peculiar lifestyle for himself. He created 'Neverland Ranch' solely for the purpose of having his own world where he could be the master of everything. The medium of his power was his huge wealth and the equally huge popularity that he enjoyed with public. At Neverland everything happened according to his wishes. Taraborrelli writes, "If any one of the thirty full-time gardeners or ten ranch hands didn't smile enough, or seemed otherwise unhappy, he would be dismissed – another necessity. After all, this was supposed to be a happy place." (455)

He knows what it is to be 'special', to be able to make demands and expect them to be met because of who he is. He knows what it's like to have great wealth, to be able to give his mother a million dollars so she won't have to work. He has experienced the pleasure of giving, of being charitable, of seeing the faces of deathly ill children light up just because he is who he is. (Taraborrelli 457)

From all the above examples it can be concluded that the great success and popularity that Jackson enjoyed was more due to the personality he had than anything else. His greatness was the mixture of genius and a powerful and determined personality. "The outstanding characteristic of man is his individuality. He is a unique creation of the forces of nature." (Allport 4) That is why he has a worldwide following even today despite the various controversies he was

involved in. He was peculiar, eccentric, and sometimes his actions crossed the line of sanity. But he had such incredible talent and such an incredible energy and motivation to go on that nothing could sabotage his success. His positive characteristics overshadow his negative ones thus, making him the hero of the masses. Michael Jackson taught the world how music could play such a vital role in bringing about important changes. Katherine Jackson, Michael's mother wrote in a book about Michael, "He valued money far less than he did his goal of making a difference in people's lives, and inspiring the world to change for the better." (K. Jackson 14)

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