

FILM REVIEW:

PRECIOUS: THE COMPLEXITY OF RESILIENCE

Reviewed by Catherine Taylor

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Lee Daniels' award-winning film, *Precious: Based on the Novel "Push" by Sapphire* is a powerful and controversial cinematic narrative of resilience. After its release at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival, Daniels recruited Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry as executive producers to help promote this independent, African-American art film (Mask, 2012). *Precious* was released nationwide on November 6 of that year, and won Academy Awards for Best Supporting Actress (Mo'Nique) and Best Screenplay. The film is based on Sapphire's 1996 novel *Push*, which tells the story of Claireece "Precious" Jones, an overweight, illiterate, African-American 16 year old growing up in Harlem in the 1980s. According to Sapphire, in telling this story *Push* does not beat people over the head with a heavy-handed political commentary, but instead opens people's hearts (Push Pictures, 2009). As a faithful adaptation of *Push*, the film portrays the world from Precious' perspective and, although understated, Sapphire's critical social commentary comes alive through Precious' story (Push Pictures, 2009).

Despite its commercial success (grossing over \$63 million world-wide), *Precious* is a highly controversial film and has instigated a “sociopolitical firestorm” (Mask, 2012, p. 97). Reviews range from describing the film as a “genuine work of art” (Scott, 2009, para. 6) to a film full of deplorable stereotypes that highlight what the author Jill Nelson calls “black pathology” (as cited in Reed, 2010, para. 2). One particularly scathing review argued that the film offers up *Precious*’ misery “for the audience’s delectation [and the result is] something uncomfortably close to poverty porn” (Stevens, 2009, para. 4). While these criticisms have merit, they have been thoroughly addressed in academic reviews elsewhere (e.g., Mask, 2012). The current review focuses on *Precious* as a unique case study of resilience. I argue that even with its flaws, *Precious* goes far beyond the classic Hollywood “rags-to-riches” fairy-tale narrative, and portrays the complex, socio-ecological nature of resilience.

Despite popular belief, research clearly demonstrates that resilience is not the result of extraordinary personality traits that enable certain exceptional people to overcome trauma (an idea frequently propagated by Hollywood). Instead, resilience is a dynamic, ecological *process* of adaptation within the context of considerable hardship (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, 2001). Most recently, Ungar (2013) conceptualized resilience as, “the capacity of *both* the individual and their environment to interact in ways that optimize the development process” (emphasis added, p. 256). This view values personal characteristics like motivation and agency, but asserts that resilience occurs when there is an “opportunity structure (an environment that facilitates accesses to resources) and a willingness by those who control resources to provide what individuals need in ways that are congruent with their culture” (Ungar, 2013, p. 260).

This review analyzes the film *Precious* from the socio-ecological perspective of resilience and demonstrates that *Precious*’ narrative captures the complexity, ambivalence, and dynamic nature of resilience. First, I argue that it is only after the character’s social ecology shifts that she begins to experience resilience and empowerment. Secondly, I argue that the film rejects the idea of a binary movement from vulnerability to resilience.

Film Summary

Through creative use of first person narration, voice-overs, fantasy sequences, and subjective camera angles, Daniels gives viewers a glimpse into the inner life of Claireece “Precious” Jones, an illiterate, obese, 16-year-old girl growing up in Harlem in the 1980s. *Precious* is pregnant with the second child resulting from sexual abuse by her biological father, who began abusing her at the age of 3. She lives with her abusive mother, Mary, who is portrayed by Daniels as nothing short of a monster. *Precious* is kicked out of public school where she had been able to hide her illiteracy; she begins attending an alternative school called “Each One Teach One”. Here, she discovers a supportive community and builds friendships with the eccentric girls in her GED class and her angelic, light-skinned teacher, Ms. Blue Rain. Ms. Rain teaches *Precious* how to read and write and cultivates *Precious*’ voice by encouraging her to write in a daily journal and participate verbally in class. After leaving her abusive mother and moving into a halfway house with her newborn son, *Precious* learns that her father died of HIV and that she has contracted the virus. Shortly after receiving this news, *Precious* confronts her mother, gains full custody of her two children (baby Abdul and 4-year-old Mongo, who has

Down Syndrome), and walks out of the social welfare office triumphantly, vowing to make a new life for her family.

Resilience as Context-dependent

As a result of the film's intentional focus on the central character's perspective, some critics have claimed that the film is "not an examination of social problems" but a story of Precious' personal strength and her ability to overcome trauma (e.g., Scott, 2009, para. 10). By contrast, I would argue that Precious' story rejects this problematic and individualistic resilience narrative and captures the dynamic role of the socio-ecological context in facilitating resilience (Ungar, 2013). Daniels accomplishes this in two ways. First, he highlights the dominant structural and cultural systems that contribute to the character's oppression. Secondly, Daniels uses fantasy sequences to demonstrate that while Precious has always had a strong voice, it isn't until she discovers the nurturing environment of "Each One Teach One" that she is able to express her voice and become resilient.

From the outset of the film, we are exposed to the oppressive reality in which Precious resides. She lives in the Harlem ghetto in the 1980s when crack cocaine had started to decimate the neighbourhood; Precious and her mother make frequent comments about the "damn crack heads" that keep ringing their buzzer. Precious lives in poverty and falls through the cracks of the public school system. The influence of racism is also evident in the film; it becomes clear that Precious has internalized dominant social norms as she repeatedly expresses a desire for a "light-skinned boyfriend". In her journal she dreams of one day being "real skinny, with light skin and long hair". In Wellington's (2010) review, he wrote that Precious is aware of the "weight of whiteness – an intangible and insidious sense that society is rule by white privilege [and this is a] double burden upon the black poor" (para. 25).

While Daniels paints a clear picture of many of the environmental and structural forces that constrain Precious' ability to be resilient, his one-dimensional and villainous portrayal of Mary (her mother) leaves little room for viewers to empathize with Mary's story or to understand the role of context in *her* ability to respond to adversity. It is troubling that Mary is depicted as a "welfare queen", a term Ronald Reagan (U.S. President from 1981 to 1989) used to describe a lazy woman who refused to get a job and took advantage of the social welfare system (Blake, 2012). We do not learn Mary's story in the film, as it is the story of Precious that is in the foreground. Despite the missed opportunity to highlight the influence of context in Mary's life, we can clearly see how Precious is marginalized and excluded by her context.

In addition to this exclusion, Precious experiences horrific abuse in her home. Mary constantly berates Precious, screaming, "You are a dummy bitch. You will never know shit. Don't nobody need you don't nobody want you. I should have aborted your motherfucking ass". While some critics have described Precious as "a passive, if sensitive, receptor" (Zacharek, 2009, para. 7) of this abuse, Daniels' creative use of fantasy sequences demonstrates that Precious resists this oppression with strength, even if her resistance is initially confined to her fantasy world. In the midst of a fragmented but vivid flashback to her father raping her, the ceiling above Precious disintegrates and she retreats into a dream world where she walks down a red carpet in

a colourful gown. She is in complete control as the paparazzi beg for her attention. Instead of passively submitting to her flashback, Precious creates a world where she, an obese black teenager, is empowered, beloved and *heard* (Kanagawa, 2012). Without minimizing the significance of her resistance, this empowerment narrative is short-lived; her fantasy ends and Precious re-enters the dark apartment where the abuse continues (Kanagawa, 2012). Precious' empowerment is restricted to her fantasies as her oppressive environment constrains her capacity to be resilient. Ungar (2013) writes that “the personal agency of individuals to navigate and negotiate for what they need is dependent upon the capacity and willingness of people's social ecologies to meet those needs” (p. 256).

While Precious' resistance is initially confined to her fantasies, when she starts attending “Each One Teach One”, her environment shifts and her empowerment narrative begins to take place *in reality* (Kanagawa, 2012). As Precious enters this classroom for the first time, Ms. Rain invites Precious to sit at the front of the class, which Kanagawa (2012) suggests is a space typically reserved for “normal girls” (p. 127). Ms. Rain then invites all the girls to share a little bit about themselves. Precious speaks aloud in school for the first time:

Precious: “Can I go?”

Ms. Rain: *nodding*

Precious (voice-over): *I wish I could sit at the back of the class again.*

Precious: “My name is Clarieece Precious Jones. I go by Precious. I live in Harlem, I like yellow ... (*stuttering*) ... I have problems at my other school so I come here.”

Ms. Rain: “Something you do well?”

Precious: “Nothing”

Ms. Rain: “Everybody's good at something, come on.”

Precious: “Well I can cook ... and I never really talked in class before.”

Ms. Rain: “How does that make you feel?”

Precious: “Here. Makes me feel here.”

This moment marks the start of Precious' resilience as she discovers a space where she is seen and heard outside of her colourful fantasy world. By deciding to speak, Precious “establishes her presence in the classroom” (Kanagawa, 2012, p. 129); there is space for her to claim. To Rutter, an advocate of the socio-ecological view of resilience, this moment constitutes a “turning point... when individuals encounter the serendipity of opportunity in otherwise impoverished environments” (as cited in Ungar, 2013, p. 257).

Ms. Rain teaches her class to read and write and encourages them to compose journals about their experiences. For the first time in her life, Precious has access to language and she uses it to express her voice and develop agency. As Precious is able to slowly re-author her story, her narrative becomes one of empowerment and resilience. When her mother attacks her (again) shouting, “You ruined my fucking life ... you took my man and had those fucking babies”, Precious verbally resists her mother's story about her abuse and yells, “I ain't stupid. I ain't taking you man. Your husband raped me”. Here, for the first time, Precious takes control over the narrative of her abuse. Earlier in the film she had used her mother's language and told her social worker, “My father gives me these babies” but she now calls it rape. Precious takes her baby, leaves Mary's house, and moves into a halfway house. It is only as her environment shifts

that she is able to reject the “narrative of self-destruction that has been mapped out for her” (Wellington, 2010, para. 13).

Ungar (2013) writes of “active nurturance by the environment that potentiates recovery from trauma [and] helps individuals resist the psychological burden caused by social marginalization” (p. 259). We see this clearly in *Precious*: It is only when she finds a nurturing, challenging, and supportive environment at “Each One Teach One” that she is able to demonstrate resilience. Instead of dreaming of being on the cover of a magazine and having a “light skinned boyfriend”, *Precious* begins to ground her dreams in reality: “I’m going to read to this baby too. And hang colours on his wall. Listen baby, mother not dumb, mother love you”.

Resilience is Not Static

In his book about redemption, McAdams (2006) writes that “we live in a society that expects, even demands, happy endings to tough stories” (p. 230). This sentiment is captured as Sandberg, Barrera, and Volino-Robinson (2010) comment, “the film challenges us to endure discomfort while watching scenes of violent abuse, yet throughout the process we are rewarded with an undeniable thread of hope – a happy ending” (p. 329). Many film critics have concluded that *Precious* is a film about transformation; reviewers suggest that we witness the character’s movement from silence to voice, from oppression to empowerment, from passivity to agency (Berardinelli, 2009; Scott, 2009). Similarly, Oprah Winfrey, who has been called the “queen of redemption” as she personifies the rags-to-riches narrative (McAdams, 2006), promotes the film as a redemptive journey to empowerment. While *Precious* is inspirational, I disagree with these reviewers (and Oprah). Kanagawa (2012) has argued that *Precious* can be read as a dialectical narrative that disturbs the idea of a teleological progression from girlhood “risk” to “girl power”. Here, I extend Kanagawa’s (2012) argument and examine how the film rejects the idea that *resilience* is a linear transition from vulnerability to empowerment. The resilience facilitated by shifts in *Precious*’ environment as she engages in a continuous struggle to resist oppression.

The constant tension between the narratives of oppression and resilience is most evident when the setting changes from a bright, colourful celebration held because *Precious* has won a literacy award to a cement room where Mary tells *Precious* that her father has died of HIV and that *Precious* probably has ‘the virus’ as well. Her developing resilience is eclipsed as *Precious* retreats once again into her fantasy world. The abrupt transition back to fantasy is jarring and as Kanagawa (2012) writes, “when *Precious* tests positive for the virus, she literally embodies her trauma, bringing past experiences of social and sexual victimization and powerlessness into the heart of her empowerment narrative” (p. 130).

Kanagawa (2012) highlights how *Precious*’ subjectivity must be constantly defended and supported, and the same can be said of her resilience. After *Precious* receives her diagnosis, Ms. Rain tries to affirm that *Precious* is loved and *Precious* says, “Please don’t lie to me. Nobody done nothing for me. Just beat me. Rape me, call me an animal, make me feel worthless. Make me feel sick”. Ms. Rain responds by placing the pen into *Precious*’ hand and says, “Write”, urging *Precious* to resist powerful forces of oppression and continue to discover resilience. This dichotomous movement between oppression and resilience is both dynamic and ambivalent. Resilience is not a static destination where *Precious* arrives; this is consistent with the literature

suggesting that resilience shifts across the lifespan (Hauser, Allen, & Golden, 2006; Masten, 2001). Even in the final “triumphant” scene of the film, as Precious walks away from Mary with her children on her hips, determined to finish her education and be a good mother, we are haunted by an understanding that she is likely to fail as systems of oppression “cannot simply be overcome or triumphed over because they are embedded in society” (Kanawaga, 2012, p. 130). Intertwined with her narrative of resilience is a narrative of constant oppression: Despite her determination, she remains single, homeless, black, and HIV-positive, a 16-year-old mother living in an economically ravaged ghetto.

Conclusions

The novelist Sapphire set out to tell the story of Claireece “Precious” Jones and let the social commentary emerge from the character’s narrative of resilience. This review has demonstrated that despite its flaws, Daniels’ film *Precious* does just this. The film resists simplistic, fairy-tale notions of resilience that overemphasize personal characteristics, and instead tells a story of resilience that is congruent with Ungar’s (2001) socio-ecological model. Initially consigned to her fantasy world, Precious’ voice emerges in reality when she finds a supportive environment at “Each One Teach One”. Although Precious discovers an environment that facilitates her resilience, her story is not a classic Hollywood tale of redemption as the oppressive forces of poverty, classism, racism, and sexism are imbedded in the fabric of society and will continue to constrain her ability to be resilient. *Precious* serves as an excellent case study of resilience. The film demands that we examine the role of social ecology in the development of resilience and avoid blaming individuals for not thriving when there are few opportunities and limited access to resources.

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