

Criminological review of 'murder on a sunday morning'



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

' Murder on a Sunday morning' is a documentary film based on a real life incident that occurred in Jacksonville, Florida in the May of 2000. This 111-minute movie was directed by the French documentary filmmaker Jean-Xavier de Lestrade and was originally released under the title Uncouplable ideal. It won the Oscar award for the best documentary in 2002.

The film brilliantly depicts an ignominious false conviction of an innocent 15-year old for a crime he never committed, the cover-up of the real culprits behind the crime, and finally the clemency of a public defender coming to his rescue in the courtroom.

The plot originated from the incident of Mary Ann Stephens, a 65-year old tourist from Georgia being shot dead by a black assailant. The police arrested the first ' convenient black culprit' available, a black African American teenager, Brendon Butler, who was on his way to a job interview. The teen was subsequently denied the right to make his phone call or contact an attorney, interrogated mercilessly for an unreasonable amount of time, threatened, racially abused, tortured physically and psychologically, and forced to sign a false confession admitting to having committed the crime. The dead woman's husband, though having caught a glimpse of the real culprit during the shootout, was forced by the police to publicly identify and proclaim Butler as the assailant. The motive behind the forceful arrest and the subsequent psychological torture of the innocent Butler was simply the preservation of the tourist trade in the state.

A public defender, Pat McGuinness, however, takes up the case and defends Brendon Butler in a case that is extraordinarily riveting. The courtroom

scenes enacted by McGuinness could probably be counted among the top classics of this genre. The well-written trial speaks volumes about the perils of 'instant justice' meted out or more aptly, 'justice of convenience' that is as common as real justice these days.

A criminological analysis on why Brendon Butler was framed should take into account the facts that his residence was just about a mile from the place of the incident; he was an African-American, a member of an ethnic group historically infamous for being convicted in racial crimes and his locality being a lower-class urban one, with high crime rates. The victim's husband, a white man in a state of trauma, might also have been under pressure to identify the victim with unclear images of a black man shooting his wife.

The next question to be answered is about the instantaneous arrest and conviction of Brendon. Could they not have made a broader search? The answers may be obtained when one considers the fact that in Florida, tourism is a major industry. The people who earn their livelihood from this industry would definitely not want Florida to be known as a risky place to visit. The image of a family oriented place was to be associated with Florida at any cost. The police would have been under pressure to dispose off the case as quickly as possible to create an image of a strong and efficient administration. Also the fact that the victim was a tourist and the news of the murder being reported by the media might have put the police under a lot of pressure to come up with a suspect who would at least approximately match the descriptions available at that time.

Another question to be answered is the gruesome way in which the teenager was tortured. It could be guessed that the officers are often puppets in the hands of their superiors. They are put under pressure to clear as many cases as quickly as possible. As per the law, as soon as an arrest is made, the case will be considered cleared notwithstanding the truth behind the crime. As far as they were concerned, the killer was caught. However, this argument does not prove the meticulousness of the police.

We may also look at why the whole bunch of the police team was so unequivocal in putting the blame on Brendon and torturing him to the extreme. The incident details show that the main third degree interrogator was the son of the sheriff of the area. Hence, he might have had the unofficial authority to take decisions on the kind of interrogation and on seeing this; the others would have felt that they are only respecting their superior's authority in joining hands to torture him.

The only saving grace is McGuinness, who played a major part in this case by defending Butler. Butler was fortunate enough to acquire such a savior in his time of extreme distress. Not all defenders are so gutsy or articulate. It was only because of McGuinness skills and dedication that Brendon Butler was proved to be innocent. Usually, it is seen that in such cases, the conviction of an innocent is used by the system to maintain their pride.

Though there are hues of a racial kind of movie of the likes of 'Cry Freedom', when one sees that the main interrogator who was instrumental in making Butler confess a crime he never did is himself a black man, the similarity ends there. The basic and most convincing underlying message is that of a

deep and ingrained insincerity in the US administration in matters of justice and a business-like attitude towards the commercial progress of the country which makes them place it above everything else.

Obviously, there are quite a lot of unanswered questions in this episode. A more sensitive and unbiased approach to such incidents would be the first step towards molding a perfectly upright society.

References

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