
TRANS-GENERATIONAL APARTHEID PAIN IN ZWELETHU RADEBE'S FILM *THE HANGMAN*

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Abstract

The film makers' contention is that "The Hangman's" central theme is family, family secrets and the need for communication which is deeply imbedded in the storyline of the film, the sentiments of secrecy and a lack of dialogue in the South African society seem contradictory. This is because South Africa's efforts for reconciliation after apartheid have been lauded world-wide. The establishment of a national platform where perpetrators and victims were able to tell of the horrors of apartheid regardless of political affiliation, class, race or tribe through South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission is celebrated as having helped the country to reconcile, heal and move forward. The South African model has inspired 'other similar efforts around the world' especially as a 'gold standard for how a divided society with a violent past might work through that past and move forward' has been set by this model (Mary Kay Magistad – 2017). It would therefore be expected that South Africa should have moved on from this dark past after such efforts which have been lauded as largely successful. Least of all, the horrors and pain of the system should not be haunting millennial South Africans. Of course, many scholars including Desmond Tutu, the chair of Truth and reconciliation Commission (TRC) have accepted that the effort was borne with 'challenges and limitations' which resulted in a failure to meet its overall objective of healing, reconciliation and restorative justice. Magistad (2017) points out that the country 'has learned over time that working through a complicated past takes time, and is still taking time.' This paper therefore reads this film as a continuation of the TRC's efforts through dialogue and national testimony of the horrors of apartheid.

Key Words: Apartheid, Family, Truth, Reconciliation, Pain, Memory, Absences

Introduction

MfundisiMdletshe, a father of 11 year oldKhethaMdlethse leaves his son at home in the evening to look for his wife who is late returning home from work in apartheid South Africa. He finds a policeman sexually assaulting her. He kills him and surrenders to the police. Khetha is informed by the mother without much detail that Mfundisi has gone and is never coming back. Khetha grows up bitter with his father for deserting them. He ends up serving as a hangman in the apartheid prison system. Mfundisi re-appears in Khetha's life when he is due to hang for killing the policeman. Khetha uses this opportunity to torture the father as a means of revenge against his disappearance and as a way of dealing with his own personal

pain of growing up without a father figure. He however learns the truth about his father's disappearance from his mother on the eve of the hanging. This is the storyline of the South African Short Film *The Hangman* by Zwelethu Radebe.

Family or Apartheid Film?

The film was released in February 2017 and has gone ahead to win more than seven awards including: Best Short Film and Ousmane Sembene Awards in Zanzibar International Film Festival (2017); Best South African Short Film at Durban International Film Festival and Best Foreign Short Film Award at 2018's LA Shorts International Festival (afda.co.za). Kearan Pennells at 2017 ZIFF, Khulu Skenjana in an interview and social media postings by the production house present the film's theme as family secrets and the need for communication within the family and society at large. Watching the film however, one gets the feeling of a deep sense of pain, trauma and betrayal that still hangs over the South African society two decades after Apartheid if the story of the film, its treatment and setting is anything to go by.

The film is set in mid-1970's and late 1980's South Africa, a period when apartheid was official government policy. A member of the audience at ZIFF was concerned that the film ran a risk of being seen as just another story about apartheid and therefore be easily dismissed or disregarded by audiences and critics. The fact that Pennells and it seems the entire production team seems to want to center discussion on the film to family secrets could easily be dismissed as a consequence of attempting to distance the film from being straight-jacketed and lumped up together with films about apartheid with the same frame of reference or criticism. The team including Pennells as a point of note have however not denied the import of apartheid in the film. They in fact seem to have put much consideration into the significance of situating this 'family' story in apartheid South Africa as it is set in 1989, five years before the end of apartheid in South Africa.

Kagiso Matlala (2017) identifies the fact that the film makers were born just after the abolishing of apartheid in South Africa but credits the film makers for being able to tell the story in 'such a profound and unusual way' consequently making the story not to be just another 'typical apartheid story'. She however points out the ability of an oppressive system such as apartheid to destroy families and make them dysfunctional especially when individual family members clash with the injustices in the system in an attempt to carry out their family responsibility as exemplified by the character of Mfundisi Mdletshe, Khetha's father. The absence of Mfundisi has led to a pain that Khetha has carried all along and has led him to make the choices he has made, the worst being to choose to collaborate with the oppressors to commit injustices to his own people.

Matlala (2017) further points out that the 'writer and director Zwelethu Radebe, tells the story in such a way that information isn't given to you on a silver platter. He gives you subtle clues that point to the horrors of the regime and how they affected 'normal' family

life.’ This is important as the film relies heavily on absences, ellipsis as well as silences both in its iconography (visual imagery) and story narrative both as a story telling device and as a structuring trope in the film with the result of making an audience to engage actively with the story by supplying the missing information and contributing in the telling of the story by filling in the gaps. This achievement by the director individualizes the story in the sense that an individual viewer feels that they not only own the story or lived it as part of their life but also feel that they are obligated to and are actually telling the story to an audience of which they are part of. The viewer comes to occupy both the roles of an audience and narrator of the story by this act of filling in missing information. The story transcends from being a South African story into a human story, a story about a dark part of humanity or human history whose consequences all of us live with irrespective of whether you are South African or not.

“We are Living Apartheid”: Zwelethu Radebe; Writer and Director of *The Hangman*

Apartheid is ‘a government-imposed system of discrimination and separation based on skin color.’ South African society suffered ‘43 years’ of this system (Magistad, 2017). The production and release of *The Hangman* marks 26 years since the ‘formal abolishing of Apartheid’ and 20 years since the establishment of TRC in South Africa (Heribert & Kogila, 1993). Zwelethu Radebe was born in 1989, two years before the official ending of Apartheid and can hardly be claimed that he lived under its horrors (Ngubane, 2017). It would be more valid to claim that he has lived with the effects of post-apartheid South Africa like many other young South Africans. Kagiso Matlala (2017) summarizes the relation of apartheid with the generation of Radebe that ‘(even) though we no longer live in the apartheid era, remnants of that oppressive system are littered all over present day South Africa and the struggle of millennial South Africans, is as a result of our history.’ It is therefore right to say that Zwelethu Radebe didn’t experience apartheid first hand hence has no basis to claim that he is living apartheid. He is however making a statement with the film that South African millennial(s) are living apartheid.

Apart from its legacy, the presence of apartheid in the life of Radebe is through an absence. It is precisely this trope of absence that positions Radebe, other South Africans and *The Hangman’s* audiences to be living apartheid in the film. Every viewer brings their prior knowledge and prior experience if any of apartheid into their viewing and later thoughts about the film. This ensures that individual viewers interact differently and at different levels of knowledge of apartheid as they watch the film. South Africans would identify more with the film’s storyline than non-South Africans. Older generation South Africans would also experience the film differently from the millennial(s) and so on and so forth. It is also true that individuals who lived under apartheid experienced it differently based on various factors. By therefore creating gaps in the storyline and visual presentation of the story, Radebe invites the viewer to bring their varied life experiences and knowledge(s) about apartheid to live in it and experience it uniquely and communally as was actually experienced during the period.

This historical period is present in the lives of the film makers and the entire South African society through its absence hence are living it in their present history. It is both an individual as well as a communal experience shared by all South Africans. The experience of apartheid and its horrors is not only present in the film through absences but it is also experienced through its violent presentation/depiction in the film and also the psychological undertones it carries with it. It is possible therefore to imagine that the feeling by disenfranchised individuals that present realities are as a result of apartheid is justified.

We are not shown how the mother of Khetha was raped by the officers, rather the scene passes the message effectively as a viewer realizes through the glimpses presented in the film and the reactions therein during and after this incident. Neither are we shown the part where Khetha's father puts a prison warder's manhood in his mouth as a punishment and denigration of the humanity and dignity of Mfundisi. Even though Khetha was punishing his father, this incident repulses him and we only get to understand that it happened when he vomits violently after witnessing the act. We are also not shown the hanging of Mfundisi by his son but we are shown Khetha leading him to the gallows after the revelation of the truth and on the morning when Mfundisi is due for execution. An impending sense of dread and an immediacy of the horrors of apartheid accompany the viewer in this journey. The unfairness of the system and its lack of justification for its existence is laid bare for an audience. An audience, just like the story writer and director Radebe, lives apartheid and its horrors during the duration of the film viewing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the psychological effect of the film on the viewer situates an audience into the lives of the people living in South Africa after the end of this system both through the awareness of the occurrence of this monstrosity and living with its legacy which continue to define the South African society 26 years later. It is precisely this that makes the statement that Zwelethu Radebe is saying that 'we are living apartheid' valid long after its official abolition.

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