

# THE LIMITS OF LIBERALISM IN SOUTH AFRICAN FILM: RECYCLING BLACK STEREOTYPES IN *SARAFINA!* AND *TSOTSI*

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## ABSTRACT

Twenty-two years into democracy, and South Africa is still producing white films for a black audience. In this film genre, black people participate as part of the cast but they are accorded questionable roles that distort important strides that the country has made to achieve racial reconciliation. Although black South Africans are participating in the production of films in South Africa, they have not been able to defeat the ghosts of liberalism that inform black films. The aim of this article is to draw attention to instances of stereotyping black children and young adults who are part of the casts of *Sarafina!* and *Tsotsi*. The article argues that, because people internalise the roles imposed on them, the cultural consequence of the creation of negative images is the production of a mentality among young black Africans that they are permanently disabled. Stereotyping is a pernicious mode of representing blacks because in the context of the post-1994 period, a numerical minority is a majority in terms of creating images and controlling the film industry, and a numerical majority is transformed into a numerical minority that assumes important role models and empowering images in films. This reality, which is informed by the ideology of white liberalism, has ensured that blacks remain marginalised in terms of the cultural creations offered through film in South Africa.

**Keywords:** liberalism; *Sarafina!*; *Tsotsi*; South Africa; black films; racial reconciliation; negative images

## INTRODUCTION: DANGERS OF RECYCLING BLACK STEREOTYPES

There are few book-length criticisms by black people of films about black people in South Africa, despite a steady growth in South African film scholarship. The most recent book on South African film is by Botha (2012). To its credit, the book is noted for its informative thrust that delineates the existence of Afrikaner nationalism expressed through films. Tomaselli's (1988) work about South African films focused mostly on the political factors that encouraged the growth of Afrikaner films. This film critic argues that in Afrikaner films there are critical imbalances partly because the black literary middle class has not used the power that it has or can command when producing films with a predominantly black-based cast. The worrying thing nowadays is that films for blacks using mostly black characters have revived the stereotypes of black people as either gracious people, who are given to easily forgiving the atrocities perpetrated on them by apartheid, or as "tsotsis" (thieves). Of course these actors/films can win awards perhaps because that is exactly what the films are intended to achieve: the symbolic dehumanisation of black people that is happening while a black government is on the watch.

Tomaselli (1988) alludes to the continuation of racial stereotyping that, curiously and ironically, is being affirmed by black producers and actors. A stereotype is a characterisation of reality that emphasises singular values of a thing, an object, or a person, and the projection of these particular aspects to represent the sum total of the whole character of what is described. Abdul R. JanMohamed (1985) observed that the economy of Manichean images in societies that had been subjected to colonialism revealed the function of racial difference as "codified" in colonialist literature. The essence of stereotypes, whether these are positive or negative, is that they can be used to "police" and inhibit other ways of interpreting the same reality. Referring to the capacity of stereotypes to reveal excessive signification and cultural inhibition, another film critic, Wolff, identifies stereotype's tendency towards "excess and inhibition" (1992, 706). Stereotyping manifests the excessive figuration of a single trait of a phenomenon, and this prevents or seeks to inhibit other ways of knowing the diversity of lived experiences that stereotyping seeks to hide. The pernicious nature of stereotyping is that it is not static; it reconfigures its singularities at different times and at higher levels of conceptualisation, sometimes in new ways that masquerade as liberating knowledge. This short description of the censorious nature of stereotyping is applicable in the case of *Sarafina!*, one of the films to have come out of a democratic context in post-1994 South Africa.

## SUMMARY OF THE PLOT OF SARAFINA!

*Sarafina!* was conceived as an anti-apartheid film. Shot on location in Soweto, the film's main protagonists are black school students who are pitted against their antagonists,

invariably depicted as the cruel white Afrikaner military machinery of war. This war machinery also manages to co-opt some black boots (black soldiers and undercover spies) who work for the apartheid government. Mbongeni Ngema, the scriptwriter, raises serious issues, many of which post-apartheid democratic South Africa has chosen to ignore. Set mainly in the late 1970s, the film attempts to recall the political fermentation within black townships. The imagined enemy of the youth rebellion is not only the famed white Afrikaner cruelty—there are also the elderly African parents who have endured the brutality of apartheid and have seemingly had their African “politics” undermined to a point where they have lost the will to oppose their exploiters. *Sarafina!* brings out this point clearly, and, in doing so, consciously or unconsciously but dramatically intimates the possibility of conflicting Afrikaner and black African nationalisms in the era of apartheid.

## RETHINKING THE DEPICTION OF BLACK AGENCY IN *SARAFINA!*

Despite the seriousness of the themes raised in *Sarafina!*, one can detect that the film director uses the genre of the spectacle to shock the audience. The first spectacle is the presence of white soldiers in the vicinity of the black school. The violence implicit in patrolling African schools intensified in the late 1980s, and the apartheid regime accepted as normal the doctrine of gratuitous brutality against black people. The high point of the state-orchestrated violence is when the history teacher, played by Whoopi Goldberg, is arrested for authorising a historical narrative that opposes apartheid historical scripts. In this scene in the film, violence is depicted as predominantly monopolised by white characters who work as different functionaries of the state. *Sarafina!* appropriates verisimilitude in its depiction of whites as enemies and blacks as victims. By and large, this is actually what was happening when, in many cases, black people were at the receiving end of apartheid violence. However, this characterisation of white brutes versus black angels tends to obfuscate complex realities. A good number of black people worked for the apartheid system in the police and the army, and even beyond 1994 some blacks wished that apartheid should not have ended because these blacks benefited from it. Within the townships, black-on-black violence was on the increase, and the film ignores this aspect that would have added complexity to the lives of black people. The struggle against apartheid is depicted as very much an internal war without outside assistance from uMkhonto we Sizwe, the military wing of the African National Congress. Admittedly, a film can only frame certain realities, but the silences imposed by the director in not including the role of the Frontline States further narrow the vision of the film and promote the culture of political entitlement.

The above observations do not vitiate the power of *Sarafina!* to appeal to its victims who in the post-independence era have become the hegemonic social group. However, when white apartheid violence is stereotyped as normative, this also tends to overshadow

the contribution of some white men and women who participated in the struggle against apartheid. Names such as that of Ruth First come to mind.

Let me focus on another scene in which generational conflicts are reconfigured. The struggle between the “Old Guard” and the “Young Turks” in the film reflects the conviction held in the era after 1994 that the past is the present. And this is how this myth is recycled in the film: first, the young blacks want to fight apartheid but the old are weary. In 1976, the presence of the ANC and PAC was absent in the country: in the film they are very much present by their conspicuous absence so that the credit of challenging the apartheid machinery with stones is accorded to secondary students. This rewriting of history smacks of the way in which the history of the struggle in South Africa is manipulated. The ghosts of liberalism haunt *Sarafina!* The elderly black characters, who are portrayed as feeble, actually fought apartheid with the tools they had, even when these tools were not effective. And yet, though the efforts of South African youths cannot be wished away, the film creates an artificial generational conflict amongst blacks, whereas the white community is depicted as coherent and possessing a unity of purpose to permanently subjugate blacks. It is possible to suggest that the creation of the stereotype of young blacks versus the old generation of blacks is a commentary about the blacks who did most of the fighting and died, and the old generation of black politicians who have taken over positions of power created post-1994 after the negotiated settlement that brought freedom to South Africa. But even if it is granted that it is the youth who did most of the fighting against apartheid, it is also controversial whether or not apartheid was militarily or politically defeated. An alternative view might be that the system actually swallowed the black, nationalist political parties, involving minimum political/economic costs and deaths of white people (as was imagined within the white community).

*Sarafina!* misses an opportunity to debate through images the complexity of the South African road to freedom. White liberalism that is grafted on unsuspecting or colluding black filmmakers such as Mbongeni Ngema, survives on the politics of non-disclosure. It is true that a film cannot say everything that happened in the struggle and cannot use the human agency of every individual who was present during the dark days of apartheid, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. What is of course astounding in *Sarafina!* is the absence on the screen of Indians, coloureds, Arabs, and some progressive white people who were not only political well-wishers but actually trained and contested Afrikaner ideology of racial separation. The omission of this dimension in *Sarafina!* is willed: it is true that often filmmakers have or should have the latitude to identify characters that they feel can represent certain historical sentiments, perhaps more than those who suffered the injustices of apartheid. Whoopi Goldberg, an African American, plays the role of the history teacher well, and most of the historical consciousness of the film is hinged on the ways in which the character is able to use analogues of European battles and wars won by ordinary people to comment on the possibility of ordinary South Africans defeating apartheid. As argued above, Whoopi Goldberg acquits herself extremely well in her role; however, her inclusion takes away the spirit of the South

African struggle by South African people. The headmaster of the school is depicted as the binary opposite of Goldberg, and the black history teacher who takes over when Mrs Mazibuko (Whoopi) is taken into custody, is also timid. The net result of this fundamental myth of the incapacity of black/white Indian/Arab South Africans to play an open contestatory role is that it vindicates the charge that South Africans are influenced by communism brought into peace-loving South African communities by outsiders such as Whoopi Goldberg.

Whether or not Ngema's script wanted to reveal this point and whether or not it wanted to contest it in the very portrayal of the character played by Whoopi, *Sarafina!* creates a myth that amounts to saying that South Africans are incorrigible dunces who cannot think for themselves. This way of arguing is not at all an attempt to discredit Whoopi Goldberg who, as I have argued, executes her politically conscious role well. My point is that just another myth is created that generates money: the casting is internationalised in a way that addresses the Hollywood market. Here, Roodt, the director of the film, also wanted to make sure that the credits of his film would increase in terms of the American box office (as the film eventually did).

The spectacular representation of violence in *Sarafina!* also serves to initiate and promote the myth of the necessity of peaceful transition into democracy. The physical harassment of school students is a verifiable historical fact and cannot be denied. When it is depicted in films, however, it not only lends authenticity to the nationalist accounts that *Sarafina!* is constructing and rehearsing for post-independence South Africa, but, when focusing the camera on children, students, and women as the victims, it also makes critics aware of the construction of the myth of soft targets (most of them blacks).

In *Sarafina!*, whites are shown as enjoying themselves in their homes and in public spaces. In the film, there is not even a single white man or woman, old or young, who is killed in the struggle against apartheid. This historical falsification paves the way for the creation and normalisation of white violence: white people shot black people, and they pushed black people out of productive economic zones. This representation of violence has made this violence become acceptable and less horrifying. The moment of the depiction of blacks as the worst brutes is the necklacing of the *impimpi*, the black man who has been covertly working for the white government. The happiness of the youths in seeing this man die defies the odds: the grotesque nature of the death of an *impimpi* through burning becomes more shocking than the casual shooting of black people. This point is significant because this practice has not stopped with the coming of democracy in 1994. The young black person who emerged from the struggle against apartheid can and does apply this sort of punishment to put to death local and foreign blacks. Young blacks who perfected their own art of violence against other Africans (for no white person has been necklaced after 1994) feel entitled to police the new state and in the process mete out violence through necklacing blacks despite the South African police keeping watch. In other words, in the film, blacks also monopolise violence, and this configuration of the stereotype equates white violence with black violence. Therefore,

since both apartheid violence and black youth violence have been put on the same level, this paves the way for another stereotype of black people being human beings who have an infinite fund of forgiveness. This fact is intimated in the last act of the film in which the black people are depoliticised. The youthful black girl throws away the gun, the very instrument that led to freedom, while the white people live peacefully in their homes, but are still armed to the teeth.

The point above recalls another manifestation of liberal ideology grafted onto *Sarafina!*, an ideology that relates to the aim of the struggle against apartheid. In the film, as in everyday post-independence South African political discourse, officials do not speak of freedom or liberation. They prefer the term democracy which is left as undefined as is possible so that it begins to mean anything to anybody. For example, in *Sarafina!* there is confusion as to whether apartheid has to be fought only to secure the release of Mandela, or whether apartheid is an evil system that needs to be fought (whether or not there is a historical figure by the name of Mandela). To put it in this way is not to undercut the Mandela *mythopoesis*: it is to point out that in *Sarafina!* the political narratives that start often as broad and somewhat flexible are, at the end of the film, narrowed to the agitation surrounding the release of Mandela. Of course, struggles operate and are achieved through the use or mobilisation of iconic figures around which collective sentiments of resistance should coalesce.

However, it can be argued that the personalisation of the struggle in the figure of Mandela is the beginning of the creation of a personality cult, which, in all fairness, the real Mandela does not share—as demonstrated in his monumental books, *Long Walk to Freedom* and *Conversations with Myself*.

The changing stereotypes of post-independence South Africa are further confirmed and replayed in the film, *Tsotsi*, in which the valence of black depictions shifts between gun-toting youths, murderers, and tsotsis (thieves). It is to this film that the rest of this essay is devoted.

## THE CRIMINALISATION OF THE BLACK YOUTH IN *TSOTSI*

If *Sarafina!* sustains the liberal myths that would prevent frank engagement with South Africa's nationalist struggles against apartheid, it is *Tsotsi* that shows how white liberalism can live off the myths created in respect of blacks. *Tsotsi* fits well with what Tomaselli (1988) describes as a white film for a black audience. The film floats images of black youths as criminals, and in the process criminalises the fact of blackness. Bhabha's (1996) observation is apposite here: he argues that stereotyping is a form of suture; although stereotypes give the impression of stabilised meanings, in reality their meanings change with time and in space. The truism of Bhabha's view can be demonstrated in the analysis of *Tsotsi*.

The film begins with a group or a gang of blacks playing dice in the notorious black townships that the governments of Mandela, Mbeki, and now Zuma have systematically failed to improve. The young men have no jobs, they mill around, smoke dagga, drink liquor, and those who are lucky to be employed as housemaids or labourers are shunted back and forth unrelentingly from work to home by trains that service the capitalist system without fail. Out of this milieu emerges a young man called Tsotsi (the name means thug) who sheepily behaves as his name directs him. Tsotsi is black, terrorises his friends, kills a woman at her gate, gets away in the woman's car, realises that there is a baby in the car, and decides to descend into the shanty towns where he finds a woman who can look after the baby. At the end of the film, Tsotsi is struck with a guilty conscience; he returns the baby to the parents, not without causing further deaths of blacks. The police catches up with his gang, and he pleads guilty. His gang is busted, and Tsotsi is rehabilitated into the community. This simplistic plot and sickeningly uncreative storyline have caused Klindo and Halyard (2006) to question mockingly whether or not a baby can redeem a hardened thug. To add to the critics' question, one cannot fail to mention that Tsotsi is a tag that has been made to stick on black youths. Furthermore, Tsotsi's sudden moral shift is improbable.

One might add that Tsotsi's asking the gutter woman to love him is not only contrived but that it has not been placed in a context that can render it believable. Characterising all blacks in *Tsotsi* as tsotsis or thugs is ideological. It creates a role for white people and new black liberals to take it upon themselves to be moral entrepreneurs who are supposed to guide the new South Africa to stability. The irony is that off-screen, most of these white liberals who fund the films together with their black hangers-on, live with the perception that blacks are thugs, while the liberals' images are supposed to be improving positively. The metaphor of *Tsotsi* also has affinities with colonialist ideologies in which blacks are seen as either animals or even worse than animals. As such, the depiction of black youths as tsotsis infers that Africans need perpetual guidance from the white economic magnates whose policies are largely responsible for the diminished material conditions that force blacks into criminal activities.

The ideological template on which *Sarafina!* and *Tsotsi* is based seems to derive from Jamie Uys's films. For example, his film, *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, feeds off and revives the image of Africans as barbaric and uncivilised. It is this genre with well-rehearsed myths that *Tsotsi* has tapped into without the patrons of democracy feeling that the film might pass as collective hate speech. To put it in this way is not at all to attempt to gag freedom of speech that films can promote. It is a call on future filmmakers to be aware of the political antics of white and black liberals who promote species of films that fan hatred more than they mend the relations between races who have a history of disrespecting each other.

In short, whether positive or negative, a stereotype amounts to a form of censorship. In *Sarafina!* and *Tsotsi*, the directors have confirmed that black youths are bestial. The backdrops to these films are the apartheid system and post-1994 liberal economic

systems that continue to marginalise black people. Other critics might suggest that *Sarafina!* and *Tsotsi* are deeply ironical, but as argued in this essay, the object of that irony is the black people. The understanding of black lives through the shifting, but singular, values associated with bestiality and vulgarity, and the idea that people need Caucasian moral guidance in the new era of democracy, are what films using black actors have been made to conform to.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to expose the hypocrisy of white liberal politics that say one thing and do another thing. The politics of dissembling have caught on, also as far as black filmmakers are concerned. Some of these filmmakers have sacrificed their creative honesty on the altar of fame based on self-denigration. The analysis of *Sarafina!* reveals the negative stereotyping of black people. The film's template appears to be dictated and informed by the values of parochial liberalism in South Africa. This limited liberal and conservative ideology cavalierly authorises narratives that are calculated not to enlighten but to set races further apart from each other. The film, *Tsotsi*, is disturbing for its sheer lack of constructive consciousness, a consciousness that could have acted to potentially glue together a society rended by crime. In the main, the metaphor of *Tsotsi* serves to criminalise not only a black youth but actually all blacks. It seems that in the minds of rich black people and liberal conservative white people, those who defeated apartheid are all "tsotsis" who have prevented conservatives and liberals from exploiting kindred South Africans with the minimum economic redress. That is why the existence of xenophobia that became evident in 2008 and during the recent Marikana massacre has been passed off as that which blacks have to pay (in the form of ritual blood) in order to supply the capitalist system in the country. That the liberals in politics and in the film industry do not speak out loudly against these heinous deeds reveals the limits of liberal democracy. The reliance of the films *Sarafina!* and *Tsotsi* on the figures of stereotypes reveals a failure to negotiate the tension between ethics and aesthetics. This failure is, in the words of White (1980, 5), a manifestation of the "problem of how to translate knowing into telling, the problem of fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning."

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