

The construction of the discourse of violence in liberation war films: The case of *Catch a Fire* (2006)

Kelvin Chikonzo

Department of Theatre Arts
University of Zimbabwe
Harare, Zimbabwe
kchikonzo@gmail.com

Barbara C. Manyarara

Department of Curriculum and Arts Education
University of Zimbabwe
Harare, Zimbabwe
bcmanyarara@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article seeks to unveil the construction of the discourse of violence in liberation war films. It uses a South African film that deals with the anti-apartheid war launched by Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) guerrillas. Violence is represented by the war. The article borrows from the input of psychologists such as Baumester, Polaschek, Whitehead and King, who have written on violence, with a view to analysing the psychological construction of violence. The article argues that violence does not just command negative readings in the film; rather violence is seen as ambivalent and necessary. The article argues that there is a connection between violence and the idea of nation. It is through violence that nations reinforce notions of heroism, patriotism, villainy, pride and honour. It reveals how violence creates a cohesive element that binds a nation together. The article also analyses the relationship between masculinity and violence with a view to pointing out how masculinity and violence are linked to the nation through the concepts of heroism and sacrifice.

Keywords: activists, ambivalence, apartheid, guerrillas, liberation, terrorists, and violence

Synopsis of *Catch a fire*

Written by Shawn Slovo and directed by Phillip Noyce, the film *Catch a fire* (2006) is based on the real life experiences of Patrick Chomusso, who works as a foreman at a coal mine in

Secunda. He is not interested in politics until he is tortured, together with his family, for a crime he has not committed. He is wrongfully accused of helping terrorists to gain access to the mine. After his detention, Chomusso crosses into Mozambique to join Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the military wing of the African National Congress (ANC). He gets military training in Mozambique and Angola and is deployed back to South Africa with a new name, Hot Stuff. Unfortunately, he is sold out by his wife, Precious. He is captured by Nic Vos, an Afrikaner police officer, and sent to Robben Island. Chomusso is freed in 1991 alongside other activists and revolutionary leaders.

Theoretical framework for analysing the manifestation of violence

Baumeister (in King 2012) isolates four ways of viewing violence. Firstly, violence is construed as a means to an end where violence is drawn as a means of gratifying immediate needs with little concern for the long-term utility of such behaviours. Secondly, violence is also a response to a threatened egotism where it becomes a response to a wounded pride or violated honour, in which the image of the self is at risk. Thirdly, violence can be regarded as a misguided effort to do what is right. In this instance, violence becomes a means of trying to carve out a sense of heroism by engaging in acts that reveal the self as victorious and hence respectable. Finally, violence can be viewed as a means of achieving sadistic pleasure where the perpetrator of violence is constructed by his/her victims as suffering from a psychological disease that makes them find pleasure in inflicting pain on others. In other words, the perpetrator of violence is not necessarily driven by circumstances, often; such a person is naturally violent. These forms of aggression provide the framework upon which the construction of violence in *Catch a fire* is analysed.

Violence and threatened egotism

There is a connection between honour, pride and violence. When institutions and values that a group of people uphold are threatened, they resort to violence as a means of maintaining and sustaining their existence. The violent nature of apartheid rule in South Africa is constructed as a response to radical communist ideologies harboured by the guerrillas which were a threat to the existence of the idea of South Africa as an apartheid state. Vos' wife, tells her daughter to be interested in defending herself and the system because: "... you live a life of privilege because of people like your father". She believes that African political activism is a threat to civilisation because the "terrorists" want to drive us into the sea.' She hardly considers the ugly side of apartheid especially on classes that do not enjoy privileges. In this way, violence and war cease to be a struggle between good and evil. Rather it becomes a means of protecting a civilisation, a social and political system which is cherished by supporters of the apartheid system.

Hence, Vos tells a captured guerrilla that: "... you say you want to liberate this country. By destroying railway lines, who do you hurt? You will be taking your orders from Russia".

Vos believes that the guerrillas are not driven by the desire to make south Africa a better place. He believes that while apartheid is wrong, replacing it with communism will certainly do no good to either the activists or to the white community in South Africa. Thus, this Afrikaner sees the war as a struggle for mastery and hegemony between two conflicting ideologies which are equally wrong and inimical to humanity. Hence the war is revealed as driven by self-serving interest rather than a desire to make South Africa a nation for people of all creeds and colours who are guided by democratic values.

The ANC guerrillas on the other hand explicate their resistance as a response to the apartheid system which threatened the existence of black communities in South Africa. Apartheid is revealed as a colonial and racially oppressive social and political system peculiar to South Africa. Chomusso is a man who is not interested in politics. He likes to be a family man and hopes to have a better life. He disapproves of his mother's actions because she is interested in the liberation war. He switches off the radio whenever his mother tunes-in to the Voice of South Africa, the radio station owned by the ANC. It is only after Chomusso has been tortured for a crime he had not committed that he decides to join MK. He is pained by the fact that the police had also tortured his wife, Precious. He moans, "... what kind of men are you that do such things to a woman? Nic Vos please release my wife". Chomusso is prepared to make a false confession just so that Precious can be released. He knows that he can be hanged but he is prepared for such an eventuality. Vos then decides to release him after realising that he was innocent. That encounter makes Chomusso realise the threat on his existence. The pain inflicted on his family convinces him that he has to take up arms against the apartheid system. His pride as a man black man and a black person has been undermined; he is prepared to die fighting to restore it. Thus, Chomusso engages in violent guerrilla war.

Even when Chomusso is finally captured again, this time as a fully trained guerrilla, he still retains his pride. Even when death is imminent, he still feels proud to be a guerrilla or freedom fighter. He tells Vos that:

There is nothing else that you can do with me. My life is finished. I may never see my children again. But when they speak of their father, they would say he was a man who stood up for what was right. A man who said I must do something now. What will your children say about you?

Perhaps the most vivid justification of violence as a means to restore pride is seen in the aftermath of the raid of an ANC camp in Mozambique. Members of the South African Defence Force (SADF) who participate in the raid are awarded medals and honoured by the state because they are protecting civilisation. Similarly, ANC guerrillas who die in the battle are revered as heroes because they died while violently championing the cause of the oppressed people of South Africa.

Violence as a means to an end

According to Baumeister (1997), violence is regarded as a means of gratification of immediate needs but with little concern to the long term utility of such a method of achieving one's desires. There is little concern over the long term effects of the violence option that both the ANC and the apartheid system employ. For example, the war ceases to target trained

personnel, which are the guerrillas and the police. The approach of the system is to inflict pain not just on ANC guerrillas but on their families as well. The police torture of Patience in order to force Chomusso into confessing to acts of terrorism, is a case in point. Vos forces Precious to sell-out her husband to the apartheid police by sending pictures of a pregnant woman in the company of Patrick, thus creating the false impression that Chomusso is cheating on her. The pregnant woman was actually a female guerrilla. Precious is misled into thinking that Chomusso has taken another wife in Mozambique. Vos knows that there was a great probability that Precious can inform him about Chomusso's whereabouts as soon as he returns as a guerrilla. Ultimately, Precious sells out Chomusso to Vos. Precious sells out in order to settle this imaginary score and Chomusso goes to jail a bitter man. She eventually realises that she had been wrong and when Chomusso returns from Robben Island, she begs his forgiveness. This shows how the moral cost of the war on the institution of the family is linked to the violence of the guerrilla war.

Likewise, most of the people associated with Chomusso are treated as terrorists, and many of his friends are tortured and killed. Even young children also become victims of the system. Sixpence [sic] is imprisoned and tortured. The young boy, who is not yet a teenager even, is subjected to police brutality as he is violently tortured. Whilst such torture is considered a necessary weapon for curbing guerrilla activity by the apartheid regime, the system is clearly inconsiderate of the moral cost and long term consequences of their violent methods of maintaining the apartheid system. Certainly such violence is perpetrated to maintain a status quo, according to Baumeister (ibid).

Similarly, guerrillas cease to direct their war efforts on members of the South African Police and the SADF. They seek to inflict pain on their forces' families. By training his wife and children to 'kill terrorists', Vos' family becomes a target for violence in turn. Unreasonably, his daughters are forced to learn to use guns "to kill terrorists", that is, they are taught to be violent. In this way, the family becomes a target for guerrilla violence and so ceases to live a normal life. Psychological impacts on the family are varied: one of the daughters is uneasy with the idea of moving around with arms. Her mother, on the other hand, is gripped with fear of what would happen if the "terrorists" raid her house. The fears of the Vos family are confirmed when one of the guerrillas, Pete My Baby, strikes at the Vos' residence. Luckily for them, one of the daughters is alert and pulls the gun first, killing Pete My Baby. Such anxieties and the disintegration of normal life show how violence inflicts both physical and moral costs on the people of South Africa.

In the same psychological manifestation of violence, MK guerrillas destroy infrastructure: targeting key infrastructure such as railway lines and even the oil refinery in Secunda. In turn, they are inconsiderate of the thousands of jobs that would be lost by the annihilation of such a facility. The bombing would certainly hurt the system but it costs black workers their livelihood, peace and security as the innocent may also become victims of police brutality. Therefore, violence is not a long lasting solution to socio-political problems. However, it has long-term political and social consequences as well as moral implications for the South African nation.

The necessity for violence

Since war and violence can be motivated by pride and patriotic honour as Baumeister (ibid) argues, the idea of the nation is connected to violence. When the film starts, one apartheid official remarks: "This is our land, we fought for it. It belongs to us". National pride is revealed as a product of pain and sacrifice. Nationhood does not come easily or freely. Logically, the militarily strong are likely to dominate the weak. A nation from its inception is driven by a violence that is legitimised as necessary for establishing territory such as occurred in the colonisation process the world over. Thus the apartheid regime is able to justify violence, that is, the "... we fought for it" mentality as the bedrock upon which their claims to the territory are conceived. Quite curiously, this is the same principle the ANC in turn, engages to justify their own brand of violence against the apartheid system or those other black people thought to help up-hold the unjust system. In this case, violence manifests as the necessary pain that a people have to go through in order to change the existing socio-political order so as to enjoy freedom and democratic governance.

In this way, violence and war as binaries that bind the nation together are constructed. Other related binaries include: hero/villain, patriot/sell-out and them/us. Heroes of the apartheid system are those people who devoted their time to defending the nation against its perceived enemies, namely, most of the non-whites. Anderson (1983) argues that the nation is an imagined political community tied together by imaginary values. Thus nations are bound together by the desire of a people to protect themselves from real or imagined enemies. A nation must have enemies, and if they are not there, the government in power must invent them so as to create a cohesive factor upon which the idea of the nation is defended and established. Polaschek (in King 2012) also confirms that violence has structured interconnected belief networks organised around an underlying dominant theme. In this way, the members of the SADF who die in war or in the violence afflicting the nation are revered as heroes by their white compatriots. It is on this principle of patriotism and heroism that the likes of Vos are honoured after successful raids on ANC camps in Mozambique. The "terrorists" who are killed are shown up and vilified as enemies of the state, the villains of the socio-political stage.

Similarly, MK cadres, such as Pete my Baby who are killed in battle, are the heroes of the revolutionary movement. They are given a hero's burial and are remembered as selfless individuals who paid the ultimate price towards the liberation of South Africa from the apartheid system. Polaschek (ibid) posits that the belief networks that guide violent actions unconsciously guide and determine behaviour, filter and categorise knowledge, and become comprehensive theories about the beliefs, intentions, desires and behaviour of a people. Expressed plainly, this means that heroism and villainy are two sides of the same coin. Chomusso alongside other prisoners at Robin Island is treated as dangerous enemies of the apartheid state. Yet, with socio-political independence and democracy, they became the new heroes at whose feet a new nation was born, the heroes of a new South Africa. They are heroes because they participated in the violence that gave birth to the rainbow nation. On the other hand, Vos and his cohorts also participated in military violence and police brutality on the non-white people of the nation but on the wrong side of history. Thus, they are revealed as villains of the struggle.

The film *Catch a fire* points out the necessity and justification for violence in nation formation. As people overcome their fears and engage the enemy, they invent themselves as heroes. Hence, without violence, risk-taking and a willingness to make the sacrifice one-self in the face of danger, it would be impossible to create heroes upon which nations could be built. Thus, Whitehead (2005, p. 416) aptly concludes:

The foundation of masculinity on the anxiety-provoking base of heroism has particular implications for man to man violence, since the Hero cannot exist without his counterpart, the Villain. The Villain, for example, the criminal, is the figure against which the Hero, for example the man who upholds law shows his courage. Each defines each other through conflict in which each attempts to impose his will on the other.

Masculinity, heroism and violence

Whitehead (ibid) argues that the violence that exists between men (sic) is driven by the desire to invent other men as villains and therefore regarded as Non-Man. Whitehead further explains that such desire creates a form of exclusive violence in which the victim is positioned as the Non-Man. Such violence is designed to humiliate and/or feminise its particular victim. Thus the function of exclusive violence is to reaffirm the perpetrator's masculinity by negating the masculinity of other men. Through violence, the victim is excluded from the category 'man' as unworthy of belonging. Such violence in its extreme and overt form is characterised by the use of overwhelming force that removes any pretence of competition and humiliates one at the gender level.

When Vos captures Chomusso, by then a fully-fledged guerrilla, he forces Chomusso to remove all his clothes. Vos uses Chomusso's nudity to reveal his limitless power over the guerrilla. Nudity psychologically renders Chomusso a Non-Man especially as this humiliation is perpetrated in full view of his two wives and children. He is rendered a non-man in full view of his wife for whom he had been a man. Totally humiliating Patrick is one form of violence that could be perpetrated on an enemy of the state. By rendering a "hero" of the revolution a non-man, the character Vos as a representative of the police force comes out as invincible and victorious. This violation of Chomusso's dignity loses him and others like him the respect and honour of his family and community. He is, therefore, rendered worthless and useless at this level.

When Chomusso pleads with Vos to release precious when they interrogate her, he reveals the tension of masculinities between him and Vos. Chomusso demands, "... what kind of a man does such things to women"; he is not just sorry for Precious. He in fact implies that Precious is already a non-man; therefore there is no need to subject her to police brutality such as is used to subdue men. Thus, Chomusso overtly accuses Vos of cowardice by picking on women who are soft targets by the mere fact of their gender. This is one reason why Chomusso lies about his initial involvement with guerrillas: he wants to save Precious. He was certain to be killed for acts of terrorism committed against the regime, whether real or imagined but could also recover his honour through that violent death at the hands of the system's death merchants. Thus, Chomusso's dangerous lie could render him a heroic figure who overcomes the fear of death to save his wife's life. That is, he is willing to trade his life

for another's life, the kind of sacrifice a guerrilla would be expected to want to make. By not behaving according to type, Vos decides not to kill Chomusso, not from any sense of justice or fairness, but from a malevolence that seeks to take away the dignity he had bravely and freely earned unlike the policeman himself who could be in the war for money and not from any nationalistic drive. Killing Chomusso would have turned him into a hero, a martyr before his wife and community, so sparing his life is no act of kindness.

The audiences of the film *Catch a Fire* get to identify heroes as violent men. In this way, physical and psychological violence are used to dent women's agency in the liberation history of South Africa. However, that same violence is used to exonerate white women from the label of oppressor that which white men are accorded in the film. By the same token, black women are also exonerated from the label of "terrorist" which is used to refer to black men who kill in the name of justice. Yet, quite ironically, from the beginning of the film Chomusso's mother is more politically conscious than he is. After all non-white women have to contend with gender, class, race and the oppression brought about by colonialism and all this within a relentless patriarchy. In a bid to control his mother's growing political consciousness, Chomusso dissuades her from listening to news broadcast externally from Mozambique. Yet, when it comes to the actual fighting, Chomusso's mother is side lined. It is Chomusso, together with other male cadres, who engage in the act of violence and who pay the ultimate price. Although there are female cadres in Mozambique, their role on the battlefield is quite limited as shown by its lack of cinematic revelation. The women serve to bury and mourn the dead, that is, they deal with violence in a more muted way. They never make it to the front because they are thought insufficiently violent for the expected acts of insurgency and terrorism. In the narration of the film *Catch a Fire* only men are entrusted with the mandate to carry out acts of terror and sabotage. Thus, it is the amount of violence that a man is able to perpetrate that defines his heroic status. In this way, the potential heroines of the struggle are absent and are only really used by Vos and his likes as decoys to trap the "real" heroes of the struggle. Whitehead (2005, p. 413) underscores this dearth of female recognition in this fictionalised representation of the South African war of liberation when he says:

Masculinity may be conceptualised as manhood. Manhood captures something of what it means to be a man ... Since the Hero is a ubiquitous and exemplary symbol of manhood, masculinity may be defined as Heroism.

Thus, violence is constructed as a masculine quality in this film. Women as non-men remain unspoken for or about, a real faux pas on the part of the film's director Noyce.

Conclusion

The article has interrogated the construction of the discourse of violence. It has argued that violence is ambivalent in that whilst it serves egotistic and parochial intentions, it is also necessary in the life cycle of a nation. The article has revealed the symbiotic relationship between violence and the process of socio-political nation building. Heroes and patriots cannot exist without the violence and pain of creating the nation into being. Thus, violence is

a celebrated concept as much as it is denigrated, that is, violence is the bedrock upon which most films liberation wars rest.

References

Primary work

Noyce, P., 2006. *Catch a fire* (101min.) Focus Pictures/Universal Pictures, France/United Kingdom/United States/South Africa.

Secondary works

Anderson, B., 1983. Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism. Available at: <http://www2.bc.edu/.../0420anderson.pdf> (Accessed 28 August 2014).

Baumeister, R.F., 1997. *Human evil: The mythical and the true causes of violence*. Available at: <http://portal.idc.ac.il/.../21-baumeister.pdf> (Accessed 28 August 2014).

Greenshaw, K., 1991. Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics and violence against women of colour. *Standard Law Review*, 43 (6), 1241–1299.

King, B., 2012. Psychological theories of violence. *Journal of Human Behaviour in the Social Environment*, 22 (5), 553–571.

Mhando, M. and Tomaselli, K.G., 2009. Film and trauma: Africa speaks to itself through truth and reconciliation. *Black Camera*, 1 (1), 30–50.

Tomaselli, K.G., 2003. Disarticulating black consciousness: A way of reading films about apartheid. *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 4 (1), 1–14.

Tomaselli, K.G., Eke, M. and Davison, P., 1997. Transcending the prison as a metaphor of apartheid South Africa. *Visual Anthropology*, 9 (3–4), 285–300.

Whitehead, A., 2005. Man to man violence: How masculinity works as a dynamic risk factor. *The Howard Journal*, 44 (4), 411–422.