

Cinematic Theology of Liberation: “Sarafina” as A Lens on Faith, Resistance and Justice in Apartheid South Africa

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Abstract: This paper examines how the 1992 film “Sarafina,” directed by Darrell James Roodt, serves as a cinematic embodiment of liberation theology in the South African context. Liberation theology, which originated in Latin America, significantly shaped Black theology in South Africa by emphasizing that Christian faith must confront injustice and champion the liberation of the oppressed through both reflection and action. By integrating Marxist social analysis, South African Black theologians exposed the structures of racism and economic exploitation inherent in apartheid. Liberation theology inspired grassroots activism and instilled hope in marginalized communities. Its legacy is evident in Black theology’s language of resistance and empowerment, as well as its insistence that authentic Christianity requires the pursuit of justice and freedom. Through a detailed examination of “Sarafina” – set during the anti-apartheid movement and the 1976 Soweto uprising – this paper demonstrates how the film dramatizes collective resistance to racial oppression and state violence. Featuring standout performances by Leleti Khumalo and Whoopi Goldberg, “Sarafina” interweaves personal stories and historical realities to portray both struggle and hope. Drawing on Adrienne Rich’s concept of re-vision, this analysis highlights how the film embodies the core themes of liberation theology: the critique of oppressive religious ideologies, resistance to oppressive political systems, and social and community solidarity in upholding human dignity. The paper contends that the South African liberation movement was fundamentally rooted in a theological vision affirming God’s justice and the intrinsic dignity of all people.

Keywords: Sarafina, Liberation theology, South Africa, film, cinema, apartheid, political independence, racial discrimination, Christian beliefs, Black conscious movement, Black theology.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cinema has increasingly been recognized by theologians and social scientists as a significant force in inspiring and reshaping liberation movements (Morgan 2018). For decades, artists have harnessed creative mediums such as film and music to challenge dominant socio-political and religio-cultural narratives that perpetuate oppression and discrimination. These narratives often contain deeply embedded intersections of racism, classism, sexism, and patriarchy (Rich 1972:18). Through critical engagement, cinema offers a unique lens into people’s lives, exploring their cultures, economic systems, religio-political ideologies, and the processes by which individuals and communities (re)construct social identities (Rich 1972:18). This paper examines how the South African film “Sarafina” embodies a theology of liberation that galvanized black South Africans during the struggle for political independence (Sarafina Movie 1992). Produced by Darrell James Roodt in 1992, following Nelson Mandela’s release from prison, “Sarafina” is situated at a pivotal historical moment. Mandela, a central figure in South Africa’s liberation, spent 27 years in prison (1963-1990) before emerging as the nation’s first black President in 1994 (Mandela 1994:853).

The film features Leleti Khumalo as Sarafina, alongside Hollywood star Whoopi Goldberg (Mary Masembuko), Miriam Makeba (Angelina, Sarafina’s mother), and Hugh Masekela. Both Makeba and Masekela, celebrated South African musicians and freedom fighters, symbolize the sacrifices made by those who resisted apartheid, often spending years in exile (Maingard 1994:239). “Sarafina” is rooted in the socio-political context of apartheid South Africa, beginning with the 1976 Soweto Uprising when students protested the imposition of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction (Maingard 1994:239). The narrative extends into the 1980s, chronicling continued student resistance and state brutality against black South Africans (Maingard 1994:240).

To analyze how “Sarafina” enacts liberation theology, this paper employs Adrienne Rich’s concept of “re-vision” – the act of revisiting and reinterpreting established texts or narratives from new critical perspectives (Rich 1972:18). Rich argues that re-vision is a vital act of survival and self-knowledge, essential for challenging ingrained cultural assumptions. Utilizing this heuristic, the paper identifies three key elements of liberation theology woven into Sarafina’s narrative: political resistance against apartheid, opposition to racial and gender discrimination, and a critique of Christian doctrines historically used to justify racial oppression. The analysis is conducted at both textual and contextual levels, decoding the film’s socio-political and religious contexts.

As Brene Brown observes, “Stories are data with soul” (cited by Kaunda 2018:2), and cinema can powerfully convey the lived realities and cultural ethos of specific communities. Despite this potential, theological discourse has yet to fully interrogate how artistic forms such as cinema and music communicate religious and liberative ideals to broader audiences. “Sarafina” stands as a significant case study for advancing such discussions.

Produced amid fraught negotiations between the apartheid regime and black South Africans, “Sarafina” reflects a period marked by widespread protest and heightened struggle. The characters, particularly Sarafina and her teacher Mary Masembuko, embody the spirit of resistance. Mary’s arrest and subsequent death in prison, followed by Sarafina’s own imprisonment and release to symbolically portray Mandela in a school concert (Maingard 1994:240), highlight the sacrifices and resilience of those involved in the struggle. The film captures the collective anger and determination of black South Africans as they confront the dehumanizing realities of apartheid, depicting student protests, school burnings, and economic boycotts (Maingard 1994:240).

“Sarafina” articulates a theological vision in which liberation from all forms of discrimination is seen as divinely ordained, with Nelson Mandela and other freedom fighters envisioned as agents of God’s justice. This is poignantly expressed by the priest during a mass funeral for students killed by police: “They fear you because you are young; they fear you because you are the future... I know freedom is coming tomorrow” (Sarafina Movie 1992). The film thus critiques ecclesiastical marginalization, political oppression, and social inequities, situating them within the broader themes of liberation theology.

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach to explore how the 1992 film “Sarafina” embodies the principles of liberation theology within the South African context. The methodology integrates textual and thematic film analysis, liberation theology, and re-visioning. First, the study conducts a close reading of “Sarafina,” focusing on narrative structure, character development, dialogue, and visual symbolism (Botha 2012). Particular attention is given to scenes depicting resistance, oppression, and collective action, examining how these elements reflect core themes of liberation theology – such as the critique of religious and political oppression and the pursuit of justice (Cone 1997, Motlhabi 2008).

Second, the analysis is anchored in the theoretical constructs of liberation theology, with a focus on its South African manifestation as Black theology. Key texts and thinkers on liberation theology and Black theology are consulted to establish the central tenets: confronting injustice, advocating for the oppressed and integrating faith with social action (Gutierrez 1971, Gutierrez 1988, Villa-Vicencio 1988).

Finally, the paper references Adrienne Rich’s concept of “re-vision” to interpret how the film reimagines theological and historical narratives (Rich 1972). This methodology synthesizes insights from film studies and theology to provide a comprehensive analysis. By integrating these disciplines, the paper demonstrates how “Sarafina” functions both as a work of art and a theological text that dramatizes the struggle for justice and dignity. This vision of divine justice and resistance, so powerfully embodied in Sarafina, directly echoes the principles at the heart of liberation theology. To understand the theological underpinnings of the film’s message, it is essential to explore the origins and influence of liberation theology itself.

3. LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Liberation theology, which first emerged in Latin America in the late 20th century, particularly 1960s and early 1970s, deeply influenced the development of Black theology in South Africa (Rakoczy

2004:5). It started as a response to the widespread poverty and social injustice experienced by marginalized communities. The movement was rooted in the Catholic Church’s engagement with the realities of oppression and was influenced by global social movements for civil rights and decolonization. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the Latin American Bishops’ Conference at Medellín (1968) played a crucial role in shaping its direction, encouraging clergy and laity to address the needs of the poor (Rakoczy 2004:5).

Liberation theology developed as both a theological framework and a social movement. At its core, liberation theology emphasizes the imperative for Christian faith to confront social and economic injustices, advocating for the liberation of the oppressed through both theological reflection and concrete action. It called for interpreting Christian faith through the experience of the poor and oppressed, emphasizing praxis - action informed by reflection. Liberation theologians questioned traditional interpretations of scripture that ignored social realities and instead promoted a theology that advocated for justice, human rights, and structural change (Rakoczy 2004:5).

Key liberation theologians have shaped the movement both in theory and practice, contributing to its development across different global contexts. Gustavo Gutiérrez, often regarded as the founder of liberation theology, laid the intellectual groundwork with his influential book “A Theology of Liberation” (1971). In this seminal work, Gutiérrez introduced the concept of the “preferential option for the poor,” emphasizing the Church’s commitment to social justice and the empowerment of marginalized communities.

Another central figure is James H. Cone, a pioneering voice in Black theology. In his work “A Black Theology of Liberation” (1970), Cone applied the liberationist framework to the African American experience, exploring the intersection of Christian faith and the struggle against systemic racism in the United States.

Leonardo Boff, a Brazilian theologian, further developed liberation theology, particularly in the realms of eco-theology and the advocacy for the rights of indigenous peoples. His work expanded the movement’s concerns beyond economic and racial justice to include environmental and cultural dimensions.

Jon Sobrino, a Spanish Jesuit based in El Salvador, emphasized the suffering and crucifixion of the poor in his theology. Sobrino advocated for solidarity with marginalized populations, arguing that true Christian discipleship requires a commitment to the oppressed.

In South Africa, Allan Boesak and Desmond Tutu played crucial roles in adapting liberation theology to the context of apartheid. Both theologians linked faith with political activism, using Christian principles to challenge racial injustice and promote social transformation.

Although liberation theology originated in Latin America, its influence has extended globally. It has inspired contextual theologies such as Black theology in the United States and resistance theologies in South Africa during apartheid, shaping religious responses to oppression and injustice across Africa, Asia, and North America (Rakoczy 2004:5-7).

Liberation theology is characterized by several key features that collectively shape its unique approach within Christian thought (Rakoczy 2004:5-7):

1. *Preferential Option for the Poor:* Central to liberation theology is the conviction that Christian faith should prioritize the needs and voices of the poor and marginalized. This principle calls for an active commitment to justice, urging both theological reflection and practical action that centers on the experiences of those who are most oppressed.
2. *Praxis:* Liberation theology emphasizes the inseparable relationship between action and reflection. Theology is not an abstract exercise, but is rooted in lived experience and concrete social engagement. This approach insists that faith must be expressed through transformative action in the world, informed by continual critical reflection.
3. *Social and Political Engagement:* Advocating for structural change is integral to liberation theology. It challenges systems of oppression and injustice, asserting that social justice is not peripheral but essential to the Christian faith. This perspective calls for active participation in movements and initiatives that seek to transform unjust social, economic, and political structures.

4. *Biblical Reinterpretation*: Liberation theology re-reads scripture through the eyes of the oppressed, focusing on themes such as liberation, justice, and the Exodus narrative. This approach seeks to uncover how biblical texts can inspire and empower communities struggling for freedom and dignity.
5. *Critique of Traditional Theology*: Finally, liberation theology questions the supposed neutrality of traditional theological approaches. It argues that faith must not remain detached from real-world suffering, but should instead be actively involved in transforming society toward greater justice and equity.

Together, these features distinguish liberation theology as a movement that intertwines faith, justice, and transformative action. These features resonated strongly with South African theologians and activists grappling with the realities of apartheid (De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2005, Rakoczy 2004, Biko 1978). Black theology in South Africa appropriated key themes from liberation theology, especially its commitment to praxis - the integration of faith and action - as well as its structural critique of power and oppression. South African theologians such as Allan Boesak drew upon liberation theology’s insistence that the gospel demands solidarity with the marginalized and a challenge to unjust systems. This theological framework provided both a spiritual and intellectual foundation for resistance against apartheid, equipping churches and faith communities to become centers for activism and social transformation.

Moreover, liberation theology’s willingness to engage with social sciences, particularly its use of Marxist analysis to critique structural injustice, helped South African Black theology articulate the systemic nature of racism and economic exploitation under apartheid. While this approach attracted criticism from some church leaders and authorities - who feared its radicalism or political associations - it also galvanized grassroots movements and offered hope to those struggling against oppression.

South African theologians and activists, confronting apartheid’s harsh realities, found resonance in this approach. They adopted liberation theology’s core themes—especially the integration of faith with activism (praxis) and a critical stance toward power structures and oppression. Influential figures like Allan Boesak drew upon its insistence that the gospel requires solidarity with the marginalized and challenges unjust systems. This framework empowered churches to become centers of resistance and social transformation during apartheid.

The influence of liberation theology on Black theology in South Africa is evident not only in the language of resistance and empowerment, but also in the enduring conviction that authentic Christian faith must be lived out in the pursuit of justice and freedom for all people. By rooting theological reflection in the lived experiences of the oppressed, Black theology in South Africa continues to echo liberation theology’s call for a faith that is both prophetic and transformative. To fully appreciate how the themes and principles of liberation theology are woven into *Sarafina*, it is essential to contextualize the South African colonial history that the film so powerfully addresses.

4. SOUTH AFRICAN COLONIAL RULE

The film - “*Sarafina*” - functions not only as a compelling narrative of resistance against apartheid, but also as a critical examination of the religious ideologies that historically underpinned and legitimized oppression in South Africa. In particular, the film interrogates and subverts Christian doctrines that were co-opted to justify apartheid policies, ultimately demonstrating how faith can be reimagined as a catalyst for liberation rather than a tool of subjugation.

To understand the context in which “*Sarafina*” operates, it is essential to trace the historical roots of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa. The colonial occupation began with the arrival of the Dutch at the Cape in 1652, under the leadership of Jan van Riebeeck (UNESCO 1974:16; Richard 2010). The Dutch East India Company established a settlement at the Cape primarily as a stopover for ships en route to India. However, this settlement soon resulted in violent conflict with the indigenous San and Khoi peoples, the original inhabitants of the region. Many San and Khoi people were killed, and their cattle were seized to provision passing ships (UNESCO 1974:15, 16). Over time, the European settler population grew, with the arrival of additional immigrants, including the British.

In 1806, British forces assumed control of the Cape, leading to increased tensions between the British and the Dutch settlers (Boers), particularly over the British stance on the abolition of slavery. The

discovery of valuable minerals, such as gold and diamonds, further intensified these conflicts. The British came to dominate the mining industry, while the Dutch remained primarily in control of agricultural land. These tensions culminated in the First Anglo-Boer War of 1880, led by Paul Kruger (UNESCO 1974:24). Throughout this period, European settlers systematically dispossessed Africans of their land and consolidated control over the mining sector, with British influence expanding during the era of Cecil Rhodes and the British South African Company.

Politically, the white population was divided between the Nationalist Party, supported mainly by Afrikaners (Dutch or Boers), and the Unionist Party, supported by English-speaking settlers. Despite these divisions, both parties were united in their opposition to racial equality. In response to the systemic exclusion of Africans, the African National Congress (ANC) was founded in 1912 to advocate for African rights (Mandela 1994:118; UNESCO 1974:29). The ANC asserted that Africans were full citizens of South Africa. Later, young leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu established the African Youth League to intensify the struggle for racial equality. Mass mobilizations, such as the 1946 miners' strike involving over 50,000 African workers, became frequent, though they were often met with violent state repression (UNESCO 1974:32).

Racial segregation became formally institutionalized in 1948 when the Nationalist Party came to power and implemented apartheid - a policy of “separateness” or “separate development” (Mandela 1994:129). Apartheid enshrined the legal and social dominance of whites over blacks through a range of measures: laws enforcing the separation of whites, blacks, and “Coloureds” (mixed race); indirect rule through traditional leaders to suppress African nationalism; and the control of economic, social, and educational institutions by the Afrikaner-dominated government (UNESCO 1974:44). Under apartheid, Africans became a source of cheap labour vital to the South African economy. In cities, they worked in mines and industries; in rural areas, they laboured on white-owned farms. Coloureds typically occupied semi-skilled or junior managerial positions, especially in the Cape, while people of Asian or Indian descent often worked as shopkeepers or traders. Afrikaners, largely farmers, gradually became urbanized, whereas English-speaking whites occupied wealthier, managerial roles (UNESCO 1974:45).

A good number of laws institutionalized racial differentiation (Mandela 1994:166-167). These included prohibitions on interracial marriage and sexual relations, racial classification of the population, mandatory identity cards for citizens over sixteen, and the restriction of each group to designated areas. African mobility and employment were tightly regulated, relegating them to low-paying jobs and inferior living conditions. Segregation extended to public spaces, hospitals, schools, and even recreational activities. Education was strictly separated, with distinct budgets and curricula for Africans, Asians, Coloureds, and whites (Mandela 1994:117, UNESCO 1994:45, 46, Guelke 2005:2).

To maintain this system, the apartheid government wielded extensive powers to suppress dissent. Organizations and individuals deemed threats to national security could be banned (UNESCO 1974:78). Political activists, such as Steve Biko, were detained without trial, sometimes for prolonged periods. Black male political prisoners, including Nelson Mandela, were incarcerated on Robben Island, while their white counterparts were held in Pretoria. Black women activists were detained at Barberton (UNESCO 1974:81, Biko 1978). Apartheid’s brutality provoked frequent protest among black South Africans. For example, on 21 March 1960, 10,000 people demonstrated at the Sharpeville police station near Johannesburg. Police opened fire, killing sixty-nine and wounding over 180. The Sharpeville massacre ignited nationwide protests against apartheid (UNESCO 1974:92, 93). Demonstrations persisted into the 1970s and 1980s. In 1985, the government declared a state of emergency, granting police and security forces sweeping powers. By 1986, more than 80,000 youths were imprisoned, and black South Africans began targeting informers, police spies, and collaborators (Maingard 1994:236).

It is within this context that “Sarafina” reconstructs the events of the 1970s and 1980s, powerfully depicting the intensity of student resistance and the violence of apartheid. For instance, the film portrays the burning of Constable Sabela by students for his role as a collaborator with the colonial authorities. The anger and sense of betrayal are palpable in the film’s music and lyrics:

*You gossip about people to the Boers (Afrikaners)
You talk about people’s businesses
You gain when human blood is shed...
You have finished them*

*The humanity is getting destroyed
Just catch this person
Just catch this witch...
(Sarafina 1992)*

Apartheid, deeply entrenched in South African society, manifested at religious, political, and social levels. “Sarafina” clearly portrays resistance to apartheid across these interconnected spheres, illuminating the broader struggle for liberation and underscoring the relevance of liberation theology within the South African context.

4.1. CRITIQUE OF OPPRESSIVE RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGIES

The film offers a critique of Christian doctrines that historically underpinned apartheid ideologies in South Africa. By reimagining the character of Sarafina - not as a passive recipient of faith, but as an active agent in her own liberation - the narrative subverts traditional interpretations of religion. This theological revision foregrounds faith as a source of empowerment, challenging the notion that it must perpetuate subjugation.

Historically, apartheid was not merely a political system but was deeply intertwined with religious justification, particularly within the Dutch Reformed Church. While British colonial authorities favoured a multiracial South Africa (Guelke 2005:6), Dutch republicans promoted white dominance through racial segregation and the systematic denial of political rights to non-whites. The formal implementation of apartheid in 1948 institutionalized beliefs that had long existed within Afrikaner communities. As early as the 1920s, the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa used the term “apartheid” (meaning separateness), embedding it in its ecclesiastical policies (Motlhabi 2008, Villa-Vicencio 1988, Guelke 2005).

Hermann Giliomee documents that in 1929, Rev. Jan Christoffel du Plessis, addressing a Dutch Reformed Church conference, declared that the “spirit of apartheid” had shaped the church’s missionary work (cited in Guelke 2005:3). Based on this doctrine, the church separated white and black congregations, justifying racial segregation as a precondition for salvation (Coetzee & Conradie 2010). As Giliomee notes, church leaders were captivated by a utopian vision of separate peoples, each with their own mission – a vision that ultimately justified injustice and paved the way for political implementation (cited in Guelke 2005:4).

The Dutch Reformed Church’s mission policy dictated the structuring of race relations both within the church and the broader society. The church actively pressured the government to enshrine apartheid as state policy (Coetzee & Conradie 2010:113). The 1974 synod document “Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture” provided theological justification for apartheid (Coetzee & Conradie 2010:114). Consequently, the Nationalist Party adopted the church’s racial policy as political ideology. The term “apartheid” appeared in *Die Burger*, an Afrikaans newspaper, on 26 March 1943, with Dr. Daniel F. Malan – former Dutch Reformed clergy and Nationalist Party leader – as its editor. In 1944, Malan assured Parliament that his party would “ensure the safety of the white race and of Christian civilisation by the honest maintenance of the principles of apartheid and guardianship” (Guelke 2005:3). This ideology was further fuelled by Afrikaner resentment towards the British and a desire to reaffirm white South African identity by keeping Africans in a subordinate position (Mandela 1994:151-152). The Nationalist Party’s victory in 1948 was interpreted by many Afrikaners as the fulfilment of God’s plan, akin to the Israelites’ journey to the Promised Land, reinforcing the belief that South Africa was destined to be a “white man’s country” (Mandela 1994:129, 152).

However, this religious justification of apartheid did not go unchallenged. Black theologians and freedom fighters in the 1970s and 1980s denounced apartheid as a “pseudo-gospel” incapable of offering true salvation (Coetzee & Conradie 2010:112). These critics called for free education, equitable land redistribution, and the abolition of the colour bar, which barred Africans from skilled labour (Mandela 1994:154). The film “Sarafina” underscores the suffering and resistance of Black South Africans, as reflected in the lyrics:

*The nation is crying
The cattle are gone, the old men are prisoners
The young men have fled*

*Only women and babies are now in Soweto
Weep for the pain of Africa
(Sarafina Movie 1992).*

Despite persistent protests, the Nationalist Party intensified repression (Mandela 1994:160). While the Dutch Reformed Church supported laws enforcing segregation, other denominations, notably the Anglican Church, consistently opposed apartheid (Mandela 1994:231). Prominent church leaders such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Rev. Allan Boesak emerged as vocal opponents of repression and police brutality (Mandela 1994:757). “Sarafina” clearly challenges oppressive religious ideologies by reinterpreting faith as a force for liberation rather than subjugation, situating itself within a broader tradition of theological resistance to apartheid. The pursuit of liberation in “Sarafina” is anchored in a theological framework emphasizing the justice of God. The film encapsulates the belief that all Africans are created in the image of God, underscoring the inherent worth of every individual. This conviction propels the characters toward independence, culminating in the expectation of divine intervention with Nelson Mandela's ascension to the presidency.

4.2. RESISTANCE AGAINST OPPRESSIVE POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES

“Sarafina” illustrates the necessity for active resistance against systemic oppression. The film’s characters exemplify courage amid adversity, seeking not only personal transformation but also a fundamental change in the societal structures that perpetuate their oppression. Central to this narrative is the context of apartheid, an explicitly oppressive political ideology.

Apartheid, as Coetzee & Conradie (2010:113) explain, was rooted in colonial policies of segregation and presented as the optimal system for governing South Africa. The regime wielded its power to organize and control the populace on the premise that racial segregation would provide solutions to the country's social and political challenges (Coetzee & Conradie 2010:115). Segregation was justified as essential for preserving the identity and wellbeing of the white community, particularly Afrikaners (Coetzee & Conradie 2010:117). This led to policies ensuring the social and economic interests of Afrikaners were protected through political self-determination (Coetzee & Conradie 2010:118). To maintain minority rule, the apartheid government fortified its military and delineated boundaries for protection.

In this context, Sarafina portrays black South Africans' aspirations for political independence (Maingard 1994:240). The African National Congress (ANC), under the leadership of figures such as Nelson Mandela, increasingly rejected the non-violent approach to liberation championed by Mahatma Gandhi. From 1949, the ANC Youth League, led by Mandela and others, advocated for more militant resistance. Mandela became a leader of Umkhonto we Sizwe (“The Spear of the Nation”), the ANC’s armed wing, which orchestrated protests and acts of sabotage against apartheid (Mandela 1994:376). Although the ANC was banned in 1960, Mandela and his colleagues persisted in their struggle, leading to his life imprisonment in 1963 on charges of sabotage and conspiring to overthrow the government (UNESCO 1974:121).

Faith played a significant role in this resistance. The freedom fighters of the ANC drew strength from their belief in a just God and categorically rejected the legitimacy of a system based on racial segregation and the colonization of black South Africans. This is powerfully depicted in “Sarafina” through the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer by students and teachers, symbolizing both spiritual resistance and a call for divine justice:

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.*

The invocation of the Lord’s Prayer in the film becomes a collective act of resistance, systematically opposing imperial authority by envisioning the reign of God on earth as one of justice and equality. Mrs. Masumbuko’s assertion that God is not white and that black Africans are equally created in God’s image further challenges the theological underpinnings used to justify apartheid.

Marcus J. Borg (2018) posits that the theology of the Kingdom of God envisions the transformation of unjust social orders into communities where justice prevails and oppressive structures are dismantled.

"Sarafina" thus embodies elements of Black Theology – a form of liberation theology that emerged in South Africa in the early 1970s, deeply influenced by Black consciousness (Motlhabi 2008, Villa-Vicencio 1988, UNESCO 1974:103). Black Theology, inspired by Latin American Liberation theologians asserts that authentic knowledge of God is inseparable from the pursuit of justice: “every attempt to evade the struggle against alienation and the violence of the powerful and for a more just and more human world is the greatest infidelity to God. To know God is to work for justice. There is no other path to reach God” (Gutiérrez 1988:156).

Against this backdrop, proponents of Black Theology condemned apartheid’s racial policies and all forms of social and political structures that marginalized black South Africans and other non-white groups. As Johan Cilliers (2012:11) notes, religious gatherings often became protest marches, with leaders such as Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, and Beyers Naudé symbolizing resistance to the status quo and embodying the hope for restorative justice.

The student protests depicted in *Sarafina* are deeply intertwined with these ideo-theological convictions. The formation of the South African Student Organization (SASO) in 1970, following a split from the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), was aimed at promoting African values and interests (UNESCO 1974:102). The students’ activism in the film is thus rooted in the Christian conviction that apartheid’s discrimination and injustices were fundamentally incompatible with the values of the kingdom of God. The ministry of Jesus Christ, as portrayed in Liberation and Black Theologies, is seen as a model for promoting justice on earth. Motivated by these convictions, Black South Africans challenged the institutionalized racial discrimination of apartheid with extraordinary courage and determination.

4.3. SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY IN UPHOLDING HUMAN DIGNITY

The film *-Sarafina-* powerfully illustrates the significance of social and community solidarity as a source of strength and resilience among individuals facing oppression. Throughout the film, characters consistently support one another during times of crisis, embodying the principle that collective struggle is essential for achieving liberation. The narrative highlights not only the importance of mutual aid but also the necessity of active resistance against systemic injustice. Through their acts of courage and defiance, the characters pursue transformation – both in their personal lives and within the broader societal structures that perpetuate their oppression.

This struggle for change unfolds within a context marked by entrenched social divisions. Different social layers of apartheid can be identified.

4.4. APARTHEID AS A SOCIAL (AB)NORM

Within the social fabric of South Africa, apartheid institutionalized racial segregation, presenting it as the preferred method of organizing society. As Coetzee and Conradie (2010:119) note, apartheid was justified as a means to preserve Afrikaner identity, with proponents arguing that integration would undermine this identity. The system sought to maintain clear boundaries to protect against both British imperialism and the demographic majority of black South Africans. Under apartheid, different races were compelled to use separate amenities - including schools and hospitals - under the pretense of minimizing conflict and ensuring the well-being of the Afrikaner community (Coetzee & Conradie 2010:117).

The lived reality of apartheid is poignantly captured by Mandela (1994:129), who describes the systematic segregation experienced from birth to adulthood: “An African child is born in an Africans only hospital, taken home in an Africans only bus, lives in an Africans only area, and attends Africans only schools, if he attends school at all...” Apartheid was thus constructed as a precondition for the social and economic salvation of the Afrikaner community (Guelke 2005:2).

The policy of white superiority was reinforced by making Afrikaans the official language in schools, a move that provoked widespread protest among black South Africans, as depicted in “*Sarafina*”. For example, at a 1972 graduation ceremony, student leaders at African Turfloop University called on their peers to fight apartheid, emphasizing the system’s inherent inequality and urging the pursuit of liberation (UNESCO 1974:99). The apartheid government deliberately designed the education system to keep black South Africans in subordinate positions, a strategy that, in the context of political and social repression, sparked mass youth protests as portrayed in the film (Vally & Dalamba 1999:9).

Recognizing the potential of film as a tool for liberation, the apartheid regime tightly controlled film production. State-owned media and cinemas rarely portrayed the oppression endured by black South Africans, and films that challenged apartheid were routinely banned. Nonetheless, privately produced films circulated among activists and students, serving as catalysts for resistance (Maingard 1994:238). The emergence of films such as “Sarafina” played a crucial role in exposing the brutal realities of apartheid. The film’s depiction of student riots and boycotts encourages viewers to identify with the oppressed and to challenge state repression (Maingard 1994:237).

4.5. THE GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF APARTHEID

The impact of apartheid was not uniform across genders and races in society. Black women and men experienced its effects differently. “Sarafina” highlights the marginalization of black women, who were often employed as domestic workers in white suburbs. The character Angelina, Sarafina’s mother, exemplifies this reality: living in Soweto but working in a wealthy white neighborhood, she exposes the economic disparities between blacks and whites. Black women performed the majority of domestic labour for low wages and were frequently subjected to sexual abuse by white men, despite laws prohibiting interracial relationships (Lee 2009:2, Maingard 1994:239). This aspect of the narrative provides a window into the compounded oppression faced by women during apartheid.

Despite their marginalized status, African women played a vital role in shaping the social and political landscape of South Africa. The apartheid era saw significant gendered economic and social shifts, including the rise of matriarchal households as many men lost traditional roles due to unemployment. Women became the primary breadwinners, finding work as domestic labourers and devising survival strategies in the face of adversity (Lee 2009:3). The film also addresses the pervasive sexism of the period, as Sarafina and other female students are targeted by police and dismissed by their male peers, who doubt a woman’s ability to represent Nelson Mandela. These intersecting forms of oppression – racism, classism, and sexism – are deeply embedded in both South African society and the film’s narrative (Murray 1982:121, Sintado 2011:99).

5. CULTURAL SUPERIORITY AS A FACET OF APARTHEID

Under apartheid, social segregation was rationalized by assertions of cultural superiority and a purported necessity to preserve white identity. Coetzee & Conradie (2010:120) note that both the Church and the state were actively engaged in elevating the standards of poor whites, with a strong emphasis on cultural purity and safeguarding Western civilization. The Dutch Reformed Church, in particular, played a central role by providing scriptural justification for racial separation, often conflating doctrinal purity with the idea of racial purity (Coetzee & Conradie 2010:122). This intertwining of religious doctrine and state policy reinforced the ideological framework that underpinned apartheid, legitimizing social divisions through appeals to cultural and religious superiority.

6. FILM AS A VEHICLE FOR RESISTANCE

“Sarafina” demonstrates the power of film to shape public consciousness and to communicate resistance to domination in innovative ways (Morgan 2018:2). The film dramatizes the theology of liberation that underpinned South Africa’s resistance movements, motivating viewers to subvert racial discrimination (Morgan 2018:3). This is symbolized through Black Power gestures, such as Mrs. Masambuko’s raised fist, which signifies solidarity and hope for freedom. As Morgan notes, such symbols - whether in gestures, salutes, or hairstyles - served as “totemic signals” of unity and black identity (Morgan 2018:3). The film thus becomes an explicit articulation of liberation theology and the principles of the Black Consciousness Movement.

7. CONCLUSION

The apartheid laws that institutionalized segregation and oppression were finally repealed on 11 February 1991, culminating in South Africa’s first democratic elections in 1994. Through its nuanced depiction of collective resistance, gendered oppression and the transformative power of cinema, “Sarafina” endures as a powerful testament to the ongoing struggle for human dignity and liberation in South Africa. As this analysis has demonstrated, films are indeed data with souls – clearly capturing and communicating the lived realities, aspirations, and theological imaginations of oppressed communities.

By examining “Sarafina!” within the context of state-sanctioned racial segregation and repression, this paper has shown how a theology of liberation not only fostered hope but also galvanized resistance. The film is firmly rooted in the agency and resilience of black South Africans who, inspired by a belief in a God of liberation, challenged the injustices of the apartheid regime. Cinema, as evidenced by *Sarafina*”, offers a profound medium for articulating collective consciousness and envisioning alternative realities.

Thus, “Sarafina!” invites theologians and biblical scholars to recognize the potential of film as a vital resource in constructing theologies that engage with and reflect evolving religious, political, and social identities. In bearing witness to the struggle for liberation, the film underscores the enduring importance of art in both chronicling and shaping the pursuit of justice.

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