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Student activism and the decolonial discourse in South African higher education: analysis of the #feesmustfall documentary (2018)

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Abstract

In the recent past, the South African higher education sector has encountered significant challenges, which have prompted civic and political contestations regarding access to quality education in the context of a complex transformation discourse. This paper analyses the #FeesMustFall (2018) documentary in the backdrop of the transformation challenges that triggered the 2015 student protests in the South African Higher education sector. It adopts the exploratory qualitative design to analyse the context, narrative focus, and characterisation that depict the decolonial nature of student activism in post-apartheid South Africa. Ideological film criticism and framing are used to explore depiction of the socio-economic and political milieu that underpin the contestations within the sector. Qualitative content analysis was used in the collection of secondary data whereas thematic analysis was applicable in the synthesis of discursive themes and generation of the findings. The paper focuses on the ongoing transformation challenges within South African higher education, which continue to mirror colonial inequalities. It appreciates the documentary's application of nuanced film production techniques to elucidate the limitations that beset post-apartheid education in the context of multiple challenges that inhibit progressive transformation to redress colonial prejudices. These include poor access, inadequate funding, equity disparities, and poor infrastructural support to promote stable and a peaceful educational environment in the sector. In conclusion, the article notes how the film's cinema verite depicts a precarious socio-economic and political situation that needs an honest comprehensive decolonial discourse in South African higher education.

Keywords: Decolonial discourse, documentary, #FeesMustFall, Higher education, South Africa, Student activism

Introduction

The advent of freedom in South Africa in 1994 signalled the beginning of a revolutionary transformation process that included establishing stable institutions and the assurance of constitutionality along with some semblance of democratic and representative governance (Gumede, 2013). Through institutional and social structural redress, the old apartheid practices were gradually replaced with a new social order because of the implementation of new government policies that were specifically designed to achieve this goal (Davies, 1996). However, some academics have suggested that the pre-democratic era's vestiges have persisted, particularly in higher education, despite the new political framework (Muswede, 2017). Among the issues that highlight these disparities have been nationwide student protests in South African universities and subsequent decolonial formations such as the #Rhodes Must Fall movement which later evolved into what became popularly known as the #FeesMustFall movement or Fallist movement (Shai & Molapo, 2017; Essack, 2020). Fallism became a metaphoric representation of the destruction of symbols of apartheid rule in South Africa, which provoked ground-breaking attempts to force society to reflect on the transformation paradox, especially in higher education (Lubbe, 2016). This situation has yielded gross ramifications for all sectors of society, prompting society to rethink and engage towards new ways of advancing South

Africa's developmental goals to improve the quality and living standards of all citizens.

As espoused in the National Development programme (NDP), higher education would play a crucial role in the reconceptualization of human rights, empowerment, and other relevant social configurations undermined by the erstwhile apartheid practices (Cloete, 2016). For this reason, the pursuit of quality higher education has remained at the centre of the social transformation discourse in the form of radical student activism and advocacy for recognition of broader human rights (Muswede, 2017). For most universities in South Africa, particularly Historically Black Institutions (HBIs), where the transformation discourse is embedded in abject poverty, the struggle manifests itself in numerous forms such as inadequate housing, overcrowded classrooms, and scarcity of knowledge resources including libraries and information and communication technologies (ICTs). Sibiya (2017) noted that, this is often compounded by unequal access to higher education, racial inequality, and inadequate student funding methods, all of which frequently result in the financial exclusion of most of the poor students.

In the context of these socio-economic and political engagements, the media have always played a big role in fostering activist discourses, albeit via intermediated political communication to guard against political dominance (Watson & Hill, 2015; Muswede, 2022). Despite the celebrated role of mainstream media in this terrain, film in particular has evolved over the past decades, ultimately becoming a key purveyor of the socio-economic and political narrative of the struggles of Black South Africans (Ndlovu, 2014). Various contemporary subgenres of film, including the documentary with its distinct technical design and ideological foundations have been used to critique the established order and pose important questions about South Africa's transformation trajectory (Muswede & Masvopo, 2018). The documentary genre, particularly the activist subgenre, has not only served as a prominent platform for the preservation of historic political and cultural data in South Africa, but has yielded differential effects that continue to shape public perceptions, policies, and socio-cultural dynamics of modern society. For this reason, media scholars developed interest in the genre's ability to depict problems through focusing on a wide range of subjects, including history, politics, and culture (Watson & Hill, 2015).

In South Africa, the end of apartheid witnessed a category of films that have narrowed their focus on themes that ostensibly put emphasis on holding the democratically elected government accountable (Reid, 2012). These films feature a number of expository activist films that offer a voice to the formerly disenfranchised masses, most of whom have not experienced the benefits of a multi-racial democracy as purported in the "#FeesMustFall" (2018) documentary. As a reality-based genre, the activist documentary is an important artefact that puts the transformation discourse in the spotlight towards understanding student activism and the decolonial discourse in South African higher education.

Literature review

The literature review pays attention to the documentary genre and promotion of civic activism, characterisation of activist roles, and ideological framing in documentary production.

The Documentary, Activism and Decolonial Discourse

Documentary Genre and Promotion of Civic Activism

In many societies the documentary genre has been exploited as one of the strongest social communication tools to explain non-fiction resemblances including political and social development matters (Pollak, 2008). Some scholars have lauded its conventions and multiple applications for enabling the cinema industry to thrive through a key device that depicts real life situations as opposed to mimicked or staged narratives often seen in fictitious genres (Silbey, 2010). The key benefits of the activist genre, which offers critical perspectives to the struggles of disgruntled sections of society, is relevant for analysing thoughts about politics, culture, and the ideology of people (Nichols, 2010). The genre does this by going beyond mere depiction of real life and political expressions of society but is

capable of representing multiple versions of a discourse (Kress, 2012). While a film genre is identified by its signifiers or iconography, the activist documentary serves different purposes such as mobilisation and promoting political consciousness among citizens (Hockley, 2016).

In many instances, it serves as a vehicle of socio-political mediation to stir society towards taking particular actions rather than just being informative (Chiumbu, 2016). As a form of social communication, the genre contributes to the representation of alternative world views in a form that is different from that of the audiences. This is critical in influencing the audiences' views pertaining to constructed perceptions towards public opinion formulation (Duvall, 2017). It is the genre's ability to provide alternative perspectives to reality which makes film producers use it as a preferred platform to afford audiences the purview to critique and engage the dominant order to improve their living conditions (Duvall, 2017). Furthermore, the genre fosters the capturing of reality with prospects that motivate viewers to participate in meaning construction facilitated through the process of film reading (Corner, 2009). As a result of this, the documentary has a significant and practical potential to advance the voices of the audiences through fostering civic involvement in society. This confirms Khan's (2017) observation that the documentary acts as a watchdog for the application of democratic values by ensuring that those in power are held accountable to society rather than leaving them to pursue self-serving interests.

Documentary Genre and Characterisation of Activist Roles

In film studies, "characterisation" refers to the acts taken by characters in order to bring a (character) role to life. This (role) may consist of particular behaviours, personality qualities, social position, economic or political influence, or any combination of these factors (Khattri, 2011; Louw, 2021). The early portrayal of roles through characters in many films produced in South Africa was heavily impacted by oppressive systems such as assimilation, apartheid, and acculturation as means of colonial rule (Kumari & Joshi, 2015). For this reason, in most documentary films, characters were selected to fulfil roles associated with particular production values and to achieve multiple functions, including political alignment (Talley, 2014). Subsequently, the advent of democracy and the proliferation of new ownership of film companies has resulted in a limited reliance on content produced internationally, largely causing a shift in character formation in most locally produced films (Reddy, 2018). In most instances, certain themes tend to dominate the characterisation of the film projects with race, stereotypes and transformation featuring as common social constructions. Often, prejudice and political failures including incumbency depict how the filmic art navigates social construction of socio-economic and political interests of the dominant class (Diangelo, 2018). Hence, the process and use of characters to depict certain paradigms have the potential to undermine or over-represent certain views in society, with the potential to sway public opinion (Terry, 2018). Despite these limitations, Rabiger (2009) noted that documentaries continue to fulfil the journalistic enquiry and expository function through the characterisation of roles that speak to matters of public concern.

Ideological Framing in Documentary Production

The documentary genre utilises different media frames in the production process to represent diverse socio-economic and political issues. This concurs with Bullert's (1997) view that media practitioners use media frames to create realities for audiences through use of various perspectives to influence public opinion. Abreu (2015) also noted that media frames are often designed based on specific agenda setting or selection criteria which may in turn carry biases and reinforce existing stereotypes (Fryberg et al., 2011). In some cases, visual media has represented events in particular frames that present biased accounts of events based on consciously or unconsciously designed scripts. For this reason, producers often present frames that give more attention to certain aspects of reality while keeping others in the background (Milioni, 2015). In the case of activist documentaries, they often thrive on issue framing to represent the voice of the

citizenry, particularly in societies where there are no alternative platforms for social communication.

In the South African context and other pre-colonial environments in Africa, the documentary has been used to depict the people's strength in confronting repressive and exploitative political systems. These platforms have reflected on societal responses to portray civic unrest, large-scale protests, and counterviolence in communities (Haupt, 2015). Thus, the documentary has been a crucial instrument used to express dissent and mobilise society to rally against injustice and prejudice in the present day. In South Africa, several political documentaries have been made that promote ideologies on democracy, national-building and accountable governance, such as Miners Shot Down -Marikana Massacre (2015), Mandela Legacy (2013) and Dear Mandela (2012). These efforts have been useful in mainstreaming important topics such as decolonisation, service delivery, and promotion of government programmes to address the apartheid legacy, including reversing censorship policies in the media industry (Milstein, 2014). This approach to nation-building and transformation has been lauded by scholars for supporting government efforts to foster development and civic participation as opposed to the apartheid-style, where the authorities took full control of all facets of society and stifled political dissent through authoritarian practices (Sherman, 2015). Thus, the current democratic dispensation has greatly benefitted from numerous film projects, particularly documentaries, which continue to provide a framework for public participation. Subsequently, scholars such as Mdege (2018) have observed that reality film, especially the documentary, has fundamentally altered political communication and citizen engagement globally, with South Africa not being an exception.

Methods and lens: framing the analysis

The article uses the qualitative research approach and an exploratory design in its analysis of the documentary. This is informed by the view that film is a cultural and visual text with the ability to provide a complex visual and audio-textual description of society (Babbie, 2010). The benefits of the approach facilitated exploration of the underlying ideologies and power dynamics that shape the discourse on decolonisation and further provided valuable insights into understanding the complexities of the higher education sector as depicted in the documentary (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The population of the study consisted of all documentary films that are relevant to the decolonial debate including historical, political, and socio-cultural transformative aspects of post-apartheid South Africa. Such films include Cry the Beloved Country (1995), Nothing but the Truth (2009), Long Walk to Freedom (2013), District-9 (2009) et cetera. Through purposive sampling, the article selected the study entity based on filmic content that captured narratives pertaining to post-colonial, socio-cultural and ideological themes that characterise the decolonial discourse in South Africa (Farley, 2011). The article employed qualitative audio-visual content analysis to decode recorded events, which were subdivided into various segments and scenes to ease the data collection process (Braun, 2013). Relevant symbolically significant content from the film's scenes and sequences were qualitatively analysed based on cinematographic codes, composition, camera movement, and focus on photos (Fourie, 2009). Thematic analysis was used to generate discursive themes, which yielded study findings.

Theoretical framework

Framing Theory

Framing theory emphasises how representation occurs in the media taking into cognisance the treatment, construction, and production processes in relation to the influence particular media texts have on society. This relates to how filmmakers often focus on interpretive production processes where content is presented to influence people's choice of how to process that information (Khan & Huckle, 2017). Frames are intended to improve audience comprehension of media material while portraying the media as institutions that have the ability to generate specific meanings through pre-arranged methods to portray social concerns (Arowolo, 2017). Therefore, the qualitative approach and exploratory design align with the theory, which fosters an in-depth examination of how the documentary under study constructs specific

frames that portray student activism as a catalyst of transformation in higher education. This generally affirms the notion that different media frames may be used to generate perspectives that are used to depict particular social problems (Kamalipour, 2010). As a result, this process can influence how audiences ultimately understand a topic or event, particularly when filmmakers frequently present their own opinions or views. This is usually done to further specific elitist goals such as upholding the ideas of the dominant class without the need to use force to produce loyalty.

Rashid (2019) observed these trends in the media and viewed framing as the window which limits the vision of reality to direct audiences' interpretation of content in a particular way and prevent formation of new perspectives. Due to these processes, some features of the realities portrayed in media content are presented as more prominent than others. In the end, media communications such as documentaries are textual and visual frameworks constructed around a primary axis of thought to give an interpretative framework for audiences exposed to the messages (Elias & Feagin, 2020). In film analysis, this process highlights specific aspects of reality, which are selected and given greater prominence or significance in order to present a situation, diagnose its sources, apply moral judgements, and recommend appropriate remedies and actions (Kamalipour, 2010). Hence, for this article, framing theory does not only focus on how the documentary portrays an issue but fosters the application of specific angles in the film production process to illustrate certain socio-economic and political contexts that converge to explain why student activism in South Africa unfolded the way it did during the #FeesMustFall movement period.

Ideological Film Criticism

The concept ideology relates to how an individual, a group or class purport to hold a particular body of beliefs that reflect their social needs and ambitions (Lemon, 1991). While this is most commonly linked to politics and party platforms, it can also refer to a particular set of ideals that are inherent in any human endeavour, including filmmaking (Hefner, 2012). Therefore, every film is an ideological construction. For this reason, scholars on film criticism noticed that the ideology of apartheid influenced South African films by shaping the content and form of those films to promote racial prejudice (Fourie, 2017). Ideological film criticism achieves this through analysis of the relationship between a specific film, its society, and the ideology which that society subscribes to. The focus is to determine the particular ways in which a film either supports or criticizes the dominant position of the society that created it (Stromgren & Norden, 1984). This article uses ideology primarily as a useful collection of assumptions with which to comprehend filmic content in relation to existing society structures and how they reflect the views of the dominant group. Furthermore, the qualitative approach and thematic analysis enabled a systematic examination of the power dynamics and decolonial narratives embedded in the film, which reveal the contours of student activism. As such, ideology serves primarily as a set of guiding principles (Lu, 2020), with which to understand particular behaviour within a society.

Based on the forgoing description, it can be argued that films have both moral and ideological value and should therefore not be treated as ordinary artefacts to be watched and set aside or discarded. Rather they should be seen as artefacts that have a psychological and cultural impact on society (Sinnerbrink, 2011). As a result, when people watch films about real-life events, they engage in ideological film reading, which measures how morally aware they are about salient matters in society (Maedza, 2019). This is true for some films where ideology has been used as a framework to defend the conduct of those in authority by falsifying and distorting the realities that people in lower positions encounter (Devereux, 2014). Essentially, ideological narratives emphasise the ways in which meaning contributes to the establishment and maintenance of dominant relations in society. By elaborating on power relations and justifying the status quo, the media, including documentaries, illustrate the social conditions of society as agents of ideological discourse (McCombs, 2004). Thus, ideological film criticism offers analytical tools for analysing student activism and the decolonial

discourse relevant to a critique of the #FeesMustFall (2018) documentary.

Study results and discussion of findings

The presentation of results and discussion of findings follows a sequential formulation of themes, which emerged from the process of thematic analysis. The researchers used Clarke's steps of familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes and reviewing of themes in relation to the coded data. This was followed by refining and defining the themes, and subsequent establishment of findings (Creswell, 2014). The following themes emerged from analysis of the #FeesMustFall documentary (2018).

Racial Inequality in South African Universities

The documentary thrives on the backdrop of exclusion of the Black students from effectively benefitting from an equal opportunity-based education system for many years in South Africa. This is revealed through an initial expose by one of the student protest leaders who highlights the students' level of political consciousness and desire to see transformation, which they view as a human right and aspect of redress towards a just society. In the context of the documentary composition and production aesthetics, race effectively plays an important role in portraying White domination and superiority (Diangelo, 2018). Race is used to reveal the skewed and disproportionate access to privileged life by a particular section of society where one's socio-economic background determines their success in South African higher education (Haupt, 2015). As was the case during the apartheid years, Black students, who form the majority of protesters in the documentary, represent the poor and unprivileged groups in society. The narrator emphasises how, despite policy reform and constitutional imperatives, Black students continue to wallow against numerous social and economic hardships (Elias & Feagin, 2020). This is symbolised through the portrayal of non-white students standing in meandering queues of food handouts from the university meanwhile others are seen begging for assistance from staff to buy basic commodities. Here, the documentary assumes the role of a powerful pendulum to juxtapose the two extreme historic moments between pre-democratic and post-apartheid South Africa. The scenario depicts a unique form of social resistance that resembles the 1976 Uprising, where students protested the use of Afrikaans in schools, albeit without political leadership nor mobilisation (Soudien, 2012). Whereas the #Fees Must Fall movement was triggered by numerous grievances, the central theme was a push-back against the exponential rise in fees structures in the higher education sector, spawning a racial inequality outcry in post-apartheid South Africa. Whereas racial undertones and sentiments were expressed overtly in the form of vile language, song and dance, their messaging was effectively made through written pluck cards, posters, and graffiti on university infrastructure such as lecture halls and security walls. In the end, the study observes that the producers used the film script to illustrate how the students' dissatisfaction resembled a polarised society whose precarious future rests on anti-colonial aspirations premised on race relations as a remnant of pre-democratic values. Suffice to say, the #Fees Must Fall documentary succeeded in both packaging the caricature and symbolism associated with student activist behaviour that resemble a struggle for a just and dignified society characterised by accessible education for all.

Inadequate Educational Facilities and Resources

The #FeesMustFall documentary highlights the impact of inadequate educational facilities and resources such as student residences, laboratories and ICTs. The producers hereby make a compelling case to demonstrate the necessity for comprehensive reforms to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to access educational resources to redress the colonial legacy (Cloete, 2016). Photographs of old and dilapidated infrastructure underscore the glaring inadequacies in educational facilities and resources, shedding light on lack of transformation more than two decades in post-apartheid South Africa. By emphasising the social struggles faced by the students, the documentary effectively emphasises the urgent need for comprehensive reforms and increased investments in higher education. Through social mobilisation and media advocacy, albeit its sporadic nature, the movement

successfully catches the attention of society on issues of the infrastructural deficit that has not been expanded in tandem with massification of education in post-apartheid South Africa (Athanasiou, 2010). Furthermore, the students force government officials and authorities to acknowledge the challenges of pedagogical access, affordability, and quality education, which they unwittingly assert serve as powerful leverages in transforming the fortunes and future of the South African youth.

As such, the documentary presents a collective bulwark of student activism galvanised by shared ideals, values, and beliefs that demonstrate the power of the genre in shaping political discourse. Through use of historical inferences, especially the 1976 Uprising, the film serves as an interlocutor and platform that broadens society's understanding of the relationship between the past and contemporary experiences. While this analysis proves that documentaries can create, transmit and stand as counter-memory artefacts in their various formats, they actively serve as official records that may be used to challenge inaccurate or skewed historical narratives. This confirms Banham's (2004) notion that documentaries can be utilised as a means of social constructs with which to make sense of the past meanwhile commenting on contemporary discourses based on historical events.

Human Rights and Social Justice for Poor Black Students

The #FeesMustFall documentary is premised on the historical context where Black South Africans were subjected to prejudiced life whereas their White counterparts enjoyed the benefits of superiority characterised by human rights (Soudien, 2012). This is evident in the producers' choice to depict clear facets of white domination in the economy, politics and spatial sphere where Blacks are subjected to poor living conditions deprived of basic needs against White supremacy associated with abundance of privileges including standard housing, healthcare and quality education (Le Roux, 2016). The documentary cinematographer's emphasis highlights both students and outsourced workers protesting unfavourable living conditions that characterise the well-being of largely poor groups in South Africa. This is strategically done through a series of aerial shots of Black students in long queues for food, and reports about workers' paltry wages. A clear depiction of the pre-1994 white minority-dominated economic structure is revealed where the Black people had limited access to basic human rights such as basic services (Soudien, 2012). One of the protesters illustrates this by saying that: *"You have to sit with students who when they pass their matric their parents buy them a Mercedes Benz in the first year so they can drive to the university" (Narration time, 10:27).* It is in the backdrop of such sentiments that the movement called for the decolonisation of education and the recognition of marginalised voices within the academic community to foster an inclusive and diverse environment. The documentary is a clarion call for authorities to redress the structural injustices within the education system, which arguably provide the impetus for subsequent epistemological decolonial imperatives such as review of curricula. Compounding this complex issue is a broader discourse where some ambitious student leaders advocated for broader labour rights and social justice reforms towards the promotion of a more equitable and inclusive society, where all individuals in the country could actively participate and contribute to the development of the country.

Student Access and Throughput Rate in South African Universities

Access to higher education in the democratic dispensation has been a fundamental component of concern in South Africa. The analysis notes how certain universities (Formerly White Universities) catered for privileged, largely white students, showing disparities in terms of access and representation of marginalised groups. Poor Black students largely fail to meet the entry requirements, have limited or no access to funding, and therefore easily drop out of university. According to Godsell (2016), "the protest revealed that the bubble of an equal society had burst and the past and present are placed right next to each other in an intruding reality context". Furthermore, the producers demonstrate that not much has changed yet, which is evidence that South Africa's

rainbow nation has been fashioned with unfulfilled promises that continue to perpetuate inequality. This is repeatedly emphasised in the view of many protesting students who believe that the material conditions in the South African society continue to entrench inequality. This causes the assumption that democracy brought with it fairness and equal access a questionable analogy (Godsell, 2016). The documentary illustrates this by portraying that Higher education institutions in South Africa remain gendered, westernised, and racialised, thus alienating a vast majority of people within them. This further indicates that coloniality prevails within higher education, which the protesters sought to challenge through the #FeesMustFall movement.

The documentary frames the issue of student access and throughput rates by highlighting systematic inequalities rooted in historical and socio-economic contexts. Former White universities are portrayed as institutions of privilege that cater predominantly for White students, thereby perpetuating racial and economic disparities in higher education. The documentary utilises visual narrative elements to frame the lived experience of marginalised students, particularly poor Black students who struggle to meet entry requirements and fail to secure funding (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015). Through interviews and footage of the protests, the documentary frames these students as victims of an unjust system who have decided to respond to this injustice as active agents to challenge the status quo (Pollak, 2008). This challenges the dominant narrative of a prosperous post-apartheid rainbow nation by exposing the persistent colonial legacies within the current South African higher education. The documentary further challenges the myth of equal access and fairness purported by the authorities of the democratic dispensation. It critically examines how higher education institutions remain gendered, westernised and racialised spaces (Cloete, 2016), which alienate the majority of the population they are supposed to serve. In the end, neoliberal policies that prioritise market-driven approaches to education, thereby marginalising students from disadvantaged backgrounds are exposed.

Poverty and Black Tax as Tenets of Inequality in Higher Education

One of the main themes that emerges from the documentary is the portrayal of students who struggle to successfully complete their studies due to complex social problems, including poverty. Moloi, a #Fees Must Fall activist, deeply highlighted the connection between poverty and systematic violence, stating that "There is nothing more violent than poverty, we came from poverty-stricken homes, and that is why we are fighting for free education" Narrative time (00:41:04). The statement suggests the urgency and boldness of the movement's demand for free education. By linking their background of poverty to the fight for free education, Moloi highlights the practical barriers that economically disadvantaged students face. This theme resonates with many students from the working class who eventually flooded the streets to register their anger against the South African government for the slow progress of transformation in universities (Essack, 2020). The producers of the documentary used the street-protests as strong imagery with placards written "poverty must fall" to frame the social urgency associated with the systematic shortcomings of the post-apartheid government.

The documentary further illustrates the pervasive presence of poverty, and the impact of the Black Tax as significant challenges faced by many students from the marginalised parts of South Africa. Through the students' voices and testimonies, the documentary offers convincing proof of the widespread impact of poverty and Black tax, demonstrating how these factors impede their advancement in higher education. The visuals of students candidly discussing their financial hardships, dependence on insufficient financial aid, and juggling multiple jobs to support their families are pivotal in conveying this narrative. Additionally, the documentary movingly highlights the emotional and physical toll of these challenges, framing them as direct outcomes of systemic inequality. This highlights the socio-economic structures perpetuating poverty and attributes of Black tax among South Africans, further challenging the notion that higher education in democratic South Africa is equally accessible to all (Cloete, 2016). The protesters

believe that the source of all these challenges stems from income inequalities and the high cost of education. In the end, it can be argued that the documentary script effectively emphasises the urgent need for transformation in South African higher education, particularly the enactment of policies that should address the root causes of poverty and Black tax towards a more equitable and inclusive education system.

Student Protest, State Violence and Appeasement

During the struggle for freedom in South Africa, student protests were always part of the broader fight for political independence, which attracted police and security surveillance to monitor protesters. In the #Fees Must Fall documentary, police are shown as being equally violent, hiding behind the protection of property against vandalism mantra (Gqola, 2007). The interaction between the protesters and police are depicted in the documentary highlighting police efforts to prevent violent protests. The film director's technical guise makes use of the top-down camera shot depicting police authority over the Black students with a police vehicle driving slowly down the road as an act of deliberate provocation. The situation is further complicated by the wielding of offensively naked protestors, which the police condemn as public indecency (Ndhlovu, 2017). The nakedness of the three Black female students at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, symbolised vulnerability caused by economic hardships and social injustice (Gqola, 2007). Dr Blade Nzimande, then Minister of Higher Education, gave police brutality the impetus when he condemned the scenes at the University of the Witwatersrand, characterising the throwing of stones and acts of vandalism as staggering and unacceptable in a democratic South Africa.

In the context of the above analysis, the documentary becomes useful in understanding post-apartheid state security operations and ability to handle public order matters, which contribute to a broader conversation about human rights, freedom of expression and opinion, and academic freedom in the country. The documentary exposes the limitations of the state in protecting citizens and highlights the need for effective mechanisms to prevent use of excessive force by law enforcement agencies. This comes in the backdrop of police's response to the student protest with unrestrained brutal violence and application of lethal force including firing live rounds of ammunition at unarmed people (Maedza, 2018). The persistence of gunshots, smoke, and fire in the film composition are a clear indication of unwarranted terror against protesting students. In solidarity with the student protest, one of the legal experts and political activists in South Africa, Advocate Dali Mpofu addressed University of the Witwatersrand students, expressing his belief in the attainment of free education, reassuring them of his commitment to their legal protection. He boldly proclaimed that, "We will not judge you. If the police want to shoot our children, then they must shoot us first" (Narrative time 1:01:57).

The involvement of external figures such as Adv Mpofu and other academic staff confirms the widespread multi-sectoral support for the students' cause while also suggesting potential external influences on the decolonial discourse. Arguably, this analogy resonates with conspiracy theories surrounding former President Jacob Zuma's populist stance on freezing of university fees for the 2016 academic year, further insinuating prospects of free education in the country. Suffice to say that, while this gesture served as a temporary reprieve for peaceful campuses and political appeasement to the students' demands for transformation in the sector, it remains the bedrock of the decolonial discourse in South Africa.

Conclusion and recommendations

The #FeesMustFall documentary represents heightened student activism as an offshoot of multi-dimensional and ideological contestations regarding the transformation trajectory in post-apartheid South Africa, which stimulates a critical discourse on the implications of the democratic process, particularly on higher education. The analysis shows that, producers of the film succeeded in packaging the caricature and symbolism associated with students' activist roles in the quest for social justice against prejudice on university campuses. The students' actions have compelled the government to acknowledge the

challenges of academic exclusion, poverty and quality education, which work to the detriment of the poor and working class. This is implied in the documentary's ability to illustrate how neoliberal policies have continued to sustain market-driven approaches to education, thereby marginalising poor students. It emphasises the urgency of policy reform to address the root causes of poverty and Black tax towards a more equitable and inclusive education system. The analysis invites scholars to engage in a prompt discourse on the imperatives of higher education and foster a deeper understanding of the complexities and challenges that hinder transformation in the sector. In the end, the paper appreciates the documentary's cinema verite, which poignantly highlights a precarious socio-economic and political landscape that calls for a more nuanced dialogue as the bedrock of the decolonial discourse towards safe and more peaceful campuses in South Africa.

Limitations

This study primarily relied on secondary data and theoretical framework with no interviews involving the political actors in the form of student protesters, whose reflective views would have added an activist personal perspective to the discourse. However, this aspect was addressed by citing the actors' views verbatim as they appear in the audio-visual version of the documentary. Moreover, an extensive review of literature review on activism was used to strengthen the study.

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