

# The 1987 movie cry freedom

[People](#), [Nelson Mandela](#)



The 1987 movie Cry Freedom is a film by acclaimed director Richard Attenborough whose most recent project then was the 1982 award-winning film, Gandhi. The general theme of the film is South Africa's policy of apartheid and the plot centers on the life of one of South Africa's prominent activists, Stephen Biko (played by Denzel Washington), the leader of the South African Black Consciousness Movement. Biko was the contemporary of Nelson Mandela who was also an activist being the leader of the African National Congress (ANC) and was imprisoned at the time.

The film covers the conditions black Africans had to live under apartheid and how Biko led the movement to oppose it, which made him the target for persecution by the authorities and eventually leading to his arrest and death while in police custody in 1977. The story for the film is based on two books written by Donald Woods who was a close friend of Biko, titled Biko and Asking for Trouble.

Woods is a white South African of English descent which is different from the other half who were descendants of the early Dutch settlers called Boers, and later Afrikaaners.

The latter was the one that became very influential in the politics of South Africa and were instrumental in the implementation of apartheid. The whites of English descent, called "rooineks" by the Afrikaaners were regarded to be more liberal compared to them when it came to relationships with blacks. When South Africa was granted its independence from Britain, the conservative South African National Party came to power and one of its first

acts was to implement the policy of apartheid in 1948 although this had been the norm since South Africa was still a British colony.

Even Mohandas “ Mahatma” Gandhi, who had lived and worked in South Africa for nearly 20 years, experienced the cruelty of apartheid which prompted him to begin his passive resistance movement, beginning in South Africa before taking it to India where it would gain ground. Apartheid was a policy that was akin to the policy of segregation in the United States prior to the civil rights movement of the 1960’s. In comparison, both policies emphasize separation of races, having their own facilities and institutions.

There would be separate housing for blacks and whites as well as schools and commercial establishments that cater exclusively for their respective races. The difference was that segregation emphasized “ separate but equal” which was an attempt to make the marginalization of blacks legal in the United States without violating the Constitution since the blacks had already been emancipated from slavery in 1863. Segregation was an attempt by whites who still could not see blacks as their peers as a means to put them in their place by keeping them separate from their communities.

Apartheid takes segregation a notch higher by not only separating the blacks, but totally denying them opportunities to better their lives as a way of keeping them inferior. The best schools and jobs were exclusively for whites only while blacks were limited to taking menial jobs or if ever any of them would get a white-collar job, they would be limited to clerical work with no chance of moving up the career ladder. The rationale behind this was the

whites in South Africa, both English and Afrikaaner, were the minority in terms of population as compared to the blacks.

The whites feared being dominated by the people whom they used to dominate during the colonial period and sought to continue the status quo by implementing apartheid. Under apartheid, blacks were confined to living in slums or townships. They were required to carry a “ passport” at all times whenever they travel outside their township. As stated before, they were denied the opportunities that would have enabled them to improve their lives they have their own schools but the quality was not at par with those of the whites. The same was also true with jobs and careers.

Anyone who would dare oppose the system would be subject to persecution. Black townships would often protest and the response would be forceful with the police using tear gas and batons to subdue them. The authorities felt that force was the only language the blacks understood and felt it was necessary to use such repressive measures notwithstanding the criticism and condemnation they were getting from the rest of the world. In the case of Stephen Biko, he was “ banned. ” He was forbidden to be in the same room with more than one other person outside his immediate family, forbidden to write anything for public or private consumption.

Furthermore, he was not allowed to leave his defined banning area, and was confined to his township. Since he was considered “ subversive,” he was constantly monitored by the authorities and somehow, Biko was able to outwit the authorities sometimes like on one scene, the authorities were searching for subversive documents Biko may have had in his possession but

were unsuccessful in finding it after he hid them in his baby's diaper (Attenborough, 1987). It was in the midst of this situation that Biko met and befriended Woods (played by Kevin Kline).

Woods was then the editor of the Daily Dispatch newspaper in Pretoria. At first, he was critical of Biko's views and actions in his newspaper but is prevailed upon to meet with him personally. Biko invited Woods to visit a black township to see the impoverished conditions and to witness the effect of apartheid on "his" (Biko) people. After seeing first-hand the cruelty of apartheid, Woods begins to sympathize with Biko's desire for a South Africa where blacks would be equals to the whites. This was why Biko refused to be silent despite the ban imposed upon him.

He could not afford and did not like to sit still and let the situation go on. Like Mandela, although both of them were opposites in the movement in terms of ideology, something had to be done and somebody had to stand up and make a statement and with little regard for his safety and the consequences, he dared to stand up to the government. It was at this point that the two men became very close friends. Biko was arrested on August 1977 at a checkpoint in violation of Terrorism Act 83 and was promptly brought to a police station where he was interrogated vigorously by the police.

As they were transporting him to Pretoria, he died upon arrival and his death was written off by the police as suicide, the result of a hunger strike he went through. The moment, he heard of Biko's death, Woods took it upon himself to expose the truth behind his death. Woods did not buy into the suicide story being released by the authorities. He met the South African Minister of

Justice James Kruger. It turned out later on that he was not getting anywhere as the authorities were being uncooperative and his efforts to expose the truth made him the target of persecution by the government as well.

Woods was also banned in the similar manner as Biko and he and his family were harassed by the police. After the police go too far and his daughter was harmed, Woods and his family fled South Africa by first hiking to Lesotho, disguised as a priest. From there he flew to Botswana for the next leg of his trek to freedom and finally arriving in England, where he lived until 1994 (Attenborough, 1987). When apartheid was finally abolished, he returned to South Africa where he spent the remaining years of his life until 2001 when he passed away.

When the movie was made, this was still at the time when apartheid was still in force in South Africa. The film was practically banned in the country and even during the making of the movie, it had to be shot in another country. Another thing worth noting about the movie was that Biko worked with the ANC though he did not see eye to eye with Mandela and other leaders. This was rather ironic in the sense that after his death, he became a martyr and a rallying point of the ANC who used his name and image to further their cause in opposing apartheid.

Where he was a non-entity in South Africa during the apartheid years, he was given posthumous recognition as one of South Africa's heroes. In comparison to other films related to South Africa, Cry Freedom is closer in plot to an earlier film titled Come Back, Africa which was released in 1960. The film also depicted apartheid during that period and because the

government was so repressive, the film was clandestinely shot and made use of non-professional actors. In one scene of this movie, a black township was wiped out to make way for a white subdivision, further underscoring the inequality and injustice of the apartheid regime.

Another movie set in South Africa, *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, made in 1980, was more humorous. There is hardly any serious political undertones in this movie as it focuses more on a bushman's journey to a world that is completely alien to him. This movie tends to show the difference between the "primitive" world where Xi (played by Nixau) belongs to which is characterized by simplicity to the world of the whites that is fraught with many complexities brought about by modern technology which appeared to make life more difficult than easier.

In conclusion, *Cry Freedom* is a very enlightening film which should reveal to people the evils other people would inflict on others. On the other hand, it also shows how people like Steve Biko refused to accept the status quo as it was and strove to make a difference though in his case, he did not live to see it but would be happy nonetheless to see his country free again. Reference List