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Revolutionary Roads: Violence versus Non-violence

A comparative study of *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) and *Gandhi* (1982)

Vikash Kumar

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi India

Considered one of the finest realist films ever which reconstitutes perfectly the revolution by the people of Algeria, *The Battle of Algiers* (Pontecorvo Gillo, *La Bataille d'Alger*, Igor Film/ Casbah Films, Italy, 1966) presents us an image of a world of anger and agony. The making of *The Battle of Algiers* possibly heralded the birth of Algerian cinema as it was the first film made just after their independence. In fact, this cinematographic masterpiece reveals to its viewers a plethora of images depicting the Algerian people in their quest for independence. Made in the year 1966, by Gillo Pontecorvo and based on the personal experiences of Yacef Saddy, Military Head of the FLN (Front de liberation National/ National Liberation Front) who also collaborated on the script of the film, *The Battle of Algiers*, interestingly, was directed with the aim to highlight the invisible aspects and unheard voices of this violent revolution by the people of Algeria as well as the counter measures taken by the colonial power to suppress the movement.

Similarly, Attenborough's film *Gandhi* (Attenborough Richard, *Gandhi*, Columbia Pictures, India/ U.K, 1982) made with the financial, logistical and political support of the Government of India during Indira Gandhi's rule depicts on celluloid using a largely Indian cast and crew, the story of Gandhi, and India's independence through non-violence. The film presents a screen history of India, by giving us an account of the life and struggle of Mahatma Gandhi. Non-violence as a principle is prevalent throughout this film. The whole philosophy of Gandhi is based on this principle which is depicted as a tool through which a revolution can be launched and won. Thus, the idea of non-violence is closely linked to the notion of independence and the creation of India as a political and sovereign country. The film opens numerous sequences depicting Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent struggle for dignity in South Africa. In this context, a noted Gandhian scholar, Anil Nauriya says:

Gandhi drew inspiration not only from his experiences in South Africa but also from his reading of the history of Africa as a whole. (Nauriya 2006: 7)

Thus, we observe that during the entire non-violent freedom struggle of Mahatma Gandhi in India, Africa was dominant in his mind as his early struggle for equality being initiated in Africa, a matter which prompts us to explore the influence and confluence of the independence struggle of the two countries this article.

We equally perceive that the directors of both films are from erstwhile imperial, colonizing powers, yet sensitive to the suffering of the subaltern, colonized peoples, be they in Algeria or in India. Gillo Pontecorvo was born in Italy but was forced to flee to France in 1938 as a victim of the anti-Semitic movement in his own country, and learnt film-making in Paris; whereas, Richard Attenborough was born in Cambridge, England, yet attempted to highlight the atrocities of war and human suffering through his films namely *Oh! What a lovely war* (1969), a satire on World War-I; *Cry Freedom* (1987), a strong comment on apartheid in South Africa and *Closing the Ring* (2007), which sensitively portrays human suffering in World War-II. We may also emphasize once again that *The Battle of Algiers* and *Gandhi* were supported by the then governments in Algeria and India. In fact, both the films narrate, recount, portray (loosely) in a fictional form the resistance offered by the Algerian & Indian people to the oppression of the colonizers, be they French or British which explains our choice of these two films by two politically conscious and dedicated directors for this article. They do, as does other films like *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), inspire people across the world and especially in Algeria as well as in India (through regular telecast on national television channels) to appreciate the courage of the oppressed.

Despite a multitude of dissimilarities between the two films, we observe some striking similarities which make them an interesting area of comparative research. Freedom struggles have been highlighted in both the films, although through two entirely different means i.e. through violence in *The Battle of Algiers* and through non-violence in *Gandhi*. Moreover, one may note that both the films begin at the end. On the one hand, we find that *The Battle of Algiers* starts in flash-back, while highlighting the atrocities by the French to dilute the insurgent movement of the FLN (National Liberation Front) with the arrest of Yacef Saddi, the central narrator who also happens to be one of the most important activists in the freedom struggle of Algeria. Almost all the scenes of this film narrate touching stories of the chagrins of the Algerian people crushed by their callous colonizers. On the other hand, *Gandhi* begins with the assassination of the Mahatma on 30th January 1948 and his last rites, and then the story goes back in time and portrays Gandhi as a young lawyer in South Africa where he is thrown out of a train despite his first class ticket, as he refuses to go to the third class reserved for Africans and Indians. Gandhi committed himself to end the social disparities and racial oppressions in South Africa through non-violence. Here we may quote Montesquieu from his book *Les Lettres persanes/ Persian Letters* edited by Jean Starobinski:

It is not that great events are the result of great causes: on the contrary, small accidents produce great revolutions as unexpected for the people who initiate them as well as those who suffer them. (Montesquieu 1973: 200)

This brings us to the opinion that even small incidents can ignite great revolutions, altogether unexpected and unforeseen. According to this hypothesis, we can point out that the insults heaped by the colonizer upon the colonized

Algerian people such as blocking roads, frisking them randomly, using abusive language against them or in the case of India, throwing Gandhi out of a train despite his first class ticket, can be some of the reasons which paved the way for the two revolutions. They not only revolted against colonial authority but also resorted to either violent or non-violent means to achieve their ultimate objective i.e. absolute independence from the shackles of colonial rule.

We equally believe that nationalism provided the energy for the popular resistance in India or Algeria. In fact, the two films project us the images of nationalism through their touching sequences. We analyze the two images given below from *The Battle of Algiers* and *Gandhi* in terms of our discourse on nationalism as a form of resistance.



Figure 1: The Algerian versus Indian nationalism: a comparative insight

The semiotic analysis of these two images clearly reveals a key difference between them such as the representation of the type of resistance which is quite opposite to each other in the two images. At one hand, we see that the Algerian nationalism supported by thinkers like Fanon and Memmi led to a resistance against the colonizers which was intensely violent. This is evident from the image. We also notice people confront aggressively with the police, hence resulting in the deaths of innocent civilians. Shot in black and white, the sequence of events in the film projects the planning of an armed rebellion by the FLN. We see the use of the technique of *Chiaroscuro* to demonstrate the cruelty of the French Empire in order to crush the popular nationalist movement. However, on the other hand, the image from the movie *Gandhi* leads us into a world of non-violent resistance of the Indian people under his able leadership. This image shows Gandhi surrounded by ordinary people. We find the role of Gandhi as an indisputable leader of Indian nationalism in the non-violent resistance of the people against the British rule. We also point out that Gandhi was a nationalist leader, but above all, was a supporter of equality and justice. He fought with a great zeal for the independence of India.

In a society as stratified as India, he supported the untouchables (inferior caste), who were deprived of all rights.

In this article, we also elucidate some unique links between the two films: both the cinematographic works are representations of more or less similar people, i.e. the colonized, and portray their suffering at the hands of the colonizer. In a broader perspective, these two films bestow us with enormous opportunities to understand the freedom struggles of Algeria and India, two lands under colonial rule, hence highlighting the universality of the theme of independence. A noted anti-colonial revolutionary writer, Frantz Fanon, who was an ardent supporter of total liberation from colonial control shares significant similarities with Gandhi when it comes to resistance to colonialism. Interestingly, both of them were educated in the colonizing countries i.e. Gandhi in Britain and Fanon in France and both stood against their colonizers. However their means for freedom were altogether opposed to each other. Leela Gandhi says in her book *Postcolonial Theory*:

If Gandhi's encounter with British imperialism generates a theology of non-violence, Fanon's experience of French colonialism produces a doctrinaire commitment to the redemptive value of collective violence. (Gandhi 1998: 18)

Gandhi's principle of non-violence against British imperialism stands equal to Fanon's conception of collective violence against French colonialism or vice-versa. She further elaborates in the same book:

Gandhi and Fanon are united in their proposal of a radical style of total resistance to the totalizing political and cultural offensive of the colonial civilizing mission. (Gandhi 1998: 19)

We may reiterate, once again, that Mahatma Gandhi stressed upon the means of non-violence for the independence of India, whereas Fanon was in favour of collective violence in order to achieve freedom for Algeria. In this context, Ashis Nandy explains in his book *The Intimate enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*:

It is crucial for postcolonial theory to take seriously the idea of a psychological resistance to colonialism's civilizing mission. (Nandy 1983: 13)

Here, Nandy clearly points out the importance of psychological resistance from the colonized to colonialism's civilizing mission. In fact, both Gandhi and Fanon shared the same opinion of total resistance to the colonial civilizing mission, however through totally different means.

It is to be noted that as a classic film of the nationalist struggle, *The Battle of Algiers* has been widely welcomed by the critics as a film of resistance. By putting the evidence of the ambiguous nature of terrorism and direct message of anti-colonial resistance, the film was widely praised as an example of *Third Cinema*

and as a resounding denunciation to terrorism. The *Third Cinema* has its roots in the social and artistic movement in 1968, launched by the Argentinean filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino. They thought of a guerrilla cinema. The distinction between the *first cinema* commercial mode embodied by the Hollywood, and the *second cinema*, characterized by the European author's films, Gettino Solanas advocated that the *Third Cinema* stands in opposition to the other two forms of cinema as an aesthetic revolution. Their conception of Third Cinema comes largely from their experience while making the documentary *La Hora de los Hornos/ The Hour of the Furnaces*, in 1968. Pontecorvo was greatly influenced by the aesthetic principles of the Italian neo-realist wave given by the predecessors such as De Sica, Rossellini and Visconti. His early films embraced the documentary style and neo-realism that appear in his popular works such as *The Wide Blue Road* (1957) and *Pane e zolfo* (1959). Later on, *The Battle of Algiers* became a symbol of Third Cinema, including the other highly politicized films of Pontecorvo in the 1960s and 1970s such as *Burn!*, a film shot in the Caribbean and *Ogro* which represents the terrorism at the end of the Franco regime in Spain.

In terms of film technique, we find that *The Battle of Algiers* uses the long shot for distance and the long take for duration, but also relatively faster sequences and the close-ups for special characters or gestures. The camera is most often hand-held as this was not just an aesthetic choice, but the narrow streets of the Casbah do not allow the use of a platform for mobile camera. The camera is always in motion, creating a dynamic sense of movement and action.

In fact, the two films through their dazzling images bring us into the world where ordinary people involved in the fight for independence against the atrocities of the colonizer. In other words, the people are enchanted by the magnetism of their leaders of the revolution in such a way that even after the death of their leader, the film *Gandhi* shows us a deluge of common people who came to pay their respect for his last rites.

In *The Battle of Algiers* and *Gandhi*, we notice the height of anger and hatred in both the camps: among the colonizer and the colonized. This is possibly owing to the increased distance between the two sides, born of the indifference of the colonizer to the plight of the colonized, who feels completely frustrated, alienated from power. As Gandhi says:

We brought the English, and we keep them. Why do you forget that our adoption of their civilization makes their presence in India at all possible? Your hatred against them ought to be transferred to their civilization. (Gandhi 1938: 66)

This quotation clearly shows that Gandhi urges the people of India to start hating the British civilization, which is based on the use of force to dominate people across the world, with the sole intention to defeat and end the British rule in the country. This ultimately led to the foundation of a non-violent Non-Cooperation movement as depicted through extensive scenes in *Gandhi*.

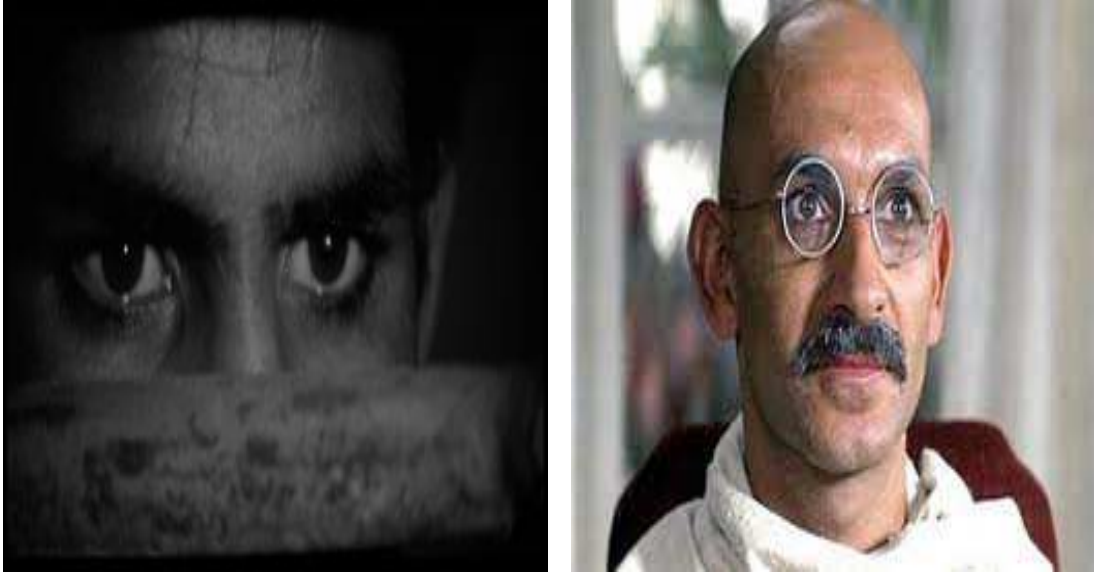
On the contrary, an overview of some of the scenes of *The Battle of Algiers* such as the ghettoisation scene and planting of bombs by the French police chief shows us that the inhuman and brutal measures taken by the French to suppress the movement led to the retaliation by the Algerian people. We find there a breakdown of administrative and social rules and regulations. We thus observe a forced relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, which leads to a war-like situation with each party striving to exceed in violence, the adversary, which is extremely terrifying. As the Postcolonial scholar, Ashis Nandy elaborates:

The temptation is to use a psychological mechanism more congruent with the basic rules of the oppressive system so as to have a better scope to express one's aggressive drives. The temptation is to equal one's tormentors in violence and to regain one's self-esteem as a competitor within the same system. (Nandy 1986: 354)

Nandy thus argues that the oppressed tends to come down to the level of the oppressors in the use of violence in order to regain their lost self-esteem. This idea is also depicted in *The Battle of Algiers* where the people use violence as a mean to express their anger against the colonizer in pursuit of independence. Gillo Pontecorvo has chosen its title as *La Bataille d'Alger* (The Battle of Algiers), probably due to a remarkable parallelism in terms of the images of the film and the selection of words as its title. We perceive the use of violence as a medium of expression by the colonized in the film *The Battle of Algiers*.

We equally perceive that despite conspicuous dissimilarities in both the films regarding the medium of struggle i.e. violence in *The Battle of Algiers* and non-violence in *Gandhi*, they are interconnected; and the two different nations achieve independence through two entirely different revolutions.

To better understand the notion of resistance and then the revolt in Algeria and India, we would like to mention here the concept of the *colonial gaze/ imperial gaze* as projected through the images of the two cinematographic works. The colonial gaze, in our opinion, is the most important part of the whole colonial discourse. It plays a significant role in the process of colonization. The colonial gaze defines how the colonizer depicts the colonized visually and psychologically and vice-versa. The contemporary colonial rule was based not only on the military and economic power of conquering nations, but also on the domination of other forms of cultural representations. The period of political expansion of Europe, from the late fifteenth century witnessed the development of new important technologies such as the printing, photography, film and sound. These technical innovations have enabled new ways of documenting and disseminating knowledge about the meetings of Europe with the non-Western world. Through newspapers, travelogues, popular magazines and documentary films, the officials of the colonial empires and the European travellers made colonial images available to a larger, more diverse metropolitan public.



The notion of colonial gaze in *The Battle of Algiers* and *Gandhi*

The images presented above from *The Battle of Algiers* and *Gandhi* depict us the beginning of the end of colonization in Algeria and India. The semiotic analysis of these images shows the anger and hatred of the colonized against the colonial oppression, as if, the oppressed has become more ferocious in the fight against the oppressors. One can observe a lot of determination among the people who put forward the resistance against the imperial powers. At one hand, the eyes of Ali trigger the violent resistance against the French, on the other hand, the more flexible (but beaming with determination) gaze of Gandhi portrays the non-violent resistance against the British Empire. However the two different gazes intersect at the common objective which is the abolition of the colonial regimes from Algeria and India.

In addition, we find that the European practice for visualization and representation of colonial realities often made more rigid social differences and exacerbated racial and sexual hierarchies. The colonial gaze has played a particularly important role in the definition of gender relations in the colonial context by portraying women as objects of desire or as targets of sympathy. The Colonial officials also paid special attention to the social rituals related to the oppression of women such as *Sati* (a practice of suicide by the woman followed by the death of her husband in ancient India) and the use of veil (in Algeria). Although these practices were condemned, they remained as subjects of fascination, and often found their place in the travelogues and in the novels written in the colonial context.

We also feel that there exists a parallelism on the theme of the suffering of the colonized versus the oppression of the colonizer in *The Battle of Algiers* and *Gandhi*. In the two films, we feel that the underground guerrilla revolution by the Algerian people in *The Battle of Algiers* shares resemblances with the over-ground political revolution of the Indian masses in *Gandhi*.

This article thus postulates that in order to understand the colonizer and the colonized, we must begin by understanding the prevailing circumstances in Algeria and India at the time of revolutions and the social as well as political status of the Algerian and Indian people in their own countries, as projected through the two films.

This article is primarily thematic in nature as we intend to explore the different paths of revolution: violence or non-violence as represented in *The Battle of Algiers* and *Gandhi*. Moreover, as we know that a cinematographic work of art needs the analysis of images, scenes and sequences, hence, it demands that a semiotic approach be followed by the researcher. In order to further justify the approach, we may quote the definition of Cinema given by Jacques Aumont and Michel Marie:

The film is an autonomous work of art, susceptible to evoke a text (textual analysis) establishing its significations on the narrative structures (narrative analysis), on the audio and visual data (iconic analysis), producing a particular effect on the spectator (psychoanalytic analysis). (Aumont 2004: 8)

The above definition points out that the films like *The Battle of Algiers* and *Gandhi* offer us immense opportunities to use these cinematographic tools in order to analyze their rich images and scenes. To go a step further, we remind ourselves that just as Linguistics studies verbal language from the point of view of sign, syntagm and discourse, in the same way, as per the semiotic method of film analysis proposed by Christian Metz (Metz 1964), we study the cinematic language of the two films from the point of view of sign, sequence and discourse. Thus, we have recourse to textual, narrative and iconic analyses viz. a diegetic as well as a mimetic analysis of the two works in a postcolonial perspective, i.e. the study of the two films from the perspective of an erstwhile subject of the Empire who remains, in the larger scheme of things, a subaltern reader.

It is to be noted that in the beginning of *The Battle of Algiers*, we notice the arrest of a key revolutionary of the FLN, who is hiding in one of the buildings. A semiotic analysis of this scene shot in black and white reveals the schism between good and evil where good is light and evil is darkness. The technique of “Chiaroscuro” has prominently been used through the medium of black and white in the film which we generally find in the *film noir*, or gangster movies. We perceive that the rapidity and swiftness of the images, one after the other, reveals the severity, the brutality of the measures adopted by the colonizer to crush the movement where justice, i.e. punishment, is quick, decisive, final and ruthless without any engagement with the other party, i.e. the accused. In fact, the totality of this sequence clearly indicates that during the suppression of the revolt, the fundamental rights of the colonized people were grossly violated.

Moreover, the analysis of the rhythms of *Gandhi* and *The Battle of Algiers* clearly demonstrates us that the slower sequences in *Gandhi* stress upon the

technique of *découpage*; whereas the faster sequences of the images of violence in *The Battle of Algiers* depict the technique of *montage*. We may also point out that the use of “close-up” in various scenes of torture shows the dominance of the colonizer over the colonized in *The Battle of Algiers*; whereas the use of “long shots” in the different scenes of crowds and *Satyagraha* (*non-violent resistance*) of the Indian colonized people in *Gandhi* highlights the spectacular mite, the formidable resistance of a suffering, crushed people yearning to be free. We point out that the presence of music in *Gandhi*, depicts the humanism of the chief protagonist, whereas, the silence in *The Battle of Algiers* suggests the complete dehumanization of the Algerians by the use of violence as a mean of resistance.

Furthermore, we perceive that *Gandhi* presents numerous images of colonial oppression which instigate the people to resort to violence. The juxtaposition of music with the images of people’s sufferings in *Gandhi* gives a sense of anger and hatred towards the colonizer which ultimately culminates into violence against them by some section of the colonized people. We find Gandhi as *agent provocateur* against the colonizer which also depicts the “temptation to use violence” by the colonized as argued by the Postcolonial scholar, Ashis Nandy in his book *Oppression and human liberation: toward a post-Gandhian utopia, in Political Thought in Modern India*. (Nandy 1986: 354) Whereas, in a scene in *The Battle of Algiers*, we perceive that a member of the FLN succumbs to the torture by French Army and reveals the location of his Military Head in order to avoid further violence. Hence, we point out the depiction of Algerians as traitors in the film, who supposedly take recourse to inaction, a form of non-violence and a euphemism for cowardice, in a bid to merely survive through the oppression. We believe that the use of non-violence causes less damage in comparison to violence. Hence, we would like to quote Ebert:

The nonviolent struggle of Indians against the British cost about 8,000 lives, whereas in the Algerian war for independence over 150,000 people were killed, even though the population of Algeria was one-thirtieth that of India. (Ebert 1976: 794)

The quotation clearly shows us that the use of non-violence causes less material and physical damages as in the case in the Indian struggle for freedom from the British imperialism. However, in the Algerian war of independence the damages were significantly higher.

Normally when we talk about revolt, we also talk about liberty. In fact, liberty often comes after a revolt. And independence is born of blood. The technique of montage is dominant in both the films, particularly in such scenes which deal with the crowd, rebellions, assaults and torture. Christian Metz believes that the idea of *montage-roi* (Metz 1964: 52) signifies the art of manipulation which gives freedom to the director to treat cinema as a language system. Metz compares a film *shot* with an *énoncé*, as its closest linguistic equivalent. He considers an image to be the equivalent of a sentence, arguing that

language disappears when a picture talks in a film. This idea is explicit in both the films as for example, the torture scene of a traitor of FLN automatically evokes the sympathy of the viewers in *The Battle of Algiers*. It is to be noted that several scenes of this film are silent, however, the technique of montage is so used in the film that viewers do not require sound to understand the sequences as the silent images of the film speak directly to them. Through the technique of montage, both the film-makers endeavoured to portray in these two films, the resistance put forward by the colonized by revolting against the colonizers in pursuit of their liberty from colonial oppressions.

We do, all the same, perceive that the brutalities of the colonizers serve as a connecting link between the History of the two countries and the diegesis of the two films. The two films, despite their authors' nationalities, are anti-colonial in nature. Furthermore, we also feel that the cinematic representation of the forms of revolution depicted in *The Battle of Algiers* and *Gandhi* brings us to the idea that the recent violent turmoil in Algeria may have its roots in its violent freedom struggle as people have a tendency to resort to collective violence to express their anger against the system. On the contrary, the non-violent freedom struggle of India has led to the foundation of a strong democratic system in the country which, despite its inherent problems, remains one of the most stable democracies of the world. Nevertheless, through the analytical re-reading of the two films from the perspective of an Indian scholar born in the postcolonial era, one attempts in this article to appreciate the efforts of the two film-makers, to rewrite History, and to write back to the Empire.

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Vikash Kumar is a poet and Ph.D. Research Scholar in Jawaharlal Nehru University (J.N.U.) New Delhi (India). He has done his M.Phil. from *School of Language, Literature & Culture Studies*, Jawaharlal Nehru University. He has published several articles and research papers in various national and international magazines and journals. He writes in English and French. His most recent publication is a poem titled "*Dream of another world*" in a Canadian Anthology published by Lipstick press (British Columbia, Canada) and a Research paper in the *Journal of English Language & Literature of Cameroon University*. He regularly takes part in conferences and seminars and his area of expertise is cinema & post-colonialism. His book of poems *Raagmala: Anthology of Poems* will be published by the end of this year.
