Addressing Blackness: In Conversation with Achmat Dangor

Conceptions of Blackness in the contemporary South African academy are premised on a decolonial approach that privileges Indigenous knowledges and bodies, while eliding a Black Consciousness understanding of Blackness that informed the fight against oppression and apartheid. In a conversation with Achmat Dangor held on Thursday 15th February 2018, #ThinkingAfrica explored conceptions of Blackness through the novel Dikeledi: Child of Tears, No More. The primary concern that Dangor addressed, focused on how the contemporary student body and Black scholars in the university sector are conceptualising notions of difference.

Dangor’s articulations during the discussion were informed by his involvement in the Black Student Movement and the Black Consciousness Movement. Proffering suggestions on notions of difference from a racialised perspective in institutions of higher learning, Dangor’s comments were reminiscent of an Arendtian conception of education which is rooted in the realisation of the humanity of the student through the pedagogical journey. Positing the discussion as an articulation aimed at understanding the humanity of the self and the other emanates from how Dangor framed his responses of contemporary antagonisms that are rooted in differences derived from contemporary negotiations of spaces marred by colonial violences.

In order to appreciate Dangor’s contributions on the role of Black Consciousness in facilitating Black ontological reclamation, the work of Ramose becomes fundamental as it reveals the negations and erasures that Blackness continues to endure owing to colonialism and coloniality. In a discussion on Effusion and Diffusion in African Spirituality, Ramose maintains that there is a violent encounter with Christianity that came with colonial impositions and subsequently necessitates a decolonial approach.

While the decolonial school of thinking will argue for the need to reclaim the land violently taken away from Indigenous/Blackbodies through colonial dispossession, there is a nascent hope in the concept of a humanising pedagogy when approaching the contemporary decolonial conversation. The hope lies in renegotiating and re-imagining the function of education.

Using the Socratic tradition, what has otherwise been termed Socratic Social Criticism by Higgins, it becomes the imperative of the pedagogue to inculcate in the student ways of seeing that undergird the humanity of the student as well as the humanity of the other. Socratic Social Criticism becomes the key facilitator that critiques contemporary modes of violence and oppression, while inspiring the hope to radically challenge contemporary modes of oppression.


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therefore presenting us with the opportunity to reimagine and renegotiate the function of education. In this framework, education becomes a process through which we inculcate ethical social values, while allowing the student the capacity to self-individuate.

*Dikeledi: Child of Tears, No More* becomes a critical entry point into this conversation, as the novel traces the lives of 3 women who negotiate the fact of Blackness from the apartheid era all the way into contemporary South African society. Dangor draws our attention to some of the challenges that contemporary South Africa continues to face, and invites critical considerations of how a female positionality of Blackness negotiates spaces that are dominated by masculinity, patriarchy and clientelism. The book serves another purpose as it intimates towards proffering an answer to the critical question posed by Lange in the contemporary South African academe, which was meant to function as a social tool of redress and social transformation. Writing about the necessity of *Rethinking Transformation and Its Knowledge(s): the case of South African Higher Education*, Lange poses the questions of whether transformation in Higher Education South Africa was intended to be racial or a reform project?

The answer to the question posed above, taken from both a contemporary and historical perspective, would suggest that the objective in HESA was the deracialisation of the system. However, what remains unattended to in this conception of the social institution are notions of decolonisation which have consistently been brought up for consideration in the contemporary dispensation. *Dikeledi* is further useful to us, in allowing the contemporary student body and the Black scholar the tools with which to navigate notions of identity and belonging, specifically in a time where claims of epistemic (in)justice and access are being made throughout the academe.

While the conversation did not focus fundamentally on a textual analysis of the book, the objective of #ThinkingAfrica was to spark a conversation premised on some of the thematic areas covered in Dangor’s *Dikeledi*. Furthermore, our objectives lay in showcasing the relevance of literary texts in the consideration of fundamental concepts that shape and inform decolonial discourse and philosophy of education in the contemporary university space.

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8 *Special thanks go to the Department of Library Services and the English Literature Department of the University of Pretoria for assisting us in coordinating and making this project a success. This discussion was the first conversation hosted by #ThinkingAfrica at the University of Pretoria. #ThinkingAfrica is an intellectual community/platform dedicated to exploring the decolonial strategies used in the contemporary South African university, with the aim of interrogating how these strategies translate to effective change in curriculum planning and design within all disciplines in the higher education landscape.*

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