



Addressing Blackness: In Conversation with Achmat Dangor

Conceptions of Blackness in the contemporary South African academe 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*¹. 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 education² 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 violences³. 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*⁴, 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 Indigenous⁵/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 Higgins⁶, 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

¹ Achmat, Dangor. 2017. *Dikeledi: Child of Tears, No More*. Cape Town: Pan MacMillan Publishers.

² Hannah, Arendt. 1961. 'The Crisis in Education', *Between Past and Future*, pp. 181-187.

³ Louise, D. Vincent. 2015. 'Tell us a Different Story', in *Being at Home: Race, Institutional Culture and Transformation at South African Higher Education Institutions*, Pedro Tabensky and Sally Matthews (eds). Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

⁴ Mogobe, Ramose. 2017. *Effusion and Diffusion in African Spirituality*. Unpublished paper.

⁵ Eve, Tuck and Wayne, K. Yang. 2012. Decolonization is not a metaphor, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, 1(1): pp. 1-40.

⁶ John, Higgins. 2001. Academic Freedom in the New South Africa, *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 2(2): pp. 1-19.



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-individuate⁷.

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 transformation⁸. 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 project⁹?

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 decolonisation¹⁰ which have consistently been brought up for consideration in the contemporary dispensation¹¹. *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 academe¹².

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 space¹³.

⁷ Richard, Rorty. 1989. Education as Socialization and as Individuation, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, pp. 114-126

⁸ Department of Education. 1997. *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education*. Pretoria: Ministry of Education.

⁹ Lis, Lange. 2014. Rethinking Transformation and Its Knowledge(s): the case of South African Higher Education, *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning*, 2(1): pp. 1-24.

¹⁰ Mahmood, Mamdani. 1993. University Crisis and Reform: A Reflection on the African Experience, *Review of African Political Economy*, 58: pp. 7-19.

¹¹ Chrissie, Boughey. 2002. 'Naming' Students' Problems: An analysis of language related discourses at a South African University, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 7(3): pp. 295-307.

¹² Andre Keet. 2014. Epistemic 'Othering' and the Decolonisation of Knowledge, *Africa Insight*, 44(1): pp. 23-37.

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