

Achmat Dangor, novelist, poet, activist, 1948-2020 by Yunus Momoniat

Achmat Dangor was something of a writer's writer, turning out books that could not be mobilised for ideological warfare.

Born in Newclare in the west of Johannesburg, about six months after the Nationalists came to power in 1948, Dangor and his family were classified as Coloured, and when the Group Areas Act wrought its unscrambling based on the Population Registration Act, all the non-Coloureds – Africans, Indians, Chinese – were evicted and resettled in ethnic townships. His concept of “home” was thrown into disarray, and he would forever reflect on this question.

This system of classification was deeply unsettling to Dangor, and he would spend his life reintroducing the scrambles apartheid abhorred, in his writing, his activism and development work. He refused to let his own family's complicated lineage – a white grandmother, with Indian, Malay and other ancestors – be eradicated by a stupid law that played havoc with one's self-image, its ensuing allegiances, sympathies and political affiliations.

The second of nine children in the small house of Ebrahim Dangor, a shoe salesman, and Juleigha, a garment worker, he went to live with his granny in Jeppestown, and matriculated at the Johannesburg High School in Fordsburg, where he was taught by Can Themba, the famous writer.

He was part of a highly politicised family that included future ANC deputy secretary general Jessie Duarte, a future ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Mohammed Dangor, and a future director general who would rebel against Bathabile Dlamini in the Sassa debacle in 2017, Zane Dangor.

He was drawn into the orbit of writer Don Mattera, who brought him into the youth wing of the Labour Party, a Coloured political party. But Dangor questioned the notion of being Coloured, telling Mattera he was a South African, not a Coloured. They quickly gravitated to the Black Consciousness movement and launched Black Thoughts, which performed at poetry recitals and other platforms.

Dangor was set on studying literature at Rhodes University but he was banned for five years in 1973, and instead he began to write. He worked for Revlon for 12 years, first as a warehouse supervisor and later as a director of the company.

During this time he began to write what would be his first book, *Waiting for Leila*, a collection of short stories which was published in 1981. He also cofounded the Congress of SA Writers.

Around the end of his banning order, in 1978, he was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease. He went for treatment at Coronation Hospital, now the Rahima Moosa Hospital, but his therapy there was making him sick. He was sent to the UK in 1981, where ANC stalwart Ismail Coovadia arranged for Dangor to be treated in

London, and he met Oliver Tambo, becoming aligned to the ANC without cutting off his links to the BC movement.

Some time after his return, he accepted the position Beyers Naude offered him in 1986 to head the Kagiso Trust, which distributed money – mainly from the EU – to community-based organisations.

He went on to head various development agencies throughout his career, such as the National Rural Development Forum, after 1994 the Independent Development Trust, the Nelson Mandela's Children Fund (1999-2001), and eventually the Nelson Mandela Foundation (2007- 2013).

A literature of the South

Among his various passions, literature was Dangor's true love. He published 10 books, among them a play, two poetry anthologies, and four novels.

His literature is concerned with the ambiguous positioning of his subjects, in every respect – race, sexuality, gender and whatnot.

Dangor was profoundly influenced by the first of writers in the Western canon, Homer. Themes and elements of the Greek epic writer's *Illiad* and *Odyssey* inform the very structure of Dangor's works, from *Waiting for Leila* to *Bitter Fruit*, perhaps his most accomplished work.

While intensely engaged in the struggle against apartheid, Dangor was never one to please with vapid struggle literature, saying in an interview that "badly written relevant literature is as unentertaining as badly written irrelevant literature". Not for him tales with a comforting moral, taking the heroic side of the powerless against the powerful. Rather, his characters are complex, contradictory and unsettling.

Waiting for Leila, which he began writing in the late 1960s in Hanover Street, District Six, in Cape Town, was deemed by apartheid censors as consisting of "disconnected and seemingly unrelated images, recollections, dreams and realities strung together to present a picture of the 'dismantling' of District Six".

The Homecoming sees the protagonist travel through Europe and the Levant before being forced "home" by Turkish authorities. But he *desires* homelessness and nomadism, taking third class "journeys to nowhere", returning to the Coloured township of Newclare to a prosaic apartheid reality.

Dangor has produced works about seminal moments in the life of his country. *Kafka's Curse*, published in 1997, is a strange novella about a marriage between a white – partly Jewish, therefore "Coloured" – woman and a "Coloured" man, set around the time of the 1994 election. It charts the breakdown of the relationship but also the discovery of a lost memory of sexual abuse.

Bitter Fruits, his masterpiece, brings up uncomfortable questions of gender based violence, which are suppressed even by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a marked foretelling of SA's future.

We will have to contend with Dangor's truths for some time into the future.

He is survived by his wife Audrey, his sons Zachary and Zain, his daughter Yasmin, three grandchildren, five brothers and a sister.

Reference:

- Yunus, M. (2020). [Achmat Dangor, novelist, poet, activist, 1948-2020](https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times/opinion-and-analysis/2020-09-13-achmat-dangor-novelist-poet-and-activist/), *Sunday Times*, 13 September 2020, online. Available at <https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times/opinion-and-analysis/2020-09-13-achmat-dangor-novelist-poet-and-activist/>. Accessed on 14 September 2020