



Achmat Dangor (1948—2020)

Hein Willemse



Achmat Dangor, Woodstock, 2018.
Photo: Hein Willemse.

The last time I saw Achmat Dangor he looked frail. He stooped and although his gait was slow, he remained steady. His smile was bright, and he had a glint in his eyes. In recent years we had not seen each other regularly. The last time prior to our chance meeting in Cape Town in late 2018 was at the funeral of Chris van Wyk, his chum from their days in Riverlea, Johannesburg in 2014. We listened among others to Oswald Mtshali who on stage, while recounting the “good ol’ days” of strive and struggle in the mid-1980s, pulled out an old poster from our Writers’ Forum days.

It was at the inaugural meeting of the Writers’ Forum in the mid-1980s that Achmat and I met. He, and the organisers of the Writers’ Forum, including van Wyk, Colin “Jiggs” Smuts and Dauphine Smuts of the Johannesburg Open School, reached out to Vakalisa, a group of Cape Town writers and artists and invited us to the meeting. We drove through the night in a rented combi without a proper functioning petrol gauge. Somehow, we misjudged its capacity and along the N1 north in the early morning ran out of petrol, with Johannesburg still many hours away. We only arrived by late afternoon

when most of the attendees—the writers, the activists and their hangers-on—already had their fill of what we believed was a scrumptious lunch, followed by afternoon tea and cucumber sandwiches. Only the organisers and a conscientious few stayed on, courteously listening to our hastily rescheduled Vakalisa presentations.


That evening I stayed over at the Dangors’ house in Riverlea, the first of several subsequent enjoyable stay overs. We spoke mostly English, even though I knew from his poetry collection *Bulldozer* (1983) that he spoke and wrote Afrikaans fluently. It was only afterwards in our conversations that I gathered that his mother tongue was in fact Afrikaans and that through his mother he had a direct linkage to Cape Town, all of it obvious from the descriptions and cadences of his first novella *Waiting for Leila* (1981). However, all his schooling was through English. Yet in his writing, particularly in his prose, the palimpsests of his mother tongue remain every present.

One cannot live in any metropolitan city without realising the multiplicity of voices and varied influences, the hybridity of human existence. Dangor’s family history, like those of so many South Africans, is a study in metropolitan hybridity. In several interviews over the years he often recounted their story with subtle humour, recalling their Indian, Dutch, Cape Muslim extractions, its multilingualism of Afrikaans, English and Sotho and a father who was a polyglot speaking thirteen languages. He once told the beguiling story following an overseas trip “where they serve you breakfast one flight upon the other” he took to his hotel’s swimming pool and one of the guests alerted her partner to the “French man who’s approaching them”!

Most of his writing exhibit traces of various strands of hybridity often recalling our torturous South African histories, whether these are the squalid surroundings of Hillbrow where in *Z-town trilogy* (1990) Muriel and Janey Meraai are coming to grips with their personal states of emergency, the mythical and fantastical in the act of storytelling and the transformational in the key characters in *Kafka’s curse* (1998), the long memories of past horrors in *Bitter fruit* (2001) and in his last published novel, *Dikeledi* (2017). In most of his longer prose Dangor explores the lives of women, their positionality within South African patriarchy, their continuing relationships with power and frequently their resilience in the face of social challenges. In his latest writings one gets the impression that Dangor increasingly experienced a sense of disillusionment with the post-1994 South Africa, although much of this awareness is filtered through the experiences and tales of his prose characters.

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When we met Achmat was still a manager at the Revlon cosmetics company in Johannesburg. Soon thereafter he moved on to the Kagiso Trust and later the Independent Development Trust. In the late-1990s he became the Executive director of the Nelson Mandela Childrens' Fund, and later a campaign manager at UNAIDS in New York. Achmat's standing with Nelson Mandela was such that the latter apparently personally intervened to entice him back to South Africa to head up the Nelson Mandela Foundation. Prior to his retirement Achmat was involved in the South African chapter of the Ford Foundation. One can barely underestimate the pivotal role he played in securing funding and resources for community organisations throughout the country during his tenure at the various nongovernmental organisations, including the Writers' Forum and later the Congress of South African Writers.

Several of Dangor's books won awards. *Waiting for Leila* won the Mofolo-Plomer Prize in 1980, one of his stories won the Vita Short Story Award in 1993, *Kafka's curse* won the Herman Charles Bosman Prize, and in 2001 *Bitter fruit* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and the IMPACT Dublin literary award. He received a lifetime award from the South African Literary Awards (SALA) in 2015.

His publications include his poetry collections *Bulldozer* (1983), *Exiles within* (1989) and *Private voices* (1992); his play script, *Majiet* (1986), his prose collections and novels, *Waiting for Leila* (1981), *Z-town trilogy* (1990), *Kafka's curse* (1998), *Bitter fruit* (2001), *Strange pilgrimages* (2013), and *Dikeledi: Child of tears, no more* (2017). These writings represent the teachable trajectory of an important South African writer, from his early musings and convictions as a Black Consciousness adherent in the 1970s, his commitment to nonracialism in the 1980s and 1990s to his incisive explorations of post-liberation disillusionment. Achmat Dangor's oeuvre is worthy of greater attention.

One last personal memory. When we relaunched *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* as a multilingual literary journal I asked him to contribute a story to our launch edition. Unfortunately, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in New York he could get very little done and only managed to make his contribution, the short story "[A reason to love](#)", in the first issue of 2004. He kept his word.

Fare-you-well, my friend.

Kleinkrantz, Wilderness
7 September 2020