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## Interview with Achmat Dangor

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## Interview with Achmat Dangor

### Abstract

South African writer Achmat Dangor was born in 1948, as the Nationalist government – the architects of Apartheid – came to power. In 1973 he was banned for five years for his involvement in the radical black cultural group Black Thoughts, which he had helped to establish. Although forbidden to attend public gatherings and publish any of his writing during that time, Dangor wrote in secret and, in the 1980s, helped found the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW), a group of mainly black writers dedicated to the freedom struggle. From 1986 to 1991 he was executive director of the rural development agency Kagiso Trust, and in 1992 taught South African literature and creative writing at the City University of New York. He was subsequently appointed Director of the Independent Development Trust and, in 1999, was made Chief Executive Officer of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund. Alongside his work in the development field he continued to write, and has published seven works of fiction and poetry to date. These include two collections of poetry, *Bulldozer* (1989) and *Private Voices* (1993), a short story collection (*Waiting for Leila*, 1982), a play (*Majiet*, 1986), and three novels, *The Z Town Trilogy* (1990), *Kafka's Curse* (1997) and *Bitter Fruit* (2001). He has won many literary prizes, including the 1998 Herman Charles Bosman Prize for *Kafka's Curse*, a novel which is in its second edition and has been translated into seven languages. In July 2001 he relocated to New York where he is currently working on his next novel. In March this year he returned to South Africa to participate in the Time of the Writer Festival in Durban.

ELAINE YOUNG

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**EY** *How has living in New York affected your writing about South Africa so far? And how do you think it might influence the way you write about South Africa in future?*

**AD** The most immediate influence is physical. New York is an immense, noisy, rowdy but wonderful place and I am so distracted by the novelty. I do

consultancy work with HIV/AIDS two days a week and I am able to write three days a week. But there are many distractions, so many cultural distractions — things that I never had time to do, like going to museums and art exhibitions, and going to listen to people read poetry. The other distraction is that New York is such an enormously noisy place. We live in an apartment just off Park Avenue and 34th which is like a major crossroad across Manhattan. You hear cars and noise all the time.

So I've decided not to pursue the sequel to *Bitter Fruit* for the moment. Instead I am writing a novel about a South African in New York. It's based on an idea that I've had for a long time — almost like something from *Death in Venice*, coupled with Garcia Marquez's *Death in the Time of Cholera*, about a character living in South Africa who was once in the Underground. During that time he had a relationship with his MK<sup>1</sup> commander, who warned him ahead of time to get out of the country when they planted the bomb at Magoo's Bar in Durban. He loses touch with her and she disappears into the system. Years later he gets an obsession to find her when he sees a picture of a woman who turns out to be the South African Consul-General's wife and he recognises her. So he moves to New York to find her, which he does, but the consequences are tragic. It's loosely based on Robert McBride's<sup>2</sup> story but it's essentially a story of a man with an obsession. Men are like that: they have obsessions which they don't want to let go of. In a way he is forced to come to terms with what he is and the things that he did, the things that he evaded and the things that he didn't do. Instead of setting the story in Cape Town as I had wanted to originally, with a different context and a different occupation for the woman that he is obsessed with, I set it in New York. It gave me the opportunity to get out of my system some of the stories that have been there for a long time: the untold stories of people who have been in exile, in the Underground. All you tend to hear are the black and white stories of the good guys and their enemies, and the ambiguities in between are never explored. So that's how I decided to deal with noisy and overwhelming New York.

**EY** *Reading your last novel Bitter Fruit, which was published just before September 11, was quite an uncanny experience in terms of the way it deals with issues of Muslim identity and fundamentalist groups within Islam. What were the implications of the coincidence of the release of your book and the events of September 11?*

**AD** It makes my sequel to the book very difficult because in it Michael, who now becomes Noor, goes to India to find his mythical grandfather's roots and ends up in Afghanistan in a school — not the Al-Qaeda, but an Islamic

school — where the disenchantment within him grows. But this disenchantment has nothing to do with ideology — this disenchantment is with himself. In a sense it is difficult to write this book because everybody is going to measure it against September 11. I'm sitting in New York, writing in an atmosphere of superpatriotism, xenophobia and a renewed interest in Islam — but from a very perverse point of view.

**EY** *Your penultimate novel has a strong storytelling voice. Do you write with a sense of yourself as a storyteller? And what sense of readership, or audience, do you have?*

**AD** I do see myself as a storyteller and one of my problems is that I see myself more as a storyteller than as a structured novelist. For example, I know that *Kafka's Curse* is a very confusing structure for many people, but I'm primarily a storyteller and I rely on the strength of the story to carry my novel. As for my sense of an audience, I have none. I try not to think of an audience because that would undoubtedly colour things and introduce all kinds of other elements. I do try to think of readers and whether I am being fair to them and explaining myself clearly to them. I don't think of a specific reader, though — and if I do, it must be deeply subconscious.

**EY** *As a former anti-apartheid activist and, more recently, Director of the Independent Development Trust and CEO of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, you have been heavily involved in bringing about social change in South Africa in various ways. How would you characterise fiction that is, to use the old catch-phrase, 'socially relevant' in contemporary South Africa? Do you think of yourself as having a kind of conscious role to play as a writer?*

**AD** I don't think any writer should have a conscious role to play, trying to define society for better or for worse. We function better when our dark creative side dominates and we look at socio-economic conditions from our own point of view. I am very disturbed emotionally and artistically by the kind of things I see, for example people dying from HIV/AIDS. My work in that area has exposed me to a side of South African society that I never thought I would see. Here is a literal plague that's killing people. Yet right from our own president down to traditional leaders are people who deny that this plague exists. It's like a writer living in the Middle Ages denying that there were rats. So in this sense I feel compelled artistically to write something about human beings who are living under these conditions. I am not going to consciously proselytise that there is a link between HIV and AIDS — those are things that I think people better qualified than me can argue about. But the sheer human dimension of this tragedy, the way it is not being dealt with, and its consequences, are something that I can't ignore as a writer. So I will explore these kinds of

things in my writing, but I don't think I can consciously write as a literary propagandist.

**EY** *Could you say that there are any particular challenges that you face as a South African writer now, other than what you've already mentioned?*

**AD** Yes. The biggest challenge I think is psychological, not just for me but for many other writers. Mercifully many of us have been able to make the crossing, as it were, from one side to the other. Let me put it this way: I can't see how history can be compartmentalised — as if there were something called pre-apartheid South Africa and then a wall came down and wiped the past out and now we suddenly have a post-apartheid or 'new' South Africa. There is a greater continuity in our history than we want to recognise and the challenge is to find the continuity and not to get hung up or stuck on genres that are so overused. Nadine Gordimer and I attended a writers' seminar at the University of Natal today and she made a comment about the number of people who are writing about their childhoods under apartheid — black, white or Indian — as if that's the only experience we've had. People shy away from contemporary issues because they are difficult to deal with: they are complex and they test your loyalties — or your prejudices. As a writer, if you can't overcome those things, you've really got a problem. What I find quite disturbing is the contest between relevancy and irrelevancy. Quite frankly, badly written relevant literature is as unentertaining as badly written irrelevant literature.

**EY** *Do you feel that it is possible — or desirable — to speak about the emergence of a 'common South African story' in recent years?*

**AD** I don't think that there need necessarily be what we call a 'South African Literature' almost as if it's an ideology. Writing is not like tourism that you can package and put a label on, or a flag that you can use as a gimmick to sell things and to bring tourists here. Writing is far more dynamic and sensitive and it engages human beings in different responses; the reader and the writer relate to each other in different ways. So we can't package our literature and that's why I am really hesitant to talk about a sudden 'South African literature'. There will obviously be some commonality in what people write because we live in the same country and we have similar experiences, although we see them from different perspectives. I would hate to see the day when what we call South African literature is nothing but a kind of national stricture or framework — a straight jacket, as it were, within which you have to operate. Why don't they ask writers like Salman Rushdie who an English writer is? Rushdie is English — he lives there. But ask him if he is an English writer and he will laugh at you. So there is a distinction between South African writers and their writing and

South African writing. South Africans have a terrible habit: when we don't know how to deal with complexity, we want to reduce it to the simple and lowest common denominator. So let's all have one national literature — that way we accommodate everybody. There is an old cliché — 'Some writers are more equal than others'. So to expect Nadine Gordimer or Zakes Mda or anybody else to conform to some mythical, difficult-to-define South African literature is for me completely unnecessary and quite frankly I ignore it.

**EY** *At the opening of the Time of the Writer Festival, you said that you had no intention of depicting South Africa as if it has no flaws. To what extent do you intend your writing to depict a sort of 'truth' about South Africa at present — and how (if at all) can this be used in a positive way?*

**AD** I am not sure whether it should be used in a positive or negative way. Again, I've learned a lesson from the anti-apartheid struggle when writing was seen as an instrument of freedom: writing cannot be a tool or instrument for anything. When it is, it begins to lose its independence and imagination and becomes diminished and shackled to something else. I think the phrase I used at the opening of the Writers' Festival was that my imagination no longer wants to climb up flagpoles — in fact my imagination is forcing me to climb down flagpoles. I'm not in search of different flagpoles, either — I just ignore them. Writing about South Africa's flaws is not going to be something deliberate — I am not going to look for a sore and scratch it. I see the country as a very complex totality and I see many different kinds of people in it. I see individuals, primarily, and I respond to individuals — not to groups and not to representations. The notion that writers can change the world is a bit arrogant and vain anyway. What we can do is record it in a way that is imaginative and different. I am going to write South Africa as I see it. Undoubtedly flaws will emerge — both in my writing, I guess, and in South Africa. We all have flaws that we need to address. Some of them are inherited, some of them are of our own making, some are unavoidable and others can be avoided.

Living in the U.S. I am constantly asked questions about South Africa: about our President's view on HIV/AIDS, about why things haven't changed for the majority of black people, and so on; and the questions come from different angles. African-Americans want to know why black people are still poor, while white Americans and some exiled South Africans lament the fact that white people have been marginalised — or so they believe. I keep telling them that in between these stark views of theirs is a different reality and greater ambiguity than they want to see. There is a bigger black middle class than there ever was before in South Africa, and that is a major change. And yes, there is poverty and the poverty is going to take a long time to eradicate, and yes there are many white people leaving,

just as there are African people leaving, and Coloureds and Indians — everybody is leaving. So the migration of exiled people from South Africa shouldn't be seen simply as what they call a 'chicken run'. This is such a global world: if I can live in New York and be a South African, what's wrong with that? It doesn't mean that because I live in New York I am not South African or I am anti-South African.

Where we go from here, and where our government goes to from here, depends on how vigilant the citizens are, whether they make their vote count and whether or not people speak their mind, and I fully intend to speak my mind. Within that, in literary terms, I may upset people, though I don't consciously set out to do that. I am not writing for the sake of creating controversy — by the way, controversy doesn't necessary sell books, it generates publicity, but it doesn't sell books.

**EY** *The central drama of Bitter Fruit is the re-emergence of a ghost from the apartheid past who brings about the dissolution of a family and the shell of normality it has erected around itself. Is this a metaphor for the impossibility of burying the past and hence the real nature of the 'truth and reconciliation' process?*

**AD** If there was any ideological starting point at all, it is probably my feeling that in wanting to forgive and forget so quickly, we swept a lot of things under the carpet — we didn't deal with a lot of issues and they've festered there. One of them is the long history of the abuse of women. The activists — the ANC, the UDF<sup>3</sup> and other people — talk about torture and abuse, but it's always about the high profile people and how they were abused. What they don't talk about is the systematic rape of women in prison on a wide scale. Another element that's never talked about is the abuse of women in the MK camps. Maybe I am interested in this because I grew up in a household that was so dominated by women, their suffering and the consequences of their suffering. I think that's what created the impetus for *Bitter Fruit*. The novel doesn't represent any particular political viewpoint, just a whole series of things that I read or experienced. For example I once asked the Truth Commissioner, Fazel Randera, what had happened to the testimonies of women's abuse which had been given in a closed hearing of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He said they had decided not to publish it because of the sensitivity of the material. Then I went onto the internet, and there they were — all of the testimonies, right there, complete with people's names and the details of the incidents. The TRC hadn't wanted to expose those people, whoever they are, and those people didn't want to be exposed — but a simple bureaucratic error had put this thing up on the internet. Although the material was subsequently withdrawn, I felt that as a fictional writer I had to tell a story about it from my viewpoint.

A number of activists that I worked with had been raped and abused in prison and I was close to some of them, though they never spoke about it. When *Bitter Fruit* came out, a number of people called me and thanked me for the story. Others were far more ambivalent and said that I had opened wounds that they had hoped they would never have to deal with. But the fact is that the sexual abuse of women in the struggle against apartheid was far more systematic and widespread than we want to believe or that the TRC has dealt with. It was in many ways on a par with what happened to Kosovo. To teach the community a lesson in a township north of Newcastle in KwaZulu Natal, for example, the police went there and raped every woman they could find. This happened in about 1986. You will not find this in any newspaper — it's not recorded anywhere. Even within the ANC it is the one thing that they will not put in their documentation archives. So all I did was try to redress a viewpoint.

The other fascination was purely an intellectual thought that came to me. What if a child discovers that his father is his mother's rapist? What would he do? That for me was one of the more rewarding exercises for writing the book. I had to put myself into the mind of this young Michael, and work through with him just what will go on in his head and how he will deal with it. I hope I dealt with it sensitively and that his reactions are sensitive. It was the most difficult part of the whole book to try to keep Michael true to himself, to what he was and to his reaction to his mother.

**EY** *As in Kafka's Curse, the theme of transgressive sexuality allows you to explore the historical hybridity of the nation, the burden of the past in individual's lives and the development of the self (especially of the female self) in bold new directions. To what extent does the experience of the characters in your novels (and especially in Kafka's Curse and Bitter Fruit) mirror a larger cultural process — a process of self-discovery and metamorphosis? And what are the implications of this?*

**AD** Maybe there was a subconscious desire in my heart to provoke South Africans out of their hypocritical silence about sex. One of the real reasons why there is an AIDS epidemic today is because people don't want to talk about sex — not just traditional communities, but educated people too. The Dutch people taught me a word yesterday: they call it 'fout', like the Afrikaner word 'fout'. But 'fout' is where you declare something a sin almost, and therefore you can't discuss it. So fascism in the Netherlands is 'fout' and therefore they never discuss it. Once you find a fascist in your midst you expel him and you never talk about him again — it's a form of excommunication. Think about South Africans and how hypocritical we are about sex. We make bawdy jokes about it. Pieter Dirk Uys makes blueish puns about it. The movies that we make here are crude. The literature in

South Africa shrinks away from sexuality as well. I think J.M. Coetzee handles it well and Nadine Gordimer always deals with it very subtly — her last book was a very sensual book for me. I don't like the way André Brink deals with sex: in his novels the women are reduced to fantasies, male fantasies. Perhaps in both my books, but more particularly in *Bitter Fruit*, I tried to provoke discussion, and maybe I did. In Afrikaans communities and in urban areas incest has been an unspoken and hugely suppressed problem. It has been like that in some Coloured communities as well, and even in Indian communities — it is never spoken about, especially when incest is also abuse, which it is most of the time. It is very rare when an incestuous relationship between a young person and an older person is consensual. And that is an element of abuse, as well as a reason why people never want to speak about it. A certain Dutch reviewer said I was obsessed with sex in both these books, but I don't think that's true. What I do think is that South Africans treat their bodies as things that you hide or exhibit for the wrong reasons. So yes, I hope that what I do is lead to some transformation, even if it is only to get people to talk about it.

**EY** *In the epigraph to Part 2 of Bitter Fruit, you quote from Mevlana Celaleddin-I Rumi: 'Since in order to speak, one must first listen, /Learn to speak by listening'. To what extent do you feel your writing depends upon your ability first to listen to people and their experience? And/or the voice of memory?*

**AD** It's all of it, it's listening to people around you, it's listening to the past, it's listening to history, it's just watching people speak and interact. Very often South Africans listen with a filter: we hear what we want to hear and not what the person is saying. That's why dialogue in this country is so often difficult. While I'm listening to you speak, I'm trying to make up my mind: 'do I want to listen to this or don't I want to listen to this?' I really believe that in the context of *Bitter Fruit* there was a need, a crying need, for those characters to listen to each other. The only person who really listened there was Michael. He listened to each one of the others and even himself. But then he interpreted it in his own way. When he went on his journey through Soweto he kept saying to himself, 'what the hell am I doing here, looking for history in the dusty streets of Soweto?' Even he was trying to listen to his own voice telling him the past is not something that you dwell in all the time — you have to move on into the future.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Umkhonto weSizwe — 'the spear of the nation' — was the military wing of the then banned African National Congress, the current ruling party in South Africa.

- <sup>2</sup> ANC member Robert McBride is a former anti-apartheid guerrilla who planted a car bomb outside Magoo's Bar in Durban in 1986, as the violent struggle against the apartheid government was reaching its climax. The bomb killed three young white women and McBride was sentenced to death. In 1992 he was given amnesty along with 149 other convicts (most of them imprisoned for violent acts in the anti-apartheid cause) by then President F.W. de Klerk in a bid to entice Nelson Mandela's African National Congress back to the multi-party negotiating table. McBride is a controversial figure, not least because of his arrest in 1998 on charges of gun-running in Mozambique, an act said by some to prove the alleged existence of a plot to topple Mandela's ANC government. McBride maintained that he had in fact been investigating gun-running in South Africa and had been falsely accused, and he was released from prison in Mozambique on September 14, 1998.
- <sup>3</sup> ANC: African National Congress. UDF: United Democratic Front.