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# Promoting Madiba's legacy

## A *Leadership* exclusive on Achmat Dangor

**T**here are many words that could describe the CEO of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, Achmat Dangor: activist, altruist, intellectual, businessman, creative author, poet and playwright are but a few.

But Dangor does not like labels. Apartheid labelled people: a process that resulted in the alienation of generations of South Africans.

Born in 1948, the same year the rule of apartheid began, Dangor defied all the crude labels it tried to impose on him.

His ancestry is Indian, Malay and Dutch. His mother tongue is Afrikaans and he grew up in Newclare in an enlightened Muslim home.

He is one of nine siblings but, at the age of eight, he was delegated to be a companion to his grandmother in Fordsburg. He attended a conventional school as well as *madrassa* (Islamic school) each day.

If pushed to describe himself, Dangor says: "I am a hybrid mix; a polyglot (a linguist capable of reading, writing and speaking in many languages)."

One dominant theme in his writing is alienation. "After reading Albert Camus' book *The Outsider*, it struck me that most human beings have to deal with alienation. Where I grew up, I experienced alienation every day. My father insisted that I go to an English school, though I only spoke Afrikaans at the time. The first few months trying to learn in English were hell," he says.

"I witnessed the destructive effects of apartheid in Newclare where forced removals occurred. I woke up one day to turmoil, and

many of my neighbours who were my closest friends were there one day and gone the next.

"When I moved to Fordsburg, we were still outsiders because we were not 'real' Indians," recalls Dangor.

Eventually, he went to live with his uncle, who was gay. "He was forced to leave the community, alienated by homophobia, which was terrible in those days. His partner was Jewish.

"So, ironically, I went to mosque on Friday and synagogue on Saturday," Dangor says.

He has published numerous works of fiction and poetry. His novella *Kafka's Curse* marked his international literary debut, and his most recent novel *Bitter Fruit* was short-listed for the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and the Man Booker Prize in 2004, reinforcing his reputation. This novel focuses on the complexity of post-apartheid South African society.

*Bitter Fruit* is the tale of Silas and Lydia Ali, a mixed race couple and their only son, Mikey. Silas is a liaison between the Ministry of Justice and the Truth and Reconciliation Committee. His family is shattered when François du Boise, the white policeman who raped his wife 20 years earlier, re-enters their lives. Mikey discovers he is the fruit of that rape and embarks on violent retribution.

For Dangor, writing is not about pushing a political message, but the passion of storytelling. He has been quoted as saying that writing is the closest thing he has to an obsession. This obsession was ignited by reading; he grew up in a house full of books as varied as Norman Mahler to *Mills & Boon*.

"I think this generation is missing the culture of reading," he says. "I loved reading and telling

stories. I used the word 'obsession' because I am driven to write."

Literature was an escape for Dangor and to this day, despite his many demanding jobs, he still makes time to write. "I have a number of drawers full of manuscripts – voices that keep calling out to me like abandoned children, but I am working on a few things," he says.

"Contemporary South Africa is so complex and you can't divorce it from the past. But you can't let the past dominate your narrative. That's what I am grappling with at the moment, and there are four or five manuscripts waiting to be published."

Dangor went to Rhodes University to study literature and became a member of Black Thoughts, the goal of which was to strengthen the black movement through literature, theatre and music.

His work as a member of the Institute of Race Relations, promoting dialogue between different races, brought him to the attention of the Security Police. His studies came to an abrupt halt when he was banned in 1973 and forced to return to Johannesburg where he continued to write in secret. Again he was alienated from society.

Dangor believes, however, that one can overcome the trauma of alienation: "It's a combination of many things: adaptation, learning in order to understand others and embracing diversity. I believe that conformity runs counter to human nature. Their instinctive desire is to intermingle with people. But it is an easy refuge to cling to a group."

Great leaders are often non-conformists, he says. "People like Nelson Mandela provided leadership by not following the herd. Non-

conformity in leaders means they often see things differently from the way their tribe, their nation or their culture sees things.”

Dangor has always been motivated to change society, and has dedicated much of his life to the upliftment of people. He has held leading positions in the Kagiso Trust, National Rural Development Forum and the Independent Development Trust.

In 1999, he became the chief executive of the Nelson Mandela Children’s Fund, which he left two years later to join his wife, Audrey, who was working for the United Nations in New York.

“I was a kept man for about two wonderful years, doing nothing but writing and the occasional consultancy,” says Dangor.

His desire to support altruistic causes led him to take up the role of managing the World AIDS Campaign.

In 2004, the Dangors relocated to Geneva, Switzerland where Achmat took up the post of director: Communications, Advocacy and Leadership for the Joint United Nations Programme on AIDS.

It is surprising that Dangor has had considerable experience in the corporate world. When he was banned in 1973 with no job, the United States’ Revlon Inc. offered him work as part of the Leon Sullivan programme, which regulated how American companies remaining in South Africa during that time should conduct themselves.

He started as a warehouse supervisor and rose to the position of director: Material Management and Planning. The company helped him obtain a passport to travel around the world.

Dangor relates how he met the founder of Revlon, Charles Revson, who asked him what he thought the company did. “I went on about beauty, cosmetics and marketing, but he said to me: ‘No, young man, remember one thing – we make money. Always remember the goal.’ That lesson stuck with me, and I am grateful for all the experience I gained in management and strategic decision-making during my 13 years with that company.”

The South Africa about which Dangor writes is no idyllic picnic in the park, but a stark reflection of its complexity and ambiguity. So one wonders if he believes Mandela’s ideal of a Rainbow Nation is attainable. “It is realisable, but it is going to take a long time and we have to work at it,” he says.

“When I was teaching adult literature classes in New York in 1992, I used South Africa as an

example of a miracle story. But it was sobering when a student from a developing South American nation pointed out that our miracle had taken us only as far as the doorstep of building a nation.

“We need to address our history of contestation and alienation through, as Mandela says, the art of listening to others,” notes Dangor. “How do we ensure people understand each other? One way is to reach out through means of communication such as language. My six-year-old son Zachary is learning Zulu at school, but he also wants to learn Afrikaans.

“Language is the doorway to understanding other cultures.

“There are also material things that need to be addressed: Our biggest obstacle is still inequality, and it still has a racial dimension.

“The average middle-class child believes he or she will be job creators while most black children are still socialised to be job seekers. We need to inculcate in all how to create wealth rather than access it,” he adds.

Dangor smiles when asked how he first met Mandela, the man whose legacy is now entrusted in his hands. “By being scolded by him!” he replies.

While overseas, Mandela had been offered a donation for the ANC; the donor wanted to know where to send the money. So Mandela’s aides suggested the Kagiso Trust, of which Dangor was executive director at the time. “When I got a call from this donor, I said we couldn’t accept the money for a political party, as we were a charity,” he relates.

“Later, I received a call from my sister, Jessie Duarte, who said someone wanted to speak to me. Mandela came on the line and said: ‘I don’t mind you contradicting me, but please tell me beforehand if you’re going to tick me off publicly!’”

Since then, Dangor has come to know Mandela more closely. “Nelson Mandela’s strength is his ability to say things as they are. He would not have made it in the diplomatic core because if there is a fundamental truth to be told, he would do that,” says Dangor. “His other side is a paradox where he doesn’t have an absolute truth that he adheres to. He can see the point of view of others. He always says you have to listen before you understand.

“That ability to look beyond himself, his own needs and his own people enabled him to reach out to what I call the ‘other’. He does this in a generous way, but not a deceptive way. He genuinely believes there is a place for all South

Africans. He is a very complex person, and this amazing ability to see the bigger picture has helped him reach out beyond what he knows.”

Dangor admires the fact that Mandela recognised when it was time to let go. In 2008, at the 46664 London concert, Mandela called on the next generation of people everywhere to take up his work. “It is in your hands now,” he said.

Dangor had helped write the speech, which had originally read: “It is in our hands now.”

Afterward, Mandela was asked if he had made a mistake, but he said he had deliberately changed the phrase because he wanted to publicly pass on the mantle of leadership to others.

“It is in your hands” has become the slogan of Nelson Mandela International Day on 18 July, adopted as an official UN commemorative day.

Mandela’s vision for his Foundation is that memory and dialogue are important tools for understanding the challenges we face now and how we deal with them in the future.

When Dangor returned to take over as CEO of the Nelson Mandela Foundation in 2007, Mandela gave him three instructions: “He told me to get his face off all those commercial products; he did not like the increasing commercialism around his name. He also said raise enough money to keep the Foundation going in the future; and thirdly, it must not become a mausoleum to one person, but depict the broader Struggle,” he recalls.

Ultimately, the Foundation’s aim is to create a platform so that Mandela’s legacy can be made accessible to people all over the world to pursue social justice without requiring the direct intervention of one man or one organisation.

Dangor says the staff of the Foundation respect Mandela’s need for rest. “The staff has made the decision that we will only visit Nelson Mandela if we are summoned. We want to leave him in peace to enjoy his retirement, his family and close friends.”

So how does Dangor find time to integrate his heavy workload, his “obsession” for writing as well as his family life? He says that having a young son at his age has opened his eyes about personal decisions.

“You find balance by deciding what makes you happy,” he says. “I could become a hermit with my books and words, but I understand that the fundamentals are my job, writing and the need to be with family – so that keeps me balanced.” ▲

*Michele Alexander*