

Dissecting the 'Decolonisation Movement' at South African Universities

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By Duduzile Zwane

The idea of decolonising tertiary institutions is not new. African scholars such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ade Ajayi have touted the potential advantages of implementing this transformative initiative for several decades. They expressed this idea publicly, but to no avail. Rather, wa Thiong'o was arrested in 1977, during his tenure as head of the University of Nairobi's English department. No official reasons were provided for his detention, but he had been a notorious advocate for the inclusion of indigenous languages into the university curriculum. Exhausted from university managements' unwavering aversion to the mere mention of this concept, decolonisation's proponents lost their fervour. They eventually channelled their energies into more rewarding pursuits such as launching private protests. In wa Thiong'o's case, he vowed to substitute English with his native Gikuyu in all his books. This personal boycott was implemented in 1981 and it effectively drew the world's attention to the urgency of decolonising tertiary institutions. In South Africa, the 'Rhodes Must Fall' and 'Fees Must Fall' protests revived the dormant decolonisation cohort. The students' intensity, coupled with that of newly invigorated academics such as Nhlanhla Mkhize, Achille Mbembe, and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, persuaded university management to earnestly contemplate the idea.

I support this 'decolonisation movement' unreservedly – primarily because I have been a student and employee at South African universities with colonial histories. I witnessed some of the injustices to which Black scholars are subjected, on account of the academy's colonial past. Before the resurgence of the decolonisation movement, our tertiary institutions harboured a plethora of horrors. The movement has forcefully exposed them and now they can be confronted. Furthermore, my own academic research output utilises a psycho-social theoretical lens in order to examine such issues. I consider it my responsibility as an emerging scholar to apply the theoretical tools I have acquired to meaningful matters such as the decolonisation debate.

Essentially, my intention in this article is to interrogate the pertinent issues that the decolonisation movement has uncovered. I argue that they were concealed for too long, prolonging a destructive status quo. Consequently, for Black

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scholars, the university experience was akin to being hurled head-first into an abyss. It should be noted that while I am a Black scholar who makes copious references to racial inequality, my critique is not intended to *vilify a specific race group*. My arguments merely *illuminate the continued existence* of the racial injustices that our universities inherited from their colonial architects. My central aim is to create an empathetic understanding of how this affects the victims, who are predominantly Black. Importantly, the decolonisation movement has plunged universities into a transitional phase that is beset by obstacles. I am of the view that as this movement progresses, it will eradicate the residual colonial debris in these institutions. However, we cannot change what we do not identify and sincerely acknowledge. This article is an attempt at doing so. Only then can the dream of a genuinely transformed South African academy, where merit supersedes skin colour, become a reality.

The Invisible Black Mass

Up until I registered for my bachelor's degree at a certain coastal university, I had never been acutely aware of my Blackness. Until that point, I had defined myself according to my personal traits: effervescent personality, empathetic listener, voracious reader, diligent student and so forth. I soon realised that I had voluntarily committed myself to a structure that reduced me to a racial category. All the aforementioned attributes were erased and I was condensed to a 'Black'. I was not even dignified with being classified as a 'Black person' – I was merely a 'Black presence'. Despite having earned my entry into the tertiary education system, I soon realised that I was a 'second-class citizen' in it (Emecheta, 1974:1). As Black students, my classmates and I far outnumbered our White peers. Nonetheless, our Black existence simply

did not register in the same way. For example, I considered the lecturers as my superiors. In contrast, my White counterparts related to them as their equals. White students had no qualms about reminding a professor that he had exceeded his lecturing time by five minutes. Said professor would then apologise profusely and promptly dismiss all 500 of us. Conversely, if I summoned up the courage to enquire about overdue examination results, I would be cautioned not to be truculent. The continuous equation of my Blackness with aggression was demoralising. Consequently, I learned to cajole my White classmates into making enquiries on my behalf, as the response would be prompt and devoid of racial overtones.

Such racially motivated power imbalances are among the most significant issues to be exposed

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by the decolonisation movement. Its advocates are forcing the South African academe to take ownership of its wilful refusal to acknowledge the *humanity* of Black students. I am of the view that this indifference was a strategy to maintain a status quo that was created by colonisers, perpetuated by the Apartheid regime and upheld by a callous minority. It should also be noted that the mission statements of all South African universities allude to their pledge to nurture diversity and promote equality. However, it is only in the last four years that concerted attempts to see Black people as intellectually capable *individuals* have been made. Prior to that, they were regarded as being inferior, tolerated to maintain the ruse of racial equality. The disingenuousness of such actions would not be evident without the decolonisation petitions.

The Racial Contract

The decolonisation entreaties were also instrumental in exposing the unspoken ‘racial

contract’ (Mills, 1997) that was upheld by many South African tertiary institutions. A contract typically refers to an agreement between two or more individuals about a matter of importance to them. Ideally, all parties are cognisant of what they are consenting to and do so to protect their interests. A racial contract is the inverse of this. To my mind, it is a tacit pact between Black and White people to marginalise the former group. Black people are to be *observed* without being *seen*. Any semblance of acknowledgement must be perfunctory. Such a contract maintains the façade of adherence to the equality stipulations on university policy documents. Black people honour their part in this contract by complying with all these expectations.

Corroborating this assessment, in his book *The Racial Contract*, Charles Mills states that,

[I]n effect on matters related to race, the racial contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially /functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made. (1997: 18)

Essentially, it is an arrangement that is founded on the assumption of Black intellectual, psychological and social ineptitude. It is also intended to intensify these perceived shortcomings. As the inferior parties, Black people’s consent to this unspoken agreement is automatic instead of negotiated. The inevitable outcome of this prejudicial treaty is chaos and White authors never assume responsibility for their part in its creation.

The existence of the racial contract is well-known. However, rarely was its absurdity questioned because the subject of race was tremendously delicate in South Africa. It was assumed that the conversion from Apartheid to democracy erased all memory of racial oppression. Therefore, any tentative foray into this subject (particularly if made by a Black person) was met with irritation at their perceived victimhood. The overall attitude was that racial subjugation was a global occurrence and ‘other peoples have transcended their periods of slavery and oppression. Why can’t Africans forget about theirs, turn their faces forward and get on with their lives?’ (Ade Ajayi, 2002: 4).

The decolonisation movement finally made it possible for Black scholars to highlight the irrationality of disregarding their continued oppression. In so doing, they violated the racial contract, which required them to remain docile and acquiescent. An example of this would be the conflict that occurred between Dr Lwazi Lushaba and Professor Anthony Butler in 2016. Both academics are based at the University of Cape Town. Lushaba is a Black lecturer in the Politics department. Butler is the White head of that department. Briefly, Lushaba gave a lecture about colonialism and decolonisation. 'In order to breathe life to these themes, viz. culture of political protest and decolonisation', Lushaba invited 'Rhodes Must Fall' activists to participate in the lecture (Lushaba, 2016: 1). Butler was perturbed by these actions and conveyed his misgivings to Lushaba in writing. The latter claims that his superior perceived the incident as a failure to perform his professional duties, as the lecture was more 'political mobilisation rather than lecturing' (Lushaba 2016: 1). The matter escalated and eventually garnered the South African public's attention. My interpretation is that Butler's concerns stemmed from unease at Lushaba's violation of the racial contract. Lushaba and the activists had dared to deviate from its conditions. Lushaba had the audacity to demonstrate professional autonomy by addressing colonial issues candidly. Such a display of intellectual self-determination did not align with the notion of Black ignorance. Most notably, the fact that Lushaba was not dismissed or publicly lynched for his 'transgressions' indicates the efficacy of the decolonisation movement.

Erasure of the Black Dependency Complex

Before the revival of the decolonisation movement, rarely would a Black South African scholar assert his right to act independently for fear of adverse consequences. Cases such as Dr Lushaba's indicate that those reservations were valid. The decolonisation crusade has emboldened all Black scholars to speak up for themselves. In addition, it has drawn attention to the unravelling of the Black dependency complex that once constrained them. Broadly speaking, this condition refers to a psychological dependence on White people for validation. It implies that Black people are incapable of surviving without

soliciting 'White' intellect, innovation and expertise (Fanon, 1986). Colonisation's structural engineers cunningly indoctrinated this victim mentality into Black people. Once their consciousness was subdued through violence and terror, all social structures were fashioned to serve the interests of the colonisers (Comaroff, 1998). Essentially, the black dependency complex is not intrinsic to Black people. Rather, it is a learned helplessness that became a survival mechanism adopted after colonisation. When one is violently programmed to be passive, one gradually relinquishes every vivacious and indomitable part of oneself. One then becomes dependent on the powers that suppress these vital qualities in order to feel validated.

The existence of the dependency complex manifests itself in various unsettling ways within the South African academe. For example, the average White scholar's academic competence is presumed. Conversely, a Black scholar's academic aptitude must be vetted rigorously. He or she must meet the standards that are dictated by a system that is partial to White intellectuals. It never occurs to anyone to question the efficacy of a system that trains people for years only to undermine them due to the pigment of their skin. Instead, the burden of the blame is placed entirely on the pigmented individual. A case in point would be Dr Nosiphiwe Ngqwala, who is a pharmaceutical biochemistry lecturer at Rhodes University (Macanda, 2015). Ngqwala began lecturing at the university in 2015. She experienced malicious harassment because her English accent had a strong Xhosa cadence. Although English was not Ngqwala's native tongue, she spoke it fluently. Essentially, the Xhosa undercurrents to her speech were a reminder of the inferiority that the tertiary education system associated with Black scholars. Dr Ngqwala endured months of racial slurs, which escalated into physical threats (Macanda, 2015). Despite repeated written pleas to her direct superiors and the institution's deputy vice chancellor, no support was offered to her. The onslaught of criticism, combined with management's apathy to her predicament, demonstrates that Black scholars were dependent on the approval of their White counterparts. Evidently, Dr Ngqwala and thousands of scholars whose skin tone and accent resemble hers do not meet their standards.



Rhodes University in Grahamstown
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The actions subsequent to the decolonisation protests demonstrate that even the most powerful cognitive conditioning can be reversed. Black scholars are increasingly reclaiming the attributes that centuries of mistreatment quelled in them. This psychological emancipation is manifesting itself publicly and in unprecedented ways. For example, Songezi Booi refused to sing a portion of the national anthem that he found offensive during a graduation ceremony. Booi is currently a Black student representative at the University of the Western Cape. He purposely sat down while other academics rose to sing the entire national anthem.

Booi later stated that he opposed the Afrikaans and English verses of the anthem because they were reminiscent of the Apartheid system. Booi clarified his controversial actions thus:

We cannot merge 2 antagonistic anthems just because we want to be seen as diverse. #Die Stem and that English part must be rejected. And also, we are not only rejecting the nation

anthem, but the establishment of 1994 in its entirety because it is a compromised settlement (Booi, 2019).

Die Stem was the official national anthem during the Apartheid era. When South Africa abolished this system, it was replaced with *Nkosi Sikelela i Afrika*, which was symbolic of the conversion to democracy. However, specific verses of the old anthem were inserted into the new one. Evidently, Booi found the anthem disturbing because he felt that retaining verses from an oppressive period nullifies claims to democracy. It is somewhat hypocritical to claim to fully support an equitable new system while holding onto the remnants of a divisive one. Overall, Booi demonstrated a type of agency that was not often seen before the decolonisation movement gained momentum. Rarely would a Black scholar publicly voice his displeasure at perceived duplicity. Booi's actions confirm that the psychological repression of the Black academic is gradually ending. Black intellectuals now realise

that his or her voice matters and are unafraid to use it.

The Charade of Diplomacy

South Africa has a history of nonchalantly dismissing major injustice instead of addressing it directly. We usually circle around it clumsily and pretend it never happened. Apartheid is a prime example of this. It was a malevolent phenomenon that caused ineffable pain, particularly to people of colour. We are yet to recover from its traumatic onslaught partly because 'very few apartheid-era atrocities have been prosecuted... [due to] White denialism' (Mbembe, 2015: 4). 'Stonewalling' is one term for this continuous avoidance of uncomfortable conversations. It is essentially the coward's way out of accepting responsibility for mistakes. This constant refusal to engage causes rage and shame because the victim's pain is not being acknowledged. In fact, the victim is forced to bear the double burden of the culprit's silent haughtiness and the struggle of creating his or her own closure. Further, there is always resentment at the thought of a perpetrator walking away with impunity, pretending to be the civil party in the situation. This has been the South African pattern and our tertiary education institutions conformed to it until the resumption of decolonisation demands.

In my view, the decolonisation activists must be applauded for exposing the time-worn charade of academic diplomacy. The reality of the matter is that all South African universities presumably embraced democracy, equality and diversity in 1994. However, they contradicted themselves through actions such as brazenly displaying colonial relics, such as the Cecil John Rhodes statue. Until 2015, when the statue was defaced, it had never occurred to university executives to question the tactlessness of harbouring painful reminders of our brutal past. To my mind, that is about as considerate as exhibiting a statue of Adolf Hitler at a Jewish university or Osama Bin Laden on an American campus. Furthermore, until that point, no tangible structural adjustments had been made to atone for past inequities. No concrete efforts had been initiated to redress issues such as disparate access to higher learning. This is despite the annual countrywide student protests for free education. It must also be borne in mind that revolt

of any kind is rarely instantaneous. It is a gradually escalating occurrence. It begins with the expression of seemingly minute frustrations, which crescendo into louder complaints that ultimately erupt into violence. Essentially, university managements had the option of showing empathy to their previously disadvantaged scholars. They chose obstinate silence.

Moreover, while the university executives from the colonial era were groomed to divide and conquer and thus could not conceive of a world where equality prevailed, modern executives have no such excuse. They experienced the best of two divergent worlds. In other words, they were raised in a world that was segregated along racial lines, and thus witnessed the atrocities therein first-hand. Post 1994, however, they experienced the harmony that is an inevitable by-product of equality. However, they chose not to implement policies that would ensure that this goodwill prevailed on campuses. With very little effort on their part, significant changes could have been made. After all,

[I]t does not take nine months to change the names of buildings, to change the iconography, the economy of symbols whose force is to create or induce particular states of humiliation; pictures or images that mentally harass Black students on an everyday basis because these students know whom these images represent. (Mbembe, 2016: 29)

These seemingly minor actions could have significantly eased the repressed hurt that most Black students carry. The decolonisation campaigners penetrated this institutional impassiveness. They forced management to take ownership for normalising abnormal actions, such as mocking Black pain by treasuring racist artefacts.

Mandatory Ubuntu

Another compelling outcome of the decolonisation movement is that it forced the country's universities to practice *Ubuntu* – or at least to simulate it convincingly. This term is familiar to all South Africans. Essentially, *Ubuntu* can be understood as a philosophy on how human beings are intertwined...we come into a world obligated to others and those others are obligated to us. We are mutually obligated to support each



Students protesting during a march in July 2016 during the 'Fees must Fall' campaign
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other in our respective paths to becoming unique and singular persons. (Cornell and van Marle, 2015: 2)

In simpler terms, it means 'I am, because you are'. Before the resurrection of decolonisation activism, our universities had declared their commitment to demonstrating *Ubuntu*. In reality, they rarely did.

For example, during my days as a student from an underprivileged background, university fees were the bane of my existence. This was the case for thousands of my peers. University management were aware of our predicament, yet assistance was never forthcoming. Instead, my destitute peers and I were treated as clients. The policies in place were geared towards rendering a service and our options were to pay for it or vacate the institution. There was never any contemplation of the historical circumstances that had rendered

us beggars who were pleading for an education. My financial challenges were mine alone. When the yearly financial aid protests ensued, the entire campus separated across racial and economic lines. The impoverished students (who were predominantly Black) would march through the campus, singing anti-Apartheid songs. The affluent students would observe the free entertainment and revel in the reprieve from tedious lectures. The aura of disconnectedness was always tangible on these occasions. Not once did I feel empathy from the aloof spectators or the management who only intervened when the protests became violent.

It was always astounding to me that the funds were released *only after* violent threats had been made. In those instances, I always questioned the university's motives and their commitment to practicing *Ubuntu*. If *Ubuntu* is about feeling each other's pain, why let me suffer until I resorted to my baser human instincts? If you have the resources to help, why not offer them to me before I demeaned myself in this way? In fact, I would argue that the disillusionment with our universities' duplicitous application of *Ubuntu* precipitated the decolonisation riots. If *Ubuntu* was being practiced sincerely, the 'Fees Must Fall' strikes would not have been necessary. The fees would have fallen on their own, not under duress. The 'Rhodes Must Fall' incident would not have occurred. Universities would have been considerate enough to confiscate all reminders of colonial brutality. Further, they would have *enforced* their equality policies more stringently. Professing to do so (through policies that the bulk of the student body never reads) is one thing. Ensuring that this is actually practiced is another matter entirely.

The decolonisation advocates ensured that universities would practice *Ubuntu* earnestly. Their relentless protests guaranteed that problems that once plagued disadvantaged students became everyone's concern. For example, financial complaints were once the exclusive territory of students from poor backgrounds. However, the almost yearlong turbulence of 'Fees Must Fall' saw students from all walks of life banding together. This yielded the unprecedented outcome of free education for undergraduate students. Further, significant strides towards equality were made. For example, permitting post-graduate

students to write their theses in their indigenous languages was unheard of. Not only is it allowed now, it is strongly endorsed as was the case with Dr Hleze Kunju, who wrote his doctorate in Xhosa (Mahlakoana, 2017). Overall, for the first time in history, all scholarly voices matter. Tentative but significant steps towards greatness for all academics, and not just an elite few, are steadily being made.

Conclusion

In sum, decolonisation is the current 'buzzword' at South African universities. Although it is a highly polarising subject, I reiterate my wholehearted support of this cause. As an emerging scholar, I am relieved that it has initiated overdue dialogue about issues that drastically affect our tertiary institutions. These challenges have always existed but were indefinitely deferred. They include, but are not limited to, the past and current invisibility of Black scholars, racial divisions and inequalities, psychological repression of scholars, feigned diplomacy by university management current and superficial *Ubuntu* declarations. I have explored the painful consequences of disregarding these concerns. Importantly, I believe I have illustrated how vital the decolonisation enterprise is to the resolution of the aforementioned challenges. It is encouraging to know that I am part of a fiery generation of academics that was instrumental in creating an equitable higher education system for all. ■

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