

# Dancing to a lyrical tune

**Natalia Molebatsi** spends regular time outside of South Africa. This gives her a bird's eye view on her country's poetry scene. In an interview with **Makhosazana Xaba** she explores her attitude to South African poetry and its limitations and richness.

***Congratulations on your debut collection 'Sardo Dance'. You dedicated the poem to Silvana, who is she and why is it the title of your book?***

Sardinia is well known for its beauty geography-wise as well as the hospitality of her people, and its dancing. So I asked a woman, Silvana, I was staying with to show me how they do some of the famous Sardo dance. I was interested in this dancing as it is done in a circle by men and women holding hands – this symbolises unity, as well as coming from death into rebirth. Silvana mentioned that she was forbidden to dance by her father. But she didn't have any resentment because she watched her brothers dance. But I feel that this is the story of many women globally.

Dance in this way is used as a metaphor for freedom. When I submitted this collection to my editor, she read through the manuscript, and said that 'Sardo Dance' speaks to her the most as it talks to every woman and every little forgotten or forbidden action or voice. Many women, when they take their lives and choices in their hands, are regarded as rebels or outcasts (and sometimes called bitches). They are made to feel they do not belong.

Dance is also used to go beyond borders. Sardinia as a location is at

'the middle of it all'. It is an island outside of Italy, but it is outside many other countries that are close by, such as Tunisia and France. It is therefore used as a metaphor for an outsider, one who does not quite belong.

***When I read the poem, I could see Silvana in the eyes of many women. How would you describe your views on women?***

As an African, I know dance is vital in the lives of Africans, both men and women. In South Africa, song and dance were used as a means to shake the load of oppression off our muddy hands and sweaty palms. So I was shocked when Silvana told me she was not allowed to dance in her own home by her own father. It also says to us as Africans, that we need to dismiss the stereotype that African women are oppressed and non-African women are not, particularly those who live in Europe.

***Last year you compiled and edited a vibrant volume of poetry called 'We Are', what motivated this and how did you choose contributors?***

'We Are' came because of all the people who inspired me, artists. It was initially supposed to be black women between 19 and 30, but I learned that words can never be contained. I therefore went by word

of mouth, to those I could reach and those who could reach me. Some people did not have time, while others forgot and I never checked on them. It was however important that we share our experiences of South Africa, and the world. They are different, but affirming.

***How would you describe the poetry scene in South Africa post-1994?***

We are not there yet, because we still don't go beyond our local into a global context. Many poets focus on rhyme and not the meaning of each word. Our poetry has to be justifiable and it has to be defensible, word for word.

But, the growth is amazing, given the short space of time. We need more and more people to speak their minds. This journey is so affirming, because you can look at your words on the backdrop of another wordsmith and not copy but improve your own.

Women poets are strong and they are breaking down barriers of domination. We have many voices but there are still issues we are not exploring like the exploitation of workers the world over. We are not talking about Palestine and Bhopal where the gas fumes are still killing people 20 years later. Same as in Somalia. Somalia is today a dumping site for multinational companies. We



need to hear these come out of our poetry.

It is not enough to celebrate black women's curves and afros, we need to go beyond. We have forgotten Boipatong and the Jukskei river where shacks are mounted. We need to talk about this wrong world system that is based on debt, and not community growth.

I like that we are mixing styles from all centres, margins and corners. There is definitely more space for imagination. We need to get out of our backyard such as how we are still obsessed with the races that were created by apartheid, for example. People are still black, white, coloured and Indian. And the fact that there are more poor whites, should not mean to us black people that things have changed for the better. It simply means that there are much, much more poor black or indigenous African people.

We also need to create spaces that evolve from the ones before. And we also need more support from governments. Artists, poets do not think in lines, and they don't always think with their heads but with their hearts as well. They need to be accommodated into policy decisions.

***Who are your favourite poets in South Africa and why?***

You, because you tell stories through your poems. Lebo Mashile because she takes poetry to where it has never been before, she is daring with her art. Gabeba Baderoon is so intense yet her words move on one's emotion like silk does on skin. I love Malika

Ndlovu for her truth. Lucille Greef I like because she takes women's lives in Khayelitsha and zooms so much in through her language and style that we begin to see pictures of them in their yards while they are looking after AIDS orphans.

***You travel to Italy regularly because of your partner. How does the South African poetry scene compare to the Italian one and who are your favourite Italian poets?***

Compared to South Africa, poetry in Italy is decadent. A few poets write in dialect and in other official languages of Italy, such as Friulano and Sardo.

There is Tubet and Stranos Elementos. They have however moved very much into music, that you can't just say they are poets,

which is why poetry is so in the centre of many things we do. Poets in Italy are not pushing the limits set out by the powers that are, that is the difference to South African poetry.

***I have had the privilege of watching you sing on stage. How would you describe your music and how does it influence your poetry and vice versa?***

I write and perform poetry, but the song just breaks into what I say. This resembles how in Africa we start to sing when we are overcome by emotion or pain or joy. The singing is never planned or rehearsed. In fact I try to leave it out. I am inspired by singers and believe that in my next life I will be a singer.

***You were born and bred in Thembisa, what of this led you on the poetry road?***

Poetry is about time and space, and these aspects of life are stolen from you the moment you are born in the township. People yearn still for a bigger and better piece of land. And most people spend half their morning and half their evening on transportation to and from work. That yearning for space and time, creates other spaces and 'times' that allow the poet to imagine and dream. These dreams come out on paper. Paper has all the space I need to pour out my frustrations, but also to be critiqued so that I can create other spaces. Life is hard in the township as you know. Things are more intense, and in order not to break, one has to find solace in the space and possibility provided by poetry and literature. <sup>LB</sup>

*Makbosazana Xaba has published two books of poetry. She does regular interviews with South Africa's creative women for SALB.*

**catch me falling/flying***for andy*

i am innocent  
baby and old  
wise woman  
on the same ride so  
catch me  
if you can

i am falling  
and flying  
at the same angle  
so catch me  
if you can

i follow angels  
and demons  
in their secret  
parades soaring  
and digging for  
a higher muse  
so catch me if you can

Natalia Molebatsi