

Meditation on womanhood

Poetry of Malika Ndlovu



Stillbirth, being coloured, women and their experiences of the new South Africa, domestic violence, women enjoying other women – these are some of the themes of **Malika Ndlovu's** poetry and drama. She talks to **Makhosazana Xaba** about her creative journey.

What did publishing your first book of poetry *Born in Africa But* in 2000 mean to you?

When my poems from as far back as my mid-teens into late twenties, finally grew into a body of work that a publisher was willing to invest in, I could assert myself as a professional writer. Even though I had operated that way for a few years before, through readings, performances and poems being published locally and internationally, *Born in Africa But* was my initiation into a new league, a deeper confidence in putting my words and deepest thoughts out there. I always knew I had the seeds of books inside me, this first allowed me to trust that they will continue to manifest.

'Invisible Earthquake', a woman's journal through stillbirth is a poetic memoir of one of the most painful human experiences, what has publishing this work done for you and others?

In 2009, six years after the stillbirth of my only daughter, I found myself in a bookstore behind a microphone proudly holding a copy of my book published by the courageous new South African women's press

Modjadji Books. It felt like a dream, a rebirthing. I needed to ground myself with deep breathing. The room was full of women: friends, writers, mothers, midwives, gynaecologists, specialist obstetricians, social workers, bereavement counsellors and most significantly for me – mothers who through stillbirth or miscarriage, knew every ounce of what I've been through.

Since then I have read in a variety of spaces, from women's expo-type stages, to bookshops and most rewarding for me, in a maternity hospital which deals with up to four stillbirths per week. Each time, I have asked myself which part of our story, hers and mine, would be most useful. Each time I stepped in with that healing intention and without fail, felt flooded with gratitude (the essence of my daughter's name, Bongiwe) for the opportunity to name and honour her, for the synchronicities that followed and the privilege of strangers opening up to me and breaking their long held silences.

When I watched you read at the Cape Town Book Fair, I felt the audience pulsate with every word. Can you describe what

goes through your heart and head when you read from this personal and painful book?

Most times I feel viscerally connected to each journal entry that I read, taking me back to those moments in the cycles of sorrow and returning to life. I respond as instinctively to the Q and A sessions that usually follow, from my gut and heart, acknowledging that I do not have all the answers, only the truth of my experience. Afterwards I generally need sleep and solitude, to retrieve my balance! This public exposure through the book is therapeutic, deeply rewarding and liberating.

The book now speaks for itself, for Iman Bongiwe, my family and for me, so that I don't have to keep pulling back my skin to tell our story again and again.

Please share the first memory that comes to you about Iman Bongiwe.

I am filled with immense love and gratitude for my child that without being known to many, being so physically fragile and only 'passing through' has made such enormous impact on so many lives. She is my greatest teacher.

Early this year you were a co-curator of The Badilisha Poetry X-Change, previously the Spier Poetry Festival at Stellenbosch. What does Badilisha mean? What can we expect of it in the future?

Badilisha is a kiSwahili word meaning change, transform, exchange and was chosen by my co-curator Lorelle Viegi and I, as a brand that would communicate most effectively what this project aims to achieve.

It's an African and Diaspora poetry intervention rooted in the commitment to facilitate multi-layered, authentic exchange between local and international poets, between established and aspirant poets, between the poets and growing, diverse audiences.

It was initiated in Cape Town but its scope and content is in accordance with the Africa Centre's overall intention to "grow spatially and conceptually over a period of several years, emerging as a multi-sited space where the visual, intellectual and performance cultures of Africa South and North are celebrated, studied and brought to life for diverse audiences in innovative ways."

In its third year under our passionate curatorship, the project has evolved from a Summer wineland experience with satellite events in 2008, to an urban Winter hub of poetry and related activities on significant city sites. It also incorporates an Africa Day commemorative event in 2009, a late 2009 and mid 2010 condensed version of both these formats plus the launching of an online poetry radio platform. This cyber space will extend the African poetry celebration and conversation to wherever African and Diaspora poets and poetry lovers find themselves in the world.

You are also a distinguished playwright, what plays have you written and directed and what was the motivation behind each?

U-Voice was a one-woman show giving voice to a range of individual and universal experiences of women, weaving poetic and dreamlike ties between the compact scenes, each one a window into a revolutionary moment or stage in a woman's life. It's a protest piece using satire, drama and poetry to raise gender issues from domestic violence to global feminism.

A Coloured Place my most successful play, speaks to universal human experience, self-determination and the search for belonging. It honours those 'mixed-therefore-historically-invisible' people who shared my birthplace and all those South Africans who inherited the racial classification 'coloured' in its many strains.

In 2004, with women's theatre collective Mothertongue, I scripted a multi-media interactive production *Uhambo - Pieces of a Dream* using scenes the cast had drafted based on interviews with women taxi-commuters and their experiences after ten years of democracy.

Sister Breyani my most recent play is about five sisters who reunite over a weekend, for the first time in almost three years. This play is dedicated to and inspired by my mother Cecelia Anastacia Dunn and her four sisters and to their mother, a grandmother I never met yet who lives through all of us, the late Cecelia Paula Dunn.

What are the most memorable comments that people have given your work and why are these significant?

"My daughter Jade in grade 11 will present her interpretation of some of your poetry and extracts from

your *A Coloured Place* for her Matric Drama assessment. Our hope is that her presentation will have an effect on her audience similar with what we experienced watching your play at the Playhouse performed by a sublime cast. Thank you for assisting Jade in wowing her audience and examiner."

"My Dear Sista, Malika... How do I thank you when the gift you have given me is priceless...? When at first I was given my copy of *Invisible Earthquake*, my body began to tremor, I was overwhelmed by unfamiliar emotions, and without even having turned a page, my soul heard you calling..."

These comments are deeply humbling and reassure me that I am growing as an artist and that I am manifesting my personal mantra 'healing through creativity.'

Most of your work centres on womanhood, why is this important?

I write in response to wherever there is a silencing or avoidance of issues and people who I believe need to be seen and heard. Life has been my teacher and shaped my responses to it through my art.

My lessons and sources of inspiration are rooted in my reality: growing up as a black South African girl, an only daughter, as a teenage mother, as a wife, a mother who aspires to raising three well-balanced sons in a patriarchal world, a woman living through the transformative grief of a stillborn daughter, as a woman constantly nourished, supported and blown away by the beauty and power of women around me and rising to the fulfilment of their potential against all odds, at home and in the world. **LB**

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

Truth Is Both Spirit And Flesh

*Truth is both spirit and flesh
 It is the hotel bill or photograph discovered in a pocket
 The open mouth saying nothing in defence
 It is the fact splattered across the courtroom
 Exposed to cameras, microphones and strangers ears
 It is the addict at the brink of suicide
 Frozen between picking up a fix or the telephone
 It is the vibration in your chest and stomach pit
 That hits when you hear or read a real guru's words
 It is the breath absent from the body of a beloved
 Who will not wake up or ever laugh into your eyes*

*Truth is the child speaking without thinking
 Unaware of the adults they have suddenly stripped naked
 It is the cut, the scar, the wrinkle, the rash, the swelling
 The illness revealed in the face, in the shaking
 The toxin reflected in the skin
 It is the uninhibited hug projected from the heart
 The electricity of a long time lover's touch*

*Truth is the smoke or the stench
 That cannot be dismissed or disguised
 The bone that waits decades to be found
 The memory in our cells
 The irrepressible rising of tears
 It is the current in our veins
 The universal rhythm of our hearts
 It can be understood in any language
 It lives within the word and the sound*

*Truth is liberation and source of great pain
 It is both water and fire
 The visible and the invisible
 It is the written and the unwritten
 The space and the line
 It is different
 It is the same
 It is buried
 Yet it will not die
 It is the silence before
 Beneath and beyond
 The lie
 It waits for you and I
 It will not die*

Truth is both spirit and flesh

Malika Ndlovu