

No stereotypes of women

Bandile Gumbi is an impressive self-published poet and arts activist. **Makhosazana Xaba** spoke to her about how she became a poet and how she sees herself.



When did you start writing poetry?

In high school. I was lucky in a sense. I had good English teachers which was a first language in the school I was in. And that got me interested in poetry. I was reading, I was not writing until around maybe '99/2000. I thought maybe I can do this and I just wrote stuff. I started writing letters to myself. That's how I started 'cause this idea of a journal that you write everyday, I couldn't do it. So I thought, you know when I feel like it, I'll just write a letter to myself just to prop myself up when I'm feeling down. I just write a *Dear Bandile* thing and a friend of mine at the time, Thokozani, was writing poetry and I was reading his work. I don't remember that time actually that I said "Okay, now I'm writing a poem", but it just carried on from those letters.

That's an interesting idea: writing to yourself. Have you kept them?

I don't have any of those things. I think at that... 'round 2000/'99 I lost a lot of work, my first works, because I was not taking it seriously. So I'd write and I'd put it

somewhere, it would get thrown away in the process. So I hardly have work from then, except one but I didn't like it. I wrote it when I was in Jo'burg 'cause I moved to Jo'burg for about eight months in 2000, and that's when I saw a poetry on stage for the first time. There's this thing: people write poetry and go on stage and read it and recite it to other people. I was so excited. So some of that work I still have.

Let's talk about your self-published book, 'Pangs of Initiation', how did it come about?

It was around my second or third year of a social science degree in Durban that I started hanging out with these friends, around the same age, we were a collective of artists and we used to meet at this house in Glenwood because one of our friends was staying there. Basically people would work in the same space – writing, painting, playing musical instruments, whatever. And we started having an exhibition and a poetry session at the house. And from that, Gabi a painter, was planning a solo exhibition. Then I thought, oh I

could publish my own book.

Luckily when I was in Cape Town earlier that year, 2004, I went out to a poetry evening one night and there was this guy who was saying, I can help people who want to put together... publish, self-publish their work. This is what I do. I'm a poet as well." So I said, "Okay, someone I need to know." I got back to Durban, I called him and we chat and we get along fine... So ya, that's how it started.

Some people associate self-publishing with poor quality work, how did people respond to your book?

People have been very positive about that aspect of it. I don't know how most people feel about the work itself. There's been lots of encouragement that it's self-published.

Most people didn't know that's possible. They ask me "How's it possible?"

Self-publishing is a very long and involved process, would you do it again?

Oh definitely! I learned a lot during that process.

I am curious about this poem in Pangs 'Sisterhood of Complex Identities', tell me about it.

My friends in high school used to call me a feminist. But there was a point when I was like, you know, "Why do boys have so much freedom?" You know, it used to irritate me. I didn't grow up with boys. We were four sisters when we grew up. But later on I found out I've got half brothers. And so the only man really in most of my life, was my father. It was just him so, in a sense we had more freedom than my female friend. So I'm like, "Guys you can't do anything. You need always to go home because you're a girl this, you're a girl that, you're a girl this." I'm like, "Why? do we have to go through this?" And at a point I got pissed off. Why can't we have friendships with boys? Either you like him or you don't or it's about sex. And, as a result, I used to fight. Not physically with boys, just verbally.

So when I was writing the piece it was just all those things happening. I mean really, it's not that I want to be a boy, no. But I would like to have the same space, you know to do things. Even if it's just sleeping longer in the morning and not having a curfew or you know all these things. All the chores... well, you know the chores. And the fact that every time you're in a relationship you can't be more intelligent than a boy. It's impossible. It doesn't work that way. So I used to fight hey!

And the complexity, what is your experience of it?

The complexity is in accepting that all of this is gendered. It's accepting that there are no stereotypes of women. You know women who are older I think women become more themselves. And I realised that, to be this girl, it's a camouflage. A person is much more... many more things than that. They've (women and girls)

tried many things which they don't talk about in public because of this thing of being feminine and being a girl. And as I grew up and I had more very close female friends who didn't subscribe to being a woman, didn't have the dream of a car and two kids and a husband. Their lives were not actually at that level.

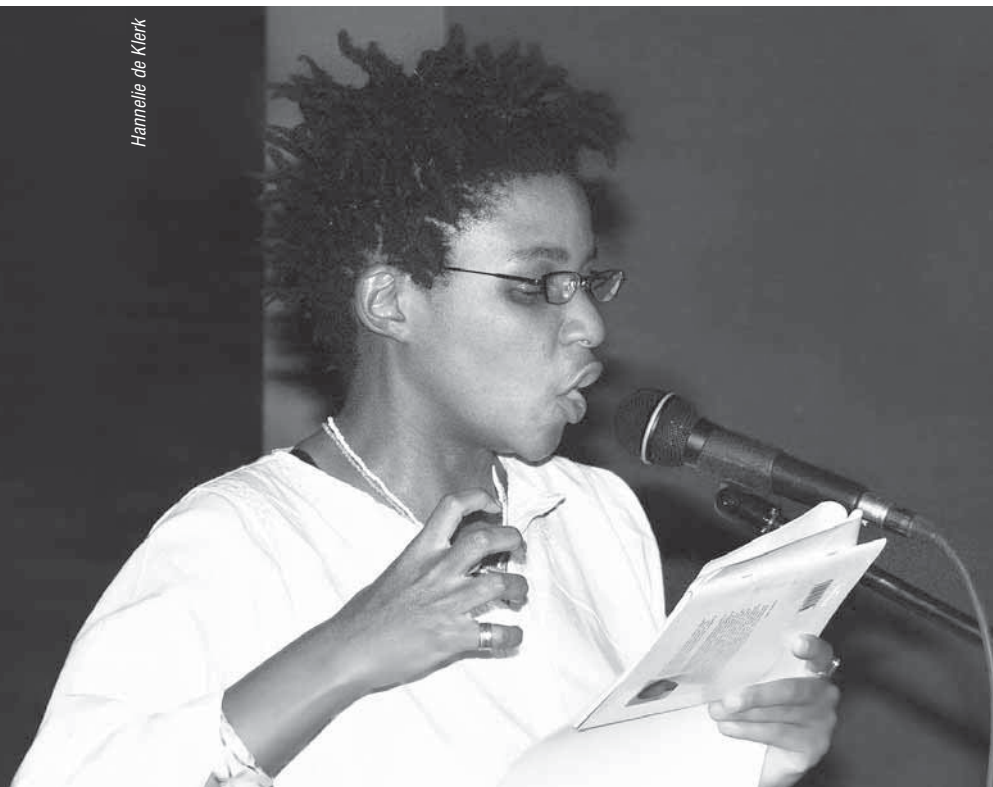
The complexity is also that you start questioning your sexuality. Yet another thing of saying, "It's not that I'm not attracted but there must be more to this in life. There must be more to relationships." This was when? 2000? When did I write this? I'm trying to figure out whether it's around the same time or not. Oh, there's another thing that, at that time, pisses me off. It comes from that labelling of feminism, it's these assumptions that you're anti-social, you are angry.

You are based in Johannesburg, what do you do for a living and tell me about the Dead Revolutionaries Club (DRC) that you are a part of.

I am the national coordinator for the Visual Arts Network of South Africa. The DRC is an alternative forum for people to come together to hold conversations on the visual arts, some intellectual thoughts about what's happening in the visual arts. On Saturday people come for art classes. We're preparing a web-site for people to write about the culture field, whatever they are writing, whatever format they are writing in. Anyone interested in visual arts is welcome. LB

Bandile Gumbi is a KwaZulu-Natal poet now living in Johannesburg. She has published a poetry collection 'Pangs of Initiation' (2004) and her work also appears in a poetry collection 'Basadzi Voices' (2006).

Hannelie de Klerk



Bread and Buttered

*They have cast a shadow over our dead
Like fools
We are sent to fetch the moon from still
waters.*

*I feed these words to heart
to be swallowed whole.*

*I pledge my womanhood
At the alter of our rebirth
Hoping tangible time-change
Will not let these words ferment.*

*We have once
Delimited our convictions
Alienated our defences
Lived with dust
Worked in dust
Ate dust
Dusted ourselves.*

Bandile Gumbi

ATTACK!

It once took a gunshot to disturb the peace

*Shield those eyes
Close the ears
Stay in silence.*

*They do not come with machine guns
Not anymore.*

*They say "poison the mind, where there are no witnesses, a
clean murder"
We are on the verge of self-destruction
Pleasure junkies, selfish and sad.*

ATTACK!

*Shield those eyes
Close the ears
Stay in silence.*

The streets are lined with rubbish, churches, beer-halls ...

*They do not come with machine guns
Not anymore*

*The bread price is just beyond the poverty line
Starve the belly
Let them drink Castle
Its penance for the sins of their great-mothers and fore-fathers.*

ATTACK!

*Shield those eyes
Close the ears
Stay in silence*

*OOPS! Sorry
I did not see you down there
The streets are crowded
What don't you go home?*

*They do not come with machine guns
For us
Not anymore*

*We are free to sleep on door-ways, beg for our food, kiss the ass
of the money machine.*

Bandile Gumbi