

Tongues of their Mothers

Letting women tell their stories

Makhosazana Xaba rings out the voices of other women through her own highly personal words in her new poetry book *Tongues of their Mothers*. **Bandile Gumbi** finds out what inspires her.

The book is divided into seasons of the year, can you elaborate on your relationship to them. I grew up in the Natal Midlands where the seasons of the year were very distinct. I have had an emotional relationship with the seasons since childhood thus have grown to realise that they mirror my emotional state. Summer is the most beautiful of all seasons in the vibrancy of its colours and movement of people. Spring is the season of new beginnings and when the poems come. Autumn is the start of the decay with the leaves falling and the dulling of the natural landscape and winter I associate with misery and alienation. Winter is the most unproductive season of the year.

How have shifts in weather affected your writing? I'm thinking of the poem 'Spring', when you say 'Birds I've never seen open my ears/before my alarm clock opens my eyes'. It is October and the poems have not come and spring has been the season of poems arriving. Thus the delay in the seasons has affected my writing, but with the birth of *Tongues of their Mothers* my energies have been in nurturing the new book. The focus has been more on the book than in writing new poems.

Why is autumn the beginning of the book?

There was no particular logic in the order of the seasons. I thought that because for instance summer being the ultimate season in my life it does not necessarily need to be at the end. The thought of starting the book with winter was too depressing. It was also not going according to the norm of spring, summer, autumn and winter.

What are the themes of this book and what is your relationship with them as opposed to your first book *These Hands*?

Themes in this book are a continuation of *These Hands*. The change has been in the creative process. With the first book I was writing through my personality. The story and events captured were interpreted as Khosi's interaction with them. In *Tongues of their Mothers* I have taken care in writing through characters thus adding more voices in addition to my own. When I was preparing the manuscript I spent time in revising each poem line by line, which was not the process with the first book. After the first book I started reading about writing poetry as opposed to only reading about the writing processes that spoke to the way I write.

My impression of the poems is that they are writing about moments as opposed to big narratives. Can you elaborate. I believe in small intimate narratives, which tell the hidden ordinary stories. In most cases those are women's stories as they usually deal with important everyday lives of their families and communities. I do not think poetry is the medium to tell meta-narratives by. If I ever have to write one it will have to be in a volume where that narrative can be divided into small intimate ordinary narratives.

What is the relevance of the glossary?

The glossary broadens the audience of the book as it explains language-specific details. It is a means of including historical background of the people who are mentioned in the books for instance Francis Rasuge and Fanny Anne Viola Eddy. It was my way of communicating with family and friends, as I wanted them to holistically understand the poems' meaning. My daughter does not understand Afrikaans as she is studying English and isiZulu at school. My primary concern was my family and immediate community rather than society at large.

What is the relationship between the cover picture and the poems?

Firstly it took a long time for my publishers to find an image that spoke to me. They work with a graphic designer and the images they presented did not capture the book. I am a lover of nature, not necessarily animals, but the mountains and especially the sea. I wanted an active image, which captured the active process of nature and the wave crashing on the rocks brought that vitality of nature.

How does the title poem *Tongues of their Mothers* encapsulate the book?

The poem is about women in history who have been spoken for and spoken about. The stories of their lives are usually written in foreign languages not in their mother tongues and dialects. This makes their stories removed from their realities through interpretations largely by people who do not understand those women's cultural communities. This book is an active intervention in letting a woman tell her story through her tongue and bring light to this historical wrong. In that sense the title poem encapsulates the purpose of the book, of a woman telling her story.

UKZN Press published the book, how has that relationship been?

The people I have worked with are nice. At the beginning when we were discussing the creative process they were very supportive. The most positive relationship has been with my editor. This editor has the ability to understand the way I think, has been able to be a proactive guide in helping me achieve my goals with the book and him being a poet as well helped. I

am not happy with the marketing of the book. It was published in June and it is now October and there hasn't been a launch. Some bookstores have orders and the publishers have not delivered the books. There seem to be a bulk of books in certain bookstore and none in others.

Why have you taken on the task of being our conscience and the burden of sharing your vulnerability?

When you ask this question it sounds like someone said take this burden. Poetry comes easily to me and I feel like I have to honour it. It is voices in my head and with time I learnt that I have to honour them and write for them to stop. The simple answer is that I am living, I interact with people, and things affect me. It's also fun! I love the idea of bringing something into being. Coming from the NGO sector, I wanted to see the difference and to get feedback. In taking this on I was not sure if it was making a difference in the world. But I realised that the mere process of doing it was exciting and you have no idea who you affect with your words. Reading poetry or reading anything is a very private thing. When I think about the books that have made a difference in my life, how many of the authors have I ever told that they made a difference in my life? It is important to just enjoy it and not to measure the impact but to just trust.

As a person who is familiar with the South African poetry landscape, how do you see it and how do you envision its future?

The one thing I am completely excited about, for the first time I think in South African history seven black women published individual



Hannelie de Klerk

books of poetry in one year. If you have to ask these women I think you will get different responses on why they have published poetry, but collectively it says there is an opening of space. It will be interesting to see what picture will come out in ten years if you take the sample of the seven women. There is a new thing of people reading black women poetry and saying they can relate to it. It is a voice that was not there before which is introducing people to poetry and something to be continuously excited about.

LB

Makhosazana Xaba is the author of 'These Hands' (Timbila, 2005) which is being translated into French. She holds an MA in Creative Writing from the University of the Witwatersrand and is winner of the 2005 Deon Hofmeyr Award for Creative Writing. She is working on a biography of Noni Jabavu, who died this year. She works for an NGO focusing on health and lives in Jozi with her daughter Nala.

Bandile Gumbi is a writer and poet.

Tongues of their Mothers

I wish to write an epic poem about Sarah Baartman, one that will be silent on her capturers, torturers and demolishers.

It will say nothing of the experiments, the laboratories and the displays or even the diplomatic dabbles that brought her remains home, eventually,

This poem will sing of the Gamtoos Valley holding imprints of her baby steps.

It will contain rhymes about the games she played as a child, stanzas will have names of her friends, her family, her community.

It will borrow from every single poem ever written about her, conjuring up her wholeness: her voice, dreams, emotions and thoughts.

I wish to write an epic poem about uMnkabayi kaJama Zulu, one that will be silent on her nephew, Shaka, and her brother, Senzangakhona.

It will not even mention Nandi. It will focus on her relationship with her sisters Mawa and Mmama, her choice not to marry, her preference not to have children and her power as a ruler.

It will speak of her assortment of battle strategies and her charisma as a leader.

It will render a compilation of all the pieces of advice she gave to men of abaQulusi who bowed to receive them, smiled to thank her, but in public never acknowledged her, instead called her a mad witch.

I wish to write an epic poem about Daisy Makiwane, one that will be silent on her father, the Reverend Elijah.

It will focus on her relationship with her sister Cecilia and the conversations they had in the privacy of the night, how they planned to make history and defy convention.

It will speak the language of algebra, geometry and trigonometry, then switch to news, reports, reviews and editorials.

It will enmesh the logic of numbers with the passion that springs from words, capturing her unique brand of pioneer for whom the country was not ready.

I wish to write an epic poem about Princess Magogo Constance Zulu, one that will be silent on her son, Gatsha Mangosuthu Buthelezi.

It will focus on her music and the poetry in it, the romance and the voice that carried it through to us. It will describe the dexterity of her music-making fingers and the rhythm of her body grounded on valleys, mountains and musical rivers of the land of amaZulu. I will find words to embrace the power of her love songs that gave women dreams and fantasies to wake up and hold on to and a language of love in the dialect of their own mothers.

I wish to write an epic poem about Victoria Mxenge, one that will be silent on her husband Griffiths.

It will focus on her choice to flee from patients, bedpans and doctors. This poem will flee from the pages and find a home in the sky. It will float below the clouds, automatically changing fonts and sizes and translating itself into languages that match each reader.

It is a poem that will remind people of Qonce that her umbilical cord fertilized their soil.

It will remind people of uMlazi that her blood fertilized their soil. It will remind her killers that we shall never, ever forget.

I wish to write an epic poem about Nomvula Glenrose Mbatha, one that will be silent on my father, her husband Reuben Benjamin Xaba.

It will focus on her spirit, one that refused to fall to pieces, rekindling the fire she made from ashes no one was prepared to gather. This poem will raise the departed of Magogo, Nquthu, Mgungundlovana, iNanda, Healdtown, Utrecht, kwaMpande, Ndeleni and Ashdown, so that they can sit around it as it glows and warm their hands while they marvel at this fire she made from ashes no one was prepared to gather.

These are just some of the epic poems I wish to write about women of our world, in the tongues of their mothers. I will present the women in forms that match their foundations using metaphors of moments that defined their beings and similes that flow through our seasons of eternity. But I am not yet ready to write these poems.

Makbosazana Xaba