

In Conversation: Living Language, Living Writing: A profile of Sindiwe Magona

Elaine Salo speaks with *Sindiwe Magona*

Elaine Salo: Why do you think it is important for you to be identified as a black woman writer in South Africa?

Sindiwe Magona: I became aware of how few black women writers there are in this country in 1990, when my first book *To my Childrens' Children* was published. I attended a writers' conference at the University of Cape Town shortly after the book was released. There I learned that there were only five – can you imagine – only five black African women authors published in South Africa. There were Noni Jabavu, Miriam Tladi, Ellen Kuzwayo and Maggie Resha. It is unlikely that there were any others. I knew that there were only a few of us, but that it was so bad [...] it was shocking! (In 1990) there were other women writers, but they were white and mostly from privileged backgrounds. In 2010 I will celebrate my twentieth year as a writer. In relation to these other women writers and the legacy they come from, I still consider myself as a 'new' writer. However amongst my own people, I would consider myself as an experienced writer.

ES: At what point did you consider writing?

SM: The 1970s and 1980s were times of great turmoil in the country. At that point I examined myself. I experienced incredible anger about others writing about us. I asked myself "How dare they write about you?". I told myself, that shouldn't stop me from writing about myself. At that time I was a teacher of History and isiXhosa at a high school and I was reading such painful things – about the (then) government's attempts to attract immigrants from Poland and other places in Europe to come here to beef-up the white [population's] numbers. They described us as 'a large reservoir of cheap labour'. I thought to myself, "This cheap labour was my father, my mother, my people!". I realized that the large reservoir they spoke of, were people's lives that were

being put up for sale on the market like slave labour – emotionally, it was the same thing. The outcomes were the same as slave labour. At that time, the day you died, you did not even manage to own a bicycle. That was my father's experience. A lot was being written about us but not written by us. We may not be for example, a professor of anthropology or history, but there is value in those like me writing about our experiences, who did not study Apartheid but lived it. That is why my first book is entitled *To my Children's Children*. This is my legacy to the next generation. This is my way of telling them 'this is who we are from our point of view'. I remember an old idiom that says 'the story of the hunt is never complete, until the lion tells its tale'. I am a black woman and I am writing from a black woman's perspective. The gatekeepers to publication are white people. Yet if a white person writes about black people, who will pick up the errors? Sometime, even in the best of books about black people, I find myself saying "How can they say that?". For example, there is a children's book showing a black child in the rural areas watching TV. Now tell me where do you find ordinary black people with TVs in the rural areas? But the author felt that she had to put it in the story about a rural child. These are the false representations I am speaking of.

ES: What difference do you think your perspective would make to the reader?

SM: The value in my story is the authenticity of my voice, of me bearing witness. This is my truth that I write, of what matters to me. You know living in the Western Cape, I am constantly aware of the great natural beauty surrounding me. I would also like to write of the beauty of this natural environment, of the beauty of daffodils; but then I think of the children deprived of seeing this beauty, of the ocean, of the mountains – who live here but who have never enjoyed it. Natural beauty is also accompanied by pain of those who, because they have never enjoyed it, are blind to the importance of its protection. Until people are able to experience, fall in love with nature, they will never know why it is important to look after it. Unless we make this beautiful natural environment accessible to most South Africans, we will not bother to protect it. We have caused alienation and now, in this new South Africa, we want wholeness without mending what is broken. Before the advent of colonialism and Apartheid, the rural areas were healthy for people and animals. With the coming of the West to Africa, the unequal relationship between these two cultures has not been kind to the indigenous people here or to the colonialists and their offspring. People now live with want, where

there never was want before. We have moved from an indigenous culture of collaboration between each other and with nature to one of competition. Unlike the old saying, “it takes a village to raise a child”, the modern village can never raise children, because competition has no harmony. Competition is about wanting to thrive at all cost, about the survival of the strongest over the weakest. It places children, women, men and animals in jeopardy. In the past, amongst the Xhosa-speaking people, we had a practice called *Inqoma*. When you have had enough, you give to the less privileged. If you have cattle and have ploughed your land, you go and plough the lands of those without cattle. Then everyone will have a harvest and no-one will steal your harvest! The dictum was “if I had, others would not go hungry for as long as I had”. It is not like that anymore. That harmony has been broken and needs to be restored.

ES: How do you address the theme of chaos or of disharmony in your work?

SM: In the book *Beauty's Gift*, I examine who we are at this moment. I say that we are looking at death and devastation of intimacy between couples, of relationships in families, of faithful women being betrayed, of these women dying of AIDS. I am asking how much further intimate and therefore how much more vulnerable can you be? In the past, betrayal of intimate relationships was considered a wrong against the person you cared for. Now betrayal of intimacy means murder, killing the person you love. Yet we are still having unprotected sex and killing. In the era of HIV/AIDS, you may not be holding a gun, but you are still capable of killing a person, because sex has become a deadly weapon. Black masculinity is corroded and we must address it by naming the crisis, by examining what a black man is now to a black woman.

ES: Are you more hopeful about our future as South Africans now in the post-Apartheid moment?

SM: We must move on from condemnation of each other as South Africans, and as black people especially if we choose to move out of the townships. You must remember that the Cape Flats¹ were forced upon us. Now we have a choice to move out or to stay. But many people who don't have a choice to move out of the townships are still disenfranchised. In 1994, I wrote a poem called '*Fear of Change*' which is all about the disappointment that will come after the honeymoon is over, and about coping with still being disenfranchised in an economic sense. I am also addressing white South Africans who are asking about black South Africans: “What's the matter with them now? Why can't they just get on with it now that Apartheid is over?”. But there are all

these social ills, there is the deep psychic wounding and I am asking each one of us: “What are you doing about it?”. The new dispossessed in this country who are the poor, are also asking: “But where is our freedom?”. It’s like the dispossession of African Americans in the South that the aftermath of (Hurricane) Katerina revealed. The psychic wounding of African Americans in the U.S. and of black South Africans live on, and then we wonder why people are not making it.

ES: What about our relationship with the rest of the continent? Can we look to other African countries for new direction?

SM: Tell me where in Africa have we found healing? Show me where in Africa and I will go there tomorrow. We have local traditions here that we should look to. If Africa had healed itself, then we would also be healed. This charade of African leaders we call the African Union – how long have they hoodwinked us? I don’t see South Africa forming a union with another country on the continent until each of our countries has put its own house in order. Then we can form a union. Its like marriage – first individuals mature by themselves and then they come together in a union. We must first mend what is broken in our own local contexts. Africa needs good, honest leadership and governments. What Africa does not need are killers in all their manifold disguises. No, I do not want Gadaffi as a leader!

ES: So how do we address these issues? How do we challenge these abuses of leadership?

SM: Writers and musicians must address these issues in our creative work, but politicians need to follow this advice, listen to the critique that arts and culture offer them. But these politicians, they don’t read. We, the general populace, need to force them to read – we must write cinema, theatre and music. If Steve Biko could conscientise a nation on Black Consciousness, we can do it as a real true form of African Renaissance, a rebirth of tradition that has been sifted, cleaned of what is not necessary any longer. But we do need to fetch the good of traditions that we left behind in our haste to be ‘civilized’. Now is the time for Africa to be truly African through critical self-examination, self-healing, to a wholeness that we can hold up. We want African nations that hold all of its citizens dear – a child that is safe within a family in all its diverse forms, where adults are shepherding them, nurturing them, from childhood to adulthood. It is not enough, for example to snip off the foreskin of a young boy and then claim that he is a man². We need these rites of passage to be accompanied by teaching him the values, attitudes of

respect for himself, for the women in his life, for the environment. These days we snip off the foreskin and he comes back worse than before – treating women badly, disrespecting himself and his family. Those new clothes he wears have become the standard; not the values that he should have been taught. He still needs to become someone who knows responsibility; who needs to learn self-respect; to respect and protect those weaker than he is, to respect women and the environment. If you respect yourself, then you will respect others because you will see yourself in others. Wholeness starts with the self and radiates outwards. This self-respect is all about the wholeness of healing and the wholesomeness of being. In the past, the time of seclusion was watched over by a man of stature in the community. Now for some, initiation is about a license to self-destruction. Now only those men who earn wages are respected.

ES: How, do you think this lack of respect is linked to the abuse of women?

SM: The abuse of women is linked to our broken-ness, our de-basedness. I don't know why we thought that just because we could vote in 1994, the de-basedness would vanish. The psychological wounding of racism and of the accompanying sexism will take a long time to heal. But we have to begin that journey.

ES: I know that one of your passions is making books more accessible to South Africans through publication in many of the indigenous languages. Tell us more about this.

SM: To translate a book means writing another. The publishers here have made small noises about translation. I have applied to the National Arts Council and the Heritage Foundation of South Africa to translate *Beauty's Gift* into isiXhosa because the survival of indigenous languages is close to my heart. I am also looking for a film producer – the film script based on the book is completed. But the film must create a buzz around books and creativity. A film based upon *Beauty's Gift* can also be a part of the 2010 Soccer World Cup. The film's message can encourage us to test, protect, love, survive and don't kill. Not just about sex. We can communicate a message that being intimate with each other does not just imply the physical side of things, but the other, richer, more nuanced, nurturing aspects of relationships too.

ES: Tell us about the project you started to nurture new writers.

SM: I began the writers group in Langa, Cape Town in about 2006, to nurture new writers, most of whom are women, to tell their stories. There was the odd man, but we did not turn him away. Our first book of short stories, entitled

“*Umthi agmnye unentlaka yawo*” (Every tree bears its own resin/fruit) was published in 2007. One of the women, Mrs Memani, who is nearly eighty years old, will have her first novel published by Oxford University Press later this year. She said to me that she always wanted to write; she would start something, but would never complete it. She has never even written a letter to the newspaper in the past, and now she is a published writer! We will also be publishing at least five children’s books in this group with publishers Room to Read and Maskew Miller. I have also launched a series of school readers in isiXhosa, for children in the various school-age categories, built around ordinary, everyday characters that they can relate to. Hopefully, this project will continue to nurture many new writers in indigenous languages.

E.S.: Thank you Sindiwe for this time and for sharing your insights on the importance of women’s writing with us.

References

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Endnotes

1. The area on the periphery of Cape Town city centre and southern suburbs, where all black people who resided in the inner city, were forcibly moved to during Apartheid.
2. Sindiwe is referring to the rites of passage to manhood amongst the Xhosa-speaking peoples of South Africa. During this process, adolescent men, usually in the late teens or early twenties, are expected to undergo the rites of seclusion in the wilderness, accompanied by circumcision and then followed by a triumphal re-entry to society as a man. The young men are provided with a new set of clothes associated with their adult statuses and expected to keep the company of men only.