Poetry of tradition

Lisa Combrinck's BOOK review

By Lisa Combrinck

KHULILE Nxumalo's head is bursting with images that come to him in dreams in that space between thinking and sleeping, between rising and resting. But the dreams that enter his head also emanate from the real world. Present-day reality is often surreal and imaginistic; and it is as a way of making sense of this world that he writes poetry.

I spoke to this poet, who is also a television producer and director and a content producer, about the role of literature in society and about his debut collection of poetry entitled *Ten flapping elbows, mama*.

Nxumalo was born in Diepkloof, Soweto, in 1971. He says that he grew up at a vibrant time of student activism where young people were at the forefront of change. It was also a time of violence. He remembers patrolling the streets to protect residents against gangsters. "Some of the boys I grew up with became gangsters."

He looks back at this period, conscious that he managed to avoid that tragic future that swallowed so many of his generation, but instead chose the direction of art and culture.

I ask him what attracted him to creative writing in the first place. He says it was the poetry he read at high school that led to his first attempts to write poems. "I got a scholarship to attend Waterford Kahlamba in Swaziland. It was there that I began to read the Heinemann African Writers Series – the writings of Ayi Kwei Armah, who I consider to be a better writer than Chinua Achebe on the African condition.

"The questions he asks in his books are real, living questions that we need to examine and answer. But he has been sidelined. I have also been influenced by Christopher Okigbo who I am still trying to understand as well as the works of Wole Soyinka."

Nxumalo says these writers have also been important in putting on paper the variety of English languages that exist and that this is something he also tried to do in his own writings. He has also been particularly influenced by the long poems of Mongane Wally Serote, those of Lesego Rampolokeng, Dambudzo Marechera and Edmund Braithwaite – whose writing he was introduced to by fellow poet, Seitlhamo Motsapi – as well as the writings of Ari Sitas.

His studies at the University of Cape Town, Natal University and Wits also put him in touch with a range of writers and participation in debates on literature and culture.

While he focuses on writing for the page, he believes that South Africa also has a rich tradition of political and performance poets already present in the 1970s such as Ingoapele Madingoane. He is aware that at the time Oswald Mtshali's poetry collection *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* sold about 25 000 copies.

For him, this is the tradition that ought to be continued into the present as opposed to the mere emulation of American performance artists. "The idea of poets with a microphone was already practiced in rallies and in stadiums in the 1970s, even if some of the poems were bad. Now there is too much information out there, an information overload. There is a danger of people being blinded to what is going on.

"Poetry has developed into a more American-based performance style rather than us continuing the poetry of the page. I wonder if young writers are reading Sipho Sepamla, Serote and (Keorapetse) Kgositsile whose images should be an inspiration for young writers. Children need a heritage and a history that develops into something long-lasting in all languages.

This is not what we see on our TV screens, the content of our radio and in the kind of music generally played. We are under an American imperialist net – what is the effect of this? More questions need to be asked and the answers found that will have life-long consequences in the future."

He also feels that there is a void at present in which discussions on culture and society ought to feature. "For young people like us, growing up meant that we were encouraged to read and to review literature. We discussed the articles of Njabulo Ndebele and Lewis Nkosi. This tradition of critical writing led to an enthusiasm with art being an integral and exciting part of society. Previously the national question, society and culture were discussed. Now you can feel the gap. As a writer you feel like you exist in a big silent room by yourself."

He pauses and in this moment of silence, one can feel this lived absence of rich debates and discussions in the present, an almost tragic passing away of what had once been the highpoint of South African life – our abilities to speak our dreams and to argue how to attain a better future.

He yearns for more journals, more debates, more literature and shudders that in an information age, so little of such networking is taking place.

But he lights up when I ask him about his poetry collection. His poems are soliloquies of sorts, which he paraphrases as "talking to myself in a long way – I call it psycho-narration. I find poetry to be a language of possession. Poetry is like birthing. You have to give yourself to it.

"Poetry has more possibilities of evoking things and capturing flashes of memory, how ideas are constructed in one's head like an ocean. The resultant echoes are large and the images resonate into the future".

In conclusion, I ask him what is the relationship between his poetry and his other cultural activities. Expecting a response that all these activities work together as one, I find his answer surprising and thought-provoking.

"Television work made me scared I could not write any more, since I always had to look at images on a screen. There is a certain cinematic tone of images in my writing but it works differently than from film. Poetry is economic. The echoes that happen are larger."

Our interview has come a full circle. It returns to the images at the heart of Nxumalo's poetry and that has taken possession of him in his quest for making sense amidst the nonsense of our reality and of shaping a different, more vibrant future for future generations of readers so that the pages speak with texture and timbre, rich in rhythm and resonating with ideas that ought to continue to possess readers for many years to come.

New voice elbows its way into poetic light

Book Review: Ten flapping elbows, Mama
Author: Khulile Nxumalo
Publisher: Deep South, 2004

THIS is an interesting collection of poetry since a new voice is brought to light that speaks in experimental language and through a literary, metaphorical and mythical landscape he can call his own.

Like the poetry of Lesego Rampolokeng, it also pays tribute to a previous generation of urban poets who wrote in and about Johannesburg. The title poem *ten flapping elbows, mama*, is both a sad tribute to his late mother, but also an acknowledgement of the influence that Mongane Wally Serote has had on South African literature.

The poem begins with a quotation from Serote's *Behold Mama Flowers*: "there is the hill now; it stands firm like the will of time / but I will tear it apart and in those days there shall be no silence".

Here the poet is conscious of the moving and manoeuvring of time: "there are trains in south Africa / backwards and forwards / forwards and backwards / and still look at days with / chameleon eyes, and / trombones and entanglements settled in and / walking oppressed spirits into my eyes / and in front of my mug of memories, and headlights and all / the kind of music that brought to the air a new generation / of questions."

Yet later in the poem, the questions are put aside and "blistered walls crumble across my face".

Despite the overcast sky in the poem, coupled with a feverish heart, the pen of the writer that threatens him so that he resembles a "goat under a slaughter's knife" and other menacing images that paint a pessimistic picture of reality, the hopeful image (and stanza division) of *ten flapping elbows* imbues the poem with an overall positive tone, since it is suggestive of a people air-borne and full of winged dreams.

The book is filled with descriptions of cityscapes that resemble wastelands, with "neon songs", "concrete shrouds" and "cotton wool words". In his *poemdramatic* – a poem that tries to combine drama and prose as well – the main character is a massgravedigger and the door to the future "is a contraceptive / reeking owreath or confession of pus/ inside a pimple mole". Yet even here, the poet through his characters search for liberation "so that I may find a cure for a crinkling road" and tries to make meaning out of cracks and skids and skewed directions, so that the right path and direction can become a living reality.

Nxumalo's poems can also be tender and filled with love as both creation and also creativity. The poems are also filled with references to oceans, so that one feels the freedom of meandering and being sea-bound. Like the lines from the Swahili quoted by Mineke Schipper in her book on African literature entitled *Imagining Insiders*, Nxumalo would probably agree that "knowledge is like an ocean. One needs to embrace it with both one's arms".

Some of the poems are hard to understand, for it takes time to enter Nxumalo's world which is sometimes arcane and yet so much his own. Yet the reader's mind does not remain clouded and there are always clues, chinks of light to lead one out of the darkness.