

WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Raphael d'Abdon (right) with Jaydeep Sarangi

'a night where june and moon
rhyme': Conversation with
Raphael d'Abdon

Jaydeep Sarangi

Dr Raphael d'Abdon is a writer, scholar, spoken word poet, editor and translator. In 2007 he compiled, translated and edited I nostri semi/Peo tsa rona, an anthology of contemporary South African poetry. In 2011 he translated into Italian (with Lorenzo Mari) Bless Me Father, the autobiography of South African poet Mario d'Offizi. In 2013, he compiled and edited the collection Marikana: A Moment in Time. He is the author of three collections of poems, sunnyside nightwalk (Johannesburg: Geko, 2013), salt water (Johannesburg: Poetree Publishing, 2016) and the bitter herb (East London: The Poets Printery, 2018), and he has read his poetry in South Africa, Nigeria, Somaliland, Italy, Sweden and the USA. His poems are published in journals, magazines and anthologies in South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Malawi, Singapore, Palestine, India, Italy, Canada, USA and UK, he is South Africa's representative of AHN (Africa Haiku Network), and he is a member of ZAPP (The South African Poetry Project) and IPP (International Poetry Project), two joint-projects of the University of Cambridge, UNISA and the University of the Witwatersrand, whose chief aims are to promote poetry in schools in South Africa, UK and beyond, and to instill knowledge, understanding and a love of poetry in young learners.

This interview is conducted through e mails in the months of April-May 2020 when Corona virus ravished the world. We saw light through the wings of poesy. We reached out each other through questions and answers about poetry, life and the immediate.

Q. When did you start writing?

A. I started writing short stories, in Italian, in 2003. At that time I was still working in Italy, more precisely at the English Studies Department of the University of Udine. It's a place you know quite well Jaydeep, because that's where we met, at the 2017 conference titled 'Living

together on this earth: Eco-sustainable narratives and environmental concerns in English literature/s' In 2008 I moved to South Africa for both family and professional reasons: I was doing research on spoken word poetry for my doctorate, and started to attend as many live poetry sessions as I could, in Johannesburg, Pretoria, and other townships in the area. Coming from Italy, that was a totally new experience for me: poetry was dynamic, fun, angry, conscious ... alive! I had never seen anything so energetic and fresh ... I was so inspired by those young poets that, in 2009, I started writing poetry myself. I really have to thank the pioneers of the Johannesburg spoken word community for showing me the funky side of poetry, and igniting my 'poetic fire' ... Poets like Myesha Jenkins, Flo Mokale, Afurakan, Khethi Ntshangase, Napo Masheane, Natalia Molebatsi, Ntsiki Mazwai, Lebogang Mashile, Tereska Muishond, the late June Madingwane, Ayob Vanya, Prophet JD, Andrew Miller, Phehello Mofokeng, Abdul Milazi, Tsoana Nhlapo ... In those years there was a bar called Horror Café in Newtown, Johannesburg, which hosted open mic sessions. There was always a full house, and the audience was passionate and vocal... I read my first (horrible) poems on that stage, so I can say that I started my poetry journey from the ground up, and Horror Café was a tough ... 'training camp', so to speak. I have been writing poetry for 11 years so, in many ways, I consider myself a beginner, a *parvenu*.

Q. Any mentor?

A. In the academia, I have had many mentors: in Italy it was Profs Antonella Riem and Armando Gnisci, two of the most prominent Italian postcolonial scholars; in South Africa I have been taken under the wings of Profs Myrtle Hooper and Catherine Addison of the University of Zululand, Maurice Vambe and Deirdre Byrne of UNISA, Denise Newfield of Wits University and, more recently, of Prof Heidi van Rooyen of the Human Sciences Research Council. As a poet, my first and most influential mentor has been the tsistsistas poet Lance Henson. I wrote my very first poem during one of his workshops. Other poets who have taught me a lot along the way are Sardinian poet Luigi Natale, the Poet Laureate of Cheshire, Harry Owen, the 2014 Commonwealth Poet, Phillipa Yaa de Villiers, and the late Poet Laureate of South Africa Keorapetse Kgositsile.

Q. How did Friuli (Udine) contribute to you as a writer?

A. Friuli is the land of my birth, of my hometown, of my youth, the place I always return to spiritually, when I feel lost in this f***ed up world. I grew up speaking Italian, but also Friulian, the language of the province (one of the three official languages of Italy), and 'dialetto udinese', the dialect of the city, an offspring of the Venetian dialect, a legacy of the times when the Republic of Venice was ruling over Udine. I think that this linguistic hybridity bastardises my English, shaping my writing in this adopted language. Friuli also incarnates my idea of *spiritus loci*, the spirit of the place, which becomes blurred and somehow distorted when you abandon the place you grew up in. My poem 'friuli blues' is a tribute to my

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Writers in Conversation Vol. 7 no. 2, August 2020.
<https://journals.flinders.edu.au/index.php/wic>

motherland, but also a manifestation of the *saudade* that accompanies and torments the life of all migrants.

Q. Working within the broad post-colonial and post-modern literary/ critical paradigm, as an academic and commentator, how do you view these dominant strands in English Studies in the metropolitan universities in South Africa of the first decade of the New Millennium?

A. I think that both post-modernism and post-colonialism have lost momentum within the field of English Studies, in South Africa and elsewhere, and there will not be a revival of these theories anytime soon. The COVID-19 hysteria, and the restrictions to personal and collective freedom that have come with it, have revealed that the post-human paradigm is now, unfortunately, the 'grand narrative' at the centre of the stage, particularly its most extreme and frightening strands. As a global society, we are already controlled by machines, but we are in the middle of a huge technological leap, and the world we are entering into is going to be dominated by robots and artificial intelligence. If we want to understand, and hopefully change the dystopian societies we are living in, we need to facilitate a paradigm shift in the academia, and acknowledge that fascism, colonialism and imperialism have changed shape, and that we need new categories of thought, new epistemologies, new methodologies, new theories and new strategies to interpret them, and fight against them.

Q. If you had to pick five poets only who had a major influence on your own writing, who would these be?

A. Lance Henson, Charles Bukowski, Giovanni Pascoli, Giorgos Seferis, Emily Dickinson.

Q. For P.B. Shelley, 'poets ... are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance, and architecture, and statuary, and painting; they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society ...' Do you think that quote still holds true in this age of cybermania?

A. Internet has opened up countless spaces for the production, dissemination, and promotion of poetry. Think about the online poetry sessions that have mushroomed from the beginning of the global detention (aka 'lockdown'). In these troubled times poets are keeping us entertained, but they are also challenging the status quo, sending out powerful political messages, strengthening existing local and global connections, and establishing new ones. Poetry is a fundamental part of the global culture today, so I think that Shelley's quote is still valid.

Q. Will you talk about your first book?

A. *sunnyside nightwalk*, the title-poem of my first collection, was written when I was living in Sunnyside, a working-class neighborhood in downtown Pretoria, inhabited mostly by African immigrants. I had just moved to South Africa, and that poem was my ode to my new home.

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Many avoid and snub Sunnyside because they say it's dangerous; crime is part of its everyday life, but I saw beauty in that place ... I love that place so lively, noisy, busy, dramatic, colourful, full of different stories ... Prof Femi Abodunrin published an article titled "'Why Are You Here?": Multiculturalism and Migration – A Study of Migrant Poetry From South Africa', in which he deftly captures the nuances and the subtext of that poem. My dear friend Phillippa Yaa de Villiers wrote an amazing foreword to the collection, in which she highlights the echoes of Alex La Guma's short story 'A Walk in the Night'. She also penned the following, which fills me with gratitude and pride:

Half-dreamed, half-spoken, his lines are like a trance, psychedelic, drunk, like those post-midnight conversations, where the here-and-now dissolves into countless there-and-thens; sometimes profound, sometimes playful, always resonant and rhythmical.

Q. Is there anything special behind the title of your book of poems *Salt Water* (2016)?

A. The image of the salt water comes from a line by Karen Blixen, which says: 'The cure for anything is salt water: tears, sweat, or the sea.' I wrote a poem inspired by this simple, but profound reflection: it was published in the South African journal *New Contrast*, and became the backbone of my second collection. That was a troubled phase of my life, and I was in search of healing from different sources, including therapy and, of course, poetry writing. I put together the poems I wrote during those hard-hitting months, and when the collection was finalised, I needed a title that would encapsulate that period of my life: 'salt water' was the most fitting and evocative.

Q. Please tell me about all your poetry collections ... in fact about your journey as a poet. Am sure it must have been a fairly eventful path so far ...

A. As anticipated above, I see each collection as a reflection of a specific phase of my life journey. This approach informs my writing, which has changed and – hopefully – evolved through the years. I briefly introduced above the motives that stand at the core of my first two collections; the third one, titled *the bitter herb*, is an exploration of my love-hate relationship with South Africa, an ironic meditation on my condition of outsider in a country that will never fully accept me. The mixed feelings of nostalgia, affection, rage, awe, love and disgust are expressed in poems like 'exile blues', 'the drifter', 'the small town where i come from', 'the famous south african poet'. One of my favourite pieces in this collection is 'purple has style', a declaration of love to the jacaranda trees that, in spring, transform Pretoria's streets into a purple heaven, but also a critique of colonialism and neocolonialism. Up until the very end of the production process, I wanted this to be the title-poem of the collection, but after consulting with my publisher and some poets friends who helped me with the editing, I opted for *the bitter herb*. Even if 'purple has style' probably remains the 'trademark poem' of that book, I have not regretted the choice.

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Q. What are your enduring themes; issues and concerns that pre-occupy you constantly?

A. I would say memory, love, nature, the everyday people, exile ... I like to think that my poetry traverses different life stories and histories, and draws trajectories dealing with different times, places and feelings of longing, fear and desire. Exile has a special place in my poetics. People commonly associate it with loss, sadness, uprootedness, and the endurance of a harsh, isolated existence in a hostile environment (this is, for instance, the angle taken by Pearl S. Buck, my late grandmother's favourite writer). There is certainly truth in this, because homesickness and displacement are ever-present feelings in the life of a migrant. But, in my view, the experience of exile is not necessarily sad or deprived, and I feel blessed to be a person of many homes. As Edward Said aptly noted: 'exile can mean you see things with more than one pair of eyes', and this is a blessing for a writer.

Q. Would you please mention some important English poets in Pretoria where you work now?

A. The most important poet writing in English (amongst other languages) in Pretoria is Lefifi Tladi, a veteran of the South African art scene who, during apartheid, lived in exile in Sweden. Another giant of poetry living Pretoria is Mphutlane wa Bofelo, who is also a scholar, an educator and an activist. Other poets who have put Pretoria on the map are: Percy Mabandu, also a journalist and a jazz historian; Vangi Gantsho, a poet, healer and publisher who has done a lot for the growth of poetry movement in the city; Roché Kester, poet, poetry events organiser, MC and prominent LGBT activist; Mo'Afrika Mogkathi, poet, musician and radio host; Xabiso Vili, a highly imaginative poet who is a living legend in South Africa's slam scene; Nkateko Masinga, a publisher, and a talented poet with a solid profile in South Africa and in the African continent. All these poets are widely published, perform regularly in South Africa and overseas, and have created what can be called the 'Pretoria-style' of poetry. These are just some of the most celebrated poets in the city, but I am sure I am leaving important names out of the list ... The poetry community of Pretoria is growing by the day, thanks – mostly – to the tireless activity of Hear My Voice, a non-profit organisation devoted to the promotion of poetry amongst the youth. They organise one of the most important slam tournaments of the country, and have launched the careers of young poets like the previously cited Xabiso Vili, plus Busisiswe Mahlangu, Modise Sekgothe, Xitha Makgeta, Emmah Mabye, Masai Sepuru, Solly Ramatswi, Torsten Rybka, Thando Mothumi and Hope Netshivhambe, who excel in national and international slam competitions, and perform in poetry festivals all over the country and beyond. I am happy and honoured to have interacted with almost all of them, in different ways. I have been severe with some of them, at times, and this earned me a reputation as a difficult guy. But my intention was always to provide constructive criticism, and I am sure they enjoyed working and performing with me as much as I enjoyed working and performing with them.

Q. Why do you write poems, a threatened literary species these days?

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<https://journals.flinders.edu.au/index.php/wic>

A. Writing poems feeds, fuels, and expands my imagination. It is my way of interacting with the ugliness and the beauty I see around me.

Q. I find an element of protest in your poems. It is subtle, of course. Is protest important?

A. Some of my poems are explicit, overtly political, and others are more oblique, allegorical, as you pertinently point out. Even confessional poetry is, ultimately, political: poetry has multiple faces, and can be articulated in many different ways. It has been an instrument of change since it existed, and poets tell stories in a rhythm that forces the masses and the elite to listen. It is protest, defiance, praise, a hymn to love, and the tool used to enact and document change. It is also a healing tool, enabling one to express his anger, pain and frustrations in a way that is imaginative, meaningful and transformative. That said, I use the term 'resistance poetry', rather than 'protest poetry'. Zakes Mda has outlined the difference between the two terms eloquently. Poetry speaks about life, in all its visible and invisible manifestations, and therefore, it cannot escape addressing social and political issues. We live in a dystopian world, but – unlike the previous generations – we have no political movement to look to for answers, no political organisation challenging the powers that be. What is commonly called 'the left' in the political landscape, is a farce, to say the least. Look at the Democratic Party in the USA, and all social-democratic parties in Europe and around the world: they are reactionary parties, agent of conservation, enforcers of oppression. Change will not come from these bureaucratic, anachronistic groups, and even the corporatised academia is a sterile space, having regimented, sanitised, and neutralised potentially emancipating theories like Marxism, feminism and post-colonialism. The only radical voices I hear are those of the poets, the writers, the artists, and therefore, resistance poetry is not only important, it is necessary, because we operate in a political, ideological and cultural void that needs to be filled with art, with creativity. When the South African police murdered 44 striking miners in 2012, I felt the urgency to write about it. My poem 'walking to school' was published a few days later in the magazine *The Palestine Chronicle*, and that publication pushed other writers to pick the pen up and voice their rage and sorrow: the result of that collective feeling of agency was the collection *Marikana. A Moment in Time*, published by Geko, which I edited.

Q. Message for writers?

A. Read, read and read ... All genres, from all ages, and all corners of the world... And don't forget to study history and philosophy, as well as the 'classic' texts of your and other traditions.

Q. What constitutes poetry for a post-modern reader?

A. Considering that the post-modern world we live in is depressed and depressing, and that the most read poet in the world is Rupi Kaur (who I do not see as a poet, by the way), I would

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<https://journals.flinders.edu.au/index.php/wic>

say that for the post-modern reader poetry is an aspirin, a cheap pill you take when you feel physically and mentally weak, a generic medicine, which gives temporary relief to sick individuals.

Q. Your reasons to continue as a poet in a foreign language?

A. I write poetry in English because I am not able to do it in Italian. I tried a few times to write poems in my mother tongue, and I always failed dismally. Now I have given up, so English is the only language I have, I have no other place to go, as a poet. The complexity of possessing a culturally ambiguous identity is an advantage for a writer, because you create stories that bring distant worlds together. Sometimes consciously, but more often than not unconsciously, I use elements of my native language and culture that can be integrated into (and shake up) both English and South African urban culture. This quest for a cross-pollinated language is what allows me to express my emotions authentically in a foreign country. Mine is an unusual gaze, a Friulian-African gaze, and this is why mine – I believe – is a peculiar voice in the South African poetry landscape: it's a voice coming from a different space. My poems can be intriguing for the readers who love to explore uncharted territories, and discover stories from the margins. South Africa's diversity of cultures and languages is phenomenal, and the challenge for me is always to add my voice to the multiple voices who are doing a great job defining ourselves, writing ourselves as a nation.

Q. What is the ultimate aim of poetry?

A. Many poets in South Africa would tell you it's healing. South Africa is a deeply traumatised country, and because of that, the poetry that is offered in public events and online platforms has become almost one-dimensional. All poets write about is stories directly or indirectly related to traumatic experiences, and how to (possibly) get over them. Two prominent local poets, Vangi Gantsho and Sarah Godsell, even started a publishing house, Impepho Press, whose aim is to publish 'books that save lives'. It's a noble initiative, much needed in wounded country like ours, with high rates of suicide, but my view is that the therapeutic is just one aspect of poetry, albeit important. For me the ultimate aim of poetry is to tell stories that reflect the human condition, stories that express or mirror the links between a human being and the seen and unseen forces that surround him, and guide his life. Poetry, therefore, must embrace the whole human experience, the good and bad sides of it. And must do it with images that challenge language and innovate it. If a poem is well-crafted, defamiliarising, rhythmical and musical, it will cleanse your spirit, even if it wasn't purposely conceived for healing or self-healing.

Q. Did you write on human trials?

A. Every poem is an exploration of a human trial, or different human trails. Writing poetry changes your relationship with language, your views of yourself, your connections to the

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Writers in Conversation Vol. 7 no. 2, August 2020.
<https://journals.flinders.edu.au/index.php/wic>

world around you, and the way you deal with your own demons and tribulations. When readers connect with your poems, they feel that they are not alone, that we are all trying to 'survive in a heartless world', as I say in my poem 'heartbeat blues'.

A. Who is your favourite living poet? And why?

A. Lance Henson, because he uses plain, conversational language to create poems that are symbolic, metaphysical and musical. His poems are short, his verses clean, sharp, shimmering. Reading his poems taught me the fundamental principle 'less is more', and also that silences are as important as words in poetry.

Q. What are basic features for a good poem?

A. The economy of language, and the precision of images. A good poem, in my view, is nothing but a sequence of clear, clean, immaculate images which, when juxtaposed, create a rhythmical, musical story. The biggest crime in poetry is verbosity, because unnecessary words, excessive punctuation, etc. overload the text, making it sound redundant, clichéd, 'anti-poetic'. Ezra Pound and Basil Bunting have taught us that poems are music scores, and I believe that they must be approached as such. Overwritten, poorly edited poems are like an orchestra/band that plays with out-of-tune instruments: instead of producing harmonic melodies, they produce noise, a cacophony of sounds. Prof Keorapetse Kgositsile once said that his poems were like jazz solos, and there is truth in this statement: in order to improvise urgent emotions into words, a poet must have a deep connection with his/her own feelings, and master technique. When agency, imagination and craft meet, a good poem is born.

Q. Do you read poets from other cultures?

A. Yes, all the time. Currently, I am reading Fernando Pessoa.

Q. Reading your poems is like falling in love with poetry intangibly, without our physical notice. — What do you say?

A. In my poems I try to create intimacy, as well as spaces of resistance, and conditions of absence. Aesthetically, I seek to create a personal style that escapes confinement and allows openness, possibilities, experimentation, i.e. the forms of breathing that are necessary for freedom and creativity to express themselves.

Q. What is your experience of (guest) editing journals of poetry?

A. It's time- and energy-consuming, but highly rewarding. The most exciting aspect of editing anthologies and guest-editing journals is the discovery of new voices. I love to read contributions from poets I did not know, and start a literary relationship with them via their texts. Recently, I guest edited an issue of the *Teesta* journal, and one of the contributors was

'a night where june and moon rhyme': Conversation with Raphael d'Abdon. Jaydeep Sarangi. *Writers in Conversation* Vol. 7 no. 2, August 2020. <https://journals.flinders.edu.au/index.php/wic>

Kim Schuck, Poet Laureate of San Francisco. It was my first encounter with her poetry, I was blown away by it, and have been a huge fan of her work since. The other intriguing part of this job is the building of communities. When you put together an anthology, a volume, or the issue of a journal, you create a literary microcosm: editors and poets become members of a new 'family', of something that will bind them forever.

Q. Please will you share with me one of your recent poems?

A. **autumn lovers**

**streets beaten by cats
butterflies settling on thyme
the tapestry of red hued foliage
and a wind that makes stars blink and glisten**

**the warm hazel eyes of soldiers
too dazed by the mystery implied
do not make a fuss over a little spilled blood**

**a night where june and moon rhyme
is the preface to mild lunacy
the mock marriage of a pun
that turns spectators into actors**

**over and over again
back to square one
with new absurd details
thus reflected faces asserting themselves
lay their claim**

**the loss of single shades
hopelessly mars the whole
the intervals between whispers
whose business is the harps of rain
murmur in mute orchestras**

**a rhythm that is foreign to
modern speech
tender ruptures of purity
little gestures made afterwards**

and beds that feel like wombs

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Writers in Conversation Vol. 7 no. 2, August 2020.
<https://journals.flinders.edu.au/index.php/wic>

Q. Thanks for patience and honesty throughout this relentless court-martial of a very promising innovative and linguistically- resourceful poet.

A. Feelings are mutual. Let our poetry never see autumn. Wishes for more love, light and creativity for you ...

Jaydeep Sarangi is a bilingual poet with nine collections, latest being *Heart Raining the Light* (2020) released in Rome, Italy. Sarangi has read his poems in different shores of the globe. His later readings were at Flinders University, University of Western Australia, University of Wollongong, Perth Poetry Club (Australia), University of Udine (Italy) and University of Rezeszow (Poland). With Rob Harle, Sarangi has edited six poetry anthologies of poems from Australia and India. With Amelia Walker, he is guest editing a special issue for *TEXT*, Journal of Writing and Writing Courses, AAWP, Australia. For him, small rivers enrich human lives. He is also known as the 'Bard of Dulung' for his several poems on river Dulung and its nearby places/temples/habitations. He is a professor of English and principal at New Alipore College, Kolkata. Address: Principal, New Alipore College, Block L, New Alipore, Kolkata: 700053, WB. Email: jaydeepsarangi@gmail.com

'a night where june and moon rhyme': Conversation with Raphael d'Abdon. Jaydeep Sarangi.
Writers in Conversation Vol. 7 no. 2, August 2020.
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