

## **Transcript: Tess Newton Cain in conversation with Rashmii Bell**

**Tess:** My name's Tess Newton Cain, and I'm a Visiting Fellow at the Development Policy Centre. And this afternoon, here in Brisbane, I'm meeting with Rashmii Bell, who, among other things, is the editor of the recently released *My Walk to Equality* collection. And we'll be talking a bit more about that later. Rashmii, good afternoon, and welcome to Pacific Conversations.

**Rashmii:** Thank you for having me, Tess.

**Tess:** So, for the benefit of our listeners and people that haven't known you as long as I have, can you tell us a bit about yourself, your background, your story so far, and what your current role is?

**Rashmi:** So, I am from Morobe province, so I'm from a place called Sio, which is halfway between Finschhafen and Madang. So, just on the coastline of Morobe Province. I was born in Lae at Angau Hospital, and have lived between Australia and PNG for gosh, well, since 1990.

So, a fair chunk of my life I've lived between both countries. So my family moved to Australia in 1990, and that was for education purposes. So, I was educated here in Australia. But I have lived back and forth between the two countries since that time. Gosh, lived back in Lae full-time between 2007 to about 2015, and I've been back here in Australia since.

And that's because for education for my own children. So, I was educated here in Australia. So, currently, I have—for the past nine years, I've been at home as a full-time parent looking after my three children, eight, seven, and three years old. And so, I have chosen to do that.

I've got another year at home and then I will re-enter the workforce. So, well, that's the plan. My background, so I went to university here in Brisbane at Griffith, and I studied psychology and criminology. So, I have about 10 years' experience in case management and corrections.

So, that's prisons. So, I started out in adult corrections and community corrections, community-based corrections. And then I moved across to youth detention in PNG. I understand it's still referred to as juvenile justice. So, I much preferred working at youth detention.

And the case management across both areas is similar in that the factors and that kind of stuff are all interlinked and interconnected. So, that's pretty much my background. So, I'm a little past nine years while I've been at home. I've just been raising children. But, I've always enjoyed reading. I read everything, read every day. And writing, I have been

writing for myself, but I only just started having my work published in the past three years, I think.

**Tess:** Okay, so that is quite a different blend of things there, and we can hopefully explore a couple more of those as we go along. Looking at your position, or your maybe newer role as an author, what do you think have been the most significant milestones in that journey to date?

**Rashmi:** I think getting published itself is a huge milestone. Growing up and reading, I never heard of many PNG authors. I mean they're the ones that you know—every Papua New Guinean knows Nora Vagi Brash and Stephen Mendillo and Dia La Vez, and you have those names.

But going to school in Australia, I wasn't really exposed to Papua New Guinean writers or authors, or really, any PNG literature. So, for myself, as someone whose writing was picked up and published via—I've been published on *PNG Attitude*, which is edited and published by Keith Jackson.

That itself, for me, was a huge thing when I first had my first piece published. So, I think being published, firstly, on this prominent blog, blog site, that's a milestone in itself. I think of course, with *My Walk To Equality*, that coming out and the things that have been linked to it, appearing at the writers' festivals, the Sunshine Coast festival this year, and then Brisbane Writers' Festival, both in 2016 and 2017, which has really, I think, for the majority of the emerging contemporary PNG writers, that's a huge thing for us to know that Papua New Guinean literature is being mentioned at these international events.

**Tess:** What are the things that you would point to that you think have had the most influence on how your voice as an author has developed?

**Rashmi:** I think that—well, I guess with the format that I write anyway, I mean my writing is mostly essay, opinion, commentary. So, it's different, well not different, but I think it may be not so popular in comparison to where the other PNG writers are—they're more fiction and children's writing, that kind of thing.

And there's a few opinion commentary writers writing that are getting published. I think I'm probably one of the few PNG women sort of writers that are doing opinion commentary, so I think that in itself helps elevate my voice because I am the minority in amongst the commentators out there, among the PNG men.

I think the subject matter that I deal with as well, I look at a lot of social justice issues and women's rights, gender equality, mental health, those sorts of areas that we don't hear so much about from within PNG. Commentators from outside of PNG, you hear—you read a lot about what they think and whatnot.

But from within the country itself, there's not many that are writing comprehensive commentary away from social media, like Facebook and Twitter and all that kind of stuff. So, I think that's another thing that helped shape my voice, where I see there's a gap in issues being dealt with, addressed by Papua New Guineans, I've tried to concentrate there to give the PNG voice to add to the whole dialogue there.

**Tess:** So, you've mentioned that you're—you like to write in essays, that essay writing is very much part of your portfolio. And obviously, increasingly that is now seen as long-form writing as compared with blog posts or maybe op eds for newspapers. What are your hopes and fears in relation to long-form writing and publishing in PNG and maybe the rest of the Pacific, based on what you've observed and experienced yourself?

**Rashmi:** I think I'll start with the publishing, because that's a key factor for PNG writers. There's virtually no, or limited opportunities or avenues for publication in PNG. I know in the past 12 months, there have been a few sort of smaller publishing operations getting started within Port Moresby, but I think nationwide, it's really—it's quite hard to get published in PNG unless you have the funding, or—

**Tess:** Do you see that as a development gap? When we talk about development, which is a bit of a weasel word, I think, but we often think about health and education and infrastructure, but that issue that you've raised doesn't often appear in that discussion. Do you think it is part of a country's, like PNG, the overall development?

**Rashmi:** Absolutely. I think that literature itself should be looked after, or at least be an area of focus for the tourism, culture, and arts, that portfolio within the government. I mean if we can have singsings festivals, cultural festivals, and sporting events throughout the country, then why can we not have literary festivals to celebrate our writers, our playwrights, poets, the theatre, all that?

So, I think definitely, they have a huge responsibility and a huge role in really elevating that, the literature and the arts scene. So, I hope that it is something that's taken on by the government in the coming year. So, we can always be hopeful—but if they stepped in, definitely I think the opportunities for publishing for PNG writers would be an improvement.

**Tess:** What about development partners? Do you think they have a role to play in that space?

**Rashmi:** Yeah, I think so. I think especially, I think partners that are coming into the country, whether under education and training, or just basically one that's coming and promoting literature, like in terms of reading, early childhood literacy, all that kind of stuff. I think them coming in, a component of their programs or whatever they hope to achieve in the country should look at supporting the people in elevating the literature culture.

Well I mean it's slowly, I think, picking up again since gosh, I think just after Independence, it was quite strong and it kind of died off. So, I think development partners definitely have a role in terms of elevating it within the country, but also in terms of international exposure, what they can do, taking a literature that's written in the country and promoting it outside the borders.

**Tess:** Okay. Did you want to say something about long-form writing as well? I mean you've—I think you've given us some very good insights into the challenges around publishing, but in terms of developing long-form writing as a form of practice, of literary practice, in PNG. What are your hopes and fears around that?

**Rashmi:** I think what I really appreciate about Australia is that the variety of long-form that's out there, and it's not just from everyday citizens such as myself. You have commentary that's appearing from academics and people from thinktanks, institutions within Australia. And because I follow quite a few of them here in the country that I read on a regular basis.

And that's what's really missing in PNG, I find, is that there's none of that sort of commentary coming from our universities or from the thinktanks, the institutes up there that are doing research, but they don't commentate on a regular basis. It's kind of we have to wait, the public has to wait for a research report to come out, and I think that really—it's a loss to the nation, to the people's understanding about what's happening to the country.

Because I mean from my experience in Australia, we have Australians talking about everyday matters that are happening in PNG, and they are academics and researchers and all that, and they're writing opinion commentaries. And I think without Papua New Guineans seeing that happening in the country, this opportunity to see it and to practise long-form writing yourself, it's not going to happen.

And so, I think that's been my advantage is growing up here in Australia and being able to have access to it all the time, it's really helped me to develop my interest and my passion for long-form writing.

**Tess:** Okay, great. Now I read in a piece of yours recently, and you've also made reference to it earlier on, that you con—you've described yourself as in constant transit between two societies, that of Australia and Papua New Guinea. Can you explain a bit more about what that means, and maybe give some examples of how that's manifested to good or possibly challenging effects for you?

**Rashmi:** Yeah, so, sorry, constant transit within two societies? Well, I think Australia and PNG are very different. PNG, there's a lot of that cultural stuff that's influencing your thinking and the way you behave, whereas in Australia, there's not so much of that. So, I think it is, it affects myself, growing up here, and then going back home and constantly having to

adjust how you—just simple things, like how you dress or how you speak, like who you speak in front of, who you don't speak in front of, just the tone of your voice, that kind of thing.

Like you always have to be mindful of those things. And so, that carries over to my writing as well, because I think—I was educated here in Australia, so I have a very sort of Western view of looking at things, and I think things like gender equality, that's something that I'm really passionate about, and women's rights and all that. But I think, when I'm back home, it's hard to articulate that without having the cultural values and the beliefs influencing it too much.

Yeah, it really does. It's a struggle. It's an interpersonal struggle I find, because I believe one way, I have this belief, and that's shaped where I've grown up, where I received my education, what I read. But then when I'm back in PNG, it's the cultural stuff really has an influence on what I think and what I do believe. Yes.

**Tess:** Yeah.

**Rashmi:** And I think a lot of time, it's not for the better. It's taking me back and regressive. It's not progressive.

**Tess:** Yeah, I can see how that would be a risk. Do you think that—is there a possibility that in some situations, it presents an opportunity for you to maybe reflect on your own thinking and perspective, and maybe drill down into “How best can I translate this into this context where it appears to not fit, but I believe there's a role for it? And how can I use my voice and my experience to insert in a way that is meaningful without feeling compromised internally?”

**Rashmi:** Yeah, absolutely. I'm always reflecting on that because, like I said, I write from what I myself believe because of what I'm exposed to and what I see around me. And I think the point I made before about researchers and academics from within PNG, if they did more opinion commentary, like wrote more on a regular basis, things like bridging my cultural understandings, of what's happening back home and what is the prevailing thought at the moment.

I think that's where that regular opinion commentary would come in really handy for people like myself, who need to sort of use our voice to I guess meet halfway to voice what I think, but then also convey what cultural values are important to PNG and sort of trying to merge the two to achieve something that's achievable, acceptable for Papua New Guineans to follow through with. Yeah.

**Tess:** I mean I think—I think what you've told us—provides a really clear example of what that struggle is like for you as an individual author—and as a person, a thinking person. And I

think some of those struggles are mirrored in other areas of public life, whether it's among policy-makers, or academics, or researchers.

And as you say, there are still some key gaps in which we're yet to see how people are articulating those tensions. We can only assume that they all are dealing with it on an internal basis, but we're not seeing that articulation being made more public or collectively.

**Rashmi:** Yeah.

**Tess:** Is that—would that be your assessment?

**Rashmi:** Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, I think so. And because I—things like Facebook, I'm not on Facebook anymore, but being on there before, if I was to go and make a post about something about gender equality. The regular response, or immediate reaction, is "You're not a white person. Why are you thinking like a white person? Let's do this the PNG way."

And for me, the struggle is well, I don't have anyone writing about it in a articulate, comprehensive way for me to understand. I don't really rely on Facebook posts. I want it articulated to me in paragraphs so I understand what you're trying to say to me in more—a way that presents it, I think, in a rational sort of way.

**Tess:** Yeah, maybe a bit more holistically or a bit more nuanced?

**Rashmi:** Yeah. I think that's the word, yeah. So, I think yeah, I just—

**Tess:** I think it's a really—I think it's, whether it's in that particular space or in other areas, I think it's something that we see elsewhere in the region. I don't think it's something that's particular to PNG. But my concern is sometimes it's easy to use that response of "Well, we have to do this the Pacific way," or "We have to do this the PNG way," as a bit of a segue into sort of "Maybe we just won't do anything at all."

**Rashmi:** Yeah. And I've had that. I've had someone will say to me that in terms of gender equality, "No one will appreciate me unless I do it or talk about it in the Melanesian way". Well, no one's really writing about the Melanesian way, so it's hard to have that expectation upon me when it's not being provided.

And I think it's a big call. I think unless it's there, unless we're talking about it, what this Melanesian way is, what the Pacific way is, then it's like you said, it's—no one's really going to deal with it. They're not going to address it, are they?

**Tess:** I think the other thing is that it's important not to underestimate or understate the fact that the Pacific way, the Melanesian way is not static, and it's increasingly influenced by

people such as yourselves who are—do move between two societies, who are educated in maybe different systems and exposed to different types of thinking. And that is informing the Melanesian way, not just on an individual level, but across groups and collectives that we would expect to have influence at national and regional levels.

**Rashmi:** Yeah, definitely.

**Tess:** I guess that leads me to my next, my final question, really. And it's just to broaden it out a bit and maybe give you a chance to draw together some of the threads of what we've already discussed. Looking at PNG's development or future trajectory, or however you want to describe that, what role do you think members of the diaspora, such as yourself, what role do you think you currently have, what role do you think you might have in the future, or where do you see the influence of the diaspora in what happens in PNG and what might happen in the future? Do you see that as—what do you see as the positives or negatives of that?

**Rashmi:** I think the role of the diaspora, it's quite important, and it's quite a huge role, especially in terms of engaging in public conversation, especially around national issues. I think I mentioned before, a lot of the commentary that you do see on social media, it's restricted to that Facebook posting, which is totally fine, but I think when you want to get out and have a debate, you need to be thinking, thinking and trying to understand from all points of view.

And I think the diaspora have the advantage, where we've lived outside of PNG. So, we're listening to other commentaries, we're getting to see and hear other perspectives. So, then we can take that on ourselves and we can choose to take that on ourselves and see whether it aligns, or it doesn't align with what we think, and then convey that back to the Papua New Guinean to be a national conversation back home.

I think it's about increasing perspective, having different perspectives to the conversation back home, because otherwise, it's just the same old rhetoric talking about the same thing over and over. So, the diaspora, I think, are very important in terms of bringing perspective to the national conversation, and I think we, to a certain degree, we may have more confidence in doing that.

And I think that comes back to things like education systems, the system that we're educated under, which, speaking for myself, being educated here in Australia encouraged debate, open dialogue, sharing ideas, that kind of thing. And I think that if we can bring that and take it back home and encourage that within the nation, speaking freely and speaking without fear of retaliation or that kind of stuff, and the stuff that would harm you, I think that's very important, too. And so, the diaspora has a role in sort of being the example and leading the way in doing that.

**Tess:** Okay. And just finally, finally, where does the *My Walk to Equality* project sit within that scope? Because a number of the contributors to that were members of the diaspora, not all of them. So, to what extent would you see your work on that project has been part of sort of the functions you've just outlined?

**Rashmii:** Yeah, I think it's—*My Walk to Equality* has really added to the discussion and the conversation that PNG's having around women's rights and gender equality, *My Walk to Equality* has added our voices to the conversation. I think prior to that, it's been mostly women within the country expressing why they think that women deserve to have more rights and need to have more rights, but from a perspective that's—that's from within the context of the country itself.

Whereas the writers from *My Walk to Equality*, we have women that have been educated in Australia and elsewhere throughout the world, who are adding their perspectives and trying to highlight to women back home, and to men as well, that whilst Papua New Guinean women are saying this back home about gender equality, why it's necessary, this is another perspective, this is why you—this is another reason why we need to do this.

**Tess:** Okay. Rashmii, thank you so much for meeting with me this afternoon and sharing your thoughts. We're looking forward to hearing and reading more of what you've got to say over the next little while.

**Rashmii:** Wonderful. Thanks for having me, Tess.