

“English Has Become Part and Parcel of My Life”

Goretti Kyomuhendo on the Role of Language in Creative Writing

Doreen Strauhs

The following interview with Goretti Kyomuhendo was recorded on January 17, 2009 at the University in Frankfurt am Main during the second Migration & Media Conference, “Literature from the African Diaspora: Language of Mobility, Language of Flight?” At this conference, Goretti Kyomuhendo and I opened the discussion on language in the African context by the introductory interview below, into which we have included some aspects on the topic of language from our previous discussions.

The question of language has always been a hotly debated subject in the context of African literature. Should African writers write in a European language like English - “a language that is not one’s own,”¹ and a language which carries the history of Africa’s subjugation during colonial times?²

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe argued in favor of the usage and appropriation of English to express African reality in fiction as long as this would be done in intelligible English, whereas the *bolekaya*-critics,³ a group of other Nigerian writers such as Jemie O. Chinweizu and Ihechukwu Madubuike, regarded the appropriation of English or the blending of English with an indigenous African language as ‘bad writing’.⁴ In their view, English was an elitist and Western language. In fact, they pointed out, African writers who would not like to be alienated from their local communities, but who would like to be read by “a community whose members, in reading [...] [these] works, can content their own life experiences,”⁵ would have to pursue an anti-elitist approach towards literature and write in an indigenous African language.⁶

Ngugi wa Thiong’o, the so far most well-known Kenyan writer, took this anti-elitist approach. The entrenchment of English on African people in both its oral and written forms, he suggested, forced them to see the world through the colonial language.⁷ Ngugi wa Thiong’o considered “language as communication and language as culture are products of one

1 Raja Rao: *Kanthapura*, vii.

2 Ngugi wa Thiong’o: *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, 90.

3 The term ‘*bolekaya*’ translated as ‘Come down, let’s fight!’ According to Kadiatu Kanneh, the term was used by the *bolekaya* critics to claim that “We are *bolekaya* critics, outraged touts for the passenger lorries of African literature”, Kadiatu Kanneh: *African Identities*, 46.

4 See Jemie Onwucheka Chinweizu/Ihechukwu Madubuike: *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, 242.

5 Ibid. S. 241.

6 Ibid.

7 See Ngugi wa Thiong’o: *Decolonizing the Mind*, 91.

another,”⁸ and concluded that it would therefore be paramount for African writers to communicate primarily in their indigenous languages. He officially abandoned English as his creative tool in 1977 and turned to writing in his mother tongue, Gikuyu, instead.

Almost twenty years later, Goretti Kyomuhendo states that although English still remains a social marker of authority and higher education, it has also become a common tool of communication for many Africans in their everyday life, and as such it has also become a tool for creative writing. As the interview unfolds, it becomes clear that Kyomuhendo’s view of the usage of English in literature is not elitist, but in fact resonates with the viewpoint that has been put forward by sociolinguists like Oluwole Adejare for years already. Adejare points out that since “[l]anguage is a social phenomenon, serving to transmit the totality of experience of its users [...], [l]iterature [as] a variety of language use, does not exist in a cultural or linguistic vacuum.”⁹ Naturally, literature is always influenced by the linguistic discontinuum of the environment that it emerges from.

In the case of Uganda, Kyomuhendo notes, writing in English is owed to the set-up of the linguistic continuum. Here to write in English is vital as to communicate effectively across the linguistic boundaries between different Ugandan linguistic communities. Since there is no national or official African language in Uganda that would be understood throughout the country, English has gained a semi-official status. While it is a medium of instruction in schools and therefore understood by a greater number of people, English is also free of ethnic markers which otherwise could lead to ethnic disagreements. In the following interview, Kyomuhendo talks about the role of language as a tool of communication in Ugandan creative writing. She also speaks out about her own attitude towards language in her writing and commenting on the personal struggles she undergoes whenever she tries to straddle linguistic communities and needs to meet the interest of international publishers, while the Ugandan audience remains closest to her heart.

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Goretti Kyomuhendo: Language and African writing is quite a tired topic. Sometimes when people outside Africa ask me, “So why don’t you write in your African language?”, I start by correcting them that there is no such thing like an African language in the same way as there is no such thing like an European language. So why do you write in English? What difficulties do you find when you write in a language that is not your own; a language that is not your first or even your

8 See *ibid.*, 90.

9 Oluwole Adejare: “Translation. A Distinctive Feature of African Literature in English”, in: E. Epstein/R. Kole (Eds.): *The Language of African Literature*, 36.

second language. I don't think, that English is a foreign language anymore for me. It has become part and parcel of my life, and it's a language that I find very comfortable to express myself in. The novel *Waiting* is based in Uganda in 1979 during the period when Idi Amin was overthrown by combined force of the Tanzanian army and Ugandan exiles. I remember that for the first time then we met young Tanzanians – that is the soldiers. Some of them were my age at that time. I was maybe thirteen. So we met this young Tanzanian army, which comes to liberate Uganda, and the first thing that hit us was language. We were intrigued that we could not communicate, although Tanzania is just across the border. They were speaking Swahili and did not understand our mother tongue, nor could they speak English, because in Tanzania, unless you go to a private school, they teach only in Swahili, their national language. So in the novel this young Tanzanian, who finds himself in Uganda, falls in love with one of the young girls he meets. In the passage he has presented a gift to the girl, and the gift is a *kanga*. I have used the *kanga* throughout the novel without explaining what a *kanga* is, because in the context you will understand what a *kanga* is.

Doreen Strauhs: When we were talking about language previously, the first questions that came to both of our minds were: 'What does language mean to you as a human being, as an individual? What is the role of language in the Ugandan context from a sociolinguistic point of view?' Maybe you could comment on these aspects before we turn to the role of English in your writing?

Goretti Kyomuhendo: Really beginning from the basics, I would say that language is a tool of communication. So it enables me to communicate. It gives me an identity in the sense of belonging. In Uganda, for example, we don't have a national language, unlike Tanzania and Kenya, where they have Swahili as their national language. We have an official language, which is English and which is used in schools as a medium of instruction, and also in government offices. But as a community of Uganda, we don't have a national language. We have over fifty different spoken languages in Uganda. These are usually based on the different regions. People from the North will have a language that almost all of them can easily understand, although this doesn't mean that they speak this particular language. But it's common in that region of the North. The same is true for the South, the East and the West. A person like me who comes from the West cannot communicate with a

person from the North. We can only communicate in English. And the challenge at the moment of trying to forge a national language for the country touches on the issue of identity. The language that is put forward as a national language by some people is spoken in Central Uganda. It is Luganda, which almost everybody can understand, or communicate in. Some Baganda I've spoken to are not happy about this because they claim that they will lose their identity. When everybody in the country speaks this language, you can no longer tell who the owner of this language is. Language gives you an identity. It carries your culture. Language and culture are inseparable. Language carries your emotions. It's OK to have several languages and to have English as the official language. When I started school with about six years, I had never encountered English before, because at my home we would only speak our mother tongue. When I went to school, I was told that I would have to learn this foreign language that was called English. At that point, I did not know why. And because it was very important that I learned English, I would be punished when I was caught speaking my mother tongue on the premises of the school. It was punishable. As long as you are on the school compound, you must express yourself in English. For some time, I started hating it, because it was foreign, it was difficult, I had never read any book, I had never heard any white person speak English, and I hated it. Inevitably, when I started writing, I became familiar with English because all the school exams are set in English. After some time, I became so familiar with it, and now I think, I will be speaking English for the rest of my life. It is no longer a foreign language to me. It's as close to me as my other identities.

Doreen Strauhs: How important is language as a tool for you as a writer and in your writing? Where do you struggle, or where do you feel that you straddle cultures and languages?

Goretti Kyomuhendo: When writing, I draw from both languages and cultures. As I have already said, the moment I started speaking and writing in English, it became a part of me, but at the same time, my mother tongue, of which I continue to express myself with my immediate family, is a part of me as well. When I'm writing there is always, for example, the issue of the proverb. A proverb in my mother tongue often has no equivalent in English. So I always have to struggle with that. How do I convey my feelings, my true emotions because they are embedded in this proverb, in this

song, in this idiom which has no equivalent in English? In my language sometimes, it's one word or one line. By translating it into English I have to break it down in phrases, and then it doesn't have meaning anymore. I'm trying to describe it. At worst, I leave it out, because I don't want to explain it, or because at times I simply don't have the words to explain it. When I leave it out, I sometimes feel a little inadequate, thinking that I haven't really expressed my emotions, that I have failed to express my feelings, because I don't have that language that I can express it in. Then in Uganda, we have certain types of food and vegetable, which cannot be found anywhere else and have no equivalent in English, but they are part and parcel of a Ugandan meal, culture, tradition, language. You cannot cook a meal and not talk about the food. But there is no equivalent for it in English. To bridge this gap in writing is a challenge.

Doreen Strauhs: Which strategies have you developed to overcome this challenge in your writing?

Goretti Kyomuhendo: At times I find myself writing "A bitter green vegetable," which really means nothing. That's one strategy. Another strategy is to just put it in the text and to leave it unexplained. There is a song in the novel, *Waiting*, which is written in my mother tongue. I was told to translate it into English because my American publishers said their audience would not understand it. I did not want to do it because the song would lose its original meaning. It's a song, and surely you can appreciate a song even if you do not understand its meaning? I did not know the equivalent words for it in English. I put italics in English just at the end of each sentence. It's just a loose translation. This is another strategy: I might directly translate a phrase or a word and put it in italics. The novel *Secrets No More* has a glossary, which I was also opposed to. But the publishers thought it would be useful because I was borrowing from another language, which was not Ugandan. Sometimes though you wonder: if this phrase was in French, would I have to translate it? When you read a European novel, for instance, some of the French words are not translated and people just expect them to be understood somehow. It's not always necessary to translate everything as we as readers don't really have to understand word per word of the story as long as the meaning of the words becomes clear in context. In my writing, I have to deal with the issue of language and culture on a daily basis.

Doreen Strauhs: How do you personally find a balance between the publishers' market interest, the interest of your audience, and your own writing in regard to language?

Goretti Kyomuhendo: I think I have to grapple two issues here: the market and the audience. I want to quote the Senegalese writer Ousmane Sembene, who put it so adequately, when he was being asked the same question. He said, 'As an African writer, Africa is our audience, but the West is our market.' I always think of that, whether we accept it or not. I grew up with my grandmother and she was a storyteller. I was her favorite because I loved stories. I would be in her company every day, asking her to tell me a story, and she would tell me all the folk stories she knew. Being young, I believed everything. So I grew up with the storytelling tradition of my grandmother, and I still draw from that culture in all of my books. I draw from the culture that I'm familiar with. That's why my first priority is to think of the audience as Ugandan, because these are their stories. For my writing, I have interviewed some of them, I have talked to my family, my friends, my neighbors. I go back to the village when I'm writing and researching, and I live with these people and eat with them. I'm in London now, writing another novel, and I only have to phone them just to hear what they talk like, in our Ugandan English. I phone them and talk to them for thirty minutes and this helps, if I find that I have a problem writing. I also feel that *Waiting* should be in schools in Uganda because from my own experience when I was forced to read the English classics like Charlotte Bronte and Shakespeare, of course, I always had to struggle to spell the names which you had to get right in the literature essay to pass. While writing, I would blank out and wonder how that name was spelled. I was afraid that I was going to fail my essay. Some of my books like *First Daughter* are used in schools, and when I'm in Uganda I also go and visit schools. The kids are so happy to see me and they can pronounce the characters' names. They can spell them, they can identify with all that I'm talking about. I feel happy that this is my primary audience. However, then comes in the publisher who is concerned with market and selling the book. He says, "We need to standardize it, it's too local; it's just for Uganda." In fact, how many people in Uganda, 30 million people, can read and write? And then how many of those who can read and write, can actually buy a book? The biggest newspaper in Uganda sells less than fifty thousand copies a day

out of thirty million people in Uganda. According to the international publishers Uganda is a non-existing market. They will tell you to put in acceptable standard for the book to be sold in America and Europe. That is the second stage.

Doreen Strauhs: This aspect turns out to be a problem when you want to convey a sense of Ugandan culture through Ugandan English idioms like ‘Can you hear something smell’.

Goretti Kyomuhendo: I’m coming from a culture where we have appropriated English because it’s no longer foreign to us. In our daily usage of English, we translate directly. ‘Can you hear something smelling?’ This phrase is translated directly from a language where the words ‘hearing’ and ‘smelling’ are one. It’s the same word. The American or European publisher would say, ‘No you have to say ‘Can you smell something?’” Yet if it was the Ugandan audience reading this, I would not be bothered at all. They would understand it immediately. But the publishers need you to communicate beyond an audience that is not Ugandan. I’m conscious of this. When, for example, I read *The God of Small Things*, I was intrigued. Arundhati Roy was writing about a culture that I’m not familiar with, but because she communicated so effectively, I found myself understanding and loving it. Recently, I also read the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* - a whole different culture, but I had no problems understanding it because again the author, Khaled Hosseini, communicated so well. When I’m writing I’m conscious of communicating. I want to tell a good story that will break those barriers of audience. I’m concerned about telling a story based on my culture, but with vivid images and good communication. But at the same time I want to be local just like these other authors are. The publishers talk about a way of standardizing in a way that will break these barriers of audience. In view of this song that I use in this book and that I had refused to translate, I think, the publishers and I have found a compromise because I provided a loose translation. In *Waiting*, I’m drawing from a culture that is embedded in song, there is no way of telling a story without a song/songs. That’s all what I was trying to say. In Ugandan culture, songs, proverbs and storytelling are functional. We use art as a function of communication, and even the most complex communication in Uganda would still be told through drama, song, poetry and proverbs. At the moment when they are trying to communicate information about AIDS/HIV they would use drama, poetry and

storytelling, and not write a textbook. In *Waiting*, there is a proverb: “Those who ask what they know are just looking for laughter.” It’s such a common expression in Uganda. And for the first time I was very happy because I was not deleting anything because that’s how I would say it in my language. Are you here familiar with that? But it makes sense, doesn’t it? About the silences in *Waiting*, where things are said between the words, I would like to say that over the years I have learned what you leave out is what makes a story stronger than what you put in. If you leave out things, at times they are more important than what you put in the story.

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