Language, Culture and Literary Translation in the African Context: The Case of Ngugi wa Thiong'o

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Language, culture and translation are pivotal questions and the most heated controversies in postcolonial African studies. The interconnection between language and culture along with translation as an intricate activity, though an age-old debate in Western societies, is still valid in contemporary Africa. Undeniably, translating is not only rendering a text from one language into another but also 'transposing a culture' to the 'receiving audience'. As for the language issue, the many questions which have been raised sofar, have often resulted in political and philosophical polemics and have led to sterile contentious exchanges . The questions that are often asked are: In what language and to whom should one write? What does it mean to have more than one language to write in ? What does it mean to write in a language that is not one's own ? Can the African writer convey his experience in a language which embodies the very culture he is resisting ? How can he, as a writer, transfer his character's words, feelings and attitudes into English and still retain the idiomatic speech and the authenticity of his character ? In response to the systematic imposition of colonial languages , some post-colonial writers and activists advocate a complete return to the use of indigenous languages and resort to literary translation to reach a wider readership. It is this literary translation in the African context and in connection with both the source and target languages which has stirred my curiosity and prompted me to think the following questions over : What might translation do to the work ? Should literary translation contribute to the cultural or rather literary exchanges ? What is the range of translatability and untranslatability of cultures ? Are there realms of the inaccessible and should they be maintained and respected ? Should the translator retain the specific characteristics of the source text and thereby render authentically the original style ? Can he surpass the aesthetic qualities inherent in the source text by making use of the advantages of the target language ? and finally, what are the limits of literary translation amidst the tetrahedran figure relating the writer to the text, the language and the reader? Given the time

limitation and the prolixity of the aforementioned questionings , my presentation does not pretend to be a panacea nor does it aim at delving in theories of translation and covering a wider scope. I will be limited to the African context because most literature ever written about translation is confined to the eurocentric family of languages and very little is done about texts written in families of languages which are alien to European cultural and sociohistorical contexts. In attempting to answer some of these questions, I will deal extensively with the essays of Ngugi wa Thiong'o (A Kenyan writer/translator and critic) and refer to the translated version of his latest novel entitled **Matigari** (1987)**1** which has been originally written in Gikuyu, Ngugi's native language.

In many of his declarations, Ngugi wa Thiong'o has asserted that any genuine African literature must be written in African languages.**2** The English language, in Ngugi's belief, has become subversive of the existence of a common culture and outlook in the English-speaking Africa. As the chief medium for the transmission of world civilization, it has become an instrument of the devaluation of the particular African Cultures. In one of his recent declarations about language, Ngugi asserts that "the African thought is imprisoned in foreign languages" and that both African literature and thought are "alienated from the majority"**3**. In **Decolonising the Mind**,**4** Ngugi observes that language as a means of communication, has three aspects (language of real life, speech, written signs). As a carrier of culture, language is a means of communication. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their entire relationship with nature and other beings. So using a foreign language as a means of communication is reflecting the "language of real life" elsewhere. It could never properly reflect or imitate the real life of the African community**5**. The written language acquired at school became divorced from the spoken language at home because the language of the books at school is foreign. Thus the language of the student's conceptualization became foreign. Thought in him takes the invisible form of foreign language. This results in the disassociation of the student from his national and social environment, what we might call colonial alienation. The African student is being made to stand outside himself to look at himself. He is to see the images as defined or reflected in the culture of the foreign language. And since those images are mostly passed on through literature, it means the child can only see the world as seen in the literature of that foreign language, a

world often associating the student's native language with low status, barbarism, racist images. . . etc.

Hence, and with reference to literature, can't we say that colonial education and the use of foreign languages, despite the ever presence of the native spoken language, alters the Africans' perception and conditions their interpretation and even distorts their world outlook? As for the African writer/translator, his shift from a native language to a foreign one entails the problem of linguistic transference which an English writer does not have. In other words, how does the African writer render an African experience in a language which was originally evolved to embody a different kind of experience and a different kind of sensibility? To what extent can the writer/translator succeed in authentically capturing the original aura and faithfully transferring his character's words, feelings and attitudes in English?

Actually, the theoretical ground Ngugi wa Thiong'o had propounded in his advocacy of the necessary use of one's native language astonishingly matches the cultural model in translation theory. This theory considers culture as language and translating means describing and explaining the world view of one people to another. The hypothesis of 'language relativity' put forward by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf postulates that any language not only provides a means of communication for its speakers but also imposes on them a different vision of the world, a different way of analyzing experiences . Each language conceptualizes in a different manner, describing life reality in different ways. In other words, language determines the way its speakers look at the world and the way they express their own thoughts. It follows from this that any form of inter cultural communication is difficult if not impossible. Sapir makes this clear: No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds not merely the same world with different labels attached.6

Other opponents of the cultural view of language, while subscribing to Sapir's opinion that languages differ enormously, regard translating as a possible task if it is carried out between cultures rather than between languages. Casagrande claims that one does not translate LANGUAGES, one translate CULTURES."7 He develops the argument further when he asserts that there is no problem of cultural gaps in translating at all, adding that if "there is a loss

of information in this process of switching codes, the same is for messages transmitted between members of the same speech community especially if they belong to different sub-cultures."8

Accordingly, translation or rather 'communicative translation' remains a possible intercultural operation though it poses many serious problems to the translator. The translation of abstract terms is very complex. The more complex abstractions are, the more difficult translation becomes. These problems are the product of the many differences in social, political, ideological and religious aspects of the lives of both cultures, especially if the cultural contexts of the two languages are quite different- the case of Europe VS. Africa.

However, if **'communicative translation'**, though difficult, remains possible, **'literary translation'** is a much more complex operation for it requires further linguistic and extralinguistic considerations. It is commonly known that each language has its own system of arranging concepts into different parts of speech, making it risky to seek one-to-one equivalents. One language may use the verb form more frequently, where another will seek to express meanings by means of a verbal noun or an adjective. These devices are a part of the style and will not accomplish their intended purpose if translated into a second language. In terms of vocabulary, a second language may not have a specific word equivalent for each of the synonyms of the source language. There may be more synonyms or less. No two languages will have equivalent sets of terms referring to a particular domain. As for the figurative forms of expression, they do impede literary translation. Figures like metonymy, synecdoche, idiom, euphemism, hyperbole do not tend to have exact equivalent in the target language. Also, the lexical items such as connotative meanings are often culturally conditioned , a word may have a positive connotation in one culture whereas in a second it may have a negative one. Differences in culture result in situations in which a concept in one language is unknown in the receptor language and no lexical equivalents exist to convey it.

Moreover , a successful literary translation is determined in part by: who the author was, the purpose of the translation , for whom the information was intended, the relationship between the author and the audience, the culture within which the information was generated, the degree of commonality between source and receptor languages.

Regarding the English-speaking African writers/translators who most of them are found in a diglossic situation, they seem to have the privilege of belonging to 'both worlds'.

Exploiting the advantage of their bilingual position, these writers, in writing in English or translating into it , have to transfer their structure of thought, feelings and expressions from an African language into English, while at the same time making sure that their English is intelligible enough to a wider readership. In other words, he who attempts to write about or translate his African experience into English needs to be thoroughly 'at home' within both languages, a requirement which is very unlikely fulfilled in most cases.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is the quintessence of the African writers who took a political stance towards language by dropping English, the colonial language,in 1978. His latest novels **Devil on the Cross** (1982)9 and **Matigari** (1987) first came out in Gikuyu and were later translated into English. However, he seems to have an ambivalent if not contradictory attitude towards the problem of language and translation. On the one hand, he insists upon the use of one's indigenous language and warns against the distorting and alienating effects of a foreign language. On the other hand, in a 'simplistic' and 'derogatory' way, he takes translation as a possible means to reach his non native readership.

It is with the translated version of **Matigari** that I want, though briefly, to comment on Ngugi's choice of his native language and his recourse to translation. My judgement might be blurred by my ignorance of the native language, but my evaluation to this specific novel is in relation to Ngugi's previous writings which were originally written in English.

Matigari begins with the protagonist Matigari wa Njirungi, whose name in Gikuyu which means "the patriot who survived the bullets," emerging from the forest, having finally killed Settler Williams and his assistant John Boy (both the oppressor and the collaborator). Matigari roams in the land seeking "truth and justice" and wishes also to reclaim the home he fought for against Williams and Boy. But Williams' and Boy's sons now own the house; ther Kenyan captains of industry who openly bribe the nation's leader. The three of them constitute the nation's neocolonial ruling authorities who work to smash workers' strikes and suppress all dissent. Matigari had sworn himself to

peace upon leaving the forest but begins to see that he must again pick up arms to fight what is wrong.

In fact, the very existence of the text in an African language implicitly transforms its epistemological function. Whatever we may think about the subject and form of the book, Ngugi would argue, Gikuyu readers are not alienated in his novel because its language reflects their knowable universe. Ngugi's return to the sources would mean his reconciliation with the traditions and a discovery of the power of orality as a necessary element in the African narrative. Nonetheless, in terms of artistic achievements, does **Matigari** (both in the original and the translation version) mark any real departure from Ngugi's previous narrative practices and ideologies?

Undoubtedly, writing in Gikuyu has slightly changed the form of Ngugi's fiction wherein there is more concentration on oral traditions But, as a Ngugi's long time reader I am disappointed with **Matigari** (read in English translation) because of its simple narrative structure and its simplified language of popular discourse. This novel, I believe, does not reveal Ngugi's technical talents and aesthetic qualities as the previous novels written in English. In terms of content, as many leftist critics observe, the intellectual level at which he makes his pitch for socialism in **Matigari** is too simplistic and propagandist as compared to his novel **Petals of Blood**. Does it mean that the translator, Wangui wa Goro, failed in translating the novel? Or does it mean because I am judging it on the basis of the Western literary norms?

In fact, the process of translation in Ngugi's case is very peculiar because it is a translation of a translation . It stems from English and moves on to Gikuyu and then back to English through the process of translation. In other words, Ngugi drew from English, the already-existing novelistic genres to write his Gikuyu novel and to evoke an African presence and the latter Gikuyu version transposes the elements to the translated version in English (Input/English----Storing/Gikuyu------Output/English).

Ngugi considers the possibility that, by writing in Gikuyu, he has generated a different kind of novel. This is not true because in his attempt to convert his native tongue into an agent of fictionalisation according to Western literary conventions, Ngugi did not reach successfully his objective. Indeed writing in an African language is subordinated to a tradition of fictionalization

which existed prior to that language. Ngugi's reliance on orality does not hide his attraction to the European realist tradition. Therefore, what reasons could Ngugi possibly give to suggest that this novel has liberated him from the prisonhouse of the colonial language and its episteme when (in its translation) it seems to affirm eurocentric generic conventions and linguistic practices found in his other texts? This question is particularly troublesome to me because I seem to be dealing with two literary objects-Matigari (in both English and Gikuyu versions)- two different artifacts directed at two antagonistic audiences.

Implicit in this dilemma is the problem of what I will call the epistemology of translation; i.e. the two texts function in a political situation where English is more powerful than Gikuyu. If Ngugi's intention was to make the Gikuyu text the great original to which all translations would be subordinated, this intention is defeated by two reasons : his reliance on the Western literary tradition and the act of translation itself. The act of translation is hence a double-edged weapon; it allows Ngugi's text to survive and to be read, as if it were a novel in English.

Admittedly, Wangui wa Goro's translation of the novel is eloquent. It is intended not only to capture the spirit of the original but also to prove the recreating efficacy of translation. It is as if the ability to translate the Gikuyu original into English is already an affirmation of the power of the African language to exist in the same universe of language and ideology as its European counterpart. On another level, however, there are moments when the eloquence of this tradition depends on the translator's decision to suppress certain unique aspects of the Gikuyu language which, because they have no equivalents in English, might either prove difficult to the English reader or render the text less fluent. Such difficulties apply particularly to proverbs and sayings. Moreover, the inclusion of another language in an English text necessarily means the exclusion of English in certain instances. When a native word is left untranslated, it implies that the English equivalent is somehow unacceptable or insufficient. The translator refuses substitution whenever it sounds inappropriate. For example, food, clothing, plants, instruments and religious elements among others are unique to the native land and culture(the word 'heart' could mean in Gikuyu :soul, spirit, conscience, mind, inner man, essence and on). They may not have accurate English names. But often, even if some words are translatable, the English equivalent falls short of conveying completely the same sentiments. Also, Ngugi's translated fiction (**Devil on the**

Cross and **Matigari)** is fringed with the author's/translator's marginal notes:"this is how it should be read", "these are the conditions which produced the text","in Gikuyu or Kiswahili it means....". which makes me feel that Ngugi's choice of Gikuyu is more a political gesture than an actual condition of existence of his fiction.

As a conclusion and with reference to the problem of translation in the African context, we often deal with the actual, linguistic translation in the context of 'one-world' literatures. I believe that translation in African or third world literatures is still dependent on metropolitan cultural and literary standards. These standards influence even the creation of "the original texts" and condition their distribution on the world market. Moreover, writing in one's native language and then translating it does not necessarily generate a successful work of art on the basis of the Western pre-established canons. Therefore, only third world literatures (cultures) themselves, hitherto pushed to the periphery and excluded from the canon10, by means of literary and textual self-projection, can counteract the danger of being administered by Western discourse. As Nadine Gordimer points out, "One must look at the world from Africa, to be an African writer, not look upon Africa, from the world." 11

REFERENCES

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2. In most of his essays, Ngugi has extensively dealt with the question of language and the necessity of using one's native language. His most recent production about language is **Decolonising the Mind** .
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11.Nadine Gordimer, cited by Susan Bassnet,**Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction**,p.74.