The Translator as Co-Author: Wangũi Goro's (Re)Writing of Gender Relations in *Matigari*

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Abstract

Translation has conventionally been seen as a practice concerned with the techniques of representing texts written in one language in another language. This article, however, claims that since the act of literary creation inevitably starts within a culture, translation is a more encompassing practice that takes into its ambit not just the transposition of language but of a whole culture. This is particularly so in the postcolonial context where translation is a one-way process in which African language texts are translated into the already dominant Western languages. In this context translation poses challenges regarding the translatability of local cultures and languages into European languages. This article examines Wangũi Goro's translation of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's ***Matigari Ma Njirũũngi*** *into English. I argue that that in translating the novel,* Wangũi *Goro, emerges as a free agent who claims as much creative leeway as the author. This is evident, I show, in the way the translator proactively intervenes to redress gendered inequalities both in the Gĩkũyũ language and in the representation of nationalism in African literature where the nationalist project has often been presented as a male project.*

Key Words: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Postcolonial, African Literature, Translation, Nationalism, Gender

Introduction

Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's decision to write in Gĩkũyũ enabled him to jettison the novel's bourgeois heritage. The choice of language allowed him to bypass the English intermediary and reconnected him with alternative literary tradition based on Gĩkũyũ oral poetics. For him, writing in Gĩkũyũ was a way of reconnecting his work with the indigenous tradition of orature and an attempt to re-establish the broken thread that had always connected language, the artist, his culture and audience to orature which the author regards as the authentic African literary tradition (Ngũgĩ, 1986a: 11). Although his creative appropriation of the codes of orature and popular culture had a salutary effect on his writing it also posed the problem of how to turn his novels into interactive aesthetic forms that his putative audience, the non-English speaking workers and peasants could relate to. Ngũgĩ confronted this challenge by creating creation of a new type of novel that is aesthetically African, a highly experimental novel that aspires to transcend the assumption of a reading public associated with the novel in the Western literary tradition.

In doing so, the author is also creatively contesting Western discourses on African literature which uphold a fundamental distinction between "traditional" – oral and verbal arts – and "modern" literature. The former is generally associated with African languages while modern literature is seen as that written in European languages and "influenced" by Western traditions of writing. This dichotomy simplifies the complex relationship between the oral and the written, and between tradition and modernity in African literature as it ignores the fact that African literature is not exclusively produced in European languages. In this contestation the author does not transact from a vacuum. He knows the multiple ways in which the new genres introduced through writing interact with the vigorous oral literary traditions that have remained part of the African popular culture. The author turns to these popular forms to reconstruct the fragmented African gnosis and to recover literary forms and languages suppressed by colonialism.

In *Matigari Ma Njirũũngi* (1986b), Ngũgĩ claims a place for orature as a central code that is socially relevant as it figures alternative ways of living in and seeing the world. The author has stated that he turned to oral literature to find a way of dealing with the problems of oppression in Kenya, and by extension, in African politics (1986a: 79-80). His use of orality demonstrates its value as an aesthetic and performative code that exists in mutually interactive relations with the new genres of the written literary tradition. His choice of Gĩkũyũ as his linguistic medium is connected directly to the impulse to authorise the alternative epistemologies embedded in orature and other popular cultural forms. This intersects with the author's ideological stances in that it seeks to empower those who are politically and economically marginalised. More significantly, using orality in Ngũgĩ's fictions is implicated in the constitution of publics for his novel. In making the shift to the indigenous language and orature Ngũgĩ was being a good student of Frantz Fanon who holds that nationalist literature emerges only when the postcolonial intellectual shifts from addressing the erstwhile coloniser and creates a new public among his own people with a "literature of combat" that calls "for a whole people to fight for their existence as a nation". Fanon explains that this literature moulds national consciousness, gives it form and contours and flings open new and boundless horizons (1968: 240).

Ngũgĩ transforms and retools the novel into an aesthetic object that actively represents the daily struggles of the oppressed for liberation. Taking advantage of the novelistic discourse to parody other genres to the extent that "the conventional languages of strictly canonical genres begin to sound in new ways" (Bakhtin, 2004: 5, 7), the author parodies not just the Western novel but also the oral genres. Indeed, in this novel the author reaches the apogee of his creative dissatisfaction with "the quietist-realist work" in the Western mode (Aizenberg, 1990: 90). Through the aesthetic codes of the oral literary tradition the form of the Western novel is relativised, resisted, and creatively modified. Canonical conventions of the novel such as realism are dispensed with as the writer mines orature for alternative modes of representation. The oral genres and the indigenous language are themselves recreated and upgraded to represent new realities and to mediate the author's ideological viewpoints.

Gĩkũyũ literary theory distinguishes between two kinds of narratives. There are *ng'ano cia marimũ* (ogre stories) – a classification that clearly overrides realism – and *ng'ano* (stories). The first category features ogres and such other mythical characters while the

second category features histories, biographies, heroic narratives, and stories of origin. "Ng'ano" are presumed to be "factual" narratives and the ogre stories as fictional. In *Matigari Ma Njirũũngi*, the material of the narrative as an oral performance is provided by Gĩkũyũ storytelling conventions which underscore the text's essential fictionality. The most fundamental of these conventions is the formulaic *Uga Ĩĩtha*! This is a crucial aspect of oral narratology which is only used in fictional narratives (Kabira and Karega, 1993: 5-6). By using the formula then, Ngũgĩ firmly connects the novel with the Gĩkũyũ oral literary tradition. The author re-orients the novel towards oral modes of reception by textually creating an ostensibly listening but actually reading audience within his novel. In this way the novel re-enacts the oral storytelling moment itself. This listening textual audience is figured as the ideal audience. The reading audience which is external to the text can only peep and listen in but it remains an outsider as the dialogic oral performance unfolds.

The Nationalist Patriarch: Matigari Ma Njirũũngi's Journeys in the Postcolonial Nation

Matigari Ma Njirũũngi tells the story of a former Mau Mau freedom fighter of the same name who returns from the forest years after the armed struggle is over and independence has been attained. After burying his weapons, the war veteran begins a search for his family to rebuild his home and starting a new peaceful future in the postcolonial nation. The novel is structured by the journey motif based on a Gĩkũyũ folktale about a man who, suffering some mysterious illness, undertakes a fruitless search for a cure. In the folktale, the plot turns on the search for the elusive healer. The protagonist uses song to ask those he meets on how to direct him to the healer whom nobody seems to know. Characteristic of Ngũgĩ's upgrading of oral genres to suit new contexts, the song is reconfigured into a song about Matigari Ma Njirũũngi's quest and enigmatic identity which remains a subject of conjecture through most of the novel. Who is Matigari Ma Njirũũngi ? What is his quest and will it be futile as in the oral narrative?

Unlike in the folktale, Matigari's quest does not turn out be in vain. This is because as a former freedom fighter Matigari is depicted in characteristically gendered terms as a father figure and, more significantly, as the embodiment of the nation. His "illness" is a public rather than an individual's affliction and hence his is a quest for a cure for what is essentially a national malady. Although the novel attempts to blur referentiality it is clear from the history that Matigari's story re-enacts that the unnamed country is post-colonial Kenya. The radio broadcasts recall events in Kenya's recent post-colonial history. President Ole Mũgathe is a composite figure of the first two Kenyan presidents – Kenyatta and Moi. "Mũgathe", a translation of "his Excellency" into Gĩkũyũ was the term used in all public references to President Kenyatta. The soubriquet "Ole" (meaning "son of" in the Maa languages) is a reference to President Moi, the second president. Other parallels recall a mutiny by elements of the Kenya army in 1967 only a few years after independence which was suppressed with assistance from Britain, the former colonial master, and the outlawing of opposition under President Moi who declared Kenya a *de jure* one party state in 1982.

Matigari Ma Njirũũngi can be read as a fictional reflection of the plight of the Kenyan state in the post-independence period. Despite the propaganda purveyed by the state broadcaster, the novel insists that the truths of the nation are its realities. The author

jettisons realism as conventionally understood in Western poetics where the writer is expected to represent reality in a "truthful" and "objective" manner (Balogun, 1995: 350-352). In the novel, these notions are as highly contested as the nation. By documenting its dystopic realities, the nation is combated and its legitimacy put to question for its failure to deliver on the aspirations of the freedom struggle.

The novel is divided into three parts. Part one entitled, "Ngarũro wa Kĩrĩro" (Wiping Your Tears Away), focuses on Matigari's return to the neo-colony after years of absence and his journeys across the nation in search of his family. In the process he meets and consoles many marginalised and oppressed characters (*MMN*, 3-58). In part two "Macaria Ma na Kĩhooto" (The Search for Justice), Matigari transverses the neo-colonial state and comes to terms with the painful reality that the ideals he, and others, sacrificed for in the struggle for independence have been betrayed. His anguished quest reveals the absence of truth and justice, the pervasive oppression and exploitation of the poor (*MMN*, 59-114). In the final part, "Gũthera na Mũriũki" (Gũthera and Mũriũki), the novel imagines new post-colonial futures emerging from the success of a second liberation struggle that is, significantly, to be spearheaded by the oppressed – symbolised by Gũthera, a former prostitute, Mũriũki, a former street boy and Ngarũro wa Kĩrĩro, a worker (*MMN*, 115-156).

The structure of the novel is episodic with the centre of focus shifting cinematically over carefully foregrounded incidents. These "snapshots" illuminate the state of the nation: the policemen patrolling with dogs bespeak the overbearing presence of the coercive apparatus of the state, young women turned prostitutes in bars, children scavenging in dumpsites and the imprint of Western multinationals on the state. Bearing such names as Anglo-American Plastic and Leather Works, Barclays and American Life Insurance (*MMN*, 9, 13), the foreignness of these corporations is highlighted in italics and subordinated to the overarching Gĩkũyũ discourse in the novel. The theme of the novel revolves around the failure by the neo-colonial state to initiate a decisive break with its colonial past.

The politics of decolonisation and betrayal of nationalist ideals are at the centre *Matigari Ma Njirũũngi*. Matigari Ma Njirũũngi whose name translates as the "remants who survived the bullets" is a figure from history and popular culture. In popular Gĩkũyũ discourses, the phrase "matigari ma njirũũngi" was at first proudly used as a badge of honour by those who had participated in the liberation struggle as they mobilised themselves in nation building. Soon, however, as it become clear that the ruling elite was not intent on delivering on the hopes and aspirations that had energised the struggle for independence, the term became a lament of exclusion. It expressed a deeply felt sense of betrayal of the aspirations that had driven the anti-colonial struggle. Often truncated to "Matigari" (thus eliding reference to bullets), the term became a coded expression of the hope that one day, the Mau Mau survivors or their children will return to the forest to complete the aborted task of national liberation.

Translation and the Critique of Nationalist Iconographies in *Matigari*

Translated by Wangũi Goro into English as *Matigari* (1989), the translation of the novel shows a deliberate departure from the conventional understanding of translation as an attempt to render a text in one language in another language. It is apparent from

the onset that the translator is not concerned about the fidelity of the translation to the "original" but is more interested in using the translation to mediate her own specific interests. As a feminist scholar and also a professional translator with a deep interest in the management of dynamic multiple knowledges, cultures and inequalities within and across cultures; two important considerations, I contend, inform Wangũi Goro's approach to translation in also *Matigari*. The first concerns the need to bridge the gap between Gĩkũyũ and English cultures to make the text intelligible to the English reader. The second is the translator's attempt to redress inequalities within Gĩkũyũ culture and history especially in relation to the representation of gender and the place of women in the nationalist struggle.

Literature is one of the most cultural discourses. Whether writing in a European or an indigenous African language, the act of literary creation inevitably starts within a culture. The author's culture and tradition serves as a metatext that is explicitly or implicitly re-written as both background and foreground to the text (Tymoczko, 1999: 21). The question then arises: how is the translator transpose such culturally embedded texts into the language of another and different culture without losing the cultural flavour emanating from the codes and the epistemologies of the original culture?

This article goes beyond the conventional understanding of translation as a solitary scholarly activity that is concerned with precise techniques of representing texts written in one language in another. Acknowledging there are limits to the translatability of culture and that, even at its best, literary translation is always a partial achievement (Catford, 1993: 21); this article argues that the efficacy of a translation should be evaluated based on how it transmits the translator's interests and not based on an assumed fidelity to the original text.

As a translator Goro's foremost concerns is the intelligibility of the translated text to the English reader. In her bid to communicate intelligibly with her reader, Goro's translation strategy tends towards the elision of difference. One notes an absence of any spillover of untranslated Gĩkũyũ terms in the English text that is quite remarkable in such a culturally bound novel. A close reading of the translated text shows that confronted by problems of the limitations of the English language in the expression of indigenous cultural epistemologies, Goro chooses an interpretative model in which elements of the indigenous culture which cannot be substituted with equivalent lexical and cultural elements of the target language. These include lexical elements, proverbs and idiomatic expressions. Annotation as a form of cultural indexing is minimally used. There are only two instances where annotation is used to explain Gĩkũyũ language (*MAT*, 4, 20). Instead, elements that would render the translation culturally opaque are suppressed or replaced with equivalent English language elements that would be more accessible to the English reader. This gives the impression that the translator has somehow achieved full translatability of the indigenous language but Goro's translation strategy actually leads to what Gikandi aptly describes as the loss of "the fresh impress of the original language" (1991: 64, 166).

Without minimising the validity of Gikandi's observation, loss is inescapable in any translation. This is particularly so in the translation of texts like *Matigari Ma Njirũũngi* where the author so deliberately sets out to embed the original text in the indigenous language and culture. In this context, Goro's suppression and elision of elements of the indigenous language suggests that as a translator she is not interested in attempting any

perfect congruence between the original and the translated text. This speaks to her agency not just as a translator but also as a powerful reader and cultural agent in her own right who chooses not just what to highlight but also suggests the perspective from which she wants the text to be seen. In doing this, she is sometimes aligned with the author's aesthetic objectives but sometimes deviant.

In writing the novel, Ngũgĩ intended for it to be received within the framework of the Gĩkũyũ / African storytelling conventions. This is evident in the author's evocation of the storytelling formulas and other conventions associated with the indigenous oral narratology. In a gesture of acknowledgement of this crucial aspect of the author's aesthetic ideology, the translator prefaces the English text with a note by the author in which Ngũgĩ provides some background information. The cultural indexing therein is critical in the English text because by explicitly explaining the "necessary cultural and literary background for the receiving audience" (Tymoczko, 1999: 22), it assists the English reader to relate intelligibly with the text. The preface attempts to bridge the gulf between the English reading public and the contexts of the novel. It is not included in the original text because it is assumed that a Gĩkũyũ reading audience would be familiar with the oral, cultural, historical and political contexts of the novel.

The interstitial space between the indigenous culture and its translation into another language is an important site of transaction. It is a space of negotiation in which the translator's agency as a "free agent" (Bassnet and Trivedi, 1999: 5), a powerful cultural interrogator and mediator, manifests itself. A translator like Goro who shares a language with the author may even add to the text, clarifying certain elements and thus making the text more intelligible to the receiving audience. More significantly, that Goro translates from within the culture means that she well versed with the inequalities within the Gĩkũyũ culture. How then does her agency as a translator who is also a feminist literary scholar and a cultural agent in her own right play out in the translation?

It is to be expected that as a cultural insider and a literary scholar Goro is not only conversant with the inequalities within the Gĩkũyũ culture but also with the biased representation of women in what Boehmer calls "national iconographies" where men and women are depicted as occupying different "spaces" and "levels" so that nationalism may rightly be "characterised as a male drama" with women playing subsidiary and supportive roles (1992: 232-233). Arguing that Ngũgĩ "has returned to the trope of the nationalist actor as masculine, as conventionally a fighter-figure and a leader of men" (1992: 230), Boehmer sees *Matigari* (The English text) as the exemplification of this skewed representation of women in African literature. It is interesting that the critic sees Ngũgĩ's representation of gender in the novel in terms of retrogression. This is hardly surprising given that the author had depicted strong women like Wanja and Warĩĩnga in *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross.* But is Ngũgĩ retrogressive in the representation of gender or could the apparent relapse be a consequence of the way the novel is translated and presented to the reader of the English text?

To answer this question, we need to recall that one of the abiding mystery in the original text relates to the identity of the main character. Reading the Gĩkũyũ text it is clear from the onset that Ngũgĩ deliberately set out to create an aura of ambiguity around Matigari Ma Njirũũngi with the question constantly being raised in the novel: Who is Matigari Ma Njirũũngi? Is he a man or a woman? The title of the Gĩkũyũ text

which is also the character's name translates as "the remnants who survived the bullets", a phrase that establishes an immediate dialogism between the novel, the character and Kenya's history and specifically with the Mau Mau struggle. Understood in this sense, Matigari Ma Njirũũngi is an is ungendered name that symbolises all the "remnants" of the Mau Mau struggle. In this sense, Matigari Ma Njirũũngi can be read as an allegorical character and the embodiment of all the survivors of Kenya's traumatic struggle for independence. However, in the English translation the name is transposed into proper noun and truncated to Matigari. The suppression of certain symbolic and parabolic nuances suggested by the original text gives the impression that we are dealing with an individual. Goro re-writes Matigari Ma Njirũũngi not just as a conventional hero but also, more significantly, as a male figure. This is the most significant difference between the Gĩkũyũ text and the translation.

The re-writing of Matigari as a male figure reflects the differences between Gĩkũyũ and the English languages. Unlike the English language, Gĩkũyũ does not have gendered pronouns. The title of the Gĩkũyũ text does not call attention to the character's gender for the remnants could be anybody – men, women or even children. Ngũgĩ studiously uses ungendered pronouns to refer to Matigari Ma Njirũũngi. However, in translating such pronouns as "aagwete" (held) (*MMN*, 3), "aakĩĩra" (tell oneself), akĩgera" (pass or walk by) (*MAT*, 3); "akĩigua magũrũ maaritũha" (felt legs get heavy) and "aagĩcemwo nĩ tooro" (felt heavy / sleepy) (*MAT*, 5), Goro consistently prefaces them with the gendered prounoun "he". In a situation where the English language does not offer the kind of linguistic possibilities and ambiguities for the representation of gender that Gĩkũyũ language has, footnoting or any other form of indexing might have helped the translator to express the ambiguities in the Gĩkũyũ text. However, Ngũgĩ rejected Goro's proposal to use such an approach (Mule, 2002: 18-20). The author might have feared that using such strategies would subordinate the Gĩkũyũ discourse to the English language. Without a free hand to use whatever devices she might have felt necessary for the task of translation, Goro had to make a choice. The choice she made was to gloss over the gender ambiguities suggested by the original text and re-write Matigari as a male figure. This is revealed in one footnote where she translates Ngũgĩ's use of the ungendered Kiswahili term "mzee" (old one) in reference to Matigari as "old man" (*MAT*, 44). This can be understood in the context of Lefevere's argument that, "some rewritings are inspired by ideological motivations, or produced under ideological constraints, depending on whether the rewriters find themselves in agreement with the dominant ideology of their time or not" (1992: 7). As a cultural insider who is well versed with the dynamics of Gĩkũyũ public culture, Goro's major problem was that she could not use annotation to explain the ambiguities in the representation of gender suggested by the original text. In the circumstances, the translator deliberately depicted Matigari as a male figure. By doing so, Goro was not acting merely as a translator but also as a cultural interrogator.

Translation is not an innocent, transparent activity but "is highly charged with significance at every stage" (Bassnet and Trivedi, 1999: 2). Because the translator may have vested interests other than those of the author, translation reflects the agency of the translator as an interpreter who chooses an emphasis or privileges an aspect of the text to be transposed in translation. As Tymoczko has noted, here the translator's judgment is "inescapable" and "objectivity … impossible" (Tymoczko, 1999: 24). Where male narratives, especially in relation to political struggles, dominate the social imaginary,

Goro’s decision to unequivocally re-write Matigari as a male figure is an attempt to intervene in literary and public discourses on the role of women in nationalist struggles in Kenya. Her decision to emphasise the maleness of Ngũgĩ’s hero shows the agency of a translator who is not just interested in transposing a text but is also using translation to interrogate the source culture. Thus although Ngũgĩ strives to correct gender imbalance in the real world through his depiction of Matigari Ma Njirũũngi in the Gĩkũyũ text, *Matigari* turns the spotlight on the indigenous culture by suggesting a “disjuncture” between Ngũgĩ’s depiction of women in national struggles and the real world from which the text derives its inspiration.

To point out the representational discrepancies between the original and the English text is not to say the translation is bad. Goro’s translation debunks the conventional perception of the translator as a passive figure who should remain invisible behind the text. More important, the disconnect between the Gĩkũyũ and the English texts’ representation of gender shows that in talking about African texts in indigenous languages and their translations, we might easily refer to two different works. *Matigari*’s ability to influence the critical reception of the novel and debates around Ngũgĩ’s representation of gender is evidence of Goro’s success in re-directing attention to the important question of women in nationalist struggles and how it is represented in literary and cultural discourses. Ngũgĩ’s representation made us aware of the real world as one that must be changed. One specific area in which the real world must change, the translator emphasises, is that of gender relations.

Conclusion

Compared to authors, translators have often was invisible. The reason for this is that translation has often been seen as a peripheral activity, secondary to the supposedly more important act of literary creation. This paper debunks this perception of the translator and the practice of translation by showing how a translator may also participate in creating the text. Whereas it is a truism in translation studies that any act of translation must involve loss this is not always the case. The paper draws attention to the often unappreciated fact that translation may also add value to the text. In Goro’s case, her translation of *Matigari Ma Njirũũngi* directs attention to issues that Ngũgĩ had not considered in his cultural and language theory such the complicity of indigenous cultures and languages in the perpetuation of gender imbalances. This shapes the reception of the text in a manner that the author may not have anticipated. The translator’s ability to shape the critical reception of the novel elevates the translator to the status of a cultural mediator who is almost equivalent to that of a co-author.

Abbreviations

MAT – *Matigari*

MMN – *Matigari Ma Njirũũngi*

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