

MARRIED TO AFRICA: IMMIGRANT POETRY BY MARJORIE MACGOYE AND STEPHEN PARTINGTON

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Abstract

The poetry of Kenyan writers Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye and Stephen Derwent Partington cannot be called typical for East African literature. Both Macgoye and Partington are ethnic British, who, each at own time, moved to Kenya and devoted themselves to literature. Their verses depict a sincere love for the land, which has become their home, pain for the hardships of Africans, an interpretation of African reality through the eyes of a European. The paper compares two views of British-born Kenyan poets, to the life and people of Kenya, and two kinds of attitudes to the portrait of Europeans through the prism of their own experience.

Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye (1928-2015), English-born writer, author of famous “Song of Nyarloka” (1977) has earned the nickname “mother of Kenyan literature.” Macgoye's poetic work is imbued with pain and compassion for the Kenyan people, who became her family – she proudly calls herself a Kenyan writer. Macgoye mourns any tormented, absurdly killed or unfairly treated human being, whether it is little girl Atieno who has to work instead of going to school, or children stampeded during the visit of President Jomo Kenyatta, or slum dwellers whose homes were knocked down by the order of the Nairobi authorities. Despite the frequent sad mood of Macgoy's poetry, it is worth noting the main positive component of her poems – a sincere love for Kenya, admiration for Africa, black people, original African nature, diverse cultures. Finally her immigrant view at Africa looks paternalistic and missionary in a whole.

The representative of English-language Kenyan poetry of the 2000s, British-born Stephen Partington in his verses demonstrates an ironic attitude to the reality; suffering and pain are not in the focus of his attention, especially in poems on racial relationships. His irony often touches his non-African origin, a misunderstanding of things that are obvious to the indigenous people of Kenya.

The poetry of both authors is a brilliant example of how the interaction of cultures among the European intelligentsia, who immigrated to Africa, forms a request for literary expression in the context of integration into a foreign cultural society. On the other hand, we see how the attitude towards the topic of Africa and African people transforms historically. The very landscape of problems changes from decolonization of consciousness in the McGoy's poetry and its obvious paternalistic notes to Partington's another modernistic «agenda».

Key words: *East African literature, Kenyan poetry in English, immigrant poetry, Marjorie Macgoye, Stephen Partington*

English-language poetry in Kenya emerges and begins to develop in 1970s, a decade later than the Ugandan one. It was at this time that the first truly brilliant examples of poetic work appeared – these are poems of Jared Angira and Micere Githae Mugo, who later became classics of Kenyan literature, whose work characterizes the two main directions of Kenyan English-language poetry of the second half of the 20th century – critical-realistic and philosophical-mystical (Frolova 75–90). Studying the English-language poetry of Kenya draws attention to such an interesting phenomenon as the Kenyan poetry of expatriate writers. These are the creative work of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye and Stephen Partington, whose creative work cannot be called typical of East African literature. Both Macgoye and Partington are ethnic British, who moved, each at their own time, to Kenya and devoted themselves to literature, and, what is most important, who called Kenya their homeland and themselves Kenyans. In their poems, one can feel sincere love for the land, which has become their home, pain for Africans who suffer social injustice, and huge efforts to understand African reality through the eyes of a European. The report compares two views of British-born Kenyan poets to Kenya and its people, the two portraits of Europeans through the prism of their own experience, showing the identity as a shifting and fluid construct. Macgoye came to Kenya in 1950s, during the height of the struggle for Independence.

Kenyan writer Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye (1928–2015), a native of Great Britain, author of several novels and two collections of poetry – *The Song of Nyarloka*¹ (1977) and *Make it Sing* (1998) rightfully earned the nickname “mother of Kenyan literature”. Née Marjorie King first came to Kenya in 1954 as a missionary, right in the midst of the struggle for Independence (in 1952 the Mau Mau uprising began). Ten years later she received citizenship and got married. After getting married, she deeply immersed herself in the study of the culture of the Luo people, to which her husband's family belonged.

Song is a key concept in Marjorie Macgoye's poetry, and not only because the words "song" and "sing" are constantly featured in her poems: thanks to the rhythm and clear tempo that demonstrate expression akin to a piece of music, these poems are really meant to be sung.

Macgoye's poems are full of folklore elements, many of them are stylized folk songs with typical repetitions, interjections, etcetera. Meanwhile, the poetic work of Marjorie Macgoye largely demonstrates the author's close connection to British culture, on the one hand, and active involvement in the culture and the socio-political reality of East Africa, on the other hand. This symbiosis is noticeable even at the formal level: for example, she uses traditional form of Swahili verse in the English-language poem *Shairi la Ukombozi*².

One of the main themes of her poetry is social injustice, life of the poor, of common people. Macgoye is sensitive to freedom issues, it is extremely important for her to be free, it is an indicator of the individuality of human being that characterizes any nation (remember the times she came to the country, it was during struggle for independence, in other words for freedom). In the poem *Song of Freedom* of the same name the reader meets unhappy girl named Atieno, a composite character, which depicts all unfortunate Kenyan (and African as a whole) children deprived of childhood, children who are forced to work instead of going to school, who have to work about the house, sell food in the market all day long. In this extremely sad poem, the poet raises the question of the unfair exploitation of the young nation.

Atieno washes dishes,
Atieno plucks the chicken,
Atieno gets up early,
beds her sacks down in the kitchen,
Atieno eight years old,
Atieno – yo. (Macgoye 73)

The fate of a teenage girl in Africa is a foregone conclusion, the death of Atieno after difficult delivery – that's the usual ending of many of her peers, as the poet tells us.

Atieno's had a baby
so we know that she is bad
Fifty-fifty it may live
to repeat the life she had,
ending in post-partum bleeding
Atieno – yo.

Atieno's soon replaced.
Meat and sugar more than all
she ate in such a narrow life
were lavished on her funeral.
Atieno's gone to glory,

Atieno – yo. (Macgoye 74)

Even talking about composite character, this does not mean that Macgoye prefers a kind of literary generalization. On the contrary, one can feel her incredibly personal approach to the problems existing in post-colonial Kenyan society. It is important for Macgoye to call the victim by name, to leave a memory about this victim, also for those who are complicit in the tragedy of this victim. Even unwittingly.

Macgoye mourns any absurdly killed or unfairly treated human being, whether it is little girl Atieno, or children trampled during the visit to the city of Kisumu by President Jomo Kenyatta in 1969:

Sleep, Alnoor, my son.
Lie quietly, My baby Ochieng',
Hush, they may hear you fidget
as though those little graves did not content you.
Rest quietly, now the big men are counting
the living, not the dead.
(*Song of Kisumu*, Macgoye 13)

Marjorie mourns slum dwellers whose homes were knocked down by the order of the Nairobi authorities in the poem *Muoroto*:

...machines like hippos' open jaws
shredding a doll's house world,
scattering kids and clothes,
battering heads and bloody limbs
near drowning among polythene islands³. (Macgoye 82)

Indignantly condemning the hypocrisy and cruelty of the Nairobi authorities, Macgoye deliberately cites fragment from *the Weekly Review* magazine as an epigraph to the poem: "Life is slowly returning to normal in Nairobi's Muoroto shanty village two weeks after it was razed to the ground by Nairobi City Commission bulldozers and baton-wielding askaris in an operation remembered for its brutality" (Macgoye 82).

This is how Marjorie Macgoye completes history – even the most insignificant events cannot be hushed up in it. Thus, the arrival of the president becomes known in her poems by the fact of killed kids, and the demolition of the slums disfiguring the capital's appearance – by the barbarously ruined lives.

Despite the frequent minor moods of Marjorie Macgoye's poetry, it is worth noting the main positive feature characteristic of her poems – her enormous love for Kenya, the country she came to as a missionary, which she wanted to become useful for and which has become her second homeland.

The extremely brilliant introduction to the *Make it Sing* collection by Philo Ikonya says: “Marjorie breathes the life of the nation into all her poems... Most of her poems celebrate Kenya – its people, great and small”. (Macgoye viii). And further: “Right from the beginning, she became a true daughter of her people, the Luo... She tried to fully understand the life of the people she had become a part of, and knew how far she was going to adopt to their customs” (xi). Admiration for Africa, black skin color, original African nature, culture, clothing gives Marjorie the right to complain about the loss of African identity, especially in such a metropolis as Nairobi:

Never has there been more fashion-consciousness
Then ours in Africa,
Always eclectic,
Always ambitious . . .
But today I saw a *moran*⁴
Wearing blanket and ear-rings,
Orange socks and *lada*⁵ from Bata.
(*African city*, Macgoye 21)

It is impossible not to notice the paternalistic notes of Marjorie Macgoye's poetry, which is not surprising, since young Marjorie King arrived in Kenya as a missionary bookseller, while already in Nairobi she opened a bookstore, around which a kind of literary saloon was formed, which gave all the reasons for her contemporaries to give her the above-mentioned nickname "mother of Kenyan literature". She partially embodied the goal of her mission in such poems as *Jesus*, *Easter Eve* and other.

Macgoye writes much in mid 1960s–70s, her famous *Song of Nyarloka* came to life in 1977. It was the time of development of the newly formed independent African countries, including

Kenya, a time when the memory of colonial subjugation was still very fresh, but already quite clearly revealed themselves as ulcers of post-colonial African reality – poverty and lack of rights of the common people, huge social problems, the hypocrisy of the former fighters for independence. Being integrated into this vortex of changes, living and working in it, Macgoye is still not completely African, Kenyan, she sincerely and with all enthusiasm assesses this life as if from the outside, acting as a kind of ambassador of peace and justice, representing a developed European power, which is undoubtedly Great Britain. It is no coincidence that at the peak of her creative, social and political activity, Marjorie communicates with many historical figures, devoting a significant place to addressing them in her poems. Among them writers Okot p'Bitek and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the politician Tom Mboya, whose memory Macgoye dedicates a poem full of pain and despair:

The grass is trampled,
Only vultures overhead
swoop, rend and darken,
All else is down.
the buffalo is down,
elephant fallen,
lion torn and unmanned.

(To Tom, Macgoye 31)

The poetry of Marjorie Macgoye is a kind of encyclopedia of Kenyan life of those times, at least thanks to her creative work, including poetry, one can compose a picture of cultural, social and political life of the 60-80s of the 20th century, history of Kenya and East Africa as a whole. Macgoye's work is literature for the intellectually prepared reader, who understands all the allusions, images and metaphors she uses in her books.

Perhaps therefore, her mourning for the girl Atieno in a kind of a Kipling's way, or her motherly condescending complaint about Maasai wearing European shoes look somehow patronizing. It is not without reason that the word "mother" is the reference word in the above-mentioned nickname of Macgoye, to say broadly "parent". That, we will repeat, is not surprising, since for that time, the cultural gap was still too big and perhaps at that time even seemed insurmountable. That is why seems so tangible the contrast between Macgoye's immigrant poetry of the second

half of XX century and the creative work of the Kenyan poet Stephen Partington, also British by birth, who writes today.

The representative of English-language Kenyan poetry of the 2000s, British-born Stephen Partington in his verses mostly demonstrates an ironic attitude to the reality, suffering and pain are not in the focus of his attention.

Partington's collection with remarkable title *SMS & Face to Face* (2003) is divided into chapters, each of which is devoted to a particular topic – interracial communication, culture, religion, social issues. For instance, he writes about love, which can be different: “It’s a broad theme, Love, that doesn’t restrict itself to the Valentine-rose relationship between woman and man. There’s the love of close friendship, parental love, sexual love, romantic love, marital love, religious love...” (Partington 19). Taking a philosophical discourse on love issue, Partington doesn’t mean to be pathetic, or romanticize love, writing about ‘love for sale’ in the poem *Malaya*⁵:

Don’t pity her unwashed plastic braids
or the tattered designer fakes she wears,
her wasting slimline hunger, or her AIDS.

...

And do not pity her lack of self-respect,
her loose morality, or frown *She-just-ain’t African*
or *Christ-says-this-and-that!*

Who, with a fat post-coital fag between
fat finger and fat thumb, has discs of silver
in his palm? Whose, then, the purchase;
whose the act? Excuse the whore
and loathe the rat.

(Partington, 21)

And right there, on the opposite page of the book, in confirmation of his words about different love a reader finds lyrical love poem *No English Rose* – the uncovered allusion to Shakespearean *Romeo and Juliet* (“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet”⁶) – addressed to his beloved black-skinned African woman:

In British verse, your sort’s not celebrated anywhere.
And so I will discover you, like Thompson, Krapf or
Livingstone,
those arrogants who wrote about this continent as if it

hadn't been before they came. I share their need to
name –
not lakes and hills and falls, but you, your beauty.
It is wrong, some folk will say, and clearly racist. So?
I love you, so I'll sing you and I'll praise you. It is
wrong,
some folk will say, and clearly sexist. Still I'll sing you
for I love you; love your ploughed-field hair, your sanded
hardwood cheeks, your lips as dusky as the fabled
tents of Kedar, and your eyes like polished baobab seeds...
(Partington 20)

The hero of Partington's poem cannot stop calling rose by its name and tries not to pay attention to all these contemporary modern-world prejudice.

In his poems the fair-skinned European Partington could not help touching on the theme of the relationship between representatives of the white and black races. Partington is often ironic about his own non-African origins, his lack of understanding of many things that are so obvious to the natives of Kenya. Thus, in the poem *It's a Funny Thing, Culture* he makes fun of his own ignorance (more precisely, too serious European-like perception) of some customs of Kenyan ethnic groups:

Because my future wife's Akamba⁶
I have bought myself a longbow
and a quiverful of arrows.
For a laugh, you understand.
Still, I would like to learn the recipe
the old Akambas used to tip
these funny-looking weapons –
I am told that it could kill you in
an instant. What a laugh! I'd
love to make it. Maybe venom from
a cobra? Just don't know. But
I'm excited, for my Kamba watch-
men tell me they will show me
just how strong it is...someday,
some future pay-day. Someday soon.
I cannot fathom why their offer
makes them double-up with laughter.
(Partington 30)

The theme of the comic dissimilarity of whites and blacks is developed by the poet in poem *Communication*, where he describes the method of conversation via SMS and e-mail, which Europeans can easily replace real talk with and which African people adopt easily. And here is how Partington describes a mzungu-European who recklessly decided to sunbathe under the scorching African sun:

It is sleeping in agony: sheets rub
like
emery...
...Is peeling and sloughing
like snakes...Is
to look like a bloody flamingo, a
traffic-
light, strawberry-lollipop-red-headed
geek.
(*Sunburn for a Mzungu*, Partington
52)

Elaborating on issues of interracial and intercultural communication, Partington dethrones the vulgar stereotypes that prevent people from seeing people behind ethnic, gender, racial restrictions, stereotypes that give rise to stupidity and enmity.

Our children will be... sepia.
Like all daguerreotypes,
but snapshots of the future...

They'll chat in Sheng.
they'll grow, in time, to eat ugali
with hint-of-light-crisp-lemon-
luscious Chardonnay.

No doubt they'll translate Ngugi
into English as a near Shakespearean
Sonnet sequence. Surely they'll be
multi-skilful *Übermenschen*,

fluent in a thousand tongues or...
Cut the crap! Our children
will be children. Simply that. For
when the shit's all said and done

they'll be, not pioneers nor symbols,
but our daughters and our sons.
(*Miscegenation*, Partington 53)

Here one cannot help noticing that the poet talks about his own prejudice, as if he's trying to get rid of stereotypes in himself, because he feels them as a general human being.

The poetry of both authors is a brilliant example of how the interaction of cultures among the European intelligentsia, who immigrated to Africa, forms a request for literary expression in the context of integration into a foreign cultural society. On the other hand, we see how the attitude towards the topic of Africa and African people transforms historically. The very landscape of problems changes from decolonization of consciousness in the Macgoye's poetry and its obvious paternalistic notes to Partington's another modernistic "agenda" of present day and his huge quest for uncompromising truth especially when talking about such issues like interracial and intercultural communication in modern world.

Since the lyric character of Macgoye poems historically clearly carries the proverbial 'white man's burden', somehow overcoming it, Partington lives and works at the same time with us, in the era of the latest technological advances, which he and the Maasai grazing cattle equally use (not without reason on the cover of his book «SMS & Face to Face» we see Maasai in national dress who is carrying mobile phone). Partington speaks with his second homeland and its people as equal to them, trying to understand the nature of stereotypes, that have developed due to intercultural and interracial relationships in order to overcome them, including stereotypes in himself. He tries to understand problems of a social nature, while not condemning anyone, but trying to think and analyze.

Partington lives in a fundamentally different Africa, different from the one observed by Macgoye, although in their poetry you can find a lot of intersections – for example, both are enthusiastic about the beautiful African nature, they touch on pressing social problems. Finally, they both think and write of themselves as of Africans, they are Kenyan people and writers, which proves the thought that identity is a shifting and fluid construct.

Notes

1. As endnote in the book says, “Nyarloka is Luo term of address for a woman who was born overseas (as in the poet’s case) or on the other side of the lake from where she is married” (Macgoye 8)
2. ‘Liberation’ in Swahili
3. A hint of cluttering the slums of Nairobi with plastic bags, this big environmental problem throughout African and many other countries.
4. Young Maasai warrior
5. Corrupted English word ‘leather’
6. ‘Prostitute’ in Swahili
7. Wikipedia: bit.ly/3okACpe
8. The Kamba or Akamba people are a Bantu ethnic group who predominantly live in the area of Kenya stretching from Nairobi to Tsavo and north to Embu, in the southern part of the former Eastern Province. (Wikipedia: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kamba_people)

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