Interview

Ngugi wa Thiong'o

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Ngugi wa Thiong'o was invited to Denmark by the Danish Library Association to take part in their 75th anniversary celebrations. Whilst in Denmark he visited Aarhus University and was interviewed by the following persons: Jirgen Martini, Anna Rutherford, Kirsten Holst Petersen, Vibeke Stenderup, and Bent Thomsen. The interview took place on 9 December 1980.
INTERVIEW

Ngugi wa Thiong'o was invited to Denmark by the Danish Library Association to take part in their 75th anniversary celebrations. Whilst in Denmark he visited Aarhus University and was interviewed by the following persons: Jürgen Martini, Anna Rutherford, Kirsten Holst Petersen, Vibeke Stenderup, and Bent Thomsen. The interview took place on 9 December 1980.

KHP: Ever since you have been here you have been involved in a discussion about Karen Blixen. Would you like to say something about this?

I must say she is one of my pet subjects. This is partly because she illustrates some attitudes by a certain type of European or Western mind towards Africa, and so when I'm illustrating these attitudes towards Africa by certain racist writers I try to use examples from her. Her name cropped up when I was talking to the Danish Library Association and I mentioned the two or the three types of Africa to be found in the Western bourgeois mind. There is the Africa of the hunter for profit, that is the Africa of the direct economic exploiter. Then we have the Africa of the hunter for pleasure, that is the tourist's Africa. I also mentioned that the Africa of the tourist was essentially the Africa of the hunter after profit. The third Africa which I spoke of is the Africa found in the fiction of a certain type of European writer which sets out to interpret the African scene. It was in this context that I quoted Karen Blixen. I find her sinister in the sense that her racism is passed off as an act of love. My main argument is that her declared love for the African is really the same kind of love which you exhibit towards an animal. She made definite distinctions between human beings who were Europeans, and animals who were Africans. Within that basic understanding she could love Africans of all sexes, as she says, but very much as part and parcel of the animal landscape. Just to illustrate this point: She creates a character who is her cook and as she is a very gifted writer with words,
phrases and details, she is able to create characters we can see visually. But in the end she compares Kamante (her cook) to a civilized dog that has long lived among human beings. In her book *Shadows in the Grass* which was published by Michael Joseph in 1960 she repeats the same racist mythology about Africa. In this book she said quite categorically that African grown-up people had all the mentality of European children of nine. According to her there were some who were a bit more advanced, e.g. the Somali, and they had all the mentality of the European child of seventeen. Now Karen Blixen of course is only one among many who held these racist attitudes towards Africa. They include writers like Elspeth Huxley, Robert Ruark, Rider Haggard, philosophers like Hegel, historians like Trevor Roper, plus many others. In other words she belongs to a certain category of writers about Africa.

KHP: *Do you find that she differs from that other set of writers that you mentioned?*

No, she is basically the same except that she goes beyond them in the sense that at least the others do in a certain strange sense recognize the humanity of the African even when they hate it. But Karen Blixen doesn’t say ‘I hate Africans’, she says ‘I love them’, but she loves them as she loves children or animals. In her book *Out of Africa* she says that when she first came to Kenya she studied the game and then she says ‘what I learnt from the game of Africa was very useful to me when I later came to deal with the natives’; in other words, in extending this one might say that her study or knowledge of the wild animals gave her a clue to the mentality of the African. So I would argue that she is more dangerous than all of them because she does not concede any humanity to the African. Her love of the African is only when he is understood as an animal or a child. Now when this is understood and accepted she can even be very passionate about him, she can weep, treat him, miss him, she can evoke all the emotions that human beings often have towards a wild creature, and this I’m afraid has been mistaken to mean that she has recognized the humanity of the African when in fact her love is based on a rejection of that humanity.

VS: *Since you have been in Denmark you have met a number of Danish writers and people interested in African literature and in co-operation between rich and poor countries. Do you feel that later generations of Karen Blixen’s fellow-countrymen are to be trusted so that there is some*
sense in continuing the co-operation, or do you feel that the country is better left to itself?

You put a number of things together. The question of people meeting and having a healthy dialogue is very important. People like Karen Blixen are in fact a barrier to this kind of a dialogue, so by trying to focus attention on a writer like Karen Blixen I would like to see Danish people face up to the content in her work and not just see the beauty of the prose. In that way people can begin to have a real dialogue, even if it is a dialogue about aid. When people like Karen Blixen were developing the racial myths and ideology, in essence it was not really personal. They did it on behalf of certain class and historical forces at work in the world then and even today, and the reason why she is being revived is because the same mythology is having a certain ideological purpose as far as exploitation of Africa today is concerned. Karen Blixen was more than a Danish person, she was the spokesman for the imperialist bourgeoisie or imperialist forces of the exploiting classes all over the world. That is why she is very acceptable in America, in Germany and in England because she articulates an ideology which makes the exploitation of Africa more acceptable. What such writers want to prevent you from seeing is that the wealth of Europe is based on the poverty of Africa. As I told the Danish Library Association, they do a tremendous service to the Danish people in this dialogue we have been talking about, if they bring home to the Danish people that Europe’s unbounded wealth is based on the exploitation of Africa. As Brecht reminded us: the food eaten by the wealthy classes in Europe is ‘snatched from the mouths of the hungry’ in the developing world, and the water that they drink is taken from the mouths of the thirsty. We have a saying which is a practice amongst the farmers of my country that when they want to milk a cow they give it some grass so that they can milk it better. Aid is the grass, given to a cow whilst it is being milked.

KHP: You have said that Karen Blixen serves this ideological purpose. Why do you think there is a need to revive this ideology now?

Because the exploitation of Africa still continues, and this exploitation in the neo-colonialist period of imperialism still needs an appropriate ideology. Karen Blixen, whose racism is projected as love, is more appropriate to exploitation in the neo-colonialist phase than the crude, obvious racism of people like Elspeth Huxley or Rubert Ruark. These will not do, but Karen Blixen will do very well.
JM: During the Frankfurt Book Fair there was a long discussion about what language an African writer should use. There have been some who say you are no longer a Kenyan writer. Perhaps you can say something about this.

I certainly make a distinction between literature written by Africans in European languages and the literature written by Africans in African languages. A literature written by Africans in European languages is what I now call Afro-European literature; in other words those of us who have been writing in English, French or Portuguese have not been writing African literature at all, we have been writing a branch of literature that can only meaningfully go under the title of Afro-European literature. This is to be distinguished very firmly from that literature written by Africans in African languages, treating African themes. The question of language is obviously fundamental here; as Fanon said, 'to choose a language is to choose a world'. In the same way when you choose a language, objectively you are choosing an audience, and more particularly a class. You cannot possibly write in English and assume that you are writing for the African peasantry, or even a section of that peasantry. There is no way, because the moment you write in English you assume a readership who can speak and read English, and in this case it can only mean the educated African élite or the foreigners who speak the language. This means that you are precluding in terms of class the peasantry of Africa, or the workers in Africa who do not read or understand these foreign languages.

There are other aspects to language which can only be understood in the colonial context. The colonizing people or nations or classes looked down upon African languages; indeed, in some cases African children at school were given corporal punishment for speaking their own languages. Others have been made to carry humiliating signs for speaking African languages, signs saying 'I am stupid!' What happens to the mentality of a child when you humiliate him or her in relationship to a particular language? Obviously he comes to associate that language with inferiority or with humiliation and punishment, so he must somehow develop antagonistic attitudes to that language which is the basis of his humiliation. By extension he becomes uncomfortable about the people who created that language and the culture that was carried by it, and by implication he comes to develop positive attitudes to the foreign language for which he is praised and told that he is intelligent once he speaks it well. He also comes to respect and have a positive attitude to the
culture carried by the foreign language, and of course comes to have a positive attitude to the people who created the language which was the basis for the high marks he was getting in school. What does this mean in practical terms? It means that he comes to feel uncomfortable about the peasant masses or working masses who are using that language. So while we African writers continue to write in European languages we are in fact perpetuating a neo-colonial cultural tradition. No matter the subject matter of our novels and plays and poems, and no matter the attitude towards the classes in those novels, poems and plays, if I say that these things can only be articulated within borrowed tongues it means that even at our progressive or our radical best we are in fact continuing the neo-colonial tradition which we are setting out to oppose. In that way we are involved in an immediate kind of contradiction.

So what happens when you write in an African language? First, you create a positive attitude to that language. The reader, when he feels that this language can carry a novel with philosophical weight or a novel which totally reflects his environment, will develop a positive attitude to that language, to the people who created that language, and to the culture and traditions carried by it. And if he begins to have respect for his immediate language, by extension he will also have a respect for all the other languages that are related to his language and to the history and culture related to that language. So to answer your question: the choice of Kikuyu language was a very deliberate choice; it was a conscious decision, although I was forced into it by the peculiar historical circumstances in which I found myself.

A further point I would like to add to this: For a long time African languages and cultures have not been communicating with one another, but have been communicating via English; in other words I have a sense of Iboness in Achebe's novels through his use of English. The moment African writers start writing in African languages some of the novels will be translated into other African languages as well as into English. The moment you get an Ibo novel translated into Kikuyu or a Yoruba novel translated into Hausa you are getting these languages and cultures talking and communicating directly and mutually enriching one another. So far from these languages being a divisive force they become an integrative force, because they will be enhancing a respect for each other's languages and cultures as well as showing the similarities between the various cultures and their concerns.
JM: You said that you got an impression of Iboness or Yorubaness through the English language. In what way do you think that we can get an impression of Kikuyu sensibility in your novels through the English language?

I said maybe one can, but I don't think it is very effective through the English language. I have come to realize this after I have written a novel in Kikuyu and collaborated on a play in Kikuyu. What I want to see is the reader's reaction to my own translation of my Kikuyu novel into English. It will be very interesting to see, assuming that the quality of the novel is about the same as the other novels, whether a different type of sensibility will emerge. There is no way in which one can effectively represent one sensibility in another language because all the nuances in one language cannot be passed on to or carried by another language. In writing the novel in Kikuyu I found myself playing around with sequences of sound patterns for the sheer kick of it and also to suggest a certain kind of meaning. Obviously when I translate this into English it will be lost on the English reader, and there is no way I can help this. This is because the sound patterns and nuances depend on certain cultural assumptions in a community.

AR: You can reach a large audience with drama. I wonder what size audience you can reach with a novel, even when it is written in Kikuyu?

Obviously the novel is limited in that sense, but both forms are limited to a certain extent, because a play needs actors, so as long as a play is not being performed it is not reaching anybody. And sometimes you get long periods between performances of a play, whereas the novel is there all the time. But I agree with you that with one performance of a play you are reaching many more people than you can reach in the novel form, and even more important, it is a more collective form, but here — and I want to put quite a big 'but' — with the publication of the Kikuyu novel I have had experiences which have made me start to question my own assumptions about the real tradition of the novel. When I was teaching in Nairobi, for instance, I would argue that the bourgeois novel in its reader tradition assumed an individual reader, reading silently. But when the Kikuyu novel came out it was bought by families who would get somebody who reads very well to read for everybody. In other words the novel was appropriated by the peasantry, it became a collective form and part of the oral tradition. Even the people who could read Kikuyu
preferred to read it in groups, and I have been told that workers in factories during lunch hour would gather together and get one person to read the novel for them. This has made me start questioning the relationship between the novel and the reader. It could well be that the novel has remained this kind of individual thing between the individual and the reader because it has been appropriated by certain classes, but when it is appropriated by the peasantry and the working classes it may very well be transformed into a collective experience.

The second half of this interview will be published in the next issue of Kunapipi. In the second section Ngugi discusses his own novels and the Mau Mau movement.