

## **‘EATING THE COUNTRY’ AND ‘ALUMINIUM FOIL’: QUESTIONS IN THE TRANSLATION OF CONTEMPORARY LITERARY TEXTS FROM AND INTO SWAHILI**

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This paper considers some of the questions posed by literary translations both from and into Swahili. While the questions a translator might address as she proceeds with each translation may be the same, their differing answers often highlight the translator’s different position towards, and history with, each target language, as well as her aesthetic and political commitments in each. The projects discussed are Mlenge Fanuel Mgendi’s comic short story *Starehe gharama* (*Comfort is Expensive*) about a young schoolboy’s misadventure on a *daladala* bus in Dar es Salaam and Tope Folarin’s Caine Prize shortlisted story *Genesis* (*Mwanzo*), in which two Nigerian boys living in the American Midwest witness their mother’s struggle with her new surroundings.

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### **Introduction**

Any translation is typically oriented by a translator’s approach to certain fundamental questions. What is the text? What kind of text is it? What are its commitments? For whom was it written? Why should it be translated? Towards what audience will, or might, the translated text be aimed? What kind of voice, range of diction, or register is deployed in the original, and what kinds might be used in making the new, translated text? Ideally, a translator will have at least provisional answers to these questions earlier rather than later in the process and can articulate these clearly. Yet, as I discuss in this paper, some answers can come rather late, being arrived at only *through* the work and, specifically, through reckoning with those challenges that a translator might – wishing to avoid their difficulty – postpone treating until the very end, when there is finally no option but to make a choice. Also, the hardest questions may sometimes have more to do with the translator’s position towards the target language than with the texts themselves.

The two projects discussed here moved in opposite directions. The first involved moving from Swahili into English, a direction to which I am somewhat accustomed and whose complexities I have had some practice untangling. The second moved from English into Swahili, a direction in which I had not taken literature before and whose challenges I had never needed to confront. Considering these two projects together has, in a practical sense, confirmed for me the uniformity of a literary translator’s task, whatever the direction. But it has also put into stark relief the personal and political dimensions of my relation to both languages, neither of which is my native tongue. That is, while in both directions the same questions may remain, the translator’s relation to each target language may be so different that the questions cannot be

answered the same way. I hope that the discussions below will be of some use to others who are working back and forth towards two, or more, languages at once.

### **Mlengi Fanuel Mgendi's *Comfort is Expensive (Starehe gharama)***

I discuss first of all a very short story – arguably a “flash fiction” – written by contemporary Dar es Salaam-based Tanzanian writer Mlengi Fanuel Mgendi. What led me to find this story, *Starehe gharama*, was a request for a short translation from Swahili by an American translation revue. Turning to my bookshelves, I was dismayed to see that, although they were loaded with Swahili novels and books of non-fiction, most of these had been written in the 1970s and 1980s. At the time, despite the growing abundance of Swahili short stories, I owned nothing short and nothing that spoke precisely to the contemporary moment. Nor did my modest college library. Consequently, I searched the internet for something suitable and soon discovered Mgendi's lively and ambitious work, which includes two collections of short stories, a book of non-fiction about Tanzanian politics and society today, and translations of Shakespeare's drama *King Lear* and Anton Chekhov's short story *The Bet*. Mgendi, a graduate of Texas Agricultural and Mechanical University and a Dar es Salaam native, was not difficult to find, and he kindly agreed to comment on the translation, graciously entertaining my questions such that, I hope, both of us felt heard. I should admit early on that the journal to which my translation of *Starehe gharama* was directed chose not to publish it, and I shall say more on this below. Luckily, after two years of hopeful sending, this painfully charming, funny story has been accepted and published at *Asymptote Blog*, where I hope that readers will recognise and love the vulnerable and plucky city schoolboy whose painful adventure it is.<sup>1</sup>

*Comfort is Expensive (Starehe gharama)* is a four-page account of a young Dar es Salaam schoolboy struggling with stomach pain as he heads home on one of the privately owned group vans famous in Tanzania as *daladala*. Like all schoolchildren in the country, the boy has to grapple with a local transportation system that does not love him. In Dar es Salaam, schoolchildren ride at a reduced fare, a benefit which bars them from sitting in a seat and relegates them to standing or crouching in the aisles, as *daladala* drivers seek to avoid sanction by police for overfilling their cabs and endangering their passengers.<sup>2</sup> Standing in the aisle, the unnamed boy realises with some anguish that most of the seats on this *daladala* are perfectly empty. He could sit without inconveniencing anyone, if not for the fierce conductor (*konda*) and his enforcement of the rule. Panicked and in physical discomfort, the boy decides to spend all of his money on his very own adult full-fare seat, which the *konda*, startled by the boy's

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<sup>1</sup> The story can be read at <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/2019/08/06/translation-tuesday-comfort-is-expensive-by-mlengi-mgendi/> (last visited 07-08-2019)

<sup>2</sup> Confirming the linguistic play that infuses this story, Uta Reuster-Jahn and Roland Kießling in their 2006 study of urban language and slang in Dar es Salaam elaborated: “Pupils get a reduction of fifty percent in *daladala*s, whereas soldiers have to pay nothing at all. That's why in the language of the *daladala* personnel the former are called *majeruhi* ‘wounded people’, and the latter are called *maiti* ‘corpses’” (Reuster-Jahn & Kießling 2006: 8).

daring but himself driven by money, cannot deny him. Once seated, the boy's relief and comfort are overwhelming. He has never felt such ease!

To the boy's misfortune, however, at the next stop, the *daladala* fills with people, including elderly travelers and a pregnant woman. With all the seats now taken, they must crowd together in the aisle. Seeing a schoolboy sitting comfortably in a full-fare seat, the passengers grow agitated and berate him for not giving up his seat to someone who, in their view, needs it more. Whether or not he has paid full fare, the passengers expect him to cleave to idealised cultural conventions governing age-rank and status, in which the comfort of elders takes precedence over that of the young. Asserting his "adulthood", which he bases on having paid full fare, however, the boy refuses to get up:

*Kondakta akaja mbio kutaka kunitoa. "We 'denti! Wapishe wenzio wanaolipa nauli kubwa!" alisema kwa ukali. Sikutaka ubishi. N'kamtolea tiketi 'kubwa' aliyonipa mida michache iliyopita. Akanywea. Nikaendelea 'kula nchi' kwenye siti ile; sikutaka 'kuangalia makunyanzi.' Akasogea mama mjamzito. Pengine walitegemea n'tamuonea 'imani.' Lakini kwa kuwa sikuwa ni abiria pekee mwenye kulipa nauli kubwa, nilijikausha, nikingojea 'wasamaria wema' wampishe.*

The *konda* raced over to remove me from my seat. "You, stoo-denty! Cede your place to those who've paid full price!" he said harshly. I didn't want an argument. I showed him the full-fare ticket he'd given me a little while before. He was humbled. I stayed right there in that seat, reveling and fat – eating up the country. I didn't give a damn about those old people. A pregnant woman came forward. Maybe they thought I'd feel some kind of 'sympathy' for her. But I acted like I had no idea what was going on and waited for some 'Good Samaritans' to help her.

This small excerpt conveys something of the boy's attitude, which, tougher and older than his years, is rendered charming by the very human and understandable nature of his predicament. If only others knew, they might sympathise with him and care for him, as elders are supposed to do for children. Also on display is the ripe linguistic world of the Dar *daladala*, where the *kondas'* fierce, unquestionable – and often stylish – authority can be exercised in surprising rapid-fire language, one that is a wellspring of the *lugha za mitaani* documented by Uta Reuster-Jahn and Roland Kießling, who describe Mgendi's native Dar es Salaam as "the geographical centre of the ongoing creation and recreation of linguistic elements" (2006: 3) and *daladala* crews as actively engaged in this production (*Ibid.*: 8).

The story is full of contemporary slang, which Mgendi celebrates and appears committed to using in his portrayals of the people of Dar es Salaam as he sees them: lively, long-suffering, alternately principled and selfish, and brilliantly adept in the art of speech. By itself, the excerpt above raised wonderful challenges, words and expressions that Mgendi places inside single quotation marks to signify their specialness and innovation, marks that also, for a reader versed

in English prose convention, generate a sense of displacement and irony (see above, ‘*imani*’, ‘*kuangalia makunyanzi*’, and ‘*wasamaria wema*’).

How to communicate the dismissive charm of *denti!*, with which the *konda* addresses the schoolboy? In Swahili, *denti!* emphasises the final syllable of the Swahili-ised English word *student* (-*dent*) and adds a third (-*i*). In English, the emphasis falls on the first syllable, *stu-*, with second syllable -*dent* very nearly swallowed, a minor and forgettable tail for the long and heavy *u*. Mgendi accepted my proposal of the invented word *stoo-denty*, which preserves the Swahili term *denti* and, with the addition of *stoo*, clarifies the meaning for English-language readers, and whose irreverent spelling (*oo* rather than *u*) may convey the *konda*’s demeaning, though to my ear also playfully performative, tone.

And what about *kula nchi* (‘eating/devouring the country/land/polity’)? In one deft stroke, Mgendi has called up “the politics of the belly”, perhaps best known in the West as the Cameroonian *politique du ventre* about which Bayart (1993) wrote so convincingly, but which is so widespread in Africa and elsewhere as to suggest multiple independent origins for the term. In “the politics of the belly”, leaders exercise power solely to enrich themselves, to “eat” voraciously and sometimes murderously (“devour”) at the expense of ordinary people; in Tanzania, Kenya and elsewhere, politicians are said to destroy (consume/eat/devour) the country and sow discord through their ever-increasing and insatiable *njaa* (‘hunger’). Thus politicians are said to be identifiable by their bellies, *vitambi*<sup>3</sup> or *vifriza*,<sup>4</sup> and their “work” is *kula nchi*, ‘to eat’ or ‘devour’ and destroy the polity through greed. Mgendi had this to say:

*Mtu apatapo nafasi ya kukaa kwenye kiti cha madaraka Afrika, mara nyingi hutumia nafasi hiyo ‘kula;’ yaani, kujinufaisha binafsi kiuchumi. ‘Kula nchi’ ni kutumia rasilmali ya taifa kujineemesha binafsi bila ya kujali yanayowakuta wengine wasio na viti vya madaraka vyenye kuwawezesha na wao ‘kula’.* (Pers. comm., 18 August 2017)

When a person has an opportunity to occupy the seat of power in Africa, they will often use that opportunity to ‘eat’; that is, to enrich themselves economically. ‘To eat the country’ is to use the nation’s resources to benefit yourself, without care for [the problems that] face others, who don’t have seats of power enabling them to ‘eat’.

As power never fails to corrupt, *kula nchi* is something politicians and people with power are understood to do. It is the preserve of presidents, ministers, parliamentarians, CEOs, department heads and local “bigwigs”. To any moral person, *kula nchi* is unacceptable. This “eating” also “eats” away at the fabric of a nation, of community, and at people’s faith in their leaders and the processes by which they accede to power. But is *kula nchi* also something that people who have grown desperate might dream of doing for themselves? What does it mean for a child to use this term for himself and say, deaf to other passengers’ outrage, that he will remain in the

<sup>3</sup> Potbelly.

<sup>4</sup> Small freezer – suggesting that the owner not only has a lot to eat, but that s/he has access to the remarkable wealth required to ensure electricity and thus the ability to store food, of which s/he will never run out.

full-fare adult seat and continue to “eat the country”? In my view, the use of *kula nchi* here is charming and even comic, but only because the speaker is an anxious child attempting to avert a private catastrophe.

A child’s use of the term *kula nchi*, however, also has a sinister side. What will happen to the Tanzanian community, the *jamii* or *umma* – often idealised as gracious, fair and loving – if children learn so early that “eating the country” is also possible for them and, moreover, that to eat the country is to triumph justifiably over others whose calls for fairness and respect one experiences as demeaning? Who will this boy be when he grows up? The idea that being able to afford a full-fare seat on a *daladala* is power enough to disrupt society, and that this really constitutes *kula nchi*, is simultaneously funny, tragic, and troubling.

Who or what is to blame for a child’s belief that he has a right to “eat the country” and that doing so is the unquestioned privilege of the moneyed? The *konda*, ‘the driver’ and the *mpiga debe*, ‘the tout’, are themselves trapped in the never-ending chase for cash that is life for the vulnerable in Dar es Salaam, and in any sprawling metropolis. They do not own the *daladala* they work in, they will be liable for any citations, tickets, or accidents that arise, and their bosses are not principally known for caring for their employees. The policy of allowing students to ride at a diminished fare may send a positive message about the state’s valuing of youth and education, but it speaks just as loudly to the government’s inability or unwillingness to address the critical problem of student transportation as they and their parents seek to secure their education. Who is to blame for a situation in which a small boy trying to save his dignity has no choice but to do so by taking part in a discourse of greed and exploitation?

Observers of African politics and history will have no difficulty in understanding the meaning of “eating the country” in such contexts. But what about less well-versed readers, who might encounter this story in a literary magazine that does not specialise in Africa? Such an encounter is one, I think, that many translators of African-language literature would support and be delighted by – the moving of translated African literature into an unmarked, general context of international or global literature and the encountering of African writers in translation as, simply, writers in translation, rather than as particularly “exotic” or “exemplary”.<sup>5</sup> How to truly render and recognise the language of *njaa* (‘hunger’) and power, while enabling readers to see how a child who is “eating” the country for the first time might appear? In the end, the addition of the words “reveling and fat” seemed apt, preventing the boy from appearing a devouring monster and communicating some of his unexpected joy, but also retaining a direct translation of *kula nchi*, here with “up” added, to signal the voraciousness and self-satisfaction of it. “I stayed right there in that seat, reveling and fat – eating up the country.”

Next, what to do with “*sikutaka ‘kuangalia makunyanzi’*”, an expression I had never heard before and one which Mgendi seemed to perceive as diverging from ordinary usage – as perhaps

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<sup>5</sup> See also Flavia Aiello Traore, “Translating a Swahili novel into ‘Kizungu’: *Separazione*, the Italian edition of Said Ahmed Mohammed’s *Utengano*. *Swahili Forum* 12 (2005): 99-107.

requiring explanation – marking it as he did in single quotation marks. Hewing in a deadly way to the words themselves because I was not deft or insightful enough to understand them, I offered Mgendi: “I didn’t want to look at the wrinkles”, and he kindly corrected me in a correspondence that time and again brought home the quickened dazzle of urban speech, which, through shorthand and elision, provides ever-diagnostic formulations that expose reality as it is. I cite Mgendi’s explanation here, which “unstitched” the expression for me so that I could see its parts, then pulled it back into its tight shape:

*Afrika, mfumo wa heshima hutegemea sana umri. Mtu mzee, mwenye makunyanzi, huheshimiwa sana kwa vile wengine wote huwa na umri mdogo kuliko yeye. Kwa hiyo, ‘siangalii makunyanzi,’ maana yake sijali chochote kuhusu mtu, hata awe na heshima kiasi gani... awe mzee kiasi gani... hata akiwa na makunyanzi mengi sitajali.* (Pers. comm. 18 August 2017)

In Africa, the system of respect hinges very much on age. An elderly person, with wrinkles, is highly respected, since everyone else is of a lesser age than him or her. So, ‘I don’t pay attention to the wrinkles’, its meaning is: I don’t give a damn about [that] person, no matter how deserving of respect s/he is ... no matter how old s/he is ... even if s/he has a lot of wrinkles, I won’t care.

In Mgendi’s *daladala*, conventions and ideals about respect and reverence accorded to the aged are at risk; here, the discomfort of travelling affects everyone. Moreover, the mistreatment of the young can lead to their revolt and to their asking not how old someone is but who has the money to pay for a seat. In the view of Mgendi’s hero, a seat is free of social meaning, to be valued solely by its price and a traveller’s ability to afford it. In fact, the elders do not take the young boy’s actions “sitting down”. They revolt and together berate and harangue him. Only one ally emerges in the boy’s defence, approving perfectly of his capitalist logic in a loveless city: a madman, a *fyatu*, rendered in translation as “a looney-tune” to maintain a sense of linguistic startle and loose playfulness:

*Wakati [waabiria wengine] wanaendelea na makombora yao, alijitokeza ‘fyatu’ mmoja aliyeamua kunitetea. “Mwacheni kijana ale matunda ya jasho lake!” alisema na kufanya abiria wengine wasonye na kumshutumu. Yeye hakujali, akaendelea ‘kuwapasha.’*

While they went on hurling word-bombs,<sup>6</sup> a looney-tune showed up and decided to defend me. “Let that boy enjoy the fruit of his own sweat!” he said, provoking the other passengers into hissing at and accusing him. But he didn’t care, he just went on telling them what was what.

A key strength of *Starehe gharama* is its view of city life from the perspective of its most vulnerable and often overlooked members – children, who, like their parents, must also make their way in *Bongo*, a city that tests the mind and will. In the figure of the *fyatu*, the story also

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<sup>6</sup> The ready availability of “bombs” for *makombora* also has the benefit of recalling the current American slang originating in contemporary mainstream parenting styles, in which one wants to refer to obscenity without committing it oneself. “F-bomb” is a way of referring to the word “fuck” without uttering the actual word.

give us the perspective of those who appear mad and who are understood to have left ideal society behind. As the elders and other passengers continue to argue about the correct system of seating and to berate the boy – arguing against a view of seats as solely defined by price and anyone’s ability to pay, regardless of status or age (insisting that, no matter what, an elder or a pregnant woman should be given preference) – the *daladala* reaches the boy’s stop, and he speeds off to relieve his painful belly in peace. In this story, and in Mgendi’s proposed alternate city, the boy and madman win.

Among the terms Mgendi employed elsewhere were ‘*matataizo*’, an arch and playful form of *matatizo* (‘trouble’), ‘*imani*’ (‘compassion’, here in single quotes such that the social norms determining “compassionate” action may well be suspect or worthless, and thus rendered as “some kind of sympathy”), and ‘*nyomi*’.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, Mgendi described *nyomi* as “[*m*]semo wa makondakta – abiria wengi kwa pamoja” (‘A *konda* expression – lots of passengers at once’), confirming the perception of *kondas* as linguistic innovators (pers. comm. August 19, 2017). A further marvelous metaphor describes a *daladala* that has been waiting empty, properly in line, and whose expected passengers are snatched up by another *daladala*, which has suddenly swept ahead of it and grabbed up all the fares. Beautifully, that defeated *daladala* is said *kupigwa mswaki*, (‘to have had its teeth brushed’), yielding the powerful image of passengers as nothing more than food particles in a *daladala*’s mouth. For me, the wonder of translating this small story was the necessity it entailed of flailing, of feeling lost in contemporary Dar slang that is on the move, here invented and disseminated in confrontations between stylish, brutal *kondas* and their surprising passengers.

I end this discussion of *Starehe gharama* with the thought-provoking critique that accompanied the rejection of the translated text. My goal is not to disparage the journal at whose request the translation was initially undertaken but to entertain their brief critique and mine it for potential insight. I ask their forgiveness in advance. The editorial board was unanimously captivated by the piece’s humour, but a crucial number was troubled by the presence of mixed diction, both in the first-person exposition as well as in the speech of various characters. They wondered if the presence of multiple registers in one story was “an element” of Swahili itself. The question is exactly on target and reflects the editors’ perfect apprehension of the piece (though for Mgendi and me without a desirable result). I do not know precisely which moments stirred the editors’ unease, but it may, as an exercise, be productive to apply their critique and see where it might lead. In fact, in choosing *Starehe gharama* for translation, I was attracted to the story’s different registers, but had not asked myself why.

When the boy first takes a seat, he says, “*Taratibu nikajikongoja mpaka kwenye siti ‘poa’ ya dirishani, na kuketi kwa madaha.*” In translation, this became: “Carefully, I dragged myself to the very ‘cool’ window seat, and sat down with elegance and grace.” Perhaps the

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<sup>7</sup> See also Reuster-Jahn & Kießling (2006). Here, *nyomi* is ‘plentiness’ (*uwingi*) (166) and is listed among other then newly coined words with this meaning, such as *bwena*, *bwi*, *kedekede*, *kibao*, *lumbesa*, and *shazi* (29).

juxtaposition of “cool” (*poa*) and “elegance and grace” (a two-term rendering of *kwa madaha*, which here recalls *mapozi* and very self-conscious self-comportment, such as that of dancing audience members at an urban *taarab* concert) was disturbing. However, I had chosen the wording specifically to communicate the boy’s self-awareness as he proudly “puts on airs”. Perhaps the question was: how can one person (moreover, a child) use the word “cool”, which has a Germanic and contemporary “unrooted” air in English, and in the next breath describe his movements as having “elegance” and “grace”. For academic speakers of American English, these words may suggest class aspirations well beyond this boy character’s reach, and their effect is so jarring as to warrant “correction”. Yet those aspirations as they feature in the boy’s fleeting fantasy, in my thinking, are precisely the point; the reality is that, for Dar speakers, a person saying *poa* in one moment and *madaha* in the next has done nothing unusual at all.

As I write, I am reminded that, as a teacher of creative writing in the United States, I often battle what seems to me class-soaked literature, where students’ fictional characters’ language is an unwitting marker of status and where fictional speech often fails to match the diverse, internally mixed, and spoken reality of Americans across categories in their actual lived lives. In my experience, despite the myth of America as a melting pot where upward mobility is possible for all, its mainstream contemporary literature often reflects, via linguistic registers, the deadly stiffness and uncrossable nature of class lines.<sup>8</sup> We devote full course meetings to what it could mean to capture speech as it is rather than as our class-locked imaginations would have it – what do we hear and say in fact and how do our biases prevent us from reckoning with and representing a more lively and human reality?

In Dar es Salaam, however, and everywhere in urban Africa, where residents are keenly savvy, alert to meaning at every turn – and where it seems to me that consciously pleasurable linguistic play, intentionally juxtaposing different kinds and styles of speech (*lugha za*), is a feature of daily life, perhaps much more so than in the overwhelmingly white and privileged American academy that produces many literary journals – it seems exactly right that children and young men like the *konda* would have access to many linguistic styles and registers and be understood to be, as they are, fully capable of drawing on multiple sociolects at once and through this usage deploying irony and diagnosis. Was there something unsettling, too, in the *konda*’s borrowing of bureaucratic, obfuscatory speech in the following, as the *konda*, bored with the schoolboy, elaborately dismisses him in a polite and high-sounding way that is no more than a heavy and certain “screw you”? “Try to be patient”, the *konda* says, “your comments have been noted, and, basically, are being addressed. Exercise some self-restraint while the relevant authorities consider your request” (“*Jaribu kuvuta subira. Maombi yako yamepokelewa, na kimsingi yanafanyiwa kazi. Uwe mstahamilivu wakati ngazi zinazohusika zinashughulikia suala lako*”). The deployment of this officious speech on a little boy who is

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<sup>8</sup> I am focusing on class here, but related and cross-cutting expectations and constraining stereotypes regarding race and gender also abound and necessarily plague literature, which often reflects mainstream (white and patriarchal) understandings of society without thereby transforming them.



afraid of soiling his pants is at once humorous, ridiculous and elaborately cruel – as is this very sort of speech when politicians use it to assuage citizens who know already that their needs will not be considered and, moreover, will likely be forgotten.

*Starehe gharama*'s language play is not self-important, nor does it simply represent the “half-concealed, or even completely concealed words of others” with “dialogic overtones” or echoes of past and surrounding language (Bakhtin 1994: 86-87). In this world, language is unstable, and what is said by one person can only be understood in the larger context of what has been said elsewhere, outside of the text, in diverse linguistic fields. The upshot is that Mgendi has listened to Tanzanians as they speak, as they use language to perform and protect themselves and to achieve their ends – *wakihangaika maisha*, as the expression goes.

This vision of urban Africa, where no word is as it seems, where a child can see his way to overturning precious social norms against the neglect of his own needs by a system that pits *daladala* crews against each other and against the vulnerable, is not a reassuring one. It may be part of what Paul Bandia has called “metropolitan African literature” (2013), a literature that, while still rooted in earlier work whose focus was on how to survive the colonial world and on indicting external colonisers, has now also turned to laying bare the workings of power within the so-called postcolony – with both children and *kondas* using the language of the apathetic state against each other as they try to simply make it through a day. The story is not aimed at Western literary critics or editorial boards, though I do feel that Western/Northern audiences would benefit from more frequent publication of work that, like Mgendi's, confounds American/European literary expectations about language use and class.

### **Tope Folarin's *Mwanzo* (*Genesis*)**

In 2013, then little-known Nigerian-American writer Tope Folarin was awarded the Caine Prize for his short story *Miracle*, about a young boy growing up in Texas with an evangelical father. In 2016, Folarin was short-listed for the Caine Prize, this time for the story *Genesis*, a first-person account of a young boy who, together with his little brother, suffers at the hands of their mother, a Nigerian immigrant like their father, who becomes mentally ill and abusive. The family is the only family of colour and the only African family for miles around. The larger setting for the piece, sinister and isolating, is the racism they encounter in the American Midwest. By the end, the boys' mother, psychologically wounded by her encounter with America, has returned to Nigeria and the boys are living with their father. Framing the drama of the mother's illness, an old white woman frequently appears on the boy's walk to school, telling the narrator that she will permit him to enter heaven as her servant. As the narrator later learns, in this woman's Mormon sect, people of colour can only enter heaven if in service to a white entrant. Responses to the woman's obviously racist vision both open and close the story.

In March 2017, a member of the Caine Prize administration asked if I would translate this story into Swahili. Although I had translated in that direction before,<sup>9</sup> I had never worked with fiction. After ensuring that my translation would undergo rigorous editing by native speakers who are writers themselves and curious about what I would learn, I agreed.<sup>10</sup>

Translating “blind”, I without warning encountered a dark and painful story about familial abuse and madness, immigration and racism. The questions that arose were not, in themselves, unusual. About voice, word-choice, diction, audience and geography, they were in fact typical. However, emerging as they did from a direction to which I am not accustomed, they provided for me an intriguing mirror image of the process of working from Swahili into a European language, forcing me to articulate some aspects of the few Swahili worlds I know and my relationships to them, which I had not closely considered before.

It is common to begin by asking, what is the source text? What type of text is it? And, further, what are its sources? Where and what does it come from? Next, what is the relationship of the source text to the target language and to the target audience – knowing that audiences may be plural and that one language will suddenly reveal itself to be made of many. The potential answers upon first considering Folarin’s *Genesis* were complex and contradictory, and sometimes troubling. First, the source text is legible as “American literature”, which has in recent decades particularly welcomed stories and books by citizen writers of African descent living in the United States,<sup>11</sup> a positive development that may yet change American ideas about who belongs and whose experiences may count as American in nature. *Genesis* is also “immigrant literature”, sharing in diaspora writ large, with likeness to the stories of many first-generation writers based in the U.S. Potentially further complicating questions about the source text’s identity, some African commentators in 2013 questioned Folarin’s connection to Africa and the awarding of the prize to a writer who has not lived on the continent (Allison 2013; see also Mengiste 2013). But the awarding of the Caine Prize to Folarin highlights the impossibility and even the danger of attempting to define and isolate “African literature” as a known and knowable object, one that is bounded in any way in space. Aaron Bady’s comments on the matter are useful:

[Folarin’s] Caine Prize signals an emerging acceptance of the radical diversity that has always been latent in the category. There have always been many Africas, after all; the continent is too hopelessly large and multitudinous for a single story, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie famously put it. The word ‘Africa’ itself has served, historically, as a single story for a stretch of human geography so vast, in reality, as to beggar the imagination, and one might observe that that’s precisely what the word was for: when faced with the impossible diversity of African humanity, white people wielded the word ‘Africa’ like a crucifix at vampires (when not using other, much more vicious words). But while everybody knows, on some level, that Africa

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<sup>9</sup> For example, *Utangulizi* (Bgoya 2013).

<sup>10</sup> While there may be others of whom I am unaware, I thank most especially Nassor Hilal Kharusi and Hussein El-Mawy for their patience and sharp eyes.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Imolo Mbue, Yaa Gyasi, Taiye Selasi, and Teju Cole.

isn't a country, it can sometimes be difficult to act on that knowledge. It's too easy and too comfortable to fall back into these old patterns and generalizations, to talk about 'Africa' as if it names a thing, a place, and a category, as if we all already know what it is. (Bady 2014)

I accept that the work is one of African literature in a contemporary sense, where a writer's heritage and loyalties matter and where whether a text is "African" is a question of orientation and vision as much as of setting or trajectory. And I note, too, that many writers in Africa, themselves vibrantly connected to writers elsewhere, have continued to give urgent and particular attention to the work of African-American writers, as also part, themselves, of a larger and in some sense recuperated African literary field.

Yet the source text, for what it's worth, also "feels" American in some key ways. Translating this piece into Swahili seemed to me a qualitatively different task, for example, from an imagined translation of Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala* or the stories of Bessie Head into the same language. How is an "Americanness" felt in the text? For me, it came first through references to television shows ("The People's Court", "The Judge", "The Incredible Hulk") and food (frozen food, Chinese takeaway and cinnamon rolls purchased at the mall). The landscapes, ranging from an apartment building to an elementary school, a shopping center at Christmas and a women's shelter, seem fully part of the endlessly replicated, generically built landscape of 1970s' Middle America. The deep loneliness experienced by the characters – and presumably by their neighbours and other state inhabitants, whatever their origins – has a distinctly high capitalist flavour – that of homeless and unrooted souls set quietly adrift in a relentlessly commodified and commodifying emptiness, whose roots in genocide are only fitfully concealed. By this, I don't at all mean that non-American or non-Western-European places and people are not also susceptible to the existential ills of omnivorous high capital in a global age; but that this aura, coupled with the importance of the television shows – as fundamentally orienting to people with no other sense of community – and the overarching atmosphere of old Protestant Christianity, seems to me to generate something that feels particularly "American" in this day and age. The prose itself also deploys what reads to me as a rather flat, plain but elegant, educated Midwestern English, unaccented by highs and lows, not infused with any recognisable idiosyncratic rhythms or ways of saying that might be linked to any specific place or sub-culture. The language is smooth and, if it draws attention to itself, it does so through occasional poetry and a quiet loping mood felt in sometimes intricate but evenly paced sentences. The characters' speech, too, has a certain joyless flatness; it is perhaps a voice of trauma. The excerpt below introduces the old white woman, whose presence marks the story's opening as well as its end:

"Remember, if you are a good boy here on earth, you can serve me in heaven." I was five years old. Her words sounded magical to me. Vast and alluring. I didn't know her, I barely knew her name, but the offer she held out to me each morning seemed far too generous to dismiss lightly. In class, I would think about what servitude in heaven would be like. I imagined myself carrying buckets of water for

her on streets of gold, rubbing her feet as angels sang praises in the background. I imagined that I'd have my own heavenly shack. I'd have time to do my own personal heavenly things as well. How else would I get to heaven? (Folarin 2017: 1070)

*“Kumbuka, ukiwa mtoto mzuri hapa duniani, utaweza kunihudumia peponi.” Nilikuwa na umri wa miaka mitano. Maneno yake yalipendeza kiajabu. Mazito, na yenye kuvutia. Sikumfahamu, hata jina lake sikulijua, lakini mwaliko wake wa kila asubuhi ulikuwa wa ukarimu usioweza kupuuzwa. Darasani, nilijiuliza, je, kuwa mtumishi peponi kungekuwaje? Nilijiona nikiimbebea madebe yaliyojaa maji, nikitembea juu ya njia za dhahabu, nikimkanda miguu yake, wakati sauti za malaika zikisikika kwa mbali wakiimba nyimbo za kumsifu Mwenyezi Mungu. Nilikisia kwamba ningekuwa na kibanda changu mwenyewe cha kipeponi. Na ningekuwa na muda wa kuyashughulikia mambo yangu ya kipeponi pia. Vyinginevyo, peponi ningefikaje?*

In thinking about what sort of voice, or language, might be deployed in the Swahili rendering, I felt immediately that the language ought not draw attention to itself – to be limpid if possible, solid, clear and, overall, unexceptional in syntax and diction, except in those moments when Folarin himself seems to move insistently in an unusual way. But what did “not drawing attention to itself” mean? In what imagined East African or Swahili-speaking context would any particular kind or style of Swahili go unnoticed? What did the question itself presume about location, standards, audience, and power? Bady’s reminder of the great diversity of “African” ways and modes is well taken in this smaller context – that of Swahili-reading and Swahili-speaking audiences in East Africa and the diaspora. According to whom or what conventions is a particular Swahili way of speaking or writing “attention getting”?

Not having much studied Swahili formally and having, as many do, taken as my standard of fluency the Swahili that has most surrounded me through the course of my work, which began not in literature but in anthropology, my own tendency is towards the geographically rooted cadences and abridgments of Kipemba rather than towards standard or literary Kiswahili (*sanifu* or *fasaha*). That is, towards a coastal dialect whose conventions are frequently at odds with the standardised Swahili used in government schools and national settings, a facility with which is crucial to professional advancement in any public field.<sup>12</sup> That inclination is one, too, that has made me skeptical of the ascendance of prominent Swahilis, much as my own work has suffered through my not knowing them well. In any case, I immediately “knew” that Kipemba was not the appropriate vehicle for this story.

But, in naming any dialect of Swahili as “wrong” for the story, what assumptions was I making? Why was Kipemba the wrong Swahili? Perhaps the first question was: would it serve

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<sup>12</sup> Just recently, a Pemban friend declared that, while he feels viscerally attached to Kipemba and feels it represents his home, he makes a concerted effort not to use it in any professional setting. There, he argued, one must always demonstrate one’s competence and ease with the standard form or risk being told that one does not belong.

the story? While *Genesis* clearly emerges from the author's knowledge of American Christianities (here, Old Mormon), speakers of Kipemba tend to be intimately associated with Islam and in their own literary endeavours have been more likely to produce poetry than novels.<sup>13</sup> What kind of project would finding Kipemba equivalents for a work rooted in middle American Christianity be? And for speakers of standard Swahili, what impact would a translation into a narrowly coastal dialect have on their entry into the story? A short story in translation, whose voice was so unassailably not regional but "American" in a very generic sense and, further, one that had been nominated for a broadly "African" prize, I reasoned, would be better directed to a much broader audience, whose members, themselves diverse, are nonetheless often conscious of sharing in a larger, common Swahili language. I also felt that, given the tendency of East African publishers to focus on the dissemination of literature suitable for setting on government exams, it would be correct to turn the story towards secondary school students and their teachers of literature.

So, a choice of Swahili for a literary translation, implicitly or consciously, is shaped by questions of history, regional identity, culture, religion, the politics of education and a translator's journey with and through these. This is true in any direction. But the configuration of choices, together with their weight and meaning, naturally differs by context. For me, translating the story into a "standard" voice meant policing my own orthography and examining my word choices, attempting to choose what I have understood to be more widely used and widely known words and formulations (in an imagined internally diverse Swahili-speaking world "as a whole") over my first impulses (for example, turning towards *nimeshampata* over *kashampata* and *shule* over *skuli*; consistently doing away with double 'n's, as in *ninachokumbuka* instead of *nn/n'nachokumbuka*). But was I thereby constructing my own biased vision of standard Swahili, opting for simplicity, not because there is anything simple about standard Swahili but because of the unformed nature of my own Swahili writing, my own uncertainty about it and about actual common usage?

A few years ago, in a conversation with a group of writers from the Tanzanian mainland, one of them said, "All the scholarly emphasis is on coastal poetry. People think if something *haina mafumbo* [doesn't conceal its own multiple meanings], it's not beautiful, not literary. But what's wrong with simplicity and writing something so more people understand it?" I felt moved by what this writer said and have tried since then to remember it in my practice. But in choosing to work in my own understanding of standard Swahili, was I imposing a false transparency on the rendered text?

At first, I felt the question of "coastal" vs. "standard/mainland" Swahili haunting the work, but in fact my naming it this way concealed a more perplexing question. More correctly, it turned out, my own shorthand ("coastal" vs. "standard") was hampering my ability both to

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<sup>13</sup> Notable published exceptions, of course, include the many works of Said Ahmed Mohammed and, more recently those of Yusuf Shoka Hamadi (*Paka wa Binti Hatibu*, 'Lady Hatibu's cat', 2018. Nairobi: Jomo Kenyatta Foundation) and Ally Hilal (*Safari Yangu*, 'My journey', 2015. DL2A Buluu Publishing).

articulate and to resolve what remains, for me, an interesting problem. The tension I had sensed was also about the use of words originating in English and how such usage might be assessed from different linguistic approaches within Swahili worlds. After the two boys have accompanied their mother to a women's shelter, where she duplicitously keeps them away from their father, the narrator tells us this:

Mom stops cooking Nigerian food when we get to the shelter. She will only prepare *frozen food*, but my brother and I don't care. We're always happy when we see her busying herself in our tiny *kitchen*, opening the box of *frozen fried chicken*, the delicious rip of *aluminum foil*, placing the *foil* and the chicken into the *oven*. Soon the savory fumes tunnel into our nostrils. She dumps a dollop of store-bought crab salad onto our plates, sometimes some fried rice from the local Chinese restaurant if she has extra money, and the fried chicken. Before we eat, Mom switches off the radio, and if it's summer, the window is open, the breeze warming our backs (1076; emphasis mine).

*Tunapofika shelta, Mama anaacha kupika vyakula vya Kinaijiria. Atapika vyakula vilivyohifadhiwa kwenye friza tu, lakini hilo si tatizo kwangu wala kwa mdogo wangu. Tunafurahi kila tunapomwona akijishughulisha katika jiko letu dogo, akifungua boksi la nyama ya kuku iliyoganda; tunaposikia kishindo kile kitamu cha foili inapochanika, mama akiweka foili pamoja na kuku kwenye oveni. Baada ya muda mfupi, moshi wenye harufu nzuri unatembea katika mianzi ya pua zetu. Katika sahani zetu, anatumia saladi ya kaa aliyoinunua dukani, au, mara kwa mara, pesa zikimtoha, wali wa kukaanga kutoka kwa hoteli ya Kichina ya mtaa wetu, pamoja na yule kuku wa kukaanga. Kabla hatujaanza kula, Mama anaizima redio, na kama ni wakati wa kiangazi, dirisha liko wazi, upepo vuguvugu ukichezea migongoni mwetu.*

The realm of food preparation, always embedded in cultural value and habit, offered up several challenges. The question of frozen food, for example, was new to me, as I had never encountered it in my experiences in rural Zanzibar.<sup>14</sup> The presence of “kitchen” as well as “oven” in such proximity also posed a challenge for the translation. Both could be easily rendered as *jiko*. But using the same word for each in the same sentence, where the author had used different ones, was undesirable. Yet which word, kitchen or oven, deserved to become *jiko*? The ovens I have known in these areas are neither electric nor gas but either clay or aluminum lidded pots topped with coal, providing enclosed spaces whose surfaces generate heat to cook food from several directions, especially from the top and bottom; and these pots

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<sup>14</sup> Additionally, “frozen fried chicken” could easily be rendered as “kuku ya kukaanga iliyoganda barafu” However, after consultation with several Swahili speakers, I decided to drop the term “fried” from the translation, using only “nyama ya kuku iliyoganda”. The concept of frozen food seemed challenging enough to translate in an unobtrusive way for an audience many of whose members may not have a freezer or refrigerator at home. Presenting *ya kaanga* so close to *barafu* seemed potentially distracting and unproductive, since the most important point is the mother's exhaustion and sadness.

are set to heat on coal or wood fires, typically in an outdoor kitchen or an inner courtyard. And so *oveni*, clearly English-derived, appeared.

But the question of “aluminum foil” generated more thinking through uncertainty than any other term. My immediate impulse was to render “aluminum foil” as *foili*, and I did not think about it much until the summer of 2017, when, in Lamu, historian, writer and retired teacher Hussein Soud El Mawy kindly consented to give me his opinions on the draft. Among his several comments was one about which he felt very strongly: “Ah-ah, si foili, hapo. Tumia *jalbosi*, bora” (“No, it’s not *foili* here. Better to use *jalbosi*”).

*Jalbosi* was a word that I had heard only rarely, and my most vivid memory of it was its use by an affinal relative of a Pemban family in Unguja as he prepared the goat kebabs for which he was famous. This man lived in Mombasa (Kenya) and, upon receiving the roll of foil he had requested, said, “*Jalbosi hiyo!*” (“This thing is *jalbosi!*”). Others around him did not know this word, and he was compelled to explain. He himself was a literary man, and I had the impression that he was no stranger to discussions in linguistic/literary circles in Mombasa about the challenges facing Swahili in general and coastal Swahili in particular.

As readers will know, since the mid-twentieth century, scholars and supporters of Swahili in East Africa have made efforts both to protect Swahili and to build its capacity to include and engage every scholarly and, in particular, scientific discipline. In Tanzania, among these have been BAKITA,<sup>15</sup> TUKI/TATAKI,<sup>16</sup> UKUTA,<sup>17</sup> TAKILUKI<sup>18</sup> and BAKIZA.<sup>19</sup> In Kenya, BAKIKE<sup>20</sup> and CHAKITA<sup>21</sup> have been important, but, perhaps more than in Tanzania, so has the work of individual cultural critics, including most notably the late Ahmed Sheikh Nabhany, for whom KiAmu and KiMvita were of poignant importance (Nabhany 2012; see also Were-Mwaro 2000). In addition to coining new words to reflect emerging technologies and newly described phenomena, many proponents of Swahili have insisted on using a suitable existing word instead of Swahili-izing a word taken from English. As a Zanzibari friend recently said, “If it means enlarging the meaning of a word to bring it up to date and give us a word we need, then let us enlarge it and use that”. I consider myself deeply sympathetic to these projects and resistant wherever possible to English borrowings made local. However, when Maalim Hussein suggested *jalbosi* for foil, a word I could remember hearing clearly only once, I felt startled. Pending an examination of available dictionaries, I asked native speakers of Swahili what they were accustomed to calling “aluminium foil”. Some had not used the foil much, or at all. But

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<sup>15</sup> Baraza la Kiswahili Tanzania.

<sup>16</sup> Taasisi ya Uchunguzi wa Kiswahili/Taasisi ya Taaluma za Kiswahili.

<sup>17</sup> Usanifu wa Kiswahili na Ushairi Tanzania.

<sup>18</sup> Taasisi ya Kiswahili na Lugha za Kigeni.

<sup>19</sup> Baraza la Kiswahili Zanzibar.

<sup>20</sup> Baraza la Kiswahili Kenya.

<sup>21</sup> Chama cha Kiswahili Kenya. Under the direction of Kimani Njogu, CHAKITA was responsible for the 2000 introduction of a bill to the Kenya Parliament to make Kiswahili compulsory in schools.

not one was accustomed to the word *jalbosi*.<sup>22</sup> Most suggested *foili*, though one, a poet and former teacher, playfully suggested the neologism *mtanda wa bati*, adding, “But I’m just making that one up.” It seemed to me that the consensus on *foili* as the default was tinged with a wish that things were otherwise.

Dictionaries yielded the following:<sup>23</sup>

1. *Jaribosi*: Foil, gold foil, gold leaf. *Kamusi ya Kiswahili-Kiingereza* (TUKI) (115).
2. *Jaribosi* (also *Jalbosi*). Coloured tinfoil or paper used in decorating the rolls of paper worn by some women as earrings. *A Standard Swahili-English Dictionary* (Johnson from Madan) (151).
3. *Jalbosi, li/ya (ma-)*. Karatasi iliyopakwa madini yanayong’aa kwenye uso mmoja. *Kamusi ya Kiswahili Fasaha* (BAKIZA) (128).
4. *Jaribosi*. Aina ya karatasi inayong’aa itumiwayo kufungiya na kupambiya karatasi nyinginezo, zawadi, na hata kuvaliwa sikiyoni na wanawake kama vipuli. *Kamusi Teule Ya Kiswahili: Kilele cha Lugha*. (230).
5. *Jalbosi, li/ya (ma-)*. Karatasi ya rangi ya dhahabu au fedha inayong’ara, ambayo hutumika kufungia vitu vidogo vidogo, k.v. sigareti. *Kamusi la Lahaja ya Kipemba* (BAKIZA) (37).

As the word (*jalbosi*) describes a supply for a now nearly disappeared adornment (as late as the 1990s not uncommon among older Bajuni women and regarded as the fashion for hundreds of years past), the word may be an old one. But is a word for “gold leaf” or “gold foil” used in decoration expansive enough to accommodate the aluminum foil so ubiquitous today in American kitchens and used almost exclusively to wrap leftover, take-away or frozen foods? I continue to understand a decision to use *jalbosi* in the translation of Folarin’s *Genesis* as one textured with linguistic activism. Whereas, moving into English, I feel confident about agitating for linguistic expansion, for pushing English to do more, I feel no such confidence when moving into Swahili. I submitted the work with “aluminum foil” rendered as *foili*, which I had heard most often and which a sample of native speakers confirmed as their habit. I continue to have the strong feeling that the decision to use *jalbosi* is not mine to make. Increasingly aware of the complexity and diversities of Swahili-language reading cultures and with a sharpened sense of the history and peculiarities of my presence in them, I have no grounds for determining what an existing, if perhaps rarely used, word might achieve in a new context. To my knowledge, there is as yet no other available Swahili translation of this story. But I can also imagine, and would be delighted to see, a fundamentally different rendering of *Mwanzo*, created by a

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<sup>22</sup> I thank Meg Arenberg here for joining me in this quest and making inquiries of her own on my behalf.

<sup>23</sup> In thanks to Ustadh Mahmoud Mau, who, as I was travelling without my own dictionary, consulted those in his library and sent me what he found there.



different translator for whom, perhaps, the choice of *jalbosi* – in a commitment to Swahili’s existing and ample resources – would be an easy one to make.

## Conclusion

In the end, the question that has given me most pause as I consider these two projects together is not about the texts themselves but about the translator’s relation to the target language. How might the translator’s identity, history, and aesthetic and political preoccupations determine what is possible inside the new text?

Working with Mgendei’s *Starehe gharama* helped me to understand anew my relationship to English. Although English is not my native language, but rather one I encountered only in school, I now do most of my writing in it. While I struggle to use it correctly and conventionally to prove my belonging in it, I am also committed, as a feminist and decolonial writer and teacher, to working intentionally against this “master language”: to make English represent the world both as I know it and as I wish it to be. Thus, English is a language I believe non-native speakers have a full right to transform and one that can be bettered by the linguistic innovations of speakers and writers who, for so many reasons, may come to English from the margins. That is one reason the work of translation into English has been invigorating – since translated expressions, visions, and conventions can so effectively unsettle and enlarge the target language. Overall, working with *Starehe gharama* also confirmed my sense that, as a teacher and writer, I have been shaped by Marxist approaches both to language and to the analysis of social life. My thinking through the editors’ remarks on Mgendei’s insistent mixing of registers in the speech of generally underprivileged characters has sharpened my sense of my own commitments as a writer, ethnographer and teacher, bringing to the fore my interest in literature that confronts head on questions of power, language and class.

Working in the opposite direction with Tope Folarin’s *Genesis* has been uniquely instructive because I had not worked in Swahili with literature before. It has also left me with questions that I cannot yet answer and which I expect will perplex me for some time to come. As *Genesis* became *Mwanzo*, I became newly aware of the implications of my personal trajectory through Swahili for my own work in the language. Coming to Swahili very early, and for many years primarily through speech, I have only recently begun to fathom the complex relationships between the many varieties of Swahili (some quite marginalised) and the standardised form that has been so crucial to national projects – political, social and educational – and to publishing in East Africa. The experience of repeatedly having to pull my own Swahili away from a literary but marginal regional dialect toward the *sanifu* form that I believe Folarin’s story warrants is one whose lessons will continue to unfold. The second issue – of aluminum foil – remains for me a puzzle. Although I intentionally and sometimes proudly exercise a non-native speaker’s right to shift and reform English, I do not believe that Swahili can be bettered by the provocations or even simply the productions of non-native speakers when these are rooted in a colonizing tongue. In resisting *jalbosi/jaribosi* for “foil”, I also aimed to resist being implicated

in longstanding East African debates about Swahili usage. As an outsider, I reasoned, it is not my place to make provocative decisions in that context, as insisting on *jaribosi/jalbos* might have been. Yet, uncomfortably, this resulted in my choosing to use a word rooted *in English* in a Swahili-language text. Although for now, the choice of “foili” seems very right, there do arise for me unanswered and perhaps even as yet unarticulated questions about translators’ acceptance of common usage in the target language and about our participation, willing or unwilling, in maintaining a status quo that is itself a complex and political field, one which may even be repressive for some native speakers and writers.

Working with Mgendi’s *Starehe gharama* and Folarin’s *Genesis* in succession brought to light for me my particular positioning with respect to both English and Swahili, confirming the idea that translation, like all writing, can be an act of self-discovery with unsettling implications. Most of all, I have been alerted to those areas of my thinking that remain opaque and which, as I continue to absorb and reflect upon the different wisdoms offered by these projects, I hope to theorise more properly one day.

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