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WHY I WRITE WHAT I WRITE

I am a Motswana by birth and by inclination, as we like to say, who writes in English.

I was born during the pre-independence era, and when Bechuanaland gave birth to Botswana through the painless process of self-inducement and negotiation in 1966, my family was living in London, England. So I did not witness that photographic moment when Sir Seretse Khama, our first president, punched his black fists into the air, with his white English wife beside him, and shouted, “Pula! – let there be rain.”

Some people would argue that our independence was handed to us on a silver or gold platter encrusted with diamonds. I would disagree. The birth of Botswana was without labor pains because the gold and diamonds were discovered five years after the British had left. The fact of our independence through diplomacy and negotiation highlights the truth of the Setswana proverb;

“the war of integrity is through the mouth,” or to put it literally, “the greatest battle is of the mouth.” It is better to jaw-jaw than war-war!

My stay in England during the critical most impressionable period of my life was very important in three ways in terms of my later life’s vocation as a writer.

- a. I became immersed in the language called English and spoke with a northwester London accent;
- b. although I did not lose Setswana (I am fluent) I missed out on the theoretical and technical aspects of the language as I could not study it formally at school.
- c. I began to understand racism and prejudice much more clearly in London. As a seven-year old in Bechuanaland (Botswana) I knew we could not play with white children in town (who were mainly of Afrikaans extraction from south Africa) simply because we were black.

The sum of all this is that the question of which language I should write in was never an issue for me as a poet. The only language that I have had to grapple with as a creative artist is the language of the unspoken and unspeaking, the language of silence, the language of space and landscape, the language of nature, the language of the silenced.

I am acutely aware of the debates amongst African writers over the question of language that have polarized them into two camp; one side declaring that our first allegiance is to our native tongue, and the other arguing that English is as much our language as it is anyone else’s; it is part of our historical (albeit colonial) heritage. The two camps are represented by Achebe on the one side, who embraces the English language, manipulates it and makes it speak in what can only be his native Igbo, and Ngugi who rejects the colonial tongue and calls for a radical decolonization. Ngugi maintains that “the voices of the (African) past will never speak to a writer in a foreign language.” In saying this he undermines his own achievements as a writer and those of such literary giants as Tutuola, Okara, Mphahlele, Soyinka (the Nobel Prize winner) and Achebe.

My experience is that those voices are translatable into a foreign language by the creative act of writing. In my act of writing, the two languages for me fuse and become one – almost instantaneously and simultaneously – perhaps not in thought – but definitely in

inscription. Structures merge and are superimposed on each other without opposition – rather like in code switching.

This is only my personal experience and I am here just trying to describe it as best as I can without any claims of trying to be a psycho-linguist or a psychologist.

I actually also use code-switching as a literary device in my column with the Botswana Guardian newspaper. The setting is a shebeen, or speak-easy, where the patrons hang out on a daily basis, and generally talk in normal, relaxed and colloquial language discussing current happenings.

In this column, called “In the Nitty Gritty,” the characters embody the language they speak. It is what give them their essence. I also use the column as a running commentary on language and its relationship with politics, literature and society. The characters quote from all sorts of texts that they have encountered in their individual worlds.

I also attempt to use code switching and bilingualism in the telling of the tale (the authorial voice), to show the wealth that can accrue from the meeting of two tongues: two languages that converse.

So, when, why and how did I start writing? I knew I had it in me when the English teacher in Botswana made it a weekly practice to read my composition to the rest of the class and the other teachers, much to my embarrassment, at high school.

I was only fifteen years old, but she would accompany such readings with critical commentary worthy of a small literary journal and then proceed to grade it a 9 out of a possible 10. I didn’t think that I was that good a writer, but I know I had the wildest imagination. For example, I harbored the wildest ambitions of being a lawyer! Alas! That was not my destiny.

Virginia Woolf talks about the necessity of having a “room of one’s own.” Sharing a bedroom in my parent’s house was the closest I could get to that spatial isolation necessary for writing. I had to make do with a bed of my own as my private little space. It was on my knees at the edge of the bed that I penned my first published poem. I was 18 years old. After some cutting and pruning, the poem found root as “determination.”

not allowed
to say it aloud
here I sit
at the edge

beyond borders
of despair
trying to conclude
a poem I am not permitted to
begin...

“Protest poetry” as it was labeled, characterized the first five or so years of my writing as a student at the University of Botswana and Swaziland, up to 1980. this reflected the radicalization and politicization that resulted as a consequence of our interaction with exiled South African students, faculty, activists, and writers who became our mentors. We caught the revolutionary spirit that was then blowing across southern Africa in search of self-determination and self-actualization “by all means necessary.

The bulk of this poetry lent itself to recitation and performance. This was the utilitarian nature of the poetry that sought to conscientize and politicize. It was also a

weapon that dealt a deadly blow to racism and oppression. We composed for community consumption in the public arena, accompanied by drumming and music. This aspect or feature of the poetry proved essential later when I wrote works that borrow directly from Setswana oral traditions.

My five year stint at Mater Spei College, where I taught English, Geography, and Moral education marked a period of development and consolidation for me as a poet – an urban poet I might add. This is the period that produced “Johannesburg 1979,” “Gaborone Mall,” “Blue town Blues,” “Spring in Harare” and others. Although I crossed the borders into the urban landscape of Zimbabwe to celebrate their independence in the Spring of Harare as the jarandas bloomed and fell like confetti on the concrete pavements that cracked under the pressure of the war for liberation, I also came back into the urban landscape of Botswana and focused on Gaborone Mall to give snapshots of a young city awakening from “the honey-heavy dew of slumber/that had settled on its eyelashes.” It is also a portrait of a city unaware of itself, but slumbering into self-knowledge.

In “Johannesburg” (1979) I made use of all those seemingly useless old nursery rhymes that we had to regurgitate at primary school, which had stayed dormant in my subconscious for 16 years waiting to be exploited and shed of their innocence:

Baa-baa black boys
Breakfast in bed?

No sir, no sir three blacks full sir
Up to here with your bull sir!

I use the nursery rhyme in two other poems for satirical comment and irony in two other poems. I call it “nursery crime.”

This period of searching within Botswana’s own geo-political boundaries and urban forests was followed by one of intense and relentless experimentation with structure, image and style. These are the Wisconsin years where my first collection of poetry was published by the African Studies Program of that University in Madison, entitled Images of the Sun. It is one of my life’s ironies that while I was searching in wind-chilled temperatures through Wisconsin snow, I actually found the Kalahari (Kgalagadi) sun! This image became the central metaphor and symbol around which the sixty or so poems were organized.

In the preface to that 1986 publication, I wrote:

In Images of the Sun, I try to capture in each poem a certain aspect of life as illuminated by the ubiquitous sun ... (the poems represent several years of experiment in an effort to find an image that is both a universal experience... that can be particularized...)

I suppose the opposite is true was well; the particular can be universal. Oladele Taiwo in *Social Experience in African Literature* (1986), alludes to the “problem of universality” in African literature and its criticism. He maintains that the “universality derives, partly, from the imaginative grasp and artistic intelligence displayed by a writer.”

I must admit quite frankly that I do not consciously strive for universality right now, although it may appear so in my choice of language. Perhaps it was in pursuit of this universality that one American critic wrote about *Images of the Sun*: “the lessons of modernism are clear in (Seboni’s) poetry. He has learned from imagist and objectivists...”

I suspect that this review is very complimentary and positive, but it assigns to me literary ancestry whose voices I cannot hear too clearly when they whisper to me. I suppose

this is the prize that I have to pay for writing in their language. But it is my language too. It has found me (I did not look for it!) and I have colonized it.

It is Eldred Durosini Jones who wrote that “the happy paradox is that, to be truly universal, one must be truly local.”

And this is the “strategy” I adopt in Wind Songs of the Kgalagadi (Kalahari) which was written in the cold autumn of Edinburgh, Scotland in 1993, when I was the poet-in-residence at the Scottish Poetry Library. I strive to be truly local. In an attempt to achieve orality in my poetry and infuse the narrative with Tswana cultural traditions and customs I redeploy “mythification, symbolism and embellishment,” in the words of Mazisi Junene the Zulu epic poet, with whom I take issue when he claims that Africans should not “expect to create a literature of excellence in the very language of their former masters.”

In Peter Nazareth’s, Critical Essays on Ngugi, Gitali Gititi rightly points out that Frantz Fanon was prophetic in his famous The Wretched of the Earth, when he says: “According to Fanon, the nations arising out of the colonial project of territorial and cultural domination incorporate the oral tradition into the liberatorial textual praxis that is part of the process of decolonization.” (p. 214)

Professor David Rubadiri says about Windsongs of the Kgalagadi; “These poems are striking because of the power of the images and symbols from his rich tswana oral tradition and culture.

I also write because I am possessed by, and I indeed possess, what Peter Nazareth in An African View of Literature, terms “a moral consciousness.”

And then, finally, how do I write? I simply shut my mouth, open my mind and listen to my heart. I also listen to the rhythm of my being which is in tune with the larger rhythm of my local environment and the larger universe. This is captured in the Windsongs of the Kgalagadi – the “Place of the sun that drinks from the land and creates the great (mother) thirst.”