

# Language as a Bridge: Navigating Cultural Divides and Generational Gaps in Francis Imbuga's *The Burning of Rags* and *The Return of Mgofu*

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**Abstract-** *This paper analyzes the use of language as a means to bridge cultural divides and generational gaps in Francis Imbuga's plays "The Burning of Rags" and "The Return of Mgofu." Imbuga employs a hybrid linguistic approach, drawing from both English and native African languages, to effectively capture the complexities of cultural conflicts arising from the intersection of traditional and modern values. The language choices reflect the generational divide, with the older characters using more idiomatic expressions rooted in African traditions, while the younger generation incorporates Western influences. Imbuga skillfully utilizes language to characterize individuals, positioning them along the spectrum of old and new. Moreover, the use of the journey motif and symbolic names reinforce the themes of reconciliation, remembrance, and the significance of preserving cultural roots while embracing progress. Through his deft manipulation of language, Imbuga navigates the intricate interplay between African and Western cultures, advocating for a harmonious coexistence that embraces modernity while retaining the essence of traditional values.*

**Indexed Terms-** *Language as a Bridge, Navigating Cultural Divides, Generational Gaps*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Language plays a vital role in navigating cultural divides and generational gaps within a society. It serves as a bridge, connecting diverse perspectives and facilitating understanding between different groups. In his plays *"The Burning of Rags"* and *"The Return of Mgofu,"* Kenyan playwright Francis Imbuga masterfully employs language as a tool to

explore the complexities of cultural conflicts and the intergenerational transmission of values.

Imbuga's linguistic approach is a hybrid, seamlessly blending English with native African languages. This fusion reflects the intersection of traditional and modern influences, mirroring the cultural clashes that arise when old and new ways of life collide. Through his deliberate choice of words and expressions, Imbuga not only characterizes his protagonists but also positions them along the spectrum of old and new, emphasizing the generational divide.

Furthermore, Imbuga's use of symbolic names and the journey motif reinforces the themes of reconciliation, remembrance, and the significance of preserving cultural roots while embracing progress. By navigating the intricacies of language, Imbuga advocates for a harmonious coexistence that respects the essence of traditional values while acknowledging the inevitability of change.

This paper delves into Imbuga's masterful utilization of language as a bridge, exploring how it facilitates the navigation of cultural divides and generational gaps within the plays *"The Burning of Rags"* and *"The Return of Mgofu."* Through a comprehensive analysis of linguistic choices, symbolic representations, and thematic underpinnings, the paper underscores the pivotal role of language in fostering understanding and promoting cultural preservation amidst the tides of modernity.

## II. USE OF LANGUAGE

Language plays a crucial role in shaping and defining a culture, providing a distinct identity to its speakers. It serves as a medium through which the cultural values and shared experiences of a community are

passed down through generations, as well as a tool for organizing and structuring thought processes, concepts, and categories. When authors depict African traditional life in literature, they are often influenced, whether consciously or unconsciously, by the importance of language in representing the culture authentically. In turn, the African audience anticipates an accurate portrayal of cultural life from writers, emphasizing the significance of capturing the true essence of the culture through language in literary works.

The West African writer faces a unique challenge when writing in English, unlike their English counterparts. This challenge revolves around effectively expressing the African experience using a language that was originally developed to encapsulate a different set of experiences and convey a different sensibility. The question arises of how the novelist can accurately portray their characters' words, emotions, and perspectives in English while preserving their idiomatic essence and authenticity. This raises the dilemma of finding a balance between the demands of the English language and the need to capture the distinct qualities and nuances of the African experience within the constraints of English literature (Obiechina, 1990, p. 53).

"The Burning of Rags" is an African drama that effectively captures the prevalent culture conflict within society. This theme arises closely in the wake of the collapse of colonialism and emerges as a consequence of the introduction of new lifestyles. The language employed in the play should mirror and convey this inherent conflict, serving as a reflection of the clash between traditional and modern values, beliefs, and practices.

The language used in African literature carries its own controversies, as outlined by Isaiah Ilo (2006). Ilo identifies two schools of thought regarding language in African drama: the Nativist/Essentialist school and the Hybrid school. The Nativist school advocates for literature, including drama, to be written in native African languages rather than English. This belief stems from the notion that adopting the language of the colonizer represents a form of subjugation, as expressed by Frantz Fanon (1952). Fanon argues that accepting the colonizer's

language means accepting their worldview, and that linguistic colonization is a severe assault on a people's consciousness. Wali (1963) further supports the idea that African literature should be written in African languages as a means of resisting neo-colonialism. Notably, Ngugi wa Thiongo, a prominent Kenyan writer, experienced a sense of fulfillment when he staged "Ngachika Nchenda" (I Will Marry When I Want), his first work written in his native language.

*During my time in the Maximum Security Prison, where I was unjustly held for a year without trial, I contemplated extensively on the complex dynamics surrounding English as both the imperial language and the language of power in a post-colonial state. These reflections led me to make a firm decision: I resolved never to write in English again.*

The Hybrid school is the more compromising lot. In his "The African Writer and the Language", Achebe argues that although English was imposed by colonialism, it should be altered for the betterment of the African nation. He describes his style as:

...that of adopting English language to carry the weight of my African Experience...a new English still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surrounding (Achebe, 1975).

Soyinka also stresses that "when we borrow an alien language to sculpt or paint... we must stress such a language, stretch it, fragment and reassemble it with no apology..." (Soyinka, 1988).

Francis Imbuga's play, "The Burning of Rags," is written in English but draws inspiration from the Hybrid school of thought. The language chosen for the play is specifically tailored to its intended audience. It is skillfully utilized in a manner that allows both the emerging and modern segments of society to connect with the characters while still maintaining a connection with the older generation. This paper highlights that the language used in the play effectively serves the purpose of emphasizing the significance of the personalities, situations, and ideas presented within the narrative.

Act One, Scene One opens with an apparition from Matilda, Denis' late wife.

Matilda: ...An audience that looks up at me and says, 'hey, isn't she somebody's daughter! My! Doesn't she deserve to be married to some body's son".

The phrase "hold your tongue you daughter of somebody" in Francis Imbuga's play, "The Burning of Rags," appears to be a transliteration of an African expression, deviating from the conventional English language usage. This particular line exemplifies the interplay between the native language and English within the play. The inclusion of the term "somebody" serves as a linguistic marker, symbolizing the fusion of native language elements with English.

The playwright gets on with the suspense and tension from the first Act; it seems quite perplexing in the first scene with Matilda and Agala, until it is revealed that it is her ghost that comes to haunt him. Matilda in her monologue, says that

Matilda: "Unfortunately, it has been all hell where I have come from. There every member of the audience comes to the theatre with a knife.... Then they examine each other's' inside carefully, organ by organ.... With their knives, they open me up and look inside, and they see my past, all my hidden past, in one corner of heart".

Until the revelation of her ghostly nature, the speech in question maintains an ambiguous and metaphorical quality. It references the world beyond while still employing the term "hell." This can be attributed to the African ideology rooted in ancestral perspectives. In Western beliefs, the unknown realm is often characterized by heaven and hell. However, in African religions, life after death is lived within the community of ancestors. The workings of this community remain mysterious, but a similarity to Western ideology lies in the notion that one must give an account of their earthly existence. The author's use of "hell" aims to bridge these two perspectives together. Matilda's description of the examination process as a dissection of two parts

reflects the concept of Judgment Day, which spans across both cultures.

The play also showcases other African expressions, highlighting the linguistic gap between the older and modern generations. Characters such as Agala, Elima, and Babu represent the older generation, while Denis, Hilda, Henrics, and Dr. Agbale represent the modern or new generation. The language used by the older generation exhibits minimal Western influences. For example, Agala tells Bandi, "Make your legs bring you back here" (1:2). Imbuga utilizes language to emphasize the generational divide between the traditional and contemporary ways of life.

The humorous use of language is seen when Babu lists the name of Jesus disciples and even mixes them up.

Babu: ...It is a pity that that son of God is not here to make me a discipline like Petero, Nicodemo, Yohana, Anania...Anania was one of them was he not? Elima: No he was not. And that is why Jesus wouldn't dream of making you a disciple (1:2:13).

Babu, a character in the play, demonstrates a mix-up of names from the Gospel, referring to Petero instead of Peter, Nicodemo instead of Nicodemus, Yohana instead of John, and Anania instead of Ananias. This highlights that the older generation, despite their perceived simplicity, have embraced Christianity and integrated it into their own comprehension. Their assimilation of the faith reflects a blending that aligns with their unique understanding and cultural context. During the serving of the native beer, Agala suggests to Babu that they should "wet their throats first," which can be roughly translated into English as "let us quench our thirst." However, Babu, in order to express his joy, employs a traditional expression infused with superstition, symbolizing abundance and fertility.

On my way here, two big flies landed on my hand, right here. When I saw the play father and mother, I knew that this day would be fruitful.

In the opening scene of the book, Agala and Babu engage in a contemplation regarding the perceived threat to their culture posed by individuals like Denis. Agala, in particular, experiences deep distress due to this situation, but what troubles him even more is the realization that his own son is among the group of young people involved in this cultural shift.

Agala: How I wish our sons were like our grandfathers! Those were men. They could beat their wives at night and the house would be full of laughter before the next cockcrows’.

Agala's statement does not insinuate that men in the present era engage in domestic violence and then reconcile before morning. Instead, Agala highlights a significant conflict within the play. He recognizes that the culture conflict would be less pronounced if men could learn to find a balance, embracing both aspects of their lives without neglecting either. The key lies in achieving harmony and coexistence between different cultural elements.

The modern or new generation’s language use has more influence of the Western culture, and the playwright does not have to meander the language to make it sound rudimentary, rather there is sophistication in the diction of the modern users. Act One, Scene three opens with Hilda and Denis in Denis’ apartment. The light hearted squabbles that exist between the two is different from that experienced between Agala and Elima.

This reflects the difference in culture, the modern culture can accommodate women being forceful and strong willed in their speech, because Denis tolerates it rather than Agala who blatantly shuts Elima down. Women are given a lease in the modern side of Denis to be expressive. Hilda: I mean aren’t we all servants? Wake up first thing in the morning, prepare breakfast, wash utensils, clean the house, then the compound. Next, dash to the market because lunch time is approaching and there is nothing to cook. From the market, back to the kitchen....

Denis: Hold it! Hilda, I know what you are getting at. I also know that you are not as desperately bored as some other women of your position in this country. Why invent misery?

As the text progresses, we observe that Denis adopts the ideology of the older culture in order to dismiss Hilda's perspective. In doing so, he taps into the mentality of the older generation, enabling him to speak in a similar manner. This realization occurs when Denis recognizes that Hilda's past is just as complex and intertwined as his own.

Hilda: But you look upset. Surely, you should not be. I mean it is basically the same case as yours.

Denis: Who says it is? You are a woman; I am a man. You have once been pregnant. I haven’t. Now do you still believe the two cases to be the same?

Hilda: But the basic facts are...

Denis: Basic facts! What do you know about basic facts? The trouble with you educated African women is that you listen to some Western intellectual feminist crap about the equality of sexes, and you think you have arrived. Well let me tell you here and now that you haven’t (2:2:63).

The play also incorporates numerous modern expressions employed by the characters depicted as modern within the narrative. Words such as "ticket office," "train station," "university" (where Denis teaches), and "oven" are utilized to accentuate the contemporary setting and atmosphere of the play. These terms serve to highlight the presence of modern elements within the storyline.

In Act One, Scene Two, during the meeting of the three friends, Denis, Agbala, and Henrics, their conversations brim with expressions that convey their lighthearted mood, similar to the earlier scene involving Agala and Babu. Denis describes politics as "a game of chameleons," and later, when Henrics dismisses the feminist movements of Hilda and other women as "mushroom," Denis responds by saying, "that is my kind of mushroom." The phrase "mushroom growth" is commonly used in the English language to depict rapid and sudden growth. Henrics uses it to express his view that feminist movements are sprouting rapidly everywhere.

In addition to highlighting the generational differences, the play effectively utilizes language to characterize its characters. Through their use of language, the characters are appropriately positioned along the spectrum of old and modern. It is worth noting that all the modern characters bear English names such as Denis, Hilda, and Henrics. Conversely, the first-generation characters possess native names like Agala, Elima, and Babu. However, Agbale, despite belonging to the modern group, bears a native name intentionally chosen by the author. This selection serves to illustrate Agbale's ability to successfully blend the cultures to suit himself and others, effectively bridging the gap between old and modern.

Hilda's use of language reflects her confidence and self-assuredness. As a modern individual, she embraces her identity and expresses herself boldly. She acknowledges that her divergent views may risk her alienation from traditional society, but she is aware that the modern society will always accept her. In contrast, Denis, a Professor of Culture, grapples with conflicting choices and finds himself torn. He lacks the ability to successfully merge the old and the new, often preaching one thing while practicing another. In Act One, Scene Three, he criticizes Hilda, saying, "you are not as original as I thought; I don't want to marry a synthetic woman." However, Hilda, being spirited and determined, refuses to accept the accusation silently. Later in the scene, she responds to Denis's remark in her own assertive way,

Hilda: That reminds me of what you treated me to on our first date: Blue Point Oysters with cocktail sauce, a large well done steak with an equally large splatter of French fries, tow pots of coffee, apple pie with ice cream, and an extra piece of mince pie for whoever finished their apple pie first. What were you trying to prove?

This aspect holds great significance within the play as it leaves the audience pondering over Denis's intentions and motives. The mentioned food items being foreign serve as a demonstration of Denis's exaggerated and passionate outburst, aimed at emphasizing his perception of being "modern" and "civilized." However, his hypocrisy becomes apparent as he willingly abandons his native culture

and only resorts to it when he believes it will serve his own interests.

Henrics, the Afro- American shows the influence of modern language through his use of language, his use of AAVE (African American Vernacular English).

Henrics: Oh cut that art for art sake stuff man. That ain't no way to celebrate a birthday, you know. It ain't no way to talk before the real goddam stuff is open....

At a later point in the play, Denis refers to Hilda as Cleopatra, symbolizing his perception of her. Cleopatra, an Egyptian Pharaoh, was renowned for utilizing her beauty and sexuality to attain and maintain power. By comparing Hilda to Cleopatra, Henrics implies that he sees her as a strong-willed and ruthless individual who will employ her feminine allure to manipulate others and achieve her objectives. Furthermore, it becomes evident later in the play that the recurrence of historical patterns influences Imbuga's choice of this expression for Henrics' characterization of Hilda.

### III. USE OF JOURNEY MOTIF

Francis Imbuga skillfully employs language in *The Return of Mgofu* to achieve a harmonious blend between the old and modern generations. The author's voice emerges as he emphasizes the importance of maintaining a connection to traditional customs and values, even amidst the influence of modern and Western cultures. Imbuga cautions against superficial adherence to traditions and advocates for compromise before it becomes too late. The play's plot takes the form of a journey, delving into past acts of violence and their impact on present society, while also exploring the implications for the future. Memory plays a significant role in evaluating society against its own values. Imbuga employs experimental forms and incorporates a diverse cast of characters, including humans, beings with human-like qualities, spirits, and ancestors. Thori and Thoriwa, a couple who were victims of genocide, return from the realm of the dead as protagonists to recount the injustices they witnessed. Sent by the ancestors, these spirits serve as messengers,

reminding the living of the horrifying stories from the past to prevent their recurrence. This portrayal affirms the moral principle rooted in African traditional beliefs, where ancestors are regarded as guardians of community history and values. Thoriwa emphasizes that as spirits, they cannot forget the past, unlike human beings.

At another level, the play utilizes the motif of a journey to evoke remembrance of the past, which is reflected in the names of certain characters. One such character is Mgofu, a Maragoli name that embodies qualities associated with African traditions, such as old age, wisdom, goodness, and virtues. Within the context of the play, Mgofu represents both an ideology and a character. Therefore, Mgofu can be seen as equivalent to Ubuntu, which is derived from a Xhosa proverb and, as Archbishop Desmond Tutu explains, encompasses the fundamental essence of human existence. The upcoming chapter will delve deeper into the exploration of this aspect.

Naming Mgofu's son, who was born in exile, after his father serves as a means of preserving and honoring Mgofu's memory. Mgofu, like his father, possesses the ability to foresee events and is a living embodiment of Mndika's important history. In the final scene of the play, Mgofu's return to Mndika symbolizes the reconciliation of the past and present. It signifies the coming together of historical legacy and current realities, highlighting the significance of acknowledging and embracing one's roots while moving forward.

Other names within the play, such as Kadesa's shrine of Katigali and Mgofu's daughter, Nora Ulivaho, carry the weight of Mndika's past. The name of Kadesa's shrine in exile, located in Nderema, serves as a poignant reminder of the violence that compelled the Mndikans to flee their homeland. It also holds the meaning of "farewell to ogres," referencing the Mndikans' loss of humanity as they tragically burned innocent children, women, and men seeking refuge within the shrine. Additionally, the shrine being referred to as the shrine of peace serves as a lasting reminder to the Mndikan refugees of the genocide committed by their ancestors in their native land.

Nora Ulivaho, the daughter of Mgofu the second, holds a significant position in the play as she embodies its three-fold structure. Firstly, she represents the third generation that has emerged since the last period of exile. Furthermore, her first name connects her to the past as it is derived from her grandmother, the wife of the Great Blind Seer. The story of the older Nora, particularly how she was saved by the Seer from the genocide and guided to safety in Nderema, has been repeatedly recounted in Mndika. Secondly, Nora accompanies her father on the symbolic journey of return to Mndika. Lastly, her second name, Ulivaho, meaning "The one who will be there," signifies her role in shaping the future. Nora, in fact, outlives her aging father, and it is implied in the play's resolution that she is prepared to assume his mantle by expressing her commitment to returning to Mndika and potentially taking on a leadership role.

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Francis Imbuga's plays "The Burning of Rags" and "The Return of Mgofu" demonstrate the profound power of language in navigating cultural divides and generational gaps. Through his deft manipulation of linguistic elements, Imbuga crafts a rich tapestry that weaves together the complexities of tradition and modernity, inviting readers to confront the intricate dynamics of cultural preservation and evolution.

Imbuga's hybrid approach to language, blending English with native African expressions, serves as a linguistic bridge, facilitating dialogue between the old and the new. The deliberate language choices not only characterize the protagonists but also position them along the spectrum of traditional and contemporary values, underscoring the generational divide that permeates the narratives.

Moreover, Imbuga's employment of symbolic names and the journey motif reinforces the overarching themes of reconciliation, remembrance, and the imperative to honor cultural roots while embracing progress. Characters like Mgofu and Nora Ulivaho embody the synthesis of past and future, their names carrying the weight of historical legacy and the promise of a new dawn.

Ultimately, Imbuga's masterful linguistic techniques transcend the confines of the plays, offering a profound commentary on the complexities of cultural identity in an ever-changing world. Through his words, he advocates for a harmonious coexistence that respects the essence of traditional values while acknowledging the inevitability of change, reminding us that language serves as a powerful catalyst for understanding, empathy, and the preservation of cultural richness amidst the tides of modernity.

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