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INTERVIEW

Khadija A. Bajaber on the inheritance of story-telling, translating culture in fiction, and how reading impacts writing

by Wambui Waldhauser

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Khadija Abdalla Bajaber is a Kenyan writer and the author of *The House of Rust* which won the inaugural Graywolf Press Africa Prize and The Ursula K. Le Guin Prize for Fiction. She has published poetry and short fiction in various literary magazines. You can find her work at *Lolwe, A Long House, Down River Road* and *Enkare Review* among others. She has also held various editing roles across several journals. In this conversation, she shares her thoughts on reading and writing, culture, poetry and prose, and what her intention was in writing *The House of Rust.*

Wambui Waldhauser: Was there something in your family, or generally growing up, that set you on the path to becoming a storyteller and writer?

Khadija Abdalla Bajaber: My mum is one of my biggest supporters. My whole family is. There have always been storytellers among them. My grandmother and some of my aunts used to be wedding singers/poets, although not professionally. They might not have understood the work creatively, but they've always understood that there is a need for creative expression. They enjoyed stories and when they saw that I wrote, they wanted to support that.

Wambui: Your prose is very much like lyrical poetry. How much time do you spend with poetry in comparison to prose?

Khadija: When I was younger, I used to live in the library. I was constantly being exposed to reading. Back then it was both poetry and prose. For the past few years, I read a book or two a month, deliberately. I read fiction and non-fiction and what I have categorized as short reading – poetry and short stories. When I'm writing something, I'm not reading about it at the same time, unless I'm approaching it in terms of studying it.

Wambui: Is that a conscious decision, to avoid being influenced by whatever you are reading?

Khadija: At first, I tried not to read at all but that's boring. You want your mind to be awake. And there are all sorts of stories you know like movies, TV shows, songs, sports, whatever it is. And as much as I say that I do not want to be influenced, you can't not be moved in some way. Depending on the kind of tone that I'm trying to go for, and the kind of thing I'm trying to write, I need to stay away from things that can bewitch me. I do not necessarily feel that it’s dangerous to be influenced, to stay away from anything that is similar to what I'm writing. It is good for me to have a period of consuming information.

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It is hard for me to talk about inspiration. Especially when you're someone writing from Kenya or from a part of the world whose fiction is not necessarily mainstream. People will ask, what are your influences? And words like influence and inspiration are very difficult because I don't look at it that way. You are not influenced by one thing.

It's not that I do not read. If something is in any way thematically close to what I'm writing or similar, I will not read it. But then you have other writers who do that, and it really adds to their work. And also, actually leads to a more profound work because they're not just writing in an echo chamber, they're actively interacting in conversation with these ideas constantly presented in other books, which obviously amplifies and makes their work better and their ideas realized because they're interacting with that subject.

Khadija Abdalla Bajaber © Camfoto Studio

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I'm conscious of creating space and distance between what I read and when I'm writing. I love short stories. I can see tricks, like performing something on a stage. You're noticing things in their performance and the things that work really well. I study short fiction and I'm not studying to emulate; I'm studying masters at work basically.

Wambui: I'm going to pivot a little. I realize you have talked about this probably tens of times, and so I do not want to bore you. What is your favorite subject to talk about regarding *The House of Rust*?

Khadija: I was telling my mom that as a writer, you write something and the process until the book is read is a very long one. It goes through editing, goes through marketing. It takes years. Whatever emotional or internal logic that you are having at that point in time, it is not necessarily accessible to you later. It doesn't mean that your conviction writing those scenes or the feelings behind those scenes weren't strong enough but I'm literally a different person right now. Whoever wrote that book doesn't live here anymore. I'm still very grateful obviously. And I still know very clearly what my intention was.

Wambui: What was your intention? Can you remember what you wanted *The House of Rust* to feel like?

Khadija: Yes, I remember. I don't know how to explain it. I can still feel it in my chest. It sounds like something big happening and… simply feeling wonder. I wanted the feeling that I had when things were too fantastic to be believed and yet they were real, and not being necessarily shrunk by that but being able to experience that moment of extreme wonder, but also what it is like to experience true terror. And the kind of terror that doesn't come through

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monsters, but by losing your entire self or realizing that you have never had a ‘self’. And ultimately, I don't know if you ever watched Studio Ghibli movies, they are much like children’s animated movies. Some of them are not necessarily disturbing, but jolting in terms of, they can be dark and most of the time protagonists can be children. They create these worlds where no one explains to you, that in this world there are monsters and these are the rules. The protagonists, mostly kids, simply get caught up in extraordinary circumstances and yet at the same time, normal life is still happening around them. I'm not inspired by those movies in this direct way. But they are an example of how the extraordinary is not something that alienates one from the ordinary or the real.

Wambui: Magical realism. Is that what you're going for?

Khadija: Not necessarily. I did a lot of reading growing up and I still try to read now and I write of course, but I don't have the brain of someone who knows how to communicate ideas about writing and craft. Doing that sounds grander than myself. I haven't given my work that kind of grace myself, in order to sit down and say, this is what I think about craft. I love listening and trying to learn, but I also know that it's not necessarily important to me. Sometimes it feels more complicated than it necessarily needs to be. There is so much stuff that has happened that whatever ideas I had; I don't know what they were in terms of defining them academically. I don't know what came first or what came after.

I knew very clearly, I wanted a fairy tale structure in approaching the story, in terms of genre or structure. A fairy tale structure was important in order to write and actually finish the story. Was this magical realism? I meet writers who are so in touch with what they're trying to do and how they want what they're doing to be understood. And I really learn a lot from those conversations. Genre hasn't been that important to me unless I'm directly approaching it as genre.

This is flavor, this is magical realism flavor. Whatever has formed that vibe, whatever instruments and tools have been used to create that vibe, you don't notice the tools. You feel the vibe and then realize the tools.

Wambui: I have to talk to you about language. There is such intricate beauty in the prose in *The House of Rust.* Very distinctive and reminiscent of Swahili poetry, the Mashairi. Would you like to comment about culture, and especially Swahili culture, and how that might have influenced your writing?

Khadija: For me the Kiswahili that I learned was the one I know at home, which is not Kiswahili I can write in. You have to lock me in before I will show you anything I've written in Kiswahili.

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Wambui: I would love to see anything you write in Kiswahili.

Khadija: No, you would not. Because you'd be like – aren't these supposed to be three different words? To me Kiswahili is a very beautiful language. You know, we can talk about decolonizing English and whatever. I do not believe you need to decolonize English, but you can decolonize it. And by decolonizing it we can disrespect it – break the rules – and pretend that we wanted it to sound as if it is ok. Kiswahili on the other hand is a language that I know, and I have to respect. I can not use it or write it however I want. I cannot allow how I use the language, or how I write in it to be some experiment. I've always appreciated Kiswahili and the way that it is spoken. It is so delicious. People will be gossiping, and someone will be awful, but the way that they're able to bring people to them, there is charisma, it is innate.

Kiswahili is also a language of exaggerations. A phrase like *kaburi inakataa maiti* – have you ever seen the grave reject the dead? – as in basically, over exaggerations. Layers upon layers upon layers.

Wambui: How is it for you, distilling that into your writing in a different language, have you felt space between that culture and poetry, and your writing?

Khadija: Definitely. Especially when you're doing research on your own people drawing your history. You have to think of how certain things are talked about, or not talked about. There are similarities in Yemeni, Arabic, Kiswahili. I'm more comfortable with Kiswahili than anything else, apart from English of course. The common denominator and the thing that has constantly stood out to me, was a poet culture, and what kind of place poetry holds in all these societies.



‘The House of Rust’ by Khadija Abdalla Bajaber

At least throughout time, and maybe more right now, the poet was never despised in Swahili culture or in Yemeni culture. The poet is not simply a good person writing poetry by themselves. The poet is an integral feature of a community. He serves as the mouthpiece of the community, and the rhetoric – that flowery, exaggerated speech – is respected, because people listen and respect the art.

These are people who know how to diffuse conflict and at the same time, entertain their people. Poetry and leaning into the poetry means that a certain musicality is going to be at test. Especially when you're doing that without restraint, writing prose. I guess the link in all

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these cultures is poetry. The challenge is to put that poetry into writing without necessarily thinking about direct translation, especially trying to get the intonations. When you look at Kiswahili, the definitions of certain words/phrases. For example, it's not just 'he was sad', because how do you translate something like *kuwa na roho baridi* in English? You would be translating, 'oh, she has a cold heart'. But that doesn't mean the same thing as *kuwa na roho baridi*.

Trying to explain that kind of language potency is not something I wanted to do. And it is not that I wanted it to be revolutionary. Writing a story is supposed to be uncovering emotional truths and not treating the human experience like anthropology.

Wambui: The use of Swahili was also very unapologetic in *The House of Rust*, without it being italicized and without necessarily adding meaning to it. Was that a challenge for you, did you get push-back from editors or publishers?

Khadija: Alhamdulillah, I was very lucky with Graywolf Press because they didn't ask me for footnotes. They didn't ask me for italics. The thing is even as a Kenyan, you don't know everything Kenyan. There are terminologies in that book that some Kenyans might have never heard of before. If I introduce concepts and continue explaining them to the reader, the reader might feel excluded by that. Just like if I stopped every time to explain things to you as a guest, you are going to feel like an outsider, constantly reminded of it.

This is where a childlike protagonist is useful in that, you have a character that is also being introduced to certain things in a culture or community. As a reader you are learning through them by exposition.

Wambui: To conclude, any next projects you would like to share?

Khadija: Right now, I have two projects I'm working on. One is a more serious project, not that other projects aren't serious, but this one is complicated. It deals with untrustworthy narrators. And it's more psychological. The other is a project much like *The House of Rust*. It centers Kenyan culture and our funny sensibilities.

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