Profile

FEMRITE and the Politics of Literature in Uganda

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Introduction

To talk about FEMRITE is to talk about Uganda's literary scene, about Ugandan politics, and especially about the connections between women, politics and writing in Uganda. FEMRITE was born in 1996 out of a dream, an idea hatched by a handful of women who had either already published, or were struggling to write and publish. The dream these women had was to see more Ugandan creative women writers in print, and especially to see more evidence in print of women's visions of post-colonial freedom. At the time, there were hardly any support systems for writers, either women or men, and the entire book industry was in need of revitalisation. There was only one indigenous mainstream publishing house in the country - Fountain Publishers.

For those who lived in Uganda during the sixties and early seventies, this scenario was shocking; this period had witnessed enormous literary output, and during that time, tremendous enthusiasm had been generated around literary activity.

But the vibrant literary activity of the time was driven by men, and revolved around men's writing. What we see in Uganda's literary history is a pattern in which, during the first years after independence, the dominance of men's voices went unchallenged. But since the late 1990s, with the emergence of new public debates and political struggles, women's voices have become increasingly prominent. Today, women are playing an important role in creating publishing platforms, developing different literary perspectives and generally challenging the male dominance associated with literary activity in the sixties.

The Sixties and the Rise of a (Male) Literary Tradition

One of the most significant indicators of Uganda's strong literary culture was Transition magazine, launched at Makerere University in 1961. The magazine was founded against the backdrop of the enormous optimism in African countries emerging from centuries of colonialism. It quickly established itself as a leading forum for intellectual debate and a first-class literary journal, and it published work by writers throughout the continent.

In the years immediately after Ugandan independence, Makerere University was a focal point for the literary activity that was central to African nationalist culture. Some of the most important writers of today, including Nuruddin Farrah, Ali Mazrui, David Rubadiri, Okello Oculi, Ngugi wa' Thiongo, John Ruganda and Peter Nazareth, were all at Makerere University at one point in their writing and academic careers.

The University's commitment to publicising African writing was reflected in a conference on "African Writers of English Expression", which was convened in 1962 and attended by Africa's foremost literary figures of the time: Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ama Ata Aidoo, Efua Sutherland, Ngugi wa' Thiongo, Es'kia Mphahlele and Christopher Okigbo, to mention but a few. This conference preceded the third triennial conference of the Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies (ACLALS), which took place at Makerere in the early seventies. Uganda thus became the first African country to host such a large gathering of scholars, teachers and writers of Commonwealth literature.

The power of writers' works often speaks volumes about the climate in which their imaginative vision is able to take root and flourish. One example of a powerful poetic voice that surfaced in Uganda during the sixties was Okot p'Bitek. The 1966 publication of his

cultural clarion call, "Song of Lawino", launched Ugandan literature on the world literary stage.

The optimism and literary growth of the first decade of independence was steadily undermined by a developing authoritarianism in Ugandan politics: the stifling of public debate, the censoring of writers' works and a regime that clamped down on all forms of freedom of expression. An obvious indication of this was the jailing of Rajat Neogy, the writer who had launched Transition, on a charge of sedition after the magazine criticised Milton Obote's proposed constitutional reforms. By 1969, one of Africa's most prolific creative writers, the essayist and poet Taban lo Liyong, declared in his book of essays, The Last Word, that Uganda had turned into a literary desert.

His comments were made in the context of the corrupt and repressive government of Milton Obote during the late sixties. In light of this situation, writers such as John Nagenda, Austin Bukenya, Okello Oculi and Okot p'Bitek left the country, with many intending to return. But the reign of terror by Idi Amin that followed shattered their hopes for a free and supportive political climate for their writing. During the years of Idi Amin's regime (1970 to 1979), certain writers who were courageous enough to criticise his brutal regime were killed; some fled to neighbouring Kenya. Many of those who remained simply kept quiet, while multinational publishing houses closed shop and retreated back home. The cultural silence continued when Obote became president in 1985 and resumed his strategy of corrupt patronage politics. For almost two decades, Uganda experienced a rapid cultural decline that testified to a political climate of fear, censorship and political repression. While the country had hosted the energetic cultural debate and literary creativity of the immediate post-independence period, the seventies and eighties were a period of stark witness to the effects of authoritarian and repressive post-colonial politics.

But it could be argued that the literary climate of the sixties, although dynamic, was itself a reflection of silencing and exclusion in Uganda's post-independence literary culture. While the period ushered in important platforms for literary expression, and while many writers found support at Makerere University, the focus of literary activity remained masculine. Transition magazine published mainly male writers, and very few women writers attended the University's important events on African writing. Overall, the literary tradition that Uganda played such an important part in shaping in the sixties reflected the gender hierarchy. On one hand, men's perspectives and goals dominated that tradition. On the other hand, women's voices were suppressed, both as a result of the dearth of women writers, and because of assumptions that women's literary voices were simply not important.

FEMRITE in the Nineties: Women's Literary Struggle for Voice

In contrast to the repressive seventies and eighties, the nineties dawned with more promise. After a five-year guerrilla war, Yoweri Museveni seized power in 1986, overthrowing the dictatorial regime of Milton Obote. This heralded a period of relative peace and stability in the country, with writers starting to pen their concerns without the fear of risking a bullet to their heads. Some of the multinational publishing houses even began returning. FEMRITE, which was established in 1996, therefore emerged in the context of increased public debate in civil society, and particularly the growth of the women's movement, the teaching of Gender and Women's Studies at Makerere University, and the inclusion of women's and gender issues in politics, policymaking and the work of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

The first FEMRITE meeting took place in the office of Mary Karooro Okurut, a lecturer in the Literature Department. She had contacted Ugandan women who had either already published, or were struggling to publish. The founders included Mary Okurut (who had

published two books), Rose Rwakasisi, Lillian Tindyebwa (both of whom had also published), Hope Keshubi, Ayeta Wangusa, Susan Kiguli and myself, all of whom were struggling to find publishers.

When FEMRITE was launched, the legacy of Uganda's cultural silence continued to hang heavily over our heads. Of still greater concern to us was that even when Uganda was producing phenomenal works of literature and hosting important literary events in the sixties and seventies, women's voices were clearly missing. As far as we could establish, only four women had managed to publish their creative works in that period. What was happening to the other women? We were determined to turn Uganda's literary desert into a haven for women's voices, and realised that the only way we could achieve this was by establishing an outfit, managed by women, which would address some of the problems that had hitherto hindered the efforts and potential of Ugandan women writers.

Around that time, I had just published my first novel, *The First Daughter*, after many years of struggle. Because the publisher could not afford to take the risk of investing in fiction, I had to raise half the money required to publish the manuscript, and went from one NGO to another in search of funding for almost three years. Finally, a Dutch organisation, which gave financial support to innovative projects by women, showed some interest. But my "project" did not quite fit their criteria for support. They sponsored projects such as turkey-rearing, bricklaying and other practical enterprises. It took some effort to persuade them to assist me, but I eventually received money for my "project", and the book was published in 1996.

Many other women who joined FEMRITE had similar struggles. Some of them had been writing for a long time, but lacked the courage to present their manuscripts to publishing houses dominated by men. Some had been courageous enough to present their work, but as happened in my case, publishers were reluctant to take risks with fiction, especially in the case of first-time writers. Other women had many stories to tell, but lacked the motivation, space, facilities, encouragement and inspiration to start writing. Besides, they did not know if their stories were "good enough" to be written down, let alone published. Another category included women who had already written and published, but did not feel as though they were "writers". The outside world did not know them as writers, and they were pursuing so many domestic and other work activities, that writing became a hard-won luxury.

Our goal as an organisation was to create support systems that would address the needs and hopes of all these categories of women. But since our dream was to see more women in print, we decided to plunge into the publishing world first. Three of our members had manuscripts which were ready for publication. We had little experience and formal training in dealing with the demands of typing up manuscripts, editing, proof-reading, evaluating, cover designing, printing, marketing and distributing. Our members, who by this time amounted to fifteen in total, all assisted on a voluntary basis, and often worked day and night.

We also needed money to print the manuscripts. Our core donors were supporting only two of our projects - publishing two social magazines and keeping the office running. Following countless trips to other funding agencies, the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Kampala stepped in to meet our need. FEMRITE Publications Limited, the publishing arm of FEMRITE, came into being in 1998, and with it, the publication of our first batch of four titles: two novels, one poetry collection and one short story anthology.

Our excitement was tremendous. I remember when the printers called to say that we should collect our books from the factory (8 000 copies in all), I exclaimed, "But we have nowhere to store them!" At the time, we had only a one-roomed office, which was shared by three staff members. The only way to solve the storage problem was to sell the books as quickly as

possible. We drew up a plan of how we would go about this: first, all the authors had to take at least a hundred copies to sell to their friends, family and colleagues at work. Then we would hawk them from office to office, then storm all bookshops, foreign missions and schools, and organise public readings. We also pressurised the media to publicise the books, until people started screaming that they were tired of reading about our authors in the newspapers, hearing their voices on radio and seeing their faces on television. "Buy the books", we would answer, "then you won't have to see them again."

In 1999, encouraged by the success of our first publications, we became more ambitious and published five more titles: four novels and one poetry collection. By then, we had established links with international markets through the African Books Collective. I cannot forget the criticisms that came along with this success. We were accused of publishing anything, as long as it was written by a woman; it was alleged that we were compromising quality in order to justify the donors' cheques. These criticisms had no foundation. The women writers we published were among the best and most prolific in the country. Moreover, FEMRITE has a quality control mechanism requiring that manuscripts be sent out for evaluation by independent evaluators. Three of our titles have won national awards, most have received international recognition, and our authors have represented the country at many international forums. Two of our titles are taught at Makerere University as recommended texts, and one is taught in two universities in the US. All twelve of the titles we have published have been reprinted, some more than once.

In focusing our efforts on potential women writers who have been prevented from writing for various reasons, over the years we have been developing support systems to address their needs. Our FEMRITE office is more of a resource centre and meeting space than a business site. We offer women the use of computers and a small library where they are able to read, write, and also dream and talk about the isolating and often frustrating exercise of writing.

In a bid to promote our publications and their authors, and to enhance the profile of the Association, we engage in numerous networking activities, such as organising public readings, visiting schools and talking to students about the importance of reading, and participating in national and international book events. One of our biggest events is an annual literary week where we invite internationally acclaimed writers to offer inspirational talks. In 2000, our guest was the Ghanaian writer and professor of literature, Ama Ata Aidoo. During this week, we organise events that promote women writers, such as radio and television talks, a book exhibition of all books written by Ugandan women, writing workshops, book launches and many other activities.
As a literary association committed to women's freedom of expression, we have realised that women often refrain from telling the stories in their hearts. Many women think of themselves as wives, mothers or daughters, and when they write, they concentrate on the feelings and reactions of others, rather than their own. Very often, anxiety and fear about how a story will be perceived precedes the need to tell a good story. I remember an obvious example of this. One of our members had written an extremely evocative story using the first-person narrative mode. When her husband read it, he objected strongly to the use of the first person (in lines such as "I was raped on my wedding night."). "People will think it is you, my wife," he argued. She ended up rewriting it in another mode, and this weakened the impact of her story.

The training workshops we have embarked on address such problems. They help women writers to shed inhibitions imposed by society as well as ingrained cultural beliefs, and to think about themselves. The workshops also help women to understand what it means to be a writer, and what responsibilities and challenges one needs to shoulder once one decides to write.

We still want to see more writing by women in print. Most of the time, our efforts are hindered by lack of facilities and resources. For example, we would love to establish a permanent and well-equipped resource centre for our writers, instead of using the premises where the secretariat is housed. In this way, we would create the necessary supportive context for encouraging the energies of women writers who confront so many obstacles and challenges in the wider world. We would like to have more computers and a vehicle to market and distribute our publications. But we have made an important start, and we are determined to continue our struggle.

A founder member of FEMRITE, Goretti Kyomuhendo, published her first novel, The First Daughter, in 1996. She has also published a children's book, Different Worlds (1998), short stories and a second novel, Secrets No More (1999). She is currently the coordinator of FEMRITE.