

“Those who travel, see”: A critical reflection on visibility and the teleological ambiguity of FEMRITE by Ted-Allan Ssekimpi

Abstract

Through hosting and facilitating writing workshops which work to produce the publication of fictional and non-fictional books, FEMRITE has, since its inauguration in 1996, been behind the emergence of women’s literature in Uganda in recent years. At the core of FEMRITE’s socio-literary project is the —the promotion of [women’s] literature and literacy inside Uganda rather than in any other African country³. However, FEMRITE has also become synonymous with household names in Ugandan literature such as Doreen Baingana, Monica Arac de Nyeko, Beatrice Lamwaka and others who have won globally recognized literary prizes. While several of these writers may not have learned their trade exclusively through FEMRITE, it has nonetheless become a signpost that directs the exchange of various forms of capital – symbolic, social, cultural, and economic – in the global and local literary market. It is at this juncture, the site of contested ‘regimes of value’, between FEMRITE’s role in promoting women’s literature in Uganda and how it functions as a sign of symbolic consecration in the global literary sphere, that FEMRITE’s teleological ambiguity begins to surface. This paper seeks, through metacritical analysis, to elucidate on the doubly nature of FEMRITE and other literary NGOs with regards to their purported aims of creating new avenues for local literary production while engendering new globally recognized literary traditions and forms - and thus a new canon’.

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To begin, according to Pierre Bourdieu, "the only legitimate accumulation, [...] consists in making a name for oneself, a name that is known and recognized, the capital of consecration - implying a power to consecrate objects (this is the effect of a signature or trademark) or people (by publication, exhibition, etc.), and hence of giving them value, and of making profits from this operation." Consecration and who has the power to consecrate the artist are vital in understanding who ultimately produces the work. Here Bourdieu postulates a new mode of production that is specific to the field of cultural and literary production - "a new definition of art"². Hereby, an artist doesn't merely enter the field and gain their audience by virtue of their own luck. It is, as he has gone to prove, the work of

¹ Strauhs, Doreen. *African literary NGOs: power, politics, and participation*. Springer, 2013.

² Bourdieu, Pierre. *The rules of art: Genesis and structure of the literary field*. Stanford University Press, 1996

the field that produces positions that new entrants come to occupy. Within their occupation of these positions, symbolic capital is accrued by way of consecration. Thus, what happens to a work of art once it enters the field is a process of remaking. It is not restricted to a single entity that holds all value relating to it³. It is instead “made hundreds of times, thousands of times, by all those who have an interest in it, who find a material or symbolic profit in reading it, classifying it, decoding it, commenting on it, reproducing it, criticizing it, combating it, knowing it, possessing it.” What Bourdieu ultimately aims to demonstrate here is that this labour should not go unaccounted for because “the work of material fabrication is nothing without the labour of production of the value of the fabricated object.”⁴

Doseline Kiguru in her essay *Literary Writers Organisations and Canon Formation* notes that the circulation of value in African novels is located in their ties to prizewinning organizations and literary organisations. Award bodies such as the Caine Prize and the Commonwealth Prize ensure that they oversee a significant amount of the production process, involving themselves in “the pre-writing process to writing, publishing, awarding and post-award sales”⁵. Writers benefit from these award bodies as they grant them mobility to circulate within the global literary market, a benefit that is a consequence of the “value conferred through the award”⁶. Both the Caine and Commonwealth Prize have been instrumental in changing and shaping the African literary scene, with their most recognisable contribution being the rising popularity of the short story form. Moreover, these awards have provided a platform for young,

³ The discourse on the work is not a simple side-effect, designed to encourage its apprehension and appreciation, but a moment which is part of the production of the work, of its meaning and its value.”

⁴ Ibid., 172

⁵ Doseline Kiguru (2016) *Literary Prizes, Writers’ Organisations and Canon Formation in Africa*, *African Studies*, 75:2, 205

⁶ Ibid., 203

undiscovered talent and have thus “set a trend”⁷ whereby young writers depend on these awards to leapfrog their careers. The charm of prize money for the winner is often equally as valuable to the ‘exposure’ and literary mobility that the award provides – often the catalyst for young writers to move from short stories to novels, local to global, independent to contracted.

The unequal distribution of cultural and economic capital has led to misrepresentations, lack of access, and a miniscule presence of African literature in the canon. Therefore, it has been the work of literary organisations such as *FEMRITE*, *writivism*, *Kwani?* and others to remedy this unequal playing field by offering workshops, publishing and networking with major industry players (such as publishers, and award bodies) to writers who may not have access to economic and cultural capital needed. These literary organisations form part of the cultural capital accrued by these award bodies. Their affiliation has ensured “that international prizes have filtered through to the production level”⁸ as the award bodies act as ‘producers of value’ usually deflecting from the quality of the writer’s text. Kiguru, citing Marx, mentions that the text as a commodity with a ‘perceived value’ results to fetishism. The value of the text is painted over by the value that the award has bestowed upon it. In other words, its commodity value - a direct result of the award – is marketed, sold and circulated over and above its cultural value. Kiguru uses Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Jumping Monkey Hill* to explore the power and influence exerted by international award bodies on African literature. Adichie’s story illustrates “the unevenness of the distribution of economic and cultural capital and its effects on the literary text”⁹, more specifically, the African literary text. Kiguru notes that Adichie’s awareness of the “global positioning of postcolonial literature as well as the frameworks through which this literature is produced”¹⁰ also brings to

⁷ Ibid, 203

⁸ Ibid, 203

⁹ Doseline Kiguru (2016) Literary Prizes, Writers’ Organisations and Canon Formation in Africa, *African Studies*, 75:2, 205

¹⁰ Ibid, 206

mind Sarah Brouillette's notion of 'authorial self-consciousness' wherein postcolonial literature is dependent on this self-consciousness of its own production and circulation.

Kiguru calls for the involvement of international award bodies into the production and canonisation of African literature to be viewed in the lens of "cultural and economic value"¹¹ as cultural/literary value does not occur in isolation to political, economic, and social power. In other words, Kiguru notes that these awards and their writing programmes are "highly influential and dependent on the material conditions of the literatures production and consumption."¹² To elaborate on this, Kiguru turns to the influence of MFA creative writing programmes and qualifications, and the effect they have had in instilling cultural capital onto authors of African literature. Kiguru notes that there is a lack of such programmes in African universities and so it has been the task of local literary organisations to fill in that gap. They do this by providing the necessary cultural capital "to link writers to prize organisations and publishers and therefore to global visibility"¹³. It is to such an extent that creative writing programmes are co-run by award bodies and literary organisations. This collaboration is affirmed through the preponderance of awards being won by writers from these organisations. Kiguru concludes that this phenomenon "reflects the conscious effort to lend the cultural capital accumulated from the award bodies for the development of literary culture on the continent."¹⁴

In my own thesis I have looked at the life of two texts affiliated with FEMRITE that have both occurred two markedly different trajectories. Looking at Doreen Baingana's *Tropical Fish*, the Commonwealth Prize Winning novel and FEMRITE's 'true-life' testimonial collections, *Farming Ashes* and *Tears of Hope* my study sought to illustrate how Doreen Baingana's *Tropical Fish* had all the aesthetic criteria necessary to gain an audience outside of Uganda while, on

¹¹ Ibid, 206

¹² Ibid, 207

¹³ Ibid, 207

¹⁴ Ibid, 207

the other hand, *Farming Ashes* and *Tears of Hope* did not achieve global recognition. A handful of factors contributed to this. In the case FEMRITE's 'true life narratives': they were written by multiple authors; while falling into the category of humanitarian literature they did not conform to the traits of the genre; and perhaps the most important factor being that they were intended to be circulated within Uganda. Meanwhile, in the case of Doreen Baingana's *Tropical Fish* this was partly due to Baingana's social and cultural background – raised from a middle-class family; travelled and lived in the United States of America; received her tertiary education in United States of America. Furthermore, while her background influenced and informed *Tropical Fish*, it was the prestige of the Commonwealth Prize that eventually led to her consecration.

Regarding their aesthetic strategies, *Tropical Fish* presents a collection of short stories that chronicle the lives of the Mugisha sisters. The chronological order of the stories, traversing from childhood to adulthood, depict the coming-of-age of the Mugisha sisters. Moreover, the interconnectedness of the short stories gives the impression that *Tropical Fish* can "sometimes be read as a fragmented novel"¹⁵. Set in Entebbe, a small town just outside Kampala, *Tropical Fish* is notable for its 'travelling', that is, for the disparate locations, spatial and temporal, that connect all the sisters to its overarching premise as embodied in the Kinyankore proverb Baingana includes in the beginning of the book, "those who travel, see"¹⁶. As this proverb suggests: the traveller is the one who sees, an idea that permeates throughout the book and is evinced in the multiple perspectives, pertaining to age and place, which the short stories depict.

¹⁵ Spencer, Lynda Gichanda. "Writing women in Uganda and South Africa: emerging writers from post-repressive regimes." PhD diss., Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University, 2014

¹⁶ Baingana, Doreen. *Tropical Fish: Stories Out of Entebbe*. Cape Town: Oshun Books, 2005

Linda Gichanda Spencer notes that there is “a sense of discontinuity in *Tropical Fish* because each sister narrates a different story”¹⁷. These multiple perspectives are also carried over to the cover art whereby the edition of *Tropical Fish* published by Oshun Books contains three different covers, each cover representing each sister – thus, each perspective. Therefore, these strategies, literary and otherwise, form part of the self-awareness that is characteristic of the anthropological exotic¹⁸. In other words, in order to circumvent the reader, presumably located in the West, from accessing the texts ‘ethnographic’ data Baingana instead chooses to depict different and conflicting perspectives. This strategy prevents the same power relations seen in anthropological studies of Africa by the Imperial West to surface in *Tropical Fish*.

This strategy that is employed by FEMRITE resonates well with Graham Huggan’s anthropological and postcolonial exotic. Evident in *Tears of Hope* and *Farming Ashes* is the kind of ‘discursive conflict’ that places it within the postcolonial. They are at once texts that replicate Western discourses pertaining to humanitarianism while in the same instance, work to subvert these very discourses by changing the format and thus imbuing their narratives with an ‘ironic self-consciousness’. This ‘ironic self-consciousness’, “designed as much to challenge as to profit to consumer needs”¹⁹, exists in the texts’ humanitarianism and how it is used to lure the Western reader into worlds of its storytellers yet also severs the compunction of such a reader to act from their position of privilege. On the blurb of *Farming Ashes* the reader is given a sense of what to expect from the text. Expectation here is coded as similar to that of any literary text –

¹⁷ Spencer, Lynda Gichanda. "Writing women in Uganda and South Africa: emerging writers from post-repressive regimes." PhD diss., Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University, 2014.

¹⁸ Huggan, Graham. *The postcolonial exotic: Marketing the margins*. Routledge, 2002.

¹⁹ Huggan, Graham. *The postcolonial exotic: Marketing the margins*. Routledge, 2002

“cogent and explosive tales”²⁰— yet is also well aware that it is within the genre of texts that compel readers to act to change or better the situation of its protagonists: *Farming Ashes* offers cogent and explosive tales of the LRA exploits that are disturbing and baffling in the extreme and leave the reader asking the question: ‘Why?’ and longing for ‘the world of no war’, as one of the storytellers puts it.²¹

The ideal world that the reader in contact with humanitarian discourse would strive for is not made accessible to this reader. As the blurb notes this “longing for ‘the world of no war’”²² speaks to the world of the storyteller. The interjection made by the writer of the blurb ensures that as much as it’s the world of the storyteller that the reader would like to see come to reality, the process of making this world is a shared, collective process. It’s a process shared by the storyteller, the listener who transmitted it, and the reader who consumes it. However, given that *Farming Ashes* and *Tears of Hope* both subverted the ethnographic and anthropological tropes familiar with humanitarian literature (thus showcasing the tenants of the anthropological and postcolonial exotic), they never gained the kind of transnational visibility and prestige as Baingana’s *Tropical Fish*.

In summation, what my study aims to address was the popularity of *Tropical Fish* in contrast to that of FEMRITE’s *Farming Ashes* and *Tears of Hope*, texts that are virtually unknown outside of Uganda. While both texts share a handful of similar characteristics, thus dispelling Bourdieu’s notion of ‘pre-established forms’ as well as Huggan’s ‘aesthetic strategies’, my study argues that the trajectories of these texts in the global literary market have ultimately been determined by factors outside of the texts themselves. Furthermore, in doing so, this study hopes to elucidate the significance of the case of FEMRITE in troubling Bourdieu’s two modes of literary production (commercial, and ‘pure art’) due to its teleological ambiguity having produced prize-winning texts for global circulation as well as

²⁰ 20Barungi, Violet, and Hilda Twongyeirwe, eds. *Farming ashes: tales of agony and resilience*. African Books Collective, 2009.

²¹ *Ibid.*, backcover.

²² *Ibid.*

texts aimed exclusively at addressing socio-political issues specific to rural Ugandan women. The shortcomings of Bourdieu's theory of symbolic production in a postcolonial context are further corroborated by Sarah Brouillette. However, where this study differs from Brouillette is that it argues that FEMRITE, functioning as a publisher and a locus of symbolic and cultural capital, stands in place or in juxtaposition to the author's biographical information insofar as it works to market the author's identity as part of the political situation in Uganda for a global audience – while also signalling the author as part of Uganda's second literary generation and the implications it confers on style and content.

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