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Marguerite Crémoux Le Roux

“[Today] a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved.”

Virginia Woolf (2000 (1929): 51)

- 1 When you go to FEMRITE today, you have to take the busy Kira road in Kampala, Uganda's capital city, and stop in front of a big metallic green gate. On your first visit, you knock for ten minutes before someone comes and open the gate for you. You enter a small courtyard in which a small SUV is parked. Small stairs behind you take you into a house divided by a long corridor. On your left you have a bathroom, the kitchen area with a table, and the office of Hilda Twongyeirwe, FEMRITE's executive director. On the right you find two more offices: Ingrid's (an intern) and Joyce's (secretary to the Board). Finally, at the end of the corridor, there is the “research centre”: a room with bookshelves covering the walls, a noisy computer, and tables and chairs in the middle. The windows are open to create a thin draught. The day was warm and dry when I drove up the dusty road, opened the gate and walked up the stairs for the first time.
- 2 The first desire of FEMRITE's founder, Mary K. Okurut, who was then a lecturer at Makerere University, was not to establish a publishing house but to have women write and create. The name “FEMRITE” underlines this desire as it stands for “Females write.” According to Hilda Twongyeirwe (2006), in FEMRITE's collective book *In Their Own Words: The First Ten Years of FEMRITE*:

Mary's eyes danced with excitement as she addressed us, “We need a room of our own,” she said, “where we can fish out one another, encourage and help each other to shed our inhibitions and write. I know we shall make it. We need an organized women writers' group.” (Twongyeirwe 2006: 2)
- 3 “We need a room of our own”—“*our own*.” Okurut's words echo the lecture Virginia Woolf gave at Cambridge University in 1928 about “Women and Fiction” that she

turned into the famous essay *A Room of One's Own*. From the beginning of her essay, Woolf establishes that in order to be able to write, a woman needs two things: an income and a place of her own where she will not be disturbed when writing. Throughout her essay, Woolf examines the problems that this statement underlines and the “room” that is given (both physically and figuratively)—if at all—to women within the literary world. Her argument resolves around two main points as she analyses how women and men are treated differently regarding invention, arts and science throughout the centuries: she demonstrates how a minimal income and a room with intimacy are a necessity; and she insists on the weight of society’s *expectations* that would stop a girl from having the same *opportunities* as a boy.

Chastity had then, it has even now, a religious importance in a woman’s life, and has so wrapped itself round with nerves and instincts that to cut it free and bring it to the light of day demands courage of the rarest. (Woolf 2000 [1929]: 51.)

- 4 If a woman were to be alone, it would undermine her “chastity” and she would appear as a depraved woman. Therefore, in order to become a writer, a woman—still in 1928, according to Woolf—would have had to face the vision that society is imposing on her. Even if Woolf’s examples are taken from 16th-, 18th- and 19th-century writers in her third chapter, she stresses that her critics are still contemporary.

A Women Writers’ Association

Creation of a Sisterhood

- 5 The women who founded FEMRITE moved from Okurut’s office at Makerere University to the Green Room of Kampala’s National Theatre in the early 1990s. As they kept growing, they moved to a house on Kira Road, plot 147, where they still are today. From the very beginning, Okurut saw and insisted on the importance and the necessity of creating a space where women could discuss literature, write and edit their texts without being bothered, scrutinised or censored by proprieties—the issue being the social pressure which is implicitly or openly dissuading women from writing, not an upfront governmental censorship. Like Woolf stressed, to be free to push their limits to the fullest, women needed an empty space where they would be the first to make their marks. Okurut, as explained in *In Their Own Words*, became “Mother Hen” as she was the one who had “gathered [the women] like a hen gathering her chicks” (Barungi 2006: 2) and the chicks became sisters. When interviewed, Twongyeirwe explained that the “chicks” were baffled by Okurut’s idea.

“But we don’t have editors, you’re [Mary Okurut] saying we bring what we have written”, because she was saying “just bring whatever you have ever written, your poems, your short stories” but people were saying “we are not editors, that is a professional thing”, then she said “No, we will edit each other so you bring your stories, I read, then by the time we go to the professional editors, we’ll have done something ourselves and maybe it won’t be that bad.”¹

- 6 As Twongyeirwe remembers, Okurut’s insistence is purely on the act of writing itself and of talking about it between women. Publishing was not the main concern and would only come at a later stage. The idea behind FEMRITE was that women *should* write about whatever they wanted and dare to speak up. The scholar Elizabeth Oldfield comments in her books on the difficulty for women writers to express themselves

freely and openly in public because traditionally and culturally it was not accepted for a woman to speak her mind.

Patriarchal values in Africa demand that women do not voice an opinion, particularly in public, since their status is constructed such that they are regarded as subordinate to men: an attitude that is upheld and reinforced by many African traditions and folklore (...). (Oldfield 2013: 138.)

- 7 By encouraging the women to write and to show their texts Okurut pushed the new members of FEMRITE to oppose two aspects of patriarchal society: they first broke the quietness required of women, and secondly they pursued Okurut's desire that women would take part in Uganda's reconstruction within the cultural world. Before Uganda's independence, Makerere University had been an important regional university in East Africa but after independence it became one of the central places where discussions or reflections on the new independent African countries and post-colonialism were led. Whether it is Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Okot p'Bitek, Grace Ogot, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (who was then attending as a student) or Langston Hughes (who attended as a member of the African diaspora), they were all at the Conference of African Writers of English Expression that was given at Makerere University in June 1962. It was the first time that a conference was taking place in Africa on African Literature by African writers. The oppositions and controversies that appeared during and continued after the conference shaped African post-colonial literature. However, Makerere was deserted until the late 1980s because of the fifteen years of dictatorships (1971-1979: Idi Amin Dada; 1980-1985: Milton Obote's regime). As students or lecturers of Makerere University in the early 1990s, the FEMRITE members had the past Makerere as a memory and the desire to be part of the future of Ugandan culture; they wanted to do so from a woman's stance.
- 8 As they built a place where they would be free to express themselves, I noted throughout the different interviews I held during fieldwork that FEMRITE represented more than a means to create and to write. It became a space of trust and confidence but also a place where women only (men cannot be members of the association) could learn without being judged or would not be mocked for not knowing.

It's a home for women writers whether you know how to write or not so you can come here and get the training that you need and get the sisterhood, people who will support you in what you want to do and show what to do.²
- 9 Beatrice Lamwaka, a member and published writer by FEMRITE, like many other members, insisted on the sisterhood that prevailed at FEMRITE. In success or failure, it would be a place where they would get support. In my interview with her, Lamwaka joked and said that even if their stories would be rejected by African or Western publishers, the members "would get together and drink a cup of tea and celebrate, (...) at least [they were] sending out things." The fact that she talked of celebration stresses that despite being rejected they were still all together and writing and sending their stories—it meant that they were speaking up. Moreover, this underlines that, unlike other publishing houses, FEMRITE has not sought to prevent its members from sending their stories to other publication houses but has focussed on teaching women writing techniques, so that they could then get published anywhere and make a name for themselves: "Publishing is actually not our main activity. Our main activity is writing development",³ Twongyeirwe explained when I asked about FEMRITE main activities.
- 10 When I interviewed a younger member, Davina Kawma, she explained the importance of FEMRITE's role in the development of her knowledge in literature and creative

writing. "Learning. (...) just within six years I felt I had learned a lot—for free essentially—interacted with so many writers, (...); so, I had the impression I've made up for the lost time."⁴ Kawma had initially a scientific background before hearing about FEMRITE and joining it, but the sisterhood that Lamwaka spoke about allowed Kawma to embrace her passion for literature and meet different writers throughout the activities proposed by FEMRITE. She was then able to exchange and have feedback both at FEMRITE but also through the workshops that she attended.

- 11 All the FEMRITE members I interviewed talked about the importance of the FEMRITE workshops within the process of learning. There are three sorts of workshops: half day or one day; three days; and residential (that last for about a week). The half- or one-day workshops are organised to study one particular aspect of writing like characterisation, dialogues, or "editing my work." From three days onwards, the workshops focus on a theme or a genre—poetry, prose, fiction, non-fiction—followed by brain-storming and writing. Depending on the workshop, those who supervise the workshop can be both members of FEMRITE or external guests. However, the latter are present more often for the residential workshops. To apply to a workshop, one has to submit a story and another story will be expected at the end of the workshop. Those interested in listening but who would not give any written texts cannot participate. It is not a class but a writers' group. So even before or after having learnt something, the association constantly pushes women to write and create.

The Production of Ugandan Literature by and about Ugandan Women

- 12 FEMRITE was officially launched in 1996 and the first four books were published in 1998: *A Woman's Voice*, the first of many anthologies, was composed of twelve short stories, each by a different writer; *The African Saga* is a collection of poems by Susan N. Kiguli; and two novels: *Memoirs of a Mother* by Ayeta Anne Wangusa, and *The Invisible Weevil* by Mary K. Okurut.
- 13 In *The Invisible Weevil*,⁵ Okurut follows the story of a girl Nkwanzi—from her youth to her life as a politician and mother. We witness how she grows up and becomes a woman in Uganda's post-independence society. The setting and progression allow Okurut to give an account of the years of war from a woman's point of view but also insist on the place of a girl, and then a woman, within Ugandan society. We thus follow what Elizabeth Oldfield calls the "Woman's Life-Cycle":

The life-cycle of the African woman entails specific stages—loosely: birth, puberty, initiation, the visit, the introduction or bride-wealth ceremony, marriage, giving birth, and, finally, death. (Oldfield 2013: 104.)
- 14 As Oldfield explains, Okurut uses those "significant events" that govern a woman's life under society's norms. Indeed, we witness Nkwanzi "struggl[ing]" and "surviv[ing]" during the years of dictatorship but also how she resists society's pressure. However, Okurut plays with those stages and their expectations. All the stages depicted by Oldfield are not described in Okurut's novel. The author uses those "expected" stages to oppose the idealised image told to children against its reality. Through the structure of the narration Okurut reverses social expectations regarding men and women. Nkwanzi's birth or death are not told; it is the tale of her husband's birth that opens the story and his death that concludes the novel—Nkwanzi survives the ending.

- 15 Through her novel *Okurut* discusses the silence that surrounds sexuality and the female body within Ugandan society through two events of the girl's childhood. When she is very young (her exact age is not given), Nkwanzu is abused by a man everyone trusts because he appears as a good Christian. Named Matayo, the man took Nkwanzu on his lap, sang "Jesus" and touched her "*shameful*"; later on, he "tried to push a hard object there which gave her so much pain" (Okurut 1998: 31). Her parents realised what had happened and took the girl to the hospital to learn she had contracted gonorrhoea. Later on in the narrative, when Nkwanzu got her periods for the first time she believes that she has dysentery. Her mother asked if the blood is not rather coming from her "*kooko*"—which means "animal" but is referring to her sex; but Nkwanzu insisted that it was not. It is only at the hospital, after the doctor has looked at her, that the girl is told about menstruation.
- 16 As the narrative is told through Nkwanzu's point of view, the vocabulary used and the description of the rape underline her innocence and her lack of knowledge regarding sexuality. Through the two examples, we see that no one in Nkwanzu's surrounding openly talks about sex, sexual attributes, or menstruation. The words used to describe the female sex underline how it is seen as a taboo and disgraceful. The second name the mother gives to sex associated it to an "animal." The humanity of a woman is thus negated. Oldfield explains:
- This "Othering" of the African female and the privilege of the African male guarantees that from an early age all children are thrust into what is considered normative behaviour for their gender and where they are "naturally" located in their society. (Oldfield 2013: 105.)
- 17 Sexuality is thoroughly discussed throughout the book. Okurut uses it to question the relevance of some norms. Okurut plays with the traditional role that is implied within the feminine figure as we watch Nkwanzu growing up and asserting (or not?) her independence and free will.
- 18 Okurut has built a strong character with Nkwanzu. The reader discovers a woman who knows how to analyse a situation and take complicated decisions. Nkwanzu has a rocky relationship with traditions, as she has a profound respect for them, yet she moves away from the traditional image of a woman: she takes up arms in the resistance army during the dictatorship or as she refuses to keep her rape secret, regardless of what other women tell her. Indeed, Nkwanzu is raped just hours before her wedding having spent most of the book refusing to have sex with the one who will become her husband, Genesis, before their wedding, because she wanted to keep the tradition of the "red sheet." Okurut uses the topos of the marriage to destroy its idealisation by folklore or common tales.
- 19 The wedding does not conclude the story. Genesis and Nkwanzu do get married despite the rape and leave Genesis' village to live in Kampala. The story accelerates and we learn that Genesis' political aspiration fails, whereas Nkwanzu is named minister. As a result, the character of Genesis is broken. As Nkwanzu works, Genesis goes back to prostitutes as he had done when they were students at Makerere and when Nkwanzu and Genesis had had a fight. When he demands sexual intercourse from Nkwanzu, she refuses unless they use a condom. Genesis contracts AIDS but Nkwanzu does not. This time, Nkwanzu's stubborn opposition is not ridiculed. Her straightness and refusal to give in is what saves her. The novel concludes with the man's death and the success and good health of the woman.

- 20 Okurut thus manages to build a strong female character who still has flaws, stopping her from becoming an idealised and unreachable character. Oldfield explains that “the African female is perceived in terms of bride-to-be” (Ibid: 108) and Okurut manages to take this stigma and shows the depth that lies behind Nkwanzu as an individual. *The Invisible Weevil* is built as more than a novel. As we follow Nkwanzu or Genesis, we are given a clear depiction of the place society gives to women and the space that Nkwanzu claims on her own or with other women. By refusing the smooth narrative of a naïve girl growing up and getting married, Okurut’s story gives another prospect to Ugandan women readers. As such, for FEMRITE, literature would transcend, beyond the words and the stories, its educational and referential aspect and become a means of empowerment for women readers, regardless of their age.
- 21 From the very beginning FEMRITE announced their stance: the first books published told stories of empowerment told by Ugandan woman about Ugandan women and their society.

A Publishing House

The Running and Issues of the Publishing House

- 22 FEMRITE remains an association that works through membership and with volunteers and occasional employees—the number depending on funding, which itself depends on donations. All published books, novels, collections of poems or anthologies are composed by members, except for a few to which I will come back shortly. As Regina Asinde explains:
- “I have my poems ready, here, I want them published.” But the member to whom I addressed told me that they only publish members and there are criteria, it is not only a matter of bringing your poems and getting them published.⁶
- 23 Membership requires paying 50,000 UGX⁷ (i.e. about 12 € or 13.50 US\$), then a yearly contribution of 20,000 UGX (i.e. 4.80 € or 5.40 US\$). Upon becoming a member, “you attend meeting, you are expected to attend activities, to participate in activities, you are expected to write. That’s one of the major issues. You find us in meeting talking about expelling members who are not writing—but we never expelled anyone.”⁸
- 24 The only books that include non-members are the anthologies, which result from residential workshops or, if FEMRITE has enough funding, three-day workshops. Anyone can apply to the workshops. If the stories are kept after the workshop, they can get published. FEMRITE organises two kinds of residential workshops: internal ones reserved for FEMRITE members, and the “Regional Residency for African Women Writers.” For both, FEMRITE gets funding so the writers stay all together in a hotel for a week and get help to work on their texts. The second type of residency is open to all women writers in Africa, gathering ten to fifteen women. We find writers from Uganda, Ghana, Zambia, South Africa, Sweden, Tanzania, Kenya, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Trinidad, Namibia, Botswana, and Malawi. Through these workshops FEMRITE can gain new members, but it is also a way for them to get *seen* in and out of Uganda.
- 25 Obviously, funding remains the main problem. Fluctuation in funding has two impacts: firstly on the editing policy, and secondly on the time needed to print a book. As Twongyeirwe explained, the state of the manuscript and the number of people working on the book affect the whole process. Sometimes funding⁹ is provided to organise a

workshop but not for book publication. This generates another problem, as FEMRITE would have to raise money again for another workshop and a book; but because the work of the two workshops would have to be combined, fewer manuscripts would get published. Twongyeirwe's conclusion underlines the militant and cathartic nature of FEMRITE, whose purpose is to give a talking and creating space to women.

- 26 Another difficulty is to create and sustain a readership, as FEMRITE's goal is also to develop women's reading. One obstacle is the price of books. Relative to people's average income, books are expensive. Ugandans have thus developed a culture of sharing—and not buying—books. The second obstacle is education and the access to books and literature. When I asked Twongyeirwe why she believed women were such a difficult readership to conquer, the first thing she said was that girls did not have access to school like boys before the country's independence and still after. Moreover, when there are many children in a family, providing school fees for the boys is generally prioritised.
- 27 Finally, the importance of the national school syllabus was discussed. The ultimate and most complicated obstacle FEMRITE is facing is the visibility of the association and of its writers: "There are more women now, women are more visible, but their works are not getting in public readings spaces"¹⁰ (such as libraries, bookshop or public readings and awards). The books on the school syllabus are often the first books the students will read—which means that being on the syllabus enables the writer to be seen and recognised from a national perspective. After independence, the first battle was to get African authors on the syllabus and not only English writers. Ngugi wa Thiong'o recalls in *Decolonizing the Mind* how the Conference of African Writers of English Expression took place at Makerere University in June 1962. It was the first time that a conference had taken place in Africa on African Literature by African writers. However, he reminds his readership that this conference, despite its innovative aspect, was limited to Anglophone writers—no space was yet given to non-English texts. This fight against this monolingualism did not limit itself to Uganda as it was shared by many East African intellectuals, professors and writers. This movement succeeded, as Twongyeirwe explains, but the books selection committee is now composed of men only, and the syllabus is made by men: "Nobody recognizes that this syllabus is only men's books, it's just..., it escapes their thoughts, I don't know how."¹¹ This echoes a phenomenon Florence Stratton analysed in her book *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*. Stratton highlights the role of post-colonial critics who would not even consider literature produced by women and "ignored gender as a social analytic category" (Stratton 1994: 1, 2).¹² Stratton in 1994 and Twongyeirwe in 2019 raise the same issue: the visibility of women's literature resides largely in a space that is denied to them. "When the books are not in the academia, if the books are not in schools, they don't get known (...) [and] there are few women texts in those spaces, and that is not just in Uganda, that is in Africa."¹³

An Activist Publishing House

- 28 Some of FEMRITE's workshops have specific topics or themes. As such, some anthologies are written with a certain readership or certain themes in mind. FEMRITE publishes both fiction and non-fiction through which transpires their activism and concern regarding the reality of contemporary Ugandan society—while the fictional works may be quite diverse within a same anthology, the non-fiction short stories are

testimonies collected by writers from women and put together into a book. In each non-fiction anthology, there is a real desire coming from FEMRITE to study and bring into the light one type of woman's everyday life. *Tears of Hope* and *Farming Ashes* are two examples. *Farming Ashes* is a collection that reports the story of people who suffered from the war in Northern Uganda led by Joseph Kony after Museveni came to power. About 70,000 children were abducted and up to 2 million people displaced between 1986 and 2009.

- 29 The stories in the anthology are reported and written by the FEMRITE members, who went into camps, villages, and hospitals to meet children and women. The details given in the stories come in a shocking contrast to the poems of the anthology. The poems are short and often in the first person, and the personality of the writer comes seemingly more into view than in the short stories, which consist mainly of reported speech. The personas are not telling their story but asking one question, stating one fact. The stories, however, are full of raw and honest details. In "Ruins," as Beatrice Lamwaka tells Helen's story, we are brought directly in her long march after her abduction, the murder of her cousin, her rapes and her escape:

One day, as we walked, my cousin Oloya decided to drop his luggage and started running. Unfortunately, he tripped up against the root of a huge tree. About five rebels hit him with their *pangas*. He cried out his mother's name. The rebels continued to cut him silently. I couldn't watch. I had become numb. All the abductees stood speechless. The incident reminded me of the way cows are slaughtered in the village market. (Lamwaka 2009: 78.)

- 30 The narrator has looked away, but the screams and images remain. The comparison made at the end of the paragraph uses images the twelve-year-old girls would have known—the ones of her daily routine. However, when describing her rapes, she speaks of "manhood" pushed into her and of a man "t[earing] into her." In the different narratives, rapes are often described explicitly; yet there is a modesty to these descriptions that we do not find in the representations of murders or aggressions. Because of intimacy, the narrative introduces a different amount of distance between the story, the reader and the storyteller. And one needs to question if this distance is introduced voluntarily or unconsciously by the writers.
- 31 In both *Never Too Late* and in *Farming Ashes*, FEMRITE makes a stand to educate and teach young and adult readers. Through its texts and publications FEMRITE imposes itself as a publishing house that "dare[s] to say."¹⁴

Giving Women a Social Status?

Writers and Editors

- 32 In *Transgressing Boundaries*, Elizabeth Oldfield highlights one of the traditional roles of women: storytellers. "A particular aspect of gendered activity relating to normative femininity is the informal education of the children through the traditional woman's role of orator or storyteller" (Oldfield 2013: 13). This traditional role enabled women to participate in social activities, but also to "transgresses boundaries" through social conventions. By telling stories, women had a place in which they had a voice. The storytellers set their place within the community by how good they were at telling a story that was known to all—the voices they took, the variations they introduced. Oral storytelling was a moment where a woman could be the one speaking and also the one

listened to. Moving from orality to writing, however, became a transgression of social norms as women stepped out of their conventional role into a space that “had not yet been claimed.”¹⁵ Undeniably there are fewer women in the African literary world than men. “There are very few women and like I said I cannot explain it. But it could come from education, how it was the men who first went to school, and women got into schools later so that could be an explanation.”¹⁶

- 33 To claim a space of their own is exactly why FEMRITE was founded. “FEMRITE came into being because in the history of the written word in Uganda, women writers were not visible” (Oldfield 2013: 174). Susan Kiguli, a member of FEMRITE recognised poet in Uganda and a lecturer in English literature at Makerere University, explains why. She describes an ambiguity and a complexity, which still lie around the status of a “woman writer”, as it comes with expectations regarding the writer and her work; however, as the members became “transgressive” together, they managed to be seen as writers. At FEMRITE, they transgressed two boundaries: the first between telling and writing a story, and the second in getting that story published. In the conclusion of her book, Stratton draws a parallel between the Western (colonial or not) patriarchal system and the African post-colonial society as “patriarchy, too, is an important factor in the development of African literature” (Stratton 1994: 171):

The exclusion of patriarchy as a determinate historical, social, and political condition has a number of interrelated consequences for current theories of African literature. (...) While African men writers challenge the racial codes of colonial discourse and attempt to subvert them, they adopt certain aspect of the gender coding of their supposed adversaries in their representation of African women. (Ibid.: 171-172.)

- 34 Stratton sheds light on two factors: the undeniable exchanges that have taken place between the cultures of the coloniser and the colonised (which cannot be limited to the use of the colonial language) and the fact that women have been written off from the literary world both as writers and characters. The core of Stratton’s critique lies in the parallel she draws between “European imperialism” and “African nationalism.” Consciously using broad concepts and geographical areas to underline the importance of the process, she points out how African post-colonial male writers restrained women’s work the way (male) colonists had done to African men’s writings. Like the independence movements during colonisation, women writers had to become “transgressive”¹⁷ and claim a new space that had yet to be.
- 35 In order to become a writer, a woman has to become more than a storyteller. What Oldfield calls “normative femininity” includes all of the social norms and statuses constructed by a patriarchal society based upon the image of woman that men created; this “normative femininity” is imposed upon women. If the role of storyteller fits normative femininity, the role of writer does not—and the role of publisher even less. Susan Kiguli explains: “I have found the whole process of living and writing within my own society is one of crossing and sometimes staying within borders (...)” (2007: 172). She underlines the ambiguity and the complexity of the place taken by a woman writer or publisher within her society. That space is unstable and changeable, as one needs sometimes to go past a tradition or a belief, and yet on other occasions keep within their limits. Some of the writers I interviewed characterised social expectations as weight or obstacles, others simply as their cultural background. Kiguli goes on, explaining that women writers have to “be brave enough to fly through “official resistance” and claim (their) space to speak and write and forever reject the myth of

the passive victim which in my experience African women have never been" (Ibid.: 185). For both Kiguli and Twongyeirwe, this space has not been stolen from women, but has yet never been claimed, and only women can do this. Both of them take a conciliatory approach that may appear as a paradigm of Ugandan feminism. Men's behaviours are not openly criticised, as it is mostly customs and the norms that are denounced. This stance is not far from those that appeared at the beginning of Western feminism. Is this position an early stage? Or is it a fact? To fully grasp the role of this position one would need to meet feminists from other movements. Yet, it is difficult to establish a comparison for I did not meet anyone that was not close to the FEMRITE circle—not because I did not want to but because I did not come across any.

- 36 There is an insistence on the diversity of the functions of those publishers' and this echoes FEMRITE's diversity as well. As both writers and publishers, as an entity and as a whole, FEMRITE and its members have established a space of their own within their society and the Ugandan "cultural landscape."

Independent and Strong Characters

- 37 To Stratton, the non-presence of women in the African literary world means their non-presence both as writers and publishers and as characters. She analyses how within men's narratives female characters were often minimised through the "Mother Africa Trope": women are a metaphor for countries and more generally for the African continent. Male writers would "employ a trope which also occurs, through sometimes in different guise, in contemporary male-authored writing: the embodiment of Africa in the figure of a woman" (Stratton 1994: 39). Moreover, Stratton underlines the history of women as metaphor *within* African male literature. It began with Senghor and the *negritude* movement then continued through others writers. This metaphor was used mainly to show two arguments: to oppose the Western image of the black savage with the description of a warm, loving and caring mother and/or woman; to describe the effects of colonisation and later the horrors of dictatorship. For Stratton, when rape or violence is described, the individual character of the woman disappears as she becomes the symbol of a country or Africa that has been fouled by both white and black men.
- 38 After asserting themselves as writers and publishers, FEMRITE writers claimed a space for women within the narratives by opposing the "Mother Africa Trope" of the first generation of African writers, giving depth to their women characters. "A general look at the FEMRITE books shows a focus on a range of issues (that have) to do with the woman's struggle to survive in a society where the emphasis is placed on male prosperity and welfare" (Kiguli 2007: 177). Not all FEMRITE books are about women, but most of them address the reality of women's everyday life in Uganda. During the interview, Kiguli came back to the fact that she, and FEMRITE members in general, were writing about women and explained why—despite the critics. She talked of "the experience of writing about what [she] know[s]"; her "battle is [to] let people be *free* to be people, let women be free to be women, to be able to name themselves."¹⁸
- 39 The writers of FEMRITE introduced into the Ugandan literary tradition strong women characters and main characters like Lyn from "The Pumpkin Seeds" by Hilda Twongyeirwe in *Pumpkin Seeds and other stories*. This story is told from the main character's point of view. Lyn is just newly married and is woken-up by her mother-in-law and sister-in-law. She has to follow them to a field where she has to plant a single

pumpkin seed. Depending on how the seed grows, they will know what kind of woman she is: "The pumpkin seed is like a woman. It is either productive or worthless" (Moffett and Barungi 2009: 27). When she is presented with the calabash and the seeds Lyn is horrified: "I want to tell my new family that I need no pumpkin seed to prove the woman in me" (Ibid). Three days after having planted the seed Lyn goes back in secret and crushes it. The story concludes on her following statement: "Several days passed by and we wait; they, impatiently for the woman I will be; I, patiently for the woman that I am" (Ibid).

- 40 Twongyeirwe achieves in this story a complete shift in the narrative voice. Lyn is the one telling the story, however at the beginning, she is still in her dreams and fantasises about her wedding. The discrepancy between what she wished for and what happened could remind a reader of the description of Emma's wedding to Charles Bovary in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857). When Emma dreams of a dinner in candlelight at night, she has a classical farm banquet. Like Emma, Lyn is wrapped up in her romanticism and idealisation of her partner and marriage. As we were warned of Charles's simple and timid nature we are also warned of George's character before the wedding: as Lyn recalls the preparations, we see that they had a completely different approach to the event. George did not care about the invitations nor the dress, and did not understand why his future wife refused to wear his cousin's wedding dress or cared so much for small details on the invitation cards.
- 41 It is through this shattered dream that we witness the evolution of the narrator as the story could be divided into three parts: the first one being when Lyn is still fantasising in her bed; the second when she walks quietly behind her mother-in-law and obeys every command; the third one when she finds her voice within the narration through her actions in her life. In this story, Twongyeirwe creates a strong character *in becoming*. The reader is made a witness to the evolution of Lyn: Lyn finds her strength as the story evolves.
- 42 By introducing women characters into their stories—whether as main characters or not, as strong women or innocent girls, as healthy or sick, as fighting or losing—the FEMRITE writers inscribe a new nature of characters in Ugandan literature. In many interviews, the women I spoke to insisted on the fact that they wanted to tell a story *they* knew and talked of their society the way *they* saw it. Through the anthologies and the workshops, FEMRITE not only looks to diversify the authors, but also the characters of the stories. Twongyeirwe explained that the goal of the association was to create a place to write and also a readership. The FEMRITE writers are consciously writing for a specific readership, which would be mostly feminine. By creating and introducing these characters, they oppose the trope of the mother Africa and recentre the story on the individual, not on a metaphor. The readers may then find an echo between their lives and the narratives. By describing realistic but strong characters, FEMRITE create new role models.

An Alienated Other?

- 43 A disturbing similarity that can be found in all the interviews that I conducted concerned self-censorship. As Regina Asinde put it, "Society plays a role in pushing us into self-censorship. Their expectation, what society expects to see—and when you write about it you get ostracized, so you apply self-censorship."¹⁹ The women writers

are conscious that they are transgressing boundaries by writing and publishing but they know as well that some topics cannot be openly spoken about without consequence. In Asinde's words, "society" did not designate society as a whole, but rather her close surroundings and acquaintances. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978) explains the concept of the "strategic location" of the writer within and outside the texts. "Strategic location" includes various point of views within which the writer has to find his/her own space as he/she would have to take all of them into account. Said explains this concept as he analyses how a writer writing on Orient tries to position him/herself in contrast to the vision the West has produced of Orient. This "strategic location" is the meeting point between the writer's relationship to the text, the relationship and filiation between different texts, and the different cultural approaches to and readings of what is described. It is in this strategic location that the writer may find his/her "authority." If we apply this concept of "strategic location" to FEMRITE, the location of its writers can be said to consist of more factors than the male writers. Today's writers would have to position themselves within a cultural heritage: texts denouncing colonialism and now neo-colonialism; texts denouncing dictatorships, civil wars and ethnic wars; but also, their own vision of this history as women.

- 44 Following Said's concept, the writers would reposition themselves in a new place. For Oldfield they position themselves as "Other" deliberately as they find their "strategic location" and desert their traditional role: "The writers' repositioning as 'Other' in order to write from a (black) African woman's perspective is a deliberate stance that situates them in opposition to patriarchy, thus indicating their involvement in cultural politics" (Oldfield 2013: 90). Thus, for Oldfield, women become an "Other" because, through their choices, women writers have disrupted the organisation of their society: "the African male uses African women to define his position" (Ibid: 15). And so "African women who reject their traditionally constructed role and refuse to serve the male by conforming to the custom of marriage and childbearing risk alienation by the community" (Ibid).
- 45 To Oldfield, a woman traditionally gains her status through motherhood, not just as a wife; by becoming transgressive, the writers become more than what society expects from them. The variety in the situations of the women I met was important. Some were students and single, others were married—some with many children, others with one or two—and some had remained unmarried and without children. However, all of them described themselves as writers, and then maybe as mothers and/or wives. It is during the informal talks in cars during long trips, or when we were preparing and having lunch, that I learned about their personal situation.
- 46 Willingly or against their will, they are categorised as "women writers" by criticism and thus once again categorised next to the "main" literature.

The convention [...] not only marks the woman writer for her gender; it also rebuked her for transgressing the norm by daring to take up the pen. Even more insidiously, it names her not a writer but a woman, the implicit message encoded in the naming being that it is marriage/motherhood that is her true vocation and not her writing. (Stratton 1994: 60-61.)
- 47 Kiguli explains in her essay her weariness regarding the fact that they are constantly talked of as "female writers" and not just "writers." The writers become somehow alienated by their society as they do not fit in, following the norms expected from them. Analysing the works of Grace Ogot, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Mariama Bâ, who were first-generation post-colonial African women writers, she stresses that

none of these names appeared in the periodisation of contemporary African literature Ngugi made in his essay *Writing Against Neocolonialism* (1986): "Ignoring gender as a social as well as an analytic category, he constructs the African writer as male" (Ibid.: 79). Even if some female writers managed to be recognised regionally or internationally, like Mariama Bâ (1983), many were rejected by the critics and denied by their contemporary, which pushed them into a specific and alienated space.

- 48 FEMRITE's writers became published twenty or thirty years after the first generation of African post-colonial writers; yet traditions and expectations remain, and they still stand on the verge of different spaces. FEMRITE writers are often reflecting on their past—both colonial and post-colonial—and the effect it has on their present society but they are also constantly denouncing the immobility and rigidity the patriarchal society. The commitments and the choices of the members of FEMRITE are the result and product of the debates and interactions that happen within their society. They are openly activists for women rights yet some are timid when pronouncing the word "feminism." All demand the complete equality between men and women and yet some are reluctant to discuss the topic of homosexuality—both because of religious faith but also because of the sensitivity of the topic, as it is still recognised as a crime in Uganda.
- 49 The self-censorship Asinde described is a remainder of social and traditional expectations. Writers both unconsciously and consciously censor themselves—not because a topic is not *allowed* by political governments and the Uganda law, but because of the pressure of their surroundings—whether it is faith, family, friends or acquaintances.
- 50 Yet, despite their position of "alienated other," the female writers break this stereotype within and out of their texts. As Oldfield concludes, "traditionally, dominant African male discourse constructs African women as the silent and passive 'Other.' This is a myth" (Oldfield 2013: 222). Stratton on the other hand transforms the notion of "Other": "Women [characters] are, in other words, conceptualized not as Other but as self-defining" (Stratton 1994: 107).
- 51 Whether as a writer or a constructed character, women would thus appear to be alienated by their society but as individual they would play with this role. This particular position and location give a certain freedom to the writers. When I met Kiguli, one of the first things she said was that she was "privileged." Her place as a University teacher and as a writer gave her a social status and a certain freedom that other unmarried women could not have so easily. Yet she explained that, from her point of view, this freedom came with responsibilities: because she had such a special space, she had to be the eyes, ears and mouth of her society and describe all that she saw and heard.

Conclusion

- 52 *Mukazi* means "woman" and "mother" in Luganda and Gikuyu. As reminded by Oldfield, in the Gikuyu Kenyan context, this word conveys negative connotation, describing a woman who is "operating outside of normative female roles" (Oldfield 2013: 120). Yet the word has evolved, and it describes today a woman who occupies different spaces: "*mukazi* combines the concept of gender, space, and identity and can be viewed as exhibiting positive connotations for the African feminist" (Ibid). Does the evolution of the meaning of word entail that the society's vision of what is a transgressive woman

has evolved as well? FEMRITE and its members appear and present themselves as more than a publishing house. By creating and claiming a space of their own they have allowed voices to express themselves. The association, through the variety of its goal and field of work, tries to reach as varied an audience as possible. It is a place to learn and to create, but also maybe to find oneself through the sisterhood that has been created; to make their voice heard they have chosen to publish themselves some of their texts; and finally they have been recognised within society as writers and publishers. They have claimed a power through the use of words and the space they enabled; and as such they have been able to create a physical space of their own. In 2018, Hilda Twongyeirwe received the National Medal, a Recognition Award from the Uganda Registration Services Bureau. This award recognises through Twongyeirwe the long walk done by Twongyeirwe and her sisters—especially as Twongyeirwe is the first woman to ever receive this award in Uganda.

- 53 Regardless of Uganda's political context and despite beliefs and rules that are constructed and implemented by society and religion, FEMRITE shows maturity as all social issues and topics are discussed. Some topics are, of course, more present than others. Denouncing women's rights and living conditions is a leading thread at the core of FEMRITE's fight. I have not particularly talked about it, because the texts concerned were not part of my corpus, but the topic of AIDS is often thoroughly discussed. The subject of homosexuality is differently approached and less present in the texts; however, the interviews balance this lack of discussion, as most of the writers talked about it on their own. The main absence in FEMRITE's corpus is urban poverty. When poverty is discussed and described, it is often in the countryside and in villages.
- 54 Yet if FEMRITE wants to continue on their journey, they will need to become important within a bigger and heavier international network—intra and intercontinental—but the members are already connected to an international network via individual memberships, so their activism has found its path, even if the road is long and expensive. There will also be a need to spread their work of collecting testimonies to the stories of urban women and to welcome more the aspirations of the youngers who are more inclined to political criticism—within the limit of the possibilities allowed by Ugandan government. FEMRITE could also be inspired by the many walks for the climate that are regularly organised by the high-schoolers and undergraduates of Kampala. We can rest assured, however, that the FEMRITE writers—both as individuals and as a group—are strong enough to seize these topics and transform them into literary material; it is only a question of time.

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NOTES

1. Hilda Twongyeirwe's interview n° 1 by Marguerite Crémoux-Le Roux, February 20, 2019, FEMRITE's office.
2. Beatrice Lamwaka's interview by Marguerite Crémoux-Le Roux, February 27, 2019, FEMRITE's offices.
3. Hilda Twongyeirwe's interview n° 2 by Marguerite Crémoux-Le Roux, February 21, 2019, FEMRITE's offices.
4. Davina Kawma's interview by Marguerite Crémoux-Le Roux, February 28, 2019, FEMRITE's offices.
5. As it was not easy to get these books in Europe because of the price of shipping, I started by studying the books to which I had access through the large collection of the BULAC library in Paris. The choice of *The Invisible Weevil* is also very personal because, more than only being available at the library, it had been written by the founder of FEMRITE and I thought important to have texts within my corpus both by the founding members as by the younger ones.

6. Regina Asinde's interview by Marguerite Crémoux-Le Roux, February 27, 2019, FEMRITE's office.
7. Ugandan shilling.
8. Hilda Twongyeirwe's interview n°1.
9. In the humanities, data about funding—associations, companies, production –, here in relation to book production, are hard to get. Unsurprisingly, this point is all the more sensible here. However, the back pages of most of FEMRITE's books bear the logos of their different contributors.
10. Hilda Twongyeirwe's interview n°2.
11. Ibid.
12. "African women writers and their works have been rendered invisible in literary criticism. General surveys have neglected them as have more theoretical works such as Abdul R. Jan Mohamed's *Manichean Aesthetics*. The first book-length treatment of African fiction, Eustace Palmer's *An Introduction to the African Novel*, refers only once to a woman writer—a reference to Flora Nwapa that labels her 'an inferior novelist.' Women authors are also notably absent from [...] Gerald Moore's *Twelve African Writers*. In his introduction, Moore goes so far as to plead with critics "to step beyond what have already become the 'safe' writers' and then expresses regret that space does not permit him to include in his own study 'such new writers' as Nuruddin Farah, Ebrahim Hussein, Kole Omotoso, and Femi Osofisan. In light of this list of men writers, it is worth noting that by the late 1970s there were several women writers who could no longer be described as 'new'—writers such as Bessie Head and Flora Nwapa, each of whom had three novels and a collection of short stories to her credit. But Moore shows not the slightest compunction about excluding them from his study" (Stratton 1994: 1,2).
13. Hilda Twongyeirwe's interview n°2.
14. Despite my research, figures regarding the readership are hard to find, and I did not find either the proof of their existence. A study of the reception is thus difficult to conduct, or would have needed longer field work.
15. Hilda Twongyeirwe's interview n°1.
16. Ibid.
17. Concept first used by Stratton and later by Oldfield.
18. Susan N. Kiguli's interview by Marguerite Crémoux-Le Roux, March 5, 2019, Makerere University, Department of English Literature, her office.
19. Regina Asinde's interview.

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