

A REPORT ON THE FEMRITE
REGIONAL WOMEN WRITERS'
RESIDENCE

Theme : **SHARED LIVES**
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1.0 INTRODUCTION

FEMRITE - Uganda women writers association is an indigenous Non-Governmental Organisation that promotes women writing in Uganda. Though it started in 1995, it was officially launched on 3rd May 1996 at the Uganda National Cultural Centre. The organisation which was founded by a small group of women under the mobilisation of Hon Mary Karoro Okurut aims at creating an enabling atmosphere for women to write, tell and publish their stories.

While Africa boasts of a rich literary tradition, there has been a general absence of women writers and this has resulted into an omission of women's experiences from the literary and cultural heritage that shape society. In Uganda for example, before FEMRITE came into being, the literary landscape was dominated by male writers.

FEMRITE's main strategy in bringing together women writers from across the continent is to create a sense of belonging for African Women writers groups – a sense of belonging that will inspire women to write and to support one another.

2.0 BACKGROUND TO THE REGIONAL WOMEN WRITERS' RESIDENCE

Recently, FEMRITE embarked on a re-strategising process to strengthen her capacity and to build a more sustainable women writers' movement in Uganda.

In the process however, it was realised that for a stronger movement, there was need to reach out to other women writers groups across Africa to seek their support. FEMRITE perceives this as a strategy towards achieving a common goal of growing women's literature across Africa.

Since writing is the main preoccupation of all women writers associations in Africa, and since one of the major hindrances to women's creative potential is lack of a conducive writing space, FEMRITE thought it fit to come up with a programme that would offer such space to women. That is when the idea of a Regional Writers Residence exclusively for women was born.

2.1 FUNDING AND SUPPORT

The Regional Women Writers Residence was funded by:

- Commonwealth foundation
- Africalia

3.0 DAY ONE - SUNDAY 16TH NOVEMBER 08

The first day of week long residence started at 10.00am on Sunday at Hotel International Muyenga. After a brief welcome, the coordinator asked the participants to introduce themselves. Below is a line up of who was who at the residence:

- | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Dr. Helen Moffett | South Africa - Facilitator |
| 2. Hilda Twongyeirwe | Uganda |
| 3. Yaba Badoe | Ghana |
| 4. Yemodish Bekele | Ethiopia |
| 5. Kingwa Kamencu | Kenya |
| 6. Betty Mukashema | Rwanda |
| 7. Olivia Jembere | Zimbabwe |
| 8. Mastidia Mbeo | Tanzania |
| 9. Colleen Higgs | South Africa |
| 10. Alal Brenda Sofie | Uganda |
| 11. Lillian Tindyebwa | Uganda |
| 12. Winnie Munyarugerero | Uganda |
| 13. Margaret Ntakalimaze | Uganda |
| 14. Philo N. Rwabukuku | Uganda |
| 15. Constance Obonyo | Uganda |

The participants heard that the facilitator, Dr. Helen Moffett from South Africa, is currently a Research Fellow at the African Gender Institute, but

is based at the Centre for African Studies at the University of Cape Town. She received her PhD in English from University of Cape Town where she taught for eight years. She has held fellowships at Princeton University, Mount Holyoke College and has been a Rockefeller Associate at UCT's African Gender Institute. She has also worked in publishing, and was Oxford University press's academic editor for four years. She also works as a freelance academic, writer, editor and trainer.

After all had been introduced, the Coordinator of Femrite, Ms Hilda Twongyeirwe took them through the objectives and the background to the residence.

She told the expectant audience that the objectives were:

- To provide space for women to write
- To create opportunities for promotion of new literary African Women Writers
- To create opportunities for strategic networking
- To celebrate women's literature
- To generate stories and poems for publication.

Dr. Helen Moffet, then took the floor and explained that her role as a facilitator was that of an enabler and of skills transfer and not a teacher or a monopolist of knowledge. She then took them through their expectations, ground rules and the setting of setting goals.

The participants' expectations from this residence included:

- Inspiration,
- encouragement,
- empowerment,
- finding the writer within,
- getting a fresh start,
- getting to understand how to write full time,
- sustainability,
- strategies for publication,
- and networking.

During session three the participants shared experiences from their organizations and from their unique environments. The highlights of this session were that:

- Mbassem in Ghana had convinced one of the newspapers to include a writers page every Saturday, free of charge. This was something other organizations could also do.
- Betty from Rwanda talked about challenge of lack of interested publishers for her work

- Mastidia from Tanzania lamented the low reading culture in her country which forces writers to turn to text book writing and publication for them to be able to survive.
- Other challenges included structural problems, lack of libraries and lack of funding to do projects related to writing such as documentaries.

Dr. Helen Moffett encouraged participants that they could post their works on blogs on the internet as a way of getting one's read by others. She pointed out that this signifies instant publishing and circulations and places one in a community of writers.

The website for blogs: **books.co.za** was recommended. She also said that internet publishing has many advantages in that it is not at any risk of closure

Participants discussed ways to sell their works. One of the ideas that came up was that of a book club for African Women writers.

On the question of funding, CISP (Culture Initiative Support programme) and NordicAfrika Institute, British council, and EU Cultural Initiatives were identified as possible funders because these organisations support creativity.

3.0 DAY TWO – MONDAY 17Th NOVEMBER 08

Topic: **The politics of Writing.**

This was a new way of looking at the whole situation of a woman writer. Dr. Helen Moffett leading the participants in a discussion about the politics of writing said that:

- A woman writer is always seen as dangerous
- That Africa is a rich source of creativity- for example, people from the west use materials and resources from Africa, transform them and make them theirs.
- Originally, whites came for slaves, then they found land, crops, now they have come back to use Africa as a source of data for their various projects.
- The challenge that lies with the African woman writer is that she still believes that she needs handouts from the west in order to be published.
- This empowers the West to dictate what should be written. But it is important that African women find their voices and write what is from their heart, tell their stories, without being controlled by

others. the participants found this discussion very helpful in understanding the environment in which they find themselves as African writers. This was also a source of encouragement and a confidence building session. Other things that hinder the writer were:

3.1 The Writers block:

When a writer realizes that she has a writer's block, she needs to be able to break through it. One of the ways is to know the cause. Practical ways to go through the writers block include:

- Taking walks with friends and talking about a story until the point where you are blocked.
- Talking to yourself
- When no progress is there with a piece of writing do not throw it away but keep it and you will get back to it.
- Make a point of going back to the older, unfinished pieces, because writing is like a piece of jewelry that requires to be polished till it shines. Remember that art, like writing, is ageless and what you tried to write and failed years ago could be the best seller of tomorrow. If there are challenges, then there are remedies!

Remedy for Writers block

- Walking- This is quite effective
Walk alone or with a friend. Keep talking through the story until you reach where the block is. At times, it is only the knowledge that the world is not just standing by in judgment; that releases the inspiration.
- Starting to Write – talk to a friend about what you want to write about.
Participants were reminded that the conditioning of the academic essay at times also affects us as we look for linear structure of beginning, middle and end. But in a story one can start at any point.
- Secondly, that the colonial and post colonial teaching also distorts our writing, where there is only one knowledgeable teacher with a red pen.

So, to avoid all this; participants were advised to just keep writing until their writing is well crafted.

Writing is about confidence and a woman with a pen is considered dangerous by society because of the self control and confidence that writing gives her.

On the other hand, participants heard that a writer's block can be caused by other things such as an event in one's life or a relationship to the person or things one is writing about.

Language such as English being a second language can also be a deterrent to one's writing because one thinks in another language and has to translate it on paper.

3.2 Other Challenges to Women Writers:

Women still get bad press, just like their predecessors such as Doris Lessing and Bessie Head. These women were called names etc. the idea or intention being to force women to believe that their place is at home raising babies only.

Participants from Femrite shared how this organization has always been attacked and accused of demonizing men and being told that they write about trivial matters.

Society wants to guide what women's writing should be about, to suit a certain mould, but participants were advised to write and write and that is the way to get past the 'gates' erected by society.

Some women write about things that may be uncomfortable for certain sections of society and this causes them trouble with the establishment.

It is at times a question of self confidence for example if one should call herself a writer even if one is not yet published, participants heard that they could get round the problem by just saying 'I write'. It was viewed that this would help to avoid any other questions that could be a bit awkward. They were however informed that when one writes, she is a writer, as she waits to complete that novel!

However participants heard that at times the guilt of knowing that the book that they have been writing for years needed to get published could push them to ensure they complete it.

Other things that help to overcome challenges and are worth keeping in mind, like:

3.2 Knowing your Audience

Participants were informed that they had to be strategic and know how to present themselves to a particular audience.

For example knowing that the lifeblood of publishing in Africa is education, so the writer has to bear this in mind that if she wants her book to be read in school or if she hopes to make a living out of her writing then it has to be suitable for school use.

However, participants were reminded that it is important to always allow a balance between society expectations and that voice within the writer. the last part of the afternoon was taken up by:

3.3 The Official Opening the Regional Women Writers Residence

Although the Writers Residence workshop had started on Sunday, the official opening was done on Monday afternoon.

It was held and Hotel International Muyenga, same venue of the workshop.

The guest of Honour was Professor Timothy Wangusa who talked about *Overcoming Barriers in the Art of Creative Writing*.

The President of Femrite, Mrs Mary Okurut gave an opening statement on *Women Writers and the Question of Public Voice*.

The following participants read from their works:

| | |
|----------------|---------------------------------|
| Colleen Higgs | a poem |
| Yaba Badoe, | a poem |
| Olivia Jembere | excerpt from her upcoming novel |
| Kingwa Kamencu | from her book |
| Sam Iga | a poem |

The facilitator Dr. Helen Moffett gave some remarks about her experience as a writer and editor.

4.0 DAY TWO – TUESDAY 18TH NOVEMBER 08

Topic: EDITING

The facilitator informed the participants that one of the great challenges African women faced as writers was editing. She emphasized the fact that any work with errors; no matter how well written is always rejected.

She pointed out that this was a formidable way of ‘gate keeping’ and keeping the published writers a small group of elite. She told the participants that in her experience as an editor for so many years, she had seen a lot of good pieces rejected because of poor editing. Therefore, it was agreed that after putting down one’s story, the priority for the writer should be to make the manuscript the best that it can be. This can be only achieved if the writer can read through it loudly to herself several times, before getting someone else to read through or to listen to her read. She pointed out that the ear is normally a better proof reader than the eye.

The next step in the editing process of the story is for the writer to get outside editing. The African woman who writes and sends her work off without even looking through it will not pass the 'gate'.

One way the African woman writer can be able to join with the rest of the world is to develop the excellent skill of self editing. Writers can form editing relationships with colleagues, and edit each others works.

The writer has to understand the various types of editing, for example:

- volume editing that deals with the story content,
- general editing that looks for mistakes and does MS development,
- copy editing which concentrates on fact checking,
- proof reading which checks out the last minute things for example- pages, lines that drop off the page and general elements of the book.

Editing also requires one to go through each chapter and write out the actions of the story in bullet points and confirm that that is the way the story is meant to be told by the writer.

The afternoon session was taken for private writing. The writers were expected to work on their creations or develop their manuscripts.

DAY FOUR- WEDNESDAY 19TH NOVEMBER

Participants continued with private writing during the morning.

Prose and Poetry

The afternoon was the time for prose and poetry performance. Dr. Patrick Mangeni, lecturer from Makerere University's Department of Music, Dance and Drama, facilitated in this session.

Participants were taken through the intricacies of making a good reading performance with emphasis on voice projection. Dr. Mangeni emphasized the importance not losing the attention of your audience.

This session was very participatory. All the participants performed a song /dance led by Dr. Mangeni, others read and performed their poetry and short stories that they would present the following day at the reading performance. The afternoon was a demonstration of learning with fun.

DAY FIVE: THURSDAY 20TH NOVEMBER 08

The morning session was also private writing time. Participants worked to polish pieces that would be read at the Public Reading at Makerere University in the afternoon.

The Public Reading

This event was held at Makerere Guest House and all the participants attended, and some read their writing.

The residence facilitator Dr. Helen Moffett was the guest of Honour at this Reading

She first read her piece developed during her time at the residence entitled: *Writers' Block*. This poem, she said, was inspired by a story told to her by one of the participants during a conversation at the lunch break. This participant narrated to her some harrowing experiences she went through during the 1970s under the infamous regime of General Idi Amin Dada.

She also gave a statement on the challenges of writing for the African woman.

Her talk, entitled: *The Curse of the Red pen: Editing women writers in Anglophone post-colonial Africa*, outlined her experiences as an editor for African women. She said that although her main experience was with academics, she was increasingly getting to work with creative writers.

She told the captivated listeners that Africa was indeed a fount of rich creativity, of gripping stories and innovation art forms, at a time when Western and Northern academic and publishing institutions seem to have grown formulaic, inflexible, irrelevant or simply dull.

She added that she could see a future in which Africa was likely to become a cultural powerhouse, feeding the world with stories, dreams, visions, fables, films, plays, poetry and more.

She pointed out however, that there were challenges to overcome, like the collapse of some publishing houses due to political upheavals like those in Zimbabwe.

She said that the publishing houses that manage to survive are the educational ones, and that this compels creative writers to resort to writing text books for a little financial security.

She pointed out that Africa's answer may lie in the use of internet publishing. She said that this would make options for distributing, sharing, and even publishing our stories, our songs, our film clips, far more immediate, far more accessible, and very much cheaper. Instead of sending manuscripts to a publisher and then waiting months and months for a reply (which is all too after a rejection), we can publish our

work and cultural productions in cyberspace, in open access forms, for very little money.

Another challenge, she said was that post-colonial Africa remained haunted by fear of the red pen – a pen all too often wielded by a settler, a missionary, a magistrate, a colonial official. She went on to explain that Africans were still ready to hand our ideas over to outsiders far too readily, and submit too hastily to their judgment.

She encouraged the African creative writers to learn to take responsibility for their own dates, resource, and stories. *It was* important for Africans to be the ones showcasing their literature, presenting and analysing their own data.

In order to do this, she said, African must learn to;

- Be professional in the way they present themselves in a global world
- Decipher the unwritten codes that act as forms of gate-keeping. It is not enough to write, to tell our stories, to share our knowledge
- Edit our work, to proofread it, to market it, shape it to meet the needs of an international audience, if that's what it takes.

She explained that the fear of the red pen takes its toll when Africans receive a “no” from a publisher, a funder, an employer; it is assumed that this is because of lack of merit, and he/she **meekly** accepts the big **red cross** of disapproval.

She extolled the writers to train themselves, commit themselves to skills transfer, and work as hard at their professional presentation as they do in their research and writing.

Lastly, she talked of the problem of using English which is a foreign language. She called it a settler *lingua franca* and said that Africans should be proud that they can be able to adapt to this form of expression where many have even to translate their thoughts before they are able to write in English.

Finally, she urged the writers to pick up the red pen, own it; use it as a tool; wield it as a weapon; and embrace it as a friend.

Other participants who read were:

| | |
|----------------------|---------------|
| Colleen Higgs | a poem |
| Margaret Ntakalimaze | a poem |
| Yaba Badoe | a poem |
| Betty Mukashema | a poem |
| Yemodish | a poem |
| Mastidia Mbeo | a short story |

| | |
|-------------------|---------------------|
| Kingwa Kamencu | a poem |
| Sofie Alal Brenda | a poem |
| Olivia Jembere | short story excerpt |
| Austin Ejiet | a poem |

The Public Reading was attended by lecturers from various universities, writers and other members of the literature fraternity.

DAY SIX – FRIDAY 21ST NOVEMBER 08

The chief facilitator, Dr. Helen Moffett, left in the early morning of Friday. The South African participant, Colleen Higgs led the group through a session of reading and critiquing each others works.

Colleen Higgs who now lives in Cape Town, has worked as a teacher, a teacher trainer, materials writer and as an academic development lecturer. In 2008, she left Centre for the Book, where she had worked since 2001 and managed the award-winning Community Publishing Project. She started her own publishing House called Modjaji Books in 2008. Colleen is a champion for writers, especially emerging writers and those writing in African languages.

Colleen then led the participants through a session of free writing and the pieces that were written entitled '*I Remember*' are to be polished and included in the anthology.

The mid part of the afternoon was spent in private writing. At the end of the afternoon participants got back together in the workshop room and read from their works again. They critiqued each other, discussed each other's works and got useful feedback from colleagues. It was a very rewarding session.

DAY SEVEN – SATURDAY 22ND NOVEMBER

This was the last day of the residence and the participants discussed the Way Forward, and evaluated the residence workshop.

The participant from Ghana, Yaba Badoe led the session. Yaba is a former Ghanian civil servant, a documentary maker, a journalist and a visiting scholar at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana. Her short story, *The Rival*, was published in anthology called *African Love Stories* (2006). Her novel, *True Murder*, is

published by Jonathan Cape. Yaba lives for six months each year in London where she works on film projects.

The participants discussed the way forward and came with the following:

- an anthology comprising of the stories and poems developed during the residence. The free writing exercise entitled “*I Remember*” would also be included after each member has polished their piece.
- The copyright however would still belong to the writer and each writer would be given a letter saying that she can use that piece elsewhere.
- The idea of a prize which had been floated earlier was deferred till the Net became bigger to allow the participation of more women from other parts of Uganda.

The Committee that was elected as caretaker of the Net was given a mandate to look into modalities of the prize, and give recommendations. It was agreed that an African Women Writers network be formed. Below are the guidelines agreed upon for its formation:

The African Women Writers Network

Background:

- The idea at first was to bring together women writers associations in Africa. But through the organizing of the residence, it was found that many countries did not have associations. It was resolved then that for those countries where there was an organization the organization would participate as such, but where there was not, the contact person would be the one to play the role.

Mode of operation:

- The Network would operate like an umbrella organization where small women writers groups, or book clubs could belong. The person leading the group would be the contact person.
- Femrite was chosen as a Coordinating Centre for the network.
- The following were elected to the Steering Committee:
Hilda Twongyeirwe - Uganda as Coordinator
Yaba Badoe Ghana

| | |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Colleen Higgs | South Africa |
| Kingwa Kamencu | Kenya |
| Lillian Tindyebwa | Uganda |
| Mary Karooro Okurut | - President of Femrite as Ex-officio |

The rest of the Residence participants were to be known as the Reference Group and would always receive communication about deliberations and decisions of the committee and would also be consulted whenever necessary.

Mandate of the Steering Committee:

- To work out modalities for the Network especially the idea of the name. FEMWRITE AFRICA had been suggested but the committee should see whether this should be so or not.
- To consider the idea of a prize for African Women Writers
- Develop the Activities/Programmes
- Develop the Communication between members ie regular e mails.
- Develop a Constitution

The participants were quite satisfied with these first steps to develop the Net and more work on it was to be done by the Steering committee. There being no further business the first FEMRITE residence officially closed at 12 noon.

The participants then left to go for a sight seeing tour of the Source of the Nile at Jinja .

Jinja, located at 50km from Kampala, is a tourist attraction and it was important for the participants to visit it.

Here, where the mighty Nile River starts its 4000 miles journey to the Red Sea, the participants networked, others who got inspired wrote poetry while others just enjoyed the scenery and relaxed after the week of hard work.

CONCLUSION

The first African Women writers' residence was at last over. Judging from the amount of positive energy and enthusiasm that characterized this last session, it could be concluded that the residence had been the answer to the participating writers' aspirations.

From the level of creativity reflected in the pieces that were developed during the residence, it can be seen that the level of achievement was high.

For Femrite, this being the first Regional Writers Residence, everything went according to plan and it can be concluded to have been a good beginning.

Participants' Evaluation

- Motivated,
- fulfilled,
- dream come true,
- renewed,
- refreshed,
- loved the residence,
- loved looking at Lake Victoria in the distance and having quiet times to write and also to share and network with the others,
- learnt new things to improve my writing:

These were some of the words that were used by the writers in their evaluation reports.

They said that their expectations were met. Many of them recommended that this should be done more often, probably rotating in different African countries.

They recommended the facilitators, who were classified as having been excellent and exceptional.

Many of them said they were eternally grateful to FEMRITE for getting them together and that they were inspired by the whole experience. Others said that the residence far exceeded their expectations. They were sure that this was a life changing experience and said that they could never be the same after this.

They promised to continue to build on what they had learnt so that they did not let FEMRITE down.

They all concurred in recommending FEMRITE for such a brilliant idea that inspired and promoted the writing of women from different African countries.

