

**ORIGINAL FEMINSIMS OR
MWENKANONKANO IN UGANDA:
INDIGENOUS VOICES IN JENNIFER
NANSUBUGA MAKUMBI'S
*THE FIRST WOMAN***

*FEMINISMOS ORIGINARIOS O MWENKANONKANO
EN UGANDA: VOCES INDÍGENAS EN LA NOVELA
THE FIRST WOMAN DE JENNIFER NANSUBUGA
MAKUMBI*

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the novel *The First Woman* by Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi in the context of indigenous feminism(s). In the narrative, the protagonist discovers "the original state" of women according to the story she hears from the town witch, Nsuuta: before patriarchy, women were free like bodies of water, shapeless, inconstant, untamed. This original state has been suppressed by centuries of male dominance, but *mwenkanonkano* (the name the author gives to local feminism) is present in the life of many women who defy discrimination every day with their mere existence and the way they conduct their life. Nsuuta, by orally rendering the myths surrounding womanhood and passing them on to Kirabo, is writing (hi)story, legitimating it in their Ugandan context. Therefore, I argue that Makumbi conveys the need of an intersectional feminism which takes into consideration the life experiences of those women who are (and were) speaking up from their (un)comfortable homes. The author proves how significant these overlooked testimonies are since they are powerful

examples of female survival in a society dominated by two intertwined forces: phallocracy and colonialism.

Key words: feminism(s), indigenous, storytelling, women, Uganda.

Resumen

El objetivo del presente artículo es analizar la novela *The First Woman* escrita por Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, en el contexto de los feminismos indígenas. En ella, la protagonista descubre el “estado original” de las mujeres que le relata Nsuuta, la bruja de la aldea. Antes del patriarcado, las mujeres eran libres como cuerpos acuáticos, sin forma, inconstantes y sin domesticar. Este estado original ha sido suprimido debido a los siglos de dominación masculina, pero el *mwenkanonkano* (la forma en que la autora nombra al feminismo local) está presente en la vida de muchas mujeres que desafían la discriminación a diario con su mera existencia y la forma en la que viven sus vidas. Nsuuta, representando oralmente los mitos que rodean a la feminidad y pasando el testigo de estas historias a Kirabo, las rescribe y legitimized en su contexto, Uganda. De esta forma, concluyo que Makumbi verbaliza la necesidad de un feminismo interseccional que tome en consideración las experiencias vitales de aquellas mujeres que estaban y están alzando la voz desde la (in)comodidad de sus hogares. La autora demuestra lo esenciales que son estos testimonios que se han subestimado, ya que son ejemplos poderosos de supervivencia femenina en una sociedad dominada por dos fuerzas entrelazadas: la falocracia y el colonialismo.

Palabras clave: feminismo(s), indígena, narraciones, mujeres, Uganda.

1. Introduction

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi is a Ugandan novelist who gained international recognition with the publication of her first book, *Kintu* (2018), in which she rewrites the (hi)story of the country by weaving together mythology and research. In this multigenerational novel, Makumbi purportedly leaves out some key pieces in Ugandan history, perhaps in order to bring some light on life before and long after colonization. *Kintu* has been appraised as the modern Ugandan novel and even considered to be “a reawakening of national identity, an icon that legitimizes Ugandan cultural heritage” and it is said it has “ignited a sense of excitement and optimism among the writing community not only in Uganda but continentally — spreading to audiences beyond” (Kiomuhendo 39). *The First Woman* (2021), set amidst Idi Amin’s Uganda, is her second novel. The main character, Kirabo, abandoned by

her mother and raised by her paternal grandparents feels she has two selves –her corporeal being, which follows the codes of conduct established by tradition, and her ‘flying/spiritual’ being, which flies out of the room when she disagrees with what she is told to do, like sitting or kneeling ‘as a proper woman’. As Kirabo unfolds as a young woman, she learns about the original state of women thanks to the town witch, Nsuuta, who tells her the story of how women were at the beginning of time, before being submitted to men’s wishes and rules. The aim of this article is to analyze how feminism is portrayed in the novel, under the term *mwenkanonkano*, coined by the author, and to highlight the importance of myth-making to contest patriarchal discourses. As Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi affirms “intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity” (1). Orality has been a powerful tool to explain reality for humanity, and it is still extremely important in many communities everywhere. Taking oral tales, reconfiguring what is told from a more inclusive perspective, and recording them on paper, can legitimize them and help them to be disseminated. Makumbi’s craftsmanship, or rather craftswomanship, turns around the story of creation and focuses on women from a woman’s perspective. Moreover, despite the fact that the many faults of patriarchy are present in the narrative, there is hope for a better future (or for a return to the original state) in some of the well-rounded characters (mainly women, but also some men).

2. Uganda’s Women Writers in Context

In Uganda, women writers’ path to publishing was overshadowed by the post-independence sociopolitical situation, which worked in detriment of women’s access to publishing. Uganda, a former British protectorate, gained independence in 1962. The colonialist British had followed the ‘divide et impera’ strategy and the first post-independence government tried to reverse that by unifying the territories and kingdoms. The king of the most powerful kingdom, Kabaka Mutesa II, was appointed President, and Dr. Milton Obote became the first Prime Minister. Their respective parties formed an alliance that did not last long. In 1966, Obote deposed Mutesa and abolished all the kingdoms while declaring himself President of Uganda, removing the positions of president and vice-president and concentrating all

the power. In 1967, a new constitution was proclaimed and Uganda became a republic. The Obote regime went on until 1971 and “marked the end of the development of systematic democratization process in post-colonial Uganda” (Kizito 61) since Obote imprisoned, killed and exiled his enemies –who were mostly Bagandans, supporters of the Bugandan former kingdom. The army chief of staff, Idi Amin, perpetrated a military coup in 1971 and proclaimed himself president. He abrogated the parliament and gave himself absolute power. His regime is known as ‘the reign of terror’ for he tortured and assassinated around 300000 people. In addition, the dictator introduced censorship, ceased to finance education and publishing, persecuted writers and banned women’s voluntary organizations. “Women were a particular target (...) of various morality crusades such as the definition of decent dresses for women, the banning of abortions and the prevention of women from occupying public spaces” (Pucherova 85). By the end of his military regime, in 1979, most writers were in exile or in jail, so the atmosphere of fear was not ideal for women to try their luck at publishing. Moreover, there were key factors impeding women to pursue an education or a literary career. Firstly, many women around the 90s were suffering from diseases such as anemia, AIDS, malaria, hypertension, among others. Secondly, the poverty of many households impeded parents to send all their children to school due to the impossibility of paying school fees and materials for everybody, and so, boys’ education was prioritized. Thirdly, women were discouraged to be educated and in many cases they were married at an early age and devoted to child bearing duties (Mwaka 450). Despite the enormous literary production produced by men, the presence of women in their stories was minimal. They “rarely feature as significant characters in men’s writing” (Kiyimba 194) and are normally relegated to a peripheral position. It was only in the late 90s when women began to be really present in the literary scene thanks to the birth of FEMRITE –an indigenous, non-governmental and non-profit women’s association that works as a publishing house, but also as an educational organization that has promoted women writers, writing workshops and cultural events for over thirty years. It gave a platform to women writers who were facing different problems: lack of opportunities, little to no education in writing techniques, no spaces for them to write and invisibility in the writing arena.

FEMRITE authors have sought to give voice to women’s experiences that have been silenced and tabooed by patriarchy: rape, forced

marriage, female genital mutilation, expulsion from school (or disinheritance) due to pregnancy, the negative consequences of customs such as the bride price (...) [and] polygamy. FEMRITE texts subversively comment on these patriarchal traditions and raise ethical questions about women's human rights. (Pucherova 92)

During its ten first years, FEMRITE focused on gender and sexuality through a variety of genres. Representation of women by women was an urgent matter, as well as the celebration and recognition of women's experiences and stories. As for many authors from other African countries –Mariama Ba in Senegal, Flora Nwapa in Nigeria, Kopano Matlwa in South Africa, among others– the organization advocates for the importance of traditional storytelling: the grandmother's and mother's accounts are valuable and powerful and should be integrated into the country's literary canon. Importantly, FEMRITE has focused on the stories of marginalized women and “it has entered into partnerships with a variety of other organizations to give a voice to women whose voices would otherwise never be heard” (Kiguli 138). Thus, they publish life writing books in which some victims of war, genital mutilation, or women suffering AIDS, tell their stories in their own local languages, releasing the pain suffered, and the writer compiles and translates them. Using this method, the organization ensures the anonymity of those women who do not want to disclose their identity, but have a need to tell their stories, as well as the collaboration between women tellers and women writers and editors. FEMRITE has not only enabled those who could not write to raise their voices (and those who can read to reflect on them), but it has also boosted women's writing visibility, paving the way for the generations to come. In only a few years, women writers have achieved a change of paradigm: women are not relegated to the margins in the current literary productions –neither as writers nor as characters; they have gained agency and are at the center of the discussions.

Despite the undeniable labor of organizations such as FEMRITE and the unquestionable progress in women writing, some authors continued to face difficulties to get their stories circulating. It was the case of Makumbi, who tried to publish a novel in 2003, but editors rejected it immediately. In 2012, she won the Kwani Manuscript prize in Kenya, and *Kintu* was published in this country in 2014, but continued to be dismissed for publication in the UK (even after winning the Commonwealth Short Story Prize). The novel was not distributed in America and the UK until 2018. Makumbi believes in

the importance of awakening the African publishing market, and suggests to do it with affordable prices. She addresses African readers in her narratives, more specifically Ugandan, and she intends to make Africa her market instead of producing for a Western audience (Kyomuhendo 41).

2.1. Feminisms and the Concept of Indigenous Feminism

The term “feminism” was not easily accepted by African women writers in general, and by Ugandans in particular. Miria Matembe narrates how in the early 90s she refused to be called a feminist because people would not listen if you identified as such, it was a “dangerous” word that came from the west and had nothing to do with Africa. She also mentions how “in Uganda, men and people in general are encouraged to take up new ideas and innovations from the West. Many things from the Western world are promoted as progressive. However, patriarchal society (...) designates new (progressive) ideas about gender as ‘foreign’ and ‘not suitable’ for Africans” (Matembe 437). Thus, women chose other words such as “womanists” or “women activists” as a strategy to make their voices heard. Nowadays, people have begun to accept the word and see it in a different light. Nonetheless, some black women prefer to distinguish themselves from Western hegemonical feminism and continue to use different terminology. It is the case of Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, who states

many black female novelists writing in English have understandably not allied themselves with radical white feminists; rather, they have explored the gamut of other positions and produced an exciting, fluid corpus that defies rigid categorization. More often than not, where a white woman writer may be a feminist, a black woman writer is likely to be a “womanist.” That is, she will recognize that, along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy (63-64).

Ogunyemi’s African womanism differs from Alice Walker’s womanism since she considers that African-American realities and contexts are not the African ones, since, among other things, they have to deal with “extreme poverty and in-law problems, older women oppressing younger women, women oppressing their co-wives, or men oppressing their wives” (Arndt, *African Gender Trouble* 714) as well as religious fundamentalism. However, she does not neglect cooperation between Western feminists and African

womanists, in the same vein that she acknowledges that it is vital to sensitize men about women's struggles. For the later, she suggests "one of the ways which they can become exposed to the idea of a change is not to use names like 'feminism.' This name would alienate them from our ideas. So you call it something else because it is something different. Then we do quarrel about having a colonized mind" (Arndt, *African Gender Trouble* 717). In addition to womanism, other names have been given to women's fight for emancipation and the negotiation of their equal rights: Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie's 'Stiwanism' and Obioma Nnaemeka's 'Nego-feminism' are some of the most important theories, developed in the continent and for the continent. For Nnaemeka, it is important to recognize the (many) forms of "possible" feminism in Africa and "feminist theory should be built on the indigenous" (Nnaemeka *Nego-feminism* 376), which "creates the feeling of ownership that opens the door to a participative, democratic process where stakeholders' imagination, values, and worldviews are taken into account while mitigating stakeholders' alienation, which could result from the invalidation of their worldviews and values" (Nnaemeka, *Nego-feminism* 377). Flexibility and adaptability are the key factors of the chameleonic feminism she defends, for she affirms African women theorizing feminism need to "walk like the chameleon—goal-oriented, cautious, accommodating, adaptable, and open to diverse views" (Nnaemeka, *Nego-feminism* 382). The term 'nego-feminism' stands for 'no ego' making reference to the shared values and the ability of negotiating around patriarchy in the different African cultures.

In regards to how African feminism is translated into African women's production, there is a significant contribution by Susan Arndt in "Perspectives on African Feminism: Defining and Classifying African-Feminist Literatures". As she echoes, the fact that there are African authors writing about African women does not imply that their texts can be considered feminist per se. In the same way that African feminism is not homogenous (and therefore we talk about feminisms in plural), African feminist texts are not all alike. Thus, Arndt classifies African feminist literature into three main currents depending on their content and form: reformist, transformative and radical. Reformist African-feminist texts are those in which it is accepted that the society is fundamentally patriarchal and therefore, women need to find alternatives of negotiation without trying to dismantle the system. Men are criticized as individuals, not as a group, and in some cases, they are able to overcome their discriminatory behavior inside the limits of the patriarchal structures. There is hope for reformation thanks to the alliance of men and

women (the narratives usually present some sort of ‘happy ending’) and criticism is only partial. Transformist African-feminist literature goes a step beyond: men are criticized more sharply, but they do have the capability to transform, albeit not radically, their behavior. As in reformist texts, men are criticized individually, having some more positive counterparts throughout the novels, and seen as potential allies (since they too are products or ‘victims’ of patriarchal patterns of thought). In addition, women who reproduce discriminatory patterns against other women are also presented, but there is the possibility of them moving onto a more accepting mindset towards progressive lifestyles. The most extreme of the author’s classification is the last tendency, the so-called radical African-feminist literature, in which men “inevitably and in principle discriminate and mistreat women” (Arndt, *Perspectives on African Feminism* 34). The texts present male individuals who in general are deeply sexist and immoral, by nature or as a consequence of their socialization. Men who disagree with the patriarchal structures or have a more inclusivist mindset are rare, and if they appear, they are completely powerless. These narratives are characterized by their pessimism: women lack perspectives of a better or fairer future (on the basis of different aspects such as socio-economic reasons and/or racial identity). The stories are mostly tragic, psychological and physical violence is present, and the only comfort or solace women are able to find, when they do, comes from other women. Although some novels might have elements from more than one tendency (once again proving that nothing that has to do with feminism can be homogenous), it is a remarkable classification to be able to discern which texts could be considered feminist. Reformist and transformist texts are more common, and one might wonder what are the reasons behind women writers trying to ‘negotiate’ instead of rebelling radically in their own writings. As Nnaemeka states (Nnaemeka, *From Orality to Writing*, 142), women writers are not only in the margins, but also on the edge of these margins: readers, critics and publishers are mostly male so, even in fiction, women writers are ‘obliged’ to maneuver characters and plots in which the acts of single men cannot be extrapolated to all of them. This situation has recently begun to change in the new generation of African women writers (Akwaeke Emezi, Buki Papillon, among others) who place radical female or non-binary characters at the very center of their narratives, and try to dismantle, to a lesser or greater extent, the inclination of negotiation with male personae. As I will argue in the next section, Makumbi’s novel is an amalgam of Arndt’s threefold categorization.

In the matter of feminism in *The First Woman*, I will analyze the text through the lenses of indigenous feminisms –understood as intersectional, postcolonial and with a special focus on rural communities for various reasons. Firstly, the most ‘radical’ and forward-thinking woman is the town’s witch, Nsuuta. Secondly, there is a variety of women characters that try to survive in male dominated spaces, each with their own personal views and levels of conformity or rebellion. Thirdly, Makumbi herself has recognized the intention of including ‘traditional feminisms’ in the book, as she mentions in an interview with Jill Owens: “For me — and this is how I have experienced feminism —(...) it’s everyday women waking up in the morning and finding ways to survive. These women tend to push, and they push against the patriarchy or oppression. When it gets too hard, they compromise, they cajole, they pretend to be weak, and then they push again” (Makumbi, Powell’s Interview). She explains how her ancestors would have never defined themselves as feminists –and this justifies why in the book feminism is called *mwenkanonkano*–, but their stories inspired her because they speak to feminism and are examples of how Ugandan women face difficulties (Makumbi, Powell’s Interview).

It is important to shed light on the term ‘indigenous’ as I use it in this paper. The word is described by Cambridge dictionary as “not foreign or from outside an area” and “used to refer, or related to, the people who originally lived in a place, rather than the people who moved there from elsewhere”,¹ but I find this last definition quite reductionist. In the case of colonized countries such as Uganda, the people ‘who moved there from elsewhere’, the colonizers, did not do so peacefully nor respectfully. On the contrary, their migration was not innocent, but it served a clear political purpose that resulted into the loss of power of traditional institutions, the vernacular languages being disregarded and, in some countries, prohibited, and the indigenous people submitting to foreign policies and Western ‘education’. For the purpose of this essay, I consider Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s approach more pertinent. Although she recognizes the term can be problematic, since “it appears to collectivize many distinct populations whose experiences under imperialism have been vastly different” (6), she delineates the phrase ‘indigenous peoples’ as a term that

internationalizes the experiences, the issues and the struggles of some of the world’s colonized peoples. The final ‘s’ in indigenous peoples’ has been argued for quite vigorously by indigenous activists because

of the right of peoples to self-determination. It is also used as a way of recognizing that there are real differences between different indigenous peoples. The term has enabled the collective voices of colonized people to be expressed strategically in the international arena. It has also been an umbrella enabling communities and peoples to come together, transcending their own colonized contexts and experiences, in order to learn, share, plan, organize and struggle collectively for self-determination on the global and local stages. Thus the world's indigenous populations belong to a network of peoples. They share experiences as peoples who have been subjected to the colonization of their lands and cultures, and the denial of their sovereignty, by a colonizing society that has come to dominate and determine the shape and quality of their lives, even after it has formally pulled out. (7)

Therefore, an 'indigenous feminism' would be the one stemming from the communities of indigenous women, who have lived a double discrimination: that of patriarchy (present in virtually every society in the world, pre and post-colonial) and that of colonization. It is the one Makumbi calls 'mwekanonkano' in *The First Woman*, the one that her ancestors practiced without even being aware of the implications it could have on global feminism(s).

3. *The First Woman*

3.1 Aquatic women, the original state and the relevance of folklore

Many African women writers, including Makumbi, have acknowledged to be "descendants of great female story-tellers in the oral tradition" (Nnaemeka, *From Orality to Writing*, 143). In *The First Woman* the importance of folk tales is key for the development of the story. In an interview, Makumbi explains how, during her studies in literature, she researched oral traditions and began thinking about the idea that, in her culture, women came from the sea. For her, it was important to interpret what these stories could mean today: "they are coded stories and all you have to do is to unpack, decode, and find out what they are doing — I had already worked out that most of them were pointing (...) that the first woman came from the sea. And so I connected that to the way women were being treated" (Makumbi, Powell's Interview). In these stories she saw an opportunity to explore feminism from an indigenous perspective, and she wanted to explore how Western feminism was destroying her culture. She saw the need to locate feminism

in her cultural context, and in order to do that, she needed to look at her people: since when were women oppressed? why and how did it happen? (Makumbi, Powell's Interview). In the novel, when Kirabo feels there must be something wrong with her because her mind dissociates from her body when she feels uncomfortable in her surroundings, she decides to consult the town witch, Nsuuta. Once in her house, Kirabo confesses " 'You know when people say *Don't do that, you are a girl?* (...) I wait until no one is around and do it'" (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 22-3) and "I hate chores, I hate kneeling and I cannot stand babies. Sometimes I feel squeezed inside this body as if there is no space. That is when one of me flies out" (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 23). Kirabo's thoughts clearly transgress the conservative expectations put on women, but Nsuuta explains this is not evil, it is the original state of women. According to the story her grandmothers had told her "[women] were not squeezed inside, we were huge, strong, bold, loud, proud, brave, independent. But it was too much for the world and they got rid of it. However, occasionally, that state is reborn in a girl like you. But in all cases it is suppressed. In your case the first woman flies out of your body because it does not relate to the way society is" (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 42). At the beginning of time, humans shared the Earth equally with animals and plants, but one day, humans started creating stories like the myth of Kintu (Buganda's Adam) to justify their dominion of Earth and therefore excluded women. The ancients believed women came from the sea and, therefore, they could not own land because it was men's territory. This myth was on detriment of women and had terrible consequences, as Nsuuta affirms:

"I think that in their *buziba* mind, the unconscious one, women were two things at once –aquatic and terrestrial. Human but fish, beautiful but grotesque, nurturing but malevolent. Today they are this shape; tomorrow they have shifted into something quite different –dubious, slippery, secretive and mysterious. What do you do with that? (...) Either you tame them, or you drive them back to the sea" (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 59).

This double identification –aquatic and terrestrial– can be read as a justification for the prevailing patriarchy women have suffered from ancient times. Indeed, Makumbi's interpretation of Bugandan folk tales in the novel helps her characters understand why and how they are subjected to male domination. According to Nsuuta's tale, men tamed women and they became "migrants" in land: they were not from there and therefore they were

the ones being sold and moving from place to place in marriage perpetuating patrilineal bonds and families. In Buganda specifically, many women were sold to the Arabs and had to move from their homelands. It cannot be said that, even though justified through the myth, discrimination towards women is rightful, for in the myth itself it is said that there was a time when women and men shared the Earth equally and in peace. The original state of women is the one that allows them to be complex, unwrapped, able to experience freedom and have rights, and not subjugated to the wishes of men. Thanks to story-telling, when Kirabo and Nsuuta talk about the situation of women in their community, they know how they have got there and can find ways to fight back. Nsuuta, who is the strongest character in the novel, was always aware of the fact that, in order to be free, she would have to resign from a lot of conventionalisms, even the ones she desired. When she was only a teenager, she decided she wanted to pursue her studies in the city. She wanted to be a nurse, and despite the fact that this idea was not welcomed in the town and it made her lose the love of her life – Kirabo’s grandfather, and her best friend – Kirabo’s grandmother, she chose this path until she lost her eyesight and had to return to town. Albeit the unfortunate turn of events in her life, Nsuuta is not bitter, she is a *woke* woman (in the modern definition of the term). She is also the one who has more self-determination and enjoys more liberties, for she does not mind what others say or think of her. Kirabo, hiding from her grandmother, listens attentively to Nsuuta’s stories, and they even have a story-telling contest. In those intimate, precious moments they share, Kirabo understands she is not immoral for not conforming to gender roles, but even though she learns to appreciate what she is, she is still too young and immature to fully grasp it and embrace it, so she asks Nsuuta to help her ‘bury’ her original state. Thus, by performing the burial, she tries to adapt to what society is asking of her, but the novel proves this is plainly unnatural for her. She stops ‘flying out’ of rooms, but her progressive ideas keep developing. She observes how other women act against patriarchy and is aware of the negotiations she has to do to keep a certain amount of freedom. If we consider Arndt’s categorization, Nsuuta would be a radical feminist character while Kirabo would be a transformist. According to Nsuuta’s tales, all men are perpetrators of their hegemony by nature, and even her own personal story is tragic. She has survived only because she has been virtually isolated from everybody after losing her eyesight, and because of the former relationship she had with Kirabo’s grandfather, who is very influential in the town. However, Kirabo believes some men have the ability

to transform and do better, and also her journey proves it (her grandfather gives her land after her dad's passing, against the wishes of the townsmen and even though she has a male brother; and her teenage sweetheart, who has cheated on her due to the pressure of being virgin, is presented later as an ally in 'mwenekanonkano'). Radical and transformist ideas face each other at the very end of the book, when Nsuuta shows Kirabo her disappointment when she realizes she will probably get married. "I thought you would fly (...) break rules, upset things, laying waste to everything right and moral. I guess you really clipped your wings and buried them" (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 430). For Nsuuta, marriage and the 'respect' that comes with it threatens the fire inside women. Kirabo's answer shows her tendency to negotiate with men instead of the rebellious character Nsuuta had been expecting: "Every woman resists. Often it is private. Most of our resistance is so everyday that women don't think twice about it. It is life. Even the worst of us, like aunt YA (...) are not really shrinking but managing their men" (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 430). This argument is insufficient for Nsuuta, who, at the end of her life, has only one petition for Kirabo: to pass on the story of the first woman. The story was given to her by what she defines as 'women in captivity' (her grandmothers) and was "their act of resistance" (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 431). It is an undeniable call for hope. Perhaps Kirabo has not turned to be the radical person Nsuuta wanted, but she is a woman who questions women's roles and defies society's standards in her own way. At nineteen, the only thing she knows for sure is she wants to go to university and be free. She affirms she wants to "get rid of this hymen" before she gets married (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 417), but she does not realize just yet that true freedom requires a more extreme disengagement from patriarchal norms.

Traditionally, history and empirical facts have been opposed to myth, memory and fiction in Western discourses. However, as Ellis points out: "even a historian who spurns story-telling still creates a narrative in some shape or form, implied by the type of facts selected and the sequence into which they are fitted" (3). In history too, information is selected, interpreted and told subjectively (objectivity is virtually impossible for human beings, since even unconsciously, your set of values will have implications on how you filter information). Folktale is as old as humanity, it was the way our ancestors tried to explain what they could not understand. They needed to give meaning to life and death, sexuality and fertility, the cosmos and the stars, the weather and the seasons. It was also the way to transmit knowledge gathered from one generation to another. Makumbi highlights exceptionally

well the importance of myths seeing that through them, we create stories about ourselves and about others: “myth-making is a tool to find a voice” (Makumbi, *Life is about Making Myth*) and in *The First Woman*, the voice is heard loud and clear. Recognizing indigenous ways of knowledge and art is one of the most significant ways of decolonizing dominant methodologies; it makes visible the spaces of agency in which women of marginalized feminism(s) have operated and it shows how women are rejecting conventions by using traditional chants, sayings and stories. Through these methods, these silenced voices can become visible for academic discourses (Chilisa & Ntseane). When talking about the role women had in oral tradition(s), it is safe to say they were at the center: “women were not only performers and disseminators of beliefs, cultural ideals, and personal/collective history, but also composers who, sometimes, transformed and re-created an existing body of oral traditions in order to incorporate woman-centered perspectives” (Nnaemeka, *From Orality to Writing* 138). Nowadays, it is women writers the ones taking the stand and making efforts to ‘adapt’ these stories with the purpose of achieving a more egalitarian and fairer society.

3.2 The ‘ruins’: Demonization of women’s bodies and intimacy

The way in which women are discriminated is evident throughout the novel. Even to Kirabo’s childish eyes, the differences between men and women in society are remarkable. At an early age, she learns from her aunts and grandmother that she needs to kneel and cross her legs. Even the boys would order her to do so when she forgets. Performing these submissive acts is physically painful for her: “inside she was tremulous with palpitations. Revulsions, self-disgust and anger tore at her; she never chose to be born with that *thing*” (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 13). Women carry bad luck in their bodies (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 63) and this idea is ingrained in every girl’s mind, as when Kirabo thinks about her intimacy with embarrassment: “the foulness of her nakedness was the one thing that made her want to tear herself out of her body and bury it. It vexed, revolted and sickened her. At home, she had to hide her knickers after washing them so boys would not see them, even though they could display their underwear in the open (...) She had never seen Grandmother’s knickers; in fact, the idea of them felt vulgar.” (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 64) For Kirabo, the problem was ‘down there’, “her whatnot would put the fire out” (Ibid.). Women refer to their parts as “the ruins”, “the burden” (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 64-65) and some of them believed that their worth depended on their vagina (Makumbi, *The*

First Woman 66). Kirabo wonders why women are nasty with other women and Nsuuta explains the concept of *kweluma*: “That is when oppressed people turn on each other or on themselves and bite. It is a form of relief. If you cannot bite your oppressor, you bite yourself” (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 66). Repression is a part of their everyday life, it has become so normalized that only a few women dare to question it. An instance of this is when Nsuuta tells Kirabo how her grandmother had a beautiful deep singing voice that now hides to appear more feminine, and she links it one more time to the power men have had over women:

‘We hunched, lowered our eyes, voices, acted feeble, helpless. Even being clever became unattractive. Soon, being shrunken became feminine. Then it became beautiful and women aspired to it. That was when we began to persecute our original state out of ourselves. Once we shrunk, men had to look after us, and it was not long before they started to own us. Fathers sold daughters; husbands bought wives. (...) Even our bodies do not belong to us. That is why when they need it, they will grab it.’ (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 67).

Women’s bodies are clearly demonized in the village. If a woman decides to sleep with somebody, she would “get spoilt” or “go bad”, which was “so total, so irreversible, so disgusting, she became rubbish on the roadside” (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 84). This happens to Gayi, Kirabo’s youngest aunt, who is dating a man and has to endure verbal and physical abuse from the town: “Any man –drunks, riff-raff, sweat-stinking labourers – would ask her for sex as if they were entitled to it” (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 84). She is then expelled from the main house and is only allowed to continue going to school because her grandfather is benevolent and highly appreciates education, although eventually she runs away. Women are devoid of agency, especially those who fall in love or have less economic means. They are not allowed in the important meetings where decisions about inheritance are taken for them, and when girls turn a certain age, they are kept under supervision because “boys and men were wolves –they had this overwhelming desire which, if stirred, made them animals” and “it fell on girls not to awaken the animal” (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 104). The novel shows how there are no consequences for men who indulge in promiscuous behavior. However, when Kirabo attends boarding school, the girls who are found pregnant have to leave the premises without even collecting their belongings nor saying goodbye to their colleagues “as if pregnancy was contagious” (Makumbi, *The*

First Woman 183). They are never again to be educated, while the boys who make them pregnant will continue their lives normally. In school, Kirabo learns about *mwenkanonkano* and “the mighty vagina”. Despite the efforts of the nuns, some girls had feminist discussions and comment on the power of sexuality, thanks to which Kirabo begins to appreciate her own body. She continues to develop a non-conformist character with the help of her aunt Abi, who talks to her about women’s rights and female sexuality and teaches her about labia elongation: “[it] is the one thing we do for ourselves. It is for when you start having sex. (...) If you land on the kind of man who does not know what to do, pack your bags and come home” (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 136). For Aunt Abi, vaginas are not something to be ashamed of, but on the contrary, she describes them as “magical” (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 136). She also tells her how important it is to be independent and to own land and a house: “until the law starts to protect us, we must find ways” (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 380). Little by little, Kirabo starts looking and examining herself differently, to the point that she lets Sio, her teenage sweetheart, look at her intimately too. Thus, she is timidly gaining self-agency and rediscovering what is being a woman *for her*, beyond the gender roles reproduced and required all around in her society. It is true that her transformation is not radical, and it seems that she still has a long way ahead in order to untame herself and recover her original state (she buries it and never recovers it), but perhaps having her embrace such power in a coming-of-age novel (at the end she is no more than twenty) would have been too unrealistic. In this manner, Makumbi has portrayed an array of characters that could be representative of any Bugandan family: radical characters (Nsuuta, Aunt Abi), transformist (Kirabo), and conformist ones (aunt YA).

4. “The minute we fall silent, someone will fill the silence for us”

“In the beginning was Africa/orality/the word and the word
was women’s.”

Obioma Nnaemeka (“From Orality to Writing”, 137)

Makumbi wanted to explore and portray women’s oppression in her Ugandan context because she feels Western feminism is failing to take hold in her country. In the novel, Nsuuta is aware of the need of an intersectional feminism. She complains about the things she hears on the radio because there is no real representation of Buganda women in feminist conferences: “Even though we are all women, we stand in different positions and see

things differently” (Makumbi, *The First Woman* 70). She knows that most of the women who are speaking out are white and privileged, and cannot help but wonder what would it be like if women from her community were also present. The old village woman understands the importance of looking out for herself and fighting for her rights within her context. She knows that her vision of the world is not Western, for she has had a westernized schooling and can firmly make a distinction. On the other hand, albeit she has not received a ‘feminist education’, through myth-making, she shows the importance of female solidarity and self-agency. To some extent, she embodies ancient knowledge and power. Thus, Makumbi is purportedly writing about women who challenge western rationalism: “There are so many ways of knowing. The West has imposed a cerebral way of knowing onto the world and will not accept (...) things like intuition, premonition, dreams, that kind of thing has been bundled up and thrown away as old wives’ tales. But I think, wait. Do not dare throw away this way of knowing, because it has not been interrogated. The West has thrown it away, but we don’t have to” (Makumbi, *So Many Ways of Knowing*). By looking at the past and honoring ancestral stories, she is centering the voices that have been invalidated or disregarded and proving how they can become tools of resistance. In words of Linda Tuhiwai Smith: “coming to know the past has been part of the critical pedagogy of decolonization. To hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges” (34). Even through fiction, Makumbi has accomplished to weave a story that feels real, and that is appreciative of her territory’s oral literature. Through her characters, one can come closer to what it was like to be a woman in Uganda during Idi Amin’s regime: women who, in some cases, were accepting patriarchy and perpetuating it; others who recognized it and negotiated ways in which they could be less oppressed; and others who could not bear the yoke and were brave enough to fight against it. Above all these voices, there is one that fills the silence and retakes the power, the perfect successor for Nsuuta, and it is no other than Makumbi herself. In contemporary Uganda, female writing is living a contemporary, hard-earned (re)naissance thanks to the labor of women writers and their refusal to remain silent, unpublished, untold.

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Notas

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