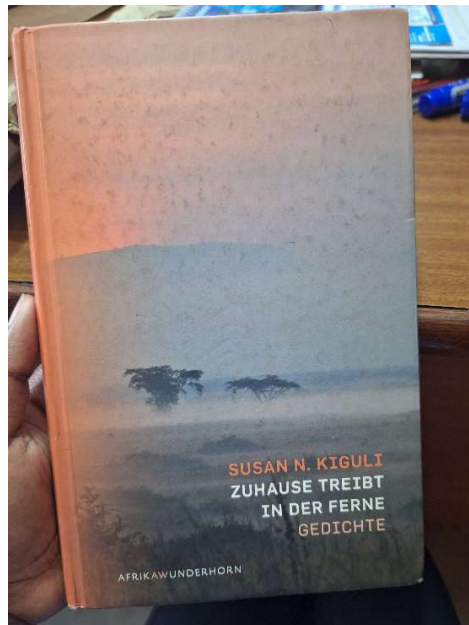


ART & LITERATURE IN UGANDA: Susan Nalugwa Kiguli

Text & Interview by Justine Nassazi



Susan Nalugwa Kiguli is an academic and poet. She is an Associate Professor and served as Head of the Department of Literature, Makerere University (March 2012- July 2016). She holds a PhD in English from The University of Leeds (UK) sponsored by the Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme. She also has a Masters of Letters in Literary Linguistics from the University of Strathclyde, (UK), Masters of Arts (Literature) and a B.A. Education degree both from Makerere University, Uganda. She is the African Studies Association Presidential Fellow, 2011 and this presented her with an opportunity to read her poetry at the Library of Congress, Washington DC in November, 2011. She has also held the American Council of Learned Societies/ African Humanities Fellowship, 2010-2011 sponsored by Carnegie Corporation of New York, and as part of the fellowship, she was a researcher in Residence at the Centre for Humanities Research at the University of Western Cape, South Africa. Her research interests fall mainly in the area of Oral and Written African Poetry, Popular Song and Performance Theory. She has served as the chairperson of FEMRITE, Uganda Women Writers' Association. She currently serves on the Advisory Board for the African Writers Trust (AWT) and on the board of the Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies Conference Series.

Justine: As a female writer what do you believe your role and importance in poetry.

SK: I am one of the founder members of Femrite, an association of female writers that encourages females to write, helping those who have written to come out to the public. I am writer who is also a teacher and my role is to equip my class with the techniques to write incase they get the inspiration to do so. Even in my poetry classes I inspire my students to write so as to familiarize them with the required content and styles to write.

I open up opportunities for my students to see beyond the conventional reading practices but to show them what is available and how they can approach and make the best of what is availed to them.

Justine: A number of your poems focus on women, and how they are treated unjustly and oppressed in the society. What inspires you to write in that line?

SK: I believe that because I occupy the female world, by virtue of that I interact with many female persons, young and old and I also interact with males but I feel that the female world is what I know best. I feel that the woman question sometimes is not given enough attention even when people say emancipation, I feel that our society is still a patriarchal one that sees from the dominance of men.

I think if we came with voices that talked about the lived experiences of women, their aspirations, their challenges, victories. There are many unsung heroines or even when sung not enough attention is given because of the framework in which they are working. Given that I know the female world more intimately than my fellow male writers, I can be able to give a glimpse into what women's lives are like. Its us to speak and write for us and activism is an important part of the African Writer whether male or female to be able to advocate for spaces where people could speak despite being less privileged without being marginalized or oppressed.

Justine: You have been associated with many big names. How did you build your network in poetry?

SK: My secondary school which was Gayaza High School, was centered on the pursuit of excellence without seeking the limelight. It instilled in me the belief that one's efforts can make a difference, even if it's in changing the circumstances of just one person within your sphere. This philosophy has guided me to consistently work hard, with honesty, and a commitment to doing my best in all endeavors.

My conviction is rooted in the understanding that women in Uganda often face limited opportunities. I strongly believe that every woman fortunate enough to receive an education should become an epitome of inspiration, offering support and guidance to others. I am a firm believer in the inherent value of every individual.

I had the privilege of being taught by Hon. Mary Karoro Okurut, and the dedicated lecturers at my university played a pivotal role in shaping my academic journey. Through their support, I

earned the position of a teaching assistant. This network proved invaluable, opening doors and creating opportunities that would have been otherwise elusive. While I recognize the significance of hard work in this journey, the connections forged at Makerere University played a crucial role in placing me in influential circles, allowing me to achieve things beyond my expectations. The university experience itself became a gateway to numerous opportunities.

Justine: What challenges have you faced in your writing career?

SK: The challenges in my writing journey have been diverse, and I've learned to navigate them one day at a time. Initially, there was a prevailing belief that poetry doesn't sell, a notion that started to change, in part, with initiatives like Femrite. However, the publishing landscape in the country still requires significant improvement to foster an environment where high-quality work is consistently published. The rise of self-publishing, while providing a platform, has also brought about concerns related to accuracy and peer review. Workshops and similar forums could contribute significantly to enhancing the overall quality of published content.

Motivating people to read and write remains a substantial hurdle. Potential writers often lack accessible avenues for learning and growth. Consequently, building a community of writers and artists that commands respect and challenges stereotypes about those in the performing arts becomes a constant battle.

Being not just a writer but also a teacher adds another layer of complexity. Balancing my limited time between teaching and writing requires careful consideration and strategic planning.

Justine: Do you have values that you hold important in your career?

SK: Absolutely, values are integral to my career. As I mentioned earlier, one of the core values that guide me is Excellence. I recall Professor Austin Bukonya's wisdom when he told Ngugi Wathiongo that he inspires and they aspire. Numerous role models surround us, shaping our aspirations and influencing our paths.

Respect, humanity, integrity, honesty, and a commitment to excellence form the foundation of my values. I place a strong emphasis on hard work, focus, and the importance of setting and striving for goals. Additionally, I believe in the guiding hand of God, relying on faith for direction and assistance in my journey.

Staying true to one's values, especially in the face of challenges, is a principle I hold dear. Sisterhood and brotherhood are essential; as humans, we must actively listen to each other and muster the courage to speak up when something is amiss. These values, collectively, contribute to shaping not only my career but also the way I engage with the world around me.

Justine: What do you particularly look forward to in your career.

SK: 5 years from now, I would like for the Arts to have a standing in this community, for people to remember what their cultural heritage is, and what the present situation is and for them to be able to relate across from what was before that they remember and what is now. I want poetry

to be able to speak to people, to be able to be something used to teach each other, to have people read and to be able to have people who do spoken word be listened to and to build values for the community because 'the word' is very powerful.

Justine: What advice would you give to an aspiring writer as a successful writer?

SK: While I hesitate to label myself as successful, I am earnestly doing my best within the constraints of my circumstances. There's always the potential to achieve more, but external factors may limit the extent of what I can do. Nevertheless, I consistently strive to give my best.

For aspiring writers, my advice is to approach your craft with utmost dedication and focus. Develop a clear plan, understanding where you fit into the larger picture of your aspirations. Stay attuned to your surroundings, be vigilant about opportunities, recognize your potential, and be mindful of the potential in others. Act on these insights. Success in writing often stems from giving your very best, being aware of your environment, and seizing opportunities with purpose.

Written by;

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