

# African feminist literature as a gateway to knowledge

by Helena Kreiensiek, *Freelance Foreign Correspondent*

***In 2020, at the height of the Covid-Pandemic, Phyllis Katembwe und Crystal Mugimba founded an online bookstore in Uganda with the goal to support African writers and increase accessibility to literature.***

## **What is Mahiri Books and who are the people behind it?**

We started in September 2020 during the height of the Corona pandemic. So Mahiri Books was born during that time when we were all dreaming, we were all locked in and there was, I would say, a lot of people looking for outlets, especially to read, to learn, gain knowledge. At the moment we can only be found online under [www.mahiribooks.com](http://www.mahiribooks.com). But we are about to open our first one. It's a collaboration with Endiro Coffee, a café chain, and we will be launching by the end of the year.

## **What does "Mahiri" mean?**

Mahiri comes from Swahili and it could be translated with "fun, witty, smart". The name, you could say, is inspired by the books that we want to sell. Currently that's children's books, non-fiction and fiction books. We source them from different publishers across the world, many of them locally, from Ugandan authors and publishers or around East Africa.

## **Is this also your mission? To make African authors more known?**

Yes, definitely. Christa and I have always been avid readers since we were little. We like reading fiction, especially the African genre. Based off that, we just wanted to make sure that African literature is made more accessible in Uganda. We are a female-led business and it's very important for us to highlight female authors as well. When you browse our website you will notice this. We have many books written by female authors with strong female protagonists to inspire women. It's very important to see yourself on a page as you read it, and we thought that it would be amazing if we had many of these titles, because the truth is they did not exist, or weren't accessible to us when growing up. But by now we see more and more African writers coming up, especially female writers, and so we intent on trying to source these particular books and make them available here in Uganda. That's why we also have a concierge service. A lot of our customers had difficulties finding a particular title. We believe that we have bridged that gap through our concierge service where we are able to source a different array of titles from across the world right to your doorstep here in Uganda. Another wish of ours is to build a community of lifelong readers in Uganda.

## **As a female-led book store, what kind of challenges did you encounter along the way?**

Starting a business always comes with its challenges. We were trying to build a platform and curate a website that put would put across our vision effectively and that took a lot of time and effort. We also source a lot of our books from publishers across the world and sometimes we faced some logistical delays in getting the books here in good time.

**What distinguishes Mahiri Books from other booksellers in Uganda?**

I think the biggest one is, with us being both being women, that we really put an emphasis on books written by female authors . Now these are accessible in Uganda – and this is also a feedback which we have been getting. Many of our customers thought that these books could only be bought on Amazon or in other parts of the world. With Mahiri Books we are trying to bridge this gap and offer a platform where African authors are showcased – but books from all over the world can be accessed easily here too.

**Are there Ugandan books that have become very popular?**

Yes, indeed. We feel like Ugandan books have become popular. I feel like they were probably not as highlighted enough up until now. To give an example, Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, who wrote “The first woman”, has become very popular. Both within Uganda and internationally. She's a very prolific writer, and she's writing about things that us Ugandans grew up with and are familiar with. We could see that there's a huge community of people who resonated with her. And so it was so important that the book was accessible. Ugandan literature is really celebrated and devoured by not just Ugandans but people across the world. And it's a way for people from outside of Uganda to learn more about our people and traditions.

**And how would you say is feminist women's literature doing in general in Uganda? What advice would you give a young aspiring Ugandan woman who wants to become a writer?**

I feel like feminist literature is doing really well. There's a keen interest. Black feminist authors have always been at the cornerstone of literature. Even more encouraging is that educational texts from voices like Bell Hooks, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Maree Brown are becoming more mainstream in Uganda. It's great to see the momentum critical to amplifying women's voices, challenging patriarchal norms, and advocating for equality. We're extremely glad to be able to use our platform for that. So as advice I would say; be fearless. Don't be afraid to step into the deep waters of writing. There are so many resources around you. Even within Uganda. Us, Mahiri books for example. Because we are distributors of books we work a lot with publishers and interact with different authors. We are very happy and we've done it in the past to connect writers to different resources, be it publishers or other Ugandan writers, just so that they can get started on that journey. It will be amazing to eventually one day read your work and have it in our shop.

**Why is literature so important to you as a person, but also in general?**

Literature, I believe, is not just something you do leisurely or for fun. Okay, people have different reasons why they read, but even without going into it really intentionally I feel like reading is a gateway to knowledge. Reading teaches empathy and teaches you to understand different perspectives that exist out there. Sometimes these are perspectives you never thought about until you opened those pages. Reading contributes to personal growth.