

Makerere Honors Novelist Goretta Kyomuhendo: Re- Launches “Whispers from Vera” Novel

Makerere University on Saturday 26th August 2023 honored novelist and literary activist, Goretta Kyomuhendo, during the closing ceremony of the 6th Mashariki {Eastern Africa} Literary and Cultural Studies Conference held at the Yusuf Lule Auditorium.

The three day conference was organized by Makerere University College of Humanities & Social Sciences {CHUSS} in collaboration with the University of Witwatersrand and the British Academy.

The closing ceremony and book launch (Whispers from Vera) was presided over by Uganda’s iconic musical composer and performer who is also, Head of Afrigo Band, Papa Moses Matovu.

Matovu described Kyomuhendo’s recognition as a celebration of the Africa’s and East African culture and his role as Chief Guest, as a beautiful song and monumental.

“I am moved by the determination of the academia to protect and promote our culture through platforms such as Mashariki Literary and Cultural Studies conference.

Loud support of Arts is very important and as Afrigo, we celebrate 48 years of existence and we extend knowledge of cultural importance of how our people are attached to their identity and culture through music”, Papa Matovu noted.

As composer with experience in using music to transform communities, Matovu expressed the need to preserve culture on grounds that music and culture helps share experiences of who people are, why they exist and what they should do.

Goretta Kyomuhendo

Kyomuhendo is famous female writer and scholar who rose from a newspaper columnist to a novelist.

Dr. Edgar Nabutanyi, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Literature, in his introduction, described Kyomuhendo as “One of the best Ugandan female writers”. She has published four books including; “Whispers from Vera”, “The First Daughter” and “Secrets No More”. She is also the first Director of FEMRITE, Nabutanyi said.

Kyomuhendo gave a brief background about her novel “Whispers from Vera” during a panel discussions before it was re – launched. She said the book, which is about two sisters from different settings sharing experiences, started as a serialized column in the then Ugandan Newspaper *the Crusader*.

“Whispers from Vera” started as a column in a newspaper called *The Crusader*. However, within one year, the newspaper closed down and in 2002, I changed it to a novel”, she explained.

“Raised in a dusty town called Hoima, at the age of 14, I came across a copy of “Things Fall Apart”. After reading, it touched my life and I drafted a letter to Chinua Achebe {deceased Nigerian Novelist} requesting him to kindly help me meet Okonkwo and Umuofia to which

letter I never received a reply. In 1997, I was invited to the UK for a conference in which I met Chinua Achebe". She disclosed.

Whispers documents Vera's experiences as she navigates through the lows and highs of motherhood and the wifehood of a middle class, modern day, Ugandan career woman. Generally, it documents the experiences of a young woman grappling with living in her context.

Kyomuhendo stated that her novels depict strong women who can stand on their own and question things on society. "Vera is the strongest character that I have ever written", she said.

Why Kyomuhendo chose to Rewrite the "Whispers from Vera"

Whispers from Vera is Kyomuhendo's third novel about a young woman called Vera .When the novel opens, she is 29years old and when it closes, she is about to turn 40 years old.

It is a story of Vera's life as she grapples and navigates through what it means to be a woman, a wife, a mother, a daughter, daughter in-law , a career woman who is struggling to advance her career amidst all issues that she is dealing with.

Kyomuhendo said they were celebrating the 20th edition of this novel. It was first published by the Monitor newspaper 20years ago that is 2002 but then it ran out of print because the publisher sold off the rights for that book to another publishers., so it has been out of print for over 20 years.

"What prompted me to re-write and rework it was, when it was in existence, it was a very popular story and I can attribute that to the story being relatable. So, most people who see it, they see themselves in the story,"

The young women who are struggling to find the so called Mr. Right and then, when they find him, there are challenges. Motherhood or wifehood of dealing with extended family, how to advance your career and all challenges that come with that.

So for me, it is a story that many people relate to and see themselves in it and I wanted it to be back in print." She said.

Panel discussion and insights into,"Whispers from Vera"

A panel of five including Ms. Goretti Kyomuhendo herself, Dr. Isaac Tibasiima,, Dr. Lynda Spencer, Dr. Evelyn Cindy Magara, and Ms. Racheal Kizza chaired by Dr. Susan Kiguli and Dr. Edgar Nabutanyi shared insights into, "Whispers from Vera", describing how the narrations in the book relate to the day-to-day lives.

The panel theme was titled, "The Journey of Goretti Kyomuhendo's "Whispers from Vera" .

From a serial text to a novella to a novel, the book guides us on how to cope with challenges in our lives. According to Lynda Spencer, *Whispers from Vera* highlights the characters and features of a young lady grappling with living in a young context.

“In this book, the men are not so much important. Most of the women in this book are in their 30s and above. They are of the working class and they tend to concentrate on their jobs. They have disposable incomes and have a special “I time”.

They are not afraid to talk about sex and any sexual subject”. Spencer noted that, “Whispers from Vera talks about women’s inferiority, women’s experiences and position in marriage”.

Dr. Isaac Tibasiima said, he enjoys reading the novel. “I enjoy stories. It is interesting to read a novel that keeps you wondering who the next character is.

The things that Vera is going through are the same things that I saw my mother go through. Vera has a strength that I saw in my mother.” Dr. Tibasiima recalled how his mother struggled to raise a family of three without their father.

Dr. Evelyn Cindy Magara said that she has introduced Kyomuhendo’s work to her children.

“A prolific writer with four novels in her name, I applaud you Goretti. In this era where children are so much addicted to TV and phones and lack what to read, I have introduced my children to Goretti’s novels”, she said.

Racheal Kiiza said, “Whispers from Vera” is a good relation of how Ugandans use humor. “As Ugandans, we process through humor”.

The session Chair, Dr. Susan Kiguli highly recommended the novel. “I recommend that you read it”.

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