

## John Rusimbi's novels: a contribution to Rwanda Education

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### Abstract

*This article discusses the role of John Rusimbi's novels in the development of Rwanda national Literature. Although a tradition of imaginative literature has existed in oral forms, and served to foster national identity and national consciousness, written literature is an essential contemporary national expression that needs to be developed. Noting the paucity of written literature in Rwanda, the article argues that being a pioneer Rwanda novelist writing in the English Language, Rusimbi will inspire other writers. The critical analysis of his two novels demonstrates their merits as suitable pedagogical texts. The novels reflect the history of post-colonial Rwanda from an insider's point of view and refract on the conditions of his country. The thematic concerns of exile, effects of genocide and national reconstruction make the novels essential reading for Rwanda children and should find a place in the school curriculum. The article proposes the reader response approach to teachers of Literature as a useful tool for engaging fruitfully with the texts.*

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**Key Words:** National Literature, pedagogical texts, school curricula, national identity, national consciousness

### Introduction

John Rusimbi's novels, *By the Time She Returned* (1998) and *The Hyena's wedding: The Untold Horrors of Genocide* (2008) set him out as a pioneer Rwandan novelist writing in the English Language. This paper is an appraisal of Rusimbi's contribution to Rwanda national Literature. The novel genre is rarity in Rwanda creative arts, although a few writers have attempted the genre in Kinyarwanda and French. François Xavier Gasimba's *Isiha Rusahuzi* and *Indege y'Ubumwe* novellas have attracted critical attention locally, and quite a number of Rwandans have written full length novels in French notably Sehene Benjamin's *Le Piège Ethnique (The Ethnic Trap)* (1999) and *Le Feu sous la soutane (Fire under the Cassock)*, (2005). An older generation novelist Saverio Nayigiziki published *Escapade rwandaise (Rwanda Adventure)* (1950) and *L'Optimiste (the optimist)* (1954).

The two novels by Rusimbi have been influenced by Rwanda's post colonial history and contribute to the discourses of post colonial conflicts that have afflicted his country from an insider's perspective. The narratives interrogate colonial legacy and inept post- colonial leadership that led to disunity and political instability. This paper attempts to show Rusimbi's contribution in the context of Nadine Godimer's proclamation that Literature demonstrates the capacity of people to write their own histories.

The concept of National Literatures, though controversial in literary circles, is undoubtedly an imperative for national consciousness and development. Russian literary critic Belinsky emphasizing the centrality of national literature in the life of a nation said that "The universal idea speaks through humanity itself, and differently through each nation in each stage of history" and further asserts that "the need for a national literature changes according to the moment the nation is experiencing" (<http://www.the-guardian.com/book/blog>). This view is further elaborated thus:

*"With storytelling comes a sense of identity. But national Literatures evolve in stages, and the need for a literature of one's own changes according to the political situation of the nation in question. A new nation, or a nation struggling to declare its independence, will be driven to*

*create something that is theirs, a literature that tells their national story” (ibid).*

Literature in its diverse forms has been the bedrock of the formation of nations and nationalism. Myths of origin or foundational fictions constitute the origins of national traditions on which nations are based. In Rwanda the myths of Kigwa, Gakondo and others played a fundamental role in national formation by creating discourses that delineate a community of Banyarwanda, with a shared heritage. Modern literature, in the written form, complements oral literature to map out national progress as it is more accessible, in book form, and deals with contemporary issues of the society.

According to Ngugi wa Thiongo (1997), a nation’s literature, which is a sum total of the products of many individuals in that society is both a reflection of that people’s collective reality and also an embodiment of that people’s way of looking at the world and their place in its making. After the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, a new nation was born. Subsequent socio-political developments and struggles by Rwandans to build a new society that ensued are captured in the two novels. Rusimbi’s narratives, as will be demonstrated later, reflect on the reality of post-colonial Rwanda, particularly the experience of exile and the struggles to reconstruct the country after the genocide. The dominant themes in the two novels, rather than their artistic merit, qualify them to be central to the Rwanda school curriculum.

The importance of national literature in curricula has been underscored by African scholars. Recognizing this imperative in the 1970s, lecturers at the University of Nairobi championed the move to replace the supremacy of English Literature and cultures with African Literatures and cultures in Kenyan Schools, Colleges and University. They proposed a new organizing principle which meant the study of Kenyan literature and East African Literature, African Literature, third world literature, and literature from the rest of the world, in that order. The lecturers’ contention that Literature encountered in colonial school system and universities made African children experience the world as defined and reflected in the European experience of history rendering their world view eurocentric (Ngugi, 1986). The pedagogic principle that education is a means of knowledge about us renders their argument plausible. They argued that;

*“Therefore, after we have examined ourselves, we radiate outwards and discover peoples and worlds around us. With Africa at the centre of things, not existing as appendix or satellite of the countries and literatures, things must be seen from the African perspective” (Ngugi, 1986).*

The decision to put Kenyan literature in a dominant position though commendable posed a problem as Kenya had few creative writers in the 1970s. Against the backdrop of the paucity of written/modern Kenyan literature (the literary genres of the novel, drama, and poetry), the Kenyan scholars in their “quest for relevance” called for placing oral Literature (orature) at the centre of Literature syllabus arguing that it was a rich and many-sided art that did not end yesterday – a living tradition that would supplement modern African literature (ibid). Since then a lot of field of work has been done and oral literature books from Kenya have been published. The lesson to learn from Kenya is that the

importance of literature in school curriculum expressed by university lecturers, was embraced by the entire education sector and the results are evident. Today, Kenyan novelists, playwrights poets and folklore are widely studied at home and abroad.

The Ministry of education in Rwanda launched a new school curriculum on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2015, which for the first time included literature as a compulsory at “O” level. This development is significant because the benefits of studying literature are many and crucial: Literature is interesting and educative, helps us to improve self expression and sharpens our critical thinking. Rwanda could borrow from the Kenyan experience to address the issue of immense capital of national literature. We have plethora of oral literature from a rich heritage of myths, legends, poetry etc. which can packaged for the education purposes, and taught alongside written literature.

Rusimbi’s contribution is significant as his works provide a base on which to develop appropriate literature syllabus and are certainly an inspiration to potential writers. Since all Rwandan children share the same history and the same linguistic background they can gain a lot from Rusimbi’s novels compared to novels whose settings are in remote environments. Below briefly I discuss the novels to show their merits as useful contemporary pedagogical texts.

The major strength of Rusimbi’s novels is their subject matter; the discourses of home and exile. He projects Rwanda’s post-colonial condition by exploring the life of exile, the struggle to re-establish order, genocide and its aftermath. Rwanda’s story or troubled history is told from an insider’s perspective. The first novel *By the Time She Returned* draws heavily from exilic experience of the writer, although the novel was published a few years after his return from exile. The novel portrays the forced exile of Tutsis from their homeland in 1959/60. The exile that lasted over decades received little attention from the international community and successive governments in Rwanda never attempted to resolve it.

The novel depicts the sorrows of exile, cultural alienation and marginalization engendered by forced migration, the impact of exile on the psyche of refugees and the desire to return home (Brah, 1995). The experiences expressed in the novel are useful resources for those involved in teaching social sciences as well as humanities as the novel interrogates the notion of nation and identity.

The motifs of helplessness, deprivation and uncertainty are Rusimbi’s narrative strategy to highlight the condition of his characters that are cluster characters or representative characters. The novel opens with the birth of a son to Seba and Muka the central characters. The baby is born in a one- roomed habitation in a Kampala slum they share with Seba’s sister Kaitesi. The baby is not received with the usual excitement and tender care for both the baby and mother because of poverty and deprivation.

The circumstances surrounding the birth evoke images of marginal existence of the main characters through whom the conditions of exile are portrayed. Even when the baby is taken to his grandmother, Mukakigeli, in a refugee settlement, abject poverty is evident. The grandmother’s home is a door-less grass thatched hut whose occupant “Sluggishly got up and greeted us in a tone full of misery”. She is a widow who lost her husband during the massacres

of 1959/60 in Rwanda. Mukakigeli does not only serve to demonstrate the condition of exile but also as a link with the past as well as a purveyor of collective memory and identity.

The Seba family's journey to the Refugee settlement enables readers to experience the frustration of refugees; lack of basic amenities and neglect by their country of asylum, conditions that lead many a refugee to a state of resignation with some resorting to antisocial tendencies like alcoholism: This is expressed by Mukakigeli while justifying excessive consumption of illicit liquor thus;

*“This drink is good for tough men. Men who have survived fire, drinking and talking about their past. The heroic past of ancestral kings and chiefs who refused to sell our people to slave dealers. Our Kingdom was powerful and beautiful. Kings like Rwabugili were superhuman. He had enlarged our kingdom to the size of Rwanda. When he died, Belgians took advantage. They divided, ruled and massacred our people. Those who survived ran to strange lands, so let, them drink as they think about themselves-their bravely, stupidity and their cowardice as well” (52).*

Mukakigeli raises the issues of nationalism, praising ancestors whose heroic deeds and great assemblage created a moral consciousness called a nation (Renan, 1990). This narration of national formation, progress, pre-colonial solidarity and disunity caused by colonialist foregrounds the discourse of nationhood. While the refugees are marginalized in employment, education and other socio-economic activities, they are not spared xenophobic treatment characterized by derogatory remarks by their hosts such as “*Ka nyarwanda identity*”. This hostile environment partially explains Rusimbi's characters' failure or reluctance to migrate into the culture of the host country but instead long to return home; the home defined by French phenomenologist, Gaston Bachelard, as the crucial site of one's intimate life and refuge, the anchor without which men and women become fragmented individuals.

The narrative evokes images of exile Edward Said (1995) described as the unhealable rift between a human being and its true home, however, the redeeming feature of the novel is that the refugees cling to their culture and identity. Cultural identity is sustained through memory of home enacted by elders like Mukakigeli who tells her children, “You cannot find an identity by running away from it. You will remain a Munyarwanda for as long as you live”. The image of home/Rwanda is portrayed by elders, as a heritage, a place created by a community of language, culture and customs and the only place they can enjoy what Homi Bhabha (1990) calls the *Heimlich pleasures of the hearth*.

Through several characters in the novel, the colonially authored narrative of difference among the people of Rwanda, is deconstructed. *The theory of conquest of inferior by superior races*, published in 1883, developed by explorer John Hunnington Speke who could not classify the three social classes, Hutu, Tutsi and Twa, he found in Burundi and Rwanda and invented the theory that Tutsi or Hima invaded the region from the north with a superior civilization and established monarchical governments, is challenged.

The distortion of history engendered by the theory of difference is deconstructed at different levels in the novel. Mukakigeli, for instance, attributes the Massacres of 1960 in Rwanda to colonialists who incited one section of the population against another leading many to exile, yet Banyarwanda are *bene mugabo umwe* ‘children of one

father'. This claim is in reference to Rwanda traditional belief that Kanyarwanda the son of Gihanga ((the founder of Rwanda) was the father of three sons; Gahutu, Gatwa and Gatutsi, ancestors of Tutsi, Hutu and Twa.

From the educational point of view it is evident from the textual analysis above that *By the time She Returned* is a text that delves into a historical experience that the youth of Rwanda need to know. Literature tells history effectively because of its capacity to heighten the awareness of the audience to a particular aspect of life. Because of its subject matter the novel provides avenues for teachers and other educators to engage with discourses of nation and nationalism as well as peace building.

A reader familiar with the history of Rwandan exiles in Uganda is struck by Rusimbi's fictionalization of the quest for 1959/60 exiles to return home. Fact and fiction seem to blend. Diplomatic efforts by Ugandan government leaders to convince their Rwandan counterparts to accept peaceful repatriation of their citizens are reenacted in the narrative and so is Rwanda's President Habyarimana's infamous metaphor of the glass. The president declined the proposal to repatriate his people peacefully saying Rwanda was like a glass full of water "You can't add more". From the narrative, logically the quest for home by use of force was the only option.

The narrative foregrounds the triumphant military return to the homeland with meticulous, albeit secretive, preparations characterized by patriotic rhetoric to mobilize exiles for the need to find a solution " TO THE LONGSTANDING PROBLEMS OF MISERY, DERGRADATION AND DESTITUTION"(142), caused by statelessness.

The novel ends with promise of hope for a better future through Kaitesi, the narrator/ freedom fighter who is expecting a baby she contemplates naming either Rwanda or Africa, symbolizing unity or the brotherhood of man. *By the time She Returned* responds to Kehinde's call that African writers should not only reflect but refract. She urges that African novelists should not only show readers what has been done or what happened but rather they should dwell on what can be done to change the ugly condition of their continent (Kehinde, 2004). *The Hyena's Wedding*, which is sequel of the first novel, refracts post-conflict Rwanda.

The setting of the novel is Nyamata commune in Rwanda immediately after 1994 genocide. Although Nyamata could be viewed as a typical community in Rwanda, it has a unique history. After the 1959/60 political upheavals many Tutsis who did not manage to go to exile were forcibly resettled in Nyamata which was then a mosquito infested area. It was a form of permanent internal displacement devised to keep them in check. Nyamata's history could be used for pedagogical purposes to examine post-colonial policies of marginalization.

Unlike the so called "tourist writers" who come armed with little knowledge of historical or political context of the country nor speak Kinyarwanda and author inaccurate narratives (Norridge, 2011), Rusimbi masters his subject and tells the story of his country's transformation from shambles to stability credibly. The novel reads like an eye witness account of genocide and its aftermath that provides rare insights into post-genocide realities.

The opening scene sets the mood of the novel when the narrator compares the prevailing situation to the wedding of the hyena saying;

*... I saw it in my country when all closed their eyes and accepted untold fears. I saw children without parents, mothers without babies, old men and old women who would never see their sons and daughters again. Victims of war and massacres, from all corners of the earth, had collected under a ruined building (p.1).*

The narrative progresses from the picture of horrors of genocide to socio/political reconstruction and national cohesion. The story is told from the point of view of Musonera, a genocide survivor who highlights the suffering of the people, obstacles to reconciliation and reconstruction.

The role of individuals like Musonera and his boss Mugabo the local leader not only provide lessons on how to cope in such difficult situations but also serves as avenues for engaging with discourses of nationalism and nation building. Mugabo, a priest-turned freedom fighter who lost a leg in the liberation war, is a selfless man who left the comfort of his vocation to liberate his country. He expresses his commitment thus;

*I was a priest myself before joining the army. They used to call me Father Stanislas Mugabo- a good Christian who believed in Love. I opposed anybody, including priests and nuns, who wanted to create ethnic hatred. I became unpopular and felt insecure. One day, I took a decision to leave the gown behind and take up a gun to fight (p10).*

Mugabo's resolve to fight injustice and his commitment to the creation of a fair society is aptly expressed during a meeting with local residents. He tells them,

*"We never fought for Hutu, Tutsi or Twa. We fought for all Rwandans who must live freely in their beloved country. A country that was once a land of milk and honey. Our collective effort to rebuild the nation is highly needed. That is only possible when we put people from all ethnic groups in administration" (p. 20).*

Mugabo's rhetoric at all times conveys positive ideology that is a hall mark of Rwanda post-genocide governance. For purposes of teaching reconciliation, peace building and justice, Mugabo presents a viable channel. His impartiality, sacrifice and hard work are exemplary.

On the other hand, Musonera is an epitome of resilience. Being a civilian survivor of genocide, he is prone to trauma and helplessness, but he resolves "to do all he can to help his war-torn country break out of the cycle of violence "(cover). Educators would find his character useful when tackling the issues of reconciliation and trauma healing/ management. The fact that he manages to face the reality of his situation and. perform the duties of sector leader efficiently is instructive. He is an accomplished cadre of the system of governance that promotes unity, fairness and reconciliation, as a basis for a better future of his country.

His commitment to the success of "solidarity camps" which were aimed at re-educating the entire population of Rwanda about their true history and sensitize them to be patriotic and co-exist peacefully is instructive. His ability to overcome self pity and to co-exist with families of genocide perpetrators, could serve as a role model in the process of reconciliation.

Musonera is a positive role model who puts the interests of the community before his own. In contrast his wife Harriet, another genocide survivor, would like him to spend more time with her and go slow on his public service. At one time she refers to his zeal for duty as a form of slavery, but Musonera simply replies “It is hard work not slavery” and drives off to work.

Dialogue is used to good advantage in the novel. Contentious issues are debated to show strong and weak arguments. For instance, during the public trial of a genocide suspect Karamira, issues of capital punishment, traditional Gacaca justice etc. are brought to the fore and diverse views are expressed. In conversation with Mugabo after the trial was adjourned Musonera says;

*I do sometimes think very hard but fail to answer some of the puzzling questions in our society. We have many genocide suspects as you know and we cannot try them overnight yet survivors are eager to see justice done, to have their hearts consoled by an appropriate action towards culprits. I would therefore think it appropriate to categorize the genocide criminals (70).*

Musonera argues that the planners or masterminds of genocide should be punished more severely by death sentence, while those they incited and ordered to commit atrocities are punished less severely. This idea could be fruitfully used to discuss the causes, course and prevention of genocide.

In conclusion; the two novels mirror Rwanda’s post-colonial history highlighting the dark periods of exile and genocide, reconstruction and reconciliation. Ethnicity is deconstructed and nationalism promoted. They are useful academic resources for national history, Literature etc. In Rwanda classrooms, teachers could explore Reader Response approach to engage with these novels so as to spur memories and thoughts within the learners, link the texts to personal experiences and thereby fill in the spaces left by the text. Reader response stresses the importance of the reader’s role in interpreting texts. This theory holds that the individual creates his or her own meaning through a “transaction” with the text based on personal association, brings his or her own emotions, concerns, life experiences, and knowledge to their reading, each interpretation is subjective and unique ([www.learner.org/workshops/hslit/session1/](http://www.learner.org/workshops/hslit/session1/)). Rwandan readers would find the approach a fruitful way to engage with the historical realities of their nation.

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