## THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN LITERATURE PRE AND

## POST-COLONIALISM: THE LIFE OF MICERE GITHAE MUGO

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Micere Githae Mugo is an internationally known world speaker recognized for her literary works, essays and writings which she has used as a platform to advocate for social justice and human rights in Africa especially Kenya. She has been described by most of her colleagues as a teacher and a woman of virtue, integrity, principle, and benevolence. As an educator, she likes to challenge her students to think beyond what they learn in the books and what they hear. The challenge is to assist the student to become a critical thinker in order to come up with evidence and ideas that provide sufficient evidence. She cites John Mbiti “I am because we are and since we are therefore I am,”[[1]](#footnote-1) an expression of the ideology of *Ubuntu* from the Shona of Zimbabwe and Nguni of South Africa. In East Africa the same concept is called “Undugu,” meaning that as humans we need each other in order to survive. This sense of community and belonging which is what she advocates is deeply rooted in African culture, in what it means to be human. She thereby challenges African societies and the world to elevate women to equality if we deem ourselves humans. Women should be given equal opportunity especially in literature to showcase their work.[[2]](#footnote-2) Thus Mugo stands as an icon in the advocacy for human rights and the empowerment of women.

Micere Mugo was born in 1942 in Baricho, Kirinyaga district, Kenya. She had two siblings Mumbi and Njeri Mugo.[[3]](#footnote-3) Her parents being teachers valued education and allowed their children to go to school. Micere attended both primary and secondary school[[4]](#footnote-4) during a period when the majority of young African girls were not given the opportunity to go to school. It was a norm that young girls would be married off because education seemed a loss to the parents -- if a girl was educated the husband would benefit, not the parents of the girl. Male children were viewed as a family’s pride and honored, owing to the fact that they carry on the fathers’ name, continuing the lineage – thus the rationale for educating the boy rather than the girl child. Micere’s parents, however, overcame the odds by educating their girl children. During Micere’s school years, Kenya had not yet attained independence. The missionaries had spread Christianity and western education which Micere received. When she was still a teenager the Mau Mau movement was at its height in Kenya. Mau Mau were land and freedom fighters who opposed the repression of British colonialism. Their struggle for freedom through guerilla war inspired Mugo. She saw the opportunity and benefit of gaining knowledge which she used to write narratives, poetry and songs to inspire Africans to value their culture which Europeans had denigrated. Her love for writing poems began when she was still a young girl. Additionally, in the 60s Mugo was influenced by momentous freedom struggles and demands for equal rights around the world, like the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa and The Civil Rights Movement in the United States.

In 1966 Mugo received a bachelor degree with honors from Makerere University, Kampala. The following year, in 1967, she attended the University of Nairobi and obtained a Diploma in Education. In the short span of two years from 1967-1969, she became a language teacher at Kaaga Girls’ High School, then deputy principal at Alliance Girls’ High School and finally principal of Kabare Girls’ High School.[[5]](#footnote-5) From 1971 to 1973, she furthered her studies, pursuing her Masters and Ph.D. in literature at the University of New Brunswick, in the US.[[6]](#footnote-6) Mugo returned back home and became a lecturer at Kenya Teachers’ Training College and the University of Nairobi where she became department head in the Faculty of Arts between1973 and 1982.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In 1982 Micere Mugo became known as an activist. Kenya was under the dictatorship of former President Daniel Toroitich Arap Moi. Citizens had no freedom of expression and public gatherings were banned. Airing grievances could result in imprisonment, torture, or disappearance without a trace. The only way Mugo was able to voice the atrocities faced by Kenyans from the government was by writing literature in the form of a play that captured the horrors people were facing. This play was then performed at the Kenyan National Theater and Mugo was subsequently jailed for inciting people to rebel against their government. Although released, her life together with that of her two daughters was threatened. After being unjustly accused of participating in an attempted coup d'état in 1982, Mugo went into exile in the United States and later Zimbabwe. During that period former President Daniel Moi arrested individuals suspected of propagating dissent and associated with the overthrow of his regime. Mugo describes her departure as a painful one because she was leaving behind family, friends and a home to which she did not think she would ever return. She departed with two small daughters, both under ten years of age. She was also ill. Life was not rosy but she kept reminding herself that she must have hope – and that she would return home in spite of the painful trials.[[8]](#footnote-8)

During her exile in America and Zimbabwe Micere Mugo excelled in life. What seemed to be a disaster and failure turned out to be a blessing in disguise. She can now truly call herself a Pan Africanist, internationalist, transnationalist and citizen of the world. Her works have influenced the world in magnificent ways that are reflected in numerous achievements. Mugo is Emeritus Meredith Professor for Teaching Excellence; past Chair of the Department of African American Studies; past Director of the Africa Initiative and past Director of Graduate Studies in Africa American Studies at Syracuse University, She is a poet, playwright and literary critic, having published 6 books, co-edited 8 supplementary school readers, 4 monographs and been editor of the journal, *Third World in Perspective*.[[9]](#footnote-9) Her writings include: her 2012 *Writing and Speaking from the Heart of my Mind* (2012) (selected essays and speeches); her 2004 *Mũthoni wa Kĩrĩma--Mau Mau Woman Field Marshal:* Interrogating Silencing, Erasure and Manipulation of Female Combatants’ Texts (monograph); her 1997 *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (play, co-authored with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o); her 1994 *My Mother’s Poem and Other Songs* (poetry); her 1991 *African Orature and Human Rights*; *Art, Artists and the Flowering of Pan-Africana Liberated Zones* (monograph); her 1978 *Visions of Africa* (literary criticism), her 1976 *The Long Illness of Ex-Chief Kiti* (play); her 1976 *Daughter of My People, Sing!* (poetry); and *Gikũyũ, Shona and Ndebele Ethics and Aesthetics* (monograph).[[10]](#footnote-10) Mugo is a recipient of numerous honors, including: Distinguished Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Award from the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; College of Arts and Sciences Award for Excellence in Master Level Teaching; and Distinguished Africanist Award from the New York African Studies Association for her contribution to scholarship. At Kenya’s 50th jubilee in December 2013, she was awarded the Elder of the Burning Spear and in November 2002, The East African Standard Century listed her among “The Top 100: They Influenced Kenya Most During the 20th Century.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Mugo is also a member of numerous organizations and serves on many committees, advisory/executive boards and holds directorships, locally as well as internationally. A committed community activist, she is a passionate advocate for human rights especially as they have been historically denied to marginalized groups. She describes her daughters, Mũmbi and the late Njeri, as her best friends and indispensable comrades in the struggle for social justice. Mugo is an internationally widely sought after Public Speaker.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In terms of writings, Mugo has produced poems, plays, essays and books. “Writing and speaking from the Heart of My Mind” is a collection of short essays and speeches that cover topics such as: autobiography, culture, class, gender, feminism, Pan Africanism, empowerment and democracy. The empowerment of women, especially in the writing of literature, is one of her uppermost concerns. Mugo observes gender bias when it comes to African women’s literature -- women have not been given equal opportunity in writing, publishing and advertising their work both during and after colonization throughout Africa.[[13]](#footnote-13) Africa has always been viewed as a patriarchal society where men tend to enjoy all the privileges. According to Mugo, the writings of African men since the 1950s have become canonized and are well-known within and without Africa -- Achebe, Ngugi, Soyinka, for example -- while their female counterparts, such as Nwapa, Emecheta and others have only slowly become known on the literary scene.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Literary criticism has foregrounded the male writer while female writing remains in the shadow, even though it is of equal beauty, power, poignancy and eloquence. Despite that, she observes, major women’s works of literature began to trend during the millennium in 2000. This was due to the education and knowledge women had been gaining over the years. Women writers were starting to write about problems their fellow women were facing in the society like female circumcision, early marriages, domestic violence, lack of education and marginalization. Women were starting to advocate for girl child rights in terms of attaining equal opportunities with the boy child. The idea of empowering the girl child was so powerful it eventually led to the ideology of feminism. Women had reached a point of not allowing society to dictate the roles they would play such as: being a house wife and taking care of the children. However, women desired that men should be part of women empowerment so they would see the problem with unbalanced and unfair gender roles and responsibilities. As a result men would assist women to move up the career ladder. A society, Mugo argues, should be able to create equality in terms of social, political and economic participation irrespective of gender.

Ideas that women should not participate in writing literature can be traced back to the medieval period where women were not allowed to do Art, write literature or even study. Their place was at home. Men dealt with politics and economics. The same ideas about women of the medieval period were applied to Africans during colonization. Thus most of the history books about African origins are written by Europeans. In the same book of essays, Mugo discusses the importance of orature to the African community, especially drama; relating how Europeans never allowed African education to be incorporated with and exist alongside Western education; and how Africans never wrote down their history which was passed down orally from one generation to another. They mixed songs, stories folkways, poems and dances to expresses their Art of work. It was wrong, Mugo argues, for Europeans to disregard African culture and think it archaic.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Women writers should also take advantage of language which Mugo deems to be important. According to Mugo, language unites individuals, as it give them a sense of nationhood, value, culture and interrelationship. She argues that the indigenous languages should be spoken, written and used in order to restore African culture. Knowing and learning their culture Africans can avoid being influenced easily by hegemonic Western views. African institutions of learning, she advocates, should include the indigenous language as part of the curriculum. Thus students will gain the advantage of a better perspective, having exposure to both African and Western education. In turn, students will become critical thinkers, able to make decisions based on what they have learnt and on what they know.

Liberation from colonialism was achieved with the participation of women fighting for independence alongside the men. Mugo names women such as Muthoni Kirimi who was among the freedom fighters that fought for Kenyan independence.[[16]](#footnote-16) Muthoni never feared the British soldiers. She worked hand in hand with Mau Mau unlike other women her age who decided to stay home as they considered fighting to be men’s work. Muthoni Kirimi’s strong leadership showcased the fact that women have the same leadership abilities as men. Yet, Muthoni Kirimi’s story is rarely if ever told as is should be -- most young Kenyans grow up not knowing who she is. Her story is not told in most of the history books published in Kenya. Mugo argues for the benefit and value of recognizing brave women who fought for freedom; for recognizing women for their major contributions, not only in art and literature but also in other fields, because they have added value to African culture[[17]](#footnote-17) Mugo’s decision to return home to Kenya in 2015 was cause for great celebration. Citizens celebrated her homecoming and the government recognized her literary works.

All in all, Mugo’s literary works are known around the world; she has empowered women especially in Africa. She has encouraged African women them to write about their culture and its beauty. She has been able to prove that a woman is a significant human being. She has shown the world that African culture is not inferior.

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