



Who Pinched My Buttocks? The Stella Nyanzi School of Radical Rudeness

By A. K. Kaiza



The drama of picking up the book would have been wholly farcical were the circumstances not surreal enough already.

The ridiculousness of furtive telephone calls in which names were neither asked nor given, the long, curving drive that skirted the city, suspicion as to why the *boda* knocked the car, and then arriving at the drop-off point only to be told the delivery man would not make it, underlined just how psychologically precarious it is to be in Yoweri Museveni's Uganda.

It was bound to be that way the day Stella Nyanzi was sent to prison in 2018. The activist and scholar had opened what amounted to a second front in the fight against the Museveni dictatorship. The means the way such a war is fought is rarely visible, so that while the placid surface of a society going about its quotidian slog remains even, nerves are getting chewed thin underneath. Along with Bobi Wine, one a poet, the other a singer, both of them versifiers, Nyanzi has deployed weapons and tactics dictators are wholly unprepared for:

The reaction of the state apparatus when it moves in on creatives is to always get it wrong. It may have looked like victory to the goonery when Stella Nyanzi was jailed nearly two years ago. But the result has been an Oxfam and PEN International award, and counting. This has been

quickly followed by a poetry collection that will now underpin Nyanzi's repute and bring to all the sheer courage of this woman. As with censorship of books, the argument that *not* imprisoning writers is the best way to silence them never gets through the collective thick skull of tyranny.

And yet the forceful Nyanzi had made it *impossible* for Mr. Museveni to not act. Her provocation - for it was, and Nyanzi proudly owns it - was delivered in such terms that Mr. Museveni was doomed to respond, even though he may have been aware of the folly of doing so. How this doctoral graduate with several degrees arm-twisted one of Africa's more wily presidents into a fight he is badly losing is one we do not as yet fully understand. But the history of Big Man-badly-mauled-by-activist woman is a long one. The late Kenyan President, Daniel Arap Moi, might have heeded wise counsel and kept clear of Wangari Maathai. But as with Nyanzi, Maathai too had set her challenge in terms that cornered the late Moi into attacking her. The day he laid hands on her was the day she won.

The diatribe Nyanzi aimed at Mr. Museveni more than found its mark; it paralysed the warmonger who is so used to operating from the outer limits of decency (and being feted for it, by no less than the World Bank), that the bounds of propriety are lost on him, a man who set fire to four, perhaps five, countries, killing millions of Africans and comprehensively corrupting Uganda. He stepped on everyone.

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He stepped on Stella Nyanzi. Like the feisty girls highschool boys live in fear of, Nyanzi has shrieked out in pain. Here, she describes graphically where she has been touched in language so stark that her attacker remains disoriented. Mr. Museveni has since stumbled from one vaguary to another, like a man searching for firm ground. He led an absurd anti-corruption walk of shameless self-mockery. He went on an aimless self-promoting trek retracing his bush war days, returning to the mythical ground of his self-declared "liberation" war, in what can only be a para-Freudian return to a time when he did believe in something. It was the subconscious speaking louder than the man could ever admit - that he has led a life of hypocrisy. Since Nyanzi spoke, we who pay attention have noticed declining changes in Museveni. There is no going back for him.

And so the irony that a man who in the 1990s used the feminist cause to build an impregnable bulwark of political support has been taken down by a feminist. We can only imagine what went on in Mr. Museveni's mind when Nyanzi used the Luganda words "*lutako*" and "*butako*" to describe him. International media picked and amplified the translation: *The Ugandan president had been called a pair of buttocks*

"If you put your hands in the anus of a leopard, you are in trouble," Mr. Museveni said in the heat of election campaigns in 2015. He had dangled a bawdy, self-assured illusion of himself. He was the first to use an obscenity against himself, a "crime" for which he still walks freely. But he had left the scatological door wide open and Nyanzi did not need a second invitation.

And so here we are. A plummet from the heights of the Marxist speechifying of the 1980s, when he had been a frequent guest of Kim il-Sung in Pyongyang, to the whiplash, road-to-Damascus conversion and pre-eminent neoliberal economic mandarin of the 1990s, a shift done without missing a beat (so we doubt how much he had understood of either) as though Karl Marx's middle name had all along been Hayek. The Museveni regime had at last hit a literal bottom:

"Means of production", "macro-economics", "leveraging comparative advantage", "stabilising

the economic base” - words (for they had really been mere words) that had one time been stock-in-trade of clever revolutionaries, had been replaced by “anuses and “thick thighs”, “vaginas” and “buttocks”, the classic declining narrative of cinema that opens with high-end screenings but find that pornography sells more tickets.

This then was where things Ugandan had ground

State reaction to Nyanzi has been a stumble from botched inelegance to overcooked crudity. Two charges - cyber-harassment and disturbing the peace of the president - were brought against her. The double charge was the judicial fishing expedition to guarantee a conviction. There had been an earlier attempt at stifling Nyanzi via the coarse chicanery of a mental illness test, which we can only assume would have been rigged and would have seen her locked up to rot in a mental asylum.

The Directorate of Public Prosecution, whose head at the time has since been elevated to a judicial bench, further besmirched the reputation of an office not wanting for infamy by going ahead with that framing, and then not stopping there.

That test never went ahead. They attempted another ruse. They offered bail, that special form of clemency within the gift of state power. Nyanzi saw through this. Acceptance of the offer of bail would mute the campaign, show that the state had been just all the while.

Makerere University, a tragic shambles under its current vice chancellor, was pressured to dismiss her from her job (we writers have all gone through employers who are forced to let us go). Vice Chancellor Barnabas Nawangwe, a man put there to make the university look stupid, terribly botched the dismissal - not that anything other than botched can be possible with Mrs. Museveni as Minister of Education.

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The tragic disconnect is how tyrannical state goonery never understands how writers see the world. Judges and prosecutors (judicial guinea fowl with eyes firmly stitched to their legalistic navels) see prison as the ultimate tool of ostracism, for is it not proof of guilt that you are locked up?

And so with alacrity they paid for Nyanzi’s 18-month writing retreat by sending her to prison. As a bonus, they handed this creative research scholar thousands of captive respondents via which to study Uganda. Might the advisory council to Mr. Museveni, creaking under its own dead weight, have pointed out to him the folly of putting writers in prison and how that has always turned out?

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Prison has at last given us and Nyanzi what had always been missing - a substantial enough work from which to see her outside of the high voltage media filter. Had there ever been doubt about her intentions, that has now vanished, and Nyanzi joins a stellar orbit of writers like Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Ken Sarowiwa, Jack Mapanje, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn whose voices were amplified.

Over the course of the past year, Stella Nyanzi smuggled dozens of poems out of prison. As she says in the book, dozens others were confiscated by prison officials, and presumably destroyed. Reading

this collection comes with the urgent knowledge that there are bound to be consequences for Nyanzi and her colleagues.

No Roses from my Mouth has that rough and ready samizdat feel. The urgency to get it out was such that the conventions of publishing, the page-setting, the mulling over cover design, was not possible. Here and there, text overruns page, the guillotine chops words midway. There is no table of contents, and the wine-coloured cover feels more like a stain.

All of which do not matter.

Of those that contrived to sentence her to a mental asylum, Nyanzi says, via the poem, *They Must be Schizophrenic*:

*They want me to upbraid the
Dictator with sweet Apples,
To rebuke him with sweetened
Milk and honey,
To reproach him with a thick
Slice of red velvet cake.*

No! In the eponymous poem, *No Roses From my Mouth*, the last stanza sets the terms of this front:

*There will be no orgasm
Coming from my mouth
Who cares about pleasure during war?
Instead there is venom and acid*

The fighting tone defines the work, as it defines the woman, through 159 poems, the urgency ranging across insights, observations, a haiku, a call to arms. We have not had a book like this in this region. It is hard to think of another writer doing what Nyanzi is doing. Her language is direct. It is more than direct. It long broke the boundaries of conventional politesse and set as its starting point the far reaches of the acceptable, and then it goes beyond that.

This attack on Mr. Museveni has been called obscene (see the judgment). But in the African tradition, it is acceptable, if not ritual, to shame or protest through nudity – the elderly women in Nairobi who stripped naked in public to protest Moi's regime in the late 1980s were not mistaken for pole dancers. It is not uncommon. We don't hear too much of it because the people at whom it is often aimed, being aged men in power, rarely dare push their way to the point that this is called for.

When an elderly woman strips naked or uses obscenities, we do not ask if she is mad. We turn to the old man and say, "See what you have done? Mr. Museveni, have you no shame that now women have to strip naked?"

Nyanzi's poetry is that. It is textual stripping, textual ritual shaming for an old man whose heedless actions threaten to destroy society. This is how we must read this book.

Thus the heavy sexual allusions, the references to castration in *Missing Jewels*, the provocative threat to "bitch-slap" the "tyrant" in *He Cries at Mere Poetry*. These are verse equivalents of clothes coming off before the masses, reading in public as a mother declares that the man in power has taken everything society has, so what is left to cover up? What does decency mean when the fount of honour is dishonourable?

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But naughtiness too. *Who Pinched My Buttocks?* is arguably the funniest poem here. Nyanzi’s narrative skill is plain to see. A poem that opens as a plaintive call for understanding, *Who Pinched my Buttocks?* sets off rhetorically, asking for understanding, to each her own, saying *Let me do my bit to the best of my ability/Do your bit, too, as well as you can*. Hence, those who speak diplomatically should not stop those who sing ragga. The religious must not drive out the demons of nude protestors. So it goes on, with calls to writers of legislation not to stymie the writers of tweets and Facebook. Fair enough. Except, that opening line was suspended and reconnects to the final lines thus...*But let me grow my finger nail that pinch/When my time comes I want to be effective/The dictator will say, “Who pinched my buttocks?”*

It is the tone with which the collection opens, the clarion call to action of *A Plea for Decongestion*. (Sure enough, four verses in, the F-word appears). Nyanzi proceeds to describe how prisoners sleep packed like sardines as...

*My thighs pressed hard onto someone’s arse
My arse pressed hard onto another’s thighs
This sequence of adult thighs pressing adult arse
Is repeated in two rows of 30 women each*

Nyanzi may be in prison, but her sense of humour is sharp at the ending of this poem:

*If fighters of sodomy in Uganda cared at all
They would start by decongesting the prison*

We will be led down this path only for sombreness to end in jest, again and again. And we have to be thankful for it.

The collection is a totality of prison life. News arrives to Nyanzi that Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wanaina has died. She says in *Is Binya Really Dead?*:

*Binya broke hard ground at a difficult time!
Binya took the bull by the horns
And inspired me with boldness.
Binya inseminated my mind.*

The closing sections of the collection are more personal and introspective. They are about Nyanzi’s family life. The lowest moments do come as she wonders in *No Padlock on Your Loin* whether her marriage will survive prison. Thoughts about her children come close to breaking her. She pulls up and says in *How to Visit Prison* that visitors to prison must not come with their tears because prisoners have trouble enough. Break down and cry after the visit is done.

It is painful to read Nyanzi retell how she lost her unborn child due to negligence by prison staff.

The more endearing poems in the book are Nyanzi’s portraits of fellow prisoners. The delicate dedications to the downtrodden include *The Mango Seller, Ganja Girl, Escapee, Asio Died in Prison, Epileptic in Prison, Deaf and Dumb in Prison, The Debtor, Intersex in Prison, and Masitula the Fistula*. These could be a separate collection by themselves. Though they are windows into the

locked-away world of incarceration, they are really insights into the world outside. We count here what values society considers acceptable by examining the obverse. Solitary souls in prison, plucked clean off the margins of society from whence they had fought to survive, the mangos hawked by the roadside to feed the 8-month-old baby who must now survive six months motherless because the mother has been locked away, the young woman who needed just that stick of weed, just the stick from inside prison. The androgynous prisoner in *Intersex in Prison*, personalities viewed via versification, poetry that captures snatches and glimpses of their being. It is their souls we feel, and what we feel lies heavy upon us.

And then the realisation dawns: But is this not what it is all about? Nyanzi's struggle, lest we forget, began with the backtracking of the promise by Mr. Museveni during the election campaign of 2015/2016 to provide sanitary pads to all school girls if elected president. Once duly declared the winner, he sent his wife, who had been elevated to Minister of Education, to say that there was no money for the promised pads. Hence the fiery Facebook post for which Nyanzi is in prison. We must ask how many women might not be in prison had their education not been interrupted by menstrual cycles?

That is the asking price here. It is the stiff penalty. If Nyanzi's language ensures that we don't casually look away from class, ethnic and gender violence, how do we then address a female Minister of Education who says there will be no pads for young girls under her watch? Which is the obscenity - the language of Nyanzi or Mrs. Museveni's sentencing into poverty and abuse millions of school girls?

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The furore surrounding Nyanzi's work has nearly succeeded in obscuring her poetry, how it is conceived, how it works. The judge that sentenced her declared that it was not poetry. And although Nyanzi responds emphatically to this in *Your Aesthetic Standards* (a title surely missing an expletive) with *Pooh to your bourgeois snobbery!/Your aesthetic what-what again?* We have now come close enough to Nyanzi's mind as a writer to know that she need not to have mentioned "standards". Arguing over literariness is a cat-and-mouse game we can play in this collection, but we would be missing something more important.

That her writing is a radical, political position is underscored by the poem, *Your Aesthetic Standards*, where she writes, of her writing:

*Bitch, I penned my pieces on the prison floors.
My sounding boards were suspected vagabonds*

.....

Druggies and junkies offered some rhymes

....

*Convicts of common nuisance passed the meter
Sex workers and fraudsters approved lines.
Impersonators and thieves approved lines.*

*Suspects of murder and assault gave symbols
Suspects of manslaughter advised on ideas
Political prisoners cried at some stanzas
And just for size, Nyanzi adds
Prison wardresses confiscated some poems.*

Far from gratuitous iconoclasm, Nyanzi's ethos is a time-honoured tradition of radical criticism, which is also at the very heart of Marxist thought, of historical materialism. Here, the human body, as the material, is posited as the central platform upon which history is generated. Stripped to its essential, the human body is the active reagent of politics and economics, from black legs, arms, torsos and heads (needed together and functioning) being sold into slavery to generate the capital in Western capitalism, it is the parts of the human body called upon to operate tools, fingers that pick cotton, the human body that is targeted as the primary digestive tool and fat storage for the fast food empire, the feet that are covered by Clarke's shoes, legs, buttocks and arms and shoulders that Vuitton and Hugo Boss target.

The colour of the skin you wear will, in America and England, determine whether the police pull that trigger or not.

The human body is the generator and archive of culture, what we do with the hair on top of it, which bits of flesh are trimmed, shaved and cut off depending on gender and religious persuasion. The body of Christ, for Christians, is the ecumenicalism that binds the religion together.

The human body is power. Entire civilisations convulse at the showing of an ankle, shoulders, breasts. Priests and judges police the human body more than they police anything else. When a tyrant wants to show who is boss, it is the eyes and nostrils at which tear gas is aimed, the head is for the baton, wrists and ankles for manacles, the heart for the bullet of the firing squad.

The body carries everywhere it goes, from temple to a football game, a litany of "unmentionables". Breaking the command of priests and judges (the perennial handmaidens of dictators) by baring some parts while covering others at once dissolves their source of power.

In Nyanzi's collection, the body plays the vital role of offering insight into society. There is the transexual with both male and female genitals whose elusive category erases gendered response: Does he/she have power or not? The state must break the body to acquire power, hence, the prisoners must sit on the floor, stooped, kneeling before the upright standing guards.

Nyanzi returns us to the basics, disavowing metaphysics (the acceptable politics of "beyond the body") that can and often comes riddled with falsehoods. A return to the body is, in political terms, a handing of power back to the masses - the working, labouring "body" of society, away from the ruling "head".

A return to the body is a threat to the ruling ethos, for once covered up and policed, those that decide what we wear, which parts we cover up, or which words we can use, can misreport to us what the body says - which is what culture and law and "civilisation" more or less add up to. A return to the body is insisting on seeing the exhibits for ourselves, to judge if what we are being told about human society is accurate or not.

[No Roses from My Mouth](#) is published by Ubuntu Reading Group, with an introduction by the writers and activists, Esther Mirembe and Bwesigye Bwa Mwesigire. It can also be purchased on Kindle.

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