

Scientist with passion for poetry

Promising talent. In lecture rooms heavy with equations and oil reserves, Gillian Ayebare writes of grief and fire. Of survival. Of love. Between science and stanza, a new Ugandan poet rises.

BY PHILIP MATOGO

Poetry thrives in Uganda's universities because it moves where formulas cannot. It is an interdisciplinary refuge — sharpening critical thought, deepening emotional intelligence, and nurturing creative expression. In lecture halls ruled by numbers and data, poetry offers breath. It makes room for complexity, for nuance, for the quiet, subjective tremors of human experience that rarely fit neatly into graphs or lab reports.

In these spaces, young people meet freely, using poetry as a vehicle to strengthen old bonds and forge new ones. Out of this communion emerge not only well-rounded Ugandans, but also fresh poetic voices. Voices such as Gillian Ayebare, a writer. A poet, to be precise.

"I would like to think I am not very good at many things. But words, I am good with words. I love words. I love their strength. I love that they can be coined to change lives. I love that they are therapy for whoever lets them be," Ayebare shares.

A third-year student of Petroleum Engineering and Environmental Management at Mbarara University of Science and Technology, she is a scientist by training, a poet by necessity.

"What draws me most is classical poetry — what I like to call poetry of the old. It speaks to me deeply. There is a particular gravity in old verse. It was written by people who understood that words are not decoration. They are the very root of survival."

Her poetic journey began quietly, almost unremarkably, before gathering promise.

"My earliest memory is of Mr Richard Otwa's Literature in English lessons at Mt St Mary's Namagunga, where the subject was compulsory. *The Government Inspector*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Growing up with Poetry* by David Rubadiri. We had to find meaning in each of them, satire, metaphor, the way language bends to carry more than it says. I have the fondest memory of him, pronouncing onomatopoeia. There was something ceremo-

nial about the way he said it. Especially *I Hate Azaleas*. That is the one I remember. She said: 'For as they bloomed, my baby died. That poem had to be personal; there was no other way it could have been written. And right there, I understood: this is what language is for — to carry what the body cannot. I found where I belonged then, with words.'

If she thought her story had reached its fullness, she soon realised poetry had more in store.

Baby steps, large strides

Then came Senior Six vacation. Her father has the largest collection of American literature meant for schools, and by fate, she had no phone.

"So I immersed myself in books, surrendered to them completely. And that is when I met Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Frost, Sylvia Plath, Charles Bukowski — and the one I love most: Pablo Neruda.

"If the star to aim for were a man, my star is Pablo Neruda. His personalisation of every emotion struck me most. He owned his work the way few people do."

And with his Nobel Prize, he birthed a new dream in Atuhaire; to become a Nobel Laureate in Literature.

"He lived

through extreme adversity at home, as many great souls have. So I came to understand that if I must write with such longing and purpose, I too would need to encounter adversity."

Adversity came.

"Adversity did come, in the form of clinical depression with psychotic disorders, according to the doctor. It rattled the shingles of the doors that make me. So, I wrote what I felt. And what I hoped for. The darkness did not stop me, it became the reason. Every poem is proof of still being here."

For the young woman, poetry is archive and witness.

"Poetry is a testament to life that I was sick. That I loved my father. That I was sad. That I was happy. That I lived. I can almost liken it to Google Photos, preserving memories. I keep mine in poetry. And every time I revisit my book, I am stunned by the rawness of the emotions. Even when I have long stopped feeling them. It is then that I remember I was once happy. And if that pushes me to live another day, gods be good."

Poetry as a bridge

She says poetry is reaching out to beautiful souls you might never otherwise meet. It is a personal mission. She wants someone who feels sick in the head to feel understood. Someone, regardless of social standing, religious affiliation, or the divisions that separate us, to feel represented.

"There is something deeply comforting about knowing another human feels the same way you do. When you are standing at the edge and you read work that says someone has stood there before you, you begin to look for how they climbed out. I want someone to read my work and say, 'I feel like this.' And because of that, choose to live one more day."

Her hope is simple: impact. For poetry to awaken fire in whoever reads it, to be a tool for freedom, or at the very least, comfort. Ayebare hopes more people read poetry and let it in.

"If you must write, let it boil within me. Or at the very least, make me laugh. Let it inspire revolution. Let it ring through generations. Let someone find meaning in your work. Let a life be changed. Let an evening by the fire be warmed. Whether it eases an emotional burden or awakens someone to start an uprising, let it mean something."

"Poetry is many things. But mostly, it is life."

Her long dream remains the Nobel Prize in Literature, not as arrogance, she insists, but as direction. A star to aim for, the way Neruda once became hers.

Competitive poetry and community

"Taking part in the inaugural Dr Ivan Edwards Poetry Competition under the theme 'Unity' was one of the most formative experiences of my early time with the Uganda Poetry Society. To stand in a space devoted entirely to poetry, hearing other voices wrestle with what it means to belong to be bound together across difference and distance, sharpened something in me that I did not know needed sharpening."

"Unity is not a simple theme. It asks you to look outward when poetry so often pulls you inward. I found that tension rich. I found it necessary. I hope we can show the fire in our spirit to whoever comes next or whoever stands nearby."

She returns often to the poets who shaped her: Poe, Frost, Plath, Neruda, Bukowski.

"Their work carries a particular gravity. A refusal to be decorative. Plath especially understood that the interior life, however dark, is worth mapping without flinching."

Saving oneself

"I am heavily influenced by Bukowski, his rawness, his personalisation of poetry, the way he refused to apologise for what his life looked like on the page. He and Neruda are kings of that. They owned their work. They let their lives bleed into their lines."

"That is the thing I reach for, writing that is personal, raw, true, and unashamed. I have very strong feelings about poetry. And that is because I have been fortunate enough to know good poetry. To have been saved by it. To keep saving myself with it, one poem at a time."



Gillian Ayebare lives and breathes poetry.

POETRY AS THERAPY

"Poetry, for me, is therapy. Writing is therapy. The way someone might get overwhelmed and say, 'I need a drink,' I say, 'I need to write.' So badly, I need to put this into words before it swallows me whole," Ms Ayebare says.

"I know there is a long, impossible, inexplicable sadness that afflicts us sometimes. I know about wanting to die, even when people ask, 'What problems do you have?' I know about love and parents, and the terror of one day losing them — of being anchored by someone and living in fear of that anchor lifting. I know psychological pain that pushes you to self-harm as a coping mechanism, where every cut and the gushing of blood feels like relief. I know mind pain. To say these things have been felt before — you are understood, whoever, whoever and wherever you are."