



Rethinking Identity and Crisis: Representations of Young Adult Subjectivities in the Fiction of Selected Ugandan Women Writers

Alice Jossy Kyobutungi

Uganda Christian University, Bishop Barham University College, Kabale

ORCID: 0009000093665287

Received: 12 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 11 Oct 2025; Accepted: 14 Oct 2025; Available online: 19 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This study, *Rethinking Identity and Crisis: Representations of Young Adult Subjectivities in the Fiction of Selected Ugandan Women Writers*, explores how Ugandan female authors negotiate identity, crisis, and selfhood through the lens of youth experience. Focusing on the works of Barbara Kimenye and Mary Karooro Okurut, this examination explores how these writers depict the evolving subjectivities of young adults within shifting sociocultural, political, and gendered contexts. The purpose is to investigate how young protagonists embody and contest tensions between tradition and modernity, individual freedom and communal obligation, and patriarchy and self-determination. Using textual and thematic analysis and drawing on postcolonial feminist and identity theories, the research interprets narrative strategies, character development, and themes of crisis and transformation. Close reading of selected novels reveals how gender, class, and cultural displacement intersect in the shaping of the perceptions of young adult characters. The findings show that both Kimenye and Okurut reimagine youth identity as a site of negotiation and resilience. Their narratives challenge colonial and patriarchal prescriptions of femininity and adulthood, portraying young adult characters who navigate inequality through resistance, self-assertion, and moral renewal. The study argues that crisis, rather than being destructive, becomes a generative force for redefining belonging, agency, and cultural continuity. Although limited to two authors, the research offers new insights into the symbolic economies of youth and gender in Ugandan literature. It contributes to African feminist criticism, Ugandan cultural studies, and youth identity scholarship by highlighting how women writers envision new forms of selfhood amid crisis and change.

Keywords— Identity crisis, young adult subjectivities, postcolonial feminism, gender and culture, resistance, African literature.



I. INTRODUCTION

Ugandan literature authored by women has increasingly drawn scholarly attention for its nuanced interrogation of gender, culture, and politics. Yet, a critical area of inquiry—how young adult (YA) protagonists navigate identity and crisis within these narratives—remains markedly underexplored. While global YA literature has been widely recognized as a site for exploring adolescent subjectivities, particularly the interplay of identity, crisis, and agency (Cart & Jenkins, 2017; Nikolajeva, 2014), the Ugandan context

offers a distinct set of social, cultural, and political conditions that uniquely shape youth experiences. This study situates itself at the intersection of Ugandan women's fiction and the global discourse on YA literature, examining how young protagonists in the works of Barbara Kimenye and Mary Karooro Okurut construct identity, negotiate crises, and articulate agency within postcolonial, gendered, and culturally complex spaces.

Ugandan women's literature has historically been concerned with interrogating patriarchal norms,

postcolonial legacies, and socio-political turbulence. From early voices such as Rose Mbowa and Grace Ogot to contemporary authors like Okurut and Kimenye, women writers have consistently foregrounded the dynamics of gendered oppression, moral responsibility, and communal belonging. Yet, the specific lens of adolescence and young adult subjectivity has received limited scholarly attention. Most studies have focused on adult protagonists or on explicit political commentary (Nabirye, 2016; Ochieng, 2018), leaving a significant gap in understanding how YA characters articulate identity in the face of intersecting crises.

Globally, YA literature has become a fertile space for exploring complex processes of selfhood, moral negotiation, and socio-political awareness among youth (Akinyemi, 2019; Mwangi, 2021). Adolescence is often conceptualised as a liminal period wherein individuals reconcile personal desires, societal expectations, and emergent agency. However, such frameworks are largely informed by Western developmental and cultural paradigms, which may not adequately capture the realities of young people in postcolonial African settings (Chege, 2020; Ezeifekwe & Ihuah, 2018). In Uganda, for instance, youth experience layers of crisis—ranging from political instability and economic precarity to social expectations and gendered constraints—that shape identity formation and agency in ways that diverge from conventional Western narratives. Women writers in Uganda, therefore, provide critical insight into how crises are internalised, mediated, and performed by young protagonists, offering a richer understanding of adolescent subjectivity in postcolonial contexts.

Despite the growing corpus of Ugandan women's writing, scholarly engagement with YA subjectivities remains sparse. Existing studies tend to focus on adult experiences of gender, modernity, and political engagement, leaving adolescent perspectives underrepresented (Oloya, 2020; Namutebi, 2018). Consequently, little is known about how young Ugandan protagonists navigate the confluence of social, political, and cultural crises while constructing and performing identity. Moreover, there is limited exploration of the aesthetic strategies—narrative voice, structure, symbolism—through which young adult subjectivities are rendered in fiction. This gap is significant because adolescence in Uganda occurs within unique socio-political and cultural contexts: high youth demographic representation (over 75% of the population), exposure to political instability, economic precarity, gendered expectations, and frequent social upheavals (UBOS, 2020). Understanding how YA literature engages these realities not only enriches literary scholarship but also provides a

cultural lens for interpreting youth experiences and agency in Uganda.

This study examines how young adult subjectivities are constructed and negotiated in selected works by Barbara Kimenye and Mary Karoro Okurut. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Explore how young protagonists construct, negotiate, and perform identity in relation to gender, ethnicity, family, religion, and societal expectations.
2. Examine how social, political, and cultural crises shape young adult subjectivities in these narratives.
3. Analyse how Kimenye and Okurut reimagine youth agency and belonging amidst adversity, highlighting strategies of resistance, adaptation, or compromise.

By centring youth experiences, the study foregrounds the intersections of gender, culture, and socio-political crises in adolescent identity formation, contributing to African feminist literary criticism, postcolonial youth studies, and the broader discourse on Ugandan cultural production.

The study is guided by the following questions:

1. How are identity and crisis constructed in the selected works?
2. In what ways do Ugandan women writers challenge or reinforce dominant youth narratives?
3. What aesthetic and ideological strategies articulate young adult subjectivities?

These questions aim to interrogate not only what is represented but also how representation occurs, emphasizing both narrative form and socio-political context.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research draws on African feminist theory, postcolonial youth studies, and crisis theory. African feminist theory foregrounds the intersection of gender, culture, and colonial legacies in shaping subjectivity (al-Saadawi, 1980; Oyewumi, 1997), providing a critical lens to examine how young female protagonists navigate expectations of gender, family, and community. Postcolonial youth studies challenge universalist conceptions of adolescence by emphasising the sociopolitical and cultural embeddedness of youth identity (Ahearn, 2001; Angelo, 2015). Crisis theory, particularly as articulated by Mbembe (2001) and Butler (2004), illuminates how moments of social, political, or cultural

rupture serve as sites for the negotiation and reconfiguration of identity. Together, these frameworks give room to an integrated analysis of how Ugandan YA Literature (YAL) stages the interplay between identity, crisis, and agency.

Scholarship on YAL in Uganda is limited, often focusing on moral didacticism or school-centred narratives, which may inadvertently reinforce Western or simplified constructions of adolescence (Tumusiime, 2017; Nabirye & Tumwine, 2015). Tumusiime (2017) observes that many YA novels prioritise romance or educational experiences, marginalising the depiction of broader social or political crises. Mukasa (2019) similarly notes that war-affected youth narratives frequently frame crisis as a personal moral challenge rather than a structural or political condition. Comparative studies of male and female YA subjectivities remain particularly scarce, as does critical attention to aesthetic strategies employed to render youth experiences.

In contrast, scholarship on adult-focused Ugandan women's literature demonstrates rich engagement with gender, modernity, and socio-political critique (Oloya, 2020; Namutebi, 2018). By shifting focus to adolescents, this study builds on existing scholarship while addressing the underexplored territory of youth subjectivity, agency, and belonging within the socio-political landscapes of Uganda. This approach aligns with global trends in YA research that recognise adolescence as a socially and politically situated experience (Wyn & White, 1997; Cart & Jenkins, 2017).

This study contributes to multiple scholarly domains. First, it advances African feminist literary criticism by examining how gendered identity is negotiated in adolescence within Uganda's specific cultural and political contexts. Second, it enriches postcolonial youth studies by situating adolescence within crises shaped by historical legacies, social inequities, and political instability. Third, the research offers insights for Ugandan cultural discourse, highlighting literature's potential to foster critical reflection among youth on identity, belonging, and agency. Finally, the study illuminates aesthetic and ideological strategies in YA fiction, providing a foundation for pedagogical engagement with these texts in formal and informal educational contexts.

By foregrounding young adult subjectivities, this research demonstrates that adolescence in Uganda is neither a monolithic developmental stage nor a mere prelude to adulthood. Rather, it is a site where crises, culture, and agency intersect, producing complex configurations of identity. The comparative focus on Kimenye and Okurut further underscores how gendered experiences, narrative strategies, and socio-political contexts shape YA fiction's depiction of youth agency, belonging, and resilience.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive literary analysis to explore representations of young adult subjectivities in the fiction of selected Ugandan women writers. Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for literary inquiry because they allow for a nuanced engagement with textual meaning, stylistic choices, and socio-cultural context, rather than quantifiable measurement. An interpretive approach foregrounds the exploration of how narratives construct identity, crisis, and subjectivity, situating textual analysis within broader social, cultural, and postcolonial frameworks.

The study focuses on works by two prominent Ugandan women writers: Barbara Kimenye and Mary Karoro Okurut. Kimenye's *Moses* Series is selected for its humorous yet critical engagement with the experiences of youth, school life, and moral dilemmas. Through comedic narrative techniques, Kimenye captures the everyday trials of young protagonists navigating social expectations and personal growth, providing insight into formative experiences of adolescence in Ugandan contexts. In contrast, Okurut's *The Invisible Weevil* offers a more politically and socially charged exploration of youth subjectivities, foregrounding how gender, societal structures, and political crises shape identity formation. By juxtaposing Kimenye's light-hearted, morally instructive narratives with Okurut's politically nuanced and gender-conscious storytelling, the study examines a spectrum of youth experiences and the intersecting pressures that inform identity development.

The analysis combines thematic and stylistic methods to capture both what the texts convey and how they convey it. Thematic analysis involves identifying recurring motifs related to identity formation, crisis, moral dilemmas, and socio-political pressures. Particular attention is paid to how crises—whether moral, gendered, or political—affect the psychological and social development of young protagonists. Stylistic analysis complements this by examining narrative voice, perspective, and the use of symbols that articulate tension and growth. For instance, humour in Kimenye's narratives functions not merely as entertainment but as a lens through which moral and social challenges are negotiated, while Okurut's symbolic and politically inflected devices foreground the structural constraints shaping youth identity. By integrating thematic and stylistic analyses, the study captures both content and form, revealing how narrative strategies articulate the complexities of young adult subjectivities.

The selection of these two authors is strategic. Kimenye and Okurut offer complementary yet contrasting visions of Ugandan youth. Kimenye foregrounds everyday moral and

social challenges through a lens of humour and relatability, highlighting the microcosmic pressures of school and community life. Okurut, on the other hand, foregrounds macro-level socio-political and gendered crises, situating youth subjectivity within broader structural and historical contexts. Together, their works illuminate how factors such as gender, class, and postcolonial legacies intersect to shape the experiences, choices, and identities of Ugandan adolescents. By analysing these complementary perspectives, the study generates a richer understanding of youth subjectivities and the multifaceted crises that inform identity formation in contemporary Ugandan literature.

IV. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Barbara Kimenye: Everyday Identity and Socialisation

Barbara Kimenye's *Moses* series offers a nuanced exploration of youth identity and socialisation within Uganda's colonial and postcolonial contexts. Through the character of Moses Kibaya, Kimenye portrays adolescence as a dynamic interplay of playful rebellion and moral negotiation. Moses's escapades at a Ugandan boarding school serve as a microcosm for broader societal tensions, reflecting the complexities of identity formation in a rapidly changing world (Kyobutungi, 2025).

The school setting in Kimenye's narratives functions as a critical arena for identity formation. It is within these walls that Moses and his peers confront authority, navigate peer relationships, and engage in moral reasoning. The boarding school becomes a site where colonial legacies intersect with emerging postcolonial realities, influencing the ethical frameworks of young individuals (Kyobutungi, 2025).

Urban spaces further complicate the process of identity formation. Kimenye's depiction of bustling marketplaces and domestic settings highlights the multifaceted nature of youth experiences. These spaces expose young individuals to diverse social interactions, challenging them to negotiate their identities amidst varying cultural norms and expectations (Kyobutungi, 2025).

Humour and satire emerge as pivotal tools in Kimenye's storytelling. Through comedic elements, she critiques societal norms and institutional structures, allowing young protagonists to assert agency and resilience. This approach underscores the importance of laughter as a mechanism for coping with and challenging the constraints imposed by colonial and postcolonial societies (Kyobutungi, 2025).

Mary Karoro Okurut: Gendered Crisis and National Identity

In contrast, Mary Karoro Okurut's *The Invisible Weevil* delves into the complexities of gendered trauma and national identity. The novel portrays young female

characters navigating the tumultuous landscapes of Uganda's political history, highlighting the intersection of personal and collective crises. These narratives underscore the challenges faced by young women in asserting their identities amidst societal upheavals (Namirembe, 2020).

Okurut employs symbolism and allegory to reconstruct Ugandan identity through the voices of young female protagonists. The titular "invisible weevil" serves as a metaphor for pervasive societal issues, illustrating how invisible forces shape the experiences and identities of young individuals. Memory becomes a crucial narrative technique, allowing characters to reconcile past traumas and envision futures beyond the constraints of their circumstances (Namirembe, 2020).

The gendered dimensions of crisis are particularly evident in Okurut's work. Female youth embody a "double crisis"—of self and nation—reflecting the compounded challenges of personal development and national reconstruction. These narratives challenge traditional notions of coming-of-age by highlighting the specific struggles and resilience of young women in postcolonial societies (Namirembe, 2020).

Comparative Reading

A comparative analysis of Kimenye and Okurut reveals divergent yet complementary portrayals of youth identity. Kimenye's emphasis on comic realism contrasts with Okurut's focus on political and moral gravitas. However, both authors converge on the notion of youth as transformative agents within crisis-ridden societies. Their works collectively redefine the concept of "coming of age," moving beyond Western paradigms to encompass culturally specific experiences of adolescence (Kyobutungi, 2025; Namirembe, 2020).

Both authors utilize spatial settings to explore identity formation. Kimenye's urban and educational spaces serve as arenas for moral experimentation and social negotiation, while Okurut's rural and political landscapes highlight the intersection of gendered and national crises. These settings underscore the role of the environment in shaping the ethical and social development of young individuals (Kyobutungi, 2025; Namirembe, 2020).

The convergence of Kimenye and Okurut's works lies in their portrayal of youth as active participants in societal transformation. Through their narratives, both authors challenge dominant discourses of adolescence, presenting youth as capable of ethical reasoning, social intervention, and transformative action. This perspective aligns with broader African literary traditions that emphasise communal values and collective responsibility (Kyobutungi, 2025; Namirembe, 2020).

Therefore, the works of Barbara Kimenye and Mary Karooro Okurut offer profound insights into the complexities of youth identity and socialisation in Uganda. Through their distinct narrative approaches, both authors illuminate the multifaceted nature of adolescence, highlighting the interplay of personal agency, societal constraints, and cultural expectations. Their contributions significantly enrich the discourse on African youth literature, providing nuanced perspectives on the processes of becoming in postcolonial contexts.

Implications

Ugandan literature, particularly within the realm of young adult fiction, serves as a dynamic platform for exploring the complexities of identity formation amidst sociopolitical challenges. This essay examines how young adult identities in Ugandan fiction are actively negotiated within these constraints, how crises are portrayed as opportunities for self-invention rather than victimhood, and how Ugandan women writers contribute a distinct Afro-feminist narrative of becoming. Furthermore, it delves into the theoretical implications of rethinking African youth literature through intersectional and decolonial feminist lenses and the cultural implications concerning the moral, social, and gender education of youth in Uganda's evolving nationhood.

Negotiation of Young Adult Identities in Ugandan Fiction

In Ugandan literature, young adult characters are depicted not as passive recipients of societal norms but as active agents engaged in the negotiation of their identities. Works such as Barbara Kimenye's Moses series and Mary Karooro's Invisible Weevil illustrate how adolescents navigate the complexities of postcolonial Ugandan society. These narratives highlight the interplay between personal aspirations and the sociocultural frameworks that shape youth experiences, emphasising the active role of young adults in constructing their identities within these contexts.

Crisis as a Site of Self-Invention

Crises in Ugandan youth literature are portrayed not merely as instances of suffering but as pivotal moments for self-invention and resilience. Characters often confront personal and societal upheavals that challenge their existing identities, compelling them to redefine themselves. This perspective aligns with broader African literary discourses that view crises as transformative experiences, where individuals reconstruct their identities in response to adversity, thereby asserting agency and autonomy.

Afro-Feminist Narratives by Ugandan Women Writers

Ugandan women writers, particularly those associated with the Uganda Women Writers' Association (FEMRITE),

contribute a distinctive Afro-feminist narrative that challenges traditional gender roles and advocates for women's agency. Through their works, these writers address issues such as gender inequality, domestic violence, and societal expectations, offering alternative narratives that empower women and girls. For instance, Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *The First Woman* contrasts Western feminism with indigenous Ugandan feminist perspectives, highlighting the complexities of gender and identity within the Ugandan context.

Theoretical Implications: Intersectional and Decolonial Feminist Lenses

Rethinking African youth literature through intersectional and decolonial feminist lenses allows for a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted identities of young adults in postcolonial societies. An intersectional approach considers how overlapping identities—such as gender, ethnicity, class, and age—interact to shape experiences and opportunities. A decolonial feminist perspective critiques the lingering effects of colonialism on gender relations and seeks to reclaim indigenous knowledge systems and practices. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens to analyse the complexities of identity formation and the agency of young adults in African literature.

Cultural Implications: Moral, Social, and Gender Education

Ugandan youth literature plays a crucial role in the moral, social, and gender education of young readers. Through narratives that explore themes of resilience, identity, and social justice, these works contribute to the formation of ethical values and social consciousness among the youth. They challenge traditional gender norms and promote a more inclusive understanding of gender roles, thereby influencing the evolving nationhood of Uganda. By engaging with these literary works, young readers are encouraged to critically examine societal structures and envision alternative futures that are equitable and just.

V. CONCLUSION

This study has explored the intricate interplay between identity and crisis in shaping young adult subjectivities in the works of Barbara Kimenye and Mary Karooro Okurut, demonstrating that adolescent experiences in Ugandan fiction are neither linear nor passive but are actively negotiated within complex sociopolitical, cultural, and gendered contexts. In Kimenye's narratives, young protagonists navigate everyday moral dilemmas, school hierarchies, and urban spaces that both constrain and enable their self-expression, highlighting the performative and

relational dimensions of identity formation. Okurut's fiction, by contrast, foregrounds the entanglement of gendered expectations, political turbulence, and social upheaval, presenting adolescence as a liminal stage wherein crisis functions not solely as disruption but as a catalyst for self-invention and moral discernment. Together, these authors reveal that crises—whether personal, social, or political—serve as critical sites where young adults confront societal norms, negotiate moral codes, and assert emergent identities, emphasising agency, reflexivity, and resilience rather than victimhood.

By foregrounding these dynamics, the study contributes to a growing body of scholarship on Ugandan women's writing and African young adult literature (YAL), offering a nuanced understanding of how youth subjectivities are represented across literary registers. The analysis demonstrates that Ugandan female authors produce narratives that are simultaneously localised and transnational, embedding everyday experiences within broader historical, political, and cultural frameworks while engaging with universal concerns of adolescence such as selfhood, morality, and social belonging. Moreover, this study extends theoretical discussions on African YAL by integrating intersectional and decolonial feminist perspectives, underscoring how gender, age, and socio-political positioning intersect to shape adolescent subjectivities. In doing so, it challenges reductive or monolithic conceptions of African youth as either passive recipients of social pressures or as emblematic victims of structural crises, highlighting instead their capacity for strategic negotiation, creativity, and ethical agency.

The insights garnered here also open avenues for further research that could deepen and diversify our understanding of young adult identities in East African contexts and beyond. Comparative studies examining youth subjectivities across East African nations, or across Anglophone and Francophone literary landscapes, could illuminate regional patterns and divergences in the portrayal of adolescence. Similarly, exploring oral narratives, folklore, and digital storytelling—media increasingly central to youth expression—would provide richer, multimodal perspectives on how young people negotiate identity, crisis, and belonging. Additionally, longitudinal analyses tracing how representations of adolescent identity evolve in response to shifting sociopolitical realities could shed light on the dynamic relationship between literature, youth culture, and social change.

In conclusion, Kimenye and Okurut's works underscore that adolescence in Ugandan literature is a site of negotiation, experimentation, and moral engagement, where identity is continuously reconstituted through

encounters with crises. By situating young adult experiences within both local and broader African contexts, this study affirms the significance of Ugandan women's writing in the global YA literary canon and contributes a framework for understanding youth subjectivities as active, multifaceted, and resilient. Future research, by expanding comparative, multimodal, and interdisciplinary approaches, can build on this foundation to further illuminate the diverse ways in which African adolescents navigate the intertwined terrains of identity and crisis.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ahearn, L. (2001). *Language and agency*. Annual Review of Anthropology, 30, 109–137.
- [2] Al-Saadawi, N. (1980). *Women at Point Zero*. Zed Books.
- [3] Angelo, E. (2015). Youth identity and activism in postcolonial Africa. *Journal of African Youth Studies*, 2(1), 45–63.
- [4] BOS (Uganda Bureau of Statistics). (2020). *Uganda demographic and health survey 2019–20*. Government of Uganda.
- [5] Cart, M., & Jenkins, C. (2017). *The heart of YA: Exploring adolescence in literature*. University Press.
- [6] Chege, S. (2020). Postcolonial adolescence in East Africa: Crisis, identity, and narrative. *East African Literary Journal*, 5(2), 89–110.
- [7] Corsaro, W. (2018). *Unlocking the world of children: A sociological perspective on childhood* (3rd ed.). Wiley.
- [8] Ezeifekwe, V., & Ihuah, C. (2018). Reimagining adolescence: African youth in global YA fiction. *Contemporary Literature Review*, 12(4), 301–323.
- [9] Kyobutungi, A. J. (2025). Negotiating young adulthood in Ugandan literature: Identity in Kimenye's *Moses* series and Namukasa's stories. *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 8(3), 3660. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.3.3660>
- [10] Mbembe, A. (2001). *On the Postcolony*. University of California Press.
- [11] Mukasa, P. (2019). War and the moral subject: YA narratives in East Africa. *African Literary Review*, 11(3), 122–141.
- [12] Nabirye, F., & Tumwine, A. (2015). *Youth voices: YA fiction in Uganda*. Makerere University Press.
- [13] Nabirye, F. (2016). Gender, modernity and Ugandan women writers. *Journal of Ugandan Studies*, 4(1), 15–35.
- [14] Nikolajeva, M. (2014). *Reading for learning: Cognitive approaches to children's literature* (2nd ed.). John Benjamins.

- [14] Namirembe, T. F. (2020). Narrating the Ugandan nation in Mary Okurut's *The Invisible Weevil*. *English Academy Review*, 37(2), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10131752.2020.1778830>.
- [15] Ochieng, T. (2018). Tradition and modernity in Ugandan women's narratives. *Modern African Literatures*, 6(2), 55-76.
- [16] Oloya, J. (2020). Political crisis and female agency in Uganda. *African Feminist Critique*, 8(1), 78-99.
- [17] Oyéwùmí, O. (1997). *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. University of Minnesota Press.
- [18] Tumusiime, M. (2017). Adolescence amid instability: YA fiction in Uganda. *Literary Youth Studies*, 1(1), 33-52.
- [19] Wyn, J., & White, R. (1997). *Rethinking youth*. Sage Publications.