



## Feminist Book Publishing Today

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To cite this article: Bibi Bakare-Yusuf & Simidele Dosekun (2021) Feminist Book Publishing Today, *Women: a cultural review*, 32:3-4, 434-441, DOI: [10.1080/09574042.2021.1973732](https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2021.1973732)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2021.1973732>



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Published online: 23 Dec 2021.



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*Abstract: In this piece, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, publisher of Cassava Republic Press based in Abuja (Nigeria) and London (UK), discusses with Simidele Dosekun her founding and continued visions for the press, how these translate into the daily management and operations of the business, and the opportunities and challenges publishing presents for feminist, Black and African political purposes, including transnationally. We also discuss what it means to run and brand a feminist business in a contemporary cultural climate in which feminism is said to be 'popular'.*

*Keywords: independent press, feminist publishing, African literature*

**Simidele Dosekun (SD):** Can you say a little bit about how you came to co-found Cassava Republic Press, with Jeremy Weate? In particular, what political impulses and agendas motivated your decision, including to set up the press as a for-profit rather than non-profit enterprise?

**Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (BB-Y):** In the early 2000s I had visited the University of Lagos bookshop and library and been shocked by both the paucity and range of books on the shelves. The limited range was replicated on bookshelves in middle-class homes across cities I visited in Nigeria. Many of the books were either Euro-American self-help, airport fiction, devotionals from Christian 'Men of God', or business/motivational books with titles such as: 'The Purpose Driven Life', 'Chicken Soup for the Soul', 'Rich Dad, Poor Dad', or books by authors such as Dan Brown or John Grisham. Where was the great literary fiction of the world and specifically, literary fiction by African writers? I felt that something had to be done because a society cannot subsist on such a meagre devoured-of-spirit diet of Euro-American cultural import. Such consumption patterns are neither good for a society's sense of self nor for its ability to build endogenous models of self and cultural world. It was particularly concerning to me given our history of colonization in Nigeria, and the attendant cultural imperialism that has continued unchecked today.

Furthermore, politically and ideologically, I am interested in the archive and very much concerned about what the African literary archive will look like in 500 years' time if we continue on the path where Africans are mere consumers of European intellectual and cultural output, or where the means of production for African creativity are still controlled by Europeans. It was the imperative to both curate and own our own archives that led to the creation of Cassava Republic Press in 2006. By controlling the means of production, I felt that I could help to birth a plurality of voices and experiences of the world that show both the diversity and richness of literature from and of the African continent, and how African authors are imagining their moment. In this way, the hope is to contribute to shaping the literary canon and global archive.

I was also uncomfortably aware that much of what passes for canonical African writing is by men of letters. From Chinua Achebe to Chiogozie Obioma, some of the best-known African writers of the last century are men. It was important to me that such phallogocentrism in our cultural output is checked. This is why at Cassava Republic Press we are very intentional about publishing more women writers. We'll continue to privilege female writers over male writers in order to redress the historical imbalances in African literary fiction. I am not coy about saying that some of the best and most profound writing coming out of the African world today is by women, and I want to encourage more of it.

When we were setting up, I was very clear that I did not want it to be a not-for-profit. I wanted to show that African literature can be commercially viable and sustained by readers, rather than rely on the whims and conditionalities of funders and donor agencies. I did not want to be dictated to as to what I could or could not publish; it was crucial for me that Cassava Republic Press remain autonomous and unbought. Of course, we are happy to receive external funding for support of certain projects. For example, the publication of our anthology *She Called Me Woman: Nigeria Queer Women Speak* (2018) was made possible through funding; similarly, our two graphic novels to date (*German Calendar, No December* and *On Ajayi Crowther Street*) were externally funded, but such funding must remain unrestricted and follow our agenda.

**SD:** How do your politics inform the press's editorial decisions—what Cassava Republic Press does and does not publish, and why?

**BB-Y:** The political decision to upend Eurocentric and phallogocentric publishing that I have been talking about plays out in our editorial decisions. For example, we do and will not publish books that perpetuate heteronormativity gratuitously and unproblematically. It was the desire to destabilize

retrogressive gender stereotypes that informed the setting up of our romance imprint, *Ankara Press*. I realized that so many women are psychically wounded and disappointed because of the stories they consume about love—in books, songs and films—which take their agency away from them. While men like Bob Marley tell women in their songs that ‘they don’t want to wait for [their] love’, Harlequin and Hollywood tell women that ‘love is coming and they should wait for it.’ Indeed, not only should women wait, they will be rescued from themselves so that they can merge with another. I envisioned a romance imprint that would not create anxiety in women about love, that would not encourage them to wait to be found, but would rather provide love narratives with women at the centre, in which women name and own and actively pursue their desire.

Also, we recognize that one of the most powerful and destructive ways Eurocentricism, heteromaleness and normativity are sedimented is through children’s books. For so long, African children have had to consume literature that does not place them at the heart of the narrative. Instead they are positioned in a looking relation to Whiteness, because their image is absent from the frame. By mostly consuming books with images or representation of White worlds, African and Black children more broadly quickly learn that their own world or image is unimportant and unworthy of monumentalizing in the book form. So, they think that they need to forever look out of the window to generate any sense of internal coherence. For White children, by contrast, their sense of the world is daily affirmed and reaffirmed because their books give them a mirror through which they can look at themselves daily. For both sets of children, it is necessary to be able to look both in the mirror and outside of the window. Looking in the mirror gives children a sense of the importance of their own world, and looking out of the window reminds them that there are other worlds and other ways of looking and being, in the process birthing empathy for and recognition of others. Given that for the African child representational books are so thin on the ground, our aim at Cassava Republic Press is to produce books in saturated quantities that put these children at the centre of the story. So, yes, my politics inform the editorial direction of the company.

**SD:** Running a small, independent press isn’t easy. How do your feminist and other political commitments play out in the day to day business operations of Cassava Republic Press, from how you hire and manage staff, to the working partnerships that you do or do not undertake, to your marketing and branding?

**BB-Y:** Traditionally, publishing celebrates the lone, self-made genius. Within the idea of the lone genius is the assumption of the divine that has no connection to the messy work of the earthy, or community or others. The genius springs forth like the miraculous conception without connection to the sweaty labour of coitus! So, it is Mary (the author) and Jesus (the product) who are worshipped. This is a convenient and capitalist script of output, of mastery and achievement without labour, and in fact is the same logic that divorces modern Western achievement, progress and wealth from the labouring bodies of plantocracy and colonialism, as well as working-class servitude. Acutely aware of this Christian, capitalist narrative of genius without effort and without community means that I am at pains, at Cassava Republic Press, to ensure that we never forgot the community of production within which we are embedded, and that we see all members of this community as equally important as the writer and the writing. Hence at the back of every one of our books, we now include prominently the names of everyone who contributed to the production. This way we help to dislodge the narrative of the lone genius writer, and remind readers that the birthing of words is not without labour and a host of specialists (from editors to sales manager) who do not declare or pronounce their own genius so as to enable someone else's to be celebrated. It is important to always emphasis and remember the community and relations of production.

Furthermore, with the knowledge that publishing is dominated by either men or White people, we are also conscious of encouraging diversity across the entire valuation, from cover design and layout to publicity. While we are not opposed to working with male or White talents, we are very conscious that if we are truly going to transform the publishing industry so that it reflects the richness of the world, we have to be deliberate about hiring more Black people, more non-White people and more women. We don't always succeed but we get there about 70% of the time. For me, heading Cassava Republic Press provides an opportunity to bring into being the kind of society that I want to live in, and part of what this means is acknowledging and recognizing the value that everyone brings to creating a product.

**SD:** What kinds of compromises or trade-offs, if any, have you had to make?

**BB-Y:** I can't think of anything here.

**SD:** On branding, to my knowledge the press is not explicitly branded as

feminist, while, arguably, your personal profile (or brand if you would call it that) is unambiguously so. How does the press negotiate the so-called 'f-word', in general and in Nigeria especially, and why so?

**BB-Y:** It was a deliberate decision not to explicitly identify ourselves as a feminist press driven by the desire to unseat and unsettle the patriarchal, heteronormative and white supremacist logic that dominates and structures publishing in general and African publishing in particular. I realized that in a place like Nigeria where the F-word seems to provoke perspiration and anxiety, it was important to give people feminist content unencumbered by labels. I was clear that for the kind of radical changes that needed to happen, we would have to introduce feminist principles to people in a way that they would think it is what they want, what they need and what they have chosen and curated into their lives. While it is important for people to claim the feminist label, because these identity categories matter in terms of solidarity and movement building, I would rather people's lived experience and ethics of being follow feminist principles rather than mere rhetoric. Feminism is both a verb and ethics of being.

Internally, we are clear that we are a feminist-run organization and our ethos is founded on feminist principles that start from our hiring practices to our editorial process and decision making. On the editorial side, as I have already said, we think that it is high time we hear the content of African women's imaginations and interior lives: how they read their own historical moment or imagine the past and provoke the future. We are therefore very deliberate about trying to publish more women, but in doing so ensure that they also do not import retrogressive gender norms which will do harm to women and men. All our authors, irrespective of gender identity, are aware and clear about our feminist position and understand that our editorial process will be guided by this ethos (actually, this conversation has inspired me, I may just write a feminist editorial process for new writers!) Sometimes, it means we can and will not publish certain materials because the author (of whatever gender) refuses to rework and relook at how certain norms are perpetuated, unchecked and offered without irony or critique in their writing.

So, it is less a negotiation because we are clear about our vision and the reason for our existence. It is more about how we tactically navigate the space so that our voices and vision are heard through the books we publish.

**SD:** How do you think Cassava Republic Press is seen or consumed in this regard by its audience/market? More simply put, does/would feminism 'sell' for the press, and in your opinion should it?

**BB-Y:** It is difficult to know exactly how we are seen or consumed, but from some indications, our readers view us as a radical, genre-defining, transformative, daring, feminist, problematic, uncomfortable and game-changing publisher. Most of these words are positive, and I embrace even those that are not as affirming because they speak more to our mission than the negative connection of the remark might convey. Even if we do not say publicly that we are a feminist organization, most of our audience perceive us to be ideological driven, against patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity and limiting social prescriptions. As such, I think feminism does sell, and at this historical juncture, there's both a voguish and problematic element to feminism with the advent of social media feminists that means that many young Nigerians are embracing the term and using it to question and challenge orthodoxy. It is these young people who appear to be our primary audience.

**SD:** From your original base in Abuja, you have recently co-located Cassava Republic Press in London. Can you say something about your experience and positioning in the British publishing landscape so far, both for Cassava Republic Press as a business and for you personally as a Black and African woman in what remains an overwhelmingly white, if female, industry? What are the politics of your being here? How is Cassava Republic Press read in and from this market?

**BB-Y:** We set up a subsidiary in the UK just under four years ago and it has been both rewarding and challenging. Rewarding because our presence has forced or encouraged established British publishers to take writings by African and Black writers more seriously and increase their publication. From an audience perspective, because of our unequivocal commitment to publishing diverse and more expansive writing by writers of the African world, they get to see the full spectrum of African talents—from realist literary fiction to fantasy and creative non-fiction, which has hardly had a look in recent publishing. Readers have more to choose from: their demand for African writing is not always served from the table of mainstream publishers, who may not take the kind of risks we are likely to take with our publishing programme. Furthermore, I can say our cover designs have really got readers to expect better from other publishers, moving away from the 'sunset and acacia tree' that dominated African book covers (Figure 1).

Yes, you're right about publishing being overwhelmingly white and female, and one would have thought there might be some kind of solidarity between us. In fact, I have found my solidarity and support either

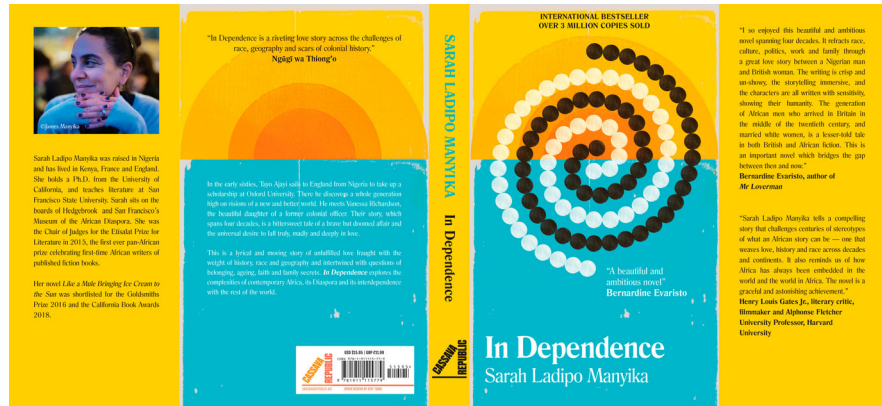


Figure 1. *In dependence*. Print Cover © Michael Salu and Cassava Republic Press.

through the network of the few Black women in publishing or from white men (either within the publishing industry or media) who proactively reached out to me with the offer of support when we started in the UK. Four years on, despite talk about diversity and inclusivity in publishing, I haven't had a tap from white women to check how things are going and how we can support each other. Of course, the ease by which white men are able to offer support and goodwill is not at all disconnected from a history of privilege, power and security. Similarly, the dominance of white women in the industry, whether as fellow publishers (to whom you have to introduce yourself to a trillion times before they remember you) or journalists (who are not deliberate about how they make choices and support), also cannot be disconnected from a history of women's minimal power, which creates a scarcity mentality in which other women become competition to be feared rather than to be embraced and supported.

While there's a large number of women in publishing, especially in lower and middle management, the top executives are predominantly still men. Where we see a larger portion of women leading publishing companies in the UK, it is because they have started their own companies, following the same pattern we see in Nigeria and across Africa. Although the challenge is to get more women in leadership position in the UK, the fact of the matter is that the face of UK publishing is still very white (male and female), concentrated in one region of the country (London), and from one class and educational background. Seeing the seemingly immovable monolith of publishing in the UK, that it is so white, so female, so upper/middle class, so London-centric, so seemingly heteronormative and of a certain physicality, makes me realize that we must not allow a similar



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sedimentation of bodies and interests and representation in the nascent publishing industry in Africa. We can do things differently, we must do things differently, learning from others. For publishers in Africa, we have a unique advantage in that we don't have an over 300-year legacy of cigarette smoking, whiskey swilling white Oxbridge men and women to unseat! We can literally fashion a different publishing eco-system that embraces all the different groups in different African societies at all levels of the value chain. And we have already began that project!

***Disclosure Statement***

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).