

## **“Men have been there for too Long, let’s have some Space”: Hilda Twongyeirwe Rutagonya on Femrite and Literary Activism in Uganda**

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### **Abstract**

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The interview with Hilda TwongyeirweRutagonya focuses on the emergence of FEMRITE as a women’s literary movement. It talks about the association’s commitment to promoting women and women’s literature in Uganda. The interview gives an insight into the inner workings of the association and how it qualifies as a literary activist group which mobilizes against women’s minimization on the literary scene. Specific activities of FEMRITE such as writing workshops, public readings, book clubs, and reader/writer interactive forum among others are discussed, showing how they have been deployed to break men’s monopoly of the Ugandan literary scene. It highlights the importance of collective action to the overall goal of the association without overlooking the creative talent and vision of individual writer as it shows in the case of Rutagonya. By discussing her personal experience and writing, this interview foregrounds the influence of the group on an individual writer.

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**Keywords:** women’s literature, FEMRITE, Uganda

Literary efforts of African women have been the focus of many scholarly inquiries in the past three decades. They show that women’s literature can no longer be ignored or simply taken as appendages to men’s.

Notwithstanding this important shift in the reception of African women’s literature, an aspect that seems to be largely overlooked is how women have formally organized to change their societies through literature. This could be as a result of the commonly held opinion that literature does not have a direct societal utility and that at best it could only be remotely connected to any form of change.

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However, studies have shown that the Ugandan women's writers' association, FEMRITE, is a literary movement that has brought about considerable change in the Ugandan literary scene (Hunsu 2014; Strauhs2013; Kiguli 2007). The association has to a large extent broken men's monopoly of the Ugandan literary scene and its achievements speak to the success of its efforts in this direction.

By 1998, two years after its official launch, it became the first publishing house in Uganda to publish four women-authored works at once and continued in 1999 with the publication of another set of five texts. In 2000, it hosted the first ever interactive workshop between international writers from outside Uganda and prospective and amateur writers in Uganda; it aired the first radio programme that allowed writers to respond to questions and comments on their works and by 2002, its members, for the first time in the history of Ugandan literature, had as a collective, published twelve titles all written by women in less than four years (Kiguli 2007, 174). These accomplishments gave rise to an unprecedented interest in women's literature, challenging male domination of Ugandan literature.

In addition to the above, there are other pointers to the success of FEMRITE as a women's movement. The first is that its members have clearly demarcated a women's literary tradition that is marked by a radical approach to issues of sexuality, female empowerment and gender role sharing both in the public and domestic space among others. They seek to portray women as resilient, independent agents of change and development. Examples include Mary Okurut's *The Invisible Weevil* (1998), Susan Kiguli's *The African Saga* (1998), and Goretty Kyomuhendo's *Secrets No More* (1999). Another notable impact of FEMRITE on Uganda literature is that through its efforts, women writers for the first time in the literary history of Uganda have now consistently attracted national and international recognition by winning prestigious literary awards and getting nominated for some.

One of its founding members, Violet Barungi won the British Council International New Play Writing Award for Africa and the Middle East in 1997, Goretty Kyomuhendo and Susan Kiguli both won the National Book Trust of Uganda Literary Award in 1999 and Jackee Budesta Batanda was the winner of the 2003 edition of the Commonwealth Short Story competition for the African region. Monica Arac de Nyeko bagged the Caine Prize in 2007 while Doreen Baingana and Beatrice Lamwaka were shortlisted in 2005 and 2011 respectively.

These awards and the (inter)national recognition that comes with them all attest to the quality and reach of FEMRITE's publications and the works of its members.

The following is the text of the interview granted by one of the longest serving Coordinators of FEMRITE (2007 to date), Hilda Twongyeirwe Rutagonya in the premises of the association located at Plot 147, Kira Road, Kampala, Uganda on the 14<sup>th</sup> April, 2014.

**Folasade Hunsu: How did you join Femrite?**

**Hilda Twongyeirwe Rutagonya:** I met Mary Okurut, the founder of FEMRITE, as a student in the Department of Literature in the early nineties where she was teaching Literature. She talked to some of us who were her students about the idea of establishing an association of women writers. I was interested and subsequently invited to be part of their first meeting in 1995 and that was how we started and how I came to be part of FEMRITE. I was later nominated to serve as the Publicity Secretary of the steering committee.

**FH:** When did you become the Coordinator and what has been your experience?

**HR:** I became coordinator in 2007 after my boss, Gorette Kyomuhendo, but had taken up paid employment in 2003 as Programme Officer. It has been opportunities. I think that's how I can describe it; because when I came, I started interacting with more people. I started writing a little more. I was also on the editorial board was doing a lot of editing, but now I am involved with managing the editing process – you know, not just looking at the text but managing the whole process and then interacting with other publishers, interacting with other writers, more writers and learning to manage projects, learning to create projects.

It's been an extremely enriching experience with a strong support system. The good thing about FEMRITE is that you have everyone's support. You know, you have willing members who would answer whenever you call them for any kind of assistance. They are a strong back-up. They are there.

They are always volunteering, in accordance with one of our values as a women's group. Another one is Sisterhood and I have seen them work in FEMRITE.

**FH:** How many members do you have presently?

**HR:** More than sixty active members and about forty inactive members. But we have those who pay their membership dues and come once in a while. Maybe they're not writing much; maybe they're not coming as often as you would want them to come. So if you look at that we have over hundred members.

**FH:** I am aware that a good number of your members have won prestigious literary awards, how have these awards impacted on the image of FEMRITE?

**HR:** I think that awards are important. You might not agree with some aspects of these literary awards but the thing is they make people write. You know, people are writing to win those awards. And once they win awards, or get shortlisted or mentioned, then they would have something - they have a name to protect; then they have to write to remain relevant. They have to write otherwise people will start asking: 'She was mentioned for this, where is she?' So, awards do push. But also, the way our society is, we're always looking for who has won what. So, when people have won or had those mentions, the literary torch is upon them, so everybody is talking about them, and that way promotes FEMRITE. Social media have been helpful because our members get mentioned for their contribution to women's literature thereby increasing our presence on the web. FEMRITE participates in nurturing and gives our members opportunities. So then, when these writers get up *there*, it reflects on FEMRITE because they don't move alone, they move as members of the Sisterhood.

**FH:** Sisterhood, as you know, is an important tenet of feminist movements. The whole idea of coming together, doing things as a community of women as a way of empowering women. Would you then describe FEMRITE a feminist group?

**HR:** In major ways FEMRITE is a feminist organization because if you look at sometimes even the stories that we write, you are not likely to find us writing and putting a woman down. We will elevate the woman. We use all opportunities to put the woman on a pedestal. So in a major way, FEMRITE is feminist. We contribute to feminist literature.

And also, just looking at where we are coming from, to give women a voice is like saying men have been there for too long, or like saying men, please let's have some space or level ground and then take it right from there. And then maybe we are not feminist if we understand feminism as a Western concept. But that is a misinterpretation of feminism because having a voice is not Western. And so, in that way, if they say this is Western, that is a bit uncomfortable, because what we do is not Western, it's relevant for us, in the space we are in.

**FH:** Would you agree with my description of FEMRITE as an activist group?

**HR:** Yes, I think you're right. You're right, because even in our programme, we have creative writing and advocacy, you know, promoting African literature and promoting Ugandan literature, especially women's literature. So we do a lot of literary activism. For example, we realized that western literature dominated schools' curricular in Uganda, so we moved for the inclusion of Ugandan voices, both male and female. So when we talk about this type of activity, it is literary activism, yes we do that and also try to take our texts out of Uganda through co-publishing. We try to find opportunities for co-publishing so that our voices could be heard outside Uganda as we have western voices here in Uganda. The aim is to provide some sort of level ground for Ugandan writers. It's not easy doing that at all. If you don't do some literary activism, some advocacy the ground will never be level. So you're right.

**FH:** Have you had any success stories?

**HR:** We are making some progress. Like last year, a publisher called me and said "Hilda have you looked at the papers?" I said "No, I haven't." He said "because we should have a glass of wine tonight because for the first time, the national curriculum development centre has called Ugandan publishers to submit books for assessment." That was a first. FEMRITE's advocacy has opened up the system for a comprehensive review for the first time. That's at least an achievement.

The books are not yet out, the books that we've selected but at least there was an open call and people participated in the selection. FEMRITE was also asked to participate in the selection because according to the authorities FEMRITE has been leading the process. In addition to this, the association has become synonymous with Ugandan literature in a way.

You would hear people saying jokingly, "FEMRITE will sue you." or "Are you not scared of FEMRITE?" So, there's a voice. We may not have achieved much, but there's a voice that people recognize as a voice that is standing for Ugandan Literature.

**FH:** So your group's advocacy is beyond promoting women's writing?

**HR:** Yes, because we realize that you have to move, push Ugandan literature to the front burners and because FEMRITE supports women to write, eventually, as we promote women's literature, we are also promoting Ugandan literature.

**FH:** In a way FEMRITE has improved the status of women in Uganda?

**HR:** I think so because now you go to places and you hear people talk about FEMRITE. You meet writers who have taken up writing as a profession because of their interactions with our association or guest writers that FEMRITE has invited to writing programmes and workshops. There are members who through FEMRITE have made a lot of contacts and you can say they now live as writers. Sometimes organizations, local and international alike, invite our members to contribute to writing projects. You can say they make their living through writing. And I think for me, that's a major.

**FH:** Talking about projects, what are some of FEMRITE's writing projects or activities?

**HR:** Our activities and writing projects are varied. We have had writing workshops for a good number of writers and people interested in writing. We have a resource centre where people could come to borrow books, but now, it's more of a Writers' Centre, because people now come, and sit, and do their writing there. Borrowing has over the time become secondary to this function that the centre performs. The centre is located within our premises.

I think it's one of our major achievements if you ask me because it provides a space, a room for women especially to take time off their busy schedules and spend quality time on developing their writing abilities and writing projects.

Then we have a club, a readers'/writers' club where readers and writers meet and interact. That also started around 1998. For some time we stopped it but then we realized that it's a major activity, and then we brought it back sometimes in 2007. We have a regional residency that started in 2008. It brings women writers from within Uganda and from other African countries together for some weeks and allows them to concentrate on writing. We have a writers' caravan. We've done it once but we think it will continue because it was a big success. We take writers out of Kampala to other towns in Uganda. The purpose is to take them on inspirational tours to see interesting sites and perhaps meet local people.

There is also the Poetry Poster Project where we work with visual artists. We do poems and they would interpret them into paintings and graphics which we use at workshops in schools where students and writers look at the poems together and discuss them. We have school clinics where we visit high schools and we give them writing workshops. It is geared towards encouraging young people to write and develop their writing talents.

We do have public readings and public dialogues. Every month we host an author and give the public the opportunity to ask questions and relate with authors freely.

All of these are little initiatives by women.

**FH:** How many books has FEMWRITE published so far?

**HR:** Over thirty-two titles including short stories, novels by individual authors, true life stories, anthologies and other genres.

**FH:** I can see that you have published a good number of short stories. Why did FEMWRITE go into writing and publishing short stories?

**HR:** Short stories are representative of many voices and we believe that almost every woman has a story to tell which they may not be able to tell in a long form like the novel or capture in a poem but they can maybe tell it as a short story. So that's how the short story started. We said, "Let's write a short story each."

Let's all challenge ourselves to bring a short story" and that's how we started the very first one. We just said we needed to do something together at the start as a collection of short stories which would represent a woman's voice in Ugandan literature. And we called it *A Woman's Voice*.

Also in our writing workshops and residencies, we realized that people were developing short stories and completing them. And so we decided to work with them to edit them and get them published by the association. So, that is how the short story concept has developed. And also the other challenge for novels – it takes a longer period and more efforts to complete novels and come up with quality manuscripts. The Sisterhood has played a huge role in developing these short stories because you finish your short story and you send it to members, and they critique, and then you are encouraged to submit it for publication once the suggested amendments have been effected, which is different from a novel. All of these are at no cost. You won't get a lot of feedback for the novel on time but also when you get it, to make it work for you is a little more difficult than for a short story. So that is why the short story has kind of taken over because of the support, the group support for this genre.

We've done true life stories on women and war, women and the law, women and FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) and women and HIV. We hope to inspire women with these projects, to amplify their voices here in Uganda. But interestingly when the voices go out, you realize that they are relevant in other situations you never imagined which I think is very important for us and good for women.

**FH:** Which of the short story collections is the most popular or the most successful by your own assessment?

**HR:** The most successful has remained *A Woman's Voice*.

**FH:** Why? What is so special about it?

**HR:** I don't know. Maybe because most of the contributors to that first volume were "virgin voices", new and fresh, providing fresh insights into Ugandan realities and conditions.

**FH:** You are also a short story writer.

**HR:** Yes

**FH:** What do you have written about?

**HR:** Some are to do with womanhood, coming of age as a girl. Most of my short stories have to do with women -the woman, the woman's spirit and the woman's experiences.

**FH:** Who is your favourite character in these short stories?

**HR:** My favourite character, the character that I'm especially attached to, and that's Ian in *Headlines* and that is probably because of what he goes through.

**FH:** What happened to him?

**HR:** He dies in an accident, but I like the way he is passionate about life.

**FH:** So it means you have some male characters as protagonists in your short stories?

**HR:** Yes. Also in *Making Ends Meet* it's also a man. One time a friend of mine read it - *Making Ends Meet* and she called me after midnight and said: "You killed him! I was a little shocked that she reacted like that. That too is a man and incidentally he also dies.

**FH:** Would you then say that you're fascinated with male characters for positive or negative reasons?

**HR:** No. Not really. Not really.

**FH:** Compare their portrayal with female characters'; don't you think you've put the men on the pedestal again?

**HR:** No. No, no, not at all. For example in "A Woman's Voice", the story after which the collection is named, it's about a young girl who sees her first period. I think she comes out quite strongly when boys are laughing at her, saying: "Your mother goes through this, what is so special?"

which is what made me write the story because actually I witnessed a friend of mine spoil her dress and the boys in class were laughing at her and that remained on my psyche for a very long time. So, when I had the very first opportunity to write, that's what I wrote about and I created my story around that. In another story titled "Pumpkin Seeds" which appeared in the collection of short stories published by FEMRITE as *Pumpkin Seeds*, I wrote on one of the traditions of the culture to which I'm married. A girl is made to plant pumpkin seeds and I wondered why, what purpose would it serve? I asked my mother-in-law but she only said it was the tradition and provided no further explanation. I make the girl plant the seed because it's the tradition and she's just gotten married into this family but I make her go back and pour hot water on the seed so it doesn't grow. So when they're waiting, when they're waiting for her to get pregnant to see if the seed will grow, she's waiting to see them wait forever. So she's not brainwashed under this tradition of planting the pumpkin seed. I depict her as a female character with a mind of her own. Like other female characters she is strong and not a push-over.

**FH:** From this example, how would you describe your interaction with African oral traditions, which feminist critics have implicated in the marginalization of women?

**HR:** My perception is that yes, there's the tradition which wants you to do certain things but you are not helpless against it. Female empowerment won't come on a platter of gold, it won't come easy which means as women we need to use whatever is within our means to break oppressive traditions and not perpetuate them. Recently I was editing a book that was going to be included on a reading list and I saw a proverb that puts women down and I told the writer, "You can't have this, because it could have been true then but it's not true now, so you cannot have it in this book." There are many proverbs like that and as a writer, I cannot reproduce such in my writing.

But if there is something that promotes women, as a woman activist, I use that. I do epic poetry, for example. When I get up to do epic poetry, men laugh - men in the audience. After the show they tell me, "That is not for women. How did you learn it?" Epic poetry is praise poetry where I was born and it is for the men. You know, they would chant it at work, they would chant it when they are marrying - when they're taking someone's daughter.

But me, I find it a very powerful tool of communication, and so my question is: "Why wouldn't they want women to be part of this?" It's a very energetic poetry, and for me really, I would love to see women perform it.

**FH:** Any closing remarks?

**HR:** I think what I would like to say is that we owe so much to the reading public that read what we write; we owe so much to people like you who teach what we write because otherwise, if you're a writer and you're not being read, then you're no one. So we owe our growth, because even when people read and give you feedback, then you grow. You try to think about how to write better, how to be a better writer, yeah, so we owe a lot to you in academia.

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