

HILDA TWONGYEIREWE TRANSCRIPT

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Betty Kankam-Boadu, Hilda Twongyeirewe

Hilda Twongyeirewe 00:00

If you're quiet about your pain, your pain will kill you. And someone will say that you enjoyed it, which again takes me to the fact that we must speak. Otherwise, our pain will kill us. Our pain will become a thorn. It will grow into something that we cannot control and we shall die.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 00:31

Hello and welcome to Inspiring Open, candid conversations with influential women whose careers and open ethos have pushed the boundaries of what it means to build community and succeed as a collective. I am Betty Kankam-Boadu, a journalist and women's rights advocate. Join me as I explore the fascinating backstories behind Africa's most tenacious female personalities. Inspiring Open is a podcast series from Wiki Loves Women, a project of Wiki in Africa. Be inspired, be challenged, be bold.

Today, our guest is Hilda Twongyeirewe. Hilda describes herself as a feminist and women's activist, traits she discovered at an early age when she found herself always getting into trouble defending women being unfairly treated in taxis, markets, classrooms, and other public spaces. She is a literary activist, an independent writing development consultant focusing on fiction and social development issues, especially to do with gender. She enjoys working in safe spaces that allow African women the liberty to share their often difficult stories. As a founding member of FEMRITE, she initiated the Residency for African Women Writers, which is currently one of the most sought-after women's writing programmes in Africa. Her writings also appear in different anthologies. Let's get right into it. Welcome to Inspiring Open, Hilda. I am happy we finally have the time to do this.

Hilda Twongyeirewe 02:11

Thank you. Thank you, Betty. I'm happy. Thank you for the invitation. I know I've given you trouble for us to get that time, the right timing to be together. But yes, I'm so glad that we are finally at it. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 02:30

Let's begin by going into a bit of your background. How was growing up like?

Hilda Twongyeirewe 02:36

I grew up in a village setting. I live in Kampala right now, but I came into Kampala as an adult when I came to study, when I came to school for my HSC. But I grew up in a village setting. I love to say that I come from the shores of Lake Bunyonyi in southwestern Uganda. If you ever visit Uganda, that's a place that you must come to. Somebody recently was talking about Uganda and he said if Uganda is the Switzerland of Africa, then Kabale is the Switzerland of Uganda. That's where I come from. And that's where I grew up from, right as a baby and my whole childhood. That's where I was, that's where I went to school, primary school, part of my secondary school. I grew up very fortunately with my both parents. We are many children. We are three girls and five boys. Two boys are gone, three boys are still alive. I grew up where I knew that when I get back from school, I need to help my mother prepare food, do some work around the house, or even go to the gardens. It never came through as a punishment, no. And so for me work; that's another thing that influences me today. I work and I will even forget that I need to get up and go take my lunch.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 04:43

I love the work bit because there is such dignity in work and sometimes we overlook that. So now seeing that you are a writer and editor; I am sure the love of books and reading featured in your life as a young woman?

Hilda Twongyeirewe 05:00

My dad had a small cupboard, where the top could have passed as a bookshelf. But other things occupied that space. But you would find one or two or three books. And I think looking back, I think those books came into our family from my cousin, God rest his soul in peace. He came to live with us for his primary school and he came with books. So that was my first interaction with books away from school. Otherwise, for me, books belonged to the school setting. I remember, I think I was in Primary Four, and we had a teacher who had come for school practice. He asked me to go and bring his novel on the table. I tell you the truth, I thought novel was the name of the book, not a type of a book. So I go, and I don't find novel. I find things on his table, different books, and I'm looking for novel. I look at

the books and what's novel? I go back to him, teacher, I don't see novel. And he explains, and I go back and pick it.

And then later, when I went to secondary school, I went to a beautiful, beautiful secondary school, Bishops Girls School Muyebe, and we had teachers who were really, really interested in literature, interested in languages. And for the first time, I could get into a library and pick out books. A lot of abridged series of the big novels. Now I knew what a novel was. And so I think that school did so much in shaping me into the life I lead now. Into loving literature, into loving language, into loving words, and wanting to use words. And I did well in literature, probably not so well in English, but I did well in literature. And later, when I went to college, I wrote a letter. I had read Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in my secondary school. When I went to college and interacted with more of his books. I looked for an address. I don't remember how, maybe it was in one of the books with the publisher's address, maybe. I don't know. But I wrote to Ngugi when I was at college, and I got a reply, but the reply wasn't from him directly, but from his wife. And she said he had travelled, but he had left instructions that she responds to me. And so at that point, I really, really was in love with literature, and I knew it's what I had wanted to do. But before that, in secondary school, I didn't know there would be a career in literature other than teaching literature. And so, I chose to be a teacher of literature. That is how I launch into being a teacher, a teacher of literature. And as training in that literature, then you get into assignments, in creative writing. You interact with teachers who have written, you interact with other people who have written. And so yeah, eventually I thought, I think I can try it, I think I can write. So that is how I got into it. And very fortunately, one of my teachers again, God rest her soul, Hope Keshubi, she had written... I think she's published. She had written a bit and she started looking out for us and encouraging us to write. She and another teacher, professor Otim Rugambwa. So while at college, they started telling us yes, you can write, yes you can publish a poem, you can publish a story. You can, you can, you can! And from there, I knew I could. And that's how I got into it.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 09:59

You know, sometimes, we again undervalue the influence teachers can have on students and even vice versa. Look at how the encouragement of your teachers impacted your career.

Hilda Twongyeirewe 10:11

They were great teachers, they were really, really great teachers. I miss them. I exchanged letters with them. When I left college, I kept writing to them, and they kind of became my career parents.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 10:27

When you were a literature teacher, you found out, there wasn't a lot of books written by women, and even Ugandans. Take us through how that made you feel, and the attempts you made to change the status quo.

Hilda Twongyeirewe 10:42

Yes, as a teacher then, I saw that very big gap. And I think it's partly what has turned me into a literary activist, because then you realise that you're not part of the mainstream literary canon in the country. You get side-lined in a way doubly because there's very, very minimal women's literature that is in the mainstream literary canon that is taught in schools. And then also, as a teacher at that time, you would find one book or even sometimes no book by a Ugandan writer on the syllabus. I think that is how I got to really be very, very inspired by people like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, because I hadn't read any other Ugandan at the time. Yes, so for me, it became a question of voice. Where then are our voices? Where are the women's literary voices? Where are the Ugandan literary voices? And so immediately I started teaching. I started looking out for groups that then launched me into literary spaces, that launched me into women's empowerment spaces. Before I even left university, I joined the part of the women who were forming FEMRITE, the few women who are forming FEMRITE, because the founder, the main founder of FEMRITE, was teaching me at university. And so she made her idea known to us and a few of us from university joined her.

So at that point, it was clear to me already that very few women were writing, or even very few women were getting into where literature was, where literature was taught, where literature was discussed. And so I knew that I wanted to belong there, because I knew then that's the path I had chosen, that I had chosen literature, I had chosen literary arts. And so I knew a better space, being part of the voices being part of that team, the force that was contributing to building a better space for literary arts. After joining FEMRITE, and I was serving on the board, I served on the board for some time, FEMRITE is Uganda Women Writers Association. After that, I thought, I think I would like to do more than just teaching, but to be part of that team that is creating texts, that team that is engaged, more engaged in literary activism, and that's when I made a mad move of stepping out of a pensionable permanent and pensionable job of a teacher because I was on the payroll, on the government payroll, and I stepped out. I stepped out and went into volunteering in FEMRITE. I remember a friend of mine, she's called Philo. I remember Philo calling me up and saying you can't, you can't do that because you're doing a lot of volunteering with the organisation. I don't think you should leave a paid job, permanent, to go and do that, go into NGO world just like that. Maybe another time you will be more ready. And I said, no, I think this is where I would like to be. FEMRITE has introduced me to a lot of initiatives that are into literary activism, both in the country, and outside of the country. So I find myself moving with other groups on the continent, outside the continent, looking at how we make literature important,

looking at how we centre literature into the important spaces of policy, important spaces of development. How do we use literature? How do we use our stories to build an even better society?

I work a lot with other initiatives. And it is because at a personal level, you've realised the importance you have. You attach a lot of importance to voice, you attach a lot of importance to our stories. Our stories define us, our stories say who we are. And so when our stories are sidelined, then our lives are sidelined. So it is important that we always find spaces for our stories, our voices.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 16:37

Let's get a bit into FEMRITE. It's been around for almost three decades. How much of a game changer has it been in the literary space in Uganda?

Hilda Twongyeirewe 16:48

It is one of the literary organisations that has really stood the test of time, in the formative years, in the earlier years of FEMRITE. That time, my predecessor, the organisation was coordinated by Goretti, Goretti Kyomuhendo, and we were really ambitious. At one point, we launched, I think there were five titles, five books, I think. I'm not so sure about the number, but it was such a big number, from nothing to about five titles. And then an article came out. And the article said, these women are probably only trying to justify funding, but let's wait and see what happens next. And in the formative years, the struggle was the women are not writing. There was hardly anything in the country written by women. And so after that article, so many years later, another article gets written. And the journalist, the title actually of the article was Ugandan Women Shine, Where Are The Men? Something like that; Ugandan women writers shine, where are the men? So that shift from hardly any woman writer to Ugandan women, writers shine where are the male writers? I think, for me, that maps the FEMRITE journey. That gives us the contribution of FEMRITE in terms of empowering women writers. There's been a lot of women who have gone through FEMRITE, who have won awards, a lot of important national and international awards. And I think that is a big milestone. That's a big achievement for the organisation to move from nothing to awards. That's very important. There is still a bit of struggle of getting into the spaces that matter. There are a lot of works which have won awards internationally. But when you come down to the Ugandan context; in Uganda, the biggest reading space is schools because I mean, we've all been complaining about the reading culture in the country, especially reading of literary texts. And so, when we write and we do not get into schools and into universities, there is still a big gap. Then we are not moving into the spaces that are shaping the literary canon of the country, and of the continent. But that is why now we are focusing in terms of literary activism. But also really, we appreciate the fact that our books, the universities are teaching them. The very first time I felt really good about my work. There's a small story that I wrote, I think my very first story, and I was moving, I was at National Theatre in Uganda, and someone, a girl came

over and she said, "You're Hilda?" I said, yes, and she said, "I love your story, *Becoming a Woman*." And she said after, I didn't know her, so she introduced herself, and later she told me their teacher, Dr Nambi, was using that story to teach about women empowerment. And people like Dr Billa has used FEMRITE books a lot in her presentations in the country, in class, to speak about women empowerment and literature. So that's also a milestone, that our books are moving into those spaces, to influence social behaviour, to influence how society lives and thinks today, and that is very critical for writers.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 22:09

Hilda, you've been a bit frustrated about why women's literature cannot exist as just literature for the society. Tell me your feelings about this constant need to differentiate.

Hilda Twongyeirewe 22:22

Yes, Betty, that is frustrating, because when we are speaking about books written by men, they are simply books, they are not men's books. And that othering of women's literature is very, very disturbing. Because you cannot find a book, and it is just about women, you cannot find a woman's piece of work, and it's just talking about women. Because the literature that women write is literature for the society, it's literature for the community. And so that tag of women's things is not even right, it's not just disturbing, but it's wrong. All literature is literature, we do not need the tags. We do not need the tags, because they are wrong, they are disturbing. When we write, we write about the same things, we will approach them differently, we will write about them differently, because we experience them differently, because we interpret them differently. But they are the same things. It is the same literature. And so, I really would like to encourage people to not look at women's works with that tag of women's works. No, it is all literature. All of it contributes to building a stronger literary canon.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 24:19

Writing your content is a form of activism. And I feel sometimes writers take this role of activism in their work for granted.

Hilda Twongyeirewe 24:28

You may not set out to do activism in your work, but writing, a voice within themselves, you may not think about it, you may not do it deliberately, but the act of writing, the act of voice is an act of activism within itself. And so even if you took it for granted, people will read things into your writing, and so it is important that you give people what you would want them to read into your writing, and otherwise they will have their own reading of what you're writing. So I think it's important that we pay attention. I do remember a few... in 2016, we hosted Professor Pumla Dineo Gqola from South Africa. And I was so thrilled she gave a keynote address. I was so thrilled by her keynote address, about literature,

about writing. And one specific thing that I have just written about in an introduction to a book that we are doing right now, which is titled *This Bridge Called Woman*. And in the introduction to that book, I have quoted Pumla, what she said at that meeting at FEMRITE@20. She said, while other people go on streets to riot, writers riot with their pens, writers riot with their keyboards. And so for me, that answers that activism thing, that we cannot take it for granted. And so the act of writing within itself, whether you intend it or not, whether you're deliberate about it or not, it is an act of activism. And so why not do it well, and do it deliberately. What we write is so critical that we cannot just write, because someone is going to read us, someone is going a book and like our voices when we speak. It's so different, a story, a poem is so different. Probably the other thing that I find critical, and that we are not paying much attention to, is the act of editing other people's work. Because sometimes, you as a writer might not realise that the statement that you have made is probably going to be a statement that might not be taken positively or might influence people negatively. But as an editor, as an editor of a piece of work, you should be able to catch it, you should be able to. Like now, if I am editing a children's storybook, and I have the father reading a newspaper, and the mother is probably grinding or doing, I will not leave that story like that. Because then I'm aware of how stories have been used to build stereotypes, sometimes stereotypes that are not helping society grow. And so, I really would like to speak to people who edit, to be deliberate again, be deliberate about catching the concepts and having conversations with authors. So that we build literature that is going to transform society. It is critical, it is very, very important.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 29:03

Indeed, that is very important, that is very important. And this will bring me to the question of safety for women in particular, in the activism space in Uganda. How safely are women navigating the space?

Hilda Twongyeirewe 29:18

I love the community of women because I really think that Uganda's women activist community...I would dare describe it as a solid community because many times you feel the sisterhood, you feel that you're supporting each other, you feel that you're there for each other. But the challenge sometimes comes with people not understanding or people choosing to understand it in a different way. And so when, for example, you say you're a feminist, then straight away, people think that you're a man hater, and that's not that's not what it is. Those attacks make it so difficult. And I think sometimes, they are also used to silence the activism, because then I know as Hilda, if I am told, I am lesbian, because I'm speaking for women's rights, then I will probably shun away. And whether I am or I am not, that has nothing to do with rights, with women's rights. We all want to be in a certain space. So, I think I feel that sometimes people will be harsh, not because they just want to be harsh, but then they want you silenced. And so I think why we meet a lot of resistance is because the other

party is a beneficiary. And so sometimes, they may not be doing it deliberately, but because it is okay, they don't feel it, because they are the beneficiaries of the system. And so, which takes me again, to another book that I read by Alice Walker. In one of the characters, I think it's Tashi, a character in the...what's the book? I will remember, but it's a book on circumcision. And one of the characters says, if you are quiet, if you're quiet about your pain, your pain will kill you. And someone will say that you enjoyed it, something like that, which, again, takes me to the fact that we must speak, otherwise, our pain will kill us, our pain will become a thorn, it will grow into something that we cannot control, and we shall die. And so, whether activism is a tough space, we do not seem to have a choice, we do not seem to have a choice.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 32:45

That is very profound. And if we don't speak about our pain, people will think we are enjoying it. So we need to speak up and not give up. Being a writer, I assume, can be initially intimidating. Because you open yourself up to be judged and criticised, sometimes very harshly. For young women writers who are starting out and don't know the spaces to take advantage of to hone their craft. What are your words of encouragement to them?

Hilda Twongyeirewe 33:18

I know that in Uganda, there's been Lantern Meet of Poets, which also brings young poets together. Right now there's Poets Association of Uganda (PAU). There is Writivism, I think right now, it's under hiatus. But what I would like to appreciate about groups is that they kind of form a security net, a safety net around us. And so, starting out, it would be nice to start out in such groups. When you get into such groups for the young people, certainly there will be someone that you will hook up with and so it's a very, very good space to start from looking out for such groups, so that you have that safety net around you. And then later after you've grown your teeth, then you can get out and fight and know that you can also bite. Bite others when you get bitten. So for me, those are advantages of groups that you then have your first readers in these groups, in these clubs, in these initiatives before you take your work to the wider public. It helps a lot, then you know what to expect. But also, you know how to deal with public criticism of your writing. So that would be my first advice.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 35:20

This podcast is called Inspiring Open and the aim is to share stories and experiences, build communities, and ultimately just promote the culture of openness, because we believe that is how our work we do gets farther and impactful. So what does open mean to you, Hilda?

Hilda Twongyeirewe 35:42

I think for me open is a position of honesty, a position of vulnerability. Many times, I think we are not open about who we are, about our vulnerabilities. Because we forget that we occupy the same space as humans, and we concentrate on ourselves. And then that puts us into a space of fear, a space of fear of being judged. Open, I interpret it as, that space of honesty, that space of facing a fellow human being, in putting them in the same space as I am, and then they choose how they would like to respond to me. That is how that is how I interpret openness.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 36:56

You know, anytime I pose this question to my guests, I get something new all the time, my mind is drawn to other interpretations I have never thought of or even considered. So it has become my favourite question. And this will bring me to my final question. And that is, what kind of Uganda do you want your grandchildren to experience?

Hilda Twongyeirewe 37:19

Oh, that is interesting. Because I think my answer merges into what we've just been speaking about. And that is about openness, that is about vulnerability, that is about honesty. And so I would like a Uganda that will embrace my children from that point of view, that my children can step out and know that they are safe with the community. And know that they can be themselves, they can be open, they can be honest, they can be vulnerable, and still be safe. And so I hope that we build our communities in a way that they can be that, that they can be safe spaces, where we can walk into in our truest, in our highest personalities. And we are still safe. That my daughter can walk in here and say, Hi, I am Stella, I am a feminist. And she is interpreted for who she is for the feminist that she is not be given tags, because she has given that description of herself a space that gives them that security, politically, religiously, socially, all round. That is the kind of space that I would want.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 39:26

Yes, yes, yes, we all do have a part to play to make our societies better and safer for all of us. And we cannot relent on our individual responsibilities towards this. And on that note, thank you, Hilda, for your time. I loved talking to you.

Hilda Twongyeirewe 39:44

Thank you, Betty, thank you very much. Thank you for creating this space so that more and more women's voices can be heard. I do appreciate immensely the opportunity to speak with you

Betty Kankam-Boadu 40:00

Thank you, Hilda for the work you do to nurture generations of female writers on the continent. That was Hilda Twongyeirewe, a writer, editor, feminist, and founding member of FEMRITE.

Thank you for listening to Inspiring Open, a podcast series from Wiki Loves Women. This first series of Inspiring Open was funded through the International Relief Fund for organisations in culture and education 2021, an initiative of the German Federal Foreign Office, the Goethe Institute and other partners; and an annual grant from the Wikimedia Foundation. If you enjoyed today's show, subscribe on Spotify, Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen to your podcasts so you never miss an episode. Feel free to share, rate and review us. We appreciate the support. You can also tag us in your posts. We are @WikiLovesWomen on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. I'll leave you with the words of Ntozake Shange. "Sisterhood is important because we are all we have to stand on. We have to stand near and by each other, pray for one another and share the joys and the difficulties that women face in the world today. If we don't talk about it amongst ourselves, then we are made silent by the patriarchy. And that serves us no purpose. Until next time, look after yourselves and your sisters. And remember, be inspired, be challenged, be bold. I am Betty Kankam-Boadu and you've been listening to Wiki Loves Women, Inspiring Open.