

## **An Interview with Rosemary E. Ekosso Author of *House of Falling Women***

**Interviewed by Dibussi Tande**

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### **What motivated you to write *House of Falling Women*?**

I always thought I would write a book some day, and I have toyed with a number of ideas at various times. But I have felt increasingly strongly that there is something about African women my age that ought to be said, and said in a way that highlights the dilemmas we face in these times. There are things we ought to talk about, and my aim in writing this book is to help trigger a debate about how our role has changed with the times.

### **A substantial portion of the story takes place at the University of Yaounde, your alma mater, and in The Netherlands where you currently reside. How much of this story is autobiographical?**

Much of it is autobiographical in terms of background and setting. However, when one creates a character, he or she is a composite of traits that one has observed in people one knows or imagined from scratch. When I was depicting Martha's mother, for example, I was actually thinking of a woman I know who is called Martha, but there the resemblance ends. It is dangerous, I think, to read too many biographical clues into a work of fiction, which belongs to the realm of the imaginary. Admittedly, imagination has to be rooted in some degree of reality – you can only have your head in the clouds if you have your feet somewhere else, otherwise you would be said to be entirely *in* the clouds; but I should hate it if people were to go around trying to fit what they think they know about me into what they're reading.

### **What was your inspiration for Martha, the lead character in the novel?**

I cannot say Martha was inspired by any one person. Like most of my characters, she is a collage of traits. I needed her to find the money to do what she thinks of as her good work and that is why she had to go to Holland (how many philanthropists do you know in Cameroon who can realistically be expected to give her the kind of money she would need for her project?). I needed her to move on from the King of Rats, so she had to find another boyfriend. Since she was in Holland, I wanted the boyfriend to be white – and to address the relationship in such a matter-of-fact way as to express my views on it without actually stating them.

I did so because of the number of people I know who are marrying outside their race. It is not a major phenomenon, but it is growing. I wanted to acknowledge it.

I dwelt on multiracial relationships at some length because I wish to emphasise that many of the characteristics with which I vested Martha are those of working women my age.

They see new things, face new challenges and try new experiences. All the while, they are grappling with the challenges inherent in playing a role in a society whose rules have been in force for decades, sometimes for hundreds of years. So I would say that she was inspired by all of us, as I see us and as I have read about us.

**Do you consider yourself a feminist writer given the theme of *House of Falling Women*?**

To answer that, one would have to define feminism. And in defining feminism, one must qualify it. Would my feminism have anything in common with the feminism of a woman in the West? I am reminded, in considering this, of Virginia Woolf's *Angel in the House*. Are African women angels in the house who are not allowed to be useful, or does their problem spring from a general failure to recognize the fact that they are the backbone of their society, and to give them the power and benefits commensurate with their contribution? If that is how you define feminism, then I am a feminist. However, this is not a label one should apply or adopt lightly.

**In the novel, there is a stark difference between the young women of Martha's generation who are much more worldly and aware of their rights, and Martha's mother whose view of the world and the place of women in society is very traditional and limited. Is this an accurate reflection of the generation gap exist today between Cameroonian women?**

There is an element of caricature in the way I have depicted Martha's mother. I do not think there is an unbridgeable gulf between her and her daughter; I have sort of summarized a number of issues into that relationship, which is, I am glad to say, not typical. Otherwise, we'd all be very unhappy with our mothers! However, there *is* a generation gap. I have observed it mostly in the different attitudes of older women to a man's providing role. Quite a few of them expect a man to be established as potential provider before he can be considered a worthy partner. Increasingly, younger women are considering other things now that they have to find their own husbands instead of having the "married" for them by their families, and initial attraction, emotional considerations, and adjustment to the pace of modern life are playing a bigger role in women's choice of partners.

**Which character do you identify with the most in the novel and why?**

I like Martha/Ophelia. I think of them as one because I view them as fairly close versions of the same person, but with crucial differences because of their individual experiences. There is a definite biographical link with Ophelia and her hesitation about whether she should take up writing seriously. But that's all, mind you!

**Did you set out to paint the male characters in a particular light, e.g., "The King of Rats" or did these characters simply evolve with the plot?**

Apart from the King of Rats, all other characters evolved with the plot. The King of Rats is a repository of all that I find wrong with men, especially those middle-aged and elderly men who run (and often ruin) everyone's lives. Mind you, this is not a sweeping condemnation of all men of a certain age. I am glad to say that I know many men of

honour and integrity who are middle-aged. But the bad ones exist. I had in mind the Kadiye in Wole Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers* when I planned this character.

**Some critics will argue that there is an undercurrent of anti-religious sentiments throughout the novel. Martha for example, stopped going to Church in high school because "she had begun to find organized religion irrelevant and hypocritical", while other characters regularly lash out at the Catholic Church in particular for its treatment of women since antiquity. Do you think it is fair to describe the novel as anti-religious?**

No. It is not anti-religious. Religion is very useful to many people. It is less useful to others.

But that is not the issue. The issue is that organized religion should not be above reproach and it should not be resistant to change. There is no point in saying that we should not criticize God's organisation. As far as I know, Jesus did not have an organized Church of any kind. He had followers. Organisations are created by humans. We are taught that Jesus told Peter to organize his church, or words to that effect. But the Bible is a very old book that has been in human hands for a long time, and human hands can be quite busy little things when it comes to furthering or propagating certain interests or views.

True, some degree of organization is necessary for people to express and explore their beliefs, but from the moment you start organizing the spiritual, a strong human element is introduced. Now, if it is accepted that humans are not perfect and should strive for perfection all through their lives, then it should be accepted that organisations of human beings are not perfect and can be improved.

So religious organisations can and should be improved. In particular, women should be given more power because they and their children are the foot soldiers who win the wars for organized religion. We need a few generals in there.

**Although the story tackles very serious issues, it is written in a very witty and humorous style. What did you do to ensure that you didn't end up with a "preachy" novel laced with boring academic discourse on women's rights?**

To paraphrase an old joke, whenever I felt another rant about women's issues coming on, I took two aspirin, lay down, and waited for the feeling to pass! I must admit it was hugely tempting to write pages and pages about what women have said about the lot of women over the ages. And there is a lot out there you can read. Not all of it is boring, though. Most of it is absolutely riveting.

**In her book *Gender in African Writing*, Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi writes that "The paucity of Cameroonian Anglophone writing, and, even more, of Anglophone Cameroonians women's writing has been a cause for concern to critics. Although some Anglophone Cameroonian women have published poetry, short stories, and short plays, the novel is a genre that Anglophone women writers need to work on." Where do you situate your**

**novel and yourself, as a female Anglophone writer, within this apparently desolate Anglophone Cameroon literary scene?**

That one is easy. I situate myself among those few women who have dared to show their manuscript to anyone. You will recall that it was not easy to get me to do it.

I ask any and all women who have a little thing hidden away somewhere to show it to their friends. I was encouraged to write by my French teacher in high school because I showed him my poems. I cringe now when I look at what I wrote 20 years ago. But I cringe when I look at anything I write, so that is neither here nor there.

Writing requires a certain frame of mind. It requires you to shift from trying to be good at things that people want you to be good at – in order that *they* may consider you to be a valuable member of society – to working at the things that really interest you and possibly being considered a little odd as a result. Being considered an oddity never killed anyone, and it can be deeply satisfying.

**Many Nigerian writers of your generation always point to the influence that early Nigerian writers such as Chinua Achebe had on their writing. Are there any Cameroonian writers who influenced you or inspired you in the same manner?**

I'm afraid I cannot point to any particular Cameroonian influence. It is probably my fault.

**Any African writers?**

A great many. However if I cite names, they will only be the ones of those I remember now or those I read more recently, and so this is not an accurate reflection of what has influenced me. I kept my manuscript in one form or another for a long time before it came out, and it kept changing throughout that time. I have been reading Nuruddin Farah of late and I would have liked him to have influenced me. But I'm afraid he did not because I hadn't read him when I started writing.

I should like to say that I read many [Pacesetters](#) in my teenage years and if anything influenced my view of writing, that would have been it. But I am not at all good at remembering titles or authors, so don't ask me for titles, please.

By the way, whatever happened to Pacesetters?

**Who are your favorite non-African writers?**

I don't play favourites. Well, that is not strictly true. The trouble is that I've got so many favourites I couldn't tell you who they are. Besides, some authors I only remember when I see their books on a shelf. As I said, my recollection of what I have read and not read is terrible. I often buy books by people whose writing I like only to find on opening the first page that I have already read them.

I'll admit I like Margaret Atwood, but she is by no means the only one. William Trevor is another. I liked William Boyd until he set a novel in a place he calls Nkongsamba and I

thought that insofar as the setting and atmosphere were concerned, the book was both insulting and a major failure. I was quite annoyed at him, actually.

This could turn out to be a very long answer, so I'll leave it at that.

**Is there a specific audience for *House of Falling Women*?**

No.

**What is your hope or expectation for *House of Falling Women*?**

I want people to read it. I'm glad it's out of my hands at last. I am even gladder that it is out of my head so I can start planning something else.

**What next? Are you currently working on your next novel?**

Not really. I've got to earn the money to pay my rent. But I've got an idea...