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## Why I Write, What I Write, and How I Write It

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Panel: Why I Write What I Write

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# Why I Write, What I Write, and How I Write It.

Jean –Marie V. Rurangwa

## I. Introduction

There is a close relationship between what I write and what I have lived. I think this is common to most writers if not to all. Whether you write a poem, a novel, a short story or a play, there is always a part of yourself you deliver to the reader in a conscious or unconscious way. We always write what we are, what we see, what we feel, what we think, what we want or what we wish.

## II. Exile and Literature for Struggle

I was born in 1959 in Rwanda. In the same year, there were bloody events of political and ethnic essence. A Hutu regime with an ideology essentially anti-Tutsi incited Hutu populations to massacre their neighbors regardless of age or sex. Thousands and thousands of Tutsi perished. Thousands more fled to neighboring countries. It was in this context that I left my home country with my parents for Burundi.

In our country of exile we were settled in camps, completely destitute. We suffered very much from hunger, epidemics, discrimination, xenophobia. In short, we suffered from anything related to our condition as refugees.

In spite of all this, I was able to complete my studies and in 1986 I got my Degree in French Language and Literature and was sent to teach French in a secondary school. The same year, Rwandan refugees achieved 27 years of exile but Burundian authorities did nothing to integrate them and the Rwandan authorities did nothing to repatriate them. The United Nations Organization and the Organization of African Unity had relegated the question of Rwandan refugees to the dungeons of history. No one worried about us. In short, we were the rejects. We were regularly the objects of persecution, contempt, humiliation and frustration in all countries where we had taken refuge.

I felt an irresistible need to express on paper the sufferings of my people in exile. I wrote a collection of poems that I entitled “Coeur d’apatride” (Heart of a Stateless Person) in which I told about the misery, the sufferings, and the dreams of the Tutsi Rwandan diaspora. I felt that I had the duty to shout all over the world what I was feeling at the bottom of my heart.

But my poems could not reach the audience that I wanted to reach and I had no possibility of publishing them. I only gave them for reading to my fellow friends. Theatre seemed to me to be the best medium to advocate for my people. I wrote two plays: “La Voix du Vautour” (The Voice of the Vulture) and “Les Enfants du Soleil” (The Children of the Sun). The first play talks about the division of the Rwandese people by the colonizer, the ordeal of the exile, the hope for unity, and the reconciliation of my people. The second play denounced the political abuses of President Juvenal Habyarimana’s regime (ethnic and regional discrimination, political assassinations, embezzlement, nepotism) and predicted a radical change in Rwanda, a change which had to be implemented by the “children of the sun.” I created this metaphoric expression to

designate both Hutus and Tutsis who were eager to build a new Rwanda, a country in which justice and freedom must reign.

These two plays were to be performed respectively on the 11th and 18th of March 1990 in Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi. When the agents of the Rwandan Embassy in Burundi heard the advertisement on the radio they got very angry and told the Minister of Culture that my plays constituted a threat to the relationship between the two countries. So Burundian authorities, at the request of the Rwandan ambassador, forbid my plays. The censorship of my plays became famous in the milieus of the Rwandan diaspora. From that time on, I was one of the artistic spokesmen of Rwandans in exile. And I assumed this role at my own risk.

In a fit of emotion I wrote another play, "La traversee du Desert" (Crossing the Desert). To avoid censorship I located the action of my play in Senegal and I gave Senegalese names to my characters. The audience, which predominantly consisted of Rwandan refugees, understood very well the message. The play made my name but at the same time put me in trouble. In fact, I was once again censored and declared to be a "Subversive element" by the Intelligence Service of president Habyarimana. Burundian authorities told me that I had to stop performing. Feeling a certain threat to my security I fled to Italy thanks to some Italian friends and Rwandan refugees in Italy.

In Rome, where I studied sociology at the "Pontificia Universita Gregoriana," I staged my plays (which I had already translated into Italian) and I wrote some others. I was regularly invited to perform my poems of exile in many theatres in Rome. I wanted the "international opinion" to be informed about a problem that neither the United Nations Organization nor the Organization of African Unity would resolve: the problem of Rwandan refugees and its consequences. Some poems of "Coeur d'Apatride" were published in a poetry anthology entitled "La poesia dell'esilio (Poetry of Exile)" edited by Maria Jatosti, an Italian writer.

## **II. The 1994 Rwanda Genocide and Writing to Remember**

On April 6, 1994 President Habyarimana's plane coming from Dar-es-Salam to sign peace agreements with the Rwandese Patriotic Front, a political and military movement which was fighting against him, was shot down in the sky of Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. Hutu extremists close to the president found in this crash an unexpected opportunity to perpetrate a genocide planned a long time before. From the night of the crash until July 1994, thousands and thousands of Tutsis, regardless of their age or their sex, and the Hutus who would not adhere to the genocide ideology were horribly massacred.

I was very indignant about the silence and the indifference of the international community in the face of the Rwandan tragedy. After the genocide I thought: I have no power to stop the genocide, but I have at least the possibility to perpetuate its memory by writing. So I wrote poems.

In 1998 the Rwandan Minister in charge of culture asked me to join a group of African writers who had decided to write about the genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda. The project of these writers was called "Ecrire par devoir de memoire" (Writing to Remember) and was initiated by Nocky Djedanoum, a Chadian journalist who lives in Lille (France) and who is director of Fest' Africa, a Festival for African literature. It was

in this context that I wrote an essay entitled “Le Genocide des Tutsi explique a un Etranger” (The genocide of the Tutsi explained to a foreigner), a play entitled “Butera Bwa Bugabo ou le Fils d’un Survivant” (Butera bwa Bugabo the Son of a Survivor), and a collection of poems called “Laissez-le vivre”(Let him live).

In 1999 I moved to Brussels to earn a PhD in African Linguistics. While there, I was asked by BildMuseet, a Swedish Museum for Contemporary Art at the University of Umea, to contribute to an anthology with a text on Africa. I wrote “Afrique qui es –tu,” an essay that was published in Swedish in “Emergencia” (an anthology of 17 texts written by African writers) under the title “Afrika.wem ar du?” I was asked to tell in a political and poetical language what Africa has been during the last century and what I wish it to be in the third millennium.

In May of 2000, I returned to Rwanda after many years of exile. To reflect this journey I wrote a book entitled ‘Sur les routes de l’exil’ (On the Roads of the Exile). This writing is about my life in exile, but every Rwandan who lived in exile recognizes himself in it. It is therefore an individual and collective history.

Today I write about the different challenges post-genocide Rwanda is now facing. Thus, to sensitize young people against the HIV/AIDS I wrote the play “Le Dangereux Seducteur” (The Dangerous Seducer), which is being performed by my troupe in schools and universities. But the 1994 Rwanda genocide takes a big place in my writings. I have written another play on genocide entitled “Les caprices du destin” (The Whims of Destiny) that will be performed in Cameroon at the FATEJ (Festival Africain du Theatre pour les Enfants et les Jeunes: African Festival for Children and Young People) in November 2004. A text entitled “Souvenirs amers de l’Annee Terrible” (Bitter Souvenirs of the Terrible Year), a collection of the testimonies of a hundred young survivors, is to be published in Rwanda.

My writings on genocide have these objectives:

- Reminding people of the horror of the genocide so that it will not be perpetrated anymore.
- Fighting against any form of negationism.
- Telling the survivors that life goes on in spite of the gloomy past and that they therefore have to survive in the names of those who were annihilated.

#### **IV.Conclusion:**

To respond to the question “Why I write, what I write and how I write,” I would like to say only this: “Exile and genocide made me a writer of my people. In poetry or in prose I express their sufferings, their battles, their dreams and their hopes.