



OPINION

English, Inter Alia

Is it my writing that's rootless and lacks authenticity, or is it I? This is our home as it is yours; we did not drop from the skies.

Free Speech: [Waffle of the Toffs]

SHASHI DESHPANDE

An open letter to some fellow-writers:

Some years back, I gave a talk titled 'Where do we belong?', the 'we' referring to what has now become IWE. The question was purely rhetorical, because I knew where we belonged. We belonged to the same world you did, all of us were part of the ocean called Indian literature.

But recently, reading your diatribe against us, loaded with invectives, I have been shaken. I think it is time we talked to each other, not at each other and not through others. Let me begin with the bogeys of rootlessness and authenticity you have raised. I must admit I'm slightly confused: is it my writing that is rootless and lacks authenticity, or is it I? This is our home, as it is yours; we did not drop out of the skies when we started writing in English. It is the here-and-now, the what-was of this country that fertilises our imagination. My father was a Kannada writer, my mother came from Pune, my husband comes from a rural landed family: my self encompasses all these, it is out of this self that I write. Keki Daruwala spoke of the poet Imtiaz Dharker as writing from her position as a woman and a Muslim. True. Each one of us writes from a particular position; this is our reality. When you say that we are making something out of nothing, are you implying that our realities are nothing? Do you, as writers, think one can go on for decades creating something out of nothing?

An equally weird charge is that by thinking, or writing, in English we do not penetrate the psyche of the people. I am puzzled. How does the language prevent me from understanding the people I write about? Can a language close the doors on imagination? On feeling? As for superficiality, yes, some of us may be superficial; but then, so are some of you. Mediocrity or shallowness is not the monopoly of any one language.

More interesting is the accusation that it is hard to express an Indian experience in English. Let me be honest: occasionally, rarely, this does happen. However, trusting in my writer's skill, I cope the best I can. And like Sunil Gangopadhyay said, replying to the charge that Indian languages have a limited vocabulary, 'I have enough words for what I want to say', I will say that I am able to express what I want to, though at times I have to work hard to reach where I want to be.

One thing is clear to me after reading what you have said about us: you are victims of the same hype you are complaining about. I take note of the names you mention and see that you have spoken only of the more visible writers. The others don't exist for you, because, not only have you not read us, you have not read about us either. We may be less visible, but we have much writing and many readers, most of them in India, we are published here the same as you are. Sometimes our books go abroad, like yours do through translation. But this is not what we aim for, nor do we think of a specific readership when we write. In fact, no real writer does that. But you close your eyes and mind, you believe what you read in the media, you generalise and accuse all of us of writing for Western readers, of being mercenary, etc. I appeal to you—listen to us, to what we are saying. Read us, not about us. Read our poetry as well as the novels. Sitanshu Yashaschandra thundered at those who spoke of 'Indian writing'—'You do not have the information'. I say the same to you. Understand that there are many kinds of writers, that neither hype, nor lack of it, are indicators of quality. That some internationally known English writers are excellent writers. And if they earn more and are known better than many others in India, it is because, as we say in Kannada, this is 'written on their foreheads'. Understand that there is now a surge of vitality in our writing and if there are imitative and shallow writers, they will fall by the wayside. The real writers go on.

Many of you have compared our writing to the rest of Indian writing and found it wanting. Writers never compete and comparisons are odious; but what is really wrong here is the fact that you are comparing a part to a whole. It's like comparing Tamil writing, say, to 'Indian literature'. And remember, English writing is the youngest among us. Give us time to grow. If we are bumptious and cocky right now, forgive us. That's what being young is all about.

I see angry people behind your words, not writers. Which is why the astonishing advice that we translate you instead of writing our own novels. How can a writer speak this way? I'm a novelist, not a translator. I can only do my work. But what has saddened me the most is the great disrespect you have shown for fellow writers; what else can I think when you call us intellectual pygmies or say we are a mess? We may not agree with one another, but surely we can respect one another's work? As writers, you know how much of us goes into our work, and how little the rewards are—yes, even for English writers. Ultimately, like all writers, we want to write, to be published, to be read. All else is a surfeit—welcome if it comes, but something we can do without.

Last year, at a gathering of women writers from different languages, we were able to meet purely as writers; when we spoke of the languages we wrote in, we did so not with hostility, but with interest in one another's worlds. Shall I too generalise and say something about the difference between men and women writers? About insecurity and so on?

(The author has been writing novels in English for over two decades, including Small Remedies)

[Click here to see the article in its standard web format](#)

[ABOUT US](#) | [CONTACT US](#) | [SUBSCRIBE](#) | [ADVERTISING RATES](#) | [COPYRIGHT & DISCLAIMER](#) | [COMMENTS POLICY](#)

