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Why I Write

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Why I Write

Abstract

I started writing rather late in life; I was nearly thirty when I began. Until then, though I had read voraciously since childhood, and had been obsessed by - no, let me not be pompous and say literature - the written word, I had written nothing, nothing at all. One day I began. And then, as if the floodgates had been opened, I wrote and wrote and wrote. It was a deluge, as if what had been pent up in me for years was flooding out. I wrote short stories initially. All about women, as my very few readers as well as family and friends never failed to inform me. I had a serious sense of doing something not exactly wrong, but something rather shaming. Surely writing about women was not serious writing? Serious literature was written by men, about men. But there was nothing I could do about it. Sometimes I cheated. I wrote in the persona of a man. A male narrator. But the stories turned out to be about women after all.



Shashi Deshpande was born in Dharwad, India, daughter of the renowned dramatist and Sanskrit scholar, Shriranga. At the age of fifteen she went to Bombay, graduated in Economics, then moved to Bangalore, where she gained a degree in Law. The early years of her marriage were largely given over to the care of her two young sons, but she took a course in journalism and for a time worked on a magazine. Her writing career only began in earnest in 1970, initially with short stories, of which several volumes have been published. She is also the author of four children's books and five previous novels – *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, *If I Die Today*, *Come Up and Be Dead*, *Roots and Shadows* and *That Long Silence* (Virago, 1988), which won the Sahitya Akademi award and has been widely translated. Shashi Deshpande lives in Bangalore with her pathologist husband. Her most recent book is *The Binding Vine* (Virago).

SHASHI DESHPANDE

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I started writing rather late in life; I was nearly thirty when I began. Until then, though I had read voraciously since childhood, and had been obsessed by – no, let me not be pompous and say literature – the written word, I had written nothing, nothing at all. One day I began. And then, as if the floodgates had been opened, I wrote and wrote and wrote. It was a deluge, as if what had been pent up in me for years was flooding out. I wrote short stories initially. All about women, as my very few readers as well as family and friends never failed to inform me. I had a serious sense of doing something not exactly wrong, but something rather shaming. Surely writing about women was not serious writing? Serious literature was written by men, about men. But there was nothing I could do about it. Sometimes I cheated. I wrote in the persona of a man. A male narrator. But the stories turned out to be about women after all.

They kept coming out of the dim corridors of my mind, places I hadn't even known they inhabited. Girls and women I had seen since childhood. Girls being 'shown' around to eligible 'boys', waiting patiently, humbly to be approved by them, by their parents, their sisters/brothers/aunts/uncles/grandparents so that they could get married and fulfil their destinies. Girls who had been lively and sparkling, looking after marriage placid perhaps, but dimmed, as if a spark had been extinguished. A great aunt who had been widowed at 10 and lived the life of a shaven widow ever since and another who was, they all said, 'so clever she should have been a lawyer' but became a widow instead. And we took it for granted that their roles were to serve anyone, everyone in the family for all their lives, with never a respite.

I wrote a story about a young woman's feelings on the first night after her (arranged) marriage. Of her fears of having sex with the man who was to her 'not even a friend, but only a husband'. A novel about a woman who thinks of herself as the 'skeleton in her own cupboard'. Another about a marriage which a woman suddenly discovers is nothing more than a yoking together of two animals: 'it's more comfortable to move in the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful; and what animal would voluntarily choose pain?' I wrote about a woman who – but why go on? Yes, I write about women.

Sometimes, in my more expansive moments, I say 'I speak for women.' In more sensible moods, I know that is claiming too much. Social

responsibility, social commitment – these are words that occur with monotonous regularity in India when writers speak/are spoken of. Yes, in a country like ours, these can never be ignored. Yet I know I do not write to change the world. I would like to; who wouldn't? But I know I cannot. I can only tell it as it is. Rejecting all that has been said, written and told to me about people, specially about women who have always been spoken for, discarding images, stereotypes, re-questioning myths and starting afresh, crawling into the minds of women, painting their inner landscapes – I tell it as it is. Rather, as I think it is. And taking pains about how I tell it, shaping my work with care and love, because the form of my creation is very important to me. This is what I have done and, hopefully, will go on doing.