

Writing and social responsibility

Meena Kandasamy

When I think of the question of whether a writer has a moral responsibility, I often reflexively think about another question: Do I have to be a writer?

But as often as I think about whether I have to be a writer, I also almost immediately think about quitting. My introspection revolves around the question: Is there a better way to address the issues that concern me, the issues that I'm very passionate about? I have tried working with NGOs, and I quit because I found them lacking. I have tried working on the margins of political and revolutionary organizations, and I have given up because I have found myself lacking. Lacking the stamina. Lacking the long-haul, endless optimism. So, writing then.

Writing is a choice that I have made because of my commitment to radical change, and often, sitting behind a blank screen, this essential fact can easily slip away. So, I remind myself of the reasons why I write: To me, it is a very personal, a very political, and a very urgent necessity.

I write because I want this voice, I want to be heard. I would not write if I did not have this burning rage to change the horrifyingly unequal society into which I was born. My mother is from a lower caste in the Indian caste hierarchy, my father comes from a nomadic tribe. As much as writing can be a child of the grassroots from which it is birthed, writing is also an intellectual activity. I think my choice of doing this intellectual activity is also an assertion. It is an act of defiance. Ancient Indian laws prohibited women from learning, they prohibited the lower castes from even hearing what was considered sacred knowledge. The punishment for those women, and those lower castes who defied this diktat, was to have molten lead poured

into their ears. To fight this oppression, it takes courage to stand up, to say: I'm a woman, I'm lower-caste, I'm from a nomadic tribe: I will lay claim to the very things that are prohibited to me. So, I write.

Now, as a brown person, a first-generation Indian immigrant here, I feel another kind of marginalization. An existence where the feeling of exclusion has become the everyday norm.

So, I don't only aspire to write, but I aspire to write to change this society. For me, the act of writing is a hard-won right, and for me, it is a moral duty. It is, to paraphrase Marx, not only enough to understand the world, but we have to change it.

Words can convince and persuade, words can spark people to challenge injustice, so I go to my work with a sense of responsibility, or what you can call a moral duty. Most of all, writing is the only outlet, the only outpouring for voices like mine, clamouring to be heard.

There is a danger: people will think you only write manifestos, they will think your work lacks literary merit, that you are an insufferable card-carrying activist-in-disguise. It is an easy pitfall. To avoid conforming to the stereotype of the bland and repetitive political writer, I think it is worth remembering that not only does such a writer have a responsibility towards fighting for an equal and just society, but she also has an aesthetic responsibility towards her readers. Toni Cade Bambara put it beautifully when she said, 'The duty of the radical artist is to make the revolution irresistible.' Those are words to live by.

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Meena Kandasamy is a poet, translator and writes fiction and essays. Her debut collection of poems, *Touch*, was themed around caste and untouchability, and her second, *Ms Militancy*, was an explosive, feminist retelling/ reclaiming of Tamil and Hindu myths. Her critically acclaimed first (anti) novel, *The Gypsy Goddess*, smudged the line between powerful fiction and fearsome critique in narrating the 1968 massacre of 44 landless untouchable men, women and children striking for higher wages in the village of Kilvenmani, Tanjore.

Kandasamy's second novel, a work of auto-fiction, *When I Hit You: Or, The Portrait of the Writer As A Young Wife* (published by Atlantic Books) drew upon her own experience within an abusive marriage, to lift the veil on the silence that surrounds domestic violence and marital rape in modern India. It was selected as book of the year by several newspapers; and was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction 2018 among others. Her third novel, *Exquisite Cadavers*, was published by Atlantic Books in 2019. She has a PhD in sociolinguistics. Her work has appeared in 18 languages. She lives in East London. **www.kandasamy.co.uk**

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

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