

# Writing with the Scalpel, Healing with the Pen

Kavery Nambisan

Thank you Manthan, for making this event possible, and thank you audience, for taking the risk of listening to a relatively unknown speaker. I am a surgeon and a novelist. I live in two worlds: The first is that of precise anatomical knowledge, diagnosis and practical skills learnt formally, in medical school and hospitals. It is mentally demanding, physically exhausting and often stressful. It is team work. The second, the world of writing, is one of lived experience, observation and imagination which I must turn into meaningful sentences that others may read and appreciate.

Here I'll digress a little and tell you how I came to have two vocations. My family wasn't in favour of my being a doctor. Most of us Indians are familiar with this 'family will' – different from the will that decides inheritance issues. It can bend us gently in the direction it wants us to move in, or it can put forceful and sustained pressure until you jolly well listen. I was stubborn and the family will gentle enough to let me be. I did medicine and went on to do my surgical training in UK where I obtained the Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons, London. About a year later, while I was polishing my skills in surgery, I got a letter from a friend who was a catholic nun in a 250-bed mission hospital in Bihar. "We're urgently in need of a surgeon, will you come?"

I went to this little 'cycle-rickshaw' town which is about 90 kms from Patna and worked very happily there. It is a dacoit-infested area of Bihar with extreme poverty and gun-shot injuries were as common as hernias or appendicitis. It was an excellent opportunity for a young surgeon and it prepared me well for rest of my career spent in rural towns and villages in other parts of India. It also nipped whatever arrogance I had as a young 'foreign-returned' surgeon. So: I received my basic surgical training in UK and my specialised training in Bihar. I have since worked in UP, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu and have been back to the same hospital in Bihar for another stint.

I took up writing well after I became a surgeon, perhaps as a hobby; perhaps out of sheer vanity and the pleasure of seeing my name in print. I discovered my true voice when I wrote stories for children. You cannot talk down to children or deceive them. I can say that children taught me how to write.

Surgeons and writers will have to take risks. In fact every creative activity is defined by the ability to take risks, and also, to know when to avoid them. Life does not afford me this second luxury all the time, and I burn my hands often. For me, surgery came before writing. My surgeon friends were amused. Writing was well, all right. But stories? They thought I was being frivolous.

The benefits of surgery are obvious but how about writing, especially fiction? Is the writing of stories frivolous, does it have any value other than that of entertainment, or "time-pass"? And if it is frivolous, then how about painting, music and other forms of art?

The first allure of any form of Art, be it a kirtan, a ghazal, a painting or a story, is aesthetic. As a novelist, my primary concern is to tell a good story, for sheer enjoyment, much like the making of a good film or a beautiful clay pot. But not every good story is a great one and even a great story can

begin to fade. With time, it's appeal might not be as big as it once was. But almost always, a very good story will survive. We need not go further than the Mahabharata or Ramayana, the works of Shakespeare or the Bible.

Literature happens when language is used to convey thought, emotion and news in a way that touches us deeply, perhaps disturbingly. It awakens our sensitivity, which enables us to understand people who may not be like ourselves. It is sometimes like looking into the dark interior of our own minds with a searchlight. Read Brothers Karamazov to see the agonising result of jealousy and hatred within a family. Or the compelling, comic masterpiece Catch 22 which depicts the futility of wars. Joseph Heller does it better than most others who have written about wars. And we have our epics which draw us into family drama, full-blown battles, and inner conflict between good and evil which we all know and experience in our own hearts. As readers, we have our own individual interpretations of stories, even epics. For instance, in Ramayana, Surpanaka is punished for coveting Rama. Now lusting for a married man is wrong but is does it really deserve the punishment of mutilation? Vali, the brother of Sugreeva is killed with an arrow shot by Rama who hides behind seven trees and thus attacks the unsuspecting Vali from the back. Is that noble? And yet, Vali and Soorpanaka fall of the wrong side of dharma. Works of art make us more aware of other people, they kindle our understanding. That is perhaps why we return over and over again to a favourite poet, or re-read novels, or treasure other forms of art.

I have a very good friend, a young brilliant scientist, whom I value particularly because of his thought-provoking arguments. Last year when we met, he wanted to know why people write poetry and why others read them. "It is, after all, prose cut up into lines, some vague and romantic notion of an experience. I just can't see the point in it," he said. He felt the same about what he called "Modern Art". My husband who's a poet and I were sort of horrified by this and offered him a few poems to read. Really good ones. But he was adamant. "A waste of time, reading such stuff," he said. He simply couldn't get off that subject for rest of the afternoon.

My young friend may not need poetry. Or Art, for that matter. He will be a brilliant scientist and engineer in spite of his rejection of Art. He will, most probably, remain the lovely person he is. But poetry and Art do not need him to survive. They will not only survive but change the lives of many people who take the trouble to understand and enjoy the aesthetics of words.

When I first started to write and publish, another friend told me, rather pointedly: "I don't like these 'Arty types' They're pretentious and bogus." Most of them, she said, were bad citizens with loose morals – they believed in live-in relationships, homosexuality and such. She said this many years ago, and even now, she clings to this belief.

Some weeks back I attended a reading by the novelist Raj Rao in Pune. He writes quite fearlessly about the gay community. His new novel, Hostel Room No 131 is both truthful and explicit. It is also very moving. He told me later that one of his uncles had called him up and said he was embarrassed by the book and afraid that his two teenaged children might get hold of it. And some gay activists criticised him for talking about the gays with irreverent humour. The truth about telling the truth is you just cannot predict who will be annoyed, who will stop talking to you or who will burn your books or send assassination threats. As for Raj Rao's book, I think it will survive such criticism and survive for a long time. In the end, posterity always forgives truth.

Recently, I came upon the word, "Misomusist" in Milan Kundera's latest collection of essays. A misomusist is one who rejects literature and art at an intellectual level. Art becomes an object of hatred simply because the misomusist does not understand it and so feels humiliated by its very presence, especially when it is accorded a certain importance by other people. To quote Kundera: "To be without a feeling of art is no disaster. A person can live in peace without reading Proust or listening to Schubert. But the misomusist does not live in peace. He feels humiliated by the existence of something that is beyond him, and he hates it. There is a popular misomusy.... The fascist and Communist regimes have made use of it.... But the intellectual decimation of art will be far more devastating than the burning of books."

A rejection of art due to political and ideological reasons can turn vicious. Misomusists attack art, especially when it is fearless and bold, especially when it reveals a truth that is uncomfortable for society. They will do anything they can to suppress or destroy art because it embodies free thinking and perspicacity. In short, they fear truth. We don't need to look northward at China or anywhere else to see such intolerance. In our country, it has become fashionable to denounce art by alleging that it has upset sentiments -- religious, cultural or personal. Women writers seem to bear the brunt of such censure more acutely. They are expected to be more prudish when dealing with sex on the page. If a woman writer strays beyond a certain bar code of decency with her words, it is more or less assumed that she must be 'loose-moralled' and a bad influence on others. In the 1970s, the Hindi writer Mridula Garg was summoned to court because in one of her novels she describes the thoughts of a young woman who detests her husband's love-making. And this allegation was made not when the novel was published in Hindi, but ten years later, when the English translation came out. Those who protested felt that such descriptions were an insult to the institution of marriage.

We hear of censure more often nowadays. A few weeks ago, Rohinton Mistry's novel *Such a Long Journey* was withdrawn from the college curriculum in Maharashtra because Bal Thackeray's grandson found passages which he felt would upset Marathi sentiment. Marathi sentiment looked after itself very well for more than two decades since the book was published and read widely. Please also note the fact that this grandson of Thackeray has just been inducted into Shiv Sena politics as the leader of youth.

Perhaps rapid material progress and more knowledge has made us intolerant and stupid. Today, we want to kill off words because they annoy us; tomorrow we kill off young boys and girls for getting married because they are in love. The writer carries a heavy responsibility. Sometimes, not often, she fails to recognise the difference between being satirical, critical or comic, and being malicious. Neither of the two writers mentioned above have resorted to malice. When we sit down to write, we must be able to recognise malice, lest it creep into our words. So should the reading public. Malice and intolerance have one feature in common: they boomerang.

Is literature (indeed, all of art) irrelevant? Should we instead dedicate ourselves to knowledge on one side and to entertainment on the other; be satisfied with Sidney Sheldons and Chetan Bhagats, Bollywood and Rajnikant? Does the world really need Kabir, Shakespeare, Thyagaraja or Bhimsen Joshi, does it need a Manjit Bawa and....does it at all need Kavary Nambisan the Writer, especially when she chooses to write frivolous stories?

Someone recently said that Kavary Nambisan has an awkwardness to her style. Let me read an excerpt from my novel, at least to reassure myself that this awkwardness is my only gift. (5 minutes)

So can literature change society? I don't think so. What it does do is change individuals. Literature works by touching one, two or tens of thousands of people, each with his own unique emotional territory. Society is not an amorphous mass of humanity to be clubbed into various groups for convenience; it is made up of you and me and the man selling meat or the girl riding her moped to a call centre; or the convict or the lady in the brothel. And each one will be touched or untouched by literature in a different way.

It is said that role of the fiction writer is to bring the reader news. It may be news of a world unknown to the reader, or from a world already known presented with a fresh perspective. This world must be well observed and well-realised, something like Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*, or the historic tales of Robert Graves, or the minutely observed inner world of Sivaram Karanth, tales in which we witness human dilemma and the conflict within. A friend and critic in English Literature from Stafford wrote to me recently: that for her, good fiction is often inventive and playful; it takes the reader on a joy-ride of imagination, intrigue and humour. Yes, humour is a sadly neglected but essential ingredient of good fiction. So also the simplicity and elegance of language, another hallmark of good writers. Mahatma Gandhi, Thoreau, Robert Graves and Chekov come to mind.

In today's world, where every human value will be constantly questioned, fiction writers need to ask ourselves more critically about our story-telling intentions. All writing – like speech – is communication. In one's eagerness to be clever and saleable, it is easy to forget this. Words can be used as a means of false communication as we see in political speeches, in the media and in the easy jargon we resort to in conversation. And just as dangerously, in fiction. Sometimes, neither the writer nor the reader is able to recognise the falsehood. Thus insidiously, the channels of communication begin to decay.

Talking of communication, we seem to be fast losing the skill of speaking to one another. What with the mobile, iphone, blackberry and the internet, conversation is a dying art. The time might soon come when we will have to go to college to learn this art.

The surgical profession, which is a very practical one of using one's brain and one's hands has also taught me a certain type of integrity which I believe runs parallel to writing. A surgeon must reach for that single truth, that choice which is the best for her patient. She will make mistakes, face failure and disappointment. If her objectives are clear, sooner or later she will do it. The pain of failure and the joys of success are vital to both surgery and writing.

Reality is not easy to find in a world that offers a bewildering array of choices. It is far easier to wrap ourselves in what we consider good, correct or proper, to shudder at the atrocities we witness, and carry on living our good lives. The role of fiction is to peel away this skin, to shake us out of our presumed innocence – or ignorance – and to enable the writers and the readers to see through the blind spots of civilisation.

In 1999, a serious weekly in France published a list of eighteen 20th century geniuses. It had the likes of Bill Gates, Coco Chanel and Stanley Kubrick and Le Corbusier but not a single poet, novelist, dramatist or philosopher. You can cast your mind back, at leisure, to those hundred years and see if you find any wordsmith worthy of inclusion in this list. I'm quite happy to leave the territory of

geniuses alone, secure in the fact that I can think of several writers and thinkers who belong there. As for me, I write with the hope that fiction, literature, and all of art will create a friction of ideas and thought and bring us face to face with the real questions that should concern us.

Let me finish with another excerpt. Here, I try to draw you into a world that jostles right next to us. It also shows a man's jealousy towards his best friend and the consequences of such jealousy. (8-10 minutes).