

Safinah Danish Elahi

Creativity or reporting?

Can you write my story? Can I write yours?

I am a woman of color, married at twenty, a mother at twenty-two – my education a luxury, my career a calamity. I have loved, lost, overcome my obstacles, accepted my failures, humbled my successes, and made mistakes. Can you write my story?

Every author writes the not-self.

The author is a modern construct, as Roland Barthes discusses in his essay *The Death of the Author*. The idea of identity and origin behind the voice that was previously nominated to a mere mediator, a simple narrator whose individuality is to be lost. Unknown, as the subject's space slips away in the negative, emphasizing the writing and not the genius of the author. In simple words, should it matter who writes as long as the writing holds value?

If so, does it matter who is telling the story?

Writers have long been asked to be politically correct – not an undemanding task. One ends up censoring their voice and hampering creativity. On the other hand, how responsible does the writer need to be?

Who can write your voice? Can you only write characters (that) you represent? Or do justice to a voice that doesn't belong to you?

Does one need to belong to ethnicity to write a story about them? Can only the blind write about blindness? Can only someone autistic write about an autistic person? What if the marginalized community does not have the means and privilege to write that story? Is it not going to be told at all? Moreover, to tell that story, is the writer engaging with a capitalist agenda, or, indeed, do they want the story to be told even if it's not their own, because it's important?

One can argue that only real experiences are the ones that can be told truthfully. Another person representing a voice may not only be unauthentic but also take away a window of opportunity for those who belong to the respective community. It is also possible, however, that the writer does significant research and can represent a class, community, race, mental state, or gender in a fair and just manner. A writer can't have every character drawn from lived experiences. One cannot expect a writer to have murdered to be able to think like a murderer or be a ghost to write about one!

However, a few particulars need to be carefully examined for it to be an accurate depiction. Firstly, the character needs to be thoroughly researched. Research can include spending time with the community, understanding characteristics, behavior patterns, response mannerisms to certain stimuli, and then gauge how the character will operate in certain situations. Secondly, the writer has to come in with zero biases. Furthermore, if they come up with assumptions, they must be tested. The writer must avoid clichés and assumptions at all times. Research must also be done from a wide variety of interactions.

In some cases, the writer may already have lived experiences that may be richer than any research. For example, being married to one from a different ethnicity or having a child who suffers from a special

disease – if the writer wishes to write about it. To make it easier for their readers, they must not alienate anything that doesn't fit into normative behavior.

There are still similar challenges in writing from the 'other.' The writer will still perceive the position of another in their character's life. One can overcome this by finding an emotion as close to empathy and using techniques and stylistic elements that do not clash with the character's reality. Then hope to sound as sincere as the circumstances of the character are.

There is a sizeable international debate about colored voices only being written by people of color, because many cultural nuances may be lost in translation. The delicacies of traditions and customs are not at all easily understood from a distance. As mentioned above, a writer's socialization affects their way of thinking and writing and may form incurable preconceived notions.

One can then safely say, while being sensitive to the character being written, it is okay to treat a body of work with respect and justification, so it no longer has to be attached to the 'person' of the author, but rather the merit of their research and authenticity of voice.

So dear writers, can you write my story?