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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande was born in 1938 in Karnataka. She and her husband now live in Bangalore, a thriving industrial centre in the South of India. The Southern location contributes significantly to Shashi’s reception and career as well as to her writing. Although Indian English writers come from a variety of locations, Delhi is the major site of publishing, followed by Mumbai and Kolkata. ¹This unevenly shared prestige once again reveals the north-south divide which is strong in many other aspects in Indian politics and culture.

JOEL KUORTTI

‘Years of Silence Came to an End’

Interview with Shashi Deshpande
Bangalore January 6th, 2000

Shashi Deshpande was born in 1938 in Karnataka. She and her husband now live in Bangalore, a thriving industrial centre in the South of India. The Southern location contributes significantly to Shashi’s reception and career as well as to her writing. Although Indian English writers come from a variety of locations, Delhi is the major site of publishing, followed by Mumbai and Kolkata.¹ This unevenly shared prestige once again reveals the north-south divide which is strong in many other aspects in Indian politics and culture.

We met at Shashi’s home in January 2000, after the global Millennium celebrations. There was a more or less constant consciousness of the surroundings as a group of workers were mending the house, thus awareness of the environment in which Shashi lives — its gender and class inequalities — had more impact on our conversation than it might otherwise have done.

Although, as she herself comments in the interview, the development of Shashi’s career has not been glamorous and celebrated, her publications are numerous. The Writers’ Workshop (WW) published her first book, a collection of short stories, *The Legacy & Other Stories*, in 1971. Since then, apart from articles and uncollected stories, she has published eight novels, six collections of short stories, four books for children and a film script. She has also written many articles for newspapers.

The discussion that follows falls into four main themes: the biographical, Shashi’s views on literature in general, her views on translation, and finally the basic changes in society regarding the status of English language, women and women’s writing.

JK *Beginning briefly with some biographical aspects, could you tell me how you started writing?*

SD Well, I started writing really late. I was thirty or nearly thirty. I don’t know how I started or why I started. There was never any conscious desire to be a writer nor was I writing in my adolescence, you know, poetry.... All that I did was to write a diary — pages and pages — which my brother would read aloud and embarrass me (laughs). So I stopped writing even that. But I

read a lot. I think that was the preparation for writing. I read an enormous amount. I was always told that you are wasting your time. You'll amount to nothing. You're a good-for-nothing. My father used to think that if you don't do your schoolwork, just see, you'll just become a clerk (laughs). So I was constantly abused for reading. My father was a writer. His objection to my reading was only because I didn't do my schoolwork. It was important for him because my father was a scholar. We come from a family of scholars and it was important for him that I do well at school. My sister, my elder sister, was good with her work. She did very well in exams. She came first and second and I didn't do any of those things. So he was very angry with me for my reading. But I think that was the preparation for my writing.

I never imagined that I would write but there was always the fascination with words — not only with literature, not only with reading — but also with words. I can remember sitting with a dictionary for hours, you know, tracing the history of words. It was always fascinating for me.

I started writing, I think, when we had gone to England for a year. My husband is a doctor and he had a Commonwealth Fellowship. We had two children by then, the younger one was just about a year and the older one was three and a half. I lived a very isolated life, obviously. England is *not* a friendly country and we were kind of isolated — being Indians — as there were not so many Indians then. I never met anybody, I never had neighbours, friends ... very isolated. Maybe that was the second stage, you know. I could distance myself from my country, from my own experiences, everything.

So when we came back my husband — I was a good letter writer — he said, why don't you just write all that we did so that *we'll* remember? So I wrote and I showed it to my father because he was a writer. My father and I, we were not very close, so he just took it and didn't say anything, he just took it. A month later he sent me a cutting from a newspaper — he had sent it to a newspaper, *The Deccan Herald*, and they had published it.

At that time my younger son was not more than two and I was very eager to do something. I was tired of being just a housewife, doing nothing, being with children — it did not satisfy me. Then I joined 'Journalism' in the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.² That was in the evenings, so in the mornings I was at home and in the evenings my husband came back and I went out. I liked it. And I found myself.

I was much older. They were all young people and I was very much older. I was thirty. I found that I was good. I could feel myself being good. You know how you feel. I could write, I could use words and I did it in my own way. I did not follow what they told me, so I knew I was creative. I did not know it consciously but it came in my writing. After that I had to join a magazine to do the practical training for my diploma. They did not give me



Shashi Deshpande

much work because I was not on the staff and they did not pay me. But one day they wanted a short story and asked why don't you write something for us. Though I don't know why they thought I could, I went home and I wrote a short story. They published it and it was good for a first short story. It was quite good. And so after that it *really* kind of began. It just came. I wrote, I wrote, I wrote, I wrote, you know. Like thirty years of silence came to an end so I wrote many short stories and a lot of articles. I got them published in magazines and newspapers. I was really kind of doing what I wanted to do. So that is how it began.

JK *It's like finding oneself again.*

SD Absolutely, absolutely. Because until then I'd never done anything which I really liked...Just drifted through life. In school I liked no subject except literature. I did law, I didn't like that. There was really nothing I was fond of. I got married and that was fine. I am happy with my husband and love my children but I did not find that it could give me everything that I wanted from life. One part of me was satisfied, one part of me was happy but there was still much more of me that wanted something. And that came out in writing.

So it was a slow process and I never, never called myself a writer for years. You know, today you write one short story and you call yourself a writer (laughs). But it took me years to even call myself a writer, because I was very shy of the word. I was very shy of what I was doing. I had no confidence. I had confidence when I was writing. When I was writing I was very sure of myself. I had control over what I was doing. I was constantly critical of myself, trying to improve myself. But to the outside world I never presented confidence and never had this brashness.

JK *Such restraint used to be common with writers but nowadays you have to come out and kind of sell yourself.*

SD Yes. It was not so much there when I started writing — nobody did that and nobody talked much. But what was good for me was that I wrote those short

stories which all got published. There was this women's magazine that was called *Femina*. It's still there. Today it's a fashion magazine. At that time it was not like that. It was new and a lot of women were just coming out — talking about themselves — you know — a part of that evolving consciousness of women — the magazine was a part of that.

When I used to write my short stories I never thought anybody was reading but so many years later people would come and say: 'Oh, I read your stories' and 'I liked your short stories in *Femina*'. So I got readers. That means, I was saying something which people wanted to hear. Women wanted to hear what I was saying. That I know only now. At that time I did not know it.

JK *It must be pleasing to hear about it, even later.*

SD Yes, extremely pleasing. And so many years later. They would remember the story and they would say: 'I read this one' and 'I read that one'. But at the time I didn't know if anybody was reading. I didn't know if I reached anywhere. But nothing stopped me from writing.

I always feel that...remember there were a lot of women writing at that time — short stories — then when I was writing. There were magazines like *Femina*. There was *Eve's Weekly*. There was something called *Women's Era*. *Eve's Weekly* had a special issue once of good short stories by women. Many women were writing short stories. I remember their names. None of them are writing today. Most of them just stopped, I don't know why.

In fact a German magazine asked me to write a piece about women's writing and this was one of the questions I was posing: Why did all those women stop writing? They all wrote a novel or so but then it ended there. So two things may be there: there was no more, only that much, for them in it, and that came to an end. The second thing is that you need to have this desire to say that this is my profession. It's not just a hobby; it's not something I just dreamed; that this is my life. For me it was like that. It was my life, my profession. There was nothing which could make me stop.

But I was nobody, nobody knew me. I didn't make much money. I had no ways of knowing whether I was becoming a known writer. When people wrote about writers in English nobody ever mentioned my name. I was quite ignored but nothing stopped me. I was writing because I had to write.

JK *What comes out of your article in The Hindu is that you write for yourself.³ Do you still feel like that?*

SD That's right. Ultimately, yes. In fact, as I said in an interview the other day, maybe this is true about my new novel that is just coming out.⁴ Next Monday

I think it is released. It may be my last novel. So many people are writing and telling me: 'Oh, you should never say that, you should write more', but right now if there is nothing, I'm not going to write. If it comes, I'll write. But at that time, you know, it came. There was a pressure inside me and it just came.

JK *You also did an MA in English.*

SD Much later, very much later. I did it when I was in my forties when my older son was doing his graduation and my younger son was doing his 12th, getting ready to enter medicine. It was a very difficult time. I was writing *That Long Silence* and everyone told me not to (do my MA, that is): why do you want to do your MA and what are you going to do with it? I didn't want to do anything with it. I just thought I'd made a mistake because I did my BA in economics and I hated economics. I don't like figures, I don't like numbers, I don't like mathematics. I don't know why I did economics. But I *wanted* to do literature. Since I couldn't do my BA I did my MA. Also I thought I would read, because I have not been a very good reader — I only read fiction — I thought I would read poetry, read drama and literary criticism. I read all that, of course, but it was very hard. I was writing a novel, my father was very sick, and my son was working for a very important exam. My husband had given up his job. We had changed houses several times and were finding it very difficult. So one year I worked with him as a typist because we couldn't afford one and all this when I was doing my MA. It was terrible. But anyway I'm glad I did it.

JK *Do you think the reading for the MA affected your writing afterwards?*

SD Not really. But what did affect my writing was something else. When I was in Bombay we badly needed money. I was not working, we had two growing children, my husband although he is a doctor was in a full-time teaching job in a medical college. So the money was not enough. *Femina* asked me to write two stories a month. You know, that kind of story where you take up a theme like 'my husband was a wife beater'. That kind of stuff. I wrote that for the money. That really affected my writing. After that I could not write for quite some time. It took me about six months. At that time I wrote children's books so I could get out of all that.

JK *I don't see even in your later novels the kind of theoretical touch you might imagine in a scholar's work.*

SD No, thankfully no. No. I think the writer in me was unaffected, even today. At first I was very shy of speaking to university audiences because my language is not their language. The language is entirely different. But it doesn't affect me now.

JK *Perhaps we could go on now to your views on literature. As I said, I read this Hindu article. In that and other articles⁵ you talk about how as a writer you are speaking to the reader and then about the book as a reading experience. Can you explain this? Could you imagine, when you are writing or after having written, yourself desiring particular effects in your audience?*

SD Now, that is strange because all these things that I have written, particularly *The Hindu* article, I have written as a reader. But as a writer I don't think of the reader. Not when I am writing, nor after I have written. Only sometimes the editors, when I give the manuscript to them, tell me that the reader won't understand this or that. At that time I have to become conscious of the reader. Or when my husband, who always reads my manuscripts, says something. Then I have to think of the reader. But on my own in the process of writing, no. In the process of editing, yes, sometimes you take account of the reader. But it is *the* reader; it is not a specific reader in India or abroad. It is just a vague reader, somebody who's going to read the book. I don't think of the reader as belonging somewhere or having a certain kind of understanding.

When I have to think, force myself to think who the reader is when I write, then it is like writing about Aswatthama.⁶ When I say 'I am like Aswatthama', I'm trying to say, 'I'm a terrible outcast'. I think Christian mythology also has the figure of the wanderer who never belongs to any human society and who is destined to be always outside human society. I think that is one of the most terrible punishments for any human being. So when I say Aswatthama, any Indian who has read the Indian mythology will know immediately that it is the terrible state of being an outcast. I'm not interested in explaining that: 'Aswatthama, the outcast etc'. because that is not how it comes to me. So then it obviously means that I'm writing for people who know this mythology. It does not mean that anyone who does not understand this will not be able to read the book but it always means to me that anyone who reads me has to make an effort. It is not easy reading. So as a writer I don't really think of the reader at all.

But when you read it again you become a reader yourself. For me as a reader there may be some problems where I have not done this or that right, so that is the critical reader — there are so many stages in which one looks at one's own novel. At first you are the creator and as a creator you are totally in power. It is your creation and you are damned if anyone's going to

do anything to that. You don't let anybody touch it or say a word about it. But then you finish it and the creative power has gone away, it is over now. Then you become a very humble writer and you know that it hasn't come out as you wanted it to. Then when you read it you become a critical reader and you give it to someone else to read and you have to think that there are other readers as well. For the first time you have to step outside and see it from the outside. So there are all these different stages.

JK *Just recently I read in an article in a newspaper that some criminals were punished by ordering them to read Alex Haley's *Roots* and to watch the film *Gandhi*.*

SD Where was this, in the United States?

JK *Yes.*

SD Oh, this was the punishment?

JK *Yes, it was the judge's decision that they read and watch these and write about them. They were young men convicted for racist crimes who obviously needed to be educated. Could you imagine your books used as a kind of educational material for that kind of educational purpose?*

SD Certainly for a lot of men it opens out different new areas which men close their minds to. You know, like when I had just started writing, my husband and his brother were talking about their mother, my mother-in-law who was a widow. A Brahmin widow lives a very bad life. She was shaven, she could only take one meal a day, she could dress only in one kind of sari, she could not wear colour, etc. I was just talking to my brother-in-law about how terrible her life was and he said: 'But she does not say it is terrible, she must be happy. I think she would tell us if it were terrible'. I thought then that men cannot hear, because unless she shouts they will not hear her. I can hear her without her saying things, you know, because we are on the same wavelength.

There is a kind of deafness in the gender barrier — between classes, between genders, between wherever there is a difference. There is this kind of a barrier which prevents us from hearing. To that extent men who read my books, many of them are made very uncomfortable. Maybe it would be a punishment for men to be made to read them (laughs). But I think more than anything else that it is enlightening. It opens up their minds.... Especially as my books go into the female mind and the psychology of the human

female which a text book may tell you about, but a living human being you create in a book can tell you much better, because that person is real.

Like Jaya in *That Long Silence*. She is a woman, she's not a text book character like one of Freud's — what are they — cases. It means much more to you than it would in a psychology textbook. When you see that, you do get an understanding of the female psyche. To that extent I suppose it would be true for women also because there's a sense of identification. Like many things we keep to ourselves: you are ashamed of your feelings because you don't want to admit them but when you see that somebody else has the same feelings you feel good: 'Look, she feels the same way, too'.

I write about motherhood and I don't write about it in a sentimental way because motherhood is very difficult. There are all shades. There could be very good bonding, there could be hostility. There are different variations.

JK *Your books are not sentimental. They are very much down-to-earth but they are still very touching. How do you manage that?*

SD They are very analytical more than anything else. The women are all very analytical and critical of their own selves; not only of their relationships but of their own selves.

JK *And not only the women. Consider for example Gopal in A Matter of Time. It is very astonishing how you brought about Gopal's first person narrative.*

SD It surprised me also because it had to come in the first person. I thought Sumi would be in the first person but when I began writing, it had to be Gopal in the first person. One doesn't know how it happens. I would hate to think anyone was being punished by reading my books (laughs). But I think it does one good to read about.... Like I like to read about men — because men are strange to me and if I read about certain aspects of men I feel good because I feel I know you better. This opens my eyes to the men in my own circle. So I suppose in that way it is a pity that many men think it is a woman's book and it is about women so they don't want to read it.

JK *Well, there are some books which seem as if they are written for women though that is not very often. But sometimes, or at least some parts feel like that.*

SD OK. It is a problem that a lot of men do not even want to read. I've said this so many times but sometimes when people come to me with my book and say 'Sign this please' and then they say, 'this is for my wife', as if they are ashamed of the idea that they may want to read it — or as if they think —

this is not for me, it's women's stuff, I'm not going to read this'. I always feel like saying, 'maybe only your wife can read and you can't read at all' (laughs). But there is this, especially in India, this very sharp division between women's world and men's world. Even today, you'll notice, to insult a man, you say, 'Go and wear bangles'. Bangles mean identification totally, absolutely, with a woman. So in the same way, reading a women's book would make you a woman — which is an insult for a man (laughs). I think that is a problem but less with younger people. I find young men read women's books more comfortably than older men.

JK *There are changes.*

SD Yes, very much.

JK *In Finland your book That Long Silence was published by a feminist publisher, Kääntöpiiri. Was it a problem for you that it was a feminist publisher?*

SD Well, I knew that only a feminist publisher would publish me. When I wrote to Virago in London it was the same thing. I knew nobody else would publish me. That was not the time when Rushdie, Vikram Seth or Arundhati Roy had made Indian writing famous. And then my novels are also not the sort of novels which the publishers could sell all over the world. Very quiet. They are not Indian like Rushdie's. He is a bit dazzling. I knew that and I thought a lot before I wrote to Virago about the book and I was right. They accepted it. It is the same even today. In America a feminist press has published it. In Finland they also wanted to publish *The Dark Holds No Terrors* but they said that money was a problem. But the publisher was no problem for me because I knew there was no other...though in one way it was a problem because it stamps you, which I did not like. After that I've tried to get away from that label of feminist writer because I don't like that.

JK *Yes, it's what I read in your comments — that you don't see yourself as a feminist writer.*

SD No. Like I said, I want to be read just as a novelist. It's just a novel. Either it's a good novel or it's a bad novel. I don't like any other labels.

JK *Still your novels do have strong women's points of view.*

SD They would because of my being who I am — being the kind of person that I am living in the time that I am. I woke up to what it was being a woman

living in India. It was the beginning of my writing. My writing began from that when I realised what it was to be a woman in this country. I have moved away a little bit from that since because one becomes more conscious of one's humanness as one grows older. Definitely this happens when you grow old because it's only, say, when you are between ten and fifty that you are very conscious of your gender for many reasons, one of which is your reproductivity. So I am now more conscious of myself as a human being — and of the whole word — I don't see it so strongly as I did before.

At that time I was very conscious, it came out of these very strong emotions, of what being a woman is. And I really was a privileged woman in many ways, because I had education. I grew up in a family where I was not barred from doing anything because I was a female. I married into a very conservative family but my husband was not like that. For him I was another human being and we had, always have had, an equal partnership which very few Indian marriages are. It used to be so and even today they are not. So in that way I was very privileged. But still I was conscious of this non-acceptance of me as a thinking human being. Acceptance of me only as a woman, and as a woman married with two children, as a mother, as a wife. I was seen more as that. I think that troubled me a lot.

JK *It is exactly these themes that you write about.*

SD Yes, correct. Especially *That Long Silence*. I think that was really the culmination of all the anger and all the repression; everything came out in that book. More than in all the others.

JK *The title carries this word silence which I think is very important. In your novels there is always this silence which needs to be breached and a way out has to be found.*

SD Yes. I think in all the novels this happens. In *A Matter of Time*, in *The Binding Vine*, in *That Long Silence*. Even in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, because Kamala never speaks to her husband so there is the silence between them.

JK *And there is also the silence between the father and the daughter.*

SD Yes, you're quite right. Someone had a very interesting theory that *That Long Silence* is about words. It's less about silence and more about words which are used, such as husband, wife. Jaya sort of takes them apart. This is how a wife is supposed to be, this is how a husband, this is what a marriage is like. She tears them apart and reconstructs them with her own you know...I thought that that was a very interesting theory and it is true. It is as much

about words as about silence. But of course, words are the other face of silence. So if you're talking about silence you're talking about words as well.

JK *Exactly — when you are trying to find a way out of the silence, you need words. I have this feeling when reading Indian women writers that they are trying to— as Rushdie puts it: 'reshape English' — so that women are now trying to reshape English for women so that women can talk about what's never been said.*

SD Yes, but that's true all over the world, why only Indian women? I think that all over the world women are trying to use language in their own way because language has not been ours. It has been given to us. For our experiences we need a different language. Literary language has been mainly for men and used by them to describe their own experiences. Since my language is English I have to reshape it but I think it would be true for any other language. Take Marathi or Hindi for example. They would be using the language differently. So it is happening. Like Gauri Deshpande, this writer writing in Marathi and English, has said. Writing in Marathi she faces this problem because there are almost no Marathi words for sexual experiences, for parts of the body. They are very vulgar — used in a very bad sense. She says it's only in English you can get these words, where you can write about these things. I thought that was very interesting. I think women have been forced to kind of forge a new language more in the [regional] languages than in English because English has all the words.

So I think for the languages it is even more difficult. In Indian languages there is so much difference between men's language and women's language. Certain things are never said by women. And women's use of language on their own [in private or amongst themselves] is very different from what it is when they are talking in public. I think in the indigenous languages it would be more interesting to see how this is happening than in English.

JK *So, I have come to think of English as a 'daughter language'. You say somewhere in your books that 'daughters don't belong', that sons belong. So the indigenous languages are sons, they belong, they are Indian. And English does not belong.*

SD That's a very original theory.

JK *Therefore, one can imagine that women writers can liberate, can let English as a daughter language speak in woman's voice.*

SD It is more liberating. A lot of women, older women especially, say that there are certain things about which you cannot write in your own languages. Two things. One thing is that in the languages there isn't that kind of eligibility for a certain use. And secondly your readership is very close to you. When I write, when I write about anything, my readership is very far. I mean I never meet my readers. It's as if the guardians are standing close by when you're writing in your own language. In English it's not so. So maybe if you write in your own language you would write differently than when you write in English. I don't know.

JK *I think it is unnecessary to say that English is in opposition — this thing you get in these debates all the time.*

SD Yes. I've said enough about it and I don't want to talk about it any more (laughs). I have become quite tired of that and as you said I think it's not necessary to have this stance of opposition. It is the language that some of us use because we don't know any other language. We are using it as best we can. It is like they say, if you lose a little you gain a little and English has much more variety, a big vocabulary, more flexibility in certain aspects than the languages. It's something which should be taken into account now.

JK *Perhaps now a few words about translation. Your books have been translated into many languages. How do you feel about that?*

SD But very few into Indian languages, very few. That's very bad. More into European languages than into Indian languages. I don't know why. This process of translation is very peculiar because the languages get translated into English but English very rarely gets translated into the Indian languages. I don't quite understand it because my book really is a language book. It is just that it happens to be in English. A friend of mine said that 'when I read your book only after I finished it I realised it was in English. I read it like I would a Marathi book because it has the same — I don't know what to call it — the same sensibility, as would a language book'. It would be very easy to translate. But it is not very much translated, I don't know why.

JK *Maybe it's because people who would read it can read it in English too.*

SD That's true and also maybe publishers are hard to get. Maybe that is the reason. You're quite right, maybe as you say the same people would be reading it in English anyway. But many more translations are from the languages into English now.

And as I said in the *Hindu* article, I feel we are running into the same problem of writing for the West. So there is this politics when you are choosing a book to be translated. Obviously you want to appeal to a very big readership. I feel again that same thing is happening. One thing is that translated books are not doing very well. I don't know of any translated book that has done very well. Excepting, perhaps, Mahasweta Devi who was translated by Gayatri Spivak. Or Ramanujan's translation of [U.R. Ananthamurthy's novel of 1976,] *Samskara*. I don't see any other translations that have done very well...

Nevertheless, it's a very good thing, translation, and it's happening. I am very happy that there is so much translation. Never mind if there are a lot of bad books. So many Indians are writing in English now, so many people are writing very bad first novels. But it doesn't matter. I think out of all this something good will come. It is a good thing. It shows that there is a lot of life. I'm sure you have seen this in India, that literature is alive.

JK *How do you feel about the so-called non-resident Indians' writing? Do you feel it is very different?*

SD Very strange (laughs), it's completely different. Our writing in India belongs to the category called Indian literature, if you must have labels. But that cannot be the case with writing from outside. Even if they write about India it's different because the whole vision is different, because the perspective is different. These are what I would call international books, they are meant for a bigger audience. It's very clearly made for an audience or a readership that would find what is mainly interesting in the book is the exotic element. I find a lot of these books have that exotic element in them.

JK *There are also a lot of books that seem to be written to similar people as the writers.*

SD That's right, autobiographical. Another thing also is that a lot of importance is given to those books. This is the only point about which I am a little annoyed. In India, there is this writer called K.R. Usha, she has written a book [*Sojourn*, 1998]. It scarcely got much notice but let somebody from abroad write a book and *India Today* will give it a big review. This is the same kind of colonial mindset in which anything coming from the West is more important. This is what I feel a little annoyed about.

Obviously if you're an Indian living there you would write differently and it is interesting because everybody has a different world and as an author I can only give my world. So these are different worlds, there is nothing superior or inferior. But somehow this coming-from-the-West hype, we are

not able to shake it off. This annoys me. They get much more importance than writers who are living and working here.

Most of these books are not for us ... grandmothers, magic, spices ... that is what a reviewer has said — these people write about spices as something exotic. For us it is not exotic, we use it every day in our kitchen. We are grinding it and putting it in our vegetables. It is an everyday matter. They make it exotic because in the West, Indian spices are exotic. Now we cannot have tigers and elephants so we have spices and grandmothers (laughs). But that's a different category all together. Totally different and I would put them in a different group altogether.

I'm not showing you anything strange. I'm just writing about this life here.

JK *Yes, and through reading critical stuff and other books I have been able to approach it. Now, how has your work been received?*

SD As I told you, for a long time I thought I was writing in a void. I had no feed-back. I did not know I had readers. Critical work on me did not exist. There was scarcely any criticism. Critics took no notice of me. I think in 1989 there was a Sahitya Akademi book on Indian writing in English and my name was not even mentioned there. I was invisible for a long time and I did not know how my work was received at all.

But after *That Long Silence*, after I got the Sahitya Akademi award rather, things changed. People became aware of my writing and I became aware of my readers. I think that there has been a good readership but as I told you, there is a problem. One thing is, I am regarded as a woman writer and writing about women. They just don't allow me to come out of that slot. My books are not read as novels, pure and simple. That is a big problem for me.

The second problem regarding my work is that people are reading it only from the feminist angle. Everything is read from the feminist angle, particularly by the critics. The ordinary readers — and I think I have, obviously, more women readers than men readers — they will read it as a novel about women or a novel by a woman, etc. And critics will be reading it as feminist writing. It's something I'm not happy about. I think I want to be read as a novelist.

A certain writer recently said: 'Where are the writers? They talk of English writing, but where are the writers. There are no writers, everybody has written either one novel or two novels'. And I wanted to say: I've got seven novels, do I not exist at all? Obviously, for them I don't. When they think of novelists they think of Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, Allan Sealy, Upamanyu Chatterjee at the most. That's all. They wouldn't think of anyone else, not even of Githa Hariharan if she hadn't won the

Commonwealth Prize. This consistent ignoring of my contribution and of the significance of what I have written — I'm not happy about that.

I've been writing for thirty years now. I have about ninety short stories, I have eight novels, I have four books for children, I have about fifty articles on all aspects of Indian writing in English but you continue to ignore me. I don't understand it. It is very hard. There was a feature in *India Today* about women writers and they had everybody from Sarojini Naidu and Toru Dutt down to the latest one who had written half a novel and I was not in there. I don't understand. This is what surprises me. They tell me it's because you don't live in Delhi.

JK *It's a good reason....*

SD Is it? (laughs)

JK *I mean, obviously, for them, because it is the great place where things happen.*

SD But even so, things happen because we write our books here. And I think what is important is writing the books — not readings, not events, not coming on TV. It's the books. I don't want you to look at me; I want you to look at my work. At least in the academic world there is a lot of interest. I have about one hundred, more than one hundred people working on me from all the universities and I have critical books coming out. So at least the academic world is interested. But there it is the same thing: the feminist angle — the women in the novels of Shashi Deshpande, tradition versus modernity — I'm so tired of all that. I suppose they have to write something....

But recently there's been a book by a teacher who taught for a long time in Germany and is now in Bangalore in a local college, Mrinalini Sebastian. She has written a book putting my writing in the context of postcolonialism.⁷ Padmini Mongia and some other critics have been talking about how postcolonialism has marginalised a lot of writing like mine. Mrinalini too has kind of redefined postcolonialism in the context of my writing rather than the other way round.

JK *The title or rather, the idea of my research is 'tense past, tense present'. It means envisaging language, the English language, as carrying a tension between the colonial and now the nationalist burdens. I see that this, as the idea of daughter language suggests, reflects the status of women: that there used to be the old traditions and now there is the burden of modernism. How do you see the changes in the status of women and where are the changes going?*

SD Well, the last thirty years have seen a lot of changes. Feminism entered this country. When I say feminism, I don't mean it in the sense of theory, I mean it in the sense of activism, which is really what feminism in India has been. It's not Simone de Beauvoir; it's not Germaine Greer, or anything. Some people will read these, but what changes things is activism. It's become understood that women activists are working for other women, on things like dowry, rape, you know.

And there have been a lot of changes in the laws. But what has really changed is the awareness that these things have to be taken into account. There was a sudden realisation that women have suffered wrongly, greatly. Even that wasn't understood before. As I said, I think there was a kind of closed-eyedness among men. I think that has gone now.

Everybody knows that these are the problems. Even if we have not been able to solve them, we have faced the fact that the problems are there. I think a lot of it is just gestures. You know, you make a law, but the society is not changing fast enough. So...In fact the society is changing fast in one way, in that we are becoming more nuclear family oriented, more women going out for jobs. So it has added to women's burdens, it's not taken them away. One thing is that when you're living in a nuclear family you are free of one burden, the one of your in-laws, otherwise the woman had to live under the guard of her in-laws. That's gone.

But then there are new burdens: of being the housekeeper, of going out earning money, and looking after all of this. There are a lot of middle class women in jobs. The problem is greater in India because life is not really convenient for women. And men are still not co-operative...men are not moving. This is to me the problem. Women are moving, there's much more awareness among women. Even if you go to a small town you will see that women are more alert, more bright. But I think men are not moving fast enough.

Secondly, I think the very young generation is not moving in the right direction. See, our generation thought about feminism, we saw the past, we saw how our mothers lived. We wanted to live better. We found that we could, with struggle, live a life of more freedom. But the younger generation today has got it all without fighting for it. The women are now becoming like the men. I find that a lot of the young women now are so career-minded that emotional ties are given second place. I think there's going to be this problem of women not being able to cope, because sometime or other you might get married, then you get children and then there's going to be a problem. I'm a little worried about what's going to happen to families with all this. Men are still unwilling to take the burden. No man would say: 'Look, I will stay at home, I will take care of the baby'. I see this as the

problem. For most of the women, especially the women in the villages, life has not changed at all.

Like the woman who is here now: the men are doing the work and the whole day she's carrying that sand on her head. I don't want to look at her. I feel so bad because I am sitting here in such a privileged position and there she is, the whole day she is carrying that burden. She will never be able to have anything else other than that. She'll be paid less than these men, she will continue to be paid less than the men are. She will be working equally hard but hers will not be skilled work. The men are skilled; they are the masons so they will get double what she is getting. She'll go back home and she will have to contend with her drunken husband and she will have babies to feed.

So, life is not changing ... unless there is, I think, a better standard of living, unless all of us come under it, unless there is population control. And population control will not come unless women are more educated. And women will not be more educated until there are fewer people in a family. If there are too many children the girls will not be educated; the boys will be educated. It is a vicious circle. I think, to a certain extent things have changed. There is more awareness. You have these panchayats now where women are given a thirty three percent representation. The panchayats are the governing councils for the village.

JK *Do you mean Women's Reservation Bill is now passed?*⁸

SD No, for the parliament, no. For the villages it has already happened. It's interesting that there it is not happening but here it has happened. And if you find in the village panchayats women who cannot read or write, they are there because this 33 % quota has to be given to them. It is generally the husband, who will put his wife there. He will tell her what to do. But — and I have a friend who is working on this — after being there for some time they start thinking: 'It's me, I'm going to do things'. So they learn. So I see hope there. I see hope at the bottom, in the village women. They are becoming aware. They will learn that they can also have money, they can be independent. So I see some hope in these things.

JK *There are many initiatives in petty industries and...*

SD Yes. There is a lot of work which activists, NGOs, are doing which are helping women. So I think there is some hope. But unless we have population control, I don't think things will change.

JK *It will make it more difficult — the population growth.*

SD Yes. Look at what is happening in the parliament now. They all talk about wanting to do things for women but when it comes to giving seats, they are not going to do it. I mean, they are willing to fight against it.

I think it will never happen because men will never give women anything. It will happen because of women themselves. They'll learn, they *are* learning. You will see. Among the younger girls today, I think, there is much more awareness, more understanding. They want to go out, they want to have a good life.

I think consumerism is good in one way. You see a TV and you see all those things and you say I want to have that. And how do you get that if you don't work and your husband alone is earning?

You know, my servant who has been working with me for many years, whatever she wants she buys with her own money. She does not wait for her husband to buy it. So, consumerism is going to be good in one way. Because if people want the goods, they'll need their own money. To earn the money they want to take up a job. Once you take up a job you become an independent person.

Some marriages will break up because of that, but I think that is going to happen anyway.

JK *There are going to be changes.*

SD Yes. You can't get anything without some kind of sacrifice. I am afraid for family life, you know...I would feel very bad if children lost out in this. But as I said, we always criticise consumerism, but in one sense I think it is good. Also I think improving this condition of women, one way to do it is to give daughters an education.

JK *Yes, education is the key.*

SD Understanding, realising, that's the key.

JK *Like Yamunabai in A Matter of Time.*

SD Yes. In fact she is a real-life person. My husband comes from a village and there was this woman in that village — she had a different name. At that time, years ago, she had classes for girls. And not only did she teach them, she had Yoga — you know, 70, 80 years ago! — she taught them Yoga, she made them do physical exercises, drama...It's amazing, in a small village. There'll always be Yamunabais. And today's Yamunabais will find girls who are responding. In those days it would have been hard. Girls would not

come out, as their parents would not allow them to come out. Now it's easier. So I have hope. And I think as women change, the society will change.

JK *Yes. And I think that it is in India, as well as elsewhere, the most important thing: the change in the status of...*

SD Status of women, absolutely. It is *the* hope I wait for. In fact I was just saying that once women in India become a force — once the political parties realise that there are so many votes, once we come together as a political force — you will find that they will give so much more importance to women. Like they give to Muslims now, because the Muslims together form a vote bank. You know, the Scheduled Castes form a vote bank. If the women from all the communities form one force, we will be the biggest vote bank in the country (laughs). It will be an amazing thing how the politicians would take a note of us. Until now they have ignored women, that is, until the last two elections. In the last two elections things changed. Suddenly they realised that there is this whole class of women which is more aware, enlightened, not going to take things lying down. Now we see in parliament that all the MPs from all the parties have got together on this Women's Reservation Bill. They are all together, all fighting it together. That happens, but the Bill will never happen — human beings being what they are, they are always going to fight it.

JK *Well, things are going to change.*

SD They are going to change. They already have, there is a lot of change. But there is still so much cruelty. Cruelty is there for both men and women. But because women are vulnerable, the mode of cruelty which women endure.... I myself know of two cases, close to us, educated girls who have put up with enormous cruelty from their husbands. One of the girls was in the United States; she married a man from here. They got married and went there. He was so enormously cruel to her that finally she divorced him. She says, 'I can't understand why I put up with it'. So there is a lot of cruelty. And this was among the educated; among the uneducated it is much more. There is a consistent, persistent cruelty towards women, which is very hard to...you know.

JK *Like in The Binding Vine, it's shocking.*

SD It is. But I think things are much worse than any fiction can ever show. Fiction can only touch a little bit.

JK *It can raise awareness.*

SD Yes that's right. It is the only thing it can do.

JK *Do you think English literature can have that kind of role in raising awareness?*

SD Yes, today it can because there are more readers of English than there ever were before. Formerly English reading was for the very, you know, elite. Now it is no longer so. Now you find a variety of readers. You really have a great number of readers. I also feel it is important for it to be translated.

JK *Sure. It's still a small readership.*

SD It's small. I'm very happy if...and I always say I don't want to take money if you translate me into any Indian language. I would like the translator to have all the money because for me it is important my work is translated. *That Long Silence* was translated into Marathi and it did very well. In fact there was a magazine which serialised it and at the end of it, they had a whole issue of readers responses, about twenty, forty pages of readers' letters, on all the distinct issues the book had raised.

I think the languages are much more responsive to literature than English. They are closer: people read and respond very strongly. In English it is a little — a little distant, I think.

JK *More reserved, more educated, that kind of thing?*

SD That's right. Maybe because a lot of English readers would not be in those positions. Well, I don't know really. It's true that in the languages there is much greater response to writing than there is in English.

JK *It is also due to a tradition of such discourse. There is already that kind of a mechanism that you can use.*

SD Which is there in all the Indian languages. Very true. Somebody says something and immediately there is a response to that. It's always been there. You're quite right. Whereas we don't have a forum in English. In Kannada, for example, they have a lot of meetings, seminars, poets' meets, you know: Independence Day you celebrate with the poets coming together reading their poems. And then you have an annual summit, a gathering where you have three, four days of discussions and interviews of one and other, make new friends. In English we don't have that. I don't meet any other

English writers. Everybody asks me if I know Anita Desai and I ask how will I know her? She lives in the States, I think, now. I live in Bangalore, where would I meet her? I don't go to seminars in England and the United States. There is no forum, whereas, as you say, the tradition is there in the languages. There is a presidential speech in the summit where a lot of literary issues will be taken up and that will be debated in the newspapers for months and months and it goes on. I think it is very lively.

JK *That is one thing I regret — not being able to enjoy, not knowing the languages.*

SD You're not the only one. I'm ignorant as well. I can get it second-hand, through friends who write in Kannada, who read Kannada. My husband reads Kannada, so whenever he reads something, he tells me about it. And then he has some literary friends, so through them he comes to know. I am interested in that. I don't feel that because I write in English I don't belong here. I feel very much a part of it. But it would be interesting, quite right. It is also interesting how they kind of fight, quarrel and all that. It is very lively.

JK *We are now at end of this discussion. Thank you very much.*

SD Thank you. I hope you get something out of all this and of India as well.

NOTES

¹ From 1st Jan., 2001, Calcutta officially changed its name to Kolkata. Bombay was renamed as Mumbai in 1996. Delhi's status is due to its being the capital, whereas Mumbai and Kolkata were among the first three Indian cities where the British established universities, the third being Chennai (Madras) in the South.

² The Bharatya Vidya Bhavan is, among other things, an educational cultural institution founded in 1938 by Dr. K.M. Munshi. The Bhavan functions in several places in India and abroad. For more information, see <http://www.cyberasia.co.uk/lifestyle/bhavan/information/institute.html>.

³ Shashi Deshpande, 'Dear Reader', *The Hindu*, (Jan. 2, 2000), p. xiii.

⁴ *Small Remedies*, Penguin, New Delhi, 2000.

⁵ For example 'Language No Bar', *The Sunday Times of India* (Apr. 23, 1995) and 'The Dilemma of Women Writers', in *Fiction of Shashi Deshpande*, ed. R.S. Pathak (New Delhi: Creative Books, 1998).

⁶ For Aswatthama in the *Mahabharata* see e.g. http://www.hindubooks.org/books_by_rajaji/mahabharata/aswatthama/page1.htm.

⁷ Mrinalini Sebastian, *The Novels of Shashi Deshpande in Post-colonial Arguments: the Enterprise of Reading Differently* (New Delhi: Prestige, 2000).

⁸ At the end of 1999 and the beginning of 2000, the Women's Reservation Bill was very much discussed in the media, but plans to secure women a quota of 33% in the

legislative assembly were met with great resistance. The issue still remains unresolved in 2002, see e.g. <http://indiatgether.org/women/authority/womensrep.htm>.

DESHPANDE'S PUBLICATIONS

NOVELS

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SHORT STORIES

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