

Book Reviews

Nancy Ellen Batty. *The Ring of Recollection: Transgenerational Haunting in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010. Pp. xlii, 305. \$95.00 USD.

Nancy Ellen Batty's *The Ring of Recollection* brings welcome, sustained attention to bear on the work of a prolific and important contemporary Indian writer. As Batty notes in her introduction, the few critics outside India who have written on Shashi Deshpande commonly note the neglect of her work in other regions, particularly North America. I will not rehearse this lament, since Batty shifts its terms adroitly. Rather than recuperate Deshpande against the grain of a postcolonial practice indifferent to writing such as hers—usually described as realist, too narrowly situated in her social context, or old-fashioned in its feminism—Batty presents her anew. She asks if “*represented differently . . . Deshpande’s work might appeal to a wider audience, even to readers in the so-called Western world*” (xix; emphasis in original).

Batty first places Deshpande in the context of other parochial writers with whom Deshpande claims affiliation—Hardy, Tolstoy, the Brontës, Dickens, and Mrs. Gaskell, among others—and notes the potential of her novels to “resituate the south Indian subject and her milieu” for Western readers familiar with the works of those writers (xxxv). She counters the easy identification of Deshpande as a realist writer, instead identifying literary modernism as the other “register in which Deshpande writes” (xxxv). This aspect of Batty’s argument is insufficiently developed in her readings of Deshpande’s novels: to note breaks with realist narrative frames in some of Deshpande’s work is not enough to bolster the claim that “her literary technique . . . has more in common with the experiments of early modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and William Faulkner” (xxxvi). This claim risks setting up misleading expectations of Deshpande for the new readership Batty would like to capture.

This is not the case, however, with the central, sustained claim of Batty’s argument, which seeks to establish Deshpande as a gothic writer. Batty fully convinces me that the lineaments of gothic fiction are to be found everywhere in Deshpande’s novels. Batty contends that Deshpande’s novels turn on the uneasy transmission and inheritance of intergenerational secrets or, following the work of psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, “crypts,” particularly among women. Batty demonstrates the centrality of narratives

of familial haunting in Deshpande's fiction from her earliest novels on—she presents detailed readings of Deshpande's first eight novels and ends with a brief discussion of *Moving On* (2004)—and locates the ruptures and excesses of plotting and character development that have been noted by a number of Indian critics within a larger gothic poetics. Her reading of the role that “specific family secrets play not only in the determination of character but also in the generation of narrative itself” in Deshpande's novels is illuminating and persuasive (27). It ties Deshpande's body of work together more specifically than the label “women's fiction,” which Deshpande herself resists as limiting.

Batty's use of psychoanalytic theory to explicate what she terms cryptomimesis in Deshpande's fiction provides a coherent theoretical frame for her enterprise (19). I am less sure, however, about the use of classical Hindu texts and traditions within this frame. Batty begins with a discussion of Kalidasa's fourth-century Sanskrit play, *Abhijnana-Sakuntala*, a story Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* (1996) alludes to in passing. The story, like much of Deshpande's fiction, turns on memory, forgetting, secrecy, and sudden, incomplete remembering. But is it as important a key to Deshpande's fiction as Batty's frequent references to it (not to mention her text's title and cover image) imply? Batty does not fully consider Deshpande's engagement with the Hindu classical literary and philosophical tradition.¹ My point is not that the story of Shakuntala is irrelevant but that other texts may be equally relevant.

After all, references to episodes from the *Mahabharata* abound in Deshpande's fiction, as do references to the *Brhdarnayaka Upanishad*, particularly allusions to Maitreyi, her husband Yajnavalkaya, and issues of property and inheritance. *A Matter of Time* can be read productively through Batty's cryptomimetic frame. But it can also be read as a feminist revision of the patriarchal narratives that allow Brahmin men to disconnect from their families (as women cannot, a restriction which has tremendous impact on their lives, as Deshpande demonstrates) and, through this disconnection, grant them greater access to philosophical illumination. The troubling death of the protagonist after she has finally gained agency in her life also grants her *runamukta*, freedom from attachment, which is denied to her husband, who renounces his family at the beginning of the novel. This does not have much to do with the story of Shakuntala, nor does it require a cryptomimetic reading. Batty does not consider such classical intertextual connections and allusions that may support feminist and materialist readings as well.

Furthermore, because Batty does not situate her in a modern Indian literary context, Deshpande appears somewhat *sui generis* in this study. Of contemporary South Asian English-language writers Batty occasionally refers

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to Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal, who she says are different—though I found Batty’s analysis of the gothic in Deshpande tremendously useful for my reading of Desai’s *Clear Light of Day* (1980). However, she does not refer to such English-language contemporaries as Githa Hariharan or Shama Futehally, who tread similar ground. Nor does she consider earlier writers such as R. K. Narayan or writers in other languages who also rework the classical tradition.

Nevertheless, these omissions can be supplemented by the work of other scholars who focus on writers who are similarly underrepresented in the critical discourse. Batty’s explication of the gothic elements in Deshpande’s fiction is deeply insightful, and her meticulous close reading of the majority of the Deshpande corpus is salutary. As a scholar and teacher of Deshpande, I highly recommend this important study.

Arnab Chakladar

Notes

- 1 Batty’s familiarity with the classical corpus is not clear. One reference cites Wikipedia as a source for a story from the *Mahabharata* (182); twice she seems to confuse Kunti and Karna from the *Mahabharata* (182, 257).