

Amrita Bhalla. *Shashi Deshpande*. Devon, UK: Northcote [Writers and Their Work Series], 2006. Pp. xi, 111. £35.00; £11.99 pb.

Amrita Bhalla's *Shashi Deshpande* is one of only a handful of monographs on this prolific Indian writer, as well as the first book of any kind on Deshpande published outside of the Indian sub-continent. As such, it inaugurates a new era in Deshpande criticism and should be welcomed by any scholar engaged in a study of contemporary Indian fiction written in English. Indeed, such a book is long overdue—Deshpande began publishing in the late 1970s, and she has won major Indian awards for her work. While her work is highly regarded in India, only three of Deshpande's nine novels have been published in North America. Bhalla's monograph provides a foundation for and is sure to inspire a wider critical interest in this important writer.

A publication of the Writers and Their Work Series, *Shashi Deshpande* clearly meets the series' mandate "to bring neglected or marginalized writers to a wider readership, to represent fully the rich diversity of post-colonial writing and to show the breadth and density of women's writing through the centuries" (Writers and Their Work home page). The series aims for both rigor and brevity, and Bhalla's work, while rigorous, is hampered only by its brevity. Of Deshpande's nine published novels (for adults) and numerous collections of short stories, Bhalla is able to treat only five novels: *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Binding Vine* (1993), *A Matter of Time* (1996), and *Small Remedies* (2000). Deshpande's latest novel, *Moving On* (2004) was published after the editorial deadline for the monograph. The novels chosen are arguably Deshpande's most accomplished works, and it is difficult to argue with Bhalla's choice to restrict her discussion to five novels, given the imposed length restrictions. Deshpande's two crime novels are not in wide circulation, and *Roots and Shadows* (1983) covers thematic territory similar to that of *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. As it is, treatments of the five novels chosen, within the allotted space of 111 pages, are necessarily limited to quite specific critical concerns.

Driven by both the series' mandate and its length restrictions, Bhalla must skillfully define her focus in the long introduction to the monograph. Here, Bhalla firmly places Deshpande within an Indian and Indian feminist context, arguing that "It is essential to locate and place Indian literary works in the context of . . . Indian 'society' . . ., to deal with a specific location ever changing, vibrant, and mediated by its internal dynamics, the politics of its multi-polar binaries in terms of caste, class, gender, rural-urban divides and the myriad ways in which it functions" (3). Bhalla limits her own discussion,

however, to the idea that Deshpande's "central trope . . . is the construction of Gender and Patriarchy" (3). To this end, Bhalla outlines the trajectory of the women's movement in India, from its roots in Hindu tradition and religious law, through colonialism and the struggle to free India, to the post-Independence period, when most of Deshpande's work is set.

In arguing that it is essential to place Deshpande's work in an Indian, rather than Western, feminist context, Bhalla extends a critical project whose groundwork has been laid by critics such as Chandra Mohanty, Susie Tharu, Meenakshi Mukherjee, K. Lalita, Lakshmi Homstrom, and Malashri Lal, among others. Bhalla makes particularly good use of the methodological approach to Indian women's writing in Lal's *The Law of the Threshold*: "The threshold suggests the barrier between the inside—the arena of home and tradition—and the outside, associated with the world of men, business trade and politics" (20). Acknowledging that there is considerable variation in the experience of contemporary women in India (as a middle-class woman from a Brahmin family, Deshpande herself occupies, arguably, a privileged position vis-à-vis other women in India), Bhalla contends that Lal's theory may be adopted as "an Indocentric methodology that may be used as an analytical tool for women's writing in India" (21). Whether or not Lal's theory can be generalized to this extent, Bhalla makes a convincing argument for its applicability to Deshpande's texts, most of which begin, either literally or metaphorically, on a threshold.

Guided by her focus on gender and patriarchy, Bhalla discusses five of Deshpande's novels in separate chapters of ten to twelve pages each. The brevity of these chapters is compensated for by Bhalla's incisive, focused, and theoretically grounded analysis. Bhalla perceptively highlights and explicates the major characteristics of all of Deshpande's fiction: a woman's mental turmoil and introspection as she faces a major dilemma or loss in her life; the house as "character" (26); the motif of silence; the re-imagining, from a feminist perspective, of Hindu mythology and religion; the vexed relationships between mothers and daughters; the importance placed on male heirs; and the inconclusiveness of the novels' endings. Drawing connections from Deshpande's life to those of her female characters, many of whom are creative artists, Bhalla argues convincingly about the dilemma of the Indian woman writer, for whom "writing as self-discovery and knowledge [is] in conflict with the attempt of a woman writer not to reveal herself" (36). Less convincing is Bhalla's claim that most of Deshpande's male characters "are created simply to highlight some aspect of her women protagonists" (60). While men may be mostly "in the wings" (Deshpande, cited in Bhalla 60) in some

of Deshpande's novels, they play a significant role in later works such as *A Matter of Time*, *Small Remedies*, and *Moving On*.

It would be churlish to fault Bhalla's book for what it does not do, given both the limitations of the Series and the relatively nascent state of Deshpande criticism, for which Bhalla must, to a large extent, compensate. Taking these conditions into account, Bhalla's *Shashi Deshpande* is extremely successful at introducing readers to the Indian contexts for and the main thematic and narrative concerns of Deshpande's novels, and in drawing attention to the resources currently available to Deshpande scholars (including Deshpande's not inconsiderable literary criticism). Indeed, Bhalla surpasses, in sophistication and precision, most of the scholarship to date on the writer. One might point, however, to some as yet uncharted territory in the field. For example, while Bhalla takes her direction from Malashri Lal's notion of the "threshold," she neglects an intriguing aspect of Lal's theory. In *The Law of the Threshold*, Lal argues that what disrupts the educated woman writer's relationship with her immediate social milieu is her exposure to non-Indian influences, particularly that of 19th-century British women writers, such as Austen and Brontë: "the [Indian woman] writer expressed her particular threshold of strenuous poise—between the outer world of patriarchy and colonial influences and an inner world of energy let loose by selected visions of the [European] 'Other'" (Lal 5). Given Deshpande's obvious passion for and frequent allusions to 19th-century European writers, from Dickens to Brontë, an examination of her work that is both sensitive to its Indian context and acknowledges the disruptive force of its intertextuality would also add to our understanding of this complex writer. Bhalla's well-researched and groundbreaking monograph, however, will be essential reading for any future critic who wishes to chart new directions in Deshpande criticism.

Nancy E. Batty

Works Cited

- Lal, Malashri. *The Law of the Threshold: Women Writers in Indian English*. Rasthrapati Nivas, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1995.
- Writers and Their Work web-site. <<http://www.northcotehouse.co.uk/about.htm>>. Accessed 12 November 2006.