

**Of Houses and Canons:
Reading the Novels of Shashi Deshpande**
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As South Asian fiction has come to be globally available, lauded, read and studied an informal canon of sorts has come into being. The names of certain writers recur so often in course descriptions and in the titles of journal articles, conference papers and book chapters that lay readers might be forgiven for thinking that other writers, if they are available, must not be worth reading. Of the contemporary writers in English who are in a sense excluded from this unofficial canon the most peculiar case may be that of Shashi Deshpande, who is in fact a globally celebrated and available writer. Her novels have been translated into multiple European languages, have won India's highest literary prizes, and have been reprinted in the United States by the Feminist Press;¹ Deshpande, a famously reserved person, has herself in recent years become more visible in the Indian literary scene, serving on the juries of major awards, and publicly taking issue with such global luminaries as V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie.² However, the critical attention paid in the western academy to her large body of work (her short stories began appearing in the early 1970s and she has published nine novels since 1980) is remarkably slim.³ In this article I will attempt to both account for this inattention in the western academy and highlight some of the reasons why Deshpande should be studied and taught more extensively than she is today. In particular, I will examine her engagement with issues of women's inheritance and property rights, particularly in her seventh novel, *A Matter of Time* (1996). Such an engagement itself requires from critics a parallel engagement of their own with issues more locally situated than those that structure the emerging canon of Indian literature in general, and in particular the construction of an idea of Indian women's literature.

The history of women's writing in India goes back many centuries, and occurs in a number of languages.⁴ The western academy's interac-

tion with this body of work to date has, however, centered almost entirely on post-Independence fiction in English.⁵ More precisely, it seems to be given over to the study of novels by a handful of women writers, who include, chronologically, Kamala Markandeya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Bapsi Sidhwa,⁶ and more recently Arundhati Roy.⁷ These are, of course, very different writers of variable talent and their careers and receptions, too, have been quite diverse. I would argue, however, that there are certain thematic similarities and trajectories in their work that may help account for at least the arc of academic interest in their writings. These similarities, I would further argue, are emblematic of the ways in which Indian Women's Literature as an academic category has come to be defined. Anita Desai's critical and academic history perhaps is the best entryway into this issue. Desai is one of the best-known Indian writers and her work has received much greater critical⁸ and popular success, as evidenced by three Booker prize finalists to date—*Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984) and *Fasting/Feasting* (1999)—as well as an Ivory-Merchant film adaptation (*In Custody*). Her career's trajectory is very telling. While her international fame rests on her output in the 1980s she had in fact published five novels before *Clear Light of Day*. Her first novel *Cry, The Peacock* was published in 1963 and she remained relatively prolific throughout the 1960s and 1970s.⁹ If she was relatively unknown outside India before the success of *Clear Light of Day*, she was already considered a prominent writer within India, with *Fire on the Mountain* receiving the Sahitya Akademi Award¹⁰ for English in 1977. With a few exceptions here and there, however, the interest by the western academy in Desai's work post *Clear Light of Day* has not extended back to her earlier output.

At the risk of a certain amount of over-generalization it seems safe to say that *Clear Light of Day* marks, if not a complete, at least a significant thematic break in Desai's writing. Where the earlier novels are focused almost entirely on the interior landscape of their female protagonists, *Clear Light of Day* marks, in the words of Meenakshi Mukherjee, "a widening out of human concerns and a willingness to integrate concrete historical and specific cultural dimensions in the creation of interior landscape" (qtd. in Pathak 39). Her subsequent novels extend this jour-

ney out, so to speak, with *In Custody* expanding her horizon of interest to a larger swath of Indian culture and *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) and *Fasting/Feasting* taking on an even larger international geography. I do not mean to imply by this that it is only the changing physical landscape of her novels that has in some way mediated her academic reception; though it may, to a large extent, explain her relatively increased popular international success.¹¹ The explanation of the status of *Clear Light of Day* in metropolitan postcolonial criticism and syllabi, however, lies I think in the fact that it, more than any other of her novels, is available to be read as a national allegory. I do not wish at this point to go in too much detail into the controversy over Fredric Jameson's contention¹² that in third world texts, "the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture or society" (69). I agree with Christine Prentice, and other critics, that as a frame for analyzing any postcolonial literature Jameson's thesis is severely flawed.¹³ However, I invoke this argument here because it seems to me that when it comes to studying Indian literature, precisely those texts, which continue to be privileged, are those that are more available to such allegorizing. This situation is particularly exacerbated in the case of fiction by and about Indian women. I would argue that this susceptibility to allegorizing is one of the threads that links Desai and Sidhwa and explains why some of their novels have occupied prominent places in the postcolonial canon and others have not. Similarly, the attention to Kamala Markandeya's and Nayantara Sahgal's novels in earlier moments of Commonwealth/post-colonial criticism cannot be separated from the fact that almost all their novels focus on either the colonial encounter or the crisis of the post-independence Indian nation state. In all these novels, be it *Clear Light of Day*, Markandeya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1955), *Cracking India* or Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985), it is impossible to separate the psychological narrative from a narrative of the Indian nation state.¹⁴

This is not to suggest that in a sense Jameson is in fact correct in describing third world texts as always operating in some register as national allegories, but to point to a process of self-selection. I want to stress here that what keeps this logic alive is text-choice. Routinely

writers, and texts by writers, that do not locate their narratives in relation to national allegories or “East/West” encounters or a transnational subjectivity,¹⁵ are marginalized or ignored.¹⁶ There is, of course, nothing wrong with studying these issues. In the case of Indian literature, however, operating only in these frameworks means that literary criticism endlessly, surreptitiously reproduces the Indian nation state. As a result the Indian woman, it appears, is doomed to be handcuffed, like Rushdie’s Saleem Sinai, to History with a capital H: if the gendered analysis of nationalism seeks to disrupt the metaphors of nation, woman nonetheless is studied only in the context of a particular subset of those metaphors. It should be clear that I am not postulating that it is possible to make a break with discourses of the Indian nation or colonialism while reading any Indian literature. However, I do feel that attempts to destabilize the foundational claims of this nation can only be successful by expanding the field of responses to it to include not just texts that are emblematic of the nation (*Clear Light of Day*, *Cracking India*) but also texts that deny it representational primacy. Since in everyday life the nation state does not function merely at a spectacular level, as critics it should be of interest to us to read texts that engage with gender and nation not just in political but also in cultural terms. It is in this spirit that I present my discussion of Shashi Deshpande’s *A Matter of Time*, and in particular her treatment in that novel of issues of women’s inheritance and property rights. I offer this reading not in an attempt to present/recover Deshpande as a more appropriately representative Indian woman writer,¹⁷ but to demonstrate the ways in which she negotiates, often contradictorily, the capillary relationships between the modern nation, traditional culture and middle-class women. Deshpande rarely references the nation or its History; her novels operate at not the macro but the micro-political level to interrogate the dialogic relationship of the past and the, largely oppressive, physical present of Indian women. She addresses head-on the contradictions in the articulation of middle-class Indian womanhood caught between the demands of tradition and modernity, yet locates at least part of her critique outside of the terrain of the postcolonial nation-state. By eschewing allegory Deshpande enables us to read women not

as mirrors or containers *of* the nation (or its limits) but *in* the nation, in search of agency.

A Matter of Time has a number of thematic continuities with Deshpande's earlier novels, in particular her first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) and her Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel *That Long Silence* (1988). In all these novels the more immediate crisis of Deshpande's heroine, that of her marriage and conjugal family, is in a sense the more apparent symptom of a larger cultural malaise that affects the extended natal family. Deshpande's protagonists cannot be understood outside the context of their families, and likewise their path to true selfhood passes through the project of rebuilding their relationships with their families. Thus in all these novels Deshpande often drops us into a bewildering multi-generational network of family members and relatives. For some critics this constitutes narrative confusion. Shakuntala Bharwani, for instance, ascribes the difficulty of reading *That Long Silence* to the fact that "several characters appear and disappear and serve no ostensible purpose," and notes of her earlier novel *Roots and Shadows* (1983) that even the presence of a family tree does little to clarify matters (150). These difficulties seem to me to be part of the point. Apart from demanding the reader's careful attention, what Deshpande accomplishes with this complicated structure is to make her reader literally confront the dense network of family ties that bind traditional Hindu society in general and her protagonists in particular. And it is not just family members and kinship ties but also family homes that need to be kept in mind. Indeed, much of the action in her novels takes place in either her protagonists' natal homes or in substitutes for them. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* we see glimpses of Sarita's married life in flashbacks but the bulk of the narrative, and the novel's present, is set in her parental home. Similarly, Jaya's married life in *That Long Silence* is alluded to but the action is set not in the Bombay flat rented by her husband, but in a flat in the suburbs that has come to her from her natal family. And, in *A Matter of Time* as well, the action begins in Sumi and Gopal's home but moves immediately to her parents' home to which Sumi returns with her daughters when Gopal walks out on them. One of the effects of these moves, as Ritu Menon has noted, is to place the protagonist's story liter-

ally in the context of her family's past.¹⁸ I would argue further that the family homes do not function merely as points of connection for the stories of different generations; rather, they are the literal sites of Deshpande's protagonists' negotiations of their places in their families. They come home not just to take their place in the larger family drama but also to literally inherit their places in their homes and by extension in the family. Thus in the case of Sarita, her parents' home serves not just as a refuge from her abusive husband and loveless marriage but as the place that she must reclaim as her own. Her coming into her own at the end of the novel, expressed in terms of her new found sense of self-worth as a doctor, which frees her from the fear of confronting her husband, is likewise twinned with her finally reclaiming her family home and her place in the family. Her move forward into self-reliance is not presented as a step out of her family; rather, the novel presents the process through which Sarita finally becomes the daughter of the house. At the start of the novel she begins her stay by cleaning out her dead mother's room and in the course of the narrative makes peace both with her mother and her father, and also, in the surrogate form of her father's lodger Madhav, with her dead brother Dhruva. The novel ends with Sarita still in her parents' house—it is there that she will finally confront her husband. Sarita's self-discovery, while it will likely take her back outside the walls of her parents' home, is nonetheless predicated on her finally inheriting her place in it. *The Dark Holds No Terrors* was Deshpande's first novel and is arguably the most interior of all her narratives. While this interiority has the effect of giving it perhaps the most visceral impact of all her novels, it also has the limitation locating Sarita's problems and their resolutions almost entirely on a psychological plane. Thus the physical violence that her husband visits upon her almost becomes a metaphor, with marital rape signifying the downfall of an unequal marriage in which the wife is more successful than the husband and the primary earner; if Deshpande indicts a social structure which is implicitly grounded on male dominance, the possibility of legal intervention is nonetheless not entertained. Deshpande's later novels, however, move increasingly outward in their social affiliations. For Jaya in *That Long Silence* the issue of the daughter's place in the family is also fraught, if not to the same

degree as it is for Sarita. Despite being her father's favorite as a child, Jaya is all too aware that women have a lower place in traditional Hindu families. On a visit to her ancestral home after her marriage she is shown a two hundred year old family tree that her uncle has created. When she points out that she is not included in it, he retorts that she is now a part of her husband Mohan's family; a view that is endorsed later by Mohan. In what represents a widening out of Deshpande's protagonists' affiliations, Jaya wonders why then it is that her aunts, her mother and her grandmother, all of who married into her father's family, are not represented in it either. Furthermore for Jaya, unlike Sarita, this question of having a place in one's natal family is not just psychological but also a question of physical inheritance. If Sarita has to literally come home to her parents, Jaya, as the exchange about family trees insinuates, is no longer a part of her extended family and cannot lay claim to her ancestral home. As a result, in *That Long Silence* the role of the natal home as scene of the protagonist's self-discovery is transferred onto a family flat in Bombay, whose ownership, as it turns out, is itself a site of family conflict. Jaya's mother gives her dead brother's Bombay flat to her oldest son Dinkar, who lives in the United States, instead of to Jaya, who lives in Bombay and may actually have use for it.¹⁹ Jaya's resentment initially causes her to resist living in the flat when she and Mohan first come to Bombay. Eventually, though, it does revert to Jaya, since her brother recognizes the injustice and cedes his claim to it to her. And when a scandal at work requires that Mohan lie low, they retreat to this flat where the bulk of the novel's narrative is set. Deshpande at this point transfers the location of conflict over ownership, so that the flat becomes not a metaphor of Jaya's conflicted relationship with her natal family but instead becomes the literal site of Jaya's conflict within her own marriage. We see nothing of Jaya and Mohan's affluent Churchgate flat that is linked to Mohan's job. The novel begins with Jaya and Mohan ascending the stairs to her family's Dadar flat, and the bulk of the narrative is set there. It is clear from the beginning that the flat is not a shared marital space, it is very much Jaya's dominion: she controls the keys, and unlike Mohan, who is put off by the dirt of the building and the neighborhood and the cramped quarters inside, Jaya is completely at home in it. More impor-

tantly, in her family's flat Jaya is presented only as a woman and a writer, not as a mother or housewife: her children are absent, on vacation with another family, and if Mohan's work woes have stripped him of his authority as head of the family, this is stressed as well by his diminished status in Jaya's flat; halfway through the novel Mohan literally leaves the flat and the novel's narrative. If Jaya's claims on her family home and its surrogate are conflicted, it is nonetheless only there that she can shed her social role as mother and wife and come into her own as a woman.

As I noted above, there is something of a slippage in Deshpande's narrative of the question of women's inheritance in this novel. The questions that Jaya asks—Why aren't daughters part of their family trees after marriage? Why do sons and their families inherit everything?—are social in scope, but Deshpande deals with them largely as part of family politics and in any case shunts the whole issue into the matter of giving Jaya, not just a room but a home of her own, where she can be free of all the burdens of family and domesticity and resolve her identity crisis. The fact that this location itself is a contested zone for her natal family adds a layer to the story but is not really foregrounded as part of Jaya's crisis, which is played out largely in terms of her marriage. The facile resolution of the conflict over the Dadar flat's ownership represents Deshpande's sudden shying away from a social resolution of issues that are once again consigned to the realm of the personal.²⁰ Jaya's coming into her own is presented as a synthesis of both parts of her identity: she no longer has to keep silent the part of her that yearned for individual self-expression in order to be a good wife. She becomes finally both the writer and the wife she wants to be. However, her dissatisfactions with her place in her natal family are left unattended. Deshpande's seventh novel *A Matter of Time* (1996) is, however, a different story.²¹ In this novel the larger social contexts of the questions of family, property, men's rights and women's claims are very much in the forefront.²²

The novel is divided into three parts, and the first part is titled "The House." Indeed, the novel begins with a lengthy description of the house in question, "The Big House," the ancestral home of the protagonist Sumi:

The house is called Vishwas, named not as one would imagine for the abstract quality of trust, but after an ancestor, the man who came down South with the Peshwa's invading army and established the family there. The name, etched into a stone tablet set in the wall, seems to be fading into itself, the process of erosion having made it almost indecipherable. And yet the house proclaims the meaning of its name by its very presence, its solidity. It is obvious that it was built by a man not just for himself, but for his sons and his son's sons. (3)

The house's foundational story and its stated purpose—as one built for sons—are immediately inverted by Deshpande: when the first character is introduced we learn it is the daughter, “Kalyani, whose father built the house” (5), who is the owner. As we quickly come to see, the “Big House” is inhabited almost entirely by women. Deshpande subtly contrasts the family's written history with the lived presence in its embodiment, the house. Thus in the family history “[O]f the women, there is nothing. They are only an absence, still waiting to be discovered” (95). The house's story, however, is completely that of its women—a story that spans four generations. The one man who resides in the house is Kalyani's husband, who lives alone in a room attached to the top of the house and who has not spoken to his wife in many decades. Presiding over the house is the picture of Kalyani's mother Manorama, whose husband built the house. Kalyani herself still lives in the house, in which she was raised with her cousin Goda who is still a frequent visitor. The latest inhabitants are Kalyani's daughter Sumi, and Sumi's daughters Aru, Charu and Seema—all of whom return to their ancestral home when Sumi's husband Gopal suddenly abandons them.

When Gopal's renunciation of his family makes staying in their own rented house unviable for Sumi, a housewife, she initially conceives of her move to her parents' house as a temporary one. Her subsequent, frustrating search for an affordable home for her daughters and herself mirrors an earlier anxiety, that of her grandmother, Manorama. The one character in the novel whose story is told entirely in the past tense, Manorama was the eldest daughter of a poor village priest who was

transformed through an unusual schooling into a young woman who caught the eye of a rich man from Bangalore as a potential wife for his son. Manorama's transition through marriage to a life of wealth, however, resulted in a great fear of the possibility of returning to poverty and she "ruthlessly cut herself off from her family after her marriage" (120); the only family member she supported directly was her much younger brother, who had been born after her marriage and rendered motherless soon after. This younger brother of Manorama is Shripati, Kalyani's uncle who her mother prevailed upon, as repayment of all he owed her, to marry her daughter. This tale, that is recounted elliptically by Kalyani and Goda to Aru and Charu, leaves out the reason for the marriage: Manorama's fear that her new found property will move out of her family. The root of this fear lays in the fact that Manorama and Vithalrao did not have a son. Manorama's "failure," after a series of miscarriages that ruled out further births, to provide a son led to family pressure on Vithalrao to marry again or adopt a son. While Vithalrao, like his father, not ruled by tradition, refused, choosing instead to leave his property to his daughter, this was scant consolation for Manorama:

Manorama, who had been terrified her husband would marry again, never got over this fear. It was as if that deprived childhood, which she so resolutely ignored, was always close to her, so close that a nudge was enough to push her back into it. To add to her insecurity, that main crutch, the one most women depended on, a son, was denied to her. All that she had was a daughter, Kalyani, who would get married and become a part of another family. (128)

Kalyani was always a disappointment to her mother, first and foremost for not being a son, and when she developed a crush as a schoolgirl on a young man, her mother in rage and panic put an end to her schooling and married her off to her uncle, Shripati. As the narrator puts it, "[P]erhaps, after this, Manorama felt secure. The property would remain in the family now. Her family" (129).

This story is overlaid in the novel with an account of Gopal's nephew Ramesh offering Sumi money from Gopal's share of the sale of a family

flat in Bombay—money that would be enough to finance a new home for Sumi and her daughters. Sumi, however, refuses; not out of pride, but because she wants to find a job, and support her daughters herself, without charity. Deshpande's twinning of Sumi and Manorama's stories not only highlights the different choice that Sumi is able to make for her daughters than Manorama could for Kalyani, it also signifies a refusal to resolve the social dilemma through a personal *deus ex machina*. Manorama's stratagem keeps Vithalrao and her property in her daughter's family but unwittingly condemns Kalyani to an empty, unhappy marriage. Sumi, on the other hand, keeps her daughters un beholden to anyone and able to make their own choices. A further echoing of earlier family stories is represented by the lack of sons in every generation. While Manorama and Sumi do not have sons, Kalyani and Shripati did have a baby boy, who was born retarded, and in tragic circumstances, was lost by Kalyani in a crowded train station. This event, the cause of Shripati's choice to abandon his wife and his refusal to speak to her after his return years later, is mirrored at the end of the novel when Kalyani loses another child. Sumi's death at this point in the story, at the point at which she has finally found a job, achieved independence from the demands of both her conjugal and natal families, is difficult to interpret. Menon ponders whether it may be an acknowledgement of the idea that, for women, consciousness and articulation of their situations might be rewarded with death. I would argue, however, that this represents a break in both the family's and Deshpande's stories. For the traffic accident that kills Sumi also kills Shripati, and after the deaths Goda and Kalyani, lying awake in the house, hear "a strange sound, as if the house has exhaled its breath and shaken itself before settling down into a different rhythm of breathing" (236). This "different rhythm of breathing" finds its expression in Sumi's eldest daughter Aru. When Sumi dies it is Aru who consoles Kalyani, saying: "I'm your daughter, Amma, I'm your son" (244). I read this declaration and the glimpses the narrator gives us of Aru's future success as a feminist lawyer as a conscious stepping out from cultural narratives that revolve around (absent) men. Aru's story will also take place in the "Big House" but it will be one no longer weighed down by the narratives of the past. The mooring of all these

narratives in the “Big House” and in the context of women’s relationships to property is key to Deshpande’s success in this novel. Aru’s affinity for the law, which initially develops out of a desire to find some way to make her father accountable, her apprenticeship under a women’s rights lawyer, and the fact that Shripati himself was a lawyer, also draw our attention to Deshpande’s location of Sumi and her family’s stories in a larger social context. And if the plot of *A Matter of Time* perhaps seems a little baroque, it becomes evident from a consideration of the history of Indian family law and women’s inheritance rights that this is not really so. Hindu widows gained an equal right to their husbands’ properties in 1937, but only for the course of their own lives (the property would return to their husbands’ male heirs upon their deaths).²³ While the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 made sweeping changes, allowing widows absolute ownership of their husbands’ property and allowing daughters equal rights as sons in the property of both parents, many inequalities remain. The most glaring of these is the fact that there are separate lists of heirs for inheriting from men and women. Thus a mother can inherit an equal share of her son’s property as a Class 1 heir but her daughter can inherit only after the heirs of her husband. A provision allowing property inherited by a woman from her father to devolve to her father’s heirs in the absence of her own heirs is counterbalanced by a provision that property inherited from a husband or father-in-law shall devolve in the absence of her own heirs to the heirs of the husband. A daughter can inherit a share of her father’s joint family property but this remains a smaller share than that of a son who inherits both as an heir and as a direct member of the joint family. Another provision of the Act that maintains the definition of family and family property through the male line allows sons but not daughters the privilege of demanding a partition of property owned by either of the parents. While some states have taken steps to rectify this situation, other forms of this bias towards keeping property within the male line continue. For example, there is no distinction made between daughters, married or unmarried, as Class I heirs of family natal property, but when it comes to residence rights married daughters, unlike single, widowed or divorced daughters, have none. Thus women who may be in abusive marriages or who may have

been abandoned or fled their married homes have no rights of residence in their natal family home. This continues to be the legal situation today.

While Deshpande does not actively foreground this legal history I would argue that it is against it that we have to read *A Matter of Time*. And when we do the family melodrama of its plot extends to a larger social canvas, and the interiority of Deshpande's narrative is thrown into sharp relief. I am not suggesting that Deshpande's novels are most profitably read when revealed to be "national allegories." In any case, what Deshpande is interested in is not nation but culture and tradition, and the ways in which they contradictorily locate/limit the middle-class woman. And her novels make clear that these narratives of culture and tradition are not collapsible into those of the postcolonial Indian nation but in fact predate and extend beyond them. While on the one hand this often leads in her fiction to the kind of disregard for collective social action that gives a critic such as Sundar Rajan pause, on the other her novels open up, often in contradictory and fragmentary ways,²⁴ fault-lines in Indian society that the texts of other, more celebrated, possibly more appropriately feminist, writers do not.²⁵ If Deshpande's novels rarely resolve all the narrative and social tensions they uncover this should be read not simply as evidence of aesthetic limitation or faulty politics, but as suggestive of the constitutive contradictions of those tensions. Furthermore, by de-emphasizing the nation and its structures, Deshpande opens up a very particular space for her characters, one in which they are not simply metaphors for or symptoms of a national failure. It is this particularity of Deshpande's narratives that sets them apart from those of many of her contemporaries who have been included in the unofficial canon of South Asian writers I referred to at the beginning of this article. However, one might wonder if it is also part of the reason for her exclusion from it. While the factors governing text-selection are doubtless varied, the hallmarks of Deshpande's novels are quite different from those of most of the South Asian women writers who have been and are read, taught and written about more frequently in the western academy: her novels are set in and have to be read in very particular cultural locations, and her narratives rarely include any pan-national, let alone international encounters. I would reiterate that

I am not arguing that Deshpande's narrative concerns make her a more appropriate or representative Indian writer or that Deshpande or any other Indian writer only receives her true due when she is "discovered" or "recovered" by the postcolonial critical apparatus. However, the very local concerns of a writer such as Deshpande, her very lack of a global address in her style or themes, unsettle the configurations of "India" and "Indian Literature" that are willy-nilly created by the seemingly unconscious act of text-selection. And the introduction of such writers and their themes and formal concerns in discussions of Indian literature and culture seems all the more important for this reason. Her writings not only expand our understanding of Indian women's literature, or of representations of women's agency, but also expand our understanding of the complex relationships that mediate community and tradition, culture and nation, and of Indian literature as a whole.

Notes

- 1 Deshpande's fifth novel, *That Long Silence*, won the Sahitya Akademi Award. The Feminist Press reissued her next two novels, *The Binding Vine* and *A Matter of Time*. European languages her novels have been translated into include Finnish, Russian, German, Italian, Danish and Dutch. Within India her novels have been translated into Urdu, Marathi, Malayalam, Tamil and Kannada.
- 2 Deshpande famously challenged V.S Naipaul's comments about Indian writers' alleged obsession with colonialism at the the celebrated International Festival of Indian Literature outside New Delhi in 2002; (for a description of the incident see: <http://www1.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/cms.dll/articleshow?art_id=1899551>). In 2000 Salman Rushdie took issue with her role on the panel for the Commonwealth Writers Prize, citing her presence as "the spectre at the feast" as the reason for the award going to J.M Coetzee's *Disgrace* rather than his own *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (for a description of the incident see: <<http://www.outlookindia.com/full.asp?fodname=20010420&fname=shashi&&sid=1&pn=10#1>>).
- 3 The MLA bibliography, for instance, returns a paltry 16 hits for Deshpande and most of these are in Indian collections. Compare this with 721 hits for Salman Rushdie, 167 hits for Anita Desai, and even 54 hits for Arundhati Roy and her one novel. Compare also to the very different estimation of Deshpande in India where articles on her book comprise two and a half volumes of the five volumes in Set 1 of the *Indian Women Novelists* series and where a number

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- of her books have won awards. Josna Rege's *Colonial Karma* is one of the few recent monographs on Indian fiction that devotes a chapter to Deshpande.
- 4 See the first volume of *Women Writing in India*.
 - 5 Gayatri Spivak's sustained work on and with Mahashweta Devi is a notable exception.
 - 6 Sidhwa is, of course, Pakistani in origin, but her novel *Ice-Candy Man* (published in the US as *Cracking India*) set during Partition is invoked often in analyses of gender and Indian nationalism. A later novel set in the United States does not seem to have attracted as much attention.
 - 7 Once again, a rough measure of this claim can be obtained by querying the MLA bibliography, or indeed by looking at the tables of contents of monographs on Indian literature in the last few decades.
 - 8 This is true both in India and abroad. For instance, in addition to the 167 hits in the MLA database mentioned above, two and a half volumes of the five volumes in Set 1 of the *Indian Women Novelists* series are given over to discussions of Desai's novels whereas Markandeya and Sahgal do not even get one article devoted solely to their fiction.
 - 9 Her other novels in this period include *Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye Bye, Blackbird* (1971), *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1974) and *Fire on the Mountain* (1977).
 - 10 The Sahitya Akademi Award is India's highest literary award, given each year to work in each of 22 Indian languages.
 - 11 Desai herself thinks the increased interest she's received in the USA is due largely to her novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* and has occurred "not because of its Indian material but because of its Jewish material" (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 168–69).
 - 12 See Jameson.
 - 13 See Prentice's critique of Jameson.
 - 14 Interestingly, *Cracking India* was published in India and Pakistan under the title *Ice-Candy Man*. Presumably subcontinental audiences did not need an "Indian" marker in the title. Similarly the film adaptation by the Indian filmmaker Deepa Mehta was titled *Earth*.
 - 15 These are the other thematic similarities (in varying degrees) between texts by Markandeya, Sahgal, Desai and Sidhwa that have made it onto the Commonwealth/postcolonial curriculum.
 - 16 Thus it is not just literature in languages other than English that remain marginalized but even literature in English that is not definitive of Indian-ness in institutional terms.
 - 17 The argument made in this essay could just as easily be made on behalf of a writer such as Githa Hariharan or even the late Shama Futehally.
 - 18 See her afterword to the Feminist Press edition of *A Matter of Time*.

- 19 This is a repetition of an earlier betrayal: Jaya's maternal grandmother had left most of her jewelry not to her daughter (Jaya's mother) or to Jaya, her only grand-daughter, but to her only son's wife; the one piece that she had left to Jaya's mother—"the least valuable of her jewels," as her mother refers to them (112)—was in turn promised to Jaya's daughter but given finally to Jaya's sister-in-law.
- 20 It is this kind of a maneuver that leads Rajeswari Sundar Rajan to find *That Long Silence* to be overly individualized and family-oriented in its evocation and resolution of the problems of Indian women and, therefore, inadequate as a feminist critique. Also see Varma for a sympathetic reading of Deshpande's novel in terms of the negotiation of gender identity and urban space in Bombay, and a critique of Rajan's reading.
- 21 I do not mean to suggest, of course, that Deshpande is the only contemporary Indian writer whose novels thematize issues to do with women's inheritance. For a discussion of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* in the context of her mother's pioneering legal battle against the Syrian Christian Church for property rights, see Natarajan.
- 22 Josna Rege goes over all three of these novels as well in her chapter on Deshpade and Githa Hariharan. Rege's analysis, however, centers on the de/re-coding of traditional narratives of womanhood in these novels.
- 23 For a more detailed account of the history of this Act and relevant colonial legal policy see Sarkar.
- 24 As should be apparent from my readings of the novels under discussion here, while the question of property rights clearly erupts in many of her novels she rarely articulates a clear position on the larger issue, and nor does she explicitly thematize it.
- 25 Varma notes of Rajan's critique of *That Long Silence* that it "forecloses an engagement with the gaps and contradictions in the narratives of middle-class Indian women that are revealed in the novel" (43).

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