

# *An Interview with Shashi Deshpande*

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I MET SHASHI DESHPANDE for the first time at her home in a suburban section of Bangalore. She made me feel at ease right away. We ate lunch with her husband and then sat down in the living room for the “official” part of the interview but really it felt like we had an afternoon-long conversation, part of which happened to be recorded on tape. I am not sure how long we had been talking before Shashi said, “Wait. Aren’t you supposed to be asking me questions?”

Daughter of the renowned Kannada dramatist, Shriranga, Deshpande is a novelist and short story writer. Her recent novels include *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *The Binding Vine* (1993), *That Long Silence*, which won the Sahitya Akademi Award for the best book in English in 1987, and most recently, *A Matter of Time* (Penguin India, 1996). She has also published several volumes of short stories, including *The Intrusion and Other Stories* (1993). Her books are published in Great Britain by Virago Press. What follows are extracts from the interview, which took place on 29 January 1994.

*I know that your father was a very well-respected writer in Kannada. Do you think it made a difference for you, in terms of your own writing, to have grown up in that kind of a family?*

Yes. Not directly, in the sense that I never told myself, “My father is a writer and I want to be a writer.” But one is so influenced by having lots of books at home. He wrote in Kannada, and I write in English, and there’s a whole world of difference. I started writing very late in life, and I never spoke to him about my writing, nor did he ever speak to me about it. We never communicated about

writing at all. But nevertheless, it did matter. It does matter, to some extent, particularly in a country like India, where I think women wouldn't have been very educated in those days—I'm not talking of now—unless you had parents who were different and wanted their daughters to be educated. Normally it's so difficult for a girl, if her family is against her, to go ahead and do anything, in our day at least.

It's not just being a woman writer, but I think one did have to—I won't say struggle, because that's too difficult a word—but one did have to go against a lot of things. And I think for me the most difficult thing was to tell myself that my work was important even though it doesn't bring in money. I was very serious from the beginning. A lot of women ask me to look at their stories, and then they say, "Ha ha, it's only a hobby. It's nothing serious. I do a little in my spare time." I never did that. I knew it was serious for me, but at the same time, it was very hard for me to take time off from other things, like to take time off from housework, because it's my duty to do the housework. And if I write, I should be earning money. So that was very hard for me, to get a sense of value for my work particularly because there's no money in it. Since I started earning a little money and got a little bit of recognition, I'm more confident about it; but that was hard.

*When did you start writing? I know you said you started late.*

Very late. I was 30. And the funny thing is I never wrote a thing until then, not even a poem. I don't think any writer hasn't written poetry even in their younger days. I didn't even try. I wrote nothing. And then suddenly I started. It was like one of those miracles they talk of, though I know it wasn't a miracle. I must have been preparing inside all those years. Once I started, I just couldn't stop. I've always been very lazy, not very hard-working at anything, quite the despair of my parents; but once I started writing, I felt myself so committed to it.

Even when I was sick—I had a lot of health problems—even in bed I used to sit and work and write, and somehow I knew that that was it. This kind of a commitment, I find, not many women have. A lot of people want to say that they are writers, but they're not willing to commit themselves to that extent.

*Do you think it's partly because women are not raised to take what they do seriously?*

I think so. Well, of course, now if you go out and take up a job and earn money, that's important. I mean you're told to consider that important, but you're still made to feel that it is less important than the home, children, and homemaking. And then you have these women who do flower decorations and dancing and classes, and this comes into that category. But that's not how writing is. It can't be a hobby. Either you're a writer in the sense that you're really totally committed to it or you aren't. Very few women cross that line between being just an amateur and being totally committed. It's a big leap. You can be a very good amateur but to be a professional and to be a good professional, you have to make a whole mental leap and put aside a lot of yourself. That is very hard. It's hard for women everywhere, and a little harder for Indian women because the family really does claim you. It's not just the immediate family; it's the extended family, and most of the family duties are taken over by women. The men are the pillars of the family, but the work, including the emotional network and the bonding and all these things like bringing the family together—it is all done by women. . . . I used to see my father, who would sit and work and just shut off the world. My mother would take care of all the work, but I can't do that.

*One thing that interests me is the question of language, the question of the choices writers make in terms of what language they write what in. I know that many writers in India write in English and a regional language. Was that a possibility for you?*

I wonder whether there is a choice because one of the things which is always asked is "Why do you write in English?" Maybe it's not asked of people like Anita Desai. It's presumed she will write in English. But for a person like me, whose father wrote in Kannada and who lives very much in this kind of a middle-class milieu, it's always asked of me, and it's asked in a kind of accusing tone, as if I've done something wrong. There was no choice in the matter. That's what I always say. It's not like I sat down and said, "Look, I'm going to write in English." That was the only language I could write.

As far as I'm concerned, I've studied only English. I feel it's a great loss now. I feel very sorry that I don't know any other language well enough. At the same time, I feel that it's given me a little more freedom. But I do regret not being able to write in my own language. And I very much regret not knowing Sanskrit.

*Did you grow up speaking Kannada?*

And Marathi. My mother is Marathi and my father is Kannada, so we grew up speaking both. But never studied either.

*And English in school then?*

English in school. It is not like it is now. In our days, the bad old British days were still very close to us. We could do with only English. Now you have to learn an Indian language—very sensible. But then you could get by without learning an Indian language. I did learn Kannada and Marathi, but at home, on my own, you know, learning the script. That is a loss. There are so many things which one cannot put exactly into English from our languages. Sometimes you feel such a sense of loss.

But there is a sense of gain too, because English is a rich language. Also, I like it because it's not flowery and sentimental like most Indian languages are, and it suits my style. I don't like sentimentality, and I don't like melodrama. I like things to be stark, and English is a stark language. It suits me sometimes; but when it comes to certain emotions and certain customs, I don't like to explain. If you explain everything in parentheses, it's like saying that I'm writing this for a Western reader, which would spoil the novel for me. It's a bit difficult; whereas if you write in your own language, it's more natural.

*The question of language doesn't seem to be getting any less problematic. It is still one of the main questions writers are asked about here.*

Yes. Which language? And, number two, why do you write about women? And, number three, are you a feminist writer? And, number four, if you're a feminist writer, then why do your women . . . ? People seem to think you are writing about women. I am writing about Jaya. I am writing about Saru. I wrote about Saru, and then Saru is over; and I'm writing about Jaya, and then

Jaya is over; and then I'm writing about Mira. Not *women*. And *my* books particularly, I feel, get slotted as women's books, more than anyone else's. I don't know why.

*Do you think it's because the main characters are all strong women?*

There are a lot of women writers who have women characters. I don't know why there should be always a kind of slotting of women's writing, and judging them only as such. Anyway, I've come to terms with that because there's no point in agonizing. At least there are people, readers, who are able to relate to my characters, and I take satisfaction in that now. Some women writers say that they don't want to be called women writers. I think it's wrong. Because by saying so, you're saying there's something wrong with being a woman writer, something inferior or subordinate in being called a woman writer. So I don't want to do that either. I am a woman, and I do write about women, and I'm going to say it loudly. I don't want to dissociate myself, which is like saying, "Look, that's an inferior kind of a club, and I don't want to be part of it."

*I'm interested in this question of what it means to be a feminist writer. As I said, I think women do write differently, and that's always what's interested me more in literature in general, at home [US], and in a country like India, it is an especially interesting position to be in.*

That's right. And I think in India, particularly when women do live in two entirely different worlds. . . . Perhaps now they are able to find some kind of a meeting ground, but most of the time, it's two totally different worlds, and that is what comes out in my books, because even as a child I saw the women's room, their world, their concerns, and only the children were the bridges. And the men and women, the husbands and wives, they met only at night, when they went to their own room, if they were lucky enough to have their own room. It was kept very shadowy and dark, the women's world, but they had their own world, their rituals, their social occasions, their religious ceremonies, and it was quite a big world in its own way. But there was no meeting point.

*Do you think that's changing?*

It's changing. There was no kind of companionship. For instance, my father used to always tell me about the kind of husbands who speak two sentences to their wives. When going out, he would say, "Close the door." You know, "Close the door behind me"; and when he used to come home, he used to say, "Open the door." So, you know, it was so total. And for a lot of people, it was considered wrong to talk, even for a husband and wife.

So, that's why women writers cannot be taken lightly. Because they're saying the kind of things nobody has said until now. They're showing you the world which the men have not known. In fact, I got a long letter from a man, after he'd read *That Long Silence*. He started off being very melodramatic, saying that *That Long Silence* is "thundering." And then he wrote about ten pages about how little he knew about the world of women, and this opened up an entirely different world to him, and how he lived in his own world, and how he never knew that this thing is going on behind the doors in women's minds. It's very interesting—I like to know what men are thinking. All these years men have been telling the world in their writing that women are mysterious, women are fascinating, women are strange, women are whimsical, women are irrational. So now women are also talking and telling the world that men are strange, men are mysterious. . . . We do find the other sex mysterious to some extent. So many of their things we don't understand. You may be very close to your friend or husband or lover or whatever but at the same time there is always that element of the unknown.

*I remember realizing once when I was writing something that I didn't think I could write a conversation between two men in a room without a woman in it. I thought, "I don't know what they say."*

I find myself not able to do it at all. I had this feeling earlier in my writing. I felt that if I'm writing only about women, then I'm trivializing myself. I was very brainwashed about this idea. I felt that if I write it from a male point of view, it's going to sound more important. And I did that in two or three stories, and then I gave up because I realized I didn't want to do it, and I couldn't do it. By that time, I had sort of unbrainwashed myself, and I knew what I was saying was important anyway.

*Are things any easier for you as a writer, now that you're more established and have a name?*

I'm very lucky that I started writing after my younger son was born. I grew into it as they grew up. And by the time they were about 13 or 14 and out of the house all day, I was really into it. By the time I really got very professional, they were out of the house. So, in a way, it worked out. But those few years were very hard, when they were about between 9 and 17. It's not that they didn't need me at all. It's, as I said, "You should be on tap."

But at the same time when I was really getting into it, I used to get very angry. Now when I think of that anger, I'm amazed. I remember I used to be very angry that I was not getting time to do what I want to do, and nobody seemed to think that I was working. That's the main thing. Nobody realizes this is work. You're just passing your time. That used to be the most difficult thing for me.

*It is not taken seriously. It is a little hobby, you go off and scribble.*

And the kind of comments I had . . . family, gentlemen asking me awful things. In cricket, there are boundaries and there are sixers. One gentleman said, "I hear you've written a novel, so now you're hitting sixers, are you?" I felt like hitting him one. And then, "Are you still writing, Mrs. Deshpande?" I remember a cousin of mine, an accountant, saying, "Are you still writing?" You know, very patronizingly. And I said, "Are you still doing your accountancy?" In one of Patrick White's novels there's a painter, and somebody asks him, "Are you still painting?" And he says, "Are you still breathing?" I mean, "Are you still eating, are you still shitting . . . ?"

My husband kept telling me, "Why do you get so angry? Why are you wasting your energy? People don't understand." But, you know, everything undermines you. All these things do undermine you, and you don't have anything else to give you back what you're losing in this. It's only since I got the Akademi Award that people recognize that I'm a writer. And people now, when they ring me up, do say, "Am I disturbing you?"