

On Concerns and Creativity: An Interview with Shashi Deshpande

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Born in 1938, Shashi Deshpande is an Indian writer, who writes primarily of man woman relationship, with a focus on shifting female responses through changing personal and social variables. She has written ten novels, beginning with *Roots and Shadows* (1983) and the latest being *Strangers to Ourselves* (2016). Between these two, are eight other novels, which function like a continuum, explicating and portraying various facets of the male female paradigm. These are *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980), *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Binding Vine* (1993), *A Matter of Time* (1996), *Small Remedies* (2000), *Moving On* (2004), *In the Country of Deceit* (2008), *Ships that Passed* (2012) and *Shadow Play* (2013). She has also written two detective novels, four children's stories, short stories which have been put together as collections and a book of non-fiction titled *Writing from the Margins*. Shashi Deshpande has been conferred with two of the highest

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awards in India for her work – the Sahitya Akademi award in 1990 and the Padma Shri in 2009.

In this interview she has responded to questions with characteristic grace, emphatic that her aim as a writer is to portray individual responses to situations, yet conceding that the perspective from which she looks into them arises from a sensibility formulated by her own experiences and understanding. One senses through her answers, an evolution of thought processes which do not always fit into theoretical constructs of feminism, yet encompass greater areas of feminine consciousness, demanding a more comprehensive evaluation of its requirements. Her responses broaden the scope of analysis through which we need to look at her work. They also provide clues to the futility of trying to slot writings by Southeast Asian woman writers into simplistic Western categories like the postcolonial or the feminist.

Deshpande recently resigned from membership of the academic council of the Sahitya Akademi (Indian Literature Academy) as a protest against the Akademi's failure to take a stand on the killing of Professor Kalburgi, a rationalist and an awardee of the Akademi. She maintains that her fiction is separate from her stance on ideological issues. Yet her latest novel, *Strangers to Ourselves*, provides a subtle insight into the connection between the political and the personal, as ideologies percolate into individual lives to change their directions. Deshpande's understanding of the situations she writes about makes her one of the most perceptive writers of our times.

With respect to the substantial body of work to your credit, and to the amount of research being done on it, does the act of writing entail anything different today, from when you first began as a new writer?

That I have written a number of novels by now and that much work is being done on these and my other writing makes no difference to me when I am writing. Writing remains what it was: a struggle, hard work, moments of joy and satisfaction, moments of frustration and despair. When I'm writing there's only what I am writing at the moment, nothing else.

Your novels are largely women-centric. Have you ever felt that this limits the range of your exploration? Does it sometimes entail dismissing other voices in the same space?

Women-centric? I've been asked this question so often I can answer it in my sleep. My answer is why not? Women are also people, they are one half of the human race. There have been so many more novels that are male-centric, yet I am sure that no male author has been ever asked: why are your novels about men? Virginia Woolf put it rightly when, in her *A Room of One's Own*, she praised

Jane Austen and Emily Bronte saying “they wrote as women write not as men write.” It was Woolf who unknotted my mind when I first read this book. Now, of course, it is so accepted that it is almost a cliché, that masculine values prevail because it has been a man’s world so far. This is why writing about women seems odd.

As one goes through the entire gamut of your work, one finds a movement from anger and confusion to calm assessment and then to a pursuit of economic and emotional independence in your women characters. Is it time for feminism, in general, to move away from angst to agency?

Feminism has never been a single-stranded, coordinated, focussed movement with a central leadership. Even the ideology differs, not only in different countries and different societies, but among different individuals as well. What you mean by feminism may be quite different from what I understand it to be. What holds it loosely together is the demand for a better and a more just world for women and a belief in the truth that women and men are equal partners in this great game of life. Also, since feminism, unlike other ideologies, enters into the realm of the personal, of intensely personal relationships, it has been more complex and has met with more animosity and misunderstanding than most ideologies. The fact that to accept feminism’s demands means a change in the structure of that most important, but least regarded institution, the home, made for problems. But there is always a time when humans become aware of great injustice and it is always a moment of great anger. So it was with feminism. But in time, the ideology became a movement (which is why I prefer the term “women’s movement”) and as it is with all movements, the anger moved into practical areas and gender inequality began to be addressed in specific ways. Which is how it should be. This is the way all movements progress. After the era of rather exaggerated responses, there came, very slowly and gradually, a beginning of awareness in the world about this movement. After a willing or reluctant acceptance of it, it settled down into working towards justice in specific fields. Now more and more women have become part of the establishment and hopefully, working from within will yield more results.

Does feminism as a theory become relevant only when modified to a particular social context? And would this involve redrawing the processes and the aims of the feminist impulse when we talk of it in the Indian middle class context?

This question has me a little confused. Of course a movement has to be relevant to a particular social or political context. It would not have begun or evolved otherwise. But why do we need to talk of it in the Indian middle class context? The aim of feminism is the same everywhere – a better world for all women, which includes everything from more equal laws and reservation in

legislating bodies to education to health and choices in personal life. But the great asset of feminism according to me is that it can be modified according to the needs of women in different countries and different communities and at different times. Therefore, in India, we have had a focus on dowry and dowry deaths, on female foeticide, on reservation in political institutions, on sexual harassment at work and rape, on women's health and toilets for women and so on – a wide range of remedies which embrace the problems of women of all classes. I see no need to separate women into different classes. While clearly the least privileged women need most attention, others cannot be ignored, because when it comes to injustice, all women are vulnerable. To separate women into different classes or communities is to bring in a divide we don't need

Do you think that intersectionality as a sociological concept needs to be incorporated in literary practices?² A woman also exists within her particular strata, level of education, religion, caste etc. Would writing on women be more effectual, if we bridged the gap between literature and sociology?

Certainly a woman exists within a particular community. A writer, specially a novelist, has to take note of this, because the novel goes into details of the characters' ways of living, of thinking, of routine etc. It is for this, and because a person is often shaped by where she/he comes from, that the novel needs to know where the character belongs in society. But otherwise the novel is dynamic, it is not written for a purpose, it has no agenda and is written about living, thinking, feeling human beings; it is not about humans in general but about specific human beings. And the ability of a novel to transcend the particular and go to the universal is what makes for a good novel. A novel is not about yielding knowledge, but helping understanding. Sociology, on the other hand, is a fact-based analytical science and exists for the purpose of yielding knowledge. I am always irritated when my novels are described as novels *about* middle class women. I am no sociologist; I do not write of a class, I write of individual women. These characters are not representative of anything, they are their own selves. I always want to quote the words of William James to those who speak of "all my women" as if I am writing of a mass, not an individual:

Probably a crab would be filled with a sense of personal outrage if it could hear us class it without ado or apology as a crustacean and thus dispose of it. I am no such thing it would say, I am myself, myself alone.

² For "intersectionality" see Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, London: Routledge, 1996.

Indeed, so would each character in a novel say – *I am myself, myself alone*. No, I think sociology and literature are poles apart and should be kept so. Literature can be judged only as literature.

Do you think that analysing literary works through the parameters of theoretical constructs, limit their understanding? Does it take away the direct experience and replace it with enumeration of what we should experience? Or does it contribute to a greater understanding of the work?

It is difficult for me to answer this question. For a writer, her work is a living dynamic thing and to have it dissected and analysed is not a comfortable feeling. Especially when the work is looked at from the point of view of what is not there rather than looking at what is there. In any case, once my book is published and is out in the world, it is no longer mine; it belongs to the readers and scholars. I leave it at that.

In Moving On you suggest that we are functional human beings because of our connections with those we care for. So, when we want to change the relational paradigms with those whom we otherwise care for, we must work from within relational constructs, not by stepping out of them. Is it more difficult to aspire for autonomy within relationships than autonomy in isolation?

Complete autonomy is never wholly possible. We are born physically attached to one human being; the ghost of the umbilical cord is always with us. And all our lives we continue to get fresh attachments. But since we live in a community of human beings we are necessarily impelled to live within some rules and boundaries, so that each one of us is as free as possible within the confines of the bonds we live in. Yet there is a struggle within us to be free. This dichotomy between attachment and the desire to be free is a part of the struggle in life. The only way of being totally free is, as the first line of “That Long Silence” says, is to love the whole world. But this is not possible for most humans, it can happen only to a very rare individual. For the rest of us, we accept the fact that we are connected to other humans, and try to find the freedom that is possible within those bonds.

From focussing only on claustrophobic relationships in your earlier novels, you have moved on to sketching some beautiful relationships within marriage in your later works like Small Remedies and In the Country of Deceit. Insistence on space by women and the readiness to provide it by men, creates companionship and love. Are you suggesting an ideal situation or do you see such relationships around you?

I think that I have begun to see relationships outside marriage as well. If Leela and Joe, Tony and Rekha in *Small Remedies*, Sindhu and Keshav in *In The Country of Deceit*, Aru and Rohit in *Shadow Play* are able to have a different kind of relationship in marriage, I see Gopal and Kasturi moving towards the same kind of relationship without marriage. But these are unusual people, they are people who are able to respect the other person, they are people who are, as you say, ready to provide space for their partners. I see these relationships as the result of two rare people coming together, standing on the same level ground and shedding the usual ideas and stereotypes of husband and wife or man and woman. An ideal relationship? Certainly. But it is possible, and it is because of both the partners, not just one of them.

The shift in relationships sought by women in your novels is accompanied by their readiness to accept all else that will change with it. Do you think that the same is true otherwise? Or is it that women want to hang on to traditional privileges and in some cases lack of responsibility, while trying to move out of traditional roles and thus defeat the process themselves?

I think it is true that all women who want change must understand and will ultimately understand that with greater power over our lives comes greater responsibility. None of us can escape the fact that you cannot have power without responsibility; it is inevitable. Perhaps in a generation or two women will look at their lives differently and they will no longer claim traditional privileges.

When reading novels like That Long Silence and The Dark Holds No Terror one confronts the fact that apparently successful relationships have strong undercurrents not visible to the outside world. Why do you think women feel pressurised to maintain appearances, even when financial dependence is not an issue?

Why only women, all of us feel the need to maintain appearances. We are social beings and want to live in society. But we also want to present an image of ourselves to society, to the world (often even to ourselves); we don't want to expose certain areas of our lives and relationships to the world. It is natural.

The difference in the response of mothers and daughters to similar relational deadlocks in novels like A Matter of Time and The Binding Vine shows a shift from a sense of devastation to a dispassionate analysis and demand for their own voice to be heard within relationships and sometimes even out of them. Do you feel that despite the many constraints in societies like ours, there is a steady change in what women settle for?

That things should change is almost a law of nature. Therefore, though much that is basic in us remains the same, different generations will look at a few

things differently. Times change, so do we and so many things which were not possible for an earlier generation becomes possible for the next. I could do so many things my mother couldn't; my daughters-in-law can do more than I could. While my mother took it for granted that her husband would support her all her life, I had some trouble with financial dependence, and my daughters-in-law cannot even dream of financial dependence. For centuries, women's lives were almost unchanged, since patriarchy made change impossible. But many things have changed in this last century. When I was young I used to hear talk of a girl being "allowed" by her in-laws to work after marriage, or that what she did after marriage depended on what "they" would say. I think these expectations and the willingness to meet the expectations are gradually decreasing. Thank god for that!

How difficult is it for daughters like Aru in Shadow Play, to relinquish bitterness and focus on building their lives differently, without sacrificing a belief in love? I am referring to an entire generation which is equipped to walk out of relationships but which also must look for reasons not to.

Aru had to work towards getting rid of her anger and bitterness. It did not come easy. Her father's abandonment, her mother's death, scarred her deeply. It was worse because she had loved her father so much. But finally, she learns to give up her anger and resentment. Whether it is possible for a whole generation to do likewise is something I cannot predict. It depends on the individual, on the amount of maturity they have and the courage and sense of responsibility they have towards others, which Aru has.

In the Country of Deceit, one of your later novels, shows the unmarried woman protagonist in a relationship with a married man with a daughter. Your emphasis on the sense of responsibility rather than any moral compunction, which draws her out of it, is interesting. Are you suggesting that to be relevant many of the social rules need to be differently spelled out?

I think that to me a sense of responsibility is the same as a sense of morality. Devayani and Aru are two young women with a strong sense of responsibility towards others. This is what gives them that strong moral sense by which they live.

Moving On shows the retrospective self-analysis of a father, discovered in the form of a diary, by his daughter after his death. Do you think we need men as partners in our endeavour for a better world, and do you think that men are in the process of becoming such partners?

Men as partners? Of course. In the years since I first began thinking and writing, I have realised that we are partners, men and women, and unless we march together, society cannot progress. The problem in our society right now is that women have moved on and men haven't. One of the failures of feminism I have increasingly begun to realise is that the movement has not been able to draw men into it. Many of them have felt alienated, threatened, not understanding that what feminism wants is a better relationship between men and women, not a hostile one. Women too have to realise that men have more to them than what they have been allowed to exhibit to the world. Only when we understand each other as human beings first can we be good partners. Again this is an ideal, but we need to keep ideals before us so that we can move on to something better.

The traditionally over enlogised mother-son and brother-sister relationships have been dissected by you in novels like 'That Long Silence and Moving On, to show, that in a way, they are instruments of control which can be burdensome to men as well as women. Are men within patriarchy a disadvantaged lot too? Does it deprive them of a sense of self outside the set roles, whether they are equipped for those roles or not? Do you think men are aware of the burden they are carrying?

Yes I have found that just as we have created human stereotypes, we also have stereotypical relationships. I remember I was often asked earlier about the mothers in my novels. Mothers are expected to be always loving, sacrificing etc. But I have found out that we are persons first and mothers next. We don't lose all our individual traits because we become mothers. It is the expectations that have been created that are the problem, both for men and women. For a woman, when she finds out that the ideals of a good mother/wife/daughter-in-law are unattainable, she considers herself a failure; she does not blame the idea of a woman attaining such perfection in relationships. Similarly, for a man to carry the burden of being a source of strength, of never letting his weakness show, of not having the luxury of showing his feeling is as bad as the pressures roles put on women. But most men, as long as they think of themselves as privileged, as long as they think they are in control, will not think of themselves as disadvantaged.

In A Matter of Time you could make the reader relate to the perspectives of Shripati and Gopal, even while detailing the momentarily adverse effects of their actions. Would you consider writing from a man's point of view?

Well, if a novel comes to me that way, from a man's point of view, I mean, and if the man's voice is the one I hear loud and clear, I would certainly write a novel from his point of view. It has not happened so far.

A personal question: Standing where you are, can you look back and analyse? Have your beliefs created balance in your own relationships?

Betty Friedan, who was one of the game changers in the world with her book *The Feminine Mystique*, once said that it was easier for her to change the world than to change her life. I agree. And, therefore, though I can say that my thinking has changed over the years, that writing has taught me much, it has helped me to make many discoveries about the world, about humans and about myself, I am unable to categorically state that it has made any change in my relationships. There are always two people in a relationship and the change has to be in both. Besides our ego and our expectations of others always comes in the way of our better understanding of them. Writing has helped me to see things with greater clarity – that is something I can honestly say.

You say, “The entire process of writing a novel does not easily lend itself to answering the ‘whys’ one is often asked.” This makes me see your work in an entirely different light. It reflects greater acceptance, lesser didacticism and an observation which picks up and validates the many hues which we try to pass off as aberrations in our understanding of the colour scheme. But when we accept aberrations, we also acknowledge the pain and loss they entail for those affected by them. Gopal leaves his family in A Matter of Time. So does Savitribai in Small Remedies. Are you just a compassionate observer here, or does your sense of right and wrong impinge on how the other characters respond to these circumstances?

The reason for my saying that the “whys?” about a novel are hard to answer is that while much of the novel is plotted (to some extent), some of it remains inexplicable even to the writer herself. I often quote the example of Sumi’s death in *A Matter of Time*. It hurt me when she died, I went back and tried to do without her death, but it was not possible. For some reason her death was inevitable. Another example I can think of is the presence of Madhav in *The Dark Holds No Terror*. He was not one of the characters in the novel when I started. When he entered the novel, he took me by surprise. In fact, it was as if Saru, when she entered the house, discovered him and conveyed the discovery to me.

I hate to make a mystery about writing but perhaps there is something working in the mind which one is not aware of. This is why the word acceptance troubles me. Acceptance brings in a concept of passivity which has no place in an act of creation. Didacticism has absolutely no place at all in a novel, while observation of the kind you so beautifully describe is a necessity. Yes, as readers we accept the aberrations, but once again I wonder whether the word “compassionate” can apply to the author. The word brings in a kind of subjectivity which is not part of an author.

The author's sense of right and wrong has no place in the novel, either. It is the characters' sense of right and wrong that the author is concerned with. Yet the author is rarely or never judgemental. Writing a novel means an understanding of the flaws in human beings as well as the occasional greatness. And yet I cannot deny that the author's moral sense, in the sense of a view of the world, is the hidden cornerstone on which the novel is built. It is not obvious, not visible, but it has to be there to make a novel meaningful.

Munni's character in Small Remedies has always troubled me. Her hankering for socially validated bonds and respectability keeps bringing to mind Jaya's realisation in That Long Silence that these don't necessarily bring the security we associate with them. Is the system too vast and too entrenched and does it keep pulling us back into itself, even if we realise the constraints it imposes on us?

Munni's hankering for respectability clearly comes out of her life with her mother who is uncaring about societal rules. Her half-knowledge, or understanding of her illegitimacy (which is never spelt out in the novel) makes her yearn for a different place in life, as part of the family her mother was married into, a conventional upper-caste family. Like children who want to be someone else, she builds a story of herself as the daughter of her mother's ex-husband and convinces herself it is true.

Jaya's is a much more complicated case. Her understanding of the falseness of the clichés of middle class life, her realisation that she has been only playing the roles expected of her so far, go beyond any idea of security or insecurity. What she sees is that the life she has believed in so far is a kind of mirage, what she comes to understand is that the real truth, the only truth, is her real self – which she has left behind. Her understanding has less to do with respectability and much to do with knowing herself. It is the *Tat tvamasi* truth that she is reaching out to.

In The Binding Vine, Urmi learns to stand up for herself in reaction to how her father forces her mother into a particular mould, but also by how the same man teaches her to break through that mould. Yet, his propelling her to independence itself becomes a bondage for her. Are we caught in a labyrinth too complicated for analysis? Responding to life frame by frame seems to be the only solution!

I can only answer this question with Walt Whitman's words, favourite lines of mine:

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

So do we all contain multitudes? And, therefore, often we do not ourselves know why we do the things we do.

There is a similarity in some of the underlying assumptions in your work and that of Margaret Atwood. One feels that both of you want to look into the invisible past to understand the present because that is the only way to proceed to a different future. Do you agree?

I don't think I am equipped to answer the question about Margaret Atwood and my work. But I am a great admirer of her and am pleased to be mentioned along with her.

You are keenly sensitive to marginalisation in contexts other than gender. Do you think it is the same circle in concentric motion which works in silencing a woman, a minority, a nation? Would you consider writing something with a broader socio-political background, even while you focus on encasing an individual and personal response to it? Or maybe, even a lack of response to it?

Once again my answer is that where the novel is concerned, there is no question of my "considering" writing a particular kind of novel. I have to write the novel that comes to me, that offers itself to me, so to say. As for writing a novel with a broader socio-political background, I can only quote Jane Austen when she wrote to her niece that "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on." That was what came best to her, that was the way she wrote. We can only write what comes best to us and in any case whatever we write about it, is only a microcosm of an entire society, of the world.

Your resignation from Sahitya Akademi General Council in protest of a lack of statement on Professor Kalburgi's murder, has been followed by similar responses from writers, theatre personalities, people associated with cinema and many more. Intellectuals obviously understand the ramifications of the political situation and the cultural fascism, as many others do not. You have said that silence is a form of abetment. Would writing openly, to analyse and bring to debate, the current atmosphere of intolerance, be more effective than registering a silent protest? Or is it too dangerous in today's circumstances?

Silence often is, and here, unmistakably was a form of abetment. But would writing openly be more effective than registering a silent protest? It is not so simple as this. Undoubtedly, writing which openly sets out what is wrong and what should be done, makes for a clearer understanding of the issues, not only for the opponents and the public at large, but for the writer herself. So far, in our country, being open about dissent has not been a dangerous activity. The

killing of the three rationalists, Dabholkar, Pansare and Kalburgi, was the beginning of something sinister.³ The reason why the three rationalists were murdered was, I think, to make an example of them, to tell everyone who believed as these three did, that to go against this group's idea of the nation or of religion should not be questioned.

To have a large community of voices speaking up takes away the element of danger. Which is why I have been asking for "a community of voices." This did happen. And we must remember that we do have a democratically elected government. The party in power will not want to forsake its chances of coming back to power by opposing the democratic system with open threats. We have gone too far on the democratic road to turn on to any other road now. And, in any case, the dirty work has been, tacitly or otherwise, left to others. A kind of out-sourcing. The answer to these covert or open threats is to continue to speak, to write. About bringing the issue to debate, it has already happened, but the cruder elements are not going to take note of it. One can only hope that sanity prevails and that the leadership applies the brake, shows who is in control.

Accidental Death of an Anarchist by Dario Fo shows how the State can make the majority close its eyes to excesses against minority, by falsely constructing the minority as a threat. When the intelligentsia speaks up against excesses, the State might try to construct it as yet another radicalised minority, like it does for the religious minorities. Or it can be constructed as conduit of the opposition. How can this be tackled?

This is an interesting question because we have been watching and listening to comments from the government about the issue, which began by charging the writers/protestors with being part of a political conspiracy and went on ultimately to the Finance Minister calling the Prime Minister himself the greatest victim of intolerance. It was a very exaggerated statement, deliberately made to shift the onus of defending themselves against the charge of intolerance on the protestors.

It has not worked. But how do the protestors respond to the various charges against them? By speaking constantly and emphatically about what they are protesting against, what they are seeking. By refusing to ally themselves with

³ Narendra Dabholkar: Rationalist and social activist from Pune, Maharashtra. Dabholkar was shot dead allegedly by Right Wing Fundamentalists while out for a morning walk on 20 March, 2103. M.M. Kalburgi: An eminent scholar, Sahitya Akademi awardee and former Vice chancellor of Kannad University, Karnataka, had been receiving threats for his rationalist and anti-right wing views. In August, 2013 he was shot dead from point blank range, at his doorstep, by unknown assailants. Govind Pansare: A left wing politician, member of the Communist Party of India, lawyer, writer and social activist, who countered radical Hindutva organisations. He was shot at from close range in February 2015 and died four days later.

any political party. (The fact that the Congress has now entered the fray seems to me a most unfortunate development.) By proving themselves through their work and their lives. In any case, in a country like India, this entire intellectual debate is open only to a privileged few and the government with its vast machinery is always in a better position to sway people. But the threats to a people's rights and freedom concern every citizen. And one hopes that the fact that writers have never come before as they have done now, that this has been a totally spontaneous and voluntary movement, will make the government understand that they have to take note of it.

Fiction cannot be any kind of a tool in this struggle. I have said it often that if I want to write about an ideology, about feminism for example, I write non-fiction. Fiction has no room for pushing ideas; fiction never has an immediate impact. The role of fiction is quite different.

Finally, standing at that vantage point, from where you can look back to see how your own responses to situations have changed, would you like to say something to those, who are beginning their foray into fictional writing? In particular, do we need fresh perspectives within the female gaze?

I would never dare to give any advice to others. Fiction writing is so individual an activity, each writer has to find her own way, discover her own strength, conquer her own weakness. One thing that I can say is that writers need to be original; they need to be their own selves. Nothing else matters.

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