

Wright State University

CORE Scholar

English Language and Literatures Faculty
Publications

English Language and Literatures

2012

The Modernism of Shashi Deshpande

Alpana Sharma

Wright State University - Main Campus, alpana.sharma@wright.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/english>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Sharma, A. (2012). The Modernism of Shashi Deshpande. *South Asian Review*, 33 (1), 207-222.
<https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/english/231>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English Language and Literatures at CORE Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Language and Literatures Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of CORE Scholar. For more information, please contact library-corescholar@wright.edu.

The Modernism of Shashi Deshpande

Alpana Sharma

Wright State University

[Abstract: This essay studies the modernist feature of metafiction in Shashi Deshpande's novels to show how it allows Deshpande to discover an agency which, while conceived in personal and idiosyncratic terms as an isolated woman's bid for independence, has ramifications extending beyond the confines of the home and the book to an outright challenge of patriarchy. An exposition of the place that writing and art occupy in Deshpande's fiction is followed by an excursion into three aspects of the female creative process shared by her artist protagonists: its genesis in mourning, its expression in sexual being, and its feminist subversion of myth.]

Rummaging through a box of photographs and notebooks belonging to her dead mother-in-law, Urmila, the protagonist of Shashi Deshpande's novel, *The Binding Vine*, happens upon her diaries and poetry. That her mother-in-law, a woman Urmil never met, wrote poetry comes as a pleasant surprise to Urmil. In the coming months, Mira's poems will provide a sanctuary for Urmil as she works through the grief of losing her child to a fatal illness. Going from the diaries, written in English, to the poems, written in Kannada, Urmil divines that the eighteen-year-old Mira was married off to a man who regularly raped her. Indeed, Urmil's husband Kishore, Mira's son, is a product of marital rape. Urmil's friend Priti, a feminist filmmaker, urges her to translate Mira's poems for a film that Priti plans to make on Mira's life. Forestalling Priti's proposal, sorting out the complications of her own childhood, and connecting the threads of her own life to Mira's while still grieving, Urmil is drawn into the scene of another rape. She decides

to report this rape to the police, and the rapist will most likely be brought to trial.

Another of Deshpande's protagonists, Sumi, in *A Matter of Time*, turns to writing as a solace from the grief of marital separation and a traumatic childhood. Struggling with abandonment and neglect by both her husband and father, Sumi writes a play adapted from a regional folktale in which a princess vowed that she would only marry the man who could identify the tree by which she washed her hands after her daily meal. Sumi is alert to the subversive potential of the story. In her version, the princess knew that only one man would qualify as a husband: the gardener's son who tends the tree, and with whom the princess has fallen in love. Dramatizing this shy yet sly female desire becomes Sumi's intensely personal feminist mission. Before she dies, suddenly and tragically, she has begun her second play. It is a feminist rewriting of the much maligned figure of Surpanakha from the Ramayana who made the tragic mistake of displaying her sexual desire for prince Rama and had her nose cut off by him for this transgressive act.

Our third vignette comes from *Small Remedies*, a novel in which Madhu sets out to write the biography of a renowned classical singer. The project requires her to plumb the depths of Savitribai's tumultuous past that the singer has blocked off. The occlusions in Bai's account of her life begin to mirror Madhu's own elisions. It turns out that Madhu cannot render Bai's "real" life story until she has confronted the enormity of her own tragic past: she holds herself and her husband responsible for their son's death, even though it was accidental. Recognizing the root cause of this guilt also means restoring in Bai's life story the illegitimate daughter whom Bai had cast out of her actual life.

I open with these three scenes of writing framed within writing, with three female writer-protagonists; three feminist metanarratives playing out the implications of what it means to be female and write about female sexuality in contemporary India: these are the modernist modes that allow Deshpande to create a world out of the void into which she writes.¹ Deshpande returns often in her essays to the isolation of the female English-language writer in India: "there was nothing, nobody I could model myself on . . . I could only tell myself, I don't want to write like this, not like this, not like this" ("The Dilemma of the Woman Writer" 229). Out of her solitary sojourn into the English alphabet, Deshpande has devised her very own rulebook, which may well be summarized by the title of one of her essays, "Masks and Disguises." In the essay, she writes:

It was the need to express what was within me that had made me begin writing. But Draupadi's junction [sic] of "Be silent about what

you think," applies not just to women writers, it is meant for all women. Which means that women have to remain silent even about the small world that is theirs. In other words, women writers are doubly confined; for them, both as women and as writers, it is only this little space of domestic life that is available. And their words have to remain confined within that space as well. (182)

The world encloses a woman within the four walls of her home; the book encloses the female writer within the cardboard covers of her "domestic fiction."

But Deshpande challenges the defeatism latent in Draupadi's message to the woman in the *Mahabharata* who has asked her how she is able to keep all of her husbands happy. For it is not as if Draupadi is saying "do not think"; instead, she is saying:

"[D]on't express your thoughts aloud." Yes, you know your name, you know who you are, but don't say it aloud. Don't write it in public. Say what you want, but in private, at home, to other women. The Lakshman rekha. I had been conscious of this line from the time I began to write, for I knew that, when I wrote, I was making public something that was very private and personal. Writing meant speaking out my innermost thoughts, it meant sharing those thoughts with the world. And always, writing gave me a feeling of . . . standing under the glare of the spotlight, something that was neither easy nor comfortable for me. (183)

Deshpande's self-professed discomfort with the public dimension of her published writing was borne out by an encounter with a distant relative who had read her short story about a married woman who connects briefly, yet intensely with a stranger at a party; the male relative insinuates a connection between that character and Deshpande herself, as if suggesting that Deshpande herself harbors adulterous thoughts. Discomfited, Deshpande concludes, "it is easier to write of women's wrongs, but harder to write of a specific woman's sexual abuse by her husband. Easier to say that women have dreams, harder to say that a particular woman has desires" (184). It is not a conclusion which Deshpande endorses. Even a cursory reading of her vast and hugely impressive oeuvre, comprising five collections of short stories and nine novels, reveals her commitment to the elaboration of the particularities of specific women and their specific desires. Here, I take issue with those Deshpande scholars who have argued against the potentially narrow reading of Deshpande as only a feminist writer.² While the invitation these critics offer—to widen the circumference of our reading of Deshpande to include her political, communal, and global dimensions, for instance—is valid, Deshpande's feminism can hardly be stereotyped or easily categorized. When one calls her a feminist writer, one is obliged to elaborate the particular features of her

feminism that are resistant to universalizing: her focus on men as part of a broader emphasis on gender and gender construction (a significant portion of *A Matter of Time*, for instance, is narrated from the male first-person point of view); Hindu South Indian and micro-level histories of intergenerational family relations involving, among other practices, the occasional marrying among relatives, and so on.

However, surely it is significant that, given this emphasis on specificity, Deshpande writes at a certain remove, which is to say that she writes about women who write about women. Why this heavily mediated distance from issues that are so central to women's experience? It is the objective of this essay to show how the modernist trope of the metanarrative—in this case, the feminist metanarrative of writers and their writing—constitutes a vital critical ground upon which Deshpande stages the predicaments that face modern-day Indian women.³ These “masks, disguises, and strategies,” this manner of “telling [the truth] slant” (“Masks and Disguises” 186-87), become a way for the author to explore critically such intensely closeted and culturally dense issues as marital rape, sexual abuse, child neglect, female physical desire, and gender preference, effecting a “quiet revolution” in the process (Sarkar 227). Behind the screen of her women writers' forays into the fraught regions of women's experience, largely subterranean because seldom expressed, Deshpande is able to work away at the ideological and relatively abstract seams of the narrative and suggest the stakes of her writer-protagonists' projects. But above all, the feminist metanarrative affords her the opportunity to create a kind of community, in print, of writers and, by extension, readers that she encounters only rarely in actual life. If, as Deshpande avers, she is isolated and marginalized in mainstream middle-class circles, “doomed to writing about ‘ladies’ subjects’ which only other ‘ladies’ will want to read” (“Writing from the Margin” 153), then it should come as no surprise that writing becomes a means for the author to create a like-minded community of writers and readers.

Both Nancy Ellen Batty and Saikat Majumdar correctly identify Deshpande as a modernist (as opposed to a realist) writer. According to Batty,

The persistent tendency to call Deshpande a realist writer ignores many of the most distinctive characteristics of her writing: her frequent use of modernist techniques such as first-person point of view, free indirect discourse, and stream of consciousness; the temporal disruptions in her work; and the implicit and explicit debt in her work to mid-twentieth-century existential writers such as Sartre, Camus, and de Beauvoir. (xxxv)

For Majumdar, this aesthetic emerges as a productive tension between Deshpande's social realism—her characteristic manner of documenting

the quotidian details of domestic life—and her modernism, which is to say, the fragmentary expressions of a subjectivity that, under duress, sporadically breaks the texture of the detached prose. However, critics have paid insufficient attention to her metafiction. I argue that it is in her feminist metanarratives that Deshpande merges both her most abiding concerns about women and how to write about them. It is this particular modernist trope, this usurpation of the (male) space of literature to talk about women's writing, this chosen method which allows the author to remain "masked and disguised" while in the midst of a full and public disclosure of the female condition, that still demands to be acknowledged and more fully investigated. It is in Urmi's tentative translations of the young Mira's sensual poetry, Sumi's dramatization of the veiled yearnings of the lustful princess and the open sexual libido of the demoness Surpanakha, and Madhu's growing realization of the maternal loss that not only these women but also Deshpande herself discover agency. This agency, while conceived in highly personal and idiosyncratic terms as a solitary, even isolated, woman's bid for independence and self-determination, has ramifications which extend beyond the confines of the home and indeed the covers of the book to an outright challenge of patriarchy, envisioned both in social and in linguistic terms. In short, it is in a certain understated but sure appropriation of the idioms of modernism for the stubbornly local articulation of a distinctly Indian brand of feminism that Deshpande must be acknowledged as one of India's most accomplished writers in English today. What follows is an exposition of the place that writing and art occupy in Deshpande's fiction and an excursion into three sites of the female creative process as Deshpande imagines them, namely, its genesis in mourning, its expression in the erogenous zones of a woman's sexual being, and its subversive challenge to patriarchal ways of structuring knowledge about the world via a rewriting of myth.

Turning our attention to the trilogy spanning the years from 1992 to 2000, we find a startling unity of ideas clustered around the subject of the creative process. The pages of these novels teem with journalists, dramatists, poets, musicians, dancers, actors, painters, and film directors who discuss art and reflect on its intrinsic and extrinsic value in an India that is visibly modernizing. Artists themselves frequently admire other artistic representations such as paintings and photographs, and casual allusions abound to a prodigious range of texts from western (canonical, literary, philosophical) to Hindu (the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, the *Vedas*) as well as to numerous regional folktales. In *A Matter of Time*, a character quotes Kierkegaard on existentialism ("Life must be lived forwards, but it can only be understood backwards" [98]); the following page quotes Camus, then alludes to the "higher

truth" in the *Rig Veda*, next mentions the miracles of the sixteenth-century mystic poet Mirabai, and closes out with a reference to the seventeenth-century sacred poetry of Tukaram! (99). I note in passing Batty's observation that Deshpande's frame of reference extends beyond Indian writers to include a host of western ones, many of whom find direct and indirect reference in her pages: Virginia Woolf, the Brontë sisters, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, Simone de Beauvoir, and so on (Batty xxxiv, 110; Sarkar 241). What Madhu says of the many selves of Bai may be said of Deshpande's writing in general: "It's always a palimpsest, so many layers, one superimposed on another, none erased, all of them still there" (*Small Remedies* 283). Critics have remarked often, and rightly so, on Deshpande's intricately woven family networks, but her densely textured allusive prose is as much the author's trademark as her characters' complicated familial and interpersonal relations.⁴ Also, periodically, one of the characters or a narrator will step outside of the narrative to comment philosophically on the action, interrupting it from the atemporal standpoint of another place, another thought, another text.⁵

One such moment occurs in *A Matter of Time*. Sumi's husband Gopal has inexplicably left the house, the marriage, and the family. He stands before a painting by Vermeer and finds himself:

fascinated . . . by the way the painter had captured a slice of time so that I was witnessing what he had seen, a bit of life in that narrow lane in a foreign land.

So I thought then. Now I know it was not just time that the painter had captured; I was his captive too, caught inside that picture, seeing what the painter wanted me to see.

Only the creator is free, only the creator can be free because he is out of it all. I did not know this then. I know it now. (54-55)

Gopal's rumination on the omniscient position of the painter is eerily reminiscent of Madhu's words in *Small Remedies*, a novel whose project is, as Amrita Bhalla argues, "the recovery of women's writing" (50). Madhu struggles to assemble a life for the singer Bai out of the self-enforced silences surrounding Bai's past:

I can take over Bai's life and make what I want of it through my words. I can trap her into an image I create, seal her into an identity I make for her. The power of the writer is the power of the creator. Yes, I can do much. I can make Bai the rebel who rejected the conventions of her times. The feminist who lived life on her terms. The great artist who struggled and sacrificed everything in the cause of her art. The woman who gave up everything—a comfortable home, a husband and a family—for love. (166)

If Madhu is the all-powerful progenitor of Bai's life story, then behind Madhu stands the creator of Madhu herself. Embedded in her admission of the will to power that would "trap" her subject (the same hunting imagery evoked by Gopal with his use of the words "capture" and "captive") is Deshpande's own admission of the creative potential of the artist to determine the terms by which she will be read and received. For, of course, as Deshpande's readers, we too have been captured and trapped, limited by the words on the page to arrive at certain foregone conclusions.

One of these conclusions—inevitable because it derives from a specter that looms large in all of Deshpande's work—is that mourning and writing are structurally and thematically linked. Why is it that all of Deshpande's women writers are mourners and that the paradox of writing for them lies in the fact that writing is at once a way to mourn and a way out of mourning? The shadow of death and the ghosts of the dearly departed—daughters, sons, mothers, fathers, mothers-in-law, aunts, grandparents—haunt the living. In *A Matter of Time*, Sumi grieves the sudden abandonment by her husband Gopal while her mother Kalyani grieves both the loss of her only son, a mentally disabled child who disappeared while under her care at a railway station, and the loss of her husband, who rejects her following her fatal lapse. Kalyani will go on to lose both her husband and her daughter Sumi in the later pages of the novel. In *The Binding Vine*, Urmi has lost her one-year-old daughter Anu to meningitis. Amidst her paralyzing and largely unvoiced maternal grief, Urmi sets about translating her dead mother-in-law Mira's poems, discovering in the process Mira's marital rape and Mira's grief at the death of her mother and first child. Urmi and Mira are twin figures of mourning, and their writing is a necessary corollary of mourning. Mira herself, of course, dies upon giving birth to Kishore, Urmi's husband. Finally, completing this community of mourners is Madhu in *Small Remedies*, who decides to write Bai's biography while recovering from the trauma of her son Adit's death in a bomb blast. His death evokes two other deaths for Madhu: the first is her father's, which leaves her an orphan at the age of fifteen; the second is the suicide of the man to whom she lost her virginity while her father lay in hospital. A set of clues reveal him as her maternal aunt's half brother; Madhu blames herself for his death, believing that he could not forgive himself for having sex with such a young girl. She recalls:

the suicide, the horror of his hanging himself, of the body suspended from the roof, twirling in space, undiscovered perhaps for days. . . . And trailing on these comes the memory of the man's face, the look on it the last time I saw him, a look so full of self-loathing and

anguish that, years later, when I remember it, I know without any doubt why he died" (262).

Batty presents a fascinating critical angle on mourning based on her psychoanalytic adaptation of the theories of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok to understand the role of family secrets in Deshpande's fiction. Extrapolating from Batty's thesis, the characters' inability to mourn is related to the withholding of a shameful secret buried in the family crypt; only when the secret is exposed will the pain and loss find expression. In the example just offered, when Madhu remembers and recounts for Som her first sexual experience, it is the fact that the man in question *was her half uncle* that has gone unmentioned in Deshpande scholarship (Batty 269-73). This shameful family secret (known in one generation and unknown in the next one, to which it has been passed on) becomes part of the psychological burden Madhu must bear, preventing her from accepting the past and moving on. However, when we recall that all of this is being written down and narrated by Madhu in the first person, we become mindful of the important role that writing plays in the mourning process. Writing for these women is a way of mourning. They may deny their loss, but they do so in language. Further, if to write is to mourn, if mourning takes place in and through writing, then writing does not simply start once the mourning ends. Rather, writing is the vehicle through which the mourning is borne. At the risk of generalizing, there is also a certain poststructuralist truth to this integral link: that writing itself is an act of mourning because, in order to be born, it takes the place of actual presence; it is predicated on the death of the subject. Hence, our own passing is what we mourn as we write. Deshpande senses this passing when she writes of the "strange and aching emptiness" following her completion of the second trilogy ("In First Person" 28).

If grieving is what defines Deshpande's writers then we must also note that their grieving embodies itself in the female body and is inextricably woven into the very fiber of these women's sexual beings. Grieving has a gender, and its name is Woman. The loss of a child, a husband, or a parent affects the female characters profoundly; it goes to the very core of who they are and how they have been constructed as *women*. Deshpande's women are primarily women because of their family ties, family uniformly figured as "this cord/this binding vine of love" (*The Binding Vine* 137). Yet Sumi, Urmi, and Madhu are also women because they desire pleasure in sex, not as passive objects but as active subjects. This pleasure, however, proves elusive. In *A Matter of Time*, when Sumi has to reconcile herself to the fact that her husband has left her not because, as one might suspect, of another woman, but because he wants to liberate himself from all emotional attachment, including attachment to family, she consoles herself by thinking: "The

loss of the familiar rustling by my side at night is what I mourn, not our lovemaking. I feel cold without the presence of Gopal in my life; sex has nothing to do with it, no, nothing at all" (168). Sumi's multiple negation of sex ("not our lovemaking" . . . "sex has nothing to do with it, no, nothing at all") and her substitution of companionable separateness ("the "familiar rustling by my side") indicates to this reader a classic Freudian defense mechanism whereby her deep loss of sexual intimacy is at once disavowed and acknowledged.

Sex in Deshpande's fiction tends to precipitate a war of sorts, with the social body and its disciplinary regimen of regulatory behaviors ranged on one side and the sexual body, with its unruly and impolite demands for immediate gratification on the other. Culture and biology, feminism's most vexed terms, form the twin poles between which Deshpande's characters roam. Deshpande is, by her own admission, a fervent feminist. All of her protagonists are mothers who work outside of the home and balance the demands of career and family. But we are not at liberty to align her feminism with the mainstream western liberal one in which economic equality forms the benchmark for "progress." If feminism is about "forcing women to have careers, to be dissatisfied with being housewives, to desert husbands and families and rush for a divorce at the smallest pretext," then, she writes, "it is not just absurd; it is a great injustice to all the activists in this country who, it sometimes seems, are the only people who care about dowry/rape/desertion/cruelty/slander victims" ("*Why I am a Feminist*" 85). That being said, however, on the subject of women's full and frank admission of sexual desire, Deshpande appears more willing to show the price paid than the price won. Everywhere that sex opens up a terrain of potential exploration and discovery for the woman, it is foreclosed by the man and the woman acquiesces to his largely unspoken distaste for her frank admission of physical need. Women may feel all they want, but it is when they admit to desire that a man draws the line. Sex cannot, in these novels, be imagined outside of the confines of marriage and motherhood without a punitive repercussion. Two examples bring the point home vividly. The first is drawn from *Small Remedies*.

On their wedding night, Madhu's husband asks her if she is frightened, and Madhu replies, "it's all right, Som, it's all right. I want it too." Fateful words, for she spies "a look of regret" on his face (230). Matters only worsen when Som forces a confession out of her about premarital sex. As she relates it, what is curious about Madhu's first sexual encounter is that she appears to enjoy it. Even past the tearing of her hymen by a virtual stranger, she is aware of the piercing pleasure:

At the contact of bare skin, the fear is immediately overlaid by a sense of shock, like plunging into cold water. There's the joy of feeling the cool water against my bare skin, its ripples teasing my body, caressing my skin. Pleasure runs swiftly along my nerves, through my body. I am conscious of my body, of the rich sap within it, rushing to meet and mingle with him. Nothing is unknown, nothing is strange. An ancient memory, waiting to be released all these years, is directing my body's responses, making me aware of the pleasure, the pleasure that reaches a climax despite the pain, the agonizing pain, when my body accepts him, when it mingles with his. (268)

Deshpande's language belies a straightforward reading of the scene as rape, though one is hardly at liberty to assume a confused fifteen-year-old girl's complicity in the act. But, as Batty points out, Deshpande critics have been preemptive in calling this a description of a sexual assault (Batty 270). The sensuality of the prose (the young girl's "rich sap" "rushing to meet and mingle" with the man, the pleasure running along her nerves, the wakening of a primeval instinct, which is the instinct of sex in explicitly biological terms, "an ancient memory . . . directing my body's responses") is palpable. It would appear that her body betrays her. How tragic that the young Madhu must feel this pleasure while reeling from the prospect of her father's imminent death and then have to relive it for her husband years later, at which time "[p]urity, chastity, an intact hymen—these are the . . . truths that matter" (262). Not only does Madhu have to face Som's disgust; the confession also leads to a violent argument between the two which is overheard by their son, and he flees, never to return. Only later does Madhu discover that the man was her half uncle and that his subsequent suicide may have been linked to his knowledge of what he had done. The act of sex is thus indissolubly linked with death, loss, and mourning, the father's death structurally bound to the deaths of her first lover and her son and the loss of her own innocence left unmourned or displaced onto these other losses.

My second example comes from a scene in *The Binding Vine* in which Urmi has left her husband Kishore on their wedding night and returned to her father's house. She attributes her fleeing to a certain expression she glimpses on his face. As she puts it: "I walked out . . . because of the look on his face. It frightened me. He looked trapped" (137). The source of this extreme reaction to their first night together—and it is relevant to mention here that theirs is not an arranged marriage—lies in Urmi's realization of Kishore's fear, that "love makes you vulnerable" (137). It is her own fear as well. She intuits that her sexual hunger for Kishore will leave her exposed to his rejection. On another occasion, in a moment of intimacy between the two, she resolves: "I will say it to him now, I will tell him how I feel" (139).

But she is unable to pour out her heart to him, conjuring up a fantasy of rejection: "I saw myself crying to him, 'Don't leave me and go. Each time you leave me, the parting is like death.' I saw myself stretching out my arms to him, putting them around his neck—the classic clingy female. And the fantasy relentlessly went on: I saw him detach himself from me, distaste on his face" (139). Like Gopal and Som, Kishore is portrayed as emotionally and sexually unavailable, distant and prone to judgment, in spite of these men's liberal outlook and education. The fathers hardly fare any better; if anything, they are more taciturn, more convoluted, and more prone to deception and sexual indiscretion.

While several sympathetic male portrayals do exist (Joe and Tony in *Small Remedies*, Bhaskar in *The Binding Vine*, and Ramesh and Rohit in *A Matter of Time*), there is in these novels an environment of fear around men in general. One of the hard lessons learned by the women in *The Binding Vine* is that every man is a potential rapist. As the following passage illustrates, Urmi can relate to the fear of the rape victim:

I know how fearfully I look back, my heart thudding in panic, when I hear footsteps behind me on a dark deserted street. And there is that dream of mine, a recurring nightmare of a strange man standing in the shadows at the edge of a grove of trees, who somehow so menaces me that fear enters into me. It begins right here, in the centre of my body and spreads until my whole body is filled with what I so bravely disavow in my waking hours. And I wake up drenched in sweat. (149)

Urmi describes here a visceral, near-primal dread of the ever-present threat that men represent to the unprotected woman. Femininity requires a near constant vigilance about the prospect of sexual violation. When Deshpande describes female communities, for instance, the safety of their self-contained, cocoon-like community depends upon the exclusion of men. Of her post-pregnancy time spent in the company of women, Urmi says: "They seem to me, even now, like an idyll, those two months we spent in Ranidurg, Vanaa, Mandira, the two newborn babies and I—with Akka the matriarch who looked after us all. Nothing existed but our physical needs, and those were all fulfilled. It was a primeval, innocent world" (114). It is, after all, this world of women from which Gopal, Sumi's husband, feels excluded: "It's not easy to be the only male in a family of females. You feel so . . . shut out" (60). As the women close in on themselves, Gopal is left out.

We may conclude from these examples that for the women, everything surrounding the act of sex is as pleasurable as sex itself: the intimacy, the exchange of minds through the exchange of bodies, and so on. For the men, however, the act of sex is a singular event, one that cannot be extricated from societal judgment and notions of propriety

and transgression. I would argue that what forestalls the mourning process for Urmi, Sumi, and Madhu, what prevents closure, if indeed any closure is to be had from these inchoate longings, these silent cries in the dark, is their inability to find fulfillment as sexual beings. But this is not to be seen as their personal failing. It is the panoptic force of the social order that, in the form of their husbands, leaves them with little choice but to accede to the patriarchal demands of their society. And, since we are dealing in metadiscursive terms, what applies to her characters applies indirectly to Deshpande herself. The language with which to stage an all-out sexual revolt against Indian social mores is not (yet) available to her. Should it be? For one might add that this is also precisely what helps distinguish her feminism from its western counterpart. Her version of Hélène Cixous's "écriture féminine" is to take on certain "masks and disguises" behind which she dismantles many hallowed Hindu traditions relating to femininity and the "good" woman.

A significant portion of Deshpande's feminist metanarratives are given over to the rewriting of myths and folktales. The importance of these myths and folktales, their embeddedness in everyday Indian life, cannot be overstated. They constitute crucial sites of local knowledge in mass culture and are powerful containment strategies used by the dominant (male, upper-caste) groups to maintain power. The daughter of a well-known Kannada writer who specialized in Sanskrit texts, Deshpande is not only proficient in the classical Hindu texts, the *Vedas*, the epics, the *Puranas*, and the *Upanishads*; she also understands the constitutive nature of myths in everyday Indian life. Remarking on the pervasive way in which iconic figures from myth populate the Indian landscape, she writes:

we have so internalized them that they are a part of our psyche, part of our personal, religious and Indian identity. A Ram or a Sita, a Krishna or an Arjuna, a Draupadi or a Savitri—these are not just characters in stories to us; they are as real as the people around us. Loving brothers are still Ram-Lakshman, an ideal couple even today a Ram-Sita or a Lakshmi-Narayan. ("Telling Our Own Stories" 88)

A pernicious aspect of these stories is that they originate in a patriarchal society and are imbricated in social structures of power/knowledge that have subjugated women for millennia. Sita, Draupadi, and Shakuntala are male fantasies produced by men to satisfy their own needs. Hence, "there is the eternal child to be protected and controlled, the self-sacrificing mother to nurture and cherish the child, the chaste partner to guarantee exclusive rights of the man over her body as well as an undoubted paternity of children and the temptress to titillate and provide sexual gratification. And, finally, the goddess to provide morality" ("Telling Our Own Stories" 90). The

“eternal child,” “the self-sacrificing mother,” “the chaste partner,” the titillating “tempress,” and the morality-providing “goddess” all circulate as fixed ideals to which women (but not men) must conform.

A crucial way of replying to the idealized and fixed representation of women in these patriarchal myths that undergird society is to rewrite them with women at the center. Thus in Deshpande may be found numerous feminist retellings of myth. Mira in *The Binding Vine* is a reworking of Mirabai, the sixteenth-century mystic poet and devotee of Lord Krishna; but Deshpande’s Mira is a flesh-and-blood creature whose poetry speaks of the tangible, not the transcendental: “Desire, says the Buddha, is the cause of grief;/But how escape this cord/this binding vine of love? Fear lies coiled within/this womb-piercing joy” (136-37). And in *A Matter of Time*, Sumi prefers to think of Draupadi’s disguise as a queen’s maid as a ploy to get away from her five husbands. I have already referred in the opening of this essay to Sumi’s play based on a regional folktale about a princess who deliberately set up the conditions of her wedding so that she could marry the man she had already fallen in love with. “To think of it,” muses Sumi,

why did the princess insist on such a queer condition? Had she fallen in love with the gardener’s son and—Sumi feels a quickening excitement at the thought—plotted the whole thing, knowing that this was the only way she could trick him into giving her what she wanted? Yes, she must have been a clever young woman, indeed. And, perhaps, a passionate one? Had she watched the gardener’s son at work, noticed his muscles gleaming in the sun and decided she would have him for her husband?

A clever young woman, anyway, who used a man’s own weapons against him. (156-57)

A similar subversive vein runs through Sumi’s second play. Like the princess who acted out of her volition to satisfy her own desire, Surpanakha too expresses her desire for Rama. Unlike the princess, however, Surpanakha is punished by having her nose cut off by Rama and his brother Lakshman because she makes the fatal error of putting her desire on display for all to see:

Female sexuality. We’re ashamed of owning it, we can’t speak of it, not even to our own selves. But Surpanakha was not, she spoke of her desires, she flaunted them. And therefore, were the men, unused to such women, frightened? Did they feel threatened by her? I think so. Surpanakha, neither ugly nor hideous, but a woman charged with sexuality, not frightened of displaying it—it is this Surpanakha I’m going to write about. (191)

The men in this passage are shown as “frightened” and “threatened” by the spectacle of a sexually potent woman who confronts them with the

specter of their own male inadequacy (one recalls Som's "regret" when Madhu tells him she "wants it too"). Sumi's decision to focus on the sexually charged Surpanakha is an important reframing of traditional accounts of femininity to address female desire. Its value extends beyond the confines of the play in the suturing of two historical time frames, past and present, making the past newly relevant for contemporary women while making women the subjects of history. Of course, for the purpose of this essay, it is equally significant that this revisionist view of the past is mediated by and through writing. Sumi's bold new play is ultimately being written by none other than Deshpande, whose subversive tactics find expression through Sumi. Through Sumi and like her, Deshpande is using "a man's own weapons against him" (157) as she intervenes in and occupies the field of English-language writing in India, a terrain traditionally associated with men, and it is her preferred indirect, metafictional mode that allows her to do so. I believe it is to this mode to which Deshpande alludes rather playfully when she uses Emily Brontë's words from *Wuthering Heights* as the epigraph to *The Binding Vine*: "What were the use of my creation, if I were entirely contained here?"

There is much else that begs critical assessment in Deshpande's works, for instance, the implications of her middle-class liberal humanist outlook for a radical feminism which would see certain occlusions and evasions in her investigation of issues confronting Indian women today.⁶ In this essay, I have dwelt upon her use of the modernist trope of feminist metafiction in order to focus attention on her creation of a community of writers and readers in an environment that generally has been hostile or indifferent to the work of Indian women writers. This is, to my mind, as much a political enterprise as it is an aesthetic one for the investigation it requires into habitual ways of reading, which translate to sedimented ways of understanding the world. In an isolated environment with few literary antecedents to speak of, Deshpande has arrived at certain hard-won truths about the human condition, creating, in the process, a community of readers and writers. "Literature," she has written, "is a means of speaking to a reader. One reader. It is a private one-to-one relationship between the author and the reader, between the speaker and the listener, between the voice and the ear" ("Dear Reader" 120). In many ways, as I have aimed to show here, she teaches us how to read even as she invents writers who teach her how to write.

Notes

1. For reasons of structural and thematic unity, I have left out the analysis of Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1998), also a novel with a writer-protagonist. Deshpande views Jaya, the writer in that novel, as coming the

closest to herself in terms of her own struggles with writing, with the problem of women's silence, at the time. However, Deshpande regards *That Long Silence* as marking the end of a trilogy of novels whose completion was necessary so that she could move on. The next three novels she wrote are the subject of this essay and, taken together, constitute a sustained modernist meditation on the act of writing. When the last of these, *Small Remedies*, was completed, Deshpande says she again felt free to move on. See "In First Person," 15-28.

2. See Jasbir Jain, *Gendered Realities, Human Spaces: The Writings of Shashi Deshpande*; Mrinalini Sebastian, *The Enterprise of Reading Differently: The Novels of Shashi Deshpande in Postcolonial Arguments*; and Nancy Ellen Batty, *The Ring of Recollection: Transgenerational Haunting in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande*.

3. The artist protagonist is a frequent figure in canonical modernist literature, the most obvious examples being Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Lily Briscoe in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. It would be a mistake to read these artist protagonists as straightforward autobiographical extensions of the authors themselves, though I am inclined to agree with Stephen Kern's assessment of them as "often embodying the personal itinerary of their authors." See Stephen Kern, *The Modernist Novel: A Critical Introduction*, 214.

4. See, for instance, Majumdar, Chakladar, and Menon, all of whom regard Deshpande's elaborate multigenerational family structures as an enabling factor facilitating a local understanding of middle-class Indian culture.

5. For an interesting analysis of the functions served by Deshpande's characters' interior monologues, see Pramod K. Nayar, "Textselfworld: Interior Monologue in *A Matter of Time*," 136-44.

6. Shalmalee Palekar terms Deshpande's feminism "a kind of gendered humanism of a liberationist kind" as opposed to a radical one that can imagine women outside of the bounds of marriage and motherhood. See Palekar, "Gender, Feminism and Postcoloniality: A Reading of Shashi Deshpande's Novels," 46-71; 68.

Works Cited

- Batty, Nancy Ellen. *The Ring of Recollection: Transgenerational Haunting in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010. Print.
- Bhalla, Amrita. *Shashi Deshpande: Writers and their Work*. Tavistock: Northcote, 2006. Print.
- Chakladar, Arnab. "Of Houses and Canons: Reading the Novels of Shashi Deshpande." *ARIEL* 37.1 (2006): 81-97. Print.
- Deshpande, Shashi. *The Binding Vine*. 1992. New York: The Feminist P, 2001. Print.
- . "Dear Reader." *Writing from the Margin and Other Essays*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2003. 117-36. Print.
- . "The Dilemma of the Woman Writer." *The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande*. Ed. R. S. Pathak. Delhi: Creative Books, 1998. 229-31. Print.
- . "In First Person." *Writing from the Margin and Other Essays*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2003. 1-29. Print.

- . "Masks and Disguises." *Writing from the Margin and Other Essays*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2003. 181-96. Print.
- . *A Matter of Time*. 1996. New York: The Feminist P, 1999. Print.
- . *Small Remedies*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2000. Print.
- . "Telling Our Own Stories." *Writing from the Margin and Other Essays*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2003. 86-100. Print.
- . "Why I Am a Feminist." *Writing from the Margin and Other Essays*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2003. 82-85.
- . "Writing from the Margin." *Writing from the Margin and Other Essays*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2003. 143-65. Print.
- Jain, Jasbir. *Gendered Realities, Human Spaces: The Writings of Shashi Deshpande*. Jaipur: Rawat, 2003. Print.
- Kern, Stephen. *The Modernist Novel: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011. Print.
- Majumdar, Saikat. "Aesthetics of Subjectivity, Ethics of 'Otherness': The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande." *Postcolonial Text* 1.2 (2005): n. pag. Web. 28 June 2012.
- Menon, Ritu. "Afterword: No Longer Silent." *A Matter of Time*. New York: The Feminist P, 1999. 247-69. Print.
- Nayar, Pramod K. "Textselfworld: Interior Monologue in *A Matter of Time*." *Women in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande*. Ed. Suman Bala. New Delhi: Khosla, 2001. 136-44. Print.
- Palekar, Shalmalee. "Gender, Feminism and Postcoloniality: A Reading of Shashi Deshpande's Novels." *Writing Difference: The Novels of Shashi Deshpande*. Ed. Chanchala K. Naik. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2005. 46-71. Print.
- Sarkar, Sonita. "Afterword: Legacies of Strength." *The Binding Vine*. New York: The Feminist P, 2001. 209-47. Print.
- Sebastian, Mrinalini. *The Enterprise of Reading Differently: The Novels of Shashi Deshpande in Postcolonial Arguments*. New Delhi: Prestige, 2000. Print.