



INTERVIEW

"Is Literature A Public Toilet That We Need To Have Signboards Saying 'Men' And 'Women'?"

Shashi Deshpande on writing, writers, readers, media, the literary spats ... in short, the contemporary literary scene (or whatever passes off for it).

Chandra Holm: How does it feel to know that your book is short-listed for the Crossword award? How important is this to you at this stage of your writing career?

Shashi Deshpande: It certainly feels good to know that *Small Remedies* is on the Crossword shortlist. It matters simply because these things make a writer and her works more visible. And one wants one's books to be read.

But to me, personally, it does not mean what it would have done, say, ten years ago. I remember how delighted I was when I got the Sahitya Akademi award. Now, the fact that *Small Remedies* has been so well received by readers is just as important to me.

What do you think in general of awards? Do awards act like moral tonic to writers? To you?

I must confess that I have very divided feelings about awards. Like I said, they make a writer and her works more visible. At the same time, they imply a kind of competitiveness between writers which I don't like.

'All that feminist stuff' as it is sometimes pejoratively called, reduces what you are saying to a kind of trivial carping.

There's something very unhealthy about the huge advances given for a single book and the ensuing publicity on the basis of this fact and the illusion created that this is great writing.

In fact, I don't like competing.

Much more harmful than the dead dodo of the Commonwealth are market forces which are shaping, or rather distorting the shape of literature everywhere, but much more so in India.

Does it matter as to who finally wins the award?
It certainly does matter that a good book wins the award.

Have you read the other books that are short-listed? If you were one of the judges, to whom would you hand over the award?
Thankfully I haven't read any of them, so I don't need to comment.

Literary awards have a great tradition. What do you feel about them?

About awards, well, I think there are just too many these days - it's almost like lollipops being distributed to kids - and too much importance is given to them. Actually, it goes this way. A book is chosen by a small group of people from among a few books given to them. It's really a matter of comparison. Books cannot be put in an order of best, second best, etc. On the whole, I think awards should be for a writer's body of work, for the philosophy that informs the work, for its meaningfulness to society.

Unfortunately the English media's vision is blinkered, it cannot see beyond the English writers. Which is why it is made to seem that Arundhati Roy invented activism for writers. Not at all.

A writer's angst or soul, as you put it, goes into all her works (I'm speaking of serious writers, mind you); I don't think just one book would carry these. What's better for writers than awards, well, for literature anyway, is to give writers grants during the period of writing. It is so hard for a writer to devote three to five years of her life to writing a book, not knowing whether at the end of it you will get anything at all. But a grant, as is given in many developed countries, will remove this financial stress. Maybe encourage more good writing, as well.

Talking of awards, Amitav Ghosh's refusal of the Commonwealth award is making headlines these days. What do you think of his stand?

I respect him for taking a stand and acting on it - it's not easy to reject a prize because of a certain ideology. I'm also glad he said what he wanted to; I believe authors should speak up. But I think he has not named the real enemy.

I always remember Dorothy Sayer's words: 'What we do is more important than what we are'. Mr Rushdie obviously thinks the other way round.

Much more harmful than the dead dodo of the Commonwealth are market forces which are shaping, or rather distorting the shape of literature everywhere, but much more so in India. There's something very unhealthy about the huge advances given for a single book and equally harmful is the ensuing publicity given to the book on the basis of this fact and the illusion created that this is great writing, only because it has got so much money. This new language, which speaks of 'bidding' for books, one the media has caught on to with such glee, has really reduced books to an auctionable commodity rather than a vehicle of ideas. Authors and



books are being seen through the lens of the amount the books earn, rather than by what they are saying and how

And imagine the bliss of not being in Delhi - with journalists having you on tap, as it



they are saying it. This (dollar imperialism I call it in short) is far more damaging to literature than an award that is linked to an empire which no longer means much, anyway. An animal sans teeth, sans claws. And as for the Commonwealth award barring books not written in English (our regional languages, for example, like Ghosh pointed out) what about the Jnanpith which is barred even to Indian writers and books published in India only because they are in English? I have serious objections to this, because I consider English writing in India as much Indian literature as that written in the regional languages. If not, where do I belong?

One of the surprising things of this incidence is the fact that Ghosh did not know that his book was submitted for the competition. This seems to be quite common. Still, is this how it should be? What kind of a relationship exists between your publisher and you, as a writer?

No, certainly no publisher should submit a book without consulting the author. The presumption is that an author will be delighted to get any award or prize, and that an author with strong convictions or ideological objections does not exist; which is, unfortunately, true for the most part.

What makes me sad - and angry too - is my work being ignored when Indian writing is being written about - for reasons that have nothing to do with the significance of my writing.

were, for opinions, with other writers sniping at you and you, if you can, sniping back!

Only some are constantly spoken of - anything Rushdie says is news, any news about literature, or even just language, means putting in a picture of Arundhati Roy - making them symbols of writers and literature.

Controversies, in which writers attack each other, owe a great deal to the fact that the media is waiting for such things, happy to give publicity to controversies.

On the whole, author-publisher relations are very poor in India. I don't mean that they are hostile, but that there is nothing positive about them. As for me, I have a good relationship with my editor who looks after most of my interests; which is okay, but nothing should be dependent on one individual. Publishers should have some policies about how they deal with their authors. Indian publishers, I am afraid, have none.

You work with publishers within and outside India.

Is there any difference in how they treat you as a writer?

Professionalism is very much lacking among Indian publishers. Like I said, there is no policy, much depends on the individual you are working with. Whereas, with the few foreign publishers I know, there is a professionalism as well as a kind of friendliness. For example, the Feminist Press wrote me a very enthusiastic and

If I was known at all, it was as the 'person who wrote for Femina and Eve's Weekly' - which so irritated me I stopped writing for them.

warm letter when my book *A Matter of Time* was chosen by Barnes and Noble for their Great Books display. Whereas, when I won the Sahitya Akademi award, my publisher, who had published this same book, didn't even write to congratulate me. But, of course, things are better here now and after Penguin entered the scene there is an element of professionalism.

I cannot help comparing Ghosh's stand on getting the regional award this year and Salman Rushdie's almost childish behavior [1] last year when he did not get the Commonwealth prize.

Any comments? Also, how far was/is the media (again within and outside India) responsible in making Salman Rushdie behave like an *enfant terrible*? Should one blame the media at all in this case?

Oh well, what can one say about individuals and their behaviour? Except that I do feel that a writer, or anyone for that matter, needs to be very strong to be able to take celebrityhood and media attention in her/his stride. Of course, Rushdie is the focus of media attention; I saw how it was during the Commonwealth award night in Delhi last year. The way the media rushed in when they were let in finally was frightening. But then, Rushdie's is a sensational case, a one-in-a-million kind of sensation. So why blame the media, either? In the final analysis, it's up to you how you cope with this glare of attention. I guess a great strength of personality would help to accept it with equanimity. Otherwise, too much media attention seems to bring out what I call the brattishness in some people. I always remember Dorothy Sayer's words: 'What we do is more important than what we are'. Mr Rushdie obviously thinks the other way round.

How important is media attention to you? Have you got too much of it, too little? Are you happy with the situation as it is?

Personally it makes me very uncomfortable and uneasy.

I'm sick of it. Why is my gender a relevant fact? I'm a writer. Period. For God's sake, is literature a public toilet that we need to have signboards saying 'Men' and 'Women'?



It's because we regard ourselves as the 'other' - a Colonial hangover; the West, its opinions, its appreciation, matter greatly to us. It's

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success there that that spells success to us, whether it's in writing, or music, or acting, or whatever.

We are letting the media tell us what books are significant, which writers matter. This disturbs me. We enthusiastically celebrate every writer who makes it - by earning huge royalties - in the West, when we don't have the least idea of what the writers in our own country are saying.

I have an odd fear of being the focus of attention. At the same time, I have come to realise that it helps to be written about - one's books become more visible. But I certainly don't like to be written about in connection with anything but my work.

What makes me sad - and angry too - is my work being ignored when Indian writing is being written about - for reasons that have nothing to do with the significance of my writing. However, I now know that these pieces, specially when they appear in newspapers and magazines, are forgotten the next day, while books remain. Authors and good books have the last word, after all. That's a happy truth.

If your wish would be granted, how would you like the media to behave towards writers?

If you ask me, literature does not really belong to the daily newspaper or magazines; these are concerned with the ephemeral and the sensational, whereas literature (good literature, that is) belongs to a much longer time-span. In one way, I must admit media focus does make people more aware of books and writers. But only some are constantly spoken of - anything Rushdie says is news, any news about literature, or even just language, means putting in a picture of Arundhati Roy - making them symbols of writers and literature. Which is wrong. It's an incomplete and lopsided picture. And making celebrities of writers is not good for literature. It's bad for writers who begin to see themselves as larger than life, it's bad for young writers who think that writing means this kind of glamour, (they want to become writers, not to write), it's bad for young writers who get too much attention because of one book; they will get stuck in that and find it hard to move on.

Sometimes, these five minutes of fame can destroy a writer. Fame and too much publicity are enemies of creativity. But my real wish would be for the media to respect the dignity of those who would rather not be spoken of.

And what about how the writers use/misuse the media to forward their own grievances and slights? I am thinking here of Salman Rushdie who wrote last year against the Commonwealth committee, and Vikram Chandra's articles published in *The Hindu* and republished in *The Boston Review*, Shobha De writing about Anita Desai ... oh, one could go on and on with such examples...

Writers using/misusing the media for their own personal agenda is becoming a problem, isn't it? I'm seeing a great deal of it in India recently. The problem, partly, is that writers have suddenly become celebrities and there are a lot of giant-sized egos around. Readers, too, seem to like reading **about** writers - even more than reading them - and find their nasty gibes and spiteful comments about other writers tongue-licking tasty. The

I get very angry when people speak of 'your women' generically. What do they mean? Each of them is an individual.

media, obviously, gives readers what they want, even encourages these things. This apart, people who are nasty are going to use their nastiness in writing as well. But I think that those of us who don't like such things should express our distaste.

A little bit of the author may go into a character - or characters - but they are never reflections of the author.

I personally feel that while many writers (rightly) join in the chorus for freedom of expression at the drop of a hat, we need also to think of self-control and self-restraint in the interests of other people's right to their privacy, their right to be free of abuse and slander. To me, there's something immoral about writing about people who don't have the platform that you have as a writer.

These days there is lots of hype in the media about literature in general, about Indian literature in English in particular. You started writing when writers writing in English could be counted on the fingers. Why did you choose English as your language?

I say this over and over again - I did not choose English. One does not sit down and choose one among many languages to write in. You write in the language in which your thoughts express themselves. In fact, the language chooses you. For me, matters were very simple: English was the only language I knew well enough to write in. I call English the language of my creativity.

How difficult was it really to get established in those days? To be noticed? To be taken seriously?

I can only tell you my writing history. I began as a short story writer - I sent my stories to all the magazines and Sunday papers I knew. I had many rejections but I knew that the stories I thought were good were accepted. Which gave me the confidence to write and a readership.

Nothing came easy - at no time could I say 'I am established'. I wrote serials and two children's books and then moved on to my first novel. So it was gradual, slow, and always hard work. And it was almost like working anonymously. If I was known at all, it was as the 'person who wrote for Femina and Eve's Weekly' - which so irritated me I stopped writing for them. I was taken note of I think only when I got the Sahitya Akademi award for That Long Silence. To be taken seriously took me even longer - even now I have a feeling I am regarded as 'one of the women writers' - not one of the significant writers in the country.

Your father was Adya Rangacharya, a noted scholar of Sanskrit and dramatist of Karnataka. How is it to continue in the footpath of a famous father?

My father - yes, it's good to have this literary heritage. And apart from this, being his daughter has given me a window into Kannada literature, into Sanskrit. English writers in India are often divorced from their own literary tradition, which is such a great loss. I've been fortunate to be able to see the Kannada literary world from close, to have a few glimpses of the literature itself.

How does living in Bangalore - far from places like Delhi and Mumbai - affect your life as a writer? Is it a lonely one?

No, it's not a lonely life. It suits me fine. I am not a party animal, anyway, nor do I like to discuss my work with other writers. I don't like crowds either, so avoid conferences and seminars as much as possible. But there's much else - family, a few friends, books, walks, crosswords, e mail contact with friends outside, household routine - and writing; my life is full indeed. I'm very happy to be away from cities like Delhi and Bombay. But it was Bombay with its enormous vitality that gave my writing a kick start - I'm grateful to it. And, in my writing, still go back to it and to Dharwad. Bangalore, strangely enough, rarely figures. And imagine the bliss of not being in Delhi - with journalists having you on tap, as it were, for opinions, with other writers sniping at you and you, if you can, sniping back!

Who are your readers? Does gender play any role here? Do you hear more from male readers or women readers? Who - men or women - do you feel really understand what you have to say in your work?

My readers - I don't have much feedback from abroad, but from Indian readers now, yes. My readers, it seems, are mostly women. Perhaps they can identify more with what I'm saying. I can understand this, but what surprises me is that men still shy away from what they think of as 'women's novels'. Don't they have any curiosity? I have no problems reading about men, I am curious, intrigued, amused, interested. Why do men close their minds?

You are almost always referred to as a woman writer. Well, most women who write are referred to in this way. How do you react to this prefix?

How do I react to being constantly referred to as a *woman writer*? I'm enraged, furious, mad, exasperated ... I could exhaust the Thesaurus and it wouldn't be enough. Just the other day I came across a book on Bangalore which has pictures of some eminent people from Bangalore. While Ananthmurthy, Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani are called just writers I am a 'woman writer'. I'm sick of it. Why is my gender a relevant fact? I'm a writer. Period. For God's sake, is literature a public toilet that we need to have signboards saying 'Men' and 'Women'? Actually, I'd kind of understand if literature was categorised this way. But it's worse - it's Human and Women. I've decided that henceforth I will always speak of 'men writers'.

For quite a long time your writing was branded as being feminist, as being about middle class women from India. How do you defend yourself against such comments? Do you see the need to defend yourself?

I don't feel the need to defend myself, but certainly a need to explain and clarify. Yes, I am a feminist, but I am not a feminist writer. I don't think this is hairsplitting - it's a very important distinction. Polemics has no place in creative writing. If I want to speak of feminism, I do it in articles - and have done so. Fiction writing captures the complexities of human beings, it cannot be framed in any ideology. However, my belief in feminism is part of what led me to explore the lives and minds and women.

Who is responsible for this kind of categorization? The publisher, the critic, the writer, the reader? Is this simply a way of self-defense so that one does not need to think about how a woman feels and acts? What is the cure to such blindness?

The critics, of course. Writers never feel the need to categorise or put themselves in any slot. We just write. And yes, certainly, by labelling any writing as feminist it has become possible to put it aside, because what is being said can make for great discomfort. 'All that feminist stuff' as it is sometimes pejoratively called, reduces what you are saying to a kind of trivial carping. What is the cure? I don't know. Sometimes I despair. Nothing will change, I feel, not in my lifetime, anyway. I continue to be called a woman writer and am spoken as one who writes about women. As if this is abnormal or an aberration. But there is a small ray of hope when one sees the younger generation has some males who consciously feel the need to be more sensitive.

Let me ask you a couple of questions about literature in general. What in your opinion makes a book a piece of literature - characterization, language, style, story line, realism?

What makes a book a piece of literature? Involvement with the subject, intensity, conviction, integrity to one's creative self and a belief in the moral nature of the human being - all these allied to an understanding of language and crafting skills.

Which books that you read in recent years would qualify as literature?

Books I regard as literature: *American Appetites* by Joyce Carol Oates, *Disturbances in the Field* by Lynne Sharon Schwartz, *St Maybe* by Anne Tyler, *Paula* by Isabel Allende, *Disgrace* by Coetzee. There may be more. I can't remember.

During these times, when so many bad things are happening in many societies, can literature play any role in helping a society? What role should it play?

One of the questions often asked of a writer is - why do you write? What follows invariably is - do you think you can change society? No, I don't write to change society because I don't think writing can change society. But what writers can do and do is to articulate doubts, questions, ideas which people have not been able to do. They make people think, ask questions of themselves. Writers can never provide the answers, but this role of keeping ideas alive is a very important one. Once in a few centuries a writer can change the world, but that is because the world is by then ready for that change.

Are writers doing this today? I like to think that writers are the conscience keepers of society, but we seem to have abdicated that role. Having entered the market place, we need to have taken on the role of pleasing, which rules out saying unpleasant things. I'm putting it very simply, but what I'm trying to say is that when you want your book to be read, when you want it to sell, when you want to be known, spoken of by the media, unconsciously or consciously you follow a certain path.

What do you think of those writers who turn activists, journalists? Like Arundhati Roy?

Writers as activists? Well, certainly, writing is a form of activism. Most (serious) writers write because they are disturbed by something in society, by the human condition and writing is a way of giving expression to this. Writers in India, specially in the languages, have always been activists when the need arose. My father, a Kannada writer, was extremely active in the cause of the formation of Karnataka, the creation of the creation of Karnatak University, use of Kannada, etc. Unfortunately the English media's vision is blinkered, it cannot see beyond the English writers. Which is why it is made to seem that Arundhati Roy invented activism for writers. Not at all. My own writing began out of my concern about the role of women, with women's need to understand themselves.

Even worse are the images the TV has given us of them, weepy women with long hair let loose and men with loads of plastic necklaces! Ghastly!

Ramchandra Guha's recent article on Roy's activism could have been the beginning of an interesting and meaningful debate about the role of writers and intellectuals in important issues. Such debates are necessary; questions should be asked and doubts stated, without letting things become personal. Unfortunately this one merely degenerated into Guha vs Roy fight, with readers taking sides. Controversies, in which writers attack each other, owe a great deal to the fact that the media is waiting for such things, happy to give publicity to controversies. Like in all professions, writers too have their spats, more interesting (one hopes!) because writers are cleverer with words. But I don't like the tone that enters controversies these days; often it's personal and spiteful. I think that writers are beginning to feel threatened by other writers. Each one wants her/his share of the cake - the publicity, the fame, the money - and someone else getting it makes your own slice smaller or non-existent.

About writers turning into journalists: well, that's writing, too, isn't it? But obviously one would write journalistic pieces mainly for the money. If I have to wait for years to get some money from my novel and need to survive in the meantime, I would think of journalism. There's the other reason, too, that it can become a vehicle for your crusading ideas. But one could also use it for one's own personal, often wrong purposes. Which, unfortunately, I think the media would encourage. Sensations and controversies translate into better sales figures.

Now a few questions about Indian literature. Obviously Indian literary scene is at a turning point. A new branch of Indian writing is coming into vogue. The literature created by the Indian diaspora. What do you think of this diversification of the Indian literature? A welcome development? Something which still needs time to ripen so as to deserve all the attention it is getting?

Yes, it's amazing how many writers are emerging from outside India. In a way it's a good thing - it speaks of a vitality, a liveliness, also of an urge to articulate. More writing, different concerns being voiced, young voices - these are all very welcome in any literature. What intrigues me in this writing is something different: most of these writers centre their work round the immigrant experience, around nostalgia for the past, (which expresses itself in the creation of an exotic India) alienation and the confusion of having different identities, so to speak. But will they find a place in mainstream American literature? Will they be able to get out of exotica and fit into straight American writing? Even if the writers are competent, I find a bit of a boring sameness in their material. They will need to get out of this and get on to other more general concerns if they are to continue as writers. But will the American literary marketplace allow them that? Will they find themselves strait-jacketed in this immigrant writing? One has to wait and see.

As a lay person, I do notice that there is discomfort, almost bordering on animosity, in the Indian literary scene at all the attention writers outside India are getting. In many of the cases the feeling is justified. This feeling is less apparent amongst the writers but more amongst the critics and reviewers. You have written a couple of essays on this subject asking people to come down to earth. Would you summarize your points here?

The attention writers outside India get is part of a larger phenomenon about which I've done a lot of thinking and writing recently. Recently, in an article about this, a publisher spoke of Indian critics and writers as being jealous of the success of these writers outside India. Crabs in the bucket, he said. So I turned myself into a honest crab and gave this serious consideration. I then realised that what disturbs me is not so much the attention, but the significance these books are given - and this comes out of the fact that these books are not only published abroad, often they have earned huge royalties and have been very well critically reviewed by critics there. At the same time, many of these books, like *The Blue Bedsprad* or *The Romantics* or *The Guava Orchard* have not done as well here. The journalist who did this story asked the question - why do Indian critics pan books that have been well received in the West? And I thought the way he had phrased the question spoke of what the problem was. For, surely, one would have put it the other way round - why do Western critics look so favourably on a book we can't feel sympathetic towards? After all, one's opinion is the starting point, isn't it, not someone else's? And I realised this it's because we regard ourselves as the 'other' - a Colonial hangover; the West, its opinions, its appreciation, matter greatly to us. It's success there that that spells success to us, whether it's in writing, or music, or acting, or whatever.

The other thing that really bothers me is the privileging of some voices, of some writers and critics because they are in the West. So that Rushdie became an authority on Indian literature. Okay, we protested, but did any voice from here reach there? Whereas, we faithfully reproduce what a critic there says about our writers or writing. To have a Western critic or writer endorsing your book is the road to success. We don't feel confident enough about ourselves, it seems; we need to have a pat on the back from there to make us feel good. There was a time when English writing here seemed to be poised to make a break from being a poor relation of English literature, when it seemed it would become a part of Indian literature, which is where it really belongs. But the success of our writers in the West, if a pleasing phenomenon because it has given our writing more visibility, has unfortunately changed this. We are now determined to become part of the global literary market. This is changing the shape of our literature. Books that get much attention - first in the West and consequently here - are being imitated. This seems to be the formula for success. I see our writing taking a wrong path - that disturbs me. We are letting publishers/critics/agents outside India decide what is good Indian writing. This disturbs me. We are letting the media tell us what books are significant, which writers matter. This disturbs me. We enthusiastically celebrate every writer who makes it - by earning huge royalties - in the West, when we don't have the least idea of what the writers in our own country are saying. Is this right?

I would like now to come to your book itself. For *Small Remedies* you were accorded an unprecedented reception in India. From the beginning it was mentioned that your '*Small Remedies*' and Amitav Ghosh's '*The Glass Palace*' were the two real good books to have come out of Indian literary scene last year. There were stage performances based on the novel in various cities of India. How important is the novel to you when you compare it with your other novels?

All novels are important to a writer. The most important one is always the one you're currently working on. But *Small Remedies* was, next to *That Long Silence*, in a sense the hardest to write. Madhu's pain made it hard - I wrote with that pain constantly within me. Again, like *That Long Silence*, it required an enormous amount of hard work hard to create an organised structure out of a huge chaotic mass of material that my head was teeming with. But it was very satisfying to write about Savitribai and Leela - my tribute to Indian women who managed to live according to their convictions in spite of everything.

Where did the inspiration to write this novel come from? What was your message in writing this novel?

The inspiration, if I can call it so, was the woman artist whom I have always been interested in. My own difficulties as a woman and a writer made me sensitive to all women artists. Savitribai came to me years back and I held off for long because I was nervous, knowing my own limited knowledge of music. And there were my years of living in Parel in Bombay among the textile mills and the workers - Leela came out of there. And my novels never have any message. I just tell stories.

You have described writing as a lonely, private, and personal activity. But however privately it is done, isn't the reader ever present? Do you think of the reader when you write? Do you write for your own sake because you cannot help but write or do you mould your writing so that it finds an echo in your readers?

Yes, writing is the most lonely activity in the world, I think. No reader exists when you are writing. All you have are the people you are writing about; you are enclosed in a world with them. The reader comes into the picture when the writing is complete and you read it as a whole yourself. Then you become a reader, your own first reader. After that, you give it to someone else - the first outside reader.

My writing, and that of most writers I guess, comes out of something that is not conscious - you just have to write what comes to you. There is never any choice.

I feel that the loneliness of the human being is at the core of most of your novels. Do you see it also like that? Do you believe that human beings are basically lonely? If you do not think so, can you summarize the one important character of your books?

All my books speak of the loneliness of the human being. Yes, I do believe we are doomed to loneliness from birth and all those ties we consider so important are very ephemeral. But important, because there's nothing else.

How far do the characters reflect their creator? How far do they lead lives of their own?

Characters are their own persons. I get very angry when people speak of 'your women' generically. What do they mean? Each of them is an individual. A little bit of the author may go into a character - or characters - but they are never reflections of the author.

Your first published work was *The Legacy*, a collection of short stories. This was published by *The Writers' Workshop*. Just last month *The Writers' Workshop* brought out yet another collection of your short stories, *The Stone Woman*. It is a special book because in it you lend voice to the silent, almost mute women of our mythology. In a sense it frees - finally - not just the characters like Kunti and Sita but also us, Indian women, who have grown up with these characters, who have carried the burden of their silence all our life-long. What were your reasons to write about these people?

To give *The Stone Women* to *Writers Workshop* was a deliberate choice. Who better than P.Lal, I thought, to publish these stories? The first story I wrote taking a character from the epics was about Amba. This came to me after I read Iravati Karve's *Yuganta*. As a child Bhisma had been always a hero - my father spoke of him and Abhimanyu as the only two heroes in the MB. But Iravati Karve's interpretation of Bhisma threw me into confusion. Then, thinking it over, I realised how much truer her Bhisma seemed. And I wrote of Amba - the story just poured out of me. Later I wrote of Duryodhana - then Kunti, Draupadi etc. I haven't just given these people a voice, some of them were both nameless and faceless. (Though even worse are the images the TV has given us of them, weepy women with long hair let loose and men with loads of plastic necklaces! Ghastly!) Once I began, these people started coming alive for me. Like my story of Nahusha. I read his story and suddenly thought - they speak of what he did and what Indra did - what about Sachi, Indra's wife? What did she think? What did she do? At some point, Nahusha's wife entered my story - and she has no name at all. Writing that story felt wonderful. Yes, I still want to write of Amba's sisters who were raped - yes, raped - in order to produce heirs for the family. And this with the blessings of the elders - Satyavati and Bhisma! Such a painful story it seems to me and really the seeds of the war lie there. There's also Surpanakha. And Urmila, Lakshman's wife. And Kaikeyi. How could any human be so influenced by another so as to turn in an instant into a monster? Let's see if I will be able to write these stories some time.

Have you come a circle as far as your personal philosophy goes? I am thinking here of the epigraphs of your very first novel (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*) and your latest novel (*Small Remedies*). For the former you chose the following words from the Dhammapada: "You are your own refuge; there is no other refuge. This refuge is hard to achieve." For *Small Remedies* you went back to the Rig Veda itself which asks "... To which God shall we offer our worship?" Please explain what these great words mean to you. Why did you choose them? How?

I never thought of it as coming round in a circle, but yes, the two epigraphs ultimately say the same thing. The only difference is that I no longer see this understanding, that there's no one but us, as a negative thing. On the contrary, to know that our strength has to come from within us and not from anywhere outside is a wonderful moment. An affirmation of the strength of human beings. The Rig Vedic epigraph seemed just right for what Madhu was coming to realise in the course of the novel - not just an expression of human helplessness, but saying 'it's all the same really, whoever we pray to, ultimately there's only us'. But, like I said, this is not a negative feeling.

1. Chandra Holm and Shashi Deshpande are both too dignified to want to get into Mr. Rushdie's behaviour, so we thought we'd provide you with at least the following which might help place things in perspective. At the Commonwealth Writers Prize 2000, the final judging panel was chaired by Shashi Deshpande. In his Diary notings of the days he spent in India, which were published in a three-part series in *The Times*, London, Mr. Rushdie had this to say: "Somewhere in there the Commonwealth Writers' prize goes to J.M. Coetzee, thanks to the casting vote of the spectre at the feast, Indian judge Shashi Deshpande. But this is a party even her curdled judgement cannot poop. India is the prize" -- Ed.

[Back](#)

(About the interviewer: **Chandra Holm**, a doctorate degree holder in Engineering, is from Bangalore, and currently teaches Mathematics and Statistics at the University of Applied Sciences, Northwest Switzerland in Olten. She has written a book on the stories of Dasavatara and published critical reviews on Deshpande's latest novel *Small Remedies*. She also maintains a website for *Shashi Deshpande*. For more, please see [Chandra's Book Page](#)

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