

the night beyond the reach of the kitchen lights. The audience gasped. He raised the pole higher... Then another little ross and the pole was balanced on his thumb...»

Readers of *A Fine Balance* may not quite gasp, as does the Monkey-man's audience, at the dexterity of Mistry's performance in this novel, but they will, I

feel sure, find this book a genuine addition to that palimpsest of literary figurations, mentioned at the beginning of this review, which describe for us the quite extraordinary dimensions of the Indian subcontinent.

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Shashi DESHPANDE. *The Intrusion and Other Stories*.
Delhi: Penguin India, 1993. 157 pages.

Among contemporary Indian women writers in English, Shashi Deshpande stands out as a major name. Although initially she began writing short stories, she also has to her credit four children's books and six novels. In this collection, she shows once more that the short story is a genre whose technique she masters. The nineteen stories are incisively sketched in a direct and unpretentious style. Her English is simple and natural, devoid of any artifice. The use of the first person narrator gives a ring of authenticity to the situations and brings the protagonist closer to the reader. The stories are for the most part woman-centered, women in their different roles of daughter, mother and wife, who find themselves enclosed in a tradition-bound male-oriented society and who inevitably suffer from loneliness and a sense of guilt and failure. Shashi Deshpande does not define herself as a feminist writer, and she has no intention of becoming the spokeswoman of the predicament of the middle-class Indian woman. Her novels and short-stories portray social reality the way it is, without any explicit critical claim on the way it ought to be.

Only three of the stories have a mythical background, with characters taken from the great Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*. The other sixteen portray common everyday situations a Hindu woman has to deal with in a society that

strictly predefines her roles. All the female characters share a deep feeling of isolation and frustration. However, none of them will put in danger the stability of family unity.

Being an obedient daughter, a devoted wife and a caring and loving mother are the three ideals of womanhood in Hindu society. Shashi Deshpande confronts the reader with a set of situations in which living up to this ideal is far more important than women's personal rights. Becoming a devoted wife means submitting to the wishes of a husband who is, very often, a total stranger for the young bride and who will take her regardless of her fears and emotions («The intrusion»). The wife's duty is to fulfil her husband's expectations, allowing herself to be modelled by him, even if it is at the cost of losing her own self and personality («The stone woman»). A woman who has a successful professional career must be willing to give it up in favour of her husband's and this sacrifice is taken as a matter-of-fact («A wall is safer»). In such a context, the decision to get on at work implies doubts, remorse and a deep sense of guilt («It was the nightingale»). A Hindu wife may even sacrifice her sexual life if her husband's ideals require it («The first lady»). Marriage is presented as a trap, from which a Hindu woman cannot liberate herself without causing the whole system to col-

lapse. The female characters are alienated in their own private worlds, away from husbands who take them for granted. The situation may be worse in the case of immigrants; on top of their alienation at home, women are also ostracised by a society who signals them as foreigners («The Ghost»). Sometimes, adultery may appear as a way out of a monotonous marital life in which the woman is perceived as a part of the household and not as an entity of her own («An antidote to boredom»). On the other hand, it will never be a question of leaving the husband. Deshpande's women are fully conscious of this process of self-effacement behind the figure of the husband and this may lead them to an anguishing desire not to be forgotten, not to vanish into nothing after death («Lucid moments»).

The role of mother can also be rife with conflicts and problems that are not too different from those of any Western woman. Deshpande portrays mothers who, due to a strong feeling of self-devaluation, consider themselves intruders in their own family and strangers to their own daughters («Why a robin?»). Mothers who have to face up to the fact of their daughter's being raped, which stirs in them the memory of their own wedding night («It was dark»). The writer also touches on the psychological burden with which women who decide to have an abortion have to cope; the conflictive feelings between their sense of guilt, on the one hand, and their affirmation of their right to their body on the other («Death of a child»). Mothers are perceived as warning signals by their daughters, who will try to break away from their model («Can you hear silence?»). Sporadically, the author shifts to the male point of view, ironising about the exchange of roles in the seduction game; the boy is left wondering if the dull looking girl has been seduced or she has actually been the seducer («The pawn»).

Being a widow in India involves not only a painful personal loss but also a loss of social status. Their sphere becomes more restricted and they are supposed to devote the rest of their lives to mourn the memory of their dead husband. Deshpande approaches the problems of widowhood from different angles. We find the character of the young widow who has to put up with the humiliations her husband's family inflicts upon her and her daughter. A second marriage proposal causes a scandal and will certainly mean being cast out from the family («The cruelty game»). In the case of old widows, they are usually «absorbed» within their sons' households in which they experience an acute sense of misplacement. They see themselves as outsiders.

At times, the figure of the granddaughter is the only affective link they can establish («And then ...?»). Veneration for the memory of the husband gone may hide the bitter truth that, for his widow, his death has been a sort of liberation from an oppressive marriage («My beloved charioteer»). Some of the Hindu epic characters contained in the *Mahabharata* are the protagonists of two of the stories which deal with the episode of the fight between the five Pandava brothers and the Kauravas. The battle ends up with the defeat of the Kauravas whose leader awaits to be killed by one of the Pandavas («The last enemy»). Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, reflects on her life and the consequences of the victory («Hear me Sanjaya...»). Deshpande also evokes the historical character of the princess Amba, who, instead of abiding by the laws of the court and accepting an unwanted husband, chooses to flee and burn herself («The inner rooms»).

Shashi Deshpande's female characters are conscious of the unfair conditions they have to endure; they are women with a rich inner world which seems to be of no interest for their husbands

and children. Nevertheless, they do not rebel or protest against it and would rather choose self-sacrifice so that their familiar structure remains intact. The conflict between duty to the family and personal fulfilment will always resolve itself through self-sacrifice and submission to the patterns of society. The author does not intend to suggest any solutions. She prefers to act like a camera, recording emotions and situations with realism

and sensitivity. The picture shows the fact that tradition is deeply ingrained in society, and for those women who have a mind of their own and a clear perception of the disadvantages of their position, one way to come to terms with the surrounding reality is the acceptance of loneliness as a factual part of their existence.

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Florence STRATTON. *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*. London: Routledge, 1994. xviii + 200 pages.

African literature has only recently become a subject admitted to the field of literary studies in the Western academic world. Wole Soyinka, for instance, explains that when he was invited to give a series of lectures on African literature at Cambridge in the early seventies, his talks were fostered by the Department of Social Anthropology and not the English Department, which was quite skeptical of the idea of an African literature.¹ Such a concept has had to confront European ideology developed by colonialism which represented Africa as the dark continent, and its peoples as a mixture of mystery and danger. Fortunately, the increasing interest in the field of postcolonial studies since the late eighties has transformed such a misrecognition.

The book by Florence Stratton, *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*, comes as a contribution to the critically informed research on African literature in English. Her study, moreover, is groundbreaking within the field since it attempts to work from the standpoint of «gender as a social and analytic category» (p.1). In fact, Stratton carries out a similar critical act to the one

that granted African literature the necessary prestige to be included in English departments' syllabi, only that now what is at stake is not the place of African literature within the field of literary studies but the «place of African women writers in African literature» (p.1). Her arguments contend that women writers have been made invisible and that critical analyses of male works have remained impassive to the misrepresentation of femaleness. For her, it is clearly the case that «sexism has operated as a bias of exclusion in African literary criticism» (p. 4). To change this critical perspective is the main goal of her book and, in order to do so, Stratton carries out two kinds of critical analyses. In the first place, she reads the major canonical works by writers such as Achebe, Senghor, Soyinka and Ngugi, against traditional criticism, bringing to bear upon them feminist reading strategies. Second, her study focuses upon the narrative of four women writers: Grace Ogot, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Mariama Ba, claiming that their representations of African society revolve around the category of gender and, in this way, their litera-

1. Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press, 1976): vii.