APPENDIX

AN INTERVIEW WITH SHASHI DESHPANDE (24 June 1993)

(Interviewer: Jessie Ranjitha Jebaselvi)

Jessie: Among your novels, I read your *The Dark Holds No Terrors* first. After having read it, somehow I had a feeling of getting a solution to a problem - I mean the importance given by Saru to her profession. At the same time I felt a tinge of escapism in her character. I think we all have that dual aspect within ourselves. That is, trying to escape from something and get out of that. What do you feel about it?

Shashi: Well. In one way you may be correct. Saru is in a bad situation which is her trap and looking for a way out. Now, her profession is one way out. That may be an escape. But at the same time she sees it as an open door and what it leads to we don't know.

Jessie: Anyhow, she is not even able to talk about this with her husband. She doesn't want to face reality in the beginning.

Shashi: You are right.
Jessie: Don't you think it is a sort of escapism from the crudity of the thing?
Shashi: I think, we all do that often - if you don't speak of that it is not there, if you close your eyes it doesn't exist - such kind of attitude.
Jessie: You mean the dual attitude?
Shashi: Yes. It is very natural.
Jessie: O.K. How do you select the theme for your novels? Do you start with the theme or characters you meet in your day-to-day life?
Shashi: I don't select themes. The themes come to me. The themes select me. Themes come after the characters. Of course, the characters come and then look in.
Jessie: In such a case, do you select the characters which affect you in day-to-day life or you just imagine?
Shashi: As in the case of all the other writers, characters come partly from real life and partly from imagination.
Jessie: So, you mould them?
Shashi: Yes, they get moulded.
Jessie: In all your novels, the clash of ego between the husband and the wife is present. Do you consider it a universal problem?
Shashi: I think, in all human relationships, and more so between husband and wife.
Jessie: Nowadays, women are aware of their real status. Still, at the point of coming out of the marital bond, they seem to hesitate.

Shashi: Right.

Jessie: Is it due to the fear of social stigma, or they want to face reality as it is?

Shashi: I think they are aware of the fact that a known devil is better than an unknown angel. For a woman to walk out of marriage is a difficult step. They know what reality is and on the other side, for a woman as well as for a man to walk out of marriage is to confess failure. I think that's a very strong reason.

Jessie: In such a case, marriage becomes inevitable.

Shashi: Yes, up to a point.

Jessie: Well, where will you fix the point?

Shashi: That depends on the characters. For Saru the point comes when she cannot carry on any more, when the appearance no longer matters.

Jessie: But the end is vague. We don't know whether she goes back to her husband or to her profession.

Shashi: To me it is very clear. She walks out of the bond.

Jessie: So you are very clear about it.

Shashi: Yes. I'm very clear about it. For her, the point
comes when appearance doesn't matter. She faces reality and decides to accept it.

Jessie: But as far as Indu and Jaya are concerned, they try to act very submissively. Don't they? They are not able to spell out their failure.

Shashi: I don't think either of them has an unwanted marriage bond that they should walk out of. It is not a bad marriage. Both of them know for certain if there is a problem in the marriage, the problem is partly because of them. They are willing to work it out.

Jessie: The realization always comes from the part of the heroines. They want to take the responsibility upon themselves. I think it's the woman who cares a lot for marriage. Do you agree?

Shashi: Yes, I agree that women care a lot for marriage. But here both the man and woman take up the responsibility. What the man does is not clear. For both of them there is hope.

Jessie: Anyhow, marriage means a lot to a woman. To quote your own words, "a husband is like a sheltering tree."

Shashi: Well. That is ironically put in. One of Jaya's aunts says that. Actually, Jaya thinks of it in a very ironical way.
Jessie: It's true, I think.
Shashi: Well. To most women it would be so. But when Jaya starts questioning, it doesn't seem very true. She finds that she is the sheltering tree and her husband Mohan is so much depending on her.
Jessie: A very interesting thing I've noticed in your novels, that is, very sharp comments about marriage - like "caged birds", "two bullocks yoked together" - something pessimistic.
Shashi: These comments are made by the women who are going through a crisis. At such a moment you can't think of all the good qualities. Perhaps they are a bit cynical.
Jessie: Well, what is your general opinion?
Shashi: My general opinion is both. One must be realistic. Lots of marriages are like that - "two bullocks yoked together". It's easier to go together (laughs) than to part. And particularly in India people don't want to part.
Jessie: Yes. I think it's the permanence of marriage that makes it tiresome. Don't you think so?
Shashi: Imagine, if it is not permanent it will be more painful. Every person has an idea of his or her partner, and then gets somebody. You would like
that person to be like that idea or that ideal. And
you also do certain things because your husband
likes them. So you try to conform yourself to his
idea. But certain things become difficult and
impossible. I think that's the problem.

Jessie: That is the gap between the real and the ideal.

Shashi: Yes. When we marry a person, we say we love him.
But in our head it is a different person. It may be
the same person. But in the head the whole picture
is so different and we try to make that person
conform.

Jessie: I think that's the case with Jaya and Saru.

Shashi: Yes, that is more with Jaya than with Saru.
Because, for Saru only he has changed. Her idea of
him has not changed. For her the ideal was what he
was when she married him. But for Jaya it is
different. She has an idea of her husband as a
sheltering tree. But he is not a sheltering tree at
all. He is the one who looks to her and wants the
answer from her. He wants her to prop him up.

Jessie: It is the same with Indu. She doesn't want to
suppress her feelings.

Shashi: Yes, she is open about it. But only out of love she
tries to suppress herself. She thinks that he may
not like a woman to have strong feelings. She tries to suppress her strength also. I think we all try to hide the things which our partners don’t like.

Jessie: The adjustment comes often from the side of women.

Shashi: Yes, that’s true.

Jessie: In one of your interviews you have stated that after getting married and begetting children only you started thinking what next. And do you mean to say that marriage is the prime thing in a girl’s life?

Shashi: No. Really I don’t remember what I said in that interview (laughs). I certainly don’t think that marriage is an important thing. But you know, it seems to be one point in one’s life - for a man or for a woman.

Jessie: For a man, his career goes on even after marriage, whereas in a woman’s life it is like a turning point.

Shashi: Right. It is very much so.

Jessie: Even education and economic independence do not relieve women from their shackles. For example, though Saru is a doctor, she is not even able to disclose her problem.

Shashi: Yes. To a certain extent it is true. But I think
education and economic independence give you the opportunity.

Jessie: In spite of Saru's education she doesn't want to talk of the sadism of her husband which creates problems in her life. Isn't it due to the traditional way of thinking that we are not supposed to talk of all such matters?

Shashi: Yes. It is because of her mother and her background where nothing is spoken of. Even talking of your menstruation is considered wrong. You can't get away from your roots.

Jessie: Yes. That is your Roots and Shadows.

Shashi: (laughs)

Jessie: When we talk of the mother figures in your novels, it is notable that the heroines are not attached to them. In fact, they have electra complex.

Shashi: I think, only in Jaya there is father fixation.

Jessie: Well. You've developed the short story "A Liberated Woman" into the novel The Dark Holds No Terrors. Is there any particular reason behind that?

Shashi: I liked the theme very much. But to develop that into a novel, I had to wait for five years.

Jessie: I find a sort of 'growth' in your writing - I mean from your short stories to the novels. For example,
in the short stories like "Rain" there is a sense of guilt in having extra marital relationships. But, in your novels, it happens so naturally like any other human activity. And the heroines don't confuse themselves with ideas of chastity, loyalty and the like. They've been able to get rid of that sense of guilt. Don't you consider it a growth?

Shashi: Ask the men (laughs). That is interesting. But perhaps yes.

Jessie: There is an idea that feminism is not possible in India, because we are very much tradition oriented. What is your view?

Shashi: I would like to debate about that.

Jessie: But we are very much tradition bound. Even if we try to come out of that, our parents will object to it. Our women cannot walk out as Ibsen's Nora. Our professor used to tell us that our Indian parents would come back the next day with the girl to convince their son-in-law.

Shashi: But it is changing now.

Jessie: Yet, it is very slow.

Shashi: Yes, it is slow. But I have an optimistic idea about it.
Jessie: Well. Do you consider yourself a feminist?

Shashi: As a writer I'm not a feminist. But as a person I'm a feminist. I don't use my novels to carry the message of feminism.

Jessie: How do you differentiate a feminist writer from a woman writer?

Shashi: A feminist writer uses his or her writing to convey the idea of feminism. But the ideas should come naturally.

Jessie: In that case, you can be called a feminist.

Shashi: You can call me a feminist writer. But I don't consider myself so. My personal ideology naturally gets a place in my novels. That's all. No writer can escape that. If feminism is within me naturally, it will reflect in my novels.

Jessie: Do you read feminist literature?

Shashi: No, I don't.

Jessie: What is your view on feminism in India?

Shashi: It has to take a different path. First, our women should shed the inferiority complex. Number two, social evils like dowry must be erased.

Jessie: The individual should play a great role here.

Shashi: Yes.

Jessie: As individuals we have to come out of the bond first.
Shashi: Yes. We should be true to ourselves. In India, among the varied status of women, it is the poor women at the lowest rung of the ladder who suffer a lot.

Jessie: No. I think it is the middle class women who suffer a lot because they are caught between their status in society and their individual wishes whereas among the lower class women divorces are very common and they can walk out of the bond at any time they wish.

Shashi: Yes. The middle class women think of themselves as the custodians of their family honour.

Jessie: They are portrayed so.

Shashi: Correct. The men expect the women to be true and faithful to their men; but they live as they wish. This kind of double standard is going on.

Jessie: Of course, it is a patriarchal society.

Shashi: Obviously.

Jessie: Well. In your novels, I have observed a lack of communication between husband and wife. Have you handled it as a technique or you portray it as a way of life?

Shashi: I don't use it a technique. It is a part of life. Between Jaya and Mohan there is verbal
communication. But it is not so between Indu and her husband. Between Saru and Manohar taciturnity develops gradually.

Jessie: The word 'silence' is often used in your novels. Is there any particular reason behind that?

Shashi: No. It just comes as I write.

Jessie: But it conveys a lot of meaning - disappointments, misunderstandings and the like.

Shashi: See, between couples, there is so much that is locked up in silence. If a couple is drifting apart they move more and more into the silence area than into the spoken area. The things they talk about are only unimportant things.

Jessie: Generally, Indian women long for a male child. You've presented it in your novels. In The Dark Holds No Terrors, Saru's mother gives importance to her son only. She simply ignores Saru. Have you presented the problem as an Indian or ...

Shashi: As a writer I write what I see. In Saru's life the whole problem starts with that. Her mother considers Saru as a less important thing. This happens in so many families. And so many couples go here and there to have a male child. It is a part of our society and we can't shut our eyes to it.
Jessie: Well. In your novels *Come Up and Be Dead* and *If I Die Today* which entirely deal with different themes, the couples are poles apart. There is lack of verbal communication also.

Shashi: Let me put it very bluntly. Show me a couple who are perfectly matched. I will try to write about them. But I may not be able to write anything because writing comes out of turmoil and conflict. It does not come out of perfection.

Jessie: And in fact, there is no made-for-each—other couple, I think.

Shashi: In my opinion, when a husband or wife tries to make him or her as something else to suit the other person, the problem starts. We should remain as ourselves.

Jessie: So, there can be no perfect match. Do you agree with me?

Shashi: Fully.

Jessie: Most of the couples have only two children like the ads in your novels.

Shashi: Yes. It reflects the existing middle class family life. I write what I see around me.

Jessie: Well, how do you find time for your writing? Do you write at a particular time or just write whenever you find time?
Shashi: I do house work in the morning and write only in the afternoon. Sometimes I sit in the early hours of morning. I can't write during nights.

Jessie: How do you find your role as a wife and a writer?

Shashi: It is difficult. Running from one thing to the other. Within this one place I have to take up two roles. If it is a kind of office work, it will be better. Lots of women say that when they go out they feel more relaxed.

Jessie: So, you envy them.

Shashi: No. I'm quite happy here, because I enjoy writing. It is part of me now.

Jessie: How do you feel when your novels are dissected and discussed?

Shashi: I feel distanced. Sometimes when their idea of my novel differs from mine, I am disturbed. But I forget that and go again to write.

Jessie: About your latest novel?

Shashi: It is Binding Vine. It has a different theme from most of my novels. The protagonist is a young woman. She happens to come across some poems written by her mother-in-law who died very young. Through those poems she comes to know about the greatness of her mother-in-law. The story goes like that.
Jessie: Each of your novels has a different technique. How do you select the technique? Do you discuss it with anybody?

Shashi: I never discuss anything with anyone. I don't talk about my novels at all. Somehow each novel selects its own technique. It doesn't come automatically. For example, I wrote fifty pages for That Long Silence. Then I realized, it was not alright. So, I rewrote everything. Even the latest novel The Binding Vine has a totally different technique.

Jessie: When you discuss the medical field, you are very realistic - especially that S.D.M. Medical College Campus and various departments. Do you get ideas from your husband?

Shashi: (laughs) Yes, I do. In fact we stayed on the medical college campus.

Jessie: In Come Up and Be Dead, the characters like Shama, Jyothi Raman, Devayani are able to lead a single life without the feel of loneliness. Do you consider it a growth?

Shashi: Right. I agree with that. I was a little bit deliberate about it. To me, Devayani who led a protected life and then learned to live on her own legs was the important character.
Jessie: So you purposely created that character.

Shashi: Yes. That character came to my mind, and I allowed her to grow to see whether it was possible. In the novel you can see the growth in her.

Jessie: Sort of round character.

Shashi: Yes. Round character. That is the only satisfactory thing in the whole novel.

Jessie: At present, are you working on anything?

Shashi: Yes, I'm working on a novel.

Jessie: Will it be published soon?

Shashi: It is a long way to go. It will take five to six years.