

Reviews

SHASHI DESHPANDE, *Die Last des Schweigens*. Roman. Aus dem indischen Englisch von Maja Ueberle-Pfaff. (Neue Indische Bibliothek, Bd. 17). Frauenfeld: Verlag Im Waldgut, 1989. 260 pages, DM 34,-

BHISHAM SAHNI, *Basanti*. Roman. Aus dem Hindi übersetzt von Margot Gatzlaff. (Neue Indische Bibliothek, Bd. 8). Frauenfeld: Verlag Im Waldgut, 1989, 193 pages, DM 32,-

The series *Neue Indische Bibliothek* is now being published by the Swiss Verlag Im Waldgut (formerly by Wolf Mersch). By chance both new publications deal with women: two women of the same cultural sphere but living at two different levels of society. Now, as is known, the social pressure on women in India is incomparably stronger and more violent than here. Both novels give manifold examples of this. The tragic result is that – caught in the closed system of repression – middle class women especially (first book) are its most efficient supporters, while those from the lower classes are its victims by 'destiny' as is the uprooted rural population crowding in the slums of the large cities (second book).

The far more complex and artistically as well as analytically more important of the two works is that of Shashi Deshpande. Due to their education middle class women are forced to recognize all implications of their status in a patriarchal and hierarchical system, a privilege denied to persons like *Basanti*.

The original title, *That Long Silence*, emphasizes that *now* is the time for one half of mankind to break a silence of thousands of generations. A silence imposed on it by the patriarchal dichotomy-ideology about 'man' and 'woman' and the social hierarchical dependence thereby created. It is the time of unrest among women everywhere, and the time for books like this to be written.

The fictitious writer is Jaya, housewife and author of nice little stories (denying her own personality). A crisis arises in her 17 year old marriage when social annihilation is threatening because the man is involved in a case of corruption. This is averted but within the c. 14 days of danger the whole 'underground' of a seemingly so successful marriage shows its terrifying face. Used to talking, living, even thinking what her husband (Mohan's ideological identity) and society wanted her to do, her silence cannot be broken yet by

spoken words. So she starts to write, freeing her thoughts hitherto covered by silence whereas he hides his feelings about her, which only results in a furious outburst. And what an enormously rich and colourful world of hitherto suppressed perception, memories, new recognitions and conclusions leading to new questions Jaya creates! In the overlapping circles of personal lives, married life, relationships, public life (more than 46 persons form its little cosmos), she fearlessly traces the contortions in women (and, partly, in men) which are justified and even demanded by tradition.

Shashi Deshpande makes Jaya go to extremes, her audacity is as admirable as her differentiation. Her greatness as a writer is constituted by her *human* integrity (not female, let alone pseudo-male).

It is a book which will be highly controversial for it shows again (see NIB 12) the indispensable problematic feature: the woman's guilt-consciousness. There is no revolutionary questioning of traditions without it. But this implies that there is real as well as unreal guilt, the latter belonging to the repression system itself and to be rejected. Jaya's perception reflects the intricate relations between seemingly purely private 'short-comings' and the whole social system and its ideology. The hope expressed by Jaya at the end that a fundamental change might be possible has a rather resignative touch - another sign of the author's realistic truthfulness.

Bhisham Sahni's *Basanti* is comparatively simple. A purely realist novel relating how Rajasthanis come to Delhi to make a living, how they manage to keep up traditions, even local ones, how their small huts are repeatedly destroyed by "the government" and their fight for survival has to be started anew. The author possesses an extraordinary perception, high sensitivity and obviously a sound knowledge of the lives and mentality of villagers crowding in the slums of the cities.

In the midst of this 'colony' we meet the 14 year old Basanti, a barber's daughter of an exceptionally energetic and courageous character. Though father and 'husband' try to treat her as saleable object in the worst Hindu tradition, she is able to find her way out. But at what costs! Costs to be paid by her all alone. Even her joy in living seems always to know of its impending end, her hectic activity being an attempt to prevent it. Her dream of happiness and dignity is her film-inspired utopia by which she can transcend the crude facts for a while (the self-chosen 'husband' turns out to be married, worse follows). Even the most surprising solutions cannot redeem the situation for her. Her social and thus individual exposedness is total. The author's admiration of her is male hypocrisy. Nor can I understand how the translator can claim that Basanti is to be seen as a symbol of the 'new India'. Basanti's tricks against the rules of society are anarchic, are still system-bound, namely

purely antithetical, resulting in her total exploitation. Not a single Indian woman will get her *human rights* by such a 'method', much less a nation. – It is a very sad book, despite so much laughter in it.

Both books demonstrate anew the great competence of the editors Lothar Lutze and Rainer Kimmig in choosing the works and translators of the NIB.

Irmtraud Höhn

HARALD UHLIG, *Südostasien*. (Fischer Länderkunde 3). Frankfurt/M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988. 719 pp., maps, tabs., DM 29,80

Compared with the original (first published in 1975), this new edition is greater in volume. And considering that it now deals exclusively with South-east Asia and not, as previously, with Australia and the Pacific Region as well, the text is almost double what it was. It is also more homogeneous; instead of several authors, as previously, Uhlig is now sole author of all the contributions on this complex subject.

This has its advantages: the treatment of the various topics is in the hands of one person, and in this case one can be sure that the author's vast and life-long field experience is a guarantee of solid judgment. Nonetheless, things are very much in flux and are becoming more complex every day as the author rightly says at the beginning. Small wonder that the number of scholarly publications has increased enormously since 1975, and hence the size of the bibliography too. This of course gives the reader a good chance to familiarize himself with different views about the nature and development "of the regions and landscapes, the structures and functions of Southeast Asia" (p. 11) – whether he does so or not is of course up to him. (The fact that some of the titles given in the bibliography are more relevant as "Club Members Cards" than as important sources of information is no doubt an inevitable by-product of the rapid increase of publications.) The maps – unfortunately there is no reference to them in the index – are very informative, and their lay-out shows quite some experience in handling pocket-book format. Though they are printed only in black and white, they (all in octavo) are eminently legible because they refrain from any overloading with detail. – Equally pleasing is the statistical appendix, for the same reason that it is concise, clearly constructed and limited to essentials, though nonetheless ideal for verifying the one or other trend. Its content is what one expects from a pocket-book, which does not claim to be a statistical compendium, but first and foremost a descriptive *Länderkunde* not crammed with statistics, and thus less liable to