

Women's work?

What do Birmingham MP Clare Short, actress Goldie Hawn and author Deborah Moggach have in common? Oh, and the telecoms giant Sunil Mittal, foreign correspondent Janine di Giovanni and novelists Manju Kapoor and Githa Hariharan? Well, they're all gathering in Delhi to discuss topics such as Muslims and the media, globalisation, snake charmers and outsourcing the elderly to developing countries – the subject of Moggach's latest book.

This is happening under the umbrella of The Hindustan Times Kitab Festival, an Anglo-Indian literary event which begins on Friday. One topic that has already got feathers flying is the subject of women's writing. For a start, there's the category itself. "Woman writer!" exclaims Hariharan. "It's not a terribly useful label if it just becomes lazy, a way to ghettoise." Moggach says: "I don't really like separating women from men novelists. Most female novelists of any calibre are not writing novels that remotely suggest that they're written by women."

Is there such a thing as feminine writing? **Caroline Phillips** asks female novelists on the eve of an international conference

Kapoor hotly counters this view: "Of course women's writing is different from men's," says the best-selling author of *Difficult Daughters*, and professor of English at Delhi University. "It's bound to be. Our experiences are different." Malavika Sanghvi, journalist and author, springs to her defence. "*The God of Small Things*, *Brick Lane* and *On Beauty* couldn't have been written by a man, just as *Midnight's Children* couldn't have been penned by a woman," she says. "Women have a 'heart' rather than a 'head' approach, a decidedly female sensitivity."

The real issue for women, according to Di Giovanni, is finding the time, space and quiet to write. "The fact that book advances are smaller and smaller, unless one is writing very commercial work, puts a lot of pressure on women," she says. "I often think of Virginia Woolf and her comfortable writer's life. Yes,

she was driven mad by her own demons. But she didn't lie awake at night wondering how to pay the mortgage and school fees."

"But it was the phenomenal boredom of those early months of motherhood that spurred me to work seriously on my first novel," demurs Hariharan.

So where is women's writing in the 21st century? There's consensus, at least, about its megastars in Britain: Zadie Smith, Monica Ali and now Ali Smith are on everyone's list. Many add Sarah Waters, Julie Myerson and Helen Oyeyemi. "The big shift is that women's voices come from a greater cultural diversity, including a flowering of African ones," says Alexandra Pringle, editor-in-chief at Bloomsbury.

"There's a new sort of writing coming from women," says Pringle enthusiastically. "It's bold and experimental. Take Lucy Ellmann, who uses lists, capital letters and upturns the

narrative form, or Clare Allan, whose unsettling novel *Poppy Shakespeare* is narrated by an inmate in a mental institution. They're breaking the bounds of conventional novel writing, broadening cultural and linguistic boundaries."

In the sub-continent, the names of Kiran (daughter of Anita) Desai, Manju Kapoor, Anita Rau Badami, Shashi Deshpande and Namita Gokhale are on many people's lips. "Indian women writers have broadened and deepened the genre of literary fiction," says Penguin publisher (Canada) and Indiophile David Davidar. "Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* electrified the literary world.

Jhumpa Lahiri did something similar with her fiction set in the Indian diaspora. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* must be one of the finest pieces of fiction published anywhere in the world this year. They're narrating and

interpreting the unrivaled complexity and diversity of the Indian sub-continent in tremendously imaginative ways."

What are the issues that interest women? Kapoor says: "Writing in India tends to involve the family and community to a far greater extent than in the West. Here women are often defined in terms of their roles. The tension between those notions of identity and the desire for personal fulfilment forms much of sub-continental literature."

"Oh no, I think women's writing is moving away from the domestic sphere in the 21st century," counters Moni Mohsin, new kid on the Penguin block. "Now women are participating more fully in public life, we can write about whatever we want."

Peter Florence, director of the Hay-on-Wye literary festival, is unhappy with such distinctions. "Look, the good novelists don't have different concerns from

their male colleagues," he says. Is this true? "Women are noticeably going into traditionally 'male' territory, from adventure stories (think of Kate Mosse's *Labyrinth*) to sci-fi, with Audrey Niffenegger," responds Helen Garnon-Williams, publishing director of Weidenfeld & Nicolson. "There's also a trend to write Nancy Mitford-style nostalgia. Plus the *Sex and the City* generation are now writing more frankly about sex."

"Female writers aren't confined any more," says Pringle, who has launched many an author from her London houseboat. "They have a sense they can do anything. There's a trend for novels that explore different kinds of female experience."

Perhaps the concluding word should go to Clare Short, author of *An Honourable Deception*? *New Labour*, *Iraq*, and *the Misuse of Power*. So where's women's writing going in the 21st century? "I can't give you an opinion on this. I'm just going to talk about my book."

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www.kitabfest.org



The fairer text? (From left) Jhumpa Lahiri, Zadie Smith and Monica Ali bring issues of gender and race to their writing AP; GERAINT LEWIS

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