

“WHAT INTRIGUES ME ABOUT LITERATURE ARE THE TENSIONS, THE CONFLICTS IN A GIVEN WORK“: AN INTERVIEW WITH MONIKA SHAFI

Monika Shafi is the Elias Ahuja Professor of German and the former director of the Women’s Studies Program at the University of Delaware. Her research interests include Twentieth Century German Literature, Contemporary German Literature, Women’s Literature, Post-Colonialism, Travel Literature, and German-Jewish Literature with a special emphasis on Gertrud Kolmar. In addition to administrative work and teaching, Prof. Shafi has published widely and continues to maintain a very active publication record.

In October 2010, Monika Shafi was the keynote speaker at the *Focus on German Studies* graduate student conference on the topic of generational issues, at which she gave a talk entitled “Als höre die Kindheit nie auf: Generational Bonds in Günter Grass’s Autobiographical Work.”

FOCUS What has been the greatest challenge in your career?

MONIKA SHAFI I have always considered the balance between work and family as the greatest challenge. Both demand time, attention, energy, and work, and the tensions and conflicts between career and family can be numerous. Whether it is having to teach a class while your young child is sick, your husband is out of town and no day care or neighbor is available, or balancing the demands of an adolescent’s sport schedule with deadlines or committee meetings, I have often felt pulled in two directions which over the long run can be rather stressful. On the other hand, having to attend to the myriad details of family life keeps you grounded in reality and perhaps it can provide a buffer against a kind of self-serving intellectualism.

FOCUS Do you have any advice for today’s PhD students on how to prepare for the rather tough job market?

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- MS** I would suggest gaining as broad a preparation as possible while pursuing your PhD. In addition to first-rate teaching, this would include giving conference papers, applying for grants, and trying to get some of your seminar papers published. I would also suggest seeking out administrative activities such as serving on departmental graduate studies committees or university committees. This is certainly a lot of work but it also signals to potential academic employers that one has an understanding of the different components of the job.
- FOCUS** What is it about contemporary literature that initially piqued and still piques your interest?
- MS** My PhD thesis, *Utopische Entwürfe in der Literatur von Frauen* covered both nineteenth century and contemporary authors and some of my early publications were on Annette von Droste-Hülshoff and Bettina von Arnim. Looking back, it seems to me that the initial focus on contemporary literature was more accidental than pre-meditated, but that it was sustained by an abiding interest in the social, political, and historical forces that shape contemporary life.
- FOCUS** How do you find new research topics and authors in contemporary literature? Do you rely on reviews in newspapers or in online magazines?
- MS** Quite often, new research topics grow out of ongoing research. For example, I am currently completing a monograph on domestic space and the topic of work keeps coming into focus. It is likely that this is the next subject I will pursue. Invitations to contribute to editions also fuel new ideas. It is really an ongoing process because in reading scholarly journals such as *The German Quarterly*, *Gegenwartsliteratur* or *The German Studies Review*, I may discover an aspect an au-
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thor overlooked or interprets differently and then decide to take it up. List servers, websites, reviews in the leading German newspapers, and conference talks are the resources I use to find new authors.

FOCUS What is your next research project about and what inspired you to look further into it?

MS My immediate project is an article on Günter Grass's volume *Grimms Wörter: Eine Liebeserklärung* and how it addresses concepts of *Heimat* and space. This piece relates both to my ongoing interest in Grass and also in configurations of space. The long-term project, as I just explained, is related to work in a globalized economy.

FOCUS As someone who researches multicultural aspects of German and Austrian literature and in light of Chancellor Merkel's proclamation that Germany's multicultural society has failed, where (or how) do you see the future of multiculturalism in Germany, in German and Austrian literature and film, and in German Studies?

MS It seems to me that the term multiculturalism has increasingly been superseded by the term transnationalism which conceptualizes the issue, nations changing from homogenous entities protected by relatively firm borders into ethnically diverse, open structures, quite differently. Yet, independently of such epistemological changes, the challenges at hand, ethnic diversity, increased religious presence, minorities with uneven access to resources and the social conflicts that result from such imbalances, will not go away, and authors and film-makers will continue to respond to them.

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- FOCUS** You are known as an expert on several women writers (Christa Wolf, Gertrud Kolmar, Bettina von Arnim, etc.). Why did you decide to research Günter Grass, who is arguably one of the most patriarchal writers of Germany's contemporary literature scene?
- MS** I certainly agree with your assessment of Grass's patriarchal bias and have written about it in different publications. At the same time, I consider him to be a brilliant author with an unprecedented command of styles, genres, and fields of knowledge; I admire his virtuosity with language and his continuous experimentation with narrative forms. Also, what intrigues me about literature are the tensions, the conflicts in a given work, and in Grass's case these concern more than his patriarchal attitudes. If we were to hold up yardsticks of correct identity politics, quite a few authors would fail the test.
- FOCUS** In your lecture "Als höre die Kindheit nie auf: Generational Bonds in Günter Grass's Autobiographical Work," you call Grass's mother complex his "source of creativity." Do you think that issues like Grass's mother complex are common motivations for artistic works?
- MS** Actually, this is a quote from Grass himself, a sort of tongue-in-cheek comment from *Die Box: Dunkelkammergeschichten*; this is not my interpretative comment. In discussing the figure of the mother in *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, I was referring to the text's inaugural scene and the juxtaposition of history, art, and maternal presence. Grass has repeatedly acknowledged that his mother was an extremely influential figure. Personal experiences will, of course, affect an author's work but I would guard against overemphasizing this autobiographical frame unless one deals with the genre itself. The autobio-
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graphical lens often leads to reducing the complexity of a given text—this happened particularly to women writers—and it can also deflect from acknowledging literature as an independent cultural production.

FOCUS Thank you for this interview!

*This interview was conducted in February 2011 via email
by Marie Buesch.*
