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## People

### Unheard Voices, Untold Stories

**Winner of 22 national and international awards for their documentaries, film makers and academicians Anjali Monteiro and KP Jayasankar, both of whom teach at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, were recently in Madurai to showcase some of their films, particularly SheWrite, a sensitive portrayal of four contemporary Tamil women poets in their struggle to be heard loud and clear in a male-dominated society, Salome Fleur Becker in conversation with the film makers**

*By Salome Fleur Becker  
Germany*

As soon as I entered the small shaded room, my eyes zeroed in on the strong presence of the couple standing near the LCD projector. Engrossed in a discussion, they radiated an uncommon harmony which made it obvious that they must have known each other for a long time. Moving like two people sharing one body, they turned around, both dressed in turquoise shirts and with the same welcoming smile. Anjali Monteiro (57), and K.P. Jayasankar (60), Professors, School of Media and Cultural Studies, at the prestigious Tata Institute for Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai, are also well known documentary film makers. The couple was in Madurai recently for the 14th international film festival, for a retrospective on their documentaries. On December 7, 2012 at Madurai Kamaraj University (MKU), they were preparing to present their documentary SheWrite, a thought provoking documentary on the challenges and constraints faced by a few contemporary Tamil women poets as they dared to question patriarchal norms and values.



Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar, sharing with us the challenges of producing documentaries

***We are different people, we think differently. One is like the left side of the brain, the other one like the right side***

Widely regarded for their incisive analysis of contemporary social issues and voicing the concerns of marginalized groups, the classroom accommodating around thirty visitors seemed, at first, to be inappropriate to me. But not in the eyes of the two film makers while we were sitting in the room next door, a little library. Between books, shelves and computers, they explained to me the importance of personal contact with their audience. Aware that their experimental and provocative documentaries evoke a range of responses from the audience, ranging from praise to severe criticism and condemnation, Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar like to personally interact with the audience to hear and discuss their comments on their work. Even though their films had been screened several times at the earlier documentary festivals in Madurai (that is now an annual event), it was the first time that they had an opportunity to be present at the festival and interact live with the audience.

#### **The harmony of the two sides of a brain**

Both Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar are self-taught film makers. Anjali Monteiro has a Master's degree in Economics and a Ph.D. in Sociology; K.P. Jayasankar has an M.A. in German Studies and a Ph.D. in Humanities and Social Sciences. But just as everything in their life is connected to movies, they also met the first time while Anjali Monteiro was working on her first documentary in 1986. Three years later they married and "since then, we do everything together," said K.P. Jayasankar happily.

As they told me about the nearly 40 documentaries they made since 1986, I wondered how they have time to also teach at TISS. "We don't think of our work as work at all! It is more like...", "More like having fun!" said Anjali Monteiro as she completes the sentence her husband began. "Although we often fight about our work," she admitted. I tried to imagine them having a fight but I could just not believe that they could ever raise their voices. To me, they seemed like the perfect pair in real and reel life: even-tempered, wise, sensitive, fun, and absolutely professional.

"We are different people, we think differently. One is like the left side of the brain, the other one like the right side," said the couple in perfect complementarity. Anjali Monteiro likes to organize things and content, to get in touch with all the people and develop a structure for their project. K.P. Jayasankar is in charge of the art work, and the restaging. And like the two sides of a brain, they need each other to complete the picture.

#### **'The medium chooses you'**

When I asked them why they had chosen documentaries as their medium of cinematic expression, there was a second of silence.



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“I don’t think that we have chosen it. I think the medium chooses you,” Anjali Monteiro answered thoughtfully and K.P. Jayasankar gave me an approving smile. When we view their documentaries, it is clear what they mean. SheWrite, for example, tells us about the four Tamil women poets: Salma, Kuttirevathi, Malathy Maitri and Sukirtharani, who publish despite societal proscription about female sexuality. The documentary weaves the poems and the personal lives of the poets with candid interviews with each of them. The effective background music adds to the film’s message. It lets them grow so that the spectator feels the rising power of those women who are courageous enough to speak about a topic about which the rest of society prefers to remain embarrassingly silent.

#### **Women’s ownership of their bodies**

“We are not taught to own our body. Most Indian women feel like their body should be owned by men,” one protagonist explains. That seems to be one of the main reasons why the four women refuse to stop writing even though they are under great pressure to do so. They feel the great need to create awareness, to give an insight into the most natural processes of the female body and celebrate and own their bodies in a male dominated society.

Anjali Monteiro explained to me that many people are uncomfortable with reading such poetry, because they feel like they are reading something obscene. But there is nothing obscene about describing the menstrual cycle or sexual desire. In the eyes of this film maker couple, it is more like describing the most natural feelings. Salma, Kuttirevathi, Malathy Maitri and Sukirtharani give a voice to their bodily needs and through their documentary, Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar give a voice to such deep rooted concerns of women that both women and men need to hear and acknowledge.

In a very artistic way, Monteiro and Jayasankar visualize the lives and the work of people who are strong enough to resist societal pressure, and more importantly, their own doubts and fears. In capturing the courageous stance of these poets who happen to be women in a male-dominated society, the documentary also subtly talks to us about some people who are willing to change something, even though they have to pay a price for doing so.

#### **A convergence of creativity**

Using poetry for their documentaries seems to be their favorite mode of storytelling. I was not very surprised when K.P. Jayasankar revealed with amusement that he wanted to be a painter when he was a teenager. His ability to visualize emotions is obvious throughout the fifty-five minute SheWrite.

As Anjali Monteiro was born and raised in Goa and K.P. Jayasankar in Kerala, they had to learn Tamil to be able to understand the poems of the Tamil poets featured in SheWrite. Their closeness to the protagonists is also indicated by scenes shot in the homes of the poets, as for example, in discussions between mother and daughter about poetry. All characters are shown in their natural environment. Whereas Kuttirevathi discovers her space and power in solitude, Salma uses her political influence as a Panchayat President to reach more people. All of them come from different places, have different ages and family backgrounds, but they stand by each other and found an organization called “Anangu” (“Woman”)—a creative platform for women writers to express their concerns, hear and be heard.

SheWrite is not a documentary which feeds you with facts; it is more a personal portrait, a film which makes you question yourself and your attitude towards the female body. Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar were hesitant to speak too much about their work. But I could hear the delight in their voices; I could see how some wrinkles around the corners of their eyes indicated a smile, which was not visible yet. Feeling their joy in their explanations of what a good documentary should be like, I detected the secret of their success: their never ending will to discover and capture life.

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