Appendix
In Conversation with Shashi Deshpande

The given interview is a transcription of the conversation held between, the writer Shashi Deshpande (SD) and the researcher S. Prithvika (SP), recorded on 22nd June, 2016, at the writer’s residence, in Bangalore. Having initiated my study on Deshpande’s fiction, I planned to interact with the writer face to face as it would be a great opportunity to meet her personally and understand her writings through the writer’s own perspective. The request for the interview was put forth by me via both e-mail and telephonic conversations. Shashi Deshpande generously, gave her consent for the interview and the appointment for the same was fixed accordingly. I am grateful, for the insights which she provided through this conversation, to lend a touch of authenticity to my research. It helped me to formulate my observations pertaining to the varied novel theory interplay with regard to Deshpande’s writings and its existential engagement. I have preferred to italicize a few statements by her, which substantiate some of the conclusions drawn by the present study.

SP: Most of your writings are very subjective writings. When we read your novel, you don’t tell us a story of a particular place. There is nothing factual for the readers to grasp. There is no story telling as such. There is no societal, nothing physical being described. What you seem to be concerned with is the importance of the subtle ‘within’ which is being voiced out. A very artistic writing. How do you define the writing as an art?

SD: Factual is there. But factual is not brought out. In the sense that, I do not want to go deep into the narrative. I do not want to go deep in the description of the things and all, because they are there. It is in the background. Like in A Matter of Time, it starts with...
the description of the house. A very detailed description. Because that is so relevant. The ‘House’ is so relevant to the story. Therefore, it is there. For me, a work of art consists of two things: one thing, you take only what is relevant to the story. And secondly, at least for me, it is the story of people. Everything else serves as background. It is like the people are on the stage, and then one has the background. A background like it is on the stage. A particular kind of a place they are living in, the kind of society they are living in, that’s all the background. Art and craft are two parts of writing a novel. And, I think, both are equally important. Unless the craft is good, the art will not emerge. Craft has to be good. So, that is the most important thing. And how am I going to tell the story? For me that’s the most important question when I start a novel. What am I going to put in, what am I not going to put in. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, I had the story of Saru. I had been fumbling for a long time. It was my second novel. It took a long time to find out the way I am going to tell the story. Finally, it suddenly came to me, I would have First and Third person alternating. Then, I realized, in fact, discover now, that the reason for I did this was, the first person is extremely intense. It goes very deep into Saru’s feelings and all. By using Third person, I move away, Saru moves away. So it enables to be little more objective about it, and also enable to include some other viewpoints there. *That Long Silence* is completely subjective. It is entirely Jaya’s story, told in Jaya’s voice, seen through Jaya’s eyes and formed in Jaya’s mind. So that happened again, when I started, the novel was not going to be the way it is now. Completely different novel. I wrote five or six drafts of the first hundred pages. And then, I realized I was doing it all wrong. It came to me that I had to tell this story in Jaya’s voice. There was no other way I could tell the story. So, that is how you come to the art. Because it’s the craft which leads you there. And this is the right way. There is no other way I can tell the story. It somehow chooses you. British Writer, Martin Ames says “In writing there are no choices, there is only recognition.” So I do not sit and choose what kind of a narrative I am going to use. I suddenly discover it. I must have told in one of the interviews with Lakshmi Holmstorm, that it is like tuning a ‘Taanpura’. Keep on tuning it and suddenly you get the right note. So this is it. That is something which you cannot plan, which you donot choose, but which comes to you but after a lot of fumbling. And, maybe one, sometimes, get it right straightaway. I think it is very unusual to do that, but this is generally the way it comes.
Once you enter into the novel, then the path is easier. It gives one the point of entry into that world. And like in *A Matter of Time*, I entered through the house and the house was the most important and it contained these people and their history and, therefore, everything that happened, the drama of their lives was worked out in that house. There the house became extremely important.

**SP:** When you are telling me about this house, I am just reminded of one thing. If I am not wrong, most of your novels have this symbol of the house. I do not want to typify in any way. In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Aparna is in hunt for a house, *In country of Deceit* also Devyani shifts to a new home and so in *A Matter of Time* and in *Moving On*.

**SD:** A house is important. In *Small Remedies* also I use the symbol of house. Somebody else’s house. Madhu goes to live with them. She is writing the biography of Savitribai Indorkar. So, a passage in the novel describes the house in detail. Like how she comes to know about the house and how she can walk into the house at night almost blindfolded. There is a kind of symbiosis between the people and the houses. That way, I think, the house becomes important in my novels.

**SP:** In *The Dark Holds no Terrors* you use the symbol of the house. The protagonist of the novel Sarita finds her connection with the past and what she is doing in the present, in the house. She gets to know herself only in the house. It is there like when Sarita crosses the threshold of her house and enters into her father’s home, that’s the moment when she gets to know herself with much clarity. All your novels have a thick knit of relationships and bindings. In *Strangers to Ourselves*, the plot is woven around the
relationships. Relationships work as threads which not only bind people socially, but also emotionally. When I say relationships, I do not mean the relationships between kith and kin, because the other relations also happen to form in the course of time. Heart’s deepest desires are expressed in *Strangers to Ourselves* to Taimavshi and Madhuri, without even thinking once. It is quite unusual. In fact, many people do not actually resort to or reflect their deepest within to their relatives, especially in the present day scenario. So, it happens quite in contrast to the present day relationships. In the course of the novel, Aparna definitely shares her inner thoughts with Jyoti. But, later one discovers in the novel, Jyoti is also her relative. Somehow they are related as well. So, what is this concept?

**SD:** It depends on each individual. I cannot generalize and say that everytime only the family is closer or something like that. But here in *Strangers to Ourselves*, the protagonist’s mother and father are dead and her aunt stands in the position of mother to her, and her cousin is the one whom she has admired. You know, a cousin is more than a sister. Jyoti is a friend and a sister. So I think those relations are important to her, not because they have been blood ties, but they have been with her since the beginning. I think old ties are very important. And, she has broken away from her past. There is nobody else for her. Her old friends are gone. After her first marriage broke, she cut herself off from everyone. There is no body else except her colleagues in the hospital to whom one generally does not talk. And even with Madhuri and Taimavshi, she doesn’t talk straightaway. It is after a while. Especially, she talks to Madhuri, because she is closer in age, and also because she admires her and she, sort of, has witnessed her love with Abbas. For her it was a great romance. Hence, she wants to share her experience first with her. *It depends on each individual’s situation.* I would never generalize and say people would generally talk to blood relations or to friends. It also depends on the kind of life they are leading or the people they have around them. Perhaps, everyone would not talk much to one’s parents about these things. There is a distance. She tells much later to Taimavshi. Madhuri is more a friend than a cousin and having told Madhuri, she has to
tell Taimavshi because she knows Taimavshi will be deeply hurt. She stands in the position of a mother to her. These are the only two women in her life right now, and there is nobody else she can talk to.

**SP:** But then do you really believe that in today’s relation, in the present world, people do confide in their relatives?

**SD:** I would not call that people confide in their relatives at all. I just state that it depends, what kind of a relationship they have with that person. It doesn’t rest simply because it is a relationship. It depends on what kind of a relationship. For Aparna, there was nobody else. If she had had a group of friends, she could have had her vantage and confided in them. But after the break up of her marriage, she has been a completely isolated woman. Look at her peculiar history… It is because of that and not because of any generalizations I do. So how she cut her off from her father, because of her mother. Her mother died. She went away having in a defiant position. She married the man of her choice, and the marriage broke later. So she is almost without any kind of support, except these two women. *One thing which I do not ever do is generalizations. I never generalize about anything because, each individual human being is specific, different, unique. As a writer that is how I see human beings. Each one is unique and what we do depends on not only how we are, but also on the situations present in our lives.*

**SP:** You have very well said that each human being is different, rather than saying each woman is different…
SD:  *Gender can be no barrier.* We have been made by nature, created by nature, almost the same in many things, except the difference of gender, which is partly physiological and anatomical and partly social. Women’s body is biologically constituted by nature to bear and nurture a child. So these differences are there, which we have no control over. There are also social things which have been taught like, if you are a girl you need to behave like this. If you are a boy, you will behave in a particular manner. I love that ad, I don’t know whether you have seen it. Madhuri Dixit comes at the end of it “Ladke nahin rotein hain... Ladke rotein hain, Rulate nahin hain.” A fine way of referring to the social construction and indicating that men can also cry.*To me, I would see human beings like that, as individuals, as persons.* You know, some boys feel like crying and they may cry. But one requires a lot of courage for that. My younger son, when he was very small, liked to do embroidery. He wished to do it and he did. Suddenly, he realized its not for the boys and now if I tell him he will kill me. These are all kinds of distinctions made by the society. Even I hate cooking and stitching.

SP:  When you say this, my mind goes back to the novel *Ships that Pass*, in which you mentioned about the *Naths* (nose ring), one of the worst ornaments that has ever been designed.

SD:  All Maharashtrians had that. My father hated it. Don’t ever wear that! He hated even that little thing which south Indians wear. “So aweful to make a hole in the noses!”, he used to say. “So unhygienic!”
**SP:** What keeps you full of life when you write? You deal with the human beings, you deal with their nature, you deal with how life functions for every individual. Sometimes, coincidentally, sometimes not so coinciding. It is your own personal weaving of the story. How do you drive yourself to get inside the mind of so many characters, who are so vital. You weave a knit of lives for them and make them alive for the reader. What drives you for writing such stories, which become compelling for the person to read, if one wants to live and not just exist. Like, “Ahalya’s story” is everybody’s story. An individual’s story, Every Individual’s story. The desire for independence, the want to live her own life, as a human being as well. What drives you to write something which is so phenomenal!

**SD:** Hard to answer. Nothing drives me. It is something which is in oneself. I have to give expression to this thing. In the morning, when I get up, I just wait to go to my writing table. Early morning I have a strong urge. I am not driven. It is my own desire to express the things, like it is for all the artists. It is hard to grapple with why you perform the act like writing.

**SD:** Every story is like an inner narrative, I will not call it a story, I’ll call it the life narrative, you weave it around a number of characters. There are so many characters, how they come to your mind. Each character has one’s own story. Like Madhuri has her own, Shree Hari Pandit has, Aparna has and even Jyoti has a major story. And these people are different. Yet they come together in some way and become a part of each other’s lives. Still, they have a very significant tale to tell independently. How do you get absolutely different people together?
Isn’t it how it is in our life? Each one of us being a part of our relational network is connected. It is a part of our own individual framework, we have our own stories and I am only the narrator. I narrate their (people’s) stories. They come to me. It’s almost like they are telling me, ‘tell our story’. I have to tell. As I go on writing, I discover their stories. Sometimes, like Shri Hari’s story. Shree Hari came first in Shadow Play. In Shadow Play, he was the young boy who sang at Rohit and Aru’s wedding. It begins with wedding. The novel is a Sequel to A Matter of Time, and all its characters come back in Shadow Play. And then in Shadow Play, you have this wedding being held. The priest comes from Bombay to perform the wedding. Aru’s aunt, Premi, she brings him. Because it’s a maharashtrian wedding. In Bangalore you do not get Maharashtrian priests. And with the priest, there is a young boy. A sulky looking boy, with shaven head, wearing jeans and T-shirt. All that he is in the role, there is to sing the Mangalashtakam. His grandfather tells the story there. This young boy, who looks sulky and dressed like a proper Brahmin in the wedding, otherwise seen wearing jeans and T-shirt, sings. Afterwards, in Shadow Play, there is a performance to which Aru and Rohit go. There again he is singing. That is the same boy and Rohit teases Aru saying ‘he is in love with you. He is fascinated.’ To me, Shri Hari did not stay there. He followed me even when the novel was over. He came with me. He was there in my mind and one day I was listening to some music by one young singer, a beautiful male voice and, suddenly, that appeared Shri Hari Pandit. They came together superimposed. And, this novel began. He enters into the novel and it becomes his story. I discovered his story, as I went on writing about his grandfather and grandmother, his step brother, his father, his step mother whom he hates, step brother whom he loves, and about his own mother who died and who he is afraid of on account of having committed suicide. The whole story came to me as I wrote the novel. I did not know when I began. So, you see, there is no drive, it’s a discovery. It’s so fascinating, it’s like an adventure. But it all happens in the mind. Writing a novel is an adventure. Even Aparna, I just had this doctor in my mind. I do not know why I had this doctor in my mind, and as I went on, there came Dandekar, who for me was a very important character, a very significant character, and came her mother Sulu, and then the family and Jyoti. Jyoti came with her own family, with her baggage and her story, and
her children and her marriage. So, I sort of discover them when I write, they come to me from somewhere, I do not know from where. That is the mystery. The whole mystery of writing a novel is you do not know from where these ideas and these characters come from. Then you have to work it out. I may get them but I have to write it out. And the journey from here to there is the hardest journey. You must be also knowing. Anyone who writes even a letter, or even a thesis for example, it's all in one's mind which is to be put on paper.

**SP:** As a reader to read your novel, one has to be very alert. Readers have to know what is happening in the past, they have to catch every nuances, even if you have just mentioned it. The reader cannot afford to drop it out. One may get the detail somewhere and then one has to flip over and see what is happening. And the stories, the way you have linked them is amazing. I cannot say, it is linear. Nor the narrative is fixed as the first person or the third person either. At one place, Aparna’s story evolves as a narrative. Elsewhere, Jyoti’s story takes shape, then, suddenly, Ahalya’s story is interlaced. It is so difficult for the reader to stay alert and grasp at times. How difficult it must be for you to get all these people together, keeping a story in your mind and yet weaving their lives independently and accomplish the writing.

**SD:** I will tell you what is difficult. Novel is written over a long period of time. That is the problem. Sometimes, after two years, you have to go back and find out you have lost something. It’s the practical part which is difficult. Putting them together, the story as it is all craft. There is something which as a writer you just have to do. If you can’t do it, you are not a writer, you may stop writing.

**SP:** Everything is there but one has to stay alert. Isn’t it so for the reader?
**SD:** I believe in the reader who simultaneously works. I do not believe in explaining things. I believe in the intelligent reader, which is why I was very angry, when some of the young writers say language is not important. Our readers will understand our kind of language. If a writer writes more difficult language, readers will not understand. You can’t take your readers for granted like that.

**SP:** I read the novel *Strangers to Ourselves* after finishing *Ships that Pass*. During that time I was also reading commercial fiction, wherein I found so much of factual description. If I don’t know a place, like Turkey or Venice, the given description would portray a picture to me. After that, the novel *Strangers to Ourselves*, means something different to me. Having read that, I felt as though nothing is outside, but I grasped what is within. When it is so difficult for the reader to grasp everything and to stay alert, What about the writer? Taking so many characters together, keeping the story emotionally alive, seeing that one remains practical too. Definitely one gets emotionally attached to the characters. Practically also while looking at them, they should not become too thick, nor the story should turn nagging in one way or the other. It should also not get prolonged. How to describe your writing at stretch on such comprehensive scale.

**SD:** Writing is a physical job. Actually it’s like putting the things together. My writing is always like a jigsaw puzzle. I do not write in the chronological order.
**SP:** You incorporate the stream of consciousness technique. You write something which is so subjective. In subjective writing, we tend to be lost in our own range of thinking…

**SD:** To me, in writing control is extremely important. You never become self indulgent. You never write what you think, your thoughts, or in other words, you never write from your head. Whenever you write, you write through your character. So that control should never go. In *Moving On*, I knew that one child was not of Manjari. It was her sister Malu’s. I had to keep that out. I would not let the reader know that secret. I had to sort of talk about the child and somehow never made the reader aware that this child is not hers. But then, there was the time when the child was not with her, because she got the child after her mother’s death. In fact, she takes over the child after the death of Mai. So those were a few years, when she was alone with her son. And that is also there in the book. When her husband dies and she lives with her son in somebody else’s house, the daughter is not there. But only a very alert reader would know that, where is that girl? It is revealed only in the end. Sachi is not her daughter, but her sister’s daughter. But there I had to work very hard. That is there.

**SP:** In *Ships that Pass*, you never reveal for long pages that Geetu the child, is actually dead. After a long lapse, we get to know that she has actually passed away. Tara is caught up for a while by the fact. She is emotionally down because the child is no more, and it is kept hidden. And here also in *STO* you do not reveal, who is this ‘he’, managing this ‘he’ for so long. And if we miss that ‘he’ in inverted quotes,…

**SD:** In fact, in the proofs, many corrections had to be because, at times, the ‘he’ was left without the inverted commas. I had to work very hard at that. Yes, I know these are practical things and these are not the things which should cause big problems. Basically, I believe that the reader also has to work, because I also work as a reader. Before everything else I am a reader, long before I became a writer, I had been a reader. As a
reader, I know I used to work. I read the Russian books. There, you have to work hard to remember the names. I never said that I would not read that book because I didn’t understand these names. I didn’t know who was who. I went on reading because I loved the story. Any reader, who is interested in the story, will be able to go on with it. And what if there is a little element of mystery! All books contain an element of mystery. I had read in a book. In that book, a line says, ‘the first mystery story was or the first question was, who is the father?’ Because that is always the story. So, it begins from where lies the mystery of this world. A mystery is there in all our lives, somewhere or the other. As a writer I do not believe in explaining everything. I see a lot of Indian writers explaining things, which, I think, is awful. It presumes that your reader is stupid. Readers can work and if one can’t understand, then one should not read the book. Many of us do that. We put it away. If the look doesn’t appeal to me. I will not read it. One does not target one’s writing for a reader.

**SP:** As you mentioned, for a reader to carry on reading there should be an element of mystery in the novels. Is it essential?

**SD:** I do not think that you must have it, it comes sometimes. Meenakshi mukherjee, she was the one who launched my book *Moving On*. I had once long ago told her, that I had had two mystery novels earlier, *Come Up and Be Dead* and *If I Die today*. I remember mentioning to her that I don’t think they are good novels. I said I would not be able to succeed at writing a good mystery novel. When she launched the book she said, atlast here is the mystery novel, you wanted to write. Because, *Moving on* has that element of mystery. In the novel, there is something about the people who try to get the house.
SP: There is also a spooky description of the skeleton, which is hung, called Mr. Bones.

SD: You do not desire to have a mystery in the novel. It so happens, that is how the novel comes to me and that is how it works when I write. This part remains hidden. It is not deliberately done. But Jiji’s daughter’s part, I had to because I could not avoid. It was a part of her life which she had not revealed to anyone except to her parents. Nobody else knew that and most of them were dead. So whatever my intentions are, they are connected to the character. Jiji would not reveal the secret to anyone, she did not even think of it. For her both those children were hers. She promised her dying and unconscious mother that she would take over Malu’s child. For her that was her child. You can see the special bond between her and her son. She is so easy with him. She has brought him up. For her there is no complication. But there was a huge complication in her other relationships. Like it is not an easy relationship between the mother and the daughter. These are the small nuances I get great pleasure in to discover in writing. But, like you said, a lot of this is missed by the readers, unless they are extremely alert.

SP: And if something is missed, will it be evident also that it is missed?

SD: It’s such a thing like her relationship with her son and also between her and her daughter. There is slight difference between the two, which would make it clear that there is something distinct between the son and the daughter. Unlike the latter, she is so easy with her son Aanand and can talk to him comfortably.

SP: We do not even know for a long time that she isn’t Jiji’s daughter, since you keep it hidden.
SD: She gets her son when her husband was alive, it was then that the problems began with her husband and Mai. The daughter was nowhere in the picture. Throughout the novel, she comes as the daughter, so nowhere the reader would know that, she is not her daughter.

SP: There is a philosophical undertone in all of your novels. Each one begins with a quote that has some philosophical element, which tells us, it is not merely a story telling. Like in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, it is from *Dhammapada*, in *Ships that Pass*, there is a quote from Longfellow. *Ships that Pass* was a much more simpler narrative, compared to other novels. What is that one philosophy you look for in your writing or in your life, which seems to govern everybody’s lives? What is that one common philosophy by which every character would wish to breathe free air?

SD: I do not think there is a philosophy that I impose. The epigraphs in *A Matter of Time*, are from *Maitreyi* and *Yagnavalkya* and the third one is from *Nachiketa*. Each one brings out what that section is about. It is very hard to say what philosophy, but in *Small Remedies* it comes out the most. That is the most philosophical of all my novels. It starts off with T.S.Eliot and ends with *Rigveda*. It talks of memory, which is a very important thing to me. It is really the element which makes us human. Both memory and hope. We look at the past (memory) and also at the future (hope). So this is what keeps human life going. Because without memory, we are nobody. First we have the individual memory, and then we have the common human memory of what we were and what we are. For example in *A Matter of Time*, when Sumi dies, people have to perform the ceremonies. It is like people just do it, as if they have always known it and this has to be done. Certain things about life and death are part of our human memory, whereas we also have our individual memories of our own pasts, and these two memories together make us what we are. And to me that is the most important philosophy.
SP: Indeed, Memory plays a significant role in many of your novels, almost all of them. The characters recollect their life and that’s how they govern their present day living. I think same for Shadow Play also.

SD: Shadow Play is a lot about memory. Gopal constantly hunts for memories. Hence, Gopal was the first character who was so philosophical in my novels. In fact, it started with A Matter of Time also.

SP: There is a little bit of sarcasm, when in one of the passages you mentioned with regard to Gopal, as how it would have been, if Sumi had left the home and gone? How did this idea of a male narrator actually struck you?

SD: Again, I don’t know, it just came to me. He was there. It is not so much as narration but introspection.

SP: It would have been a hard task. I would not mention that you write about women and moreover about all. You appear, perhaps, one of the pioneers, who has taken up philosophical thinking in the first person male narration too.

SD: Maybe philosophical thinking is neither male nor female. There is no gender.

SP: There is nothing which is portrayed as ideal. Be it Aparna having a great professional life or Hari being traditional in nature. Yet neither of them is ideal in any ways. They do not hold on to anything. Even in the case of other characters, each one is a
combination of both positive and negative traits. There is no character who is ideal in any sense. Every character has one’s own perfections or imperfections. You have not idealized any character, how come so?

SD: That is life, isn’t it? I am not writing on ideal situations.

SP: Be it an elder, you have not portrayed them too in that manner.

SD: Do you think the older you become, the nicer you turn out to be? Not at all.

SP: Perhaps, Wiser you may become, truly…

SD: Sometimes you remain as stupid. Sometimes you turn out to be more stupid. I do not believe in all these generalizations like the one the older you become the wiser you may grow. You know people are human, and they are full of imperfections. We live a life which has flawed all of us. In spite of that we are able to care for each other. That is a miracle of this world. It is of course not in being an ideal. We all have flaws. Even your own parents for that matter. As a child you saw them as heroes/ heroines. But when you grow up you realize, they are full of flaws. But it doesn’t stop you from loving them. And parents especially see their children, as they grow up, with a number of flaws. You see husband and wives. They don’t see each other as ideals. In the whole idea of sexual relationship, this kind of idealization is a myth. It was born during the middle ages in Europe, wherein the medieval courts, had the idea of courtly knights and their ladies. It was love which was never consummated upon. One would love the lady. But it was true love. In real life, men make their wives pregnant year after year. This is the truth and I believe in the truth. And I don’t believe in anything false, however beautiful it maybe.
And to me the truth is always beautiful. *In the Country of Deceit* as well, Devyani sees Ashok not as a wonderful character, but she discerns his cruelty. She knows that somebody comes across by his car. He gets up and down and beats up the person. To her, that gentle person appears horrible too. But that doesn’t stop her from loving him.

**SP:** *In the Country of Deceit* and *Strangers to Ourselves*, you have rendered a bold perception of how the characters don’t have guilt, like when the heroine enters into the pre marital relationship.

**SD:** She does feel guilty.

**SP:** Guilt, not in the negative sense. She doesn’t have that guilt, or dislikeness for what she has done. I mean, this is quite positive.

**SD:** But she is guilty because of Ashok’s marriage. She sees the child. He talks about the child and that is what hurts her, and that is really the reason why she perceives it not as dirty, but as a moral wrong. Her sense of morality is very strong. When she feels that what she is doing is wrong, Devyani gives it up. It is not because somebody might have told her. So many people have made this mistake that her sister or Aunt forces her. Nobody knows except her sister, who taunts whether she is going only for physical gratification. Later her Aunt gets to know. These are the only two people and both are concerned with her, more than anyone else. It is not because of them, but due to her own inner feelings and moral sense of wrong. She feels it is not she who is betraying anybody but he who betrays. That’s how she absolves herself in the beginning. Both Aru and Devyani possess a very strong sense of morality.
SP: Yet this has been shown very positively, as something natural which can happen. There is nothing to hold back and hide one’s feelings for other person.

SD: She never does it.

SP: In the novel *Strangers to Ourselves* also, Aparna keeps it away from herself. She hides the fact. She is against the idea of marriage. She does not want marriage because of her own past. But still there is no scope of guilt. You allow the characters to progress in whatever they do. You don’t pull them back by imposing your sense of right or wrong.

SD: They have to feel it from inside within themselves. Some reviewer also once said that, I am not there to judge my characters. No author can judge her characters. If they judge and find themselves wrong, they will give it up. I can’t sit and say that Devyani or Aparna or for that matter, anybody is doing wrong. It’s not for me. That has been taken up very progressively by other characters and the society as well. Hari is observed not only by Taimavshi, but Jyoti and Aparna as well. Infact, both Taimavshi and Madhu tell Aparna, why don’t you go and sleep with him. It is easily dealt with yet…

I don’t think in today’s world, the idea of pre-marital sex, even when both the partners are unmarried, is not a big deal. It may be a big deal, if you live in a closed society, or in a conventional family. If one wants to get married, one’s reputation should be intact. Otherwise, I don’t think it matters. I don’t think girls are too much scrutinized. The said character tries to keep away from sex mainly because she doesn’t want to initiate herself. She wants him to take the step, which he does and she enjoys herself completely. The whole idea of “sex being wrong” is imposed by the society.
SP: One takes up such an endeavour to portray a new world which is gradually emerging. The idea of morality has changed. I mean look at the way we now view at homosexuals.

SD: It was considered a sin at one point of time. People wouldn’t even talk about it. If there is one in the family, it would stay completely hidden. But now it is no longer so. It is also happening in India to some extent yet not completely. In the west it is much more open. I mean these are the things, and changes in the world. After all, writing mirrors the society. So I can’t write of the 19th century morality in my 20th century novels.

SP: Today, nobody lives in the Victorian era. But then, it has truly inspired a bold change.

SD: I took the first step in 1971, when I wrote the short story called “Intrusion”. I think that was my first real story in which I found my voice, and I think it was a very important story for me to write. In that story, there is a couple who had been arranged marriage recently. They go for their honeymoon and stay in a guest house. That evening, the wife can feel that her husband is waiting for the night. She becomes nervous. She thinks, she doesn’t know this man. They have scarcely met. She wants to chat with him. She wishes to know what he thinks, and feels, and how he felt when he met her first, you know, to be a friend first. In fact, for that particular story, I was a little hesitant, but once it came, it came in a flow. I don’t think I have compromised on what I wanted to write for any reason.

SP: The stories are like that. The main character does not bother...
SD: But, it is true. For a man the urge is different. Dandekar says, a man is chained to his libido. That’s very true. It is not the man’s fault. That’s how he is made by nature. These are the things which were not talked about in those days. It was nothing great or anything special for me to write them. I just wrote what came to me and fortunately nobody took much note of this.

SP: At least what is depicted in *In Country of Deceit*, the concept of man’s post marital affair and a woman’s pre-marital one, is easily observed today.

SD: Absolutely. It can happen very naturally.

SP: And even if it does not happen the feeling for the other person, despite being hidden, stays… And I think it happens much more than one knows. What criticism did you receive for it?

SD: Nothing negative. The main criticism was that Ashok was not a nice man, how could she fall in love with him? You don’t love a person because one is perfect. There is no ideology behind why one loves another person. So that was the only thing. There was nothing about an affair as such. Nobody criticized that. In fact, it is because I write in English. If I had written in an Indian language, there would have been much more criticism for such things. I had a good friend, Anupama Niranjana, She writes in kannada. She wrote a short story in which a woman aborts a child. She got hate letters and phone calls. This was, of course, many years ago. Whereas I wrote “The Death of a Child.” In fact, in the 70’s. In the early days, I wrote a number of stories which poured out my thoughts, feelings and observations. Like in the said story, a woman and her husband get two children. When the woman conceives the third time, she feels not to have the child. The husband asks her to take her own decision. ‘You do what you want.’ She decides for
an abortion. In the story, I have described the process of abortion, portraying her experience she undergoes when she wakes up. How she feels an emptiness within. She feels like she is haunted by the ghost of her dead child. *One of the critics remarked that, it was a feminist story. This is not Feminism. If you are a feminist, you don’t long for your dead child. I mean I can’t believe this, but it was the only criticism I received.*

Mrudula Garg, the Hindi writer, wrote about women’s breasts and she was held for obscenity. Even the police came to arrest her. All was quite impossible to believe. I wrote a story about lesbians. It was called “The Window”. Not a single comment on that. Because it was written in English, nobody read that. Nothing was ever said, no social comment on any of my novels. In a way liberating, in other way frustrating. You feel you are not getting any response from the readers. During early days the response was more or less blank. I didn’t even know I had readers. Actually, I wrote about a huge number of short stories for *Femina*. Even in the 90’s, I met people who used to come to me and say ‘I read your short story’, so it gave me a wide readership. But, surprisingly, almost everybody said, “they are not the stories you expect to find in a woman’s magazine.” In their views, they were neither romantic, nor did they engage with gaudy romances like a boy meeting a girl. On the contrary to their expectation, they were about abortion, the first night, the suhaag night business. I find these responses absurd.

SP: It is amazing to know a writer and a person like you who belong to an altogether different generation holds on to this kind of view.

SD: From the beginning, I have a different view of things where there is no room for false romanticism. There can be real romance. Real romance does not include false ideas, like Devyani and Ashok, Aparna and Hari. Once a critic remarked that a talk during the love scenes is quite juvenile. Yeah! Lovers are juvenile. Once a friend took me along when her boyfriend had come to meet her. I didn’t know the reason for ‘*Kabab mein Haddi.*’ I was much younger than her, hence, kept on giggling to myself all the time. It’s a kind of false romanticism that I reject. True love is not romanticism. I think Devyani’s
in *In the Country of Deceit* and Rohit’s in *A Matter of Time* is symbolic of true love. Rohit sees Aru in front of her home in *A Matter of Time* and romance between them starts. Later, turns into love. Kasturi and Gopal in *Shadow Play*, also at that age, experience true love. I have not written whether they consummate or not, but leave the relationship there. But the way they come close to one another, they heal each other. I think that is very beautiful. A very wonderful relationship between these people, despite his daughter Aru being much against it. Her sister Charu tells her, ‘Are you not happy for him?’ I think these are the emotions which are real. At certain age, one reads love stories, in fact, loves frothy love stories. Even today many Indian writers in English are writing romances, like Preeti Shenoy, Ravinder Singh. It’s fine at a certain age because readers belong to all ages. Yet serious books are also there for the readers who need serious books.

**SP:** Well, such love stories are only for a particular age group. One reads and then forgets them. They are rather physical and factual. I think, serious books are remembered more.

**SD:** There is a difference between different kinds of writing.

**SP:** In your novels, you generally try to grasp inner dilemmas. There is a quest to identify one burning essence of human living. The quest for living is the identification of that one essence. Every character goes through one or the other inner dilemma within. It might not be so obvious at the surface level, but there is a dilemma within experienced by your protagonists and in most of the other characters as well. In normal course of human life, we also have at every point certain dilemmas. It could be physical, like in looking at a career. Or it could be emotional in other way. Could you comment on the same?
SD: Whatever I have told, that’s what I want to tell. I don’t make any decisions before writing that it is what I wish to tell. What comes, comes through people’s stories. First the people come home, then the dilemma comes through them. I don’t create the dilemma. Nor do I create the plot. To me, it’s all a part of the people and the issues faced by them in their lives. It depends on what kind of people they are. So whatever the dilemma presents is because of the particular person being what he/she is. In Small Remedies, one of the major thing was motherhood and the main character Madhu, gets a child. For her motherhood takes over her entire life. The son dies, when he is around 18 or so. And she is left with nothing, completely blank. That is a terrible dilemma. There is nothing worse in life than losing a child. It’s not that I deliberately wanted to talk about a child or highlight that, there is a woman who loses her child. It came to me in the course of my novels. These are not the things you choose.

SP: Thanks a lot ma’am for giving me the opportunity to talk to you personally and allow to have this insightful experience. It has been extremely delightful.