

EMANCIPATION OF WOMAN IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *SMALL REMEDIES*

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Abstract

In Small Remedies (2000) Shashi Deshpande voices the true emancipation of women. It is a complex novel dealing with various aspects of life like love, marriage, courage, sincerity, belief, death, pain, ambition, music, about the power exerted by time and by words. In Small Remedies Shashi Deshpande has tried to explore human relationships outside marriage. As a postmodern novelist she offers a foretaste of passionate love between man and woman beyond the periphery of religion, through art and music at a time when life for Indian women was governed entirely by male dictates in an orthodox Hindu society. Small Remedies is a novel with an extra-ordinary emotional range. For the first time in Deshpande's fictional world, two main characters – Leela and Bai do not remain confined within the four walls of the house and work out their own salvation. Motherhood occupies a significant position. Through fiction, Deshpande offers a fruitful glimpse into the evolution of the modern women.

Key Words : *emancipation , human relationship, salvation, modern women...*

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In *Small Remedies* (2000) Shashi Deshpande voices the true emancipation of women. It is a complex novel dealing with various aspects of life like love, marriage, courage, sincerity, belief, death, pain, ambition, music, about the power exerted by time and by words. Deshpande in this novel tells about the making of a writer, singer and a social worker. She visualises a hopeful future for women in their shared experience as women. Madhu and Leela, Savitri Bai Indorekar and Hasina, Madhu and Lata- all learn about their true 'self' in the company of female folks in a better way and achieve their social and spiritual identities. They defy the patriarchal, male dominated society. Through their occupations and skill these women create a niche for themselves and defy subservience to man. They realise the authenticity of the lives they lead and struggle to discover for themselves their own impulses, reactions, desires and needs. As one of the researchers Urvashi Sinha points out, "Shashi Deshpande through her novel *Small Remedies* projects the quest for self-realization of Indian women in a hostile patriarchal society" (Sinha 129).

In *Small Remedies* Shashi Deshpande has tried to explore human relationships outside marriage. As a postmodern novelist she offers a forestage of passionate love between man and woman beyond the periphery of religion, through art and music at a time when life for Indian women was governed entirely by male dictates in an orthodox Hindu society. A scholar Chandra Holm rightly puts it,

Small Remedies clearly bears the stamp of Shashi Deshpande's writing. In the manner typical to her writing the story is revealed through the inner consciousness of one central character; life around is focused through the eyes of this

character and understood through the mind of this one character. Not just in this aspect but also in her special way of looking at details, love for imagery, in her deliberately slow manner of unveiling the plot that is full of sudden twists and turns, in her ability to look into the depths of human heart and give expression to the feelings buried in there, and in the very life, in the importance given to dreams to unravel events, this is a Deshpande book. (Holm 64)

Deshpande has beautifully interwoven the delicate relationships of human beings. MadhuSaptarishi, the narrator undertakes the task of writing the biography of “SavitriBaiIndorekar, the ageing doyen of Hindustani music belonging to Gwalior, the Gharana” (Deshpande 28). In the life of SavitriBaiIndorekar, Ghulam Saab occupies an important position. Similarly Joe has a significant presence in Leela alias Sindhu’s life. Som too is important to Madhu, but in spite of her intense love for him, she thinks and acts in an independent way.

Deshpande writes more about the creative writer’s grief, agony and problems. The story is narrated by Madhu, Leela’s niece who travels to Bhavanipur, a small town on the Maharashtra-Karnataka border, to meet Savitribai. Madhu, who is disturbed and depressed with the death of her seventeen year-old son Aditya, runs her aggrieved mind in retrospection to make sense of her life. Madhu is not very confident of her capability as she gave up writing long back but wishes to write the biography as to restore her sanity. Before her marriage, she worked as the editor of a magazine published about Bombay and its people. Madhu immersed herself completely in the role of a wife and mother.

Death is not the end but rather a beginning for Deshpande’s characters. The untimely death of her only son Aditya completely shatters Madhu. The old and loyal family friend Chandru wants her to come out of this trauma and so requests her to write a biography. Besides, Chandru has full confidence in Madhu’s capability as a writer. Madhu tries to make some sense out of her life and takes up the proposal. She gets mental food which brings her

back to life. Even as a child, while staying in Neemgaon, a small town in Karnataka, Madhu was intrigued by Savitribai's life and the mystery that surrounded her life style with a Muslim partner, Ghulam Saab. But now since "She is the last of the musicians of the great classical style one of the handful of purists, the doyen of all Hindustani vocalists... Indeed of all musicians." (165) Madhu feels she should write her biography for, "Everyone likes to read about real people. And Savitribai's life has been so controversial that it cannot but attract attraction and controversy." (19)

Quest for identity makes her take up the task. Deshpande takes us into the interior of the protagonist's minds with a marked boldness. She brings out the tabooed issue of a women's sexuality in her writings. In Bhavanipur, as the story unfolds, Baiji does not show any acquaintance when Madhu meets her. She rather treats her like a professional writer. Madhu goes back and forth in time, drawing out, remembering and telling the facts and memories about Leela, Bai and Munni – Bai's daughter. In the background, there is Madhu's story- story of a grieving mother and a shocked wife who loses everything in an instant.

Shashi Deshpande stresses the importance of honesty and courage as well as the ability to accept own role in suffering. Being true to one's own self is a difficult task especially for women. A person has to deny the social norms, family pressure and even a child sometimes, so as to attain what one wants to. In the present dispensation women are caught on the horns of dilemma, whether to affirm one's independence at the cost of values fostered over centuries, or to be lost in the midway of apathy, drudgery and slavery. For SavitriBaiIndorekar, life can draw its meaning and sustenance only for music. While narrating her story Savitribai insists on non-interruption and tells Madhu that her love for music was ingrained in her by her mother. She says, "It was my mother who showed me the beauty of music." (27) She gives the credit to her mother for the passion that she has for music. Madhu's grandmother being from the traditional, orthodox Hindu family restricts Savitribai from learning music as it was looked down upon. Savitribai's enthusiastic exhibition of her talent and passion for music in a family gathering is brutally curbed by her grandmother. The grandmother has internalised the patriarchal codes and tries to socialise

the child by handling down behavioural patterns and set roles. Savitribai's mother tried to help her by sending her to music class but failed as she was restricted by her husband. He "thundered at her mother... Do you want your daughter to be one of those women?" (29)

An institution of marriage is paid topmost priority. It tries to control the past of a woman's life, the life she has lived before marriage. Marriage is not looked upon as a subordination of one by the other but a common pursuit of an elevating *Dharma*, religion. The family members think of marrying Savitribai and capturing her in wedlock. She is born in a traditional Maharashtrian family and is married too in the same type. Thereafter she leads 'a sheltered life of the daughter-in-law of an affluent Brahmin family' (38) in ShukrawarPeth, Pune, an area famous for reformist movements. She finds her way to achieve her aim in life. Her father-in-law who was a reformist as Bai says:

He believed in girl's education and all the young girls at home were going to school despite much muttered criticism from the women themselves. Nevertheless there was a clear line of demarcation between what females could do and what they couldn't. Associating with musicians definitely lay outside the LakshmanRekha. (218)

Deshpande has focused on the benevolent and patronizing aspect of patriarchy. Being a reformist the father-in-law thinks of the betterment of his daughter-in-law. He generously arranges a female tutor for her music lessons. The tutor comes along with a 'tabalji' a muslim who plays tabla. Music without the accompaniment is dissonance. The tutor, "In turn introduces a 'tabla', therefore a tabalji. A man, since no woman played a tabla. A Muslim man, sitting a little distance from the two women, on a seperate piece of carpet".(219)

Like the other novels, Deshpande has given a place to extra-marital affair in this novel also. Her heroines find solace and sense of autonomy in breaking the norms of society and cheating their life partners. Adultery is a form of revenge. It begins with the Muslim tabalji

who is soft spoken, well behaved, kindhearted and a real artist. She falls in love with him neglecting the fact that he was a Muslim. He becomes “Something more than ‘a pair of hands’ providing the rhythm, the taal for her music.” (29)

Breaking the social norms is a form of protest in the eyes of men. Savitribai herself was married and belongs to a rich orthodox family. She is happy in the company of the tabalji, Ghulam Saab. She faces anger, hostility, and is ridiculed at by the other women in the family. But so devoted she is to her music that she leaves the comforts of her in-laws and elopes to Bhavanipur with her lover. Bai walks out of the institute of marriage which is a bold and radical step in her times. Unlike the other earlier protagonists of Deshpande who try to find their salvation within the four walls of the home, Savitri Bai leaves the comforts of a rich home and faces the hurdles that come in her way to become a successful singer. Bai's relationship with Ghulam Saab adds more to the social stigma. She conceives before leaving the house and has a child from that man. She gives birth to a girl, Munni, but fails in her duties as a mother to give love and warmth to Munni because her aim is to pursue her genius in music and not to lead a domestic life. Bai never understands Munni's needs and as a result she hates both Bai and Ghulam Saab.

Economic independence, creative freedom and liberty in career are the expectations of the women. To gain creative freedom, Bai uses Ghulam Saab's influence and his contacts to come in limelight. She uses him to fulfil her own desires and to become a well known and a renowned singer. As Hasina, Ghulam's grand daughter says:

Ghulam Saab was the one who made Bai known. He met people on her behalf, he arranged her programs, and he made the contacts for her. It was not easy for a woman to do these things then, it's not easy even now. Bai would never have been able to manage this part of her professional life. (274)

Madhu sees another dimension in Bai's personality like dominance, ambitions and hardwork. She sacrifices many things for the achievement of her goal:

And yet there's the other Bai I see as well, a calculating ambitious woman, using the man for her own ends, abandoning him finally when her need for him was over. Was this how it was. True, Bai is a worldly woman, but when she sings she transcends her own wordliness. Why not then in love as well? She had a child by that man before she left her husband's home. What else but passion could have led to the conceiving of a child? But let me not forget that she abandoned that child when she left home with her lover. I (Madhu) am suddenly halted by the thought. She left her baby scarcely a year old behind. Could a woman who did that be capable of great love? Why not? Isn't this itself a sign of her love for the man? (176)

In *Small Remedies*, it is the notion of respectability that confines a woman's talents and demands a heavy sacrifice from her. Bai had a firm belief that she will be Pundit Kashinath Buwa's pupil though he has expressed his unwillingness several times to accept her as his pupil. She deserts everything to become his pupil and follows him to Bhavanipur. She undergoes painful and treacherous moments to meet him.

Past and present is dexterously presented by Deshpande. Madhu in her childhood was Savitribai's neighbour and a friend of her daughter Munni. She leads a life of fury and there is emptiness and no direction in her life. Though Munni is Bai's and Ghulam Saab's daughter, she denies Ghulam Saab to be her father. Forever she is fabricating stories about her father's home in Pune and ultimately she goes back to Bai's in-laws house. When Madhu's father praises Munni's voice and asks her to sing, she keeps mum. Here again the mother-daughter relationship in Deshpande's novel comes to the fore. Munni hates music, hates to be exceptional and wants to be commonplace. Unfortunately she dies young but Bai seems to efface Munni completely from her life. She never discusses or mentions either Ghulam Saab or Munni. Even when on the verge of death, Bai makes all the points that are to be mentioned in her biography very clear. At the end of her life, she has her music

accompanists and Ghulam Saab's grand-daughter Hasina is with her and no other kith and kin.

The novel projects radical characters. Madhu's maternal aunt, Leela is another radical who dares to defy the so called norms of the society. Leela and Kaveri, Madhu's mother was considered two rebels in the family. Kaveri is a rebel because she marries a widower much older to her and a non-Brabmin. Leela is a multifaceted personality. She, after becoming a widow stays with her in-law's family instead of going back to the comforts of her parental home. She is a communist who participates in the 1942 'Quit India Movement' and indulges in all daring acts. She takes the call of her heart seriously and worked accordingly. She remarries a Christian doctor Joe. She is labeled as the black sheep of the family, because she as a widow, remarried and what was worse, infinitely worse married a Christian man." (45) Leela is the first person to disown caste and defy customs and tradition: "Leela moved away from caste and disowned it. It meant nothing to her, which is why she alone in the family accepted my parents, marriage, rejoiced with them and invited them to stay wither." (98)

Even after her husband, Vasant's death she stays in the same house and takes up a job to support her family and the in-laws. After marrying Joe she continues to work and earns her livelihood and does not depend on Joe like Urmi in *The Binding Vine*. Leela is economically independent and does not experience gender discrimination. This is due to the support extended to her by Ghulam Saab in her career. Both Bai and Leela are radical feminists who dare to pursue their field of interest. Throughout her life she continues to work for the upliftment of women belonging to lower strata, especially the women connected with mills. Madhu narrates Leela's suffering in her effort to create a place in the male stratified system.

Death is a recurring theme in almost all the novels of Deshpande. It tolls like a persistent bell in her novels. After Joe's death, Leela goes back to the Marutichawl house. Leela and Joe's relationship is very romantic. No two persons can be more different. Joe, a

sophisticated doctor, is a great lover of literature and is ready to quote from English authors immediately. Leela knows very little English, wears mill sarees and continues to work for poor people. Yet they love each other passionately. Joe waits for fifteen years to marry her and the marriage is done in the face of strong opposition from his snobbish daughter Paula.

In Deshpande's fictional world, inter-religion people and marriage enter for the first time. After Gopal, Deshpande creates very convincing male characters in Joe and Tony. Joe is generous, large-hearted human being who gives love not only to his near and dear ones but also to Madhu, Leela's niece also. It is Joe who stirs in Madhu the inclination of love for literature. Tony becomes a sincere brother of Madhu who is always there for her happiness and sorrow. Tony and his wife Rekha frequently visit Madhu when she is facing loneliness and dejection due to her son Aditya's loss in Bhavanipur. Tony takes the BhauBeej ritual so sincerely that he travels all the way from Bombay to Bhavanipur.

Child abuse is seen in *Small Remedies* as in ManjuKapur's *Home*. Madhu has a physical relationship when she was only fifteen and faces the trauma of her father's impending death. Her father's young friend tries to comfort her and assure. Jasbir Jain analysed the situation psychologically thus:

It is at this particular time that the love and warmth of a human being is able to provide sustenance. Human touch and belonging can pull someone out of the despair; the sexual act is also a release of tension and a restoration of balance. (Jain 120)

Madhu displaces this incident in her memory due to the shock of her father's death. Years after, a painting in an exhibition revives her memory. She recollects the memory of the pre-marital sex she had with her father's friend who committed suicide out of guilt. After a disturbing dream, Madhu discloses it to Som and their life is ruined. Their marriage which is based on love is destroyed in a moment. Som constantly asks her for more truth and becomes suspicious and cruel. He constantly demands to know the truth. Madhu says:

I can sense an enormous grief under his suspicion and his anger. I can feel the weight of his grief. I even share the burden of it with him. At times, I pity him at other times I am filled with a helpless rage. I turn on him in fury then. What does he want? What is it that he wants from me... why is it that something that happened so many years ago makes me a different person in his eyes?... I can not recognize this sad and angry man, distraught, possessed by a madness that seems to have no end. (257)

Shashi Deshpande focuses the violence existing in the society today. During one of their fights, their son Aditya leaves the house and gets killed in a bomb blast during the Bombay riots. The circumstances that led to the sad demise are unbearable for Madhu. She blames herself and Som for it.

Madhu's friendship with Munni is quite intense. Munni tells Madhu about various relationships and also gives hints on various topics such as love, sex, extra-marital relationship and the present affairs in the society. Munni tells Madhu about her father's affair. Madhu starts neglecting and stops entertaining Munni. Munni shifts with her parents from Neemgaon and meets an untimely and unexpected death in a bomb blast.

Madhu stays with Hari and Lata in Bhavanipur and gets a new identity from Baiji as 'A writer from Mumbai'. A female writer is always treated and looked differently from male writers. Deshpande's thoughts are revealed through the epigraph. Chandra Holm writes:

Small Remedies is also a novel that clearly marks the development of the personal philosophy of the writer. No farther than the epigraphs of the books need to be looked at to understand the core of Deshpande's philosophical thoughts, and to trace their development. (Holm 65)

Hari's touch of compassion and her own catharsis bring in a great relief to her troubled heart. But Tony, her step-cousin has much to contribute to her recovery. He advises Madhu:

"I can only say-come back to Som. Do not destroy everything because Adit has gone. It is not fair to either of you, not fair to Adit either." (211) He urges Madhu to use words to express her emotions, for words have great effect. He says: "Without words there can be no ideas, no emotions. We need words, not only to speak but to live out our lives as well. Wordless we are blank, vacant." (163) Madhu's desire to write an honest and true biography of Bai helps in overcoming her sense of loss. Madhu even finds a similarity between herself and Bai as both of them have lost their only child.

The Vedas and myths of Hindu religion are inextricably ingrained in the novel. The epigraph comes from Rigveda and the exquisite Vishnu-stotra also finds its place here. Madhu is continuously haunted by the ultimate truth- death. Lata, Madhu's friend in Bhavanipur suggests that one cannot change the fate. Madhu also understands these facts but cannot endure the pain of living rest of her life without her son. Her feeling of childlessness and emptiness makes her miserable. In a very realistic and moving style, Deshpande portrays the helplessness of a bereaved mother. The readers move by Madhu's misery and sorrow. Herself a motherless child, she takes the vocation of motherhood very earnestly and she gives up writing. For nearly eighteen years she drowns herself in a single identity- Aditya's mother. Hence, her obsession with death is seen throughout the novel.

The novel ends with Hasina's successful musical programme in the temple in spite of all the hurdles. Som calls Madhu back home as it is going to be a year after Adit's death. Leela's and Bai's life teaches Madhu a very crucial fact. Amnesia is not an answer to the grief concerned with death. She feels that as long as there is memory, Adit's loss is never going to be total.

Small Remedies is a novel with an extra-ordinary emotional range. For the first time in Deshpande's fictional world, two main characters – Leela and Bai do not remain confined within the four walls of the house and work out their own salvation. Motherhood occupies a significant position. Through fiction, Deshpande offers a fruitful glimpse into the evolution of the modern women.

Among Indian women writers, Shashi Deshpande is specifically committed to the reorganisation of female subjectivity. Deshpande's fiction tries to find out a way for the emergence of Indian women from their subordinate position which is accentuated by social norms, sacred literature and practice. Her protagonists come out of kitchen and attend to articulate their lives and views through their feminist awareness and introspection. Shashi Deshpande does not believe in militant kind of feminism. She fully knows that changes in the society are gradual and do not take place overnight. Though influenced by Kate Millet and Simone de Beauvoir, Deshpande knows well that their views cannot be applied fully to the Indian life. Indian women have to discover their freedom in their own lives and experiences.

Shashi Deshpande's protagonists are the educated middle class working women. A larger section of the present day Indian society consists of this class. Though economically independent, this woman is very much dependent on her male counterpart as far as emotional and social aspects are concerned. Men have not changed much. A woman works both outside and inside the home. Deshpande wishes that man should also change in the face of the changed situation in a women's life. She does not believe in stereotyped images of Sita, Savitri and Sati. She believes that these stereotypes were propagated by men to suit their own interests. Times have changed and so the norms of society should also change.

Shashi Deshpande's novels reveal her awareness of contemporary social reality. She clearly declares that her novels are not meant for the western readers. Religion and mythology are woven in the psyche of Indian life. Her novels are richly strewn with mythologies, references from Epics, Vedas and Puranas. She is much concerned about family life and human relationships. Deshpande thinks that the human relationships one encounters in society are an extension of the family relationships. Deshpande is not very radical. Her protagonists do not revolt but compromise. Western feminism places the individual above society, family and state.

In India, religion, culture and family are still very important and one cannot conjecture the placing of the individual above society and family. Deshpande seems to believe that gender equality can be achieved through women's share in materialistic resources, participation in the decision making process and, the control over one's body. Then only Indian women can come out of servility syndrome. Shashi Deshpande's fictional world is densely populated and in this novel she covers three generations of people living in a joint family. Deshpande's keen sense of observation enables her to include both urban and rural characters.

Small Remedies works on different levels- personal, social, women's rights, violence, extra-marital relations, obsessions, motherhood etc. The narrative wavers between past and present like almost all the novels by Shashi Deshpande. The novel is full of sub-narratives, exploring the lives of the characters like Savitribai, Leela, Munni and the narrator Madhu herself. The narrator is a writer. Flashback technique is applied in this novel also. The status of women, marital-discord, deaths, extramarital relations, economic problems, cultural conflicts, inter-caste marriage, mother-daughter relationship, issues in joint and nuclear families and art finds place in this novel.

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