

Quest for Self-Realization in *Small Remedies* of Shashi Deshpande

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ABSTRACT

The present paper focuses on the quest for self-realisation of Shashi Deshpande's female characters. Her female characters are mostly educated, employed and housewives also. Her characters range from middle class to higher middle class. All characters play various roles at the different stages of life and in their each role they are expected to remain loyal to their family members especially to their husbands. All these female are in quest of their real identity in the male dominated society. The present paper is an attempt to study the female characters who are longing for their status and real identity in the male dominated society. All the female major characters like Madhu, Munni, Leela, Savitribai are discussed in the light of quest for self-realisation.

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1. Introduction

Shashi Deshpande through her novel *Small Remedies*, projects the quest for self-realization of Indian women in a hostile patriarchal society. Until the women have the courage and come ahead to make their own way of success, they will not achieve the status. To get the independent identity and preserve it one has to struggle hard and fight courageously. This is the message that Deshpande passes on to the Indian women. Deshpande knows well that in the Indian society based on patriarchal mode they will never be allowed to come parallel to the dignity and status of male. The way to have independent identity is not easy. There are many problems, no doubt, but these may be overcome if there is hard determination and real will to resist. Madhu, the chief narrator, is ambitious from her very childhood to have an honourable place in the society, but circumstance through which she is to pass is not favourable. Rather it is tough but she never allows herself to be lost. She manages to obtain the degree of graduation without parental support. Her chastity is molested by her father's friend, but she is not discouraged. Her husband does not care for her will and status. Rather he frequently quarrels with her. Her son at the age of seventeen dies. Madhu gets derailment for the time being, but she comes to the sense and makes the career to have dignity. She lives and works hard remembering her son in her heart.

2. Quest for Self-Realization

In *Small Remedies*, Shashi Deshpande projects the women who have the willingness to preserve the identity and make the career. Deshpande makes honesty an important tool in the quest for self and projects Bai and Munni as failures due to their denial of a certain part of their lives. Madhu and Leela's ability to accept the facts of their life, achieves them success in their quest. But what forms the crux of the novel is the fact that we experience of Bai, Munni and Leela, but she alone have to find her identity by understanding her life. The secret of self-realization is that there is no any other refuge other than oneself. Self refuse is hard to achieve, but it is not impossible. In

her latest novel, *Small Remedies*, Shashi Deshpande seems to have honed her skills to perfection. Her protagonist is still the urban, middle-aged and educated woman, but her canvas has broadened to encompass a cross-section of people who belong to different communities, professions, and a level of society. Madhu Saptarishi, is not much different from her counterparts Indu, Sarita, Jaya, Urmi and Sumi in age, education and family background. Also, all of them in some measure or the other face upheavals in their marriages - upheavals which are inevitable when a woman refuses to conform to her accepted role as wife, mother or sister. But, moving away from her near perfect portrayal of a traditional Kannadiga - Maharashtrian Brahmin family, Deshpande ventures to write about a Goan Christian family and also mentions a Muslim labia player and briefly touches upon his life and the people surrounding him, notably his grand-daughter, Hasina.

In a review, Meenakshi Mukherjee briefly sums up Deshpande's works and observes the noticeable change:

In *Small Remedies*, Deshpande is attempting much more than she did in her earlier novels - all five of them different from each other - but smaller than this in scope.... But none of them gathered up, as this new novel does, in one large sweep, the plurality, diversity and contradictions of our composite culture where an Anthony Gonsalves (the reference to "Amar Akbar Anthony" is deliberate), a Hamidabai and Joe can all be part of Madhu's extended family, and the daughter of Ghulam Saab can opt, though not very easily to get accepted as Shailaja Joshi. (23)

Yet another successful first attempt has been Deshpande's foray into the world of classical music. Madhu is writing the biography of a famous classical singer, Savitribai Indorekar, doyenne of the Gwalior Gharana, and this calls for a deep understanding of Hindustani music on the part of the author. Deshpande never falters and seems to be on familiar ground,

using the jargon and idiom of music quite effortlessly and all the while writing in her impeccable English. As Meenakshi Mukherjee observes:

Of the four remarkable novels I have read in recent times that deal with music - Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music*, Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Bani Babu's Bangla novel *Gandharvi* and now *Small Remedies*, Shashi Deshpande, I think, faces the toughest challenge. This has to do with incompatibility between the discourse of Hindustani music and the English language. (25)

The novel, however, is less about music and more about the fascinating vocalist, Savitribai Indorekar. In spite of Deshpande's repeated denials of being a feminist writer, she creates characters who often contradict such statements. Savitribai is one such character, vividly portrayed and brought to life by the author. Physically she appears to be a frail woman. She is, however, imperious in her attitude to her servants, students, and even her biographer, often giving her instructions on how to conduct the interview. It needed tremendous grit and determination to be born in a traditional, orthodox Brahmin family and make a name for oneself in the field of classical music. Madhu observes the unspoken resentment in Bai's voice when she recalls how she was abruptly asked by her grandmother to stop singing when she was performing as a child during a family gathering. Madhu herself recollects how, "In Neemgaon she was 'the singer woman' and there was something derogatory about the words, yes, I can see that now, about the way they said them" (SR 29).

But Madhu refuses to pander to the publisher's wishes to write a trendy feminist biography. They feel that "Victim stories are out of fashion, heroines are in." (SM 167) As Mukherjee observes that:

Madhu, however, cannot impose the new concept of heroinism on an old-fashioned woman who whitewashes her life through selective amnesia. (28)

She records the life of a young woman who had lived a sheltered life of a daughter-in-law of an affluent Brahmin family, a woman who even as a child had been part of a large family. For a woman with such a background to elope with a Muslim labia player and live in a strange town among total strangers must have required immense courage.

She is aware that her father with his unorthodox ways was an oddity. Being a widower and bringing up a daughter on his own with only a male servant at home, observing no rituals or religious customs and openly indulging in a drink or two every evening, he obviously stood out in a conservative place like Neemgaon. But, looking back, Madhu realizes that while people were willing to overlook her father's eccentricities and his foibles they were not so generous when it came to accepting Savitribai. As Deshpande narrates, "Being a man he could get away with much. He could live the way he wanted without open censure or disapproval" (SR 139). It is only when a woman dares to defy convention that people are shocked. As Madhu observes:

In a sense, neither of us belonged. Munni's family, with her singer mother, absent father and another man - a Muslim - sharing the home, was of course radically, shockingly different. (SR 138)

Madhu also gives the example of Savitribai's father-in-law, who had a mistress, a singer famous for her Thumri singing. It was common knowledge that he visited her regularly. The women looked on in amusement and gossiped about it. They wondered at his choice of a mistress but there was never any outrage over the fact.

For a man to indulge in his love of music and even to have a singer for a mistress was alright. But, for a daughter-in-law to be learning music seriously, as if she was going to be a professional, was scandalous and unthinkable. Though Bai had the support and encouragement of her father-in-law, Madhu could imagine the anger, contempt and ridicule she had to face from the other women when she returned to her life among the women, after her music classes. She could imagine the hostility and the way she would have been cast aside like an untouchable. She says:

To be set apart from your own kind, not to be able to conform, to flout the rules laid down, is to lay yourself open to cruelty. Animals know this, they do it more openly, their cruelty towards the deviant is never concealed. But the subtle cruelty of persistent hostility leaves deeper wounds. There's always the temptation to succumb, to go back to the normal path and be accepted. To resist the temptation speaks of great courage. (SR 221)

Madhu also remembers the gossip surrounding Bai in Neemgaon. There was a Station Director who frequented Bai's house and got her many contracts with the radio, and was generally believed to be her lover. Madhu remembers the children teasing Munni and calling him her mama, a kind of euphemism for a mother's lover. Bai denies the existence of any lover, while recounting her story to Madhu. But to the town, in Madhu's childhood, it was very simple - why would a man go out of his way to do so many favours for a woman, why would he visit her so often? All such assumptions ending finally in the conclusion, "A woman who'd left her husband's home - what morals would she have, anyway!" (SR 222) Madhu is left quite confused at times about Bai's courage or lack of it. She had, undoubtedly, led the most unconventional life anyone in her society would ever imagine. But behind these acts of bravado was a woman who wanted to conform, to be accepted by society.

Savitribai was not the stereotypical feminist with a devil-may-care attitude. This is evident in her blanking out Ghulam Saab's name while relating a story of her life to Madhu, her biographer. This reveals her anxiety to cover up her youthful indiscretions in order to present a picture of respectability. She even goes to the extent of hiding the details of her daughter born through her association with Ghulam Saab. Madhu who is aware of Savitribai's past and her daughter Munni, is unable to digest her indifference to her daughter, more so, because

Madhu herself is a doting mother, grieving over the death of her son.

Madhu feels that she can give Bai the immortality she desires only if she is willing to pay the price of revealing her daughter to the world—a daughter whose existences she had successfully obliterated until then. She cannot understand why, when she had the courage to walk out on her marriage and family, she was so frightened to reveal the existence of her child. Munni, however, desperately hankered after the name her mother had left behind and went to great lengths to dissociate herself from her father and, after a while, her mother, Bai had found conventional life stultifying, but Munni yearned for it all her life. As a child Madhu recollected how Munni refused to accept Ghulam Saab as her father and instead concocted stories about a lawyer father who lived in Pune. She also remembered how the girls in their neighbourhood tormented her with questions, "What's your name? What's your father's name? Where is your father? Who's the man who lives with your mother?" (SR 77) Years later when Madhu met Munni in a bus and recognised her, the latter refused to answer to the name of 'Munni' or even acknowledge her childhood friend. She declared that her name was 'Shailaja Joshi,' trying as it were, to desperately wipe out any connection with her past.

Deshpande, while writing of people like Savitribai and Leela, people who dared to be different, has also created characters like Munni who desperately seek the approval of society. Malathi Mathur, a reviewer, writes:

At the other end of the spectrum is Munni, Savitribai's daughter who turns her back on her mother and all that she stands for, in a desperate desire to conform, having encountered early in life the poisoned barbs that society levels against those who dare to be different. (121)

Apart from Savitribai, Madhu's narrative also includes the saga of another equally, or perhaps more, remarkable woman, her aunt Leela who was "ahead not only of her generation, but the next one as well." (SR 94) She was a fiercely independent woman and was strongly committed to the communist ideology. She had participated in the Quit India Movement, but was critical of Gandhiji's principles of Ahimsa and Satyagraha and thought that it was ridiculous to allow oneself to be beaten up. As she grew older, however, she mellowed down and regretted some of her actions. It was evident that she was no run-of-the-mill activist, but a woman who had the courage of her convictions. She re-signed from her party when she felt that the party's reaction to a political situation was not appropriate.

Though Leela was a generation older than Madhu, she was financially independent and supported herself. When her first husband, Vasanth, died she took up a job and educated her brothers-in-law. She lived in the crowded chawls among the cotton mills and worked for the welfare of the women afflicted with TB. It was this which first brought her into contact with her second husband, Joe, a doctor who had established a clinic especially for TB patients. Leela and Joe were poles apart and Madhu exclaims at the strangeness of Joe falling madly in love with her. He was a widower with two children, spoke impeccable

English and was very widely read, quoting from his favourite writers at the drop of a hat. Literature and music were the two great forces of his life, in addition to medicine. Leela, on the other hand, wore 'ayah sar-ies,' according to Phillo, Joe's housekeeper. She spoke no English and knew nothing of literature or music. She had no sense of humour, according to Joe. But theirs was a wonderful companionship and a beautiful relationship, according to Madhu.

At the foreground of the novel is the story of the narrator Madhu herself. She is commissioned to write the biography of Savitribai. She had always been intrigued, even as a child by Bai's relationship with Ghulam Saab and Munni, their daughter. The novel covers that period of her life when she is grieving over the death of her only child, Aditya. In remembering and retelling the stories of Leela, Savitribai and Munni, she presents the glaring inequalities in gender in society. The pity of it is that some of the victims are not even aware of the injustices heaped on them. Madhu herself is a victim of sorts of which the reader is aware only towards the end of the novel. She had been brought up as a child by two men - her father and Babu, a male servant, but she had no complaints. On the other hand, she felt pity for the children who seemed to be constantly harassed by their mothers.

Deshpande spares no effort to present the picture of life it is without conforming to stereotypes. This is all the more obvious in her portrayal of motherhood, which she seldom glorifies. Her protagonist, Madhu, says:

I get some images of motherhood in the movies I see myself through the songs that speak of 'ma ka pyar.' But real life shows me something entirely different. Munni's mother who ignored her daughter; Ketaki's mother, stem, dictatorial and so partial to her sons; Sunanda, sweetly devious and manipulating. Som's mother, so demanding - none of them conform to the white-clad, sacrificing, sobbing mother of the movies. (SR 183).

But Madhu herself, turned out to be a doting mother and ever perceptive of her son's every need. Therefore it was all the more tragic when Aditya, her son, died in a bomb blast. Madhu's estrangement with her husband, Som, began earlier than this tragedy, when Madhu, waking up after a nightmare, one night, revealed to him a secret which she had locked up in the innermost recesses of her mind. She had slept with a man when she was only fifteen, a man who later committed suicide. Som is unable to accept this of his wife. As one who had been a good husband by any standards and shared a wonderful relationship with his wife, he is now unable to come to terms with this news. He is totally devastated. It does not matter that Som himself had a full-fledged relationship with another woman before his marriage. It is a typical situation where a man may have any number of affairs but expects his wife to be a virgin. It's all the more undigestible to Som that his wife had been a willing partner. Madhu thinks "that he could, perhaps, have borne: that I had been raped, forced into the act, that I was a victim, not a participant" (SR 260).

Shashi Deshpande has repeatedly expressed her displeasure at being considered the champion of oppressed women. It is, indeed, a tribute to her that some of the reviewers recognise her for what she is. Malati Mathur writes:

In portraying straggles of these women for identity, Shashi Deshpande waves no feminist banners, launches into no rabid diatribes. She drives her point home with great subtlety and delicacy. (128)

3. Conclusion

To conclude it can be said that Deshpande has presented woman psychology through her female characters. At the same time, she also presents psychology of male especially that of Indian husband. Love, hatred, passion, joy, pain, suffering, longing etc have been well portrayed in the present novel.

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