

## A Critique of the Reflection of Indian Woman in Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies*

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Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies* (2000) projects the life of Indian women living in a hostile patriarchal society. Like her other women-centered novels, it is her work that describes the period of about a year in the life of the narrator, Madhu. Nearly half a century ago, the life of women in India was ruled almost by male dictates. At such a crucial time, two young women, one obsessed with music and the other a passionate believer in the communist world, broke away the stereotype tradition and seek fulfillment in public life. Using the stories of two women – Leela, the trade union activist, and Savitribai Indorekar, the music maestro of the Gwalior Gharana – as the background, Shashi Deshpande explores her favourite theme of a woman, a journey which will bring past and present within a single scene, which will certainly heal the wounds even if it does not provide all the answers. The primary purpose of the novelist is to show how small remedies in terms of affection, care, love, understanding and complete faith in oneself enable an individual to understand the nature of reality. These remedies sustain and enlarge the relationships and outcast the forces of depression, anger and frustration.

The true meaning of *Small Remedies* is determined by the events which happen in the life of four female leading characters – Madhu, Leela, Savitribai Indorekar and Hasina. All of them have to confront challenges and complexities which are interlinked with their domestic and social life. The novelist graphically depicts Madhu as a doting mother and wife, Leela and Savitribai Indorekar, who symbolizes independence, as representatives of the new woman. Hasina is characterized as a woman who entertains a burning desire to exploit her latent virtues. In this way she works very hard to attain a minimum level of perfection which is intertwined with the idea of female autonomy.

Madhu has been portrayed as a motherless child brought up by her father, who is by profession a doctor, at Neem Gaon. After the death of her father, she is guided by an uncontrollable urge that makes her body respond to the confronting embrace of a friend of her father. His effort to console her leads to a sexual encounter between the two. But soon, she finds herself at her aunt, Leela's place. The novelist shows how her bitter experiences with her incompatible cousin, Paula, make her feel extremely lonely. It is true that Leela and Joe provide all type of comforts and encouragement to Madhu, but in spite of all this, she

remains extremely perplexed and her extremely sensitive nature proves quite disturbing. Madhu passes through a phase of complete loss of identity in her new surrounding amongst strangers. Madhu recalls,

After that, there's only Leela and Joe. I enter their home holding on to Leela's sari, as it were, but I never become part of the family. This is not a proper family, nor the kind of family the girls evoked in their 'house house' game, either. Joe and Leela are a couple, but they are not father and mother. Paula draws a line around Joe and herself, she ignores Leela completely. For her, it's as if Leela does not exist. Leela responds by making herself invisible – she scarcely speaks in Paula's presence. Perhaps Paula would have liked to include Tony in her circle, but Tony, vacant-faced, elusive, keeps slipping away, he doesn't seem to want to belong. (*Small Remedies*, 102)

Madhu honestly recognizes that she, "Can never be part of this set up, ... she has no place in it, not even as an outsider" (102). Time and again, Madhu is made to feel that Paula does not like her. She even despises Madhu's presence in the family. Whenever Madhu goes into her room, she can feel anger on her face. She remarks,

She pushes my clothes off the chair, from the bed – wherever I've placed them. She walks all over them in her shoes as if she can't see them. I see her footprints on my dress, on my petticoat, my towel when I pick them up. She never touches them, or any of my belonging, with her hands, nor does she ever speak to me directly. (119)

Paula, in fact, "begins her tirade then, strings of abuses. She calls me a beggar, a disgusting pauper, a savage, a stinking bit of filth" (119). The novelist shows how Madhu suffers at the hands of Paula. At Leela's house, Madhu experiences the harsh realities of life. It is true that both Leela and Joe shower their love and affection on Madhu, but she is all the time conscious of her position. Soon, Madhu understands that she is like an alien in their house. The feeling of being an orphan always haunts her. Whatever she gets there she feels obliged and says,

But making myself invisible, merging into the background, had become second nature to me after my father's death. Living, even for that brief while, in Joe's house, I became a very careful and circumspect girl, not letting any part of my life spill over into Leela and Joe's life, into that house. Paula's hatred and fury reminded me each moment that I was an intruder. I knew I had to stay out of sight, I had to remain unnoticed, not for myself alone, but for Leela's sake as well. (160)

Madhu's interdependence on Joe is not allowed to continue for a long time because Madhu decides to leave her studies and starts working. Both Leela and Joe wanted Madhu to go for higher studies. Joe has his own dreams for her. He wants her to do M.A. in English Literature, to go abroad, but Madhu, does not want to remain dependent on anybody. As she remarks,

But I am determined. I will start working, I will earn my own money, become independent. It seems a godsend when Joe's friend, Hamid Merchant, offers me a job with his magazine *City Views*. (83)

Madhu, as a matter of fact, wants to lead a life full of self-respect and dignity. She does not want to become a parasite. She knows in her heart that it is neither good nor desirable to accept anything in charity. One has to carve one's path oneself. One should not be cowed down by the challenges of life. One should not burden one's relations with the responsibility of one's life. Madhu learns useful lessons from her adverse circumstances. She emerges as a woman with indomitable courage and strength. The novels of Shashi Deshpande, in fact, underline the importance of economic independence for women because it is, to a great extent, through economic independence that a woman can establish meaningful and respectful relationships. Her economic independence does not allow others to exploit her status and social position.

While projecting the peculiar problems of working women in Indian society, Shashi Deshpande discusses that the responsibilities of job and family overburden them. Moreover, they have to fulfill all their familial obligations along with their job. The novelist also shows how working women are insulted at their workplaces. For example, Madhu is subjected to the lusty eyes of her senior, Dalvi. Madhu recalls,

He works out his hostility in other ways too. He comes to my table to berate me, his face angry, his tone sarcastic, but his eyes and his hand say other things. The eyes dart over my face, drop down to my body, they linger over my breasts, his hands brush lightly, and seemingly by accident, but I

know with deliberate intent, against my body, my face. (84-85)

Such a situation often occurs at work places when a woman tries to stand on her own legs in order to earn her livelihood. It is true that Madhu does not bother about Dalvi's actions and she categorically says: "Dalvi's role in my life is talked about, commented on" (86). In other words, if women become victims of sexual exploitation and harassment, the whole blame lies on the social and ethical moves prevalent in the society. Such ghastly and highly condemnable actions become a permanent stigma on the fair name of social and moral values. In a traditional Indian society, women have to keep their emotions and ideas at a distance in order to satisfy their male counterparts. If different moral codes exist for men and women in a society, how can a meaningful world of relationships exist in such a society? If a woman becomes a victim of infidelity or if she commits infidelity, it is considered to be an act of sacrilege whereas her male counterpart never feels guilty for breaking the established social and moral codes. Society looks down upon a woman who commits infidelity, while a man is free to betray the faith of his wife and his moral behaviour is not subjected to any scrutiny.

In *Small Remedies*, the estrangement of husband-wife relationship occurs due to the momentary infidelity. This infidelity is unconsciously committed by Madhu. Madhu shares this secret of her life with Som. She tells him that she had once slept with a man when she was a girl of fifteen, who had later committed suicide. Madhu also tells Som that the thought of her father's death had made her hysterical. She recalls how a man approached her at that time to console her. While doing so they unconsciously indulged in physical gratification. Madhu recalls it in a very nostalgic manner,

Now this man is holding me close, tight, I can smell his body, his clothes with their distinctive smell – of turpentine? -I can feel the texture of his shirt, the rough scraping of his unshaven cheek. All these things penetrate through my grief. (267)

This clearly shows that Madhu is quite innocent and Madhu's revelation about her physical gratification with a man in her teenage is just an expression of her pure and simple mind. She does not want to hide anything from her husband. She thinks that she has not committed any guilt. However, the society associates guilt with such actions because it never tries to understand the compulsions and the dark and torturous forces which operate mysteriously in the life of an individual. That is why, the whole episode narrated by Madhu with all her innocence serves as a catastrophe on the relationship. As Madhu elaborates,

But it's the single act of sex that Som holds on to, it's this fact that he can't let go of, as it's been welded into his palm. Purity, chastity, an intact hymen – these are the things Som is thinking of, these are the truths that matter. (262)

The vague and confused memories crowd the emotional world of Madhu. The trust between Madhu and Som seems to be ebbing away with every passing moment. Madhu realizes,

Som and I are locked in a silent, fearful struggle that exhausts us. We are like two travellers embarked on a terrible journey, rocketing at a dangerous speed, on the verge of going out of control, yet unable to stop, unable to help ourselves. (257- 258)

Madhu realizes that the silver of greater understanding has turned into a base metal and, "The catalyst that turned my words into poison lay within him, it was he who made the words what they became – destroyers of our life together, destroyers of our son's life" (260). Madhu finds herself in a catch – 22 situation. On one hand, she is emotionally perturbed by the tragic death of her son, Aditya, in the communal riots at the time of demolition of Babri Masjid. On the other hand, her relationship with Som has verged on estrangement, and life appears to be a deadwood to Madhu. This situation brings total collapse to her mental world. Madhu decides to move away from her repressing surrounding. In order to make herself busy in writing her biography on Savitribai Indorekar, she goes to Bhavanipur. Her stay at Bhavanipur with Hari and Lata opens new vistas for her. She learns the art of being open and extremely receptive of life. She realizes that it is better not to be guided by any preconceived pattern of life. One should always allow oneself to be led by the stream of life which symbolizes complete spontaneity. It is a fertile exercise to plan things in advance. Madhu, after experiencing uncongenial and unwarranted situations, makes a bold attempt to reassess her life. Her attempt to write the biography of the vocalist, Savitribai Indorekar, serves as a trigger to her creative imagination. This act of writing makes her surrender before the force of truth. She makes up her mind to go back to Som. She realizes that as a human being one has to face miseries and mishaps of life. She decided to mourn the death anniversary of her son with Som, "We need to be together, we need to mourn him together, we need to face the fact of his death and our continuing life together. Only in this is healing possible" (323). She has realized that some mysteries have to remain unsolved, some answer will never come. The fact, of the matter is that, despite, all tragic situations life continues. Those who are alive have to live it. Madhu clearly confesses, "Now I am beginning to understand. It's not just living children who need to be free, the dead clamour for release as well" (323).

In *Small Remedies*, Shashi Deshpande gives us a graphic description of the defiant attitude of characters like Leela, Savitribai Indorekar and Hasina. Leela is exceedingly unconventional and does not have any faith in the established norms set by the society, for women. Both, Madhu's mother Kaveri and Leela are labelled as, "the two rebels of the family, both the sisters, disowned by the family" (45). Leela, infact, is also called as "the black sheep of the family" (45). Being a widow, she remarries a Christian man. This clearly illustrates that the social codes prevalent in Indian society are not kind to women. A widow has to take a bold stand in order to live and survive in an otherwise uncongenial society. The novelist, infact, shows how a woman is subjected to the tyranny inflicted upon her. Whenever, a woman wants to live her own life according to her desire, she is seen with a critical eye because widow remarriage is not socially acceptable to those who have conventional outlook. The novelist is of the view that the widows should be allowed to lead their lives according to their will and choice. They should not be treated like worthless creatures. That is why, Leela refuses to submit herself before the will of the traditional society. She is assertive and tells her members of family that she does not want to lead a life of reasonable comfort. At her father's home, rather she prefers to look after her in-laws as they need her active support and help. She refuses to live within the limits set for her by her grandmother. She decides to live with her in-laws because,

There was Mai, there were her two brother-in-laws; they was her family now. She had to help them, to earn a living to all of them until the boys were educated. She refused to go back home, perhaps she said things which cause a rift. There was no communication with her family after that. The next time Leela went home was nearly thirty years later. (234)

Leela, as a matter of fact, wants to be a decision-maker of her own life because she wants to lead an independent life. She makes a bold effort to free herself from dependence syndrome. She wants to choose her own path. This is the reason why she appreciates the independent nature of Madhu. Savitribai Indorekar is another important female character who breaks the stereotype norms for women in an orthodox society. She is highly conventional in her attitude. Her deep interest in music makes her approach her father-in-law, who in turn appoints a lady music teacher for her education. This lady teacher comes with a Tabla Master, Ghulam Ahmed. Savitribai does not feel satisfied as she has a burning desire to learn music from a great maestro. After hearing about the performance of Guruji, Savitribai flees with Ghulam Saab to meet him. Madhu recalls,

There is no music lover, no Savitribai admirer, who hasn't heard the story of her search for a teacher.

Her determination, after she heard Pundit Kashinath Buwa, that he had to be the one. Her persistence in seeking him out, the long wait before he finally agreed to take her on as a pupil. These are all the much-told, much-dramatised incidents of her life. (127)

There is another dimension of Savitribai's relation with Ghulam Ahmed. She lives with Ghulam Ahmed and gives birth to a daughter – Meenakshi. Meenakshi dislikes the presence of her father. But Savitribai does not pay any heed to Meenakshi's problems. While Meenakshi experiences frustration, pain and loneliness, Savitribai remains completely absorbed in learning the subtle nuances of music. Such actions on the part of characters like Savitribai Indorekar raise certain philosophical questions. For instance, How can one forget one's own parents, how can a mother forget her own daughter, how can the relationship between the two individuals be allowed to die? If such things do happen, how can an individual sustain a very idea of his/her own self? Savitribai Indorekar, further, added that there are different kinds of mother and daughter relationship. Relationship takes a particular pattern, depending upon person to person. She saw people as human beings first. And mothers, wives and daughters, next. People are born as human beings. All these relationships come later.

Madhu rightly observes that the story of Savitribai Indorekar is essentially the story of "the artist, the woman in search of her genius, of her destiny" (133). But the novelist rightly observes, "But the artist was born of the woman. First there was the woman and then the artist. Is it possible to cut the umbilical cord, to sever the connections between the two? Did Bai manage to do this?" (133). Infact, this is a moot question which needs thorough investigation. It is true that Savitribai refuses to be bound by the conventional mode of living. Like a modern woman, she asserts her individual will. She is extremely self-conscious and challenges the established social traditions. Her well defined approach towards life is combined with realistic approach which defies the formal and institutional constraints in a very dexterous manner she established new relationships in order to transform her dream of becoming a great classical

singer into reality. Thus the character of Savitribai raised certain vital social issues which serve as a telling comment on the present day Indian society.

The granddaughter of Ghulam Saab, Hasina, is constantly engaged in fighting in order to prove her point of view. She wants to establish her own identity in the society. Hasina regards Savitribai Indorekar as a 'Great Musician' and Ghulam Saab as a great Tabla Player. She calls him incomparable 'Lajawav'. However, she fails to understand the reasons for the separation of Savitribai and Ghulam Saab. However, the novelist describes how a 'special' and intimate relationship develops between Hasina and her grandfather Ghulam Saab,

Hasina's mother and her children visited the family home every vacation. These holidays were very special to Hasina because of her grandfather. There was something more powerful than the blood tie that bound these two, something apart from her being the only granddaughter that made the child precious to him. It was their common obsession with music that brought them close. (275)

This clearly suggests that music plays an intrinsic role in structuring this relationship. When Ghulam Saab, in the last year of his life, breaks his silence and speaks to Hasina of Bai, Hasina decides to meet Bai. She becomes her disciple and establishes a new relationship. Thus, it is clear that Shashi Deshpande, through her female protagonists, has artistically explored their lives. As long as there are hope, faith and devotion, relationships acquire value and shape. The new equation of the traditional man-woman roles spells a refreshing break from the mythological image of Indian women. These women were away from their time-worn function of bolstering the male ego by sublimation, debasement of self or assumption of mark of adoring subservience. They also desolate the faultlessness and negation of identity which resulted from the masochistic pride woman derived from suffering at the hands of a brow-beating and oppressive male. Thus, Shashi Deshpande has employed her writings as vehicle to probe into women's lives and experiences.

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