breaking the Code: Women in Small Remedies

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande, a Sahitya Academy Award winner, is much-celebrated author for the depiction of the society and relationships among the individuals. A close reading of her novels reveals how the women characters are shaped by the situations in which they live. But the individuality of every character reshapes them. The paper attempts to interpret female characters in her novel Small Remedies in terms of their individuality by breaking the code and social context. The paper chooses to analyse these characters in the light of Raymond Williams’ critical essay ‘Realism and the Contemporary Novel.’ The novel throws light on an individual’s personal experience with society by recreating lives from the real world as observed by Raymond Williams in the mentioned essay. The novel delves into the life of three women - Savitribai Indorekar, who is an ardent music lover, Leela who passionately believes in communism and Madhu, protagonist of the novel. The common strand between first two is that they both quit their familial ties to attain fulfillment in public life. Madhu, the protagonist of the novel, tries to reshape her ‘self’ by observing their lives. The novel also proves that the individuals are the fundamental forces of the society. All the characters are depicted with reference to the socio-cultural aspects they encounter. Madhu grows the consciousness by looking around her own life. She cares so that she can gain self-respect and recognition in the wake of repeated failures and despair.

When I think of realist tradition in fiction, I think of the kind of novel which creates and judges the quality of a whole way of life in terms of the qualities of persons. The balance involved in this achievement is perhaps the most important thing about it… Yet the distinction of this kind is that it offers a valuing of a whole way of life, a society that is larger than any of the individuals composing it, and at the same time valuing creations of human beings who, while belonging to and affected by and helping to define this way of life, are also, in their own terms, absolute ends in themselves. Neither element, neither the society nor the individual, is there as a priority. [Williams, 1961, 584]

All the characters are representation of certain ideas of the society in which they live in. Small Remedies is basically a novel about women, their lives, their sorrows and...
their courage to fight against odds of life. There are three prominent characters in the novel: Madhu, Savitribai and Leela. But among them, Madhu receives our whole attention for many reasons. She is the narrator and protagonist of the novel. From the humble beginning to various changing moods, she presents herself as a living character. As the novel develops, she keeps on growing in the mind of the reader that often makes us sad, happy, surprised and angry. Apart from these three major characters, the novel portrays wide range of characters. Characters from different social, religious and cultural backgrounds are fathers, mothers, sons, husbands, wives, siblings, uncles, aunts, and friends and so on. Realism is a way of describing certain methods and attitudes and the descriptions, quite naturally in the ordinary exchange and development of experience (Williams, 584). A world is actualized on one man’s senses: not narrated, or held as arms length, but it is lived (Williams, 587).

The narrative of the novel is woven around three women characters. Madhu who has lost her son is the protagonist of the novel. She endeavours to get out of her sorrow by observing life of people around her. Savitribai Indorekar, hailing from a conservative Hindu family – Gwalior Gharana, eloped with Gulaam Saab, her Muslim lover to pursue a career in music. Leela, Madhu’s aunt, devotes herself to the party and to her work with the factory workers. The action of the novel takes place fifty years later. Madhu has lost her son Aditya and in despair. As she was a neighbor of Savitribai in Neemgao in her childhood, she was assigned to write biography of Savitribai by Yogi and Maya. Madhu goes to Bhavanipur to write biography on Bai.

With her creativity and capability, Madhu earned a good name in City News. Magazine became popular because of her honest efforts and hard work of Madhu. Madhu is gifted to craft a world of her own argument and justice. She is a creative writer and that’s why Yogi and Maya assign her to write a biography of Savitribai. They knew that she was a controversial figure; so writing on her would be an exciting novel and profit would be also good. But Madhu did not want it to make larger than life. She tries to make it very ordinary everyday experience with truth. According to her,

“I can take over Bai’s life and make what I want of it through my words. I can trap her into an image I create, seal her into an identity I make for her. The power of writer is the power of creator. Yes, I can do much. I can make Bai the rebel who rejected the conventions of her times. The feminist who lived her life on her terms. The great artist who struggled and sacrificed everything in the cause of her art. The woman who gave up everything – a comfortable home, a husband and a family – for love.

‘Don’t be afraid of bringing out the truth’ – Maya and Yogi’s words. Yes, we want truth. But what are the truths we seek? Battered children, rape, incest, adultery, the gruesome actions of perverted minds – these are what we want… And this, we call the truth.”

[Deshpande, 2000, 166]

As a responsible writer, Madhu tries to bring out the truth without manipulating the information. Though, she has strength to modify her subject and content, and put it forward in disguise, she is not willing to do so. Madhu was surprised when Bai never mentioned her only daughter Munni and Ghulam Saab. She completely ignores as if they never existed. Bai never loved her child and always ignored her. Even after Munni’s death, Bai has completely obliterated the memories of her only child. She had no remorse, no grief and no regrets for her death. This was not so with Madhu to whom her child becomes the only world in which they exist. After the death of her beloved son, she lost herself in emptiness. She cannot imagine world without him. It is too much to handle for her. She wants to give Bai immortality but not at the cost of Munni and Ghulam Saab, not at the cost of truth. She wants Bai to bring them in her life story. She is bewildered when Bai does not reveal anything about them.

Deshpande portrays another prominent character Leela in very different light. Madhu finds Leela an extraordinary and exceptional woman because of her way to deal with life. She marries Joe, a Christian and has two children – Tony and Paula. Madhu narrates the wonderful and beautiful relationship of Leela and Joe. Initially Madhu finds the couple that does not fit into social framework. Afterwards she finds the same relationship ontological. She realizes that it is love among people that bind them, not the society. Where society marginalizes, love plays its role to the fullest. Here Madhu discovers the power and strength of love that retains everything in general life. There must be love at the bottom of any relationship to make it sound and concrete. It works as reinforcement to support the entire system. It is this love that throws away all the stereotypes of culture and society. She also considers the story of Lata and Hari who have an appealing tale to tell. By asking questions to herself and seeking answer from within, she comes to the conclusion,

Am I wronging him [Joe] by thinking this way? Is he not part of a love story as well? Lata and he [Hari] – two persons from entirely different backgrounds, different languages, different ideas – what else is it but love that holds them together? [Deshpande, 2000, 100]

We can realize the honest character, Leela, as very outspoken and revolutionary kind of woman. She is honest to herself and has her own philosophy and beliefs. She does not believe in Gandhian ideas about ahimsa and satyagraha. She strongly believes in herself and human nature. She has her own ideas and feelings pertaining to people and their relationships. Nobody can move her from what she relies on. She says,

She had been opposed to the Gandhian methods of ahimsa and satyagraha. I thought there was something ridiculous about letting oneself be beaten up, she said. It goes against the grain of human nature, she thought, to submit that way. A blow for a blow – that’s how we’re made, that’s natural. [Deshpande, 2000, 97]

The novel is little satiric when it comes to the relationship between men and women. Bai and Leela both are proved social revolutionary. Madhu states, “Men can never be a friend of woman.” There are many examples in the novel of such kind. Savitribai went away with her Muslim accompanist Ghulam Saab and had a child out of that relationship. She told Madhu that it became a curse being a Brahmin woman who belonged to a respectable family. Leela, a widow, got married to a Christian.
The society is not a background against which the personal relationships are studied, nor are the individuals merely illustrations of aspects of the way of life. Every aspect of personal life is radically affected by the quality of general life, yet the general life is seen at its most important in completely personal terms. We attend with our whole senses to every aspects of the general life, yet the centre of value is always in the individual human person – not any one isolated person, but the many persons who are the reality of the general life.

[Williams, 1961, 584]

Linguistic plurality and social diversity facilitate the individuals to come together and rejoice. When Savitribai goes for the performance, she meets one of the groups where she finds herself very comfortable though there is a language barrier.

They are all speaking Kannada, a language she cannot understand. But she can sense the atmosphere of ease and good fellowship among them; the slightly elevated state that speaks of their returning from a successful performance.

[Deshpande, 2000, 131]

Savitribai rarely finds this kind of ease when she is with the people who share the same language. Another very attractive example of this kind is the couple of Hari and Lata. Both of them speak different languages but how beautifully they communicate with each other. In Lata’s words, if you want to enjoy the relationship, you should avoid intimacy.

The game ‘house-house’ is realistic in Indian milieu. The reader is informed about the concept of family in the Indian context. The name of family members and their duties towards family are predetermined in the name of duties. This example exhibits the opposite movements of individual and social realities. Madhu finds the myriad web of relations highly complex and incomprehensible.

This is Baba. He is the father. He goes out to work.
This is Aai. She is the mother. She looks after the home and children.
This is Dada, the eldest brother. He helps his father.
This is Akka, the eldest sister.

And so on. Each one paying out his or her allotted role to perfection. The dignified father. The nurturing mother. The serious, responsible oldest brother. The eldest sister.

[Deshpande, 2000, 133]

This concept of a family is reflected in the game that children play. The games are also coloured by the predominant ideals of the society. Madhu does not adhere to the ideal of a traditional family. Since Madhu had grown up in a motherless family, she reacts to the family ideal in the game. The game that finds wide acceptance by the society is termed as ‘always boring’ by Madhu.

One of the favourite games of the girls during my childhood was playing ‘house-house’ in which the ‘mother’ settles down with her little pots and pans to cook, the ‘children’ go to school or self-consciously play and the ‘father’ goes out to work. When he comes home, he sits, legs crossed, calling out loudly to the children or the mother.

I find this a very boring game. I can’t relate to it, because I’ve never seen this pattern, I’ve never been part of it. My father gives me no orders, he does not yell at me. He and I are equals in a way. Babu is the domestic authority – he cooks and cleans, but he is no mother.

[Deshpande, 2000, 101]

Shashi Deshpande relates the idea of family through a ‘house-house’ game. Here we find total contradiction of idea and feelings of individual and the society. The general life is studied and judged by the personal experiences of a common individual. Sometimes this individual is Leela or Savitribai or Madhu or any other minor or major character in the novel. All three characters – Madhu, Leela, and Bai – are developed in such a way that they cast away all the social and cultural traditions. Though they are opposed, neglected, and suffer a lot, they stick to their own emotions and way of life.

The author projects the inner world of the individuals with different perspectives. As in A Matter of Time, Shashi Deshpande shows the world of women with the character of Aru by raising many questions in her mind. She develops a technique to illustrate what Gopal [male] thinks about the real happiness of women. She puts the words into the mind of Gopal when Sumi asks him,

She [Sumi] spoke of Draupadi’s disguise as Shrirandhri, the queen’s maid.

‘Don’t you think this was something she had often wanted, to be by herself, to sleep alone, to be free, for a while, of her five husbands?’

What about Arjuna becoming Brihannala? Yes, that was easy; Arjuna, tired of the male world of war and violence, of relating to woman only as a lord or conqueror, became Brihannala the eunuch, so that he could enter the gentle world of women, of music, and dancing and become insider in this world.

[A Matter of Time, 85-86]

As if, in our final moments, we want a listener, a witness, before whom we can lay out our lives, as if we need the witness, the listener, for us to make sense of our own lives. Bai moves back and forth in time, she flits from memory to memory, she picks on events, occasions, people, at random. It seems utterly disconnected, but there is some connection in her mind, something that links these things together for her. A question, perhaps, that she’s asking herself now, in these last days of her life.

[Deshpande, 2000, 215]

The thoughts of Madhu leave readers with many questions. The description of the inner world sparks the fire and rages which are sometimes incomprehensible in the real world. The question of freedom is explicit in the novel which Madhu says lies always elsewhere.

For Bai to develop a relationship with another man, a tabla player, a Muslim – this must have been not only unimaginable, but the height of criminality. Did anyone blame the father-in-law for this? As the head of the family, a position that was indisputable then, he was not accountable to anyone. Nevertheless, there must have been comments and criticism. Did he blame himself? For a man, a wealthy man and the
head of the family, to indulge in his love of music, even to have a singer as a mistress, was all right. But for a daughter-in-law to be learning music, and that seriously, as if she was going to be a professional! Surely there was outrage, surely there was anger in the family. Rules could be modified for the daughters, sometimes they were purely out of affection, but daughters-in-law carry the weight of the honour of the family, its reputation, its izzat.

[Deshpande, 2000, 220]

Music is Bai’s reality and wholeness, as Madhu has Adit, her only beloved son. But culture and society create complications. Bai has an experience when she gets married in the respectable family. For her, there is no place for family and her daughter in her story as a musician. As a musician, she seems to be more real. Madhu’s innocence becomes barrier in her married life. Leela’s openness and liberty causes problems in her life. But she is more comfortable with her ideology and philosophy. Anyhow, all the characters manage their own reality and try to balance between society and individual. But their individuality reshapes their character in a unique way.

The operation of societal codes in the lives of individuals is minutely asserted in the novel. At the same time the novel also proves that the individuals are the fundamental forces of the society. Shashi Deshpande does not glorify the social relationships but rather presents its realistic picture. The motive is to voice the characters with a view to influence the society and effecting social reforms. The process of self-realization takes place everywhere in the novel and this self-realization helps them to hold the society and the individuals together. Society and individuals are separate entity but they need each other to survive. All the characters are depicted with reference to the socio-cultural aspects they encounter. The whole novel endeavours to prove that there should be balance between these two essential elements – society and individuals. As David lodge quotes Raymond Williams:

We live in an expanding culture, yet we spend much of our energy regretting the fact, rather than seeking to understand its nature and conditions.

[Williams, 1961, 580]

REFERENCES