

## Conundrum of Advocacy with Remedial Methods: An Insight of Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies*

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**Abstract.** Shashi Deshpande writes about Indian women with the authority of the universal female experience. When she embarks on journey through the sea of human relations, she discovers at its depth the most complicated and hidden feelings of woman. These precious gems are transformed into a novel for the readers. Each of her novels is a unique experience for her readers. *Small Remedies* is a path breaking novel by Shashi Deshpande, which belongs to the second phase of her writings. This novel holds a mirror to the social transitions occurring in Indian society. In a male dominated society like India where women have been treated like a foot mattress for centuries, Shashi Deshpande makes a novel attempt to trace the position of woman in 21<sup>st</sup> century. Till today though the status of woman has changed her fight for identity has not yet ended. Like the old wine in the new bottle her struggle has taken new faces. Shashi Deshpande's novels implore women to discover their selfhood not as a genderised being. The power of the writer is the power of the creator. She feels that she can make Bai the rebel who rejected the conventions of her times. The feminist lived her life on her terms. The great artist struggled and sacrificed everything for the cause of her act. The woman gave up everything-a comfortable home, a husband and a family-for love.

**Keywords :** Universal female experience; selfhood; social transitions; human relationship.

...nothing in life comes "next" but ... everything exists together and at the same time within us...there is no past to be "brought forward" in a human being, but ...he is his past at every moment and ...the present is merely that which his past is capable of noticing and smelling and reacting to.

(Miller, 23)

Shashi Deshpande writes about Indian women with the authority of the universal female experience. When she embarks on journey through the sea of human relations, she discovers at its depth the most complicated and hidden feelings of woman. These precious gems are transformed into a novel for the readers. Each of her novels is a unique experience for her readers. *Small Remedies* is a path breaking novel by Shashi Deshpande, which belongs to the second phase of her writings. This novel holds a mirror to the social transitions occurring in Indian society.

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Vikram Seth's third novel *An Equal Music* (1999), Salman Rushdie's *Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) and Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies* (2000) are woven around music. 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 their 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 Hamidbai 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. Meenakshi Mukherjee points out:

Of the four remarkable novels I have read in recent times that deal with music Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music*, Salman Rushdie's *Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Bani Babu's Bangla novel *Gandharu*; 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. (Mukherjee, *The Hindu*, 7<sup>th</sup> May 2000).

In a male dominated society like India where women have been treated like a foot mattress for centuries, Shashi Deshpande makes a novel attempt to trace the position of woman in 21<sup>st</sup> century. Till today though the status of woman has changed her fight for identity is not yet ended. Like the old wine in the new bottle her struggle has taken new faces. Shashi Deshpande's novels implore women to discover her selfhood not as a genderized being. As Barbara Berg says, "It is the freedom to decide her own destiny, freedom from sex-determined role; freedom from society's oppressive restriction; freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely into action" (Berg, 13). Feminism demands the acceptance of woman's right to individual conscience and judgement. It postulates that women's essential worth seems to form her common humanity and does not depend on the other relationships of her life.

In 'Remembering and Retelling' the stories of Savitribai, Leela and Munni, Madhu discovers her moral and physical self. The self is the self; it is the pure identity just being our self not being somebody for others. According to Jungian psychologists the "ego" is merely the centre of the conscious personality while the "self" is the unifying centre of both the conscious and the unconscious personalities. Jung defines the self as both the centre and the circumference of the psyche which "incorporates within its paradoxical unity all the opposites embodied in the masculine and feminine archetypes" (Edinger, 7).

The stories of Bai and Leela reveal this struggle in the opted career such as music and politics and even in their personal life. Bai with the craze towards

music eloped with muslim guy burning her contentedly married life. Leela, a widow, remarried Joe, with him she had to take on the problem of Paula. Both Bai and Leela accepted wholly the consequences of their actions; therefore, there were no complaints. Their stories set glaring example of inequalities in gender in the fields of music and politics. But Bai and Leela were masters of their will, had great faith in themselves. Marianne Dekoven observes, "Public space, the traditionally masculine sphere, is still a new field for women, even though they now must traverse it, and finally can do so without being blown immediately to bits" (Dekoven, 191).

Even in this novel through Madhu, Deshpande deals with a wife's position, her struggle for identity in a patriarchal society and her delicate relationship with her husband and condemns the marriage system. Madhu feels marriage is one in which 'nobody can get hurt'. As a girl she felt funny about the marriage between a plant and a tree. Making a bridal wear, green bangles, *mangalasutra* and all the stuff, she feels very disgusting about the rehabilitation plans for the Devadasi women, which seem to centre on marriage. As if there are only these two options for the women-marriage or prostitution and to get away from one they need the other. It seems that happiness lies only in marriage. Deshpande emphasizes love and its importance in any human relationships. Each and every person searches for love and Ketaki, Madhu, Munni are not apart from them. Munni searches in the movies, Ketaki in her books and magazines and Madhu in her child Adit. When her boy started to grow and developed gap between them she was shattered. She is frightened by Adit's behaviour. Som calls this as *Moha, Putra Moha*, a sort of obsession. Joe's words are reminded by Madhu, 'Love is an adult emotion'. In fact it is the story of all those who dare to endure the sufferings and come up in life struggling alone. Jasbir says,

It's a tribute to those who accept the truth and move forward to self-knowledge and acceptance of a 'flawed' self, past mistakes and future failures. The self-help is the best help, the inner strength, which sustains Savitribai, Leela, and Madhu to drive away, the grief, pain and anguish. Though Bai was successful in fulfilling her dreams as a great singer according to Madhu she was an unhappy mother.  
(Jain, 280).

Madhu is surprised to hear the story of Bai without any trace of Munni, an illegitimate child of Bai. Bai wants to discard her from her life so that she may portray a clean life story in front of the society. She wants to be accepted by the society as an image of Indian "Woman". Madhu is facing problems in her married life as she didn't accept the words of her stereotyped husband. Madhu blames her husband for the death of her only child Adit. Both Bai and Madhu are equal as bereaved mothers. The former forgets in her music and sticks to silence while the latter strives to forget her pain in writing and sticks to the memories.

Madhu starts writing Bai's biography. 'Savitribai Indorekar, Doyen of Hindustani music. Belonging to the Gwalior gharana ...' Madhu feels that chronological narrative of Bai's life is not appropriate, as we don't live our lives this way. We see our lives through memory and memories are fractured, fragmented, almost always cutting across time. She feels she can trap her into an image she creates, accord her a distinct identity and a discerning aura so that she might be recognized in the light of her talent. The power of the writer is the power of the creator. She feels that she can make Bai the rebel who rejected the conventions of her times. The feminist lived her life on her terms. The great artist struggled and sacrificed everything for the cause of her art. The woman gave up everything—a comfortable home, a husband and a family—for love.

As a child Madhu felt that Munni's mother is beautiful and had a crush towards her. She was always elegantly dressed unlike other women. In Madhu's imagination Bai is far from trendy heroines, she is "a young woman who had lived the sheltered life of the daughter-in-law of an affluent Brahmin family" (*Small Remedies*, 85). A woman with this sort of background was being a married Hindu woman eloping with a Muslim partner and it needs a greater gut. She learns music from Guruji Kashinath Buwa, and lives in a strange town among total strangers. She had to travel by local shuttle train to get to Guruji's place, with a two-mile walk through the fields at the end of it. The house she lived in was a ramshackle arrangement. It has two rooms with an outside toilet shared by others and no electricity. It is not an easy going for one who has come from a rich family. Being a woman she had to take this risk, as she was not allowed to stay in Guruji's establishment. Savitribai has no idea that Madhu was her daughter's childhood friend in Neemgaon and on the top of it she has mapped her story in such a way that Munni was out of her story, "whose existence she has obliterated" (168). Madhu says, "So there was no need to remind her, I'm Munni's friend Madhu. Remember me?" (29).

Savitribai's love for music was not nurtured in her orthodox family. Savitribai tells Madhu how she was hurt when her grandmother asked her to stop singing immediately during her performance at a family gathering. Madhu recalls, "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 then"(29). Bai as a woman though successful as a classical singer was not accepted in the society as she had eloped with a Muslim tabla player and had a child from him. But Madhu's father and father-in-law were accepted by the society, as they were men. Madhu's father was a widower who brought up his daughter with a male servant at home. He never followed any rituals and indulged in drinking, "Being a man he could get away with much. He could live the way he wanted, without open censure or disapproval" (Ibid, p. 139). Bai's father-in-law had a mistress who was a well-known Thumri singer. He went to her daily and thought that it was known to

everyone and it was negligible, but Bai's interest in singing was taken in a negative sense and was treated as an untouchable. The indifferent experience is quoted in these lines, "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". (221)

Shashi Deshpande through Madhu's story suggests how premarital sex could lead to disintegration of marriage. Though her husband Som had a relationship with a married woman before marriage he is not ready to forgive the lone act of sex by his wife. Madhu says, "Purity, chastity and intact hymen-these are the things Som is thinking of, these are the truths that matter". (262) Between women, male supremacist values are expressed through suspicious, defensive, competitive behaviour. It is sexism that leads women to feel threatened by one another without cause. Sexism teaches women-hating and both consciously and unconsciously we act out this hatred in our daily contact with one another. The death of her only child makes her existence meaningless and futile. Madhu needs to share with her husband about their son as Benjamin says, "To transcend the experience of duality, so that both partners are equal, require a nation of mutuality and sharing". (Benjamin, 86) When she accepts Chadru's proposal of writing a biography and stays with Hari and Lata. It is Hari who brings her back to the network of relations and calls her "Kaku". But all the efforts of the young loving couple to make her part of their life is in vain as she remains aloof. During the day time she engages in her work but the nights are torturous for her. Gradually she comes close to them and openly for the first time talks about Adit's death and her mindless waiting for her son. She revives her hope of seeing Adit who had kept her alive and her frustrations in her failure to find him. Finally Madhu breaks down and speaks of the final movement of her absence during her son's death. She says :

I can't come to terms with my ignorance of those days. I am obsessed by the need to reclaim them from the darkness. Sometimes I think I could have borne his death if I had been able to be with him, to see him die. We have a right to share it, the most profound human experience of death, with those we love, we have a right to be with them, to travel part of the way, even if we cannot go all the way. But I was denied that right, I was deprived of it. I don't know, I will never know how he faced the moment (*Small Remedies*, 305-306).

She cries for her loss of identity with the death of her only son. She says, "How long will I live this way? And what for, oh God, what for?" (Felski, 126).

Self-realization is the main theme of Shashi Deshpande's novels, which help her protagonists in discovering their identity. Rita Felski, elaborating on the

narrative of female self-discovery, foregrounds that it is by itself an ideological site. “An active process of meaning production and that since feminist ideology is plural and heterogeneous, the narratives of female self-discovery are significantly different in their deliberations, reflections and emphases” (127). Felski makes a broad division of self-discovery narratives into two distinct groups :

In the first kind of narrative which is often linear in structure, female self-discovery and emancipation is depicted as a process of moving outward into the public realm of social engagement and activity, however problematic and fraught with difficulties this proves to be...The second depicts self-discovery as a process of awakening to an already given mythic identity on inner self and frequently occurs in nature or in a generalized symbolic realm from which the contingent social world has been excluded. (Deshpande, 315)

With the help of the myths and rituals the writer also places the life of an individual in society in direct relationship with the unseen and the mysterious world of cosmic powers. This is evinced by the way she describes in *Small Remedies* a mythic ritual called “Dhristi Ceremony,” performed by mothers to protect their children from an evil eye. In the novel, Madhu’s sister-in-law would perform the ritual every time the children of the family have been praised or admired in a gathering. In earlier times, because of lack of medical help, a large number of children used to die at the time of birth or in infancy. So, praying to God for their health and long life was the only way left for parents. They believed that God alone, when fully propitiated, could keep off the dangers from their children. And that’s why rituals like “Dhristi Ceremony” were conducted. The prevalence of rituals like this suggests the blind faith of humans in the supremacy of an omnipotent power over their lives. Deshpande has rendered the attitudes based on irrationality and superstitions in a highly ironical manner. This, in fact, serves to reveal the complex nature of human life and the world she has depicted which baffles human comprehension. It juxtaposes the unquestioning faith of women like Madhu in the mercy of gods with the utter indifference of these powers to their worshippers.

This juxtaposition of the images of life and death is a recurring feature of her literary man-oeuvre. This can be seen, for example, in her novel *Small Remedies* also, in which Madhu loses her only child, Aditya. After his death she loses touch with reality. The novelist has vividly described the image of a mother caught in despair due to the death of her only son. She anxiously waits for a call from him and keeps searching for him in the streets as if he were alive.

This preoccupation of the novelist with death scenes and description of people wailing over the losses of a dear one also has a deterministic undertone.

The world of Deshpande, however, depicts an ever-going battle between the forces of life and those of deathlosses of a dear one also has a deterministic undertone. The world of Deshpande, however, depicts an ever-going battle between the forces of life and those of death. That's why images representing death are counter balanced by those which stand for life and human resilience. In *Small Remedies*, the images representing death and emptiness are counterpoised by the ceremony of Upanayanarm, an image of birth and the affirmation of life. This ceremony enables Madhu, driven distraught by her son's death to realise that the real essence of life lies in moving on. She contemplates: "so many of us walking this earth with our pain, our sorrow concealed within ourselves, so many of us hiding our suffering, going about as if all is well, so many of us surviving our loss, our grief. It's a miracle, nothing less than a miracle" (345). Madhu comes on to find a way out of her own grief.

Besides writing, there are certain other actions of her characters which acquire a larger symbolic significance and tend to give insight into the writer's vision of life. One such act in *Small Remedies* is Savitribai's bold decision to leave her husband's house and marriage in pursuit of her urge to be a classical singer. She elopes with her lover, Ghulam Saab, in order to realise her dream and ambition, thus asserting her indomitable will and commitment to her deepest self. This elopement constitutes an act of affirmation of her faith in her own capabilities.

As Deshpande has said in *A Matter of Time*, "Life must be lived forwards, but it can only be understood backwards". (98) Madhu in remembering and retelling the story of Bai and Leela is bringing back her past to the present and acquiring knowledge to lead her future peacefully.

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