
Self-Realisation: A Reading of Shashi Deshpande's Novel *Small Remedies*

Dr. E. Bhavani

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Krishna University, campus-II, MTM.

ABSTRACT :

Women writers in Indian Writing in English have become more conscious of the concept of a liberated woman. Among the women novelists in India Deshpande's literary works of art explore the inner psyche of middle class educated women. Shashi's concern in her novels is quest for self discovery. Her protagonists who strive to find out themselves through the fullness of experience in their lives because they are trapped between tradition and modernity. No doubt, they are haunted by the memories of their past and feel a kind of worthlessness; however, towards the end they realize their selves. Her women protagonists are middle class, educated, who have become victims of conjugal life and its responsibilities. Though, they appear to be successful outwardly, but they seem to lack direction and feel a sense of futility. Her women protagonists are in constant search of their selves. Deshpande's novels fit into such a scenario and help women realize their potential in a positive manner. This paper seeks to explore quest for self realization in Deshpande's novel *Small Remedies* which is a powerful narrative dealing with the theme of quest for self realization as experienced by women in an orthodox male dominated and tradition-bound society. The theme is delineated in terms of the conflicts and imbalances between traditional expectations and the new demands on the part of modern women. In the process of resolving the conflicts, the women in the novel undergo psychological suffering. Deshpande effectively portrays in the novel the struggles and sufferings of women for recognizing their real self.

Key words: Indian Writing in English, women writers, Shashi Deshpande, middle class educated women, tradition and modernity, victims of conjugal life, self realisation.

Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies* (2000) is about the protagonist's quest for self realisation. It delineates the journey of women towards self-realisation in relation to society, and the relationships that are central to women. The women in her novels face upheavals in their marriage. The upheavals are generally inevitable when a woman refuses to conform to her so called established role as wife, mother and other stereotyped roles. The cultural changes in India are contrasted through the lives of individuals, communities and the nation.

The novel assumes the form of a biography of Savitribai written by Madhu. Though Savitribai gives interview to her biographer about her life as an artist, Madhu tries to capture the real Savitribai from various other sources. Being the eldest grandchild, she was endowed with love. She was initiated into the world of music by her mother, who

was also gifted with a melodious voice but was restricted to sing only devotional songs.

As far as her brought up as an artist is concerned, her mother encouraged but her father prohibited her from pursuing music. Traditionally the art of music and dancing is considered a talent of notch girls in India. Therefore, her father considered it below the dignity for a daughter of high class Brahmin family to practice it. After marriage, she desires to pursue music. Surprisingly, she is overjoyed when she learns about her father-in-law's love for music. His encouragement gives her self-confidence. She begs him to let her learn music so that she would lead a life of fulfillment.

Breaking the traditions, a trainer is arranged for her. This was a pleasant surprise to her. Besides this, she is provided with a male Tabla accompanist, who is Muslim. But this breach of tradition creates a furor in the family giving rise to discussion. She braces this talk boldly. It is her determination to achieve her goal that gives her courage to face the hurdles. Madhu's concern is to observe the resentment in Savitribai's voice, and the reasons for the same. 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 recollects, "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" (Shashi Deshpande, 2000: 29). This episode suggests that there are different yardsticks for men and women in Indian society.

Madhu also gives the example that Savitribai's father-in-law who had a mistress, a famous singer. It was common knowledge that he visited her regularly. The women looked in on amusement and gossiped about it. They wondered at his choice of mistress but there was never any outrage over the fact "that he had a mistress was accepted, a wife from one's own class, a mistress from another was normal" (Shashi Deshpande: 220).

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 it was scandalous and unthinkable to learn music seriously as if she was going to be a professional. Though Savitribai 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. This used to happen when she would return from her music classes. She could imagine the jibes and 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... There's always the temptation to succumb, to go back to the normal path and be accepted. To resist the temptation speaks to great courage. (Shashi Deshpande: 220-21)

Madhu also remembers the gossip surrounding Savitribai in Neemgaon. There was a station director who frequently visited Savitribai's house, and got her many contracts with the radio. Therefore, he was generally believed to be her lover. Savitribai denies

the existence of any lover, while recounting her story of Madhu. All such assumptions finally end in conclusion: “A woman who left her husband’s home what morals would she have any way!” (Shashi Deshpande: 223).

Madhu is left confused at times about Savitribai’s courage or lack of it. She had, undoubtedly, led the most unconventional life anyone in the society would ever imagine. But behind these acts of bravado was a woman who wanted to conform so as to be accepted by the society.

Savitribai tells a story of her life to Madhu, her biographer. She asks her to cover up her youthful indiscretions in order to present a respectable picture of herself. For this purpose, she goes to the extent of withdrawing the details of her daughter being brought up in association with Ghulam Saab. Madhu is aware of the past of Savitribai and her daughter, Munni. Being aware, she is unable to digest her indifferences to her daughter. In contrast, Madhu is sentimental and grief stricken over the death of her son. She feels nostalgic when she meets a young family celebrating the initiation ceremony of a boy. On being asked to bless the boy, she wonders:

What blessing can contend against our morality? Mustard seeds to protect us from evil, blessing to confer long life nothing works. And yet we go on. Simple Remedies? No, they are desperate remedies and we go with them, because, in truth, there is nothing else. (Shashi Deshpande: 315)

She realises the inevitability of death and everyman’s destiny against which one cannot fight. This realisation makes her accept the death of her son. But it also gives her the strength to accept fate. She is not resigned to her fate but accepts it with dignity. She recovers her own sense of self, being aware of her needs. She grows to share not only her sense of despair but also her joy and pleasure of having Adit for seventeen years. Deshpande writes:

We need be together, we need to mourn him together, we need to face of his death and our continuing life together, and only in this is healing possible ... How could I have ever longed for amnesia? Memory, capricious and unrealisable though it is, ultimately carries its own truth within it. As long as there is memory, loss is never total (Shashi Deshpande: 324).

Madhu feels about the loss of her child. But Savitribai is rather concealing about her identity in relation to revealing her daughter to the world. She successfully obliterates the identity of her daughter till then. Being a woman, who had the courage to walk out on her marriage and family, she is so frightened to reveal the existence of her child. She wonders how “she gave that child the name ‘Indorekar’ -the name she adopted as a singer not comprising either her maiden name or her married one, Meenakshi Indorekar. Marking her out as her child alone, not the child of her marriage, not the child of her lover. This surely is a statement I cannot ignore?” (Shashi Deshpande: 169).

Thus from the account of Savitribai, as rendered by Madhu as her biographer, the readers learn about the way Madhu's attitude to life is vindicated. A comparison between them gives an impression that Madhu is endowed with the quality of self-assertion that Savitribai too had been endowed with. Besides, Savitribai is free from the sense of hypocrisy of not being guilty of a daughter born of unconventional relationship. Madhu thus learns about herself through the life of Savirti.

II

Munni, daughter of Savitribai grows up denying to her and to others that Ghulam Saab was her father. This is so because of the Muslim identity of Ghulam Saab. She asserts, "my name is Meenakshi;" "He's not my father;" "My father is in Pune;" and "He's not here" (Shashi Deshpande: 31-32). This attitude of Munni towards her father shows her futile attempts to disown her own father. Munni strongly tries to detach herself from the illegitimacy for her parent's relationship. She is open in her dislike for Ghulam Saab. Further, she talks of Savitribai's husband with much affection. She tells Madhu that he is in Pune; that he is a lawyer; that he is a very famous one and earns a lot of money. Ghulam Saab, she tells that he was only a tabla player for her mother. Thus creating her own imaginary relations, Munni strives to attain the life and identity of a respectable family which Savitribai had rejected.

Munni in her imagination helps her lead a life of illusions. She creates a story to convince others of her life. Munni says to Madhu that she had been kidnapped by Ghulam Saab because of which she is not living with her father in Pune. She is forced to live in Neemgaon, and asks "Do you think I'd have come here otherwise? My father would never have let me go" (Shashi Deshpande: 64).

She reasons that he cannot come to take her back. She further tells that if he comes, Ghulam Saab will kill him. Entertaining full of hatred for him, she calls him her enemy and talks of his cruelty exercised on her through starvation and beatings. However, in spite of her rejection of her father, she resembles him. He is aware of her resemblance to her natural father too. Yet, "she tried hard to cover it up, deliberately cultivating a bedraggled ragamuffin look, for removed from his tidy elegance" (Shashi Deshpande: 75). Yet, her eyes light gray in colour "unmistakably linked her to the man she so strenuously disclaimed as father" (Shashi Deshpande: 75).

Interestingly, Munni's relationship with her mother is also unusual. Because, her mother's ambition made her neglect her daughter. Unloved and uncared for, Munni reciprocates in a similar way. She develops contempt for her mother and detests everything about her. The daughter dislikes everything in her, from her talent to her looks.

Munni, however, desperately hankered after the name her mother had left behind, and went to great lengths to dissociate herself from her father. After a while, her mother, Savitribai had found conventional life preferable. 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 created stories that a lawyer, who lived in Pune, was her father. She

also remembered how the girls in their neighborhood tormented her with question: What's your name? What's your father's name? Where is your father? Who's the man who lives with your mother?

After so many years, Madhu meets Munni in a bus and recognises her. Later, she refuses to give answers or even acknowledge her childhood friend. She declares that her name is Shailaja Joshi. Thus she tries to desperately wipe out any connection with her past. All her life, Munni struggles to reject her parentage. If she tries hard to make her resemble with her father, she also deliberately denies her vocal talent. Because this would link her to the two people she desperately tried to detach herself from. However, years later, Madhu recognises Munni.

Munni's childhood is spent in her struggle to attain a respectable status and somehow she even succeeds in doing so. She is accepted by Savitribai's in-laws. After the marriage, she becomes a common middle-class woman, named Shailaja Joshi. Thus, to some extent, she achieves the "identity she wanted to have, the one she claimed finally, successfully denying her old one Shailaja Joshi, but before a long way from Munni, daughter of Savitribai and Ghulam Saab" (Shashi Deshpande: 77).

Thus Munni and her identity lay in being an ordinary woman belonging to a respectable family. This identity was rejected along with everything associated with her mother, music, genius, ambition and freedom. Through Munni's search for identity, Madhu learns about herself. The novelist narrates:

but for all of us, there's a self inside which we recognise as our real selves for Munni, the self that she was as her own lay in the future, it was towards that self that she moved with deliberation it was that self I met in the bus but she is like an ordinary looking woman with an ordinary family life and a name so ordinary that it covers pages in the telephone directory (Shashi Deshpande: 170).

Yet, the past with the illegitimacy of her birth catches up with her. Madhu's recognition of her after so many years pushes her a few steps back in her struggle. Finally her death in the bomb blast, which killed Aditya and her recognition as Shailaja Joshi, neutralizes her lifelong struggle to attain an identity separate from her mother. Thus, in death, Munni is once again identified as the daughter of the woman she detested. In spite of her determination, Munni fails to attain self-realisation. Instead of accepting her true self, she denies the truth of her birth and her identity given by her parents. Therefore, she leads towards a life of illusion and deception where she fails.

Deshpande's chief concern in the novel is to reveal about Savitribai. While writing of people like Savitribai, who is different, she also creates a character like Munni, who desperately seeks the approval of society. Malathi Mathur, a reviewer writes in this connection:

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. (Malati Mathur, 2000)

Thus through Munni, Deshpande vindicates that one cannot give up one's identity searching for an imaginary identity. Munni serves in the novel the notion of false identity that most urban middle class women desire to have. Such a quest for false self discovery only results in failure in life. Madhu, the protagonist and biographer, who too is in quest for self discovery, learns from Munni that the original and authentic self has no alternative

III

Giving an account of the lives of two women Savitribai and Munni the novelist presents the kind of transition that the protagonist, Madhu undergoes in the course of the novel. The reader is given an account of Madhu's tract of life from marriage to self realisation. A quick succession of series of incidents helps her know herself. Madhu's father, being a widower, brings up the daughter with only a male servant at home. He does not observe rituals or religious customs and openly indulges in drink. With this kind of life, he obviously stood out in a conservative place where he lived. But, in retrospect, Madhu realises that people were willing to overlook her father's eccentricities. He could live the way he wanted without open censure or disapproval" (Shashi Deshpande: 138). It is only when a woman dares to defy convention that people are shocked. Madhu thinks that her father is an orthodox man.

Madhu's friendship with Som gradually develops and blossoms to love. She marries Som. Madhu becomes the part of a real family for the first time. Then she gives birth to Adit. She finds fulfillment with the birth of the child. According to her "... child's birth is a rebirth for a woman, it's like becoming part of the world once again" (Shashi Deshpande: 88). Motherhood gives her a new sense of fulfillment.

At a time when Madhu is very happy, she suddenly learns about the death of her son in the riots in the city. She feels bitter about the loss of the role of a mother. Though everyone around her consoles her, nothing interests Madhu anymore. Subsequently, Madhu's attention is diverted from her grief when Chandru forces her into taking the job of writing the biography of Savitribai. Madhu takes residence in the house of a young and loving couple Lata and Hari. She accepts the change as she feels herself that she has to forget the horror of her son's death. In spite of her desire to remain isolated and detached, Madhu slowly gets involved in the lives of people around her. But Savitribai's sudden stroke and Hari's accident create crisis, which bring her in the centre of all action. Madhu's final breakdown and her talking about Adit's death prove to be cathartic for her. For the first time since Adit's death, she opens up and tells Hari of her mindless waiting for her son. However, she carefully avoids the memories of her flights with Som.

She finally speaks of her loss of identity and alienation from her life when she says “How long will I live this way? And what for, Oh God, What for?” (Shashi Deshpande: 306). Madhu had no identity and no desire for self for seventeen years. But talking about the loss lifts the burden and brings in the realisation of the despondency of her life.

Madhu herself is a victim of sorts that the reader learns about only towards the end of the novel. She is not happy with her father and the male servant who had brought her up. On the other hand, she felt pity for the children who seemed to be constantly harassed by their mother. She says, “Motherless child I am, motherhood is an unknown world to me. The mother I see in my childhood are drab creatures, forever working, forever scolding their children, certainly they are not the women to arouse a sense of deprivation in me” (Shashi Deshpande: 182).

Deshpande presents life without conforming to stereotypes. The portrayal of motherhood is an example. 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. Munki’s mother who ignored her daughter; Ketaki’s mother, stern, 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 (Shashi Deshpande: 183).

Madhu’s estrangement with her husband, Som, began earlier than the tragedy of the death of her son. One night, she reveals to him a secret which she had locked up in the innermost recesses of her mind that she had slept with a man, when she was only fifteen, a man who later committed suicide. Som is unable to accept this reality. As one who had been a good husband by any standards shared a wonderful relationship with his wife. He is now unable to come to terms with the news. He is totally devastated. Madhu is unable to comprehend this, “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 if it’s been welded into his palm. Purity, chastity, an intact hymen, these are things Som is thinking of, these are the truths that matter” (Shashi Deshpande: 262).

However, it does not matter that Som himself had a full-fledged relationship with another woman before his marriage. It is typical that a man can have relations with others, but he thinks his wife must be virgin. 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” (Shashi Deshpande: 260).

Indian patriarchy is such that it categorises women as immoral on the slightest deviation to the normal course of behaviour. Madhu notes as to how Hari and Lata looked at her, when she returned after spending a night in a hotel room with Chandru. She thinks that it is not a matter that Chandru is Som’s friend. She considers that Chandru and she had been friends for nearly twenty five years. She recalls the way

even the waiter looked at them suspiciously when he had brought them dinner. In the conventional society, men and women can never be friends. Men can be only brothers, fathers, lovers, husbands, but never friends. Deshpande portrays this sensitive aspect in a subtle way.

From the account of the three women—Madhu, Savitri and Munni one can understand women in relation to patriarchy. Unlike other women novelists, she portrays women differently. Though she is referred to as a champion of women in her novels, she denies being one. Malati Mathur writes in this regard, "...in portraying struggles of these women for identity, Shashi Deshpande waves to conventional banners, launches into no rabid diatribes. She drives her point home with great subtlety and delicacy." (Malati Mathur, 2000)

It may therefore be understood that Deshpande projects in *Small Remedies* the aspect of quest for self-realisation of Indian women, who live in a hostile patriarchal society. She does this by portraying the failures of women. The failures are due to their denial of a certain part of their lives. The novelist does this in comparative terms. The abilities of Madhu and Leela to accept the facts of their life achieves them success in their quest. Through these two characters, one understands the crux of the novel that one is alone in one's quest for self realisation. Madhu for example is alone in finding her identity by understanding her life. Savitri too faces her life single handedly. This aspect is true of *The Darks Holds No Terrors* in the epigraph of which Deshpande wrote, "You are your own refuge; there is no other refuge, this refuge is hard to achieve." (Shashi Deshpande, 1990)

NOTES

- i. Meenakshi Mukherjee, "On Her Own Terms," *The Hindu*, 7th May 2000.
- ii. Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies*, New Delhi: Viking, Penguin India, 2000, Subsequent quotations, with page numbers given in parentheses are to this edition.
- iii. Malati Mathur, "Rebels in the households", *India Today*, April 3, 2000. Malati Mathur.
- iv. Shashi Deshpande, *The Darks Holds No Terrors*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1990.

REFERENCES

- i. Deshpande, Shashi. *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1990.
- ii. _____. *That Long Silence*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1989.
- iii. _____. *Binding Vine*. London: Virago, 1992.
- iv. _____. *Roots and Shadows*. Disha Books, New Delhi. Orient Longman, 1983.
- v. _____. *A Matter of Time*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1996.

-
- vi. _____ . Moving On. New Delhi: Penguin/Viking, 2004.
- vii. _____ . “Of Kitchens and Goddesses” 2003, 138.
- viii. Joshi P.J. Shashi Deshpande’s Fiction: A study in Women Empowerment and Postcolonial Discourse. New Delhi: Prestige, 2003.
- ix. Sree S. Prasanna. Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande: A Study. Sarup and Sons, 2003.

www.ijahms.com