



SMALL REMEDIES

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**To achieve something [...] you have got to be hard and ruthless.
[...] There is no other way of being a saint. Or a painter. A writer.**

Shashi Deshpande

Abstract: This research article related to Small Remedies and the liberation of women. Data related to this research article used is mainly secondary which collected from books, research articles, newspapers, research papers and the working of research scholars. Anu, and to the resultant depression. This inward journey enables her to look at each character around her analytically. Madhu, too, sets out on a long and lonely journey in her attempt to come to terms with her bereavement. The novel is, thus, a "profound piece of writing about love and loss, grief and hope, rebellion and sacrifice, and above all about the Promethean will to endure and survive."

Keywords: Libration of women, Shashi Deshpande, woman's spirit, struggle of women.

This unexpected first paragraph of *That Long Silence* (1988) is the voice of the narrator Jaya, but it also gives us a clue to the author's approach to writing. Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies* (2000) is the most confident assertion of this strength and deliberate denial of sentimentality. Rightly opines Usha Bande that the novel is "an insightful work of art celebrating human strength and will power" to face the assault of life. Shashi Deshpande foregrounds music in the fabric of the novel and death at the core of the story. Madhu Saptarishi, the protagonist of the novel, is a journalist, a part-time writer like Jaya and Indu in Shashi Deshpande's previous novels, and has recently lost her teenage son - Adit - in the meaningless bomb blasts that rocked Bombay. To Madhu:

Death is not an event; it's an end. It's like a nuclear devastation; there's nothing left. Som and I are moving through the rubble of our devastated lives, searching for something, for any bits and pieces of our past. But there's nothing. (Usha Bande, rev. of *Small Remedies*, by Shashi Deshpande, 27-28.)

Similarly, Urmi, in *Binding Vine*, experiences death through the loss of her infant daughter

Madhu's healing process for her internal wounds starts when she is confronted with the lives of two liberated women who follow the call of their souls to achieve completeness as individuals and pay the price it entails. One is Savitribai Indorekar, the successful singer; the woman who has rebelled; the mother who has been rejected by her own daughter; the aging matriarch who rules over her kingdom of music and musicians with impunity. The other one is Leela, Madhu's aunt, a political activist who demolished the conventions of widowhood and dares to marry a Christian widower having children. Both these women do not mould themselves according to anyone else's concept but are persons, who determine and shape their own destinies. They liberate themselves from their respective surroundings in order to seek fulfillment in public life.



Shashi Deshpande employs withdrawal as a tool for both introspection and self-realization for her protagonists. Her women withdraw not into a world of fantasy but into a world away from the suffocating circumstances of their life. It is a "remedy" by which they can find out their lost selves. Accepting the offer made by Chandru (Madhu's friend and Savitribai's doctor) Madhu comes to Bhavanipur to write the biography of Savitribai, the "doyen of Hindustani music" of "the Gwalior gharana". Madhu came to Bhavanipur, overtly, to liberate herself from the memories of her dead son but, covertly, to escape from the icy silence between her and her husband. Soon she begins to feel at home in the house at Bhavanipur where she is staying with her cousin Hari and his wife Lata. Talking about the importance of milieu in her novels, Shashi Deshpande in her interview with Lakshmi Holmstrom has commented upon her need to have the (background) "image" clear, "For me it is essential - almost as essential as it is for movie director - to have the shape of the house clear." In previous novels, Saru, Jaya and Indu go to their parental homes in search of liberty. Each protagonist is able to view her future more positively only after this homecoming.

The story of the novel unfolds in the tiny town of Bhavnipur where Savitribai (known as Bai in the novel) makes her home in the last days of her life. Savitribai, a star singer, wrote headlines not only through her music but also through the way she lived her life. She had liberated herself from the worn-out religious and social codes that circumscribe and undermine a woman's spirit and deny her an identity of her own. Bai was married in a respected and conservative brahmin family, where one could patronize the art but could not participate in it. But her father-in-law, a great lover of music, allows her to enter the forbidden territory and learn music. At that time, women from respectable families were not supposed to practice music; it was the preserve of the courtesan. Akka, in *Roots and Shadows*, forms the same opinion. When Saroj (old uncle's daughter) wanted to learn music, Akka put her foot down:

What - learn music from a strange man! Sit and sing in front of strangers! Like *those* women? Are we that kind of a family? Isn't it enough for you to sing one or two devotional songs, one or two aarti songs? What more does a girl from a decent family need to know?(Shashi Deshpande, "Shashi Deshpande Talks to Lakshmi Holmstrom, 23).

Bai's father-in-law was a broad-minded person who modified the rules of the family for his daughter-in-law. He arranged a middle-aged woman to teach her music and later a Muslim man, Ghulam Saab, to play table into the classes, since no woman played table at that time. It was that period of her life when Ghulam Saab entered her life.

Notably, Bai had to face the jibes and the hostility of other women in the family, and to face this one requires enormous courage. We have already discussed in the previous novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* that it is a power struggle in which a section of women is the spokesperson of a male point of view. Each protagonist (Saru, Jaya and Indu) liberated themselves from the environment of hatred and hostility when it posed a threat to their individuality and self-will. Savitribai was a step ahead. Being an ambitious woman, she had abandoned a secure married life to devote herself to music and to live with her muslim accompanist - Ghulam Saab. Here, Savitribai's comparison can be made with Nayantara Sahgal's women like Rashmi in *This Time of Morning* (1965)", Simrit in *The Day in Shadow* (1971) and Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) all of them have courage to walk out of their marriage to live their life according to



their own will. Like Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, too, portrays the "New woman" whose virtue is courage, which is a willingness to risk the unknown and to face the consequences." As Naresh K. Jain opines:

Staying within marriage or walking out of it or staying single [...] not by itself important. What matters is what a woman makes of her life and how far she is able to go towards selfhood and decide things for herself.(R. K. Narayan, Painter of Signs, 132).

Madhu is now in Bhavanipur to write the biography of Bai. In the very first session with Bai, Madhu realizes that it is not a meeting between two people after a gap of many years rather it is a meeting in which Bai studiously avoids any mention of their earlier association. She denies their association because that would amount to admit Munni. Madhu wonders why Bai is so frightened of revealing about her daughter when she has the courage to give birth to a child out of that illegal union and also to give the child her name:

[...] she gave that child the name 'Indorekar' - the name she adopted as a singer (from her mother's home town Indore) - not compromising 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.(Margaret Drabble, *The Millstone*,10).

This reminds us of Ainsley, an unmarried mother, in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman* (1969)' who refused to marry Leonard (the father of her child) and resolved to bring up her child entirely in accordance with her wishes.

The novel also focuses on the "remedies" that need to be adopted to come to terms with the anguish, the unbearable pain of losing one's child. Shashi Deshpande provides an interesting contrast between Madhu's inability and disinclination to forget her dead son and Bai's conscious effort to forget negate and deny her only daughter - Munni. Bai seems to endorse the idea that "to remember is to make living impossible" . Madhu gradually begins to realize:

I've been looking at the fact of Bai's silence about Munni, turning it around, seeing sometimes disease - induced amnesia, at other times a deliberate cruel forgetting. But perhaps it is neither, maybe it's just indifference that has made forgetting possible. Indifference is, after all, the best armour you can wear. If I don't care, I can't be hurt.(Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman*,123).

Munni, the daughter of the famous singer, hated music because her mother was associated with it. She was ruthlessly discarded by Bai in her subsequent climb to respectability. Munni refused to accept Ghulam Saab as her father and considered her mother's first husband as her father as she often states, "My father is Sadashivrao, he's in Pune". Experts believe that "children's emotional development is poorer if a parent is cohabiting than if a parent is married. This poor development is partly due to the high risk that the couple will break up.""" Munni's life is spent in pursuit of normalcy, which her mother



has destroyed by taking to music as a profession, by loving a Muslim Man and giving birth to her out of that union. Munni rejects the name given to her by her parents and calls herself Meenakshi. In this context, Meenakshi Mukherjee opines, "It is just symptomatic of her rejection of the life led by her parents and her yearning for respectability." Munni succeeds in "breaking the umbilical cord"[^] and finally returns to her grand-parent's family. Her desire to have a respectable identity, independent of her biological parents, forces her to don a new identity as Shailaja Joshi. Much later when Madhu meets Murmi in a bus in Bombay, Munni does not want to be recognized as Munni. She had obviously tried to make a sterile and clean break from her past identity. Munni's denial of her relationship with her biological parents is further proved by her wedding card:

A showy red frayed at the edges now, the letters in ornate gilt, almost undecipherable - a card like many others, but different in one thing: the bride was identified only by her father and grandfather. The mother's name was nowhere. I thought there was something cruel about it, about the rejection of Bai as a mother, this erasing of her from her daughter's life. (Mukherjee, rev. of Small. 12).

In Shashi Deshpande's previous novels, the protagonists Saru and Indu, both reject their mothers. These women are equally determined to liberate themselves from the folds of their mother/family. In this context, P.Ramamoorthi opines, "Their rejection is an indication of their autonomy and their capacity to see their lives independent of their mother/past."[^] Savitribai's true heiress is Hasina, grand-daughter of Ghulam Saab from his first marriage. Hasina devotes herself to looking after Bai in her declining years. Interestingly, mothers are an intriguing absence in *Small Remedies*. Paula (Leela's step daughter) refuses to have anything to do with her mother and Madhu is surprised that even Lata's mother is conspicuous by her absence:

It suddenly strikes me that there's no picture of Lata's mother anything in the house, not in Lata's room, or in her father's either. Mistress of the house, dead wife and mother - I wonder why she's been wiped out of here. Boarded up, like the well outside.(P. Ramamoorthi, "My life is my own: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's women,120).

Even Madhu's mother, Kaveri, hardly finds mention except in a picture which "shows her as a girl [...] scarcely a mother figure". She confesses that her "mother is not even an absence a tabula rasa on which I can write what I want". This absence of the mother, an empty space for this important part of the family reminds one of Anees Jung's memoirs of her childhood:

My mother remains absent in the only family portrait that rests on the last page of the album. Her seven children are grouped solemnly around a father, proud in the color black. The inscription below the picture reads 'Hosh ki Duniya,' Hosh being my father's pen name. My mother, it appears, has no claim on this happy world which she helped to create.(Anees Jung, Unveiling India,14).

Jung goes on to say that women were always outside the frame and were never allowed to enter these photos which were actually documenting the family history. Deshpande too is troubled by "the blanking out that is a woman's destiny after her death". Surprisingly, Bai remembers her mother with love and nostalgia:



It was my mother who showed me the beauty of music. She had a sweet voice. She sang the sort of songs women sang then, aarti songs, ritual songs, stotras. When she sang the Ramraksha [...] the music transformed it altogether. I loved listening to her when she sang it. I even picked up a few verses on my own. She heard me singing this one day and she was surprised and so pleased. She began to teach me after that.(Anees Jung, Unveiling India,19).

In each session with Bai, Madhu finds that Bai is projecting only that aspect of her life, she wants to be written about as "Bai is holding on resolutely to her own idea of her life". Looking back, Madhu now sees Munni's unashamed lies as an attempt to make sense out of her insecure life, to create a life-story to suit her dream, as Bai is now doing for the benefit of her biographer, Madhu. Hence, Madhu's questions have to necessarily remain unanswered and are always engulfed by silence. The questions are raised again and again only to be met with silence:

What is the truth about Bai? Why did she leave her home, and that, with a Muslim lover? [...] Was it truly love? Or a way out of a situation she could no longer endure? Did she use the man for her own ends? Or was she seduced by him? (Anees Jung, Unveiling India, 56).

Silence" is the recurring motif in Shashi Deshpande's novels. "The silence that speaks more than words - the gaps that fill the spaces between words in thoughts, in conversation and in writing have always attracted and intrigued Shashi Deshpande," opines Indira Nityanandam.' The silence of generations of women, the silence that neither female waters nor characters could hope to break was the silence that Jaya sought to break at the end of *That Long Silence*, that Mira hoped to break by writing her poems in *The Binding Vine*, that Indu thought that she would be able to overcome when she would don as the family matriarch in *Roots and Shadows*.

In *Small Remedies* "silence" emerges as a major "remedy" for most of the problems pestering the major characters. Bai, a woman who flouted the rules of the society and was a renowned singer, has now opted silence on issues concerning her personal life. In spite of the "ellipses in all stories", Madhu (as a biographer) tries to negotiate her way trying to find the "real" Bai out of her various roles as the dazzlingly beautiful singer, as the cruel mother or as a respectable wife of a traditional Hindu Brahmin family or as the woman who rejected the conventions of her times or as the woman with a Muslim lover and as the near-tyrannical, cantankerous woman who bosses over Hasina at the end of the novel.

Writing biography, Madhu realizes is a difficult art. It is not history to be told in a sequential order. It is life and life has its own pattern. Shashi Deshpande makes some perceptive remarks about biography which defies narration in a temporal sequence, "We see our lives through memory and memories are fractured, fragmented, almost always cutting across time." After several weeks' efforts, Madhu is able to collect all the required information about Bai. She is overwhelmed by her own omnipotence because she could recast the great singer in the mould she wishes to. She has the pen and she knows "the power of the writer is the power of the creator". She can create an infinite range of Bai:



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.(Indira Nityanandam, "Deafening Silence, 143).

Shashi Deshpande subtly indicates the constraints under which women writers seek self-expression. In her previous novels, *Jaya*, in *That Long Silence*, and *Indu*, in *Roots and Shadows*, are alive to their writing potential but soon they have to curtail their freedom and knuckle under the dictates of the editor. Madhu's publishers want a trendy feminist biography for "victim stories are out of fashion, heroines are in". But Madhu cannot impose the new concept of "heroinism" on Bai, an old fashioned woman who whitewashes her life through selective amnesia. Madhu is keen to discover Bai, the mother, and to probe her silences and see the suffering mother in her.

Shashi Deshpande has clearly projected the need for reading between the lines for every writer, especially for a biographer. With flashbacks, fractured memories and stream-of-consciousness technique, Bai's story gets written. Madhu wonders, is it really the biography of a woman who broke many of the accepted norms of a patriarchal society and who dared to dream and translated that dream into reality? Madhu catches on that she is not writing about Bai alone, it is also Madhu's story:

[...] about Leela as well. And my mother and all those women who reached beyond their grasp. Bai moving out of her class in search of her destiny as a singer, Leela breaking out of the conventions of widowhood, reaching out from her small room to the world, looking for justice for the weak, my mother rearming in her bare feet, using her body as an instrument of speed, to break out the shackles, finally triumphantly breasting the tape - yes, they're in it together.(Indira Nityanandam, "Deafening Silence,123).

In Indian society, there may be no harm in knowing about sex before marriage, but "the unpardonable crime for an unmarried girl is to have sexual intercourse with any man" Madhu's unveiling of a past act sullies her marital life. Som feels cheated. Madhu sees her loving, generous and kind husband turn into a savage, haunted and haunting one. He tortures her physically and mentally:

[...] there is something savage in his love making. He throws himself at me in a kind of desperation and I sense a concealed violence that both frightens and infuriates me. I resist, but our bodies are so used to each other, they settle down [...]. Soon this stops and he ceases even to touch me [...](Indira Nityanandam, "Deafening Silence,156).

Unable to cope with the situation, Madhu wonders, "When will this end, oh God, how will it end? The theme of pre-marital sex, even as a fictional strategy, has a limited presence in Indian-English women writers. Besides, Nayantara Sahgal's *This Time of Morning* (1965) and *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) mention a pre-marital sexual involvement in order to depict its painful social consequences. Nita, in *This Time of Morning*, fearlessly and voluntarily indulges in physical passion for Kalyan Singh whom she finds irresistible. Sex becomes her fulfillment and she desires it without a sense of guilt or regret. In *Storm in Chandigarh*, Saroj's husband, Inder reacts violently to an affair which took place before their



marriage. To Saroj, pre-marital sex is a mere youthful experiment indulged in more out of curiosity and fondness for her male friend than because of any deep and abiding love. Inder considers her a sinner for her having lost her virginity before her marriage, as it is evident from the following piece of conversation between him and his wife:

"Well, why did you do it? That's what I keep coming back to. [...]" "I was fond of him," she said wearily, "and I was curious. Is that a crime?" "Good God. Didn't you have any inhibitions, any sense of modesty? Couldn't your curiosity wait till you got married?(Rev. of Jo' of relationships, by Neale Donald Walsch, Sunday Times of India).

We do not know the exact nature of Madhu's problems until quite late in the novel, but Madhu's friends feel that working on this assignment (Savitribai's biography) may be a therapy, helping her to come to terms with her own personal trauma. Now, Madhu is trying to see the reflection of her own suffering in Bai. But Bai has drowned her pain in music as Madhu is trying to forget hers in writing. Similarly, Jaya in *That Long Silence* and Mira in *The Binding Vine*, also achieved articulation of their predicament, their constraints and their anguish by penning down their stories. Isn't Deshpande proclaiming the sustaining power of art?

Shashi Deshpande asserts in an interview with Chandra Holms that Madhu's "real philosophy comes to her later, at the end of the novel, after the upanavanam in the temple." Madhu meets a family celebrating an upanayanam ceremony in a very simple manner in the Bhavani temple in Bhavanipur. On being asked by the mother to bless the small boy, Madhu thinks:

What do I say? Ayushman bhava? Chiranyu bhava? May you live long. But what blessing can contend against our mortality? Mustard seeds to protect us from evil, blessing to confer long life- nothing works. And yet we go on. Simple remedies? No, they're desperate remedies and we go on with them because, in truth, there is nothing else. 'Sukhi_bhaya,' I say finally to the child.(Rev. of Jo of relationships, by Neale Donald Walsch, Sunday Times of India).

It suggests that instead of escapism, a permanent solution to one's problem comes from within one's "self" Shashi Deshpande foregrounds music in the fabric of her novel. Music has an ennobling quality and it is beyond caste, class or religion. The healing process of Madhu is accentuated when Hasina, Ghulan Saab's grand-daughter, who was Bai's student for the past fifteen years, gives a concert in the temple in Bhavanipur. The Hindu hooligans attempt to prevent Hasina, a muslim girl, from performing in a temple. They attacked Madhu mistaking her to be Hasina but she remains unhurt. This concert would launch Hasina on her musical career. Hasina sings a vachana by Akka Mahadevi, "I saw a dream, I saw a dream" (319) This song is a befitting tribute to all those women who dare to dream and have the courage to realise their dreams. Listening to her song, Madhu feels:

It's not the dead poet's dream alone that Hasina is singing of, but her own as well [...] of my dreams too, so many of them, all woven about Adit. And Som's dreams for his son. It's all over now, there are no more dreams left for me, for either of us.



The song sung by Hasina has a remedial effect on Madhu as she gets a clear-cut picture' of her future with her husband. This was a moment of self-realization for Madhu. One is reminded of Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980) in which the protagonist Bim is cleansed of all ill-will and melancholy on the musical evening at the Mishras.

As the novel terminates, Bai is lost in coma, "the shadowy land between life and death". Her death does not affect anyone. On the very last day in Bhavanipur, Madhu receives a letter from Som waiting for her. Som's letter begins with this stark statement "It will be a year now [...] come home. We need to be together at this time". Madhu knows that this is how it should be, that she should be with Som:

Som and I will have to do this for Adit, only Som have I can do it for him [...] we can recreate him, we can invoke his presence and make his existence real. [...] It's not just living children who need to be free, the dead clamour for release as well. .(Shashi Deshpande, "Shashi Deshpande in an interview with Chandra Holms," *Indian Review of Books*, 126).

Conclusion: Today, woman "no longer swing in the ancient orbits." Unfortunately, her efforts and pursuits to extricate herself from her wretched and sordid position and carve out a place for her in the men dominated society have further worsened her state. But can this male-dominated society explain to a woman why can't she have the freedom to live life her own way if men have been granted the same liberty? Why cannot she pursue professional dreams the way men can?

"Feminism" emerges as "a concept that can encompass both an ideology and movement for socio-political change based on a critical analysis of male privilege and women's subordination within given society." It is an expression of resentment at the unjust treatment meted out to women. Though feminism has been entwined with political events from its very beginning, it appeared as a social and historical force with the passage of time. Through the long line of women writers, who protested against the inequities from Mary Wollstonecraft to the nineteenth century American Suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, through Simone de Beauvoir to Elaine Showalter and from French psychoanalysts to the present day feminist thinkers, an outlook, a theory, a feminist thought system evolves.

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