



# Self-Discovery in Small Remedies: A Reading of Shashi Deshpande's

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**Abstract**— Women writers in Indian writing in English portray women as daughter, wife, mother and other stereotyped roles in their literary works of art. The cultural changes in India are contrasted through the lives of individuals, communities and the nation. The novelist interweaves many aspects of the personal life with the public matters. Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies* (2006) is about the protagonist's quest for self. It delineates the journey of women towards self-discovery 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 ascribed traditional role. The article examines the self-discovery of the women characters in the novel *Small Remedies*.



**Keywords**— cultural change, refuse, stereotyped role, self-discovery, traditional role, upheaval, women.

## I. SOCIETAL CHALLENGES AND HYPOCRISY IN 'SMALL REMEDIES': A BIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON SAVITRIBAI AND MADHU

*Small Remedies* can be considered a novel of music. Deshpande successfully portrays music, though music is not its main theme. The musical aspect of the novel is accomplished by portraying Savitribai Indorekar, a classical singer. This shows a deep understanding of Hindustani music on the part of the author. Deshpande skillfully uses the jargon and idiom of music effortlessly. Meenakshi Mukherjee observes in this connection:

Of the four remarkable novels I have read in recent time that deal with music ... I think, she faces the toughest challenge. This has to do with incompatibility between the discourse of Hindustani music and the English language.[1]

However, the novel's main theme is not so much about music as about the fascinating vocalist. Savitribai physically appears to be a frail woman: The author writes: As small sized woman. Even from my child's perspective she had seemed petite. Age and illness have so shrunk her that she's a doll-sized woman now ...

the skin is fine and delicate, even if it is crinkled like tissue paper. Her arms are slim and firm, but the hands, with their branching of veins, seem incongruously large for those delicate arms.[2]

The novel assumes the form of a biography of Savitribai written by Madhu. Savitribai, the doyen of the Hindustani music belongs to Gwalior Gharan. 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 singing 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. 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" (29).

This episode suggests that there are different yardsticks for men and women in Indian society. There is a parallel between the predicament of Savitribai and Madhu herself. Madhu herself was a victim of rejection by the conventional society. She remembers how

"Each family had its place marked out for it according to religion, caste, money, family background, etc." (138).

Madhu thinks that her father is an orthodox man. Being a widower, he 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" (138). It is only when a woman dares to defy convention that people are shocked.

Madhu observes, "In sense, neither of us belonged. Munni's family, with her singer mother, absent father and another man a Muslim sharing the home, was of course radically, shocking different" (138).

Madhu also gives the example that Savitribai's father-in-law 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" (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. Animals knows this ... But the subtle cruelty of persistent hostility leaves deeper wounds ... To resist the temptation speaks to great courage. (220-21)

Madhu also remembers the gossip surrounding Savitribai in Neemgaon. There was a station director who frequently visit 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!" (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. (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: We need be together, we need to mourn him together, we need to face of his death and our continuing life together ... Madhu in the end has attained self-realisation and how hopes to accomplish her dream to recreate ... How could I have ever longed for amnesia? ... As long as there is memory, loss is never total (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, she 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?" (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. FALSE IDENTITIES AND SOCIETAL PRESSURES: MUNNI'S STRUGGLE FOR ACCEPTANCE AND THE REJECTION OF HER ROOTS

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" (31).

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. She tells her that Ghulam Saab 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.

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.

The author writes, "She tried hard to cover it up ... unmistakably linked her to the man she so strenuously disclaimed as father" (75).

Interestingly, Munni's relationship with her mother is also unusual. Because, her mother's ambition made her neglected 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?" (74)

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.

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 living way from Munni, daughter of Savitribai and Ghulam Saab" (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:

... 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 that self I met in the bus but she is like an ordinary looking woman with an ordinary family life ... (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 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.[3]

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 identity only results in failure in life. Madhu, the protagonist and biographer, who too is in quest for self, learns from Munni that the original and authentic self has no alternative.

### III. CHALLENGING TRADITIONS: LEELA'S PATH TO SELF-REALIZATION AND INDEPENDENCE

Madhu discovers herself through her relationship with other women around her. Besides Savitribai and Munni,

another person through whom Madhu discovers herself is her aunt, Leela who is a remarkable woman as perceived by Madhu.

She describes,

"Leela who was the head not only of her generation, but the next one as well" (94).

The reader gets an impression that Leela is a confident woman being well aware of her needs. From her very childhood, she showed an inclination towards studies rather than domestic chores traditionally considered most suitable for girls. Leela seems to be a rebel too. This is true of her marriage. Her grandmother, who wanted to punish her, got her married off to a man of few means. But, it was a blessing in disguise. For Leela, the punishment turned into a blessing, as her husband encourages her to study. She could thus clear her metric examination. Unfortunately, her husband suffers from TB, and dies subsequently. Later, she strengthened her resolve to be an independent woman, and leads her life.

What is important about her is that Leela is financially independent, supporting herself. When her husband died, she took up a job. Living a community life, she works for the women afflicted with TB. Subsequently, she gets into contact with Joe, whom she marries. Joe, a doctor, establishes a clinic, especially for TB patients. Joe too falls in love with her madly. A widower with two children, Joe speaks impeccable English. Literature and music are the two great forces of his life. Contrarily, Leela speaks no English, and has no knowledge of literature or music. She has no sense of humour too. Yet their relationship continues wonderfully.

Leela disapproves a life in which one does not look beyond one's own self. It is her awareness of the needs of the self that make her a more understanding person. Leela reaches the stage of self-realisation. It is various demands of self and her persistent pursuit of them that earns her happiness and contentment. From the account of her life, one understands that Leela's personal as well as public life is unconventional. She revolts against tradition.

Being a Brahmin widow, she dares to fall in love with a Christian and marries him, fifteen years after the death of her first husband. Her decision to marry Joe after years of waiting for Joe's daughter, Paula's consent shows the resolve and her determination to attain her identity. They find fulfillment in each other. Thus, through her determination, Leela attains self-realisation and fulfillment in the love and companionship of Joe.



#### IV. THE INTERSECTION OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY: MADHU'S JOURNEY THROUGH LOSS AND RESILIENCE

To Giving an account of the lives of three women; Savitribai, Munni and Leela, 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 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" (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?" (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 (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 kapyar.' But real life shows me something entirely different ... none of them conform to the white-clad, sacrificing, sobbing mother of the movies (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. 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 (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" (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.

## V. CONCLUSION

From the account of the four women—Madhu, Savitri, Munni and Leela—one understands 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."<sup>3</sup>

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. Madhu for example is alone in finding her identity by understanding her life. Leela too faces her life single handedly. Deshpande wrote, "You are your own refuge; there is no other refuge, this refuge is hard to achieve". [4]

## VI. NOTE

In this section of the part of the research paper features direct quotes that highlight self-discovery and explore various remedies or solutions for personal growth. These quotes come from a specific source referenced in my paper and are crucial for illustrating how characters or individuals find themselves or work through personal challenges. To help readers locate these quotes, I've included the relevant page numbers from reference [2], which are:

(29),(31),(74),(75),(77),(88),(94),(138),(169),(170),(182),  
(183),(220),(221),(223),(260),(262),(306),(315),(324).

## REFERENCES

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