Affirmation of ‘Self’ in Shashi Deshpande’s Small Remedies

Yaul Usha

Assistant Professor, Department of English,
Shri Ganesh Arts College, Kumbhari-Akola

Dr. Raman Ashalata
Associate Professor
Department of English
Smt. L.R.T. College of Commerce, Akola

Abstract:

Shashi Deshpande, the living dynamic woman writer in English Literature occupies a prominent position in the galaxy of contemporary Indian writers writing in English. As themes, she has treated the everyday common and ordinary experiences through which a middle class woman is going. A middle-class working woman is her protagonist of every novel. Deshpande’s protagonists of novels are stronger for they attempt to resolve their problems by a process of temporary withdrawal from their traditional assigned role. Small Remedies is a path breaking novel by Shashi Deshpande, which belongs to the later phase of her career in writing. This novel holds a mirror before the women of society. Madhu, Savitribai, and Leela are the three ambitious and courageous women who prove their strength by sacrificing everything for their goal. These women do not become victims of their so-called feminine weakness. Instead they aspire to masculine power and respect. Writing, music and politics are the fields these women want to establish their identity. Because of their gender, sometimes, they are sidelined in their career, like politics so called male bastion. Deshpande reveals the understanding of woman psyche particularly educated, middle-class urban women aspiring for self assertion and independence.

KEY WORDS: Women, Dream, Rebellion, Male-Ego, Music, Biography, Politics, Self-Affirmation

INTRODUCTION:
Shashi Deshpande, a Sahitya Akademi Award winner for *That Long Silence* writes about aspiring women and their quest for self. Till date she has twelve novels, six short story collections, four books for children and a screen play to her credit. Deshpande’s creative talent and accomplishment have established her credentials as a worthy writer. Her protagonists are modern, educated young women, crushed under the weight of a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. They are aware of oppression in society when they want to establish their own identity and suffer a lot. In *Small Remedies* Shashi Deshpande makes an honest and novel attempt to trace the position of women in the 21st century. The female protagonists move from feminine consciousness to the self-affirmation.

In the present paper focus is on the struggle, hardships, subject to male ego and oppression faced by the women protagonists of the novel who are taking themselves from self realization, rebellion to self affirmation as an individual having their own principles, rights instead of submissive before the male domination. Music for Savitribai, writing biography of Bai for Madhu, selfless service to T.B patients for Leela, and discharging household responsibilities of middle-class house wife for Munni are the small remedies that make loss in life bearable.

The novel, *Small Remedies* explores the lives of three women, one is obsessed with music, second one a passionate believer in communism and the third one with writing. These three women take up their fight alone. Savitribai Indorekar’s rebellious act to break away from her family for her love of music is not an isolated, whimsical, individual decision. It transcends personal borders and becomes a part of the key social and political agendas undertaken by the late nineteenth century women such as Pandita Ramabai, Anandibai Joshi, Kashibai Kanetkar, Tarabai Shinde etc. who had the courage to stand up against the oppressive social regime. The protagonist-biographer Madhu exercises her choices, rejects her husband’s essentialist’s approach and reconstructs her ‘self’. Like Bai, Leela, another major woman character too goes beyond the acceptable boundaries set for women, though less spectacularly. Shashi Deshpande has considerable success in portraying woman as protagonist in plots centered round issues such as female marginalization, marital discord, sexual suppression, alienation and the search for self.

For centuries, Indian traditions, social norms, cultures and customs have been leading men to feel that they are superior and different and forcing women to think that they are inferior human beings who are not expected to play any role other than the traditional ones of each being a wife to her husband, mother to her children and a caretaker of the house. The patriarchal system flourishing
in India is always inclined to a magnification of the roles and goals of men and to a minimization of the importance and ambitions of women in all the spheres of life.

Contemporary Indian women writers have focused a women’s self image and their attitude to their bodies, enabling them to transcend narrow confines defined by patriarchy. Novelists like Shashi Deshpande and Githa Hariharan together represent the half century since 1947 and the changing concerns of feminist thought. They created powerful female characters which break the shackles of docility and compliance.

Shashi Deshpande explores and exposes the prominent patriarchal premises and prejudices embedded in Indian culture and lifestyle. In a variety of ways she challenges the ideology of gender which justifies and neutralizes the inequitable division between male and female. She raises her voice against the patriarchy in which talent and emotions of women are suppressed and the self is subdued by the age-old customs and traditions. Deshpande tries to present the new image of woman to be needed in the society.

All the protagonists of her novels are in the search of their ‘self’. Deshpande makes us to ponder over how male supremacy damages female egos and leads women to a state of intellectual slavery. Educational and professional opportunities enable women to function outside the family domain to prove their efficiency. But there is a discrepancy between their aspiration and achievement.

Indian woman is considered to a blind emotional dependence on men and in a sense the whole purpose and meaning of woman’s life is to win and retain a man’s love in her life. Even though the middle class Indian women want to stand against the patriarchal social set-up of family and achieve the self-fulfillment in their endeavours, they fear that their rebellion attitude could affect their relationships. And they become the slaves of their own emotions as they do not want to have any emotional as well as economical independence at the cost of their relationships in the family. Shashi Deshpande’s protagonists Jaya, Indu Saru are the representatives of this attitude. They are sufferers of their inner conflict and domineering male ego of their counterparts.

Shashi Deshpande in her novel “Small Remedies” subverts the traditional image of domineering and demanding husbands by portraying Lata’s husband Hari who enjoys cooking and household chores instead of depending on his wife and Leela’s husband Joe who encourages her in social work by establishing medical clinic for TB patients. This kind of subversion is relevant and praiseworthy as most of the wives and mothers of India spend their whole day in the house. Their
lives are incredibly overloaded within the patriarchal social set-up of the family without any expectation of reward or recognition.

Indian women desire to have intellectual and spiritual companionship with their male counterpart which should culminate in their total surrender of minds and bodies for each other. But very few are lucky enough to get such type of egalitarian relation with men. So they lead life suppressing their dreams, desires, visions, goals and ideals in mind. Woman realizes that the only way to relate her male counterpart is by offering body and mind to him unconditionally. She becomes puppet in hands of her husband. She knows that otherwise there will be discord in her marriage, a secure and safe institution for woman as per social norms. Being aware of this humiliating and self denying experience of woman in the family, Deshpande, in her novels dealt with this issue.

In Small Remedies, Shashi Deshpande portrays a strong character of women. This novel presents the changing role of women who do not believe in the inferior status of woman in the family as well in the society. Instead of being passive and submissive they fight against all odds of customs prevailed in the society in order to explore and safeguard their individuality and identity. The main characters of this novel Madhu, Savitribai, Munni and Leela, along with their feminine qualities exercise their independence, courage, intellectual energy, rationality and ambition. They do not compromise with their dignity while solving their problems rationally. They boost their moral and emotional strength to withstand in this male dominated society. They do not allow them to get victimized of anxieties, indoctrination, social conditioning and oppression. They are aware of the injustices heaped upon them; they display a determination to face the challenges of life boldly.

Madhu, a protagonist was brought up in a liberal atmosphere by her father. Her father is so lavish in his love and affection that she never feels the need of her mother. But her father’s death when she was only fifteen years old shatters her and she lives with her guardian aunt Leela. In her aunt’s family, she could not feel comfortable with aunt’s husband Joe and their two children Paula and Tony. She completes her graduation on the money that has been left by her father. Madhu refuses to pursue her study when the money finishes, though Leela and Joe were ready to provide money for her education. On the contrary she asserts her self determination.

“I am determined. I will start working. I will earn my own money, become independent.”(83)
These words reflect her strong determination for economic independence and courage to face the basic challenges of life. Fortunately, Hamid Bhai, Joe’s friend offers her job of writing and editing his magazine *City Views*. Madhu does not lose this golden opportunity as it was her first step towards her assertion of independence. This opportunity comes in her life along with another problem that is residential problem. This problem too is resolved by Hamid Bhai. He offers her a small room on rent where she experiences a sense of independence and fulfillment.

In her happy world of independence, Tony introduces Som and Chandru to Madhu. Her friendship with Som results into marriage and they become parents of their only son Aditya. Being a concerned mother, her life revolves around Aditya. To take care of him, even she gives up her job and adopts a new identity as a devoted mother. Madhu’s love for Som cannot allow her to stomach the secret of her past life that she had one night experience of sex with her father’s friend Dalvi. And it becomes a reason for losing a peace of mind and happiness in her married life. There is a beginning of violent quarrels and arguments between Madhu and Som. He becomes suspicious of her character. Madhu wants to exclude that incident from her life involves a fait accompli, a sexual encounter that she had with Dalvi, in the immediate aftermath of her father’s death, long before she met Som. Adit and Som are intertwined with this story of an unarticulated violence. Som thinks it was an act of betrayal and is tormented by the thought of his wife’s sexuality.

Madhu makes an imaginary conversation with her son. In a confessional mode she says,

What do I tell you, Adit? That I slept with a man when I was a girl, a child really, and your father can’t take it? That your father is tearing himself, apart, and me too, because of something that happened--- and only once--- years ago? (258)

Madhu’s memories of herself cannot exclude memories that she does not consider important. She wants the scars of her past erased. But Som wants to see them in their original form. By revisiting the original site, he wants to cure himself in the process of curing his wife. So he says: “Tell me the truth… tell me the truth, tell me the truth”. (257-58)

Madhu says: “But what does he mean by the truth? Does he mean revealing everything?” (259) The realization is both frightening and irritating.

“I know what the truth is that Som wants from me: that it has not been happened, that I was a virgin when he married me. I begin to understand … that I had been raped, forced into the act that I was a victim, not a participant.”
Madhu had not expected Som’s hostile reaction to her revelation, so many years after their marriage, that she had not been the “chaste, virginal bride” of his expectation. She expects understanding and acceptance from her husband. She is devastated by his violent reaction. She does not have any active memory of her single sexual experience at the age of fifteen in a peculiarly vulnerable state of mind. In her self-image she remains a ‘chaste’ woman. Instead, Madhu recollects that she had felt pleasure. But quarrels and arguments between Madhu and Som affect the tender mind of Aditya. Som’s suspicious attitude and thinking of parting, she gets angry but remains silent only because of her son. The oppressive atmosphere which stems from this, drives Adit from home to meet death in a bombed bus. One day he leaves home in disgust after a noisy scene between his parents. Unfortunately, Adit is killed in bus blast. Her pain is unimaginable. Madhu cannot maintain stony silence on the loss of her son, she lays blame on the male ego of her husband that traumatized the boy and sent him away. She has to find her own strength lies within to stand firm and that strength sustains her through grief and pain, anguish and agony. Madhu’s attitude registers a much stronger assertion of female sexuality.

To come out of grief, Madhu accepts the offer of writing biography of Savitribai Indorekar. She wants to get away from her Bombay flat and her husband not only from agonizing memories of Adit’s death but also from the bitterness seeping into her marriage. So Madhu moves to Bhavanipur and stays there with Hari and Lata. There she recounts chronological story of Bai’s life and experiences for her biography. Madhu does not yield to the urges of Tony and Rekha to come back. Even Som pleads her through letter but she remains adamant and determined in her decision saying that, “I turned my back on them. Nothing can help”(113). It is Lata’s and Hari’s affection towards her helps overcome grief and pains. Soon she gets involved with her new family world. Bai’s stroke and Hari’s accident forces her to confront her own grief. She lets herself open up to other people’s grief and pains. Kisa Gotami’s tale is just like a healing medicine for her. Gradually she accepts the truth of her Adit’s death.

Through the character of Madhu, Sahshi Deshpande reveals before us an image of a courageous woman who displays a rare courage and confidence in leading the life which is full of difficulties, humiliations and frustration.

Another two strong women, portrayed by the novelist are Savitribai and Leela. They are the rebels of their own time. They showed their courage to dream and to achieve freedom. Transgressing the social barriers was not an easy proposition, but they surmounted the hurdles and achieved what
they wanted to---the freedom to affirm ‘self’. Madhu is impressed by the inner strength of both Savitribai and Leela, who are the victims of gender discrimination. They had dreams and both learnt how to realize those dreams despite social barriers.

Savitribai is the pampered daughter of a wealthy Brahmin family. She inherits exceptional musical talent from her mother who encourages and teaches her. As music is at the core of heart, Savitribai wanted to become a professional singer. Where Bai’s grandmother stops her from singing at family function under the same roof Savitribai’s father was enjoying unconventional ways of life that he would observe no rituals or religious rites and would openly indulge in drink. Savitribai tells Madhu how she was hurt when her grandmother asked her to stop singing immediately. Married of as a young girl into a rich, joint family, she is enabled to indulge her love for music by the generosity of a music-loving, liberal-minded father-in-law, whom she dares to approach to plead her case in the first instance of the transgression of boundaries that is to mark her life. She is dissatisfied with the “mundane domestic life she was leading.” In Madhu’s imagination Bai is far from trendy heroines, she is a young woman who had lived a sheltered life of the daughter-in-law of an affluent family.(38)

A woman with this sort of background eloped with Station Director Ghulam Saab to pursue her goal of famous classical singer. She had to live in a strange town with strange people. To learn music from Guruji Kashinath Buwa, she had to travel by the local shuttle train to reach to Guruji’s place, with a two-mile walk through the fields at the end of it. Initially Guruji was not ready to accept her as a student since he felt was no profession for a respectably married woman. Finally he agrees to accept her as his student on some conditions. But her craze for music was uncontrollable. So she accepted each and every condition to quench her thirst for music. The place where Bai lived in was a ramshackle arrangement of two rooms with an outside toilet shared by others and no electricity. It is not an easy going for any one from a well to do family. But Bai had taken that risk. Being a woman she was not allowed to stay at Guruji’s place. Suffering and humiliation do not swerve her from her resolve to gain acceptance as a disciple of the guru of her choice.

Bai is unknown of Madhu’s childhood friendship with Munni, her daughter. Bai creates her story in such a way that Madhu finds no mention of Munni and her association with Bai’s life. Madhu who is aware of Savitribai’s past and her daughter Munni, is unable to accept her indifference to her daughter, more, because Madhu herself is a doting mother, grieving over the death of her son.
So Madhu realizes that there was no need to remind her: “I am Munni’s friend Madhu. Remember me?” (29).

Though, Savitribai was a successful singer, she was not accepted by the people of Neemgaon. There were some derogatory remarks about her as she was eloped with Muslim table player Gulam Saab. Madhu comes to know that there are different laws for men and women in this tradition-bound and male-dominated society. Bai’s father, a liberal having unconventional attitude and father-in-law who had mistress, a well-known Thumri singer, was accepted by this society. He had regular visits to her and was known to everyone. Through the character of Bai, we have a woman who gives preference to her own individuality, aspirations and rejects the traditional role of an ideal wife and caretaker of children. The erasure of her daughter is seen in terms of a rejection of the traditional concepts of feminine which enjoins sacrifice and selflessness on the part of a mother. Bai is an advocated artist, the woman in the search of her genius, of her destiny. Amrita Bhalla in her book says, “Bai’s story speaks of commitment and dedication to her art, of the courage to step across the threshold and break out of the restrictions of upper caste patriarchal society in search of a dream”

The novelist has introduced us the second major character, Leela, a caretaker of Madhu after her father’s death. Leela, an iron-willed woman, is a contemporary of Savitribai and Madhu, the narrator’s aunt. She is simple poorly educated woman who has spent a lifetime working closely with the factory workers of Mumbai, an association formed through her first marriage to a factory employee. Though a deglamorised figure, belonging to a much lower stratum of society than Savitribai, the two are alike in their non-conformity. Her desire to find her position other than wife is not looked upon by society as normal. Like Bai, it is through her self-realization that Leela attains her freedom. While writing about Bai, Madhu reminds Leela, who was her mother’s eldest sister and was also the eldest sister of Hari’s grandmother. Madhu sees similarities between these two women. “Leela breaking out of the conventions of widowhood, looking for justice for the weak, my mother was running in her bare feet, using her body as an instrument for speed—yes, they are in it together. But they paid the price for their attempts to break out.” (284)

Leela is a rebel in a wholly conventional, tradition-bound family. Like Savitribai, she makes a cross-caste alliance in her remarriage to Joe, a prosperous doctor and a caring husband. Theirs is a union forged on understanding, despite differences of religion, language and interests. Leela, however, retains her identity as an individual which is evident in her retention and return to her
Maruti Chawl home after Joe’s death. She had refused to return to her parental home had chosen, instead to carve a career for herself by connecting with the workers and their problems. Leela is a strong minded who did not care for the convictions of the society. When her first husband Vasant died she took up a job and educated her brothers-in-law.

Leela was an active member of the Communist Party and opposed the Gandhian principles of Ahimsa and Satyagraha. She feels that being beaten up and abused goes against human nature. She was in India’s freedom movement. Although she had a strong belief in the communist ideology that boasts of making no difference between men and women and declares equal rights and opportunities for both alike, she finds party is a victim of male chauvinism which ignores merits of woman activist on gender ground. Even there was a price on her head, she had narrow escapes and avoided getting caught. She is an uncommon woman who devoted her whole life for the betterment of the factory workers and women. Leela was a victim of gender politics. Madhu remembers how Leela resisted gender prejudices in the party she was working for. She never reached the hierarchical top because of her gender. Like Bai, Leela goes beyond the acceptable boundaries set for women. While writing biography of Savitribai, Madhu recalls Leela and realizes that “both were courageous women, that both were women who worked for and got the measure of freedom they needed, that both were ready to accept wholly the consequences of their actions”. (284)

Munni alias Meenakshi Indorekar, is the illegitimate daughter of Savitribai from Ghulam Saab. Bai gave the child the name Indorekar--- the name she adopted as a singer--- not comprising either her maiden name or her married one. Madhu recalls how children used to tease her by calling the Station Director her mama, a euphemism for mother’s lover. So Munni realized that she is misfit in the society as her mother, a Brahmin married woman, staying with a Muslim man. Munni decides to discard this identity as a daughter of Savitribai. She assumes a new identity and becomes Shailaja Joshi. She tries to leave no trace of her past identity. Munni concocts a new story that her father is a successful lawyer in Pune. She makes attempts to show that she too belongs to a respectable family. Her denial of Gulam Saab was so strong that “she tried hard to cover her exact resemblance to him by deliberately cultivating a bedraggled ragamuffin look, far removed from his tidy elegance… but her eyes, her light grey eyes… unmistakably linked her to the man she so strenuously disclaimed as father”. (75)
In the journey of search for identity, Bai rejects everything i.e. respectable family, comforts, even her own daughter Munni, and achieves name and fame as a doyenne of Hindustani classical singer. On the other hand Munni, denies her fondness for music and her imposed identity as a negate daughter of famous singer, Savitribai. She wants to become a middle class housewife. For this purpose she denies her vocal talent and ability. She rejects all that are associated with her mother, music, name and fame. Through her selfearned new identity as Shailaja Joshi, Munni sought the safe comfort of conventionality.

CONCLUSION:

Thus in *Small Remedies*, Shashi Deshpande delineates the major women characters in their subversion of their traditional roles. We have glimpses of their shattered lives but they fight their own battles in different arena of the society. In their own way, they tried to establish their individuality instead of getting compromised to their principles. Bai, Madhu and Leela are the victims of the gross gender discrimination but their self-realization helps them in discovering their identity and ‘self’. They went on with the dying desire towards their achievements facing the hardships while life threw upon them. They never looked back. Passing through the alienation, rebellion and aggression if necessary, they achieved their dream of being a ‘new’ woman. They have their own dreams and they learn how to realize those dreams despite social barriers. They suffer a lot in their desire for the “unfeminine” right to freedom. Women, though talented, gifted with courage, are sidelined as they are women.
Works Cited

7. Sushila Singh, “Preface”, Feminism and Recent Fiction in English, New Delhi: Prestige, 1991