

WOMAN PRACTICES SELF-ASSERTION IN THE MALE INSTITUTIONS, THE REMEDIAL MEASURES FROM "SMALL REMEDIES" A NOVEL WRITTEN BY SHASHI DESHPANDE

Abstract

Since the 1980s, Shashi Deshpande, an Indian English woman writer who won a Sahitya Academy Award for her work, has been one of the most significant and versatile writers in India. The paper focuses on a darker side of persistent hostility that the women have to succumb to achieve their dreams and goals. It employs in portraying the issues of how the woman characters of Deshpande in the novel, *Small Remedies* would not withdraw themselves from transgressing the stringent norms and rules of a social and cultural system of traditional bound male- society. The novel renders the lives of three women; one is a staunch music lover, Savitribai Indorekar who has taken a rebellious act to break away from her family and is deeply engrossed to learn the music of her choice. In inquest of self-identity, she faces hardships and battles all alone become offended, alienated, and slandered. Finally, she attains what she deliberately yearns for all her life to become a successful singer by being affirmative and self-assertive. Thus, these women characters in the novel, *Small Remedies* ensure to find some remedial measure adhering to their aims and goals, enduring pain to recover from their feminine distress by practicing self-affirmation and self-assertion in a male-dominated society.

Keywords: *Feminine, Male-Domination, Oppression, Suppression, Male Stereotypes.*

Author

Dr. Noor Fathima

Associate Professor in English

Department of Foreign Languages

Presidency University, Rajunkunte,
Bengaluru, India.

Mob: 91 88619 31615

E- mail: noor.fathima@presidencyuniversity.in

I. INTRODUCTION

Shashi Deshpande, a winner of the Sahitya Academy Award for *That Long Silence* has to her credit twelve novels, six short stories, four books for children, and a screenplay. Deshpande's unique talent for observing the life and battle of a woman in everyday life as depicted in her novels. The protagonists of Deshpande are often educated, middle-class working- women aspiring to achieve their goals by being submissive and assertive playing their distinctive roles in a family and society of a male chauvinistic world. With a unique degree of empathy and nuance, she captures the plight of the Indian woman who transitions with her own particular aspirations and the patriarchal forces that surround her.

Deshpande's books and short stories explore the psyche of educated middle-class Indian women. The household environment and the man-woman relationship inside marriage are prominent themes in her writing. The female protagonists in all her novels waver between the conflicting tradition-bound society and the modern world contain full of hopes and aims that claim the quest for assertion and self-fulfillment. They undergo the trauma of the mental psyche in proving to desert the futility of their 'selves' from the old lost woman confined in traditions to the newfound the liberated woman of modern times. During this self-exploring process, they move from feminine consciousness to self-affirmation, emerging from oppression, male ego, and submission to male-dominated society. The present paper employs the struggles, hardships, oppression, and suppression of the male –chauvinistic world.

India, which is regarded as the nation where Durga removed the fear of demons from the minds of all but women, is suffering from a terror within. Men established several social and moral standards for women more than two thousand years ago, as Manu Smriti defines a woman's identity and status as: "During childhood, a female must depend upon her father, during youth, upon her husband; her husband being dead, upon her sons; if she has no sons, upon the near kinsman of her husband..... a woman must never govern herself as she likes" (Singh 11). In this regard, Shashi Deshpande is a brilliant novelist who depicts the direct and unambiguous position of women under our society, i.e. how they attempt to break free from all the constraints in which they live. This female sorrow is explored in Shashi Deshpande's works through the world of male dominance. The novels of Shashi Deshpande are about women taking or losing spaces. In such a severe scenario, women fight for the injustice not only with males but also with other women. Women are not just depicted as domestic wives who make food, bear children, and remove stains from garments; they maintain a good status in society, but after much fight.

Tolerance is essential for any person, male or female. The effects of an action might vary, and if a person is willing to face the challenges, overcoming life's barriers is not tough. Bai and Leela are strong enough to handle the consequences. They are not weak women; they are educated and cultured ladies who care about their own and others' well-being.

Because our society does not condone pre-marital relationships, women are always seen with suspicion. Bai's elopement is not recognised by society in the novel. Even Madhu exposes her worst secret to her husband Som, who is unable to accept this about his wife. Som was a decent spouse to Madhu before the revelation, but now he is uninterested in her. Another issue is that he had a previous connection with a woman. Madhu, on the other hand,

was not willing to perform such act. She was compelled to do so, but how can a man comprehend this: "But it's the single act of sex that Som holds on to, it's this feel that he can't let go off, as it's been welded into his palm. Purity, chastity, an intact hymen – these are the things Som is thinking of; these are the truths that matter" (Despande 262) these facts, however, are exclusively relevant to women. In this society, every man expects his wife to be pure and virgin, even if he has numerous relationships with other women. A lady must keep her virginity. Deshpande has depicted the harsh realities of the world. It occurs as a result of the patriarchal society in which we live. "That he could, perhaps, have borne: that I had been raped, forced into the act, that I was a victim, not a participant," Madhu believes (Despande 262). These lines encapsulate the plight of all women. Women are never willing participants in this heinous act; they are forcibly coerced into it, which is why they are the victims. Madhu was physically raped once in her life, but when she recounted her ordeal to her life partner, she was astounded that it is impossible for a male to understand a woman's plight.

A family is an institution in and of itself-everything begins in the family, and everything that happens outside the family reflects in the family. The domestic atmosphere, which should be peaceful and sanctified by societal norms, is frequently marred by discord, dominance, and violation. The intricate nature of human interactions is examined, whether inside a family or in a broader communal context. As the novelist locates the self in the labyrinth of her actual experience, the experienced becomes the touchstone in storytelling. This process of rebuilding and destruction is continued in the novel in a narrative flow.

Our society was so conditioned to label women as immoral at the slightest divergence in their behaviour from the norm (Amarnath, Vol.2). Madhu understands that it was okay for a man (her father) to live their lives by disregarding the conventional rules, indulging in alcohol, and engaging in immoral behaviour.

Even Savitri Bai's grandfather defies convention. Women should not live their lives alone. Shashi Deshpande addressed the absence of female identity and freedom through this novel: "Being a guy, he could get away with a lot; He could live the way he wanted to without open judgement or rejection." (139) Women's rules and roles are heavily influenced by society. In our Indian civilization, each family has a designated place based on religion, caste, wealth, and family history (Jasbir Jain). Savitri Bai, Madhu, and Leela's lives have been highly influenced by society and its dimensions on women. Imposing some rules and customs will worsen their situation. It fueled the fire and exacerbated the pain.

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II. SPEAKING FROM THE MARGIN: RESISTANCE TO PATRIARCHY

Understanding patriarchy requires how the power structure that produces it functions in a given society and at a particular time. It operates through a complex network of power relation wherein it not only creates victims of hierarchy, but also uses them as the perpetrators of the hegemony. In other words, the victims of the system become its agents too. It also requires that patriarchy functions in various ways and emerges in various forms. That explains why harassed women turn into torturers. Young brides who move into their husband's house are treated as subordinates not only by men but by elderly women. Thus

either way as women their condition is tragic. But this double role of victim and perpetrator throws up larger questions about the role of women and the movement itself. If given power, would women behave differently from men? They would exercise power differently provided they have a different value system.

It is often pointed out that for long time feminists who projected men and women as binaries, as – men as rivals and women as victims – did not work towards creating a different value system for women. If, as feminism at one stage believed, women act, think and experience differently and then they should also look upon power differently. They should oppose domination of any sort as ‘unfeminine’. The reason for women not behaving differently when it comes to use of power is squarely blamed on patriarchy and some liberal feminists question this practice of blaming men and patriarchy for everything. Strangely, the role of women either as dominating or subjugated persons is class specific. Sharing or exercising of power happens differently in middle and working class families. Similarly, resistance to male dominance also varies from class to class. Commenting on this Karen Kollias urges middle class women to see working class women as role models:

- Lower and working class women have been forced to surface their strengths in order to survive, and often have had to assume responsibility for others, as well. While most women have some elements of strength within them, many simply haven’t had to develop it, because of their comfort and economic security. (Web)

One of the major issues of the Women’s Movement has been to eliminate women’s weakness and replace it with confidence, independence. This is partly because middleclass women who have some kind of protector (a successful husband or father) feel a lack of control over their own lives and have felt the need to organize around that. This is valid within its own class context.

III. WOMAN CONFINED HERSELF IN THE DOMESTIC SPHERE

The woman Protagonists in the novel, *Small Remedies* like Madhu, Savitribai, and Leela Predominately play the active role in probing a remedy from the vulnerable, passive and conflicting syndrome of male stereotypes. They have their own principles and rights well set in their minds and negotiate with the small therapies like music, writing biography, and discharging the household chores. ‘Women should be confined to a domestic sphere, nurturing children, maintaining the household, and serving their husbands. John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony, held that “A true wife accounts her subjection her honor and freedom’ finding contentment only ‘in subjection to her husband’s authority” (Madsen. L. Deborah). Since the past ages, woman is believed to be the carrier of all Indian traditions, culture, and customs. They are bound to follow the old and vague conventions of society regardless of being hard and inconvenient. The stereotypical image of women targeted to oblige the traditional role, as a wife, mother, and housekeeper never deters. Instead, a woman questioned as violating the rules of patriarchal society. Thus, a woman attempts to present an affirmative role of herself that is unwelcomed and despised by the male world.

Deshpande’s woman characters, in pursuit of career, break all shackles of male-dominated society as the line suggests here: “A woman who’d left her husband’s home – what morals would she have, anyway!”(P.223, SR)‘Women are defined as ‘other’ or they are

ignored, rendered invisible and silent if they do not fit the patriarchal scheme. Outside the dominant definitions of male-dominated culture women exist only as 'insane, inarticulate, or irrelevant' (Madsen. L. Deborah). The novelist tries to eliminate the incompetent stature of women in her novels. In the present novel *Small Remedies*, Bai moves out to pursue her love of learning music for which she has to cross all barriers and face the ruthless consequences of the outside world. She is a modern woman voicing her desires and goals. Her woman characters encounter the act of injustice and imbalance in the world of employment. Her novels vividly portray such characteristics of a woman, despite her consistent hard work and rigorous selfless services. In her stories, a woman has not given credit for any professional advancement or rewards in her line of work. She is restrained to maintain her inferiority, despite her efforts and advancements in quality. This is quite a rigorous and rebellious activity that defines socially, politically, and culturally contentious concerns that feminists in the current world cannot accept.

As the line suggests here, "In her work, too, though she was sidelined after years of working for the party, though she never reached the top of the hierarchy, while men who'd worked under her got there, she never complained (P.224,SR). "The married woman surrenders all her rights, including the right to control her own body, though her husband gives up nothing; she becomes an unpaid domestic drudge, robbed of her labor; and when women are paid to work outside the home they are paid not according to the value of their gender" (Vol.2, P. 70, Blatch & Stanton, 1969). 'Literary feminism tried to awaken a sense of the value of the feminine by promoting a reevaluation of the image of women in literature (Madsen.L.Deborah).

Madhu, another protagonist who is writing Bai's biography becomes a true admirer of the indomitable and aggressive attempts Bai has taken in her life. She learns from her how she has become potential and independent in constructing a life, as she wants after having got to undergo the bitter experiences with love, sex, and scandals in her life. Leela, another protagonist is a passionate believer in communism who becomes a widow, but she never dissuades herself from fulfilling her ambitions. She, being well-determined fights for her rights and tries to seek her way out of agony and despair. Deshpande utters the agony of a woman through Madhu's words as she remembers Leela reiterating it once as the line suggests. "It seems you've got to become a widow for them to remember that you exist" (P.224, SR). This is an explicit viewpoint of the male –chauvinistic society. It exposes the sad plight of a woman, as it is believed that the status of a woman cannot be improvised until a man dies and she becomes a widow when she gets a chance of undertaking his role and status.

IV.FEMININE CONSCIOUSNESS PERVADES IN THE MARITAL LIFE

Each of the women characters of Deshpande in *Small Remedies* upholds feminine characteristics like Savitribai moving out of her class in search of her destiny as a singer, and Leela breaking all conventions of widowhood, reaching out to the world. As they are struggling to emerge successful in all their endeavors despite having got to face the huge consequences. However, the woman takes up a rigid stand to fight against injustices against the male society with the help of their educated and professional qualification. They come to a certain point where they really fail to advance further due to the emotions and feelings that comes across their way due to which they lose all their potentialities and capacities once

again and yield up to the desires of the patriarchal world, thereby suppressing their own choices and vision of life. Some fear due to their feminine ideals and consciousness, there would be discord in their married life, and they plunge to set back. Paradoxically, those who could sustain the powers of emotions and the weakness of the mind can really emerge triumphantly.

In *Small Remedies*, Deshpande portrays the strong character of a woman who adheres to her own principles and ideals fighting against all odds of customs that prevailed in the patriarchal society. The novel centers on strong woman characters like Madhu, Savitribai, Munni, and Leela who are active, intellectual, rational, and ambitious. Though they are very much cautious of the social injustice and inferior status, they exercise courage and take up the ordeal of all the challenges of life subjected to male stereotypes. Madhu's persuasion to find a job and begin her working career immediately after her completion of graduation proves her distinctive nature of self-affirmation. Ostensibly, sensing the money getting over which was left by her father after his death and Madhu never yields to accept a favor from Leela and Joe, she asserts her self determination to become financially independent and socially potential to tackle her own problems "I am determined. I will start working. I will earn my own money, become independent" (P.83,SR).

V. PAST LIFE EXPERIENCES THAT TRIGGERS THE SELF-REALIZATION

Never long before Madhu steps into a new job of writing and editing a *Magazine City Views* offered by Joe's friend, Hamid Bhai. The job has opened her new vistas of life where another bright future awaits her. As she happens to meet Som and their friendship turns out into a marriage relationship. The happiness and peace are not going to remain for long as she indulges in revealing the truth of her past the sexual experiences she encountered once with her father's friend. This revelation brings disaster to her married life. Moreover, fate provides her another sense of the gloomy and tragic side of her life where accidentally due to the quarrels and disputes; she loses her only son, Aditya in the bombed bus. She completely loses her own self.

In order to reach the top hierarchical grounds, a woman has to endure hardship to break through the barrier to get there. Deshpande, through her woman characters, tries to show the clear mirror of society where a man can do anything he likes, even an illegal relationship with a woman for years and on its revelation, society never considers it wrong or regards it as violating and offending any societal laws. Even a woman reluctantly though accepts such a man, overlooking his guilt which is never a small blunder. On the other hand, a woman being honest, loyal to her husband, following all 'pativrata' roles, nevertheless accidentally and reluctantly becomes a victim of having an illicit relationship perhaps for a shorter time in the past or present life. On its revelation, the reaction of man and society is distinctly different before the world and the guilt she carries is an eternal one that is never forgotten or forgiven. As the line reflects the above-given idea when confronted by such untold issues. "To him, I was chaste, I was untouched. I should have remembered that look; I should have kept it intact in my mind. But these things are lost in the trivia of daily living.....I was unconscious of anything but the need to unburden myself... Now I know that with my revelations I destroyed the girl he had married. Suddenly I became a stranger to Som, a woman he did not know. And then, it was he who changed. From a genial easy going

man, he turned savage, destructive, hating me, hating himself" (P.230, SR). Madhu could not really bring back the happiness that in a deceitful and false image she was able to find pleasure in but that she has lost in the revelation of truth. However, she is relentless.

Although stricken in grief and agony she becomes more and more stern and adamant and decides to be even more firm and determined in her views. Therefore, she plunges to write a biography of Savitribai Indorekar in order to get away from the painful memories her life has offered her. She moves to Bhavanipur where she starts recounting her life and experiences of Bai. Despite Som's plead to return home she never yields as quoted here, "I turned my back on them. Nothing can help" (P.113,SR)

VI.MINOR CHARACTERS CONFRONTING CONFLICTS

Shashi Deshpande has portrayed two other woman characters, Savitribai and Leela besides Madhu who in order to achieve their goals, freedom from the clutches of male-dominated and traditional society, tend to transgress a social barrier and surmount all hurdles on their own. Every woman who turns out rebellious has her past, which must have forced her to become so. Savitribai aspires from her childhood to become a professional singer but being a girl brings disgrace to a respectable family. Bai's grandmother stops her from singing at the family functions and she fears Bai's father who enjoys an unconventional life would not care for the rituals and religious rites and would indulge in drinking. Then, it so happens that Bai gets married to a rich joint family. Her father-in-law, a liberal-minded man whom she approaches to transgress the boundaries, and surprisingly this works. Madhu feels she is far from trendy heroines, who have to bear the ultimate sense of contradictions in all her attempts. Bai's love of music stirs her up to the extent that she becomes a student of Guruji Kashinath Buwa who reluctantly accepts her to teach classical music. She is noted in whole Neemgaon as being eloped with station Director Ghulam Saab to pursue her career. Madhu realizes how Bai could ever take up this ordeal, as it is very tough for a woman living in the traditional bound society to confront such conflicts.

Another major character, Leela reasserts herself by waging war against a patriarchal world. Madhu finds some similarities between Leela and Savitribai as they trespass the boundaries of the traditional society, they find small remedies to ease themselves and liberate their minds and bodies through self-assertion and self-affirmation in the male-dominated society. Madhu reiterates about Leela, her mother's elder sister," 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 part the price for their attempts to break out" (P.284, SR).

Leela, an active member of the communist party, fights for equal rights between men and women. She considers the party being passive and negligent and struggles to win the merits and opportunities for women. This strongly exposes the hidden structural or class determinants of feminine experiences, especially the social, political, and economic forces that constrain women. Leela has dedicated her whole life to the betterment of the factory workers and women. Even though there lies a price on her head, she escapes narrowly and with much fortitude and courage faces the challenges of the patriarchal world. Madhu emphatically says, "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."(P.284, SR)

VII. CONCLUSION

Thus, *Small Remedies* investigates a remedial measure for Madhu, Bai, and Leela, each one strives to achieve her goal belonging to different cultural backgrounds transgressing all norms of tradition-bound society and surmounting the hurdles by being more assertive in a male-dominated society. They emerge successful in playing their specific roles to fulfill their dreams by being rebellious, alienated, and aggressive despite the social barriers they confront in the conventional and patriarchal society. As a result, the paper investigates the oppressive nature of men towards women as they are engaged in asserting their identity. It probes the modern women who are increasingly looking into articulating a vision of the future that includes gender equality and social justice.

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