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Alienated Self in Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies*

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Abstract

In Greek, there are two words for alienation -*'anomi'* and *'anomia'*. While 'anomia' stands for self-alienation, 'anomie' refers to alienation from society. In fact, self-alienation and alienation from society are the two basic forms of alienation. If a person's spontaneous individual self has been stunted or stifled, that person is said to be in a condition of alienation from himself or herself. The female characters of Shashi Deshpande suffer from both *anomie* and *anomia*. The reason in both the cases is patriarchal codes governing the society. Since ages they have deprived women of the right to live according to their own will. Deshpande's treatment of alienation in her women characters has a different dimension. Her protagonists, unlike the protagonists of Anita Desai, neither commit suicide nor go into self-exile because of an oppressive sense of alienation.

Keywords: 'Anomie', Alienation, Patriarchal, Consciousness, Protagonists.

The marginalization of women in a patriarchal society has resulted in their alienation. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines 'alienation' as "A term used with various meanings in philosophy, theology, psychology and the social sciences, usually with emphasis on personal powerlessness, meaninglessness, cultural estrangement, social isolation or self-estrangement." Alienation implies an individual's feeling or state of dissociation from self, from others and from the world at large. In Greek there are two words for alienation – '*anomic'* and '*anomia*'. While '*anomia*' stands for self-alienation, 'anomie' refers to alienation from society. In fact, self-alienation and alienation from society are the two basic forms of alienation. If a person's spontaneous individual self has been stunted or stifled that person is said to be in a condition of alienation from himself or herself. An alienated person is a stranger to himself as his fellow man is stranger to him. Thus alienation from self leads to alienation from society.

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The female characters of Shashi Deshpande suffer from both *anomie* and *anomia.* The reason in both the cases is patriarchal codes governing the society. Since ages they have deprived women of the right to live according to their own will. Women have been forced to live a dependent life under the control of men. Education has brought some changes in their lives but not so fundamentally. Whether they are earning women or housewives, they are not leading their lives of their own choices. This has alienated them from themselves. With changing times, they have also not remained, at least in the case of the educated urban women, the mere puppets in the hands of their men. This has alienated them from society. This is the case with the protagonists of Shashi Deshpande. Highly sensitive, intelligent and educated protagonists of Deshpandemay be said to be the representatives of modem Indian women. They suffer from alienation because if they listen to the voice of their hearts and minds they are called undutiful daughter, sister and wife and find themselves alienated from society and other members of their families, and if they conform to the male concept of the traditional woman, they become alienated from themselves. Therefore, Deshpande's heroines try to adopt a middle path where they can perform their domestic or social duties without compromising much with their individual desires and values. Thus Deshpande's treatment of alienation in her women characters has a different dimension. Her protagonists, unlike the protagonists of Anita Desai, neither commit suicide nor go into self-exile because of an oppressive sense of alienation.

Alienation can be an essential condition for man's awareness of himself as an individual. It gives him an opportunity to address to such questions as to who he is in essence and what he should do or not do in the broader sense of the term. This is true in the context of the heroines of Shashi Deshpande. Put under certain circumstances they are set on the path of self-discovery. The process begins with their sense of alienation both from themselves and those around them. They all try to know who they are besides a secondary sex. Deshpande's women of the younger generation refuse to tread the beaten path of staying at homes, looking after the children and their husbands and meekly accepting whatever is given to them. They prefer to make their own decisions. They are not always happy about it and have to make compromises, but ultimately they reach a better understanding of themselves and their lives. This is what makes them so individual.

With the change in the social and cultural milieu of India in the post-Independence period, Indian urban women with education find themselves at crossroads. Women have adopted professional careers but they are not free from the roles assigned traditionally to them by the patriarchal society. This has created a divided mentality in them. Shashi Deshpande's female protagonists also face this crisis and undergo a sustained period of self-doubt and mental agony but they finally succeed in overcoming them and gaining a sort of mental equilibrium. They neither break completely free from the traditional fold nor do they lose their individuality. Charu Chandra agrees with Deshpande's concept of feminism where achievement of individual identity and female autonomy is not the only goal but is balanced against life in the family and career:

> After having accorded that autonomy to her, she should accept the basic human values like motherhood and responsibility of the family, thereby of society, at least on her own terms. There is need to harmonise the man-woman relationship as equal partners. Victory is there, not in the subjugation and destruction of the male, rather in bringing him to see the indispensability of each other's space. (Chandra 86)

Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies* focuses not on a single woman character but on three women from three different backgrounds but with common elements of tragic suffering and alienation. Structured as a biography within a biography, the novel is about Savitribai, the famous classical singer who has become old now. It is also about Leela who overcomes her personal tragedy to serve the poor workers of a Bombay suburban locality. Finally, the novel is also the story of Madhu, who apparently is the link between the other characters. Trying to come out of her personal tragedy, she tries to relate to others. She is the narrator of Savitribai, Leela and Munni's life, and hopes to find a way out of her own tragedy. She has fractured memories about the life of Savitribai from her childhood. In her childhood, Madhu had witnessed the rejection of Savitribai by a traditional society because Savitribai had the courage to defy the conventions of that society. Another memory of Madhu's life is that of her father who was a doctor. He also did not conform to the ways of a traditional society. Being a widower and bringing up a daughter with the help of a male servant, observing no ritual or religious customs and taking drinks every evening, he also did not conform to the social norms of a small town. But looking back, Madhu realizes that while people of Neemgaon were willing to overlook her father's deviations from the conventional norms, they were not so generous in the case of Savitribai. This showed the dual standard of a male dominated society.

The protagonist of the novel, Madhu suffers the tragedy of the death of her young son in a communal violence. Her estrangement from her husband, Som, also begins shortly afterwards when waking from a nightmare one night she reveals to him a secret which she had locked up in the innermost recesses of her heart for a very long time. She had a sexual intercourse with a friend of her father who was in fact trying to console her after the death of her father. It was not something that was intentional. She was just fifteen years old then. The intimacy of a male body and a desire for release from her grief had also made her succumb. Later on, the man had become so ashamed of himself that he had committed suicide. Thus it was an occasional episode in her life which she had concealed from everyone but she had not been able to forget. When she discloses this truth to her husband, he is unable to bear it. Though he has been a good husband, he cannot tolerate it. His male ego is hurt. He does not complain, nor does he ill-treat her, but there falls a shadow on their relationship. All this makes Madhu alienated, both from herself and her surroundings:

> But it's the single act of sex that Som holds on to, it's this fact that he cannot let go of, as if it has been welded into his palm. Purity, chastity, an intact hymen - these are the things Som is thinking of, these are the truths that

> matter. I know this when I see his face, when I feel the hurting grip of his hands, when he says, 'Tell me, go on, go on.' Go on with what? There is nothing else, so far as I am concerned. But Som wants facts, hard facts. How often had this happened, how long had it gone on? Tell me, tell me. Only once. No, never again. No never before either. Som cannot believe me. He thinks I am holding back. When I say it is all very vague, he thinks I am evading him. When I tell him I'd forgotten about it, he goes rigid with disbelief and anger. (*Small Remedies* 263)

To Som it does not matter that he himself had an affair with another woman before his marriage. He cannot bear that his wife did not come to him untouched. So Madhu feels trapped in her situation. When she is asked by a publisher to write the biography of the famous singer Savitribai Indorekar, she takes it as an opportunity to get away from her situation, though she has not much faith in her ability to write a good biography. Going to Bhavanipur, where Savitribai lives, is an attempt to rehabilitate herself, to get away from her life as a mother and wife: "Here I am safe in Bai's house. I'm the woman who's going to write a book on Savitribai Indorekar. Nowhere am I Aditya's mother . . . the identity I've drowned myself in for nearly eighteen years" (153).

For Yogi and Maya who are publishing the book, the commercial value of the book is more important, so they are less interested in music and more in the controversial aspects of Savitribai's life which they hope Madhu would be able to ferret out. For Savitribai, this book would be a means of glamorizing her achievements. Thus the writing of this biography means three things for the people concerned, the writer, the subject and the publisher. Madhu observes:

> Firstly there's Bai's book, the book Bai wants to be written in which she is the heroine, the spotlight shining on her and her alone. No dark corners in the book anywhere, all the shadows kept out of sight, backstage. Then there's Maya and Yogi's book. A controversial one, trendy, politically correct, with a feminist slant. A book that will sell. And there's my book, the one I'm still looking for. It's evading me, not giving me a hold anywhere. (*Small Remedies* 125)

She does not want to write a trendy biography, but a real one which will bring out the travails of that legendry singer. She knows the problems that she must have faced in a patriarchal society must have been tremendous. She recollects the resentment in Savitribai's voice when she tells her that she was stopped from singing by her grandmother when she was a child. Madhu recalls, "In Neemgaon she was the 'singer woman' and there was something derogatory about the words. Yes, I can see that now, the way they said them" (*Small Remedies* 29).

Madhu who had been the witness of Bai's youthful days, remembers how Bai had to face gross gender discrimination prevalent in the society which had different yardsticks for men and women. She remembers how in Neemgaon each family had its place marked out for fulfilling religious offering, it is according to religion, caste, money and family background. Here men could live their lives of their choices but

such freedom was denied to women. This is what happens to Savitribai when she decides to pursue a career of singing. Singing was a passion for her but her life seemed meaningless to her. So she ran away with a Muslim *tabla* player who helped her in career. But so single minded was Savitribai's devotion to singing that she did not allow any relationship to pose a hindrance to it. Even her love for her Muslim lover or for that matter her daughter, Munni born out of this love, did not mean much to her.

Savitribai's act of having a Muslim lover alienated her not only from her family, but also from her society. She had to leave her town. To highlight the discrimination against woman Deshpande gives the example of Savitribai's father-in-law. He had a mistress, a singer, famous for her *Thumri* singing. He too could get away with his way of life without any censure or disapproval from society. It was not a secret affair. The women took it with amusement and gossiped about it. There was no outrage over this fact: "That he had a mistress was accepted, a wife from one's own class, a mistress from another - this was normal" (220). For a man to indulge in love, whether for an art or for a woman, was acceptable but for a woman both were denied. Although her father in law encouraged Savitribai to sing, she had to hear caustic remarks about it from other members of the family. Gradually, she became alone in the family. At times it became unbearable:

> 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 know this, they do it more openly, their cruelty towards the deviant is never concealed. But the subtle cruelty of persistent hostility leaves deeper wounds. There's always the temptation to succumb, to go back to the normal path and be accepted. To resist the temptation speaks of great courage. (*Small Remedies* 221)

Savitribai's single-minded devotion to her music exposed her to other accusations from her society. The gossip surrounding her in Neemgaon was that there was a station director of the radio station who visited her house and was supposed to be her lover.

Another victim of Savitribai's decision to dedicate her life to her passion of music was her daughter, Munni, born out of wedlock and of her association with Ghulam Saab, the Muslim *tabla* player. Munni had a lonely childhood. As a child she suffered the scorn of the society for her mother. She was deprived not only of a family but also of a father's name: "She gave the child the name 'Indorekar' - the name she adopted as a singer - not comprising either her maiden name or her married one, Meenakshi Indorekar. To save herself from the scorn of her school mates Munni told them imaginary tales about her family and grandfather. Bai ruthlessly pursued her singing career, relegating her duties as a mother. The daughter naturally had a lonely and alienated childhood: ".....Walking on without a backward look at the child hovering in the shadows, the child who was waiting for a word from her mother, a glance. Any kind of recognition of her presence" (*Small Remedies* 169).

Deshpande while writing about people like Savitribai, who dared to be different, has also created characters like Munni who desperately seek approval of the society

"She yearned for conventional life Bai had found so stultifying" (*Small Remedies* 169).

The novel deals with the life of yet another woman - Leela, the aunt of Madhu. Like Bai, she also believes in making her own way in life. But, unlike Bai, she is not self-centred and prefers to spend her life helping others. She was a generation older than Madhu, but as the novelist says, "she was ahead not only of her generation but the next one as well" (94). After death of her husband, she took up a job and educated her brother-in-law. She lived in a crowded *chawl* in Bombay among the mill workers and worked for their welfare. She caught TB there but refused to leave the locality. It was then that she came in contact with Joe who was running a TB centre. Though they were poles apart in most of the things, Joe fell madly in love with her and persuaded her to marry a second time. Leela, a Communist in her ideology had her own alienation, not only personal but also political. She had also to face gender discrimination within her party.

Thus alienation is a recurring feature in the novels of Shashi Deshpande. Her characters, mainly the leading female characters and also many of the male characters, suffer from alienation. For women the most prominent reason is the patriarchal system of society. Discrimination against the girl child by parents, mainly by mother, makes them feel alienated from the family. Arranged marriage brings upon a woman certain stereotyped roles in each of which she is supposed to sacrifice her own self for somebody else's, most of all for her husband. Even if she marries for love, very soon her lover turns into a conventional male who cannot bear his wife walking ahead of him. All this alienates the woman from herself.

Shashi Deshpande has very beautifully brought this tragic situation of Indian women in her novels. But her female protagonists, all of them educated middle class women with a strong personality, do not surrender before the tragic odds in their lives. They overcome their alienation and finally redefine their selves.

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