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A Critical Study of Women Subjugation and Resistance in Sashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies*

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Abstract

Sashi Deshpande's novels are woman-centric. Her protagonists refuse to live on the margins of a male dominated society, but see themselves as women in their own rights who are ready to draw new boundaries for themselves. *Small Remedies* (2000) is also a woman-centric novel. It depicts the life of two women who lived almost fifty years ago in a male dominated society. In such a milieu, two young women, Savitribai Indorekar and Leela, find courage to defy all mores, break from their families and pursue their passions. Madhu, the narrator of the novel who is closely connected with both of these women, has her own life to live. The novel moves backward and forward in time to depict the life of these three women. Be it olden times or recent ones, all the three women have one feature in common - they are confident persons who know what they want and how to get it. They are dependent upon men for a harmonious and balanced life but at the same time they live life on their own terms. The present paper explores women subjugation and resistance in Deshpande's *Small Remedies*.

Keywords: Woman-centric, Milieu, Mores, Harmony, Balanced.

Sashi Deshpande emerged on the literary firmament in the 1980's first with her *Short Stories* (1979) and then her first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980). "Her writing", observe M.K. Naik and Shyamala A. Narayan, "is…part of Indian literature and emerges from the rootedness in middle-class Indian society." (85) She chooses women protagonists for her novels who refuse to live on the margins of a male dominated society. They see themselves as women in their own rights who are ready to draw new boundaries for themselves. S.P. Swain comments thus on her fictional world:

> The novels of Shashi Deshpande are a realistic and an optimistic portrayal of the Indian middle-class educated women. Deshpande successfully presents these women as they are engaged in the complex and difficult social and psychological problems of defining an authentic self. She delineates them

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> with their variegated swings of mood, the ebb and flow of joy and despair. We also get an insight into their feelings perceived and desires suppressed. (Dutta 453)

Small Remedies (2000) is a reaffirmation of Shashi Deshpande's commitment to the cause of women. It depicts the life of two women who lived almost fifty years ago in a male dominated society which was tradition bound and governed by rules which did not allow much freedom to women. In such a milieu, two young women, Savitribai Indorekar and Leela found courage to defy all mores, break from their families and pursue their passions. If Savitribai was obsessed with music, Leela was passionate about communism. If Savitribai turned her world upside down by running away with a musician to further her career in music, Leela lived and worked with factory workers of Bombay. Madhu, the narrator of the novel who is closely connected with both these women, has her own life to live. Her story is the story of a woman who in a moment seems to lose her grip on life and her family, when her only son Aditya is killed in senseless violence by a frenzied mob.

The novel moves backward and forward in time to depict the life of these three women. There are early years when Savitribai and Leela struggled to step out of their conventional lives and then the author shifts her gaze to the Modern Times, when many controls over women have fallen by the wayside. Be it olden times or recent ones, all the three women have one feature in common – they are confident persons who know what they want and how to get it. They are dependent upon men for a harmonious and balanced life but at the same time they live life on their own terms.

Savitribai Indorekar, grande dame of the Gwaliargharana, started her adult life as a dutiful daughter-in-law in an orthodox Hindu household. Madhu, the narrator of the novel, has seen her as a neighbour and the mother of her friend Munni, when she was a child. Now, Madhu travels to Bhavanipur, Savitribai's home, in her last years to write a biography of Bai. It is through her interviews to Madhu and Madhu's own remembrance of the early years that the mystery and unconventional life of Bai is unravelled. The interviews take the form of 'meetings' with Savitribai at her residence.

After five such "meetings", Bai talks of her childhood. She belonged to a wealthy family. She was close to her mother who showed her "the beauty of music" (27). The mother had spotted talent in her child and would encourage her to sing before the family. But in a conventional society this is where a woman has to stop. There was no question of making music a career or pursuing it as a passion. Moreover, as Bai grew older, her father who doted on her otherwise would not allow her to have a music teacher.

Ironically, it is in her married homethat she gets her first music teacher. Her father-in-law, himself a lover of music, engaged a middle-aged woman to teach her music. In doing so, he was going far ahead of his times for music was definitely not a realm for women. Those were orthodox times, when education was conceded to girls and nothing more. Learning music must not have been easy for the young Bai for she had to face contempt and derision from her own family members. May be to

escape this or because she fell in love with the young tabla player Ghulam Saab, Bai eloped with him. This was a radical step she had taken.

It is indeed quite comfortable to lead a conventional life according to the norms of the society but to go against established norms "speaks of great courage." (221) By choosing to live life out-of-the-ordinary, Bai was effectively cutting herself from the life of an ordinary woman. As an artist "the ordinary life of ordinary woman" (221) would be denied to her. Bai chose music above all else denying even her liaison with Ghulam Saab and Munni, their daughter, from this entanglement. Her life had no place for social restriction put by a traditional world order. Ghulam Saab was only a means to free her from her life in a respectable household.

From here, her journey started to seek Guruji, Pandit Kashinath Bawa. She wanted to be his student but again the times did not permit a man to have a married young woman as a disciple. She pursued him relentlessly for over a year till he succumbed to her singular devotion and accepted her as one of the pupils. Under his tutelage, she became a complete singer and "reached the pinnacle of her profession" (225) and over the years, she gained the reputation of a great singer when "her respectability, or her lack of it, no longer matter(ed)." (225) Bai lived her life on her own terms taking seriously the advice offered by her Guruji. Her fulfilment lies in the world of music,in her art, not in the world of children. Once she gains respectability as asinger she does not need either Ghulam Saab, her lover, or Munni, her daughter. This is not out of modern trend or fashion of the day. Savitribai is totally unaware of modern feminism or politically correct attitudes. All this comes out of "her own idea of her life." (166) She has the courage of her convictions; she defies her times and challenges her destiny, all for wanting to live "the life she wanted, steady in the pursuit of her goal, pure of purpose." (170)

The purity of purpose is evident also in the life of Leela, the other woman who leads an equally unconventional life and dares to break all ground rules framed and supported by the dogmatic structure of society. One of six sisters, Leela was named Sindhu, after one of India's rivers. Whereas all her sisters opted for marriage to fulfill their destinies, Leela became the rebel who was "disowned by the family." (45) She too married but became a widow thereafter. The steps she took subsequently made her the "black sheep of the family." (45) She decided to remarry, an unheard of thing in those days. If this were not enough, she settled for a man from another religion, a Christian named Joe. That they had a very happy married life did not placate the family. Neither were they appeased and pacified by her other activities, such as "teaching her role in the trade unions, her work among the factory workers." (46) They just ignored her achievements and tried to wipe her out from their lives. Leela did not care. She was passionate about communism and so she broke family ties to seek fulfilment in public life. Leela was too independent a spirit to be confined by norms of an orthodox society. She had decided to give her life to the Party and she fulfilled this wish right upto her death. She willingly sacrificed the cloak of respectability to gain love and unhappiness in equal measure.

Leela's life is a chronicle of "unusual woman" (94) who was far ahead of times. Some of the things that Leela did were undreamt of by other women of her age. Right from the beginning, Leela had decided to be financially independent. From the time she became a widow she took care toeducate herself. Thereafter, she took up a job to support herself. She not only took care of herself she even lent a helping hand to the family of her dead husband. She educated her young brothers-in-law and gave meaningful direction to their lives. On remarrying Joe, a doctor with a good income, she was too proud to become a liability on him. She continued with her job and her fervour for work amongst the disadvantaged sections of society. Joe fully supported her in her ambitions which only made their married life fulfilling and happy. When Joe died, she moved back to her Maruti Chawl's home to be with the poor to whose cause she was committed passionately.

Madhu who had observed these two women closely cannot remain untouched by them. "To know that I am linked to these two women is to drink the draught of strength, the magic potion the elixir of courage." (225) These two towering personalities leave an imprint on Madhu's own life when she is facing the greatest crisis of her life; the death of her only child Aditya. Her travel to Bhavanipur, Savitribai's home in her last years to write her biography, is also a journey undertaken for herself, in order to repair her mind and heal her body. An occasional unhappiness is an inevitable part of life but when unhappiness threatens to take away sanity it cannot be ignored. Madhu leaves her husband, Som and her city, Bombay to come to a little known Bhavanipur inorder to be alone to fight her inner demons and test her pain barriers. Confronting reality within needs a lot of courage. It often shatters carefully polished self-images. Madhu has to delve deep into her inner self, into her past so that she could accept accountability for one's condition in life. She had to rediscover the wisdom of the sages that extorts, "you are your own master" as "the cause of your happiness or misery is within you." This ancient wisdom accepts that everything in the world changes constantly including people and situations. Our full enjoyment of life is not dependent on any particular circumstance. Happiness means a balanced mind to face the reality of the moment. It is to achieve this balance that Madhu is inspired by the lives of these two extraordinary women, Savitribai and Leela. Their lives form the core of this book, *Small Remedies* as well as the core of Madhu's own tortured existence.

In Madhu, the author has presented today's woman who does not necessarily seek company of other women or is content to live a Zenana-like existence; in today's times a woman is ready for platonic relationships with men on conditions of equality and camaraderie. This confidence and self-assurance gives the young woman a right to choose and Madhu chooses Som to marry. Marriage like any other relationship, is based on faith and a desire and need for another person. Madhu who till now was totally effaced in the company of these young men, who filled their need of "an audience, the listener" (161), now noticed that for Som she was becoming "a woman, a desired woman, a desirable woman", the woman Som wanted. Madhu herself is prepared to be noticed in all her femaleness, for it serves nature's purpose. "A young

woman ready for mating, a young woman bearing a child – yes this too – cry out to be seen, to be taken note of." (161) Marriage, here, is seen as a fulfilment of nature's design for both men and women. From the moment her son, Aditya is born, Madhu discovers her world consists of only Aditya, even to the exclusion of her husband, Som. She is ensconced in this happy world. However, when fate snatched away her seventeen years old son, Madhu decides to move away from Som, for to see him "is to remember. In his face, in his eye I see my own grief, my guilt, my anger." (107)

The distance that Madhu puts between Som and herself by travelling to Bhavanipur, achieves two purposes. By moving away from Bombay, she tries to minimize the loss of her son by removing herself from the scene of crime. This distancing is also a means of measuring the gap in the relations between Som and herself. She has to find "an explanation" (55) for the chasm that divides the two of them. This could be achieved by travelling down the memory lane and remember what happened to her when she was a fifteen year old girl. The incident which lay buried under forgetfulness has to be resurrected to understand it. The process is painful but necessary and Madhu picks up courage in both hands to relive the agony of the day when her father's best friend assaulted her in her own house. The rape took place with almost innocence about it, without the bestiality associated with such acts. Young Madhu, while being initiated in her first sexual contact, remembers "Joy of feeling" and "pleasure." This violation had no violence or disgust inherent in it. On the contrary, Madhu was wonder-struck by the responses of her own body: "Nothing is known, nothing is strange." (268) And contrary to traditional behaviour, it is the man who feels ashamed of his act and soon thereafter commits suicide, Madhu puts away this experience as an "ancient memory" (268) and it only comes back many years later when she happens to see a painting by the same man. Yet Madhu was not ashamed of what happened to her as a young girl. The incident does not leave any scar on her life. She feels it has no relation, "no place" (269) in her life which she is living with Som. And when Som discovers this truth about Madhu, he is devastated. To an Indian male his wife should be chaste and a virgin at the time of marriage but that is not so with Madhu. He brings silence between them as punishment. But more than Madhu it is punishment to himself. He takes almost a year to come to terms with his own emotions and then makes the first conciliatory gesture for reconciliation between them. Madhu was more than willing to begin the healing process. She is eager to "wash away the darkness and ugliness" (323) of her unhappy past. The novel ends on a note of hope for a better future for Madhu and Som.

Shashi Deshpande has again projected her protagonist, Madhu, with a rare boldness and courage. She is the image of a new woman who lives life filled with joys and sorrows, but in her own defined manner. The author does believe in the female empowerment but in her world view both men and women are equally necessary. Her female characters be they Savitribai, Leela and Hasina can opt for life with men or without men. They are successful in ordering their life with or without male support.

Thus, *Small Remedies* is a complex and extraordinary novel in which Deshpande uses her power of words to expound the cause of women. Her female characters in

this book as in her earlier ones, present the bold face of today's women, but this new found courage that they have acquired is not a sudden phenomenon. Today's Madhu, Lataor Hasina are a possibility because they have been nurtured by women like Leela or have admired and idolized achievers like Savitribai who showed the way.

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