

Women in Sashi Deshpande's small remedies: A critical analysis

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Abstract

Sashi Deshpande is one of the renowned Indian woman writers writing in English. Sashi Deshpande is entirely different from any of her contemporary women novelists. She stands apart from them. Her writings are complex but seamlessly woven narratives which explore the lives of people, especially women. Unconsciously, her writing is related to the modern Indian woman's beleaguered existence. Her recent novel, 'Small Remedies', published in the first decade of 21st century will make rich contribution to women's studies. The central theme of this novel seems to be in search of individual autonomy, and self-realization in the web of family relations.

Keywords: beleaguered existence, autonomy, tradition, modernity, society

Introduction

Deshpande's novels are about women in self-quest to posit the view that women in these novels have established themselves as autonomous beings. Free from the restriction imposed by societal cultures, from their own fears and guilt that women have reached a stage of understanding the fundamental truth: "you have to find yourself." Deshpande's major concern is to depict the anguish and conflict of the modern women who are caught between tradition and modernity. She portrays women with their fears, anxieties, and agonies within the married frame work. The past plays a vital role in shaping the present. Their search for freedom, self-identity within marriage is a recurring theme in most of her novels. The protagonists are shown to be in a state of confusion at the beginning. Slowly as the novel unfolds they go through a process of introspection, self-realization and self-analysis. At the end they finally emerge as more confident, more in control of themselves and significantly more hopeful about life.

Feminist perspective in her novels reveals her sincerity and ability in voicing the concerns of the urban educated middle class women trapped between tradition and modernity, her sensitive heroines are fully conscious of being victims of gross gender discrimination prevalent in a conservative male dominated society.

Women writers, can understand the problems of women in society more than men and can champion the cause of their own sex and project a new vision of 'modern womanhood' and in this process, they try to emancipate women from the well-established traditional shackles that have stunted the natural growth of and development of their personalities.

The title of the novel "Small Remedies" suggests that there have been certain solutions from times immemorial ingrained in tradition, to common problems that confront mankind. Deshpande seems to believe that these 'remedies' give man certain measures of relief, though not permanent cure or healing.

'Small Remedies' is a vivid portrait gallery of the members of a large family wherein no characters share similar tastes. Each is etched out with his/her own peculiar qualities. A kaleidoscopic variety of characters is presented by the novelist.

In this paper an attempt is, therefore made to study Deshpande's women protagonists, as portrayed by her in her novel, 'Small Remedies' with a view to understand and appreciate their trials and tribulations under the impact of the conflicting influence of tradition and modernity and to critically analyze their response to the emerging situation in life so as to fit themselves in the contemporary society.

The novel mainly deals with three women namely, Madhu Saptarshi, the narrator; Savitribai, the granddame of Gwalior Gharana and aunt Leela, a political activist living in a Bombay chawl who too reached beyond her grasp. The narrator of the novel is Madhu, Leela's niece who travels to Bhavanipur, Savitribai's home in her last years, to write a biography of Bai.

Savitribai Indorekar, the granddame of the Gwalior Gharana, starts her adult life as dutiful daughter-in-law in an orthodox Hindu household, but elopes with her Muslim lover and accompanist, Ghulaamsaab; Leela on the other hand, gives her life to the party, to working closely with factory workers of Bombay. The stories of these two women – independent spirits both, who give up respectability to gain love and unhappiness in equal measure form the core of 'Small Remedies'.

Rani Dharkar opines:

"The importance that our society attaches to marriage is reflected in our literature. It is the central concern of Deshpande whose heroines, caught in the quagmire of marriage, struggle to come up for air."

Madhu had been intrigued by Bai's relationship with Ghulaamsaab and Munni, their daughter even in her

childhood. Now, grieving the loss of her only son Aditya in a ghastly bomb blast, Madhu tries to make sense of the lives of these three people. In doing so, hopes to find a way out of her despair.

As the story unfolds, Madhu moves back and forth in time drawing out, remembering and retelling the stories of Leela and Bai and Munni. And always in the foreground is Madhu's own story——of a life transformed in one traumatic moment that took away everything she had loved and believed in: her marriage, her son and very nearly, her sanity.

With total control over her (Madhu's) unwieldy material, she weaves a fabric of intricate design in this novel in which music forms the organizing strand. The biographer's detachment from her subject makes it possible to make clear-eyed inquiries into the larger problems of writing a life——anyone's life or one's own. Madhu realizes that a chronological account will not do because "We see our lives through memories, and memories are fractured, fragmented, almost always cutting across time." (SR-165) Mere facts do not cohere, only the glue of imagination can join them into a plausible narrative. Aware of the enormous power of words which can sculpt a life and conjure a person into a fixed image, Madhu is overwhelmed by her own omnipotence because she can create an infinite range of Savitribai. "A great rebel who defies the conventions of her time, the feminist who lived her life on her own terms, the great artist who sacrificed everything for the cause of her art" (SR-166) or the impetuous lover who abandoned secure married life in Brahmin household to live with her Muslim accompanist. Madhu's publishers want a trendy feminist biography: "Victim stories are out of fashion, heroines are in." (SR-167) But Madhu cannot impose the new concept of "heroine" on an old fashioned woman who white washes her life through selective amnesia.

"To achieve something... we have got to be hard and ruthless....there is no other way of being a saint. Or a painter. a writer." (TLS-1) This unexpected first paragraph of 'That long silence' is the voice of the narrator, but it also gives us a clue to the author's approach to writing. 'Small Remedies', Deshpande's sixth novel, is the most confident assertion of this strength and a deliberate denial of sentimentality. Madhu reflects on the true nature of Bai :

"True Bai is a worldly woman, but when she sings, she transcends her own worldliness. Why not then in love as well? She had a child by the man before she left her husband's home. What else but passion could have led to the conceiving of a child? But let me not forget that she abandoned that child when she left home with her lover. I am suddenly halted by the thought. She left her baby, scarcely a year old, behind. Could a woman who did that be capable of great love?" (SR-176)

Savitribai is a law unto herself. Deshpande takes care in depicting the character of Savitribai in spite of certain unwomanly traits about her, not to make a caricature of her — travesty of womanhood. Sashi Deshpande's women are more self-willed and less discrete. Deshpande tries to lay bare something unexpected, something nearly shocking of human nature.

Each session with Bai triggers off Madhu's own memories, some of them connected with Munni, Bai's daughter by her Muslim partner, who had been Madhu's playmate once; entirely unconnected with Bai and to do with Madhu's own troubled life. Madhu reflects "To me, she was Munni's mother. I knew her as Munni's mother. When I came here, it was to meet Munni's mother. But she hasn't spoken of Munni, not once. She has not identified me, either, as Munni's friend, or as the daughter of my father, her doctor and her admirer. I find it strange. Has she forgotten? Does she remember those days at all? Am I nothing more than an unknown woman who's come here to speak to her before writing her biography? And why haven't I declared my identity to her either? Why haven't I said I'm Munni's friend Madhu. Remember me?" (SR-29) We do not know the exact nature of her until quite late in the novel, but we do know that Madhu's friends feel that working on this assignment may be a therapy, helping her to come to terms with her personal trauma. The author is in no great hurry to get on with the story. The narrative unfolds leisurely like a raga, beginning with alaap, continuing with vistaar, gradually gaining momentum in a quickening spiral of suspense eventually to achieve a cathartic calm.

Munni, the daughter of this famous mother professed to hate music. Ruthlessly discarded by Savitribai in her subsequent climb to respectability, this girl is the most vivid character in the novel. As a neighbour and companion she had once cast a brief, but strong spell on the child Madhu and initiated her into adult secrets. Twelve-year-old Munni could enact entire Hindi films, repeating songs, dances and dialogues exactly, fabricated stories about herself and did things forbidden to other children. Looking back, Madhu now sees Munni's unashamed lies as an attempt to make sense of her insecure existence, to create a life-story to suit her dream, as Savitribai is now doing for the benefit of her biographer. When Madhu meets Munni in a bus and at once recognizes her Munni tries to ignore her and does not even respond to her call rather boldly declares that she is Shailaja Joshi. This shows that she is trying to have an existence independent of her biological parents and have a respectable identity by taking on a new name. Deshpande has also created characters like Munni who desperately seek the approval of society.

Malathi Mathur, a reviewer, writes:

"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"

Her women are ordinary creatures in their first creation, and they pass through the friction of circumstances, become half-awake to the realities of life and try to grapple with the problems that lie close to their person and in this process, they are educated to understand where their problem originates. The struggle begins and uncoils slowly and surely. And this grappling with the problem is shown to be their uneasy struggle, wriggling out of the tight coils of tradition. Her women are not recalcitrant nor are they docile creatures. They

may have been born in middle class families against the backdrop of orthodox social milieu but they may be exceptional and out of way characters in accordance to the circumstances.

Madhu reflects on the parallels between the lives of Savitribai and Leela:

“I have begun thinking that in writing about Bai, I am writing about Leela as well. And my mother and all those women who reached beyond their grasp. Bai moving out of her class in search of her destiny as a singer, Leela breaking out of the conventions of widowhood, looking for justice for the weak, my mother running in her bare feet, using her body as an instrument for speed — Yes, they’re in it together. But they paid the price for their attempts to break out.” (SR-284)

Without probing deeply into the novelist’s conviction of what would serve as the ideal panacea for the different kinds of challenges her characters have had to contend with, in the given situations, she deals with the inner world of the Indian women in her novels. The women in her novels search for their self-identity and the novels highlight the image of the middle class women sandwiched between tradition and modernity. It is apt to quote Madhu’s reflection on Leela:

“But there was Leela part of a generation even before mine. She always supported herself. When her first husband, Vasant, died, she took up a job and educated her brothers-in-law. Even after marrying Joe, a doctor with a fairly good income, she continued to live on her own money and after Joe died she moved back into her Maruti Chawl home the very next day, the place where she began her married life at the age of fifteen. But Leela was an unusual woman, ahead not only of her generation but the next one as well; I am realizing this only now.” (SR-94)

Deshpande is one such literary voice which is pointedly devoted to the task of unearthing and unbosoming a well-esteemed account of deep-seated reality of female psyche and its operation in post-colonial context. She does this by an exploration of the myths and the stereotypes that they indubitably entail upon women and by showing how entirely fallacious these stereotypes are. Simultaneously she tries to furnish the reader with quintessential woman by closely analyzing the woman’s psychological, emotional and intellectual needs and aspirations, cravings and desires and the conflicts and catastrophes that they inevitably bring in their wake. Madhu reflects on the idea that woman can never be free:

“No knowing Leela and now Bai, I can’t go along with this idea. Both these women got for themselves the measure of freedom they needed, they worked for it. And they both know the price they had to pay for it.” (SR-224)

Gayatri Spivak is of the opinion that,

“Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears,

not into a pristine nothingness, but a violent shutting which is the displaced figuration of the third -world woman caught between tradition and modernization”.

Shashi Deshpande is essentially a serious writer touching the roots of things. She is capable of perceiving all variety of moods of all subtle shadows not excluding the comical; but the last one is seen far and few between (her pages). She hardly indulges in any comical situation that is likely to be on the border of the farcical. There is hardly any such incident in the whole range of her fiction. She takes a balanced view of life, without leaving any facet of the multi-coloured tints of human life.

The tragic perception of the writer takes the upper hand despite herself, it seems. She is, of course, right in so painting life with a darker streak of grimness for the dominant note of life, from its highest degree of elevation to the lowest one — is sorrow and suffering.

Thus, Deshpande presents several viewpoints according to each individual’s way of looking at things. Some of them meet at the cross points and some of them go in a parallel way, never to meet anywhere. But this hardly happens. Deshpande doesn’t seem to embrace any particular philosophical view point and no label of any denomination can describe her vision of life. It is universal that catholicity of vision of human life, such as we find in some unique writers like Shakespeare, is clearly manifest in her novels. She doesn’t treat love in the abstract. She treats it as a passion — as supreme passion that is at the basis or root of the personality of the subject and at the height of its supremacy, it makes the subject to take his or her own decisions that are often irrevocable. And the decisions taken under the irresistible spell of the passion continue to hold their sway on the subject and mould the personality of that character.

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