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Small remedies: The story of love and loss

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande's small remedies like the earlier novels, portrays her middle class female protagonist's predicament in a male dominated society. It also enshrines her search for love, meaning and happiness in life, a search for something to cling in the strange world she has perforce to live. Shashi Deshpande conjures up a woman's vision of life which is expressed in the novel partly through the consciousness of Madhu, the female protagonist, and partly through the consciousness of other female characters. Woman pines for love and understanding in married life. Instead she is made to suffer from fear.

Keywords: Predicament, dominated, consciousness, protagonist, pines

Introduction

Shashi Deshpande's novels are concerned with woman's quest for self; and exploration into the female psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life. She has not remained static in her themes and characters. Social criticism has also remained the pivot of her fiction. Commenting on the otherness of her fiction. M.K. Naik writes:

Her writing is clearly part of Indian literature, and emerges from her rootedness in middle-class Indian society. Understatement is the hallmark of her work. (97:2001)

Shashi Deshpande herself says in an interview with Lakshmi Holmstorm:

.... I am different from other Indians who wrote in English, my background is very firmly there. I was never educated abroad. My novels don't have any Westerners, for example. They are just about Indian people and the complexities of our lives. Our inner lives and outer lives and the reconciliation between the two....(17:1993)

Small Remedies is a novel about myriad feelings such as love, courage, honesty, truth, trust, death and the pain associated with death. It is a novel in which past and present are intermingled. At one place, Deshpande says –

My novels are about women, they are about women artists.... They are not only about marital estrangement but also about love and loss. Small Remedies is as much about obsession – Madhu's, Bai's – as it is about love and loss. It is about words and language as well and also about truth. (24:1998)

This novel is not a story told along a straight line, but it cuts across the timeline; Madhu's own memories as well as those evoked by the association of the people around her. These memories are so fresh obliterated or ignored. The novel opens with the sentence, "This is Som's story" (165). But it turns out soon and become the story of Madhu who is happily married to Som and is blessed with a son Aditya. Much later when Aditya is seventeen years old Madhu sees a painting at an exhibition. The painter had committed suicide for some unknown reason. Madhu ruminates over her past and then confides in her husband about her sexual encounter with her father's friend which took place several years ago.

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This revelation sounds the death knell for their peaceful marital alliance. Som is suspicious of her and henceforth violent arguments and quarrels ensue between the two adversely affecting the tender psyche of Aditya. Soon Aditya leaves the house never to return for he dies in a bomb blast. Both parents are guilty for Aditya going away. The central trope of *Small Remedies* is the writing of a story, a book about a living person, an artist. Madhu grieving for the death of her son. She accepts the offer to write the story of living legend. Savitribai Indorekar (or Bai as she known), doyenne of Hindustani classical music. Madhu has come to Bhavanipur to write the story of Bai's life. Would this writing of the life of the ageing Savitribai help her answer the one question that has preoccupied her since Aditya's death: "how does one live with the knowledge of a child's death?" (155). Because in writing about Bai, she would be dealing with the relationship between Savitribai and her daughter Munni. Her childhood friend Munni was the daughter, whose existence Bai has obliterated for the sake of her career. The girl rejected her famous mother and took the name of Shailja Joshi who died by a strange coincidence, like Aditya on the same day victims – both of them of the same madness that gripped the country in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid incident in Ayodhya. For Madhu, writing the biography and going to Bhavanipur is an attempt to rehabilitate herself, to forget, to get away from memories and forge a new identity: "here, I'm safe In Bai's house, I'm the woman who's going to write a book on Savitribai Indorekar. Nowhere and I am Aditya's mother, the identity.... I've drowned myself in for nearly eighteen years." (153) Madhu wants to teach from Bai, a mother who has successfully eradicated the memory of her daughter Munni and silenced every reference to her. "Can bai give me the clue to this? Has she found the secret?" (155).

Madhu sets out to first record of Bai's life story and allows her to speak from her perspective. Bai's story as a singer is almost predictable. Born into a wealthy Brahmin family, she shares with her mother a love of music. Tutored by her in the sort of songs women song then, arti songs ritual songs, strotas, the child songs before a family gathering, only to be silenced. As a daughter-in-law she is allowed to hear but not see the singers who perform in her married home. Crossing the first barrier, literally the threshold of her father-in-law's room, she pleads for music lessons and is allowed both lessons and an opportunity to attend concerts. The story of her pursuit of her Guru, Pandit Kashinath Buwa. She is told that music is no profession for a respectable married woman. She has to live in town in one room, travel each day by train than walk two miles to Guruji's house and spend ten to twelve hours practicing.

Bai's story speaks of commitment and dedication to her art of the courage to step a cross the threshold and breakout of the restrictions of upper caste patriarchal society in search of a dream her success is evident in the photographs she shows Madhu. "Savitribai is the woman artist, self-obsessed, dominating and living for her art, has a single goal- it is through music that she is reaching out to immortality." (168) In madhu, for the first time Deshpande, depicts a woman narrator who is an artist fashioning and moulding the life of another artist:

I can take over Bai's life and make what I want of it through words. I can trap her into an image I create, seal her into an identity I make for her. The power of the writer is the power of the creator. Yes, I can do

much I can make Bai the rebel who rejected the conventions of her times. The feminist who lived her life on her terms. The great artist who struggled and sacrificed everything in the cause of her art. The woman who gave up everything – a comfortable home, a husband, and a family for love. (166)

Madhu's memories of Bai relate to her avatar as her childhood friend Munni's mother. Deshpande has said motherhood is a bonus ... that women are privileged to have. Linked to Bai's story is the story of Ghulam Saab, the muslim table player, the only male artist to be allowed into Savitribai's music lessons and the man with whom she elopes in search of her destiny. When Som leaves Madhu, she establishes an identity with Leela and Savitribai. She ruminates, "I've begun thinking that in writing about Bai, I'm writing about Leela as well. And my mother and all those women who reached beyond their grasp." (284) Leela, her mother's sister, is seen by Madhu as her guardian and protector, as a mother figure who had looked after her and brought her out of the terrifying emptiness of her father's death and who was there for her after her son's death. Madhu knows that Leela is widow who could not speak English and who married the Christian doctor Joe. The widowed Leela had refused to return to her father's house and to a life of comfortable domesticity and anonymity. She had both economic independence and a room of her own in Maruti Chawl, from where she supported the striking mill and railway workers and women afflicted with T.B. Madhu can see two Leelas: "Hari's Leela is the public figure, my Leela is the woman who made me a part of her life... It was because of Leela that I never felt an orphan."(98)

Small Remedies touches upon deeper feelings and emotions, feelings and emotions which cannot be described in terms of known experiences and events. The totality of human condition can never be adequately expressed in words. Man concerts, prayers and rituals to create meanings of the complexities of life but they are small remedies „to counter the terrible disease of being human“. The only remedy the novelist concludes is –

To believe that tragedies, disasters and sorrows are part of the scheme – if it can be called that.... you get the happiness, you've got to accept the sorrow and the pain as well. You can't get the one and escape the other.... we all know the philosophy of duality – life and death, day and night, sorrow and happiness. It sounds good, it sounds right and when we speak of it, we nod our heads and agree that this is the truth of life. (81)

We need remedies, big or small, in our journey through life, otherwise this journey would become unbearable. This is the truth of the epigraph to the novel taken from the Rigveda –

*Father of the earth,
Protect us;
Father of the sky,
Protect us;
Father of the great and shining waters,
Protect us."*

Small Remedies is not one story but a string of stories of broken and disjointed lives, sad stories, in fact. And much of the sadness of these lives arises from the denial of unsavory

experiences, of the past that may disfigure the present. The narrator who narrates these stories has her own story, equality sad and disjointed, to bear upon these stories. She has lost her only son, she has lost her way in life. But she realizes that no experience should be blotted out from life. For long time she conceals her own past from her husband, fearing that it might destroy her present bliss. The novel concludes on a note of affirmation. Madhu concludes that this is the best way for a woman to survive to conceal her grief and live life as if it were a miracle indeed. Madhu is aware of the fact that she herself has to find a way out of the mire as no one can help her while undergoing self-introspection. Madhu realizes that her miseries are caused by misconceptions about life as well as due to distorted egoistic perspectives concluding that the power to emerge out of these lies within her Madhu says, "as long as there is memory, there's always the possibility of retrieval, as long as there is memory, loss is never total (324)."

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