Shashi Deshpande’s Small Remedies as a Representation of the Contradictory Pluralities – A Study

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Abstract:

Shashi Deshpande’s *Small Remedies* as a representation of the contradictory pluralities that form the images of women in Indian English literature and as an attempt to string together varied selves of womanhood to accept a multidimensional reality. The study begins by tracing the images of the two central characters in the novel-Savitribai and Leela. The diversity in these images is accounted for in the memories these characters had left behind with the people in their lives. The role of imagination in translating experience into memory is the root of the problem. Shashi Deshpande creates one image only to restore it with the next. Using the analogy of music, she declares that experience alone cannot authenticate. It is one’s own interpretation of experience that forms one’s ‘truths’. The chapter attempts to establish that with *Small Remedies* Shashi Deshpande has broken away from mono-dimensional representation of women as wounded rebel achievers against a socio-cultural backdrop and has brought into the arena of Indian English literature sole direct images of plurality within womanhood. *Small Remedies*, represents the arrangement of a life story within a life story. Madhu Saptarishi, the narrator, has been specially made by a publisher to inscribe a biography on a well-known traditional singer, Savitribai Indorekar, Doyenm of the Gwalior Gharana. Madhu represents her as a young woman who had guided a protected life not only as a child in her maternal home but also as a daughter-in-law in a wealthy Brahmin family. It is her bold self-determining character that creates her try to find her own individuality and escape with a Muslim tabla player to survive in a odd town. Although born in a tradition-bound orthodox Brahmin family, she makes a name for herself as a big orthodox singer. Madhu reports how Savitribai experiences harm when her grandmother asked her to discontinue singing instantly throughout her presentation at a family meeting. Madhu recalls: “In Neemgaon she was ‘the singer woman’ and there was something disparaging about the words, yes, I can see that now, about the way they said them.

Keywords: Shashi Deshpande’s, Small, Remedies, representation, contradictory, pluralities.

Introduction:

In a society where each family “had its place marked out for it according to religion, caste, money, family background, etc.” Savitribai’s father with his unusual habits placed out from society. He was a widower, bringing up a daughter on his possess with a male servant at home. He was alternative in the sense that he would watch no ceremonies or spiritual rites. He could survive the mode he required to lacking open reprimand or condemnation. But they disapprove of Savitribai’s acts as she absconds with a table player to several further towns and also creates a child from him. Yet Savitribai’s father-in-law
is no dissimilar. He too could obtain away with his mode of life with no one fault or condemnation from society. He had a wife who was a renowned Thumri singer. He approached her frequently and the people about identify this. His selecting a wife from one’s own group and mistress from another was rather tolerable, but for a daughter-in-law hunting a profession in a classical melody was appalling. The hearsay adjoining Savitribai in Neemgaon was that a Station Director, who had helped her gets several agreements with the radio, was her beloved. He was a usual visitor to her place. In course of time a daughter is born to her from him. As the child develop, Madhu reminds how children would taunt her by calling the Station Director her mama, a euphemism for mother’s lover. As Savitribai was “a woman who had left her husband’s home, she was considered an immoral woman.”

She is ashamed of her childish lack of discretion as although connecting her life-story to Madhu, she conceals her cherished relationship with Ghulam Saab and also the reality that she had a daughter from him. This proves Savitribai’s nervousness over her past’s thoughtless acts which she believes a stain on her personality and decency, she maintains herself detached from her illegal daughter Manni, lest it should dull her representation.

In her search for individuality she has developed into very self-centered and domineering for she provides the child her individual character for her own sake, but rejects her when it approaches to surrender her well-deserved name for her only child. She feels affection for the child till her own exciting need get satisfied but when it comes to Munni’s own identity and pleasure; she egoistically keeps her out of her life, withdrawing under the appearance of decency and a good name.

Savitribai remove the existence of her daughter from her life to keep her good name and identity intact. She is guilt-ridden and is now embarrassed of her past imprudence and wants to wipe off the memory of such acts from her mind. Meenakshi Indorekar, her daughter, is no omission. She directs the life of a renounced child and is dejected and humiliated of her survival, as she is a child born of her mother’s association with another man. Like her mother, she too wishes her past were dead. She dissociates herself from Ghulam Saab, refusing him as her father and later performs the equal to her mother. Madhu evokes how as a child Munni had invented stories of a lawyer-father residing in Pune, and also suffered immense psychological anguish when the neighborhood girls taunted her by asking her about the identity of her real father—was it Ghulam Saab, the Station Director or the man “who lives with your Munni’s mother?”

Shashi Deshpande’s portrayal of yet another woman character, Leela, Madhu’s aunt is equally admirable and remarkable. She is a communist and a very independent woman. She is not only ahead of her generation but the next generation as well. She was very patriotic, had taken part in the Quit India Movement, but as a leftist she was against Gandhi’s Ahimsa Satyagraha as she considered allowing oneself to be beaten up as ridiculous. Finally she quit the party as she felt that the party’s stand in a particular political event was improper. She also finds that the party is a sufferer to male prejudice which disregards merit in favor of gender.
The chapter is presenting much more than she did in her earlier novels. It is an insightful representation of women’s search for individuality in a patriarchal society. It is the most positive declaration of her power as a novelist with her intentional rejection of sappiness and her total control over the unwieldy material.

It is the tale of Madhu, a friendless daughter, a responsive and able woman, a very defenseless wife and mother. The novel presents Madhu’s struggle with her shattered family life, as she goes through her husband’s sudden change into suspicious distressing husband, who wants to know about her relationships with men, before she married him.

During this period Madhu’s son Adit is killed in a Post-Babri Masjid bomb blast, throwing both Madhu and her husband Som off their touching balance. It is the tale of Madhu, who mugs with the awful space grounded by the death of Adit, her only son who sets out on a extended and feeling alone voyage in her effort to approach to conditions with her defeats. Madhu’s curative practices arise when she is tackled with the loves of two other women, both brave in their own ways. One is, Savitribai Indorekar, a luminary singer of the Gwalior Ghaarana, a singer who wrote captions not only through the way she lived her life. The other one is Leela, Madhu’s aunt, with whom she had exhausted her youth and adulthood.

Madhu herself turned out to be a doting mother and ever perceptive of her son’s every need. Therefore it was all the more tragic when Aditya, her son, died in a bomb blast. Madhu’s relation with her husband, Som became estranged before this tragedy. Once Madhu worked up after a nightmare one night and revealed to him a secret which she had locked up in the innermost recesses of her mind. She had slumbered with a man when she was fifteen, a man who later devoted suicide. Som is incapable to accept this of his wife. Som, who had been a good husband and shared a wonderful relationship with his wife, has now become unable to come to terms with this news. He is totally upset. Madhu is unable to understand this: “But it’s the single act of sex that Som holds on to, it’s this fact that he can’t let go of, as if it’s been wheeled into his palm. Purity, chastity, there are the things Som is thinking of, these are the truths that matter.”

Madhu’s husband, Som himself had a developed affiliation with another woman before his marriage, did not matter. It is indeed a typical situation that a man may have a number of relations and affairs with other women, but always expects his wife to be a virgin and pure.

She is the character who is vividly portrayed and brought to life by the novelist. She is a frail woman. Madhu remembers that: “Savitribai is a little shape woman. Even from my child’s viewpoint, she had appeared diminutive, age and sickness have so shriveled her that she is Toy-sized woman not. The skin is fine and delicate, even if it is crinkled like tissue paper. Her arms are slim and firm, but the hands, with their branching of veins, seem incongruously large for those delicate arms.”

Savitribai Indorekar, the classical singer is domineering in her attitude to her servants, students, and sometimes even to her biographer, Madhu. Sometimes Savitri Bai gives her instructions to Madhu as to how to conduct the interview. Madhu observe the bitterness in Savitribai’s voice when she recalls how she was suddenly asked by her grandmother to stop singing when she was performing as a child during a relatives meeting. Madhu recollects. “In Neemgaon she was the singer woman and there was something derogatory about the words, yes I can see that now, about the way they said them.”

Madhu remembers: “In a sense, neither of us belonged to Munni’s family, with her singer mother, absent father and another man—a Muslim-sharing the home, was of course radically, shockingly different.” Thus Madhu concludes that no vision or viewpoint is perfect and complete, no understanding can be total and final. Through Madhu’s dilemma and the final expression of her
resolution, Shashi Deshpande has raised the question of the plurality of discourse. Since her writings deal with women and their portrayal, it is all the more important that this plurality be acknowledged. There can be no fixed attitudes, no watertight compartments for discourses. Shashi Deshpande challenges this kind of classification. No feminist, Marxist or psychological point of view can attempt to discover the truth. Each view has to be seen in the light of the other so that there emerges a unified whole. The task of the writer is to create a whole out of the available fragments:

“The tail, the trunk, the ears, the legs—yes, I have to put them together; I have to create an elephant out of these desperate bits”\(^{29}\)

Meenakshi Mukherjee remarks: "Madhu, however cannot inflict the fresh idea of heroionism on an old shaped woman who fair clean her life through discriminating amnesia"\(^{20}\) It is obvious to Madhu that there are different yardsticks for men and women in our society. In Neemgaon, Madhu remembers that “each family had its place marked out for it according to religion, caste, money, family background etc”\(^{21}\)

There has been a superseding academic effort in the past years to classify Shashi Deshpande into the category of feminist writing. With this book Deshpande not only defies any such classification but puts a question mark on this practice of compartmentalization of discourse.

The interpretation of a Hindustani raag thus can present for the narrator a site for conflation of music, life and creative writing. ‘Savitri’ itself is a loaded name in the Hindu cultural context. being the embodiment of wifely chastity and loyalty that can even thwart the deity of death-and is thus made to carry the burden of the mockery in the present context; ‘Savitri’ and ‘Bai’ together seem to present a paradoxical amalgamation, suggesting the opposites-the essential wife confined to the indoors and the public woman with her individual identity. Ironically, Savitribai, after defying the orthodox norms of a conventional society, yet longs for the uprightness of the socially prescribe role. Hence her desperate attempt: to insist on her own constructs regarding her biography. While allowing Madhu to ‘interview’ her she is actually engaged in this game of memory-making-very much like Nanda Kaul building up airy castles to her great granddaughter’ by means of ‘memory-making’.

Madhu can of course see through the chinks, and realize that both Savitribai, as an aged celebrity, and her daughter, as an embittered child, have been engaged in the same game of ‘memory-making’, and their ‘memories’ bear striking mutual resemblance: “Munni described this same house, her father’s house, in almost exactly the same words Bai uses, words that conjured up a picture of a rich home, a loving father and she, Munni, the centre of the household... Yes, it is Munni that Bai reminds me of, Munni, who like her mother, used words to create a glamorous world she had left behind”\(^{22}\)

Savitribai had, undoubtedly, led the most unconventional life anyone in her society would ever imagine. It was the daring strength and courage of Savitribai, who wanted to conform to be accepted by society. She was a woman who possessed the daring-devil spirit. It was quite evident when she blanked out Ghulam Saab’s name while telling the story of her life to Madhu, her biographer during the interview. This designate that she wanted to cover up her youthful life in order to protect and present her social respectability. She even goes to the extent of hiding the facts of her daughter born through her daughter born through her association with Ghulam Saab.
Her biographer, Madhu wanted to give Savitribai the immortality she had desired only if she was willing to pay the price of illuminating her daughter to the world—a daughter whose survival she had successfully removed till then. She could not understand when she had the courage to walk out on her marriage and relatives why she was so terrified to reveal the existence of her child.

Madhu’s aunt Leela was a extraordinary and a self-determining woman who was strongly committed to the communist ideology. She participated in the Quit India Movement. She criticized Gandhi’s principles of Ahimsa and Satyagraha. In the later course of her life she, however, regretted some of her actions. It was evident that she was a woman who had the party’s reaction to a political situation, was not appropriate, she resigned the party. At the beginning of the novel we find that “Leela was ahead not only of her generation, but the next one as well.”

Leela was financially autonomous and supported herself. When her husband, Vasantha, died she get the job and maintained her family while educating her brothers-in-law. She had to live in the crowded chawls among the cotton mills. She had to work for the benefit of the deprived women who were suffering from the contagious disease Tuberculosis. During this period she came into contact of Joe, a doctor who had a clinic especially for T. B. patients. Later on, Dr. Joe became her second husband.

Leela and Joe were quite different in their likes and dislikes. However, Joe loved Leela passionately. Joe was a widower with two children. So also Leela was a widow, who married Dr. Joe after the death of her first husband Vasantha. Dr. Joe was a well-read man. He was devoted to literature and music, in addition to medicine. According to Madhu, it was a wonderful companionship and relationship between Joe and Leela as husband and wife. Leela was not well educated and had no interest in literature and music.

Madhu recollects Leela’s reaction to the film ‘Devdas’. When Leela remained silent for a long time after watching the film ‘Devdas’, Madhu thought that the film had evoked memories of her dead husband, who like Devdas the hero of the film had died of tuberculosis. Leela expressed to Madhhu: “Now I know why that poor man drank so much. He had nothing to do; he didn’t have any work at all. If any intelligent man like him remains idle, what else can he do but take to drink.”

Leela did not approve of a life which did not look beyond one’s own self. Leela wanted to lead a simple life. She did not like the high standard her family gave itself and surprised what made them so special. She also did not believe in caste, creed and color. Among her relatives she was the only woman who had accepted Madhu’s parents’ marriage and had invited them to stay with her when they had no place their own. She was a kindhearted woman who was always ready to help the people who are in need. She had, therefore, worked for the welfare of the women who afflicted with tuberculosis.

Leela was the woman who powerfully believed in communist ideology. At times she did not vacillate to talk against the party. Although her unbreakable job in the party, she was not given a superior position by the party bosses. She was worried because party members who worked under her were already given good places in the party while she was not given the opportunity to rise in the party. Once, a widow of a staying along with party member was given a ticket to stand for elections. this made Leela to comment although she had never complained against the party. Leela said, “It seems you have got to become a widow for them to remember that you exist.” She feels that this always happens in our worldly affairs.
Munni always wanted to seek the approval of the 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 bards that society levels against those who dare to be different.”

After many years Madhu met Munni in a bus and recognized her, Munni refused to answer to the name of Munni. Munni did not like to recognize Madhu, her childhood friend. She said that her name was Shailja Joshi. She did not like to recollect her childhood days. Munni’s mother wanted to hide the fact that Munni was born through Savitri’s association with a Muslim fellow, Table master, Ghulab Saab, who lived in Savitri’s house a member of the house. She provides that child the name ‘Indorekar’ the name she approved as a singer—not embracing either maiden name or her married one, Meenakshi Indorekar, scratching her out as her child unaccompanied, not the child of her marriage, not the child of her lover. This surely is a statement “I cannot ignore?” This was the surprising remark Madhu made about Savitri and Munni. Madhu and her friends would rather have celebrated Bai as a ‘heroine’ who had defied society and family for the sake of art. To her bewilderment she finds:

“But Bai is unaware of this. She clings fiercely instead to her respectability, the respectability she claimed in her second birth as a singer, when, after a gap of two years, she reappeared in public view, wearing at that first public performance the mangalsutra of the married woman, instead of the pearls she had worn until then. A respectable married woman, both Ghulaam Saab, her lover, and Munni, her daughter, no longer part of her life”

The personalities of these two women are analyzed and presented through Leela’s niece Madhu. Madhu sees these women as they are remembered by various people connected with them and what emerges is a conspicuous plurality of selves. The idea that the two women have of themselves and the idea that their family, friends and admirers have of them is often in sharp contrast. Madhu, the narrator, is also represented in many ways: the motherless child, the young independent woman working for City Views, Som’s wife and most importantly, as Aditya’s mother. The changes that these multiple roles bring about in Madhu serve to foreground the stories of Savitribai and Leela.

Savitribai’s first encounter with Madhu is in a remote town, Neemgaon. Savitribai is accompanied by her daughter Munro, and Ghulaam Saab. Madhu befriends Munro. After her father’s death, Madhu leaves Neemgaon and goes to stay with Leela and Joe. Many years later she spots Munro on a bus but Munni refuses to recognize her. Munni had framed a new life for herself, totally rejecting her connections with Savitribai. Accepting Madhu’s presence in her life could open up those connections once again, so Munro blocks her with steely silence and non-recognition. Madhu is puzzled and intrigued by the prosaic speeches of the artist maintaining her rigid facade of social respectability: “but how do I write about her with this huge hole in the centre of her life?” Yet on occasions Madhu has her flashes of insight and these are granted in terms of music. For instance, when Savitribai makes the rare slip, in spite of her usually magnificent control by defining the loneliness of a period of her life with the analogy of vocal music without tabla: “It was like singing without the tabla. Music without taal is meaningless”
This relationship between the voice and the instrument also carries the clue to the mystery that united Savitribai with Ghulam Saab, her accompanist on the tabla. Years later, Ghulam Saab’s granddaughter Hasina, listening to old records of their performance “notices the ease and comfort with which they move together, the seamless union between the voice and the instrument”.

CONCLUSION:

And Madhu, the biographer, can fall back on the Wisdom which she had possessed in a way even during her childhood: “to know that you don't need to know everything about a person” Madhu, assisted by Hasina, tries to capture the essence about the artistic personalities and the crux of their relationship. Munro wanted predictable social respectability. So she discarded all connected with her mother—music, mastermind, desired and freedom. She even rejected the name her mother had given her Indorekar—the name Savitribai had adopted as a singer, marking Munro out as her child alone: neither the child of her marriage, nor the child of her lover. But Munni’s quest for self led her away from Savitribai: ‘For Munro, the self identity that she saw as her possess arrange in the prospect, it was towards that self that she stimulated with reflection an normal appearing woman with an usual family life and a name so ordinary that it covers pages in the telephone directory’

However, in Savitribai’s death Munro had that identity thrust upon her, Shailaja Joshi the only daughter of Savitribai Indorekar this newspaper notification of her mother’s death gave her back the identity she had resisted all her identity.

In a review, Meenakshi Mukherjee remarks “Shashi Deshpande’s philosophy of life as a novelist is that though each individual has to solve his problems of his own, it does not mean that he was to reject all relationships in life. Her protagonists need to be on their own to come to terms with life.” Deshpande’s work is steeped in the authenticity of daily domesticity. Although Shashi Deshpande takes a pride in not writing for a target readership, she admits that her style of writing has contributed to her feeling of being alienated from the more westerner writing that is community in India.

References:

2) Ibid, p. 139.  

