

SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *SMALL REMEDIES*: AGONY AND TRAUMA OF WOMEN UNDER MALE CHAUVINISM

Dr. Adi Ramesh Babu,
Asst. Professor of English,
Government Degree College,
Jammikunta, Satavahana University,
AP, India

Abstract

Shashi Deshpande writes about the problems of women and their quest for identity. Her characters are sensitive and thoughtful creatures. They try to know what they are and overcome from the problems created by men and society. They fight against the gender discrimination and endeavor to find an underlying principle for the identities of masculinity and femininity. The article deals with the agony and trauma faced by women from Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies*.

Keywords:- quest for identity, gender discrimination, masculinity and femininity.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most powerful novelists in the modern Indian English. She makes a novel attempt to trace the position of women in the twenty first century. Her novels mostly depict women from the middle class with the special attention of their sexual, cultural, traditional and sensitive roles. They convey the educated earning women characters that are suppressed and oppressed by men, other women and society also. They spotlight on women ideas of women and internal struggles of women in women. They demand the acceptance of woman's rights and laws. Through her novels, Shashi Deshpande usually raises various issues related to women and her position in human society. In all her works, she focused on the problems of women. Regarding feminism and women writings, she says "A woman who writes of women's experiences often brings in some aspects of those experiences that have angered her" (Ramamoorthy, 1991: 7). Although she writes about the issues of women, she says that she is not a feminist. In one such interview Shashi Deshpande (1993: 26) says: "I now have no doubts at all in saying that I am a feminist. In my own life, I mean, but not consciously, as a novelist. I must also say that my feminism has come to me very slowly, very gradually, and mainly out of my own thinking and experiences and feelings. I started writing first and only then discovered my feminism. And it was much later that I actually read books about it." In deed she wanted to be a house wife rather than a literally trapped woman. She didn't decide to write the problems of women but her writings, in directly, had been taken the themes of feminist. She declares: "I am a feminist very much and I strongly react against any kind of cruelty or oppression, denial of opportunities to women because they are women...the important thing is we have the right to live

ourselves. But as a writer I'm not going to use my novels to carry the message of feminism. Then it becomes propaganda.” (Sree Prasanna, 2003: 22). Her *Small Remedies* is a self-conscious novel. It brings many contemporary issues. It is about love, like, sex, courage, honesty, truth, trust, domestic feelings, husband and wife. It is dissimilar from her earlier works. Mukherjee Meenakshi (2000: 02) observes: “In *Small Remedies*, Deshpande is attempting much more than she did in her earlier novels – all five of them different from each other but smaller than this in scope...But none of them gathered up, as their new novel does, in one large sweep, the plurality, diversity and contradictions of our composite culture...” The novel is about the experience of experienced women, neither in happy journey nor in a sad journey.

Madhu is the protagonist of the novel. She is a motherless child. She grew up with her father. At a younger age, she loses her father too. She always wants her mother's love and affection. She has idealized it through pictures. But she slowly “learns that the women around her do not confirm to white clad, sacrificing and sobbing mother of the movie” (183). She is helped by Leela, her aunt and Joe, Leela's husband. Madhu completes her graduation and takes up a job with a magazine *City Views*. She settles in a room offered by her colleague Hamidbhai. Joe's son Tony and his friends Chandru and Som usually visit there in weakened where Madhu also lives. Madhu and Som become closer each other. They have fallen in love and get married. She enjoys the new relationship with her husband. Soon she gets pregnancy and gives birth to a boy, Adit. She feels that “A child's birth is a rebirth for a woman; it is like becoming a part of the world once again....from death you return to life, not just the new life you've produced, but your own life, renewed given back to you.” (88-89)

Madhu has been happy for a few years. Adit dies in a bomb blast that takes place in a bus boarded by him. She doesn't believe his death till some days. She goes out every day and tries to find him on the roads. She searches for him and says that his death is “not an event, it's an end. It's like nuclear devastation, there is nothing left. Som and I are moving through the rubble of our devastated life, searching for something, for any bits and pieces of our past. But there's nothing” (211). She cries for her loss of identity with the death of her only son. She says, “How long will I live this way? And what for, Oh God, what for?” (306). She plans to go to Savitribhai, who is her friend. Finally she visits to Bhavanipur to write Savitribhai's biography.

Savitribhai is a small sized woman. She is a “rebel who rejected the conventions of her times. The feminist lived her life on her terms. The great artist 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 has known Savitribhai from her childhood. In Madhu's interview, Savitribhai describes not only her problems as a woman but also the problems of women in domestic Indian society. She married a Muslim, Ghulamsaab. She says that she isn't helped by anyone, except Ghulamsaab, when she is in miserable mood. Madhu wants to collect her ideas regarding her life. She feels she can make Bai the rebel who rejected the conventions of her times. While writing the biography of Bai, Madhu writes the biography of Leela also. There are many similar things between Bai and Leela. Both of them protest against gender discrimination. Madhu says that “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” (224). Bai and Leela are bold women and they have great faith in themselves. Both are women of self-confidence. Madhu realizes “that both were courageous woman, that both were women who worked for and got the measure of freedom they needed, that both were ready to accept wholly the consequence of their actions” (284). Madhu concludes that life has to move on whatever changes occur in the lives of people. She realizes herself that nobody can stop anything. She

observes that “So many of us (are) walking this earth with our pain, our sorrow concealed within ourselves, so many of us hiding our suffering, going about as if all is well, so many of us surviving our loss, our grief. It’s miracle, nothing less than a miracle!” (315). Thus the autobiography of the subject includes the biography of three women’s ideas. In another way, the writer brings some of her own ideas, but she never revealed it anywhere.

Shashi Deshpande’s protagonists are bold, modern, educated, middle class and young women who find themselves controlled in male dominated society. Her characters fight for women’s rights. They fight against the historical context of patriarchy and oppression. They attack the male domination in antagonistically. In an interview she told: “My characters take their own ways. I’ve heard people saying we should have strong women characters. But my writing has to do with women as they are.” (Viswanatha, 1998: 235) Like her other characters, Madhu feels herself that her struggle for identity in a patriarchal society. As she has fragile relationship with her husband and condemns the marriage system. She wonders to see bridal wear, green bangles, tali and other things. Although she knows about marriage which brings a lot of burdens to woman, she gets marriage with Som. For a few months, their relationship is very strong. May be is for sexual intercourse or attraction of each other. But Som is upset when he knows that Madhu had sex with her father’s friend who committed suicide and died. It was happened when she was fifteen years old. Although he had many illegal sexual affairs with many young girls in his teenage, Som can’t accept a single act of sex from Madhu. She is exhausted with him and she says “Purity, chastity and intact hymen – these are the things Som is thinking of, these are the truths that matter” (262). Madhu knows that all women are suppressed by male domination. She realizes it when she writes the biography of Bai. She is really engaged in the act of self-discovery. Madhu explains it thus: “We see our lives through memory and memories are fractured, fragmented, almost always cutting across time... Truly, dreams are the stuff of life, the hidden truth that lies beneath the hard reality. Invention, creation, is sometimes the greater, possibly the best part, of reality. Even to write our own stories, we need to invent” (165).

Savitribai loves music and becomes a great singer. But she is not allowed to dance or sing songs in her orthodox family. Madhu is told that Bai was not allowed to dance in a family function. Later on she becomes a classical singer. People are surprised to see her decision but nobody protested against her father-in-law who had a mistress. He used to go her daily and everyone knows it in the town but it is not treated as a sin but Bai’s interest is treated as a great sin and untouchable. Is it wrong to dance in functions? Can men only dance in functions? Bai never steps back as a stubborn lady. She has learnt dance and later on she becomes a classical singer. For her success, the people murmur that there was a gossip of a love affair with a Station Director who helped her get many contracts with the radio. In the patriarchal setup Bai was “a woman who had left her husband’s home” (222). There are many similar things between Madhu and Bai. Madhu’s son Adit was killed in the same bomb blast as Bai’s daughter Munni. Both of them are artists. Madhu is a writer and Bai is a dancer. Both are childless mothers.

Leela is always supported herself. Since she was a leftist, she was against Gandhiji’s principles of Ahimsa and Satyagraha. But she participated in Quit India Movement. When her first husband Vasant died, she took up a job. She educated her brothers-in-law. She believed in communist ideology. As soon as she finds that the party is a victim to male chauvinism. After she became a widow, she married Joe, a doctor with academe fairly good income. Leela and Joe made a wonderful companionship apart from their differences (99). She decides to become a social worker by serving women who suffer from T.B.

Thus in most of Shashi Deshpande's novels, She brings the educated and wised women as the main characters but they have too been humiliated and suppressed by any one of the reasons of the society. The silent and inner-heart agony and trauma of women is clearly described in her novels. In the case of Madhu, she is rejected by her husband. Bai becomes alone when her child dies. Leela, though she is married to Joe, is a victim of male chauvinism and she is commented when her husband has dead. Shashi wisely convey the ideas and opinions of women to outer world.

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