

Travails of Self Identity

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Shashi Deshpande novel *Small Remedies* has very strong portrait of women. This novel is an embodiment of changing ideologies in the society seen through changing role of woman. All of them represent the woman of today they do not believe women are inferior beings who must remain passive and submissive. Instead the women give a tough fight against the established order and often come up with new concepts of morality. They not only live their lives as a wife, mother and daughter but also as an individual. These characters along with feminine qualities are also invested with the conventionally considered unfeminine qualities like courage, independence, intellectual energy, rationality and ambition. They are autonomous and self determining women who struggle to obtain selfhood by dissolving their pessimism, inculcating the strength to survive with dignity and analyzing their problems rationally. They refuse to surrender before anxieties, indoctrination, social conditioning and resultant oppression. They are aware of the injustices heaped on them; they display a determination to face the riddles of life boldly. These women are Madhu, Savitri Bai and Munni.

In the book, Madhu the protagonist of the novel brought up in a liberal atmosphere by her father. Her father is so lavish in his love and affection for her that she never feels the need of her mother. Her father's death when she is only fifteen years old shatters her and she comes to stay with her aunt Leela her guardian henceforth. She is not happy in her aunt's home and cannot adjust to staying with her aunt's family which includes Joe, her aunt's husband and their two children Paula and Tony. She finishes her graduation on the money that has been left by her father but when the money finishes she refuses to study further despite being cajoled by Leela and Joe but she insists, "I am determined. I will start working. I will earn my own money, become independent" (SR,83)

In the meantime a friend of Joe's Hamid Bhai offers her a job of writing and editing his magazine City Views. This offer of a job is like a godsend opportunity for her to establish her independence. The next step of course is a place to stay. This problem too is resolved by Hamid Bhai's offer of a small room on rent. The small room becomes a symbol of her independent identity and provides her a sense of fulfillment.

She is happy in her world of independence which gives her a profound sense of self fulfillment. Tony her cousin visits her frequently and introduces Som and Chandru to Madhu. Madhu's friendship with Som blossoms into love and they soon get married. Marriage brings bliss and soon they are blessed with a son who is the apple of her eye. Aditya her son gives her a new identity he becomes the centre of her universe and for his upbringing she gives up her job and becomes a devoted mother.

One night she reveals a secret of the past to Som and after that her peace and happiness is finished as Som becomes increasingly suspicious of her and violent quarrels and arguments ensue between them adversely affecting the tender psyche of Aditya. She gets infuriated many

times at his suspicious attitude and even thinks of parting but she remains silent because of Aditya. Aditya however leaves the house and soon dies in a bomb blast. Madhu is shattered and walks the streets looking for him; she remains seated by the telephone waiting for his call. She loses touch with reality and her days are spent in fitful anxiety worrying and praying for his safe return. One day confronted by Som she accepts the death of Aditya and if Aditya was the catalyst which kept them together his death becomes the cause of estrangement.

Madhu holds Som responsible for Aditya's going as it was his over suspicious attitude that created tension in the household and consequently his death. She feels that "to see Som is to remember and to remember is to make living impossible and therefore it is that Som and I prefer to part (SR83). Therefore she decides to leave Som and live apart. She wants to forget whatever has happened in the past between them and moreover she cannot share the moments of her suffering as a bereaved mother with him. She deliberately creates the indifference with Som as she feels, "it is just indifference that has made forgetting possible. Indifference is, after all, the best armour you can wear. If I don't care, I can't be hurt" (SR,107)

She decides to accept the offer of Chandru who wants her to write the biography of Savitribai Indorker so that she can divert her grief and also it would give her the opportunity to be away from Som.

Madhu moves to Bhavanipur, where Bai lives and takes up residence with a young couple, Lata and Hari but despite their demonstration of love and care Madhu engages herself in her work and largely remains indifferent to those around her. She also has visits of Tony and Rekha who urge her to come back to Som, even Som writes to her pleading with her to come back but all these appeals are like water off a ducks back. She remains adamant and resolute in her decision saying that, "i turned my back on them. Nothing can help" (SR,113) but gradually she starts to connect with her surroundings trying to overcome Aditya's death and Som's ealos nature. She responds to Lata's sincere efforts of love and affection but it is Hari who reveals his connection to Madhu's mother and begins to call her *Kaku*. It is Hari's persistent efforts that help bring Madhu to the real world by initiating new relationships.

Madhu slowly gets involved with all especially since Hari asks her about her aunt Leela. All the memories of her life repressed by her come flooding back and then a crisis in the form of Bai's stroke and Hari's accident forces her to confront her own grief.

She confides in Hari about the agony of losing Aditya how she mindlessly waited for him to come back and the disappointment when each day ended with no sign of him. She also talks of the immense sorrow of not being with him in his final moments and also what a waste of a life that got finished in bomb blasts. She says, "Sometimes I think I could have borne his death if I had been able to be with him, to see him die. We have a right to share it, the most profound human experience of death" (SR,305)

Talking about Aditya's death with Hari is therapeutic for Madhu. It has a cathartic effect and she lets herself open up to other people's grief and pain also. Her healing begins on comparing herself with the tale of Kisa Gotami who had gone to Lord Buddha to revive her dead son and Lord Buddha had asked her to get mustard seeds from a house which had not been visited by death. Obviously there was no such house as she soon realized and peacefully accepted her son's death. Remembering this story helps Madhu to accept her fate.

Shashi Deshpande through the character of Madhu presents the picture of an extremely courageous woman who faces the problems of her life boldly and also manages to come out of them. She though given to occasional self pity displays rare courage and confidence in trying to cope with difficulties, humiliations and frustrations by herself.

Through Madhu we are told of another lady called Savitribai Indorker. She was an extremely dare-devilish kind of woman. She crosses “a clear line of demarcation between what females could do and what they couldn’t by breaking not just a couple but a whole host of taboos” (SR,218)

She was interested in music right from childhood and wanted to become a professional singer. On not gaining permission from her father she takes music lessons without her father’s permission. And later on in her in laws household she listens to music secretly and even asks her father-in-law to arrange for music lessons for her and finally one day she runs away from her inlaw’s home with a tabala master who she feels can better her prospects of becoming a professional singer. By taking this step, she summons the courage to break all the barriers of caste and marriage codes. She dares to defy society. Madhu says about it, “A step so great that even today it would require enormous courage. The stuff even movies still hesitate to take on” (SR,166)

She is so desperate in her desire to earn name in the musical world that she not only abandons her husband and family but also rejects her only daughter. “By taking this step she entered another world far removed from the world of food, cooking, festivals, rituals, pregnancy and children that she had to inhabit as a daughter-in-law of the house” (SR,219) .Somuya Bhattacharya finds this novel as an “uplifting experience” as there are a lot of anti-traditional decisions being taken.(Bhattacharya)

Savitribai disassociates herself from all her relations but perhaps the most painful of all is her treatment of her only daughter, she neglects her and the child Munni too feels unwanted, unloved and rejection because of which she develops an aversion to her mother.

Through the character of Bai we have a woman who gives preference to her own individual aspirations and rejects the traditional role of housewife and devoted mother. This is in subversion to the traditional roles of a mother and wife. For a woman to aspire to a life beyond the limits of the home was considered heresy of the worst kind. Malti Mathur asserts, “Any woman who wished to give up the security and safety of the confines of the home for an uncertain, unsafe identity outside, are looked upon as no less than a jezebel” (Mathur,85)

Bai’s character is the epitome of strength and courage. She is a daring woman who, instead of choosing the sheltered and respectable life, prefers the path less trodden which no doubt would be full of obstacles.

She is a source of fascination to Madhu who admires Bai’s strong will and determination in the achievement of her goal. It is never easy for Bai to move on as she is alone in the journey. Many hurdles come in her way but she never gives up rather faces and overcomes each of them courageously and rather it is this determination to achieve her goals that gives her courage to face the jibes and hostility of society. Madhu sees her as “the rebel who rejected the conventions of her times. The feminist who lived her life on her terms” (SR,166)

She moves on in her life and at last all her efforts bear fruit as she becomes not only a singer but an extremely successful professional singer as is depicted from the various awards, photographs, pictures with prime minister, ministers, singers, writers, dancers and various dignitaries. This is all due to her dedication to her art. Amrita Bhalla in her book Shashi Deshpande comments about this involvement of Bai to her art. She says, "Bai's story speaks of commitment and dedication to her art, of the courage to step across the threshold and break out of the restrictions of upper caste patriarchal society in search of a dream"(Bhalla,79)

Bai also brushes aside some age old beliefs which reflect the subversion of the role of new women. She shows immense courage to give her illegitimate child the name 'Indorker' the name she herself adopted as a singer later, from her mother's hometown Indore, thus neither using her maiden name nor her marital name. Her daughter was given by her only her name, not of the male parent thus claiming her daughter exclusively as her own child once again neither her husband's nor her lovers. She is a woman who takes all the decisions herself and bears the responsibility for her decisions. Her ability to choose and the desire to face the situation boldly without surrendering and being oppressed by anybody make her a unique woman who successfully manages to subvert the traditional role of woman. Darshana Trivedi says, "She challenges the code of Manu, she proves that her life is her own. She can take the decision in her own life."(Trivedi,262)

The last but not the least important character that follows the theme of subversion of roles is Leela, Madhu's aunt. We were introduced to her as the caretaker of Leela after her father's death but now we would study her character as she too is a remarkable lady. Leela was fiercely independent. She participated in the quit India movement but as a leftist she is against Ahimsa and Satyagraha. She feels being beaten up and abused goes against human nature. She went underground many times and did many daring deeds. There was even a price on her head, she had narrow escapes and avoided getting caught. She devotes her life helping the poor, destitute, under-paid, over-worked factory laborers. She endeavours to do a lot for the women inflicted by T.B. She is deeply loved and honoured by the people. Leela devotes her life to the people marrying very late. She marries Joe, a Christian while she herself was a Brahmin Hindu widow. she did not believe in caste and was the only one who accepted the marriage of Madhu's parents and offered them a place to stay with her as they had nowhere to go. Madhu recalls, "Leela moved away from caste and disowned it. It meant nothing to her, which is why she alone in the family accepted my parents marriage"(SR,98)

She defies many traditional norms and joins prabhat pheries, her nationalistic views; her individualistic viewpoints make others perceive her as a rebel who disregards codes of society. Leela also persuades Madhu to study further and not to surrender to the vagaries of time. Madhu admires Leela for her integrity and strength. She says, she was "part of a generation even before mine. She always supported herself" (SR,94). Though her entire life was full of trials and tribulations she lived a complete life both in the public and private spheres. She tries her best to be a mother to Madhu, and Paula and Tony, Joe's children. She fulfills the expectations of all who rely on her and proves to be a complex and modern woman

Munni, is the illegitimate daughter of Savitri Bai. From the very beginning Munni realized that she was a misfit as her mother a Brahmin married woman staying with a muslim man. Munni denies that her father is Ghulam Sahib and makes up stories of her father staying in Pune, a successful and famous lawyer. She confides to Madhu, her closest friend and neighbor that

Ghulam Sahib had kidnapped her. Madhu narrates Munnis words, “Do you think I,d have come here otherwise?...My father would never have let me go”(SR,64) Thus creating imaginary stories munnis strives to attain the life and identity of a respectable family, which her mother had rejected. Munnis starts living a life of illusion, no matter However how much she tries to reject Ghulam Sahib as her father, her resemblance to him is exact and foils all her efforts to disown the relationship between them. Madhu says, “ she tried hard to.... cover it up, deliberately cultivating a bedraggled ragamuffin look ,far removed from his tidy elegance...but her eyes, her light grey eyes ...unmistakably linked her to the man she so strenuously disclaimed as father”(SR,75)

Munnis’s relationship with her mother is based on rejection .as Bai rejects Munnis so too Munnis rejects everything to do with her mother, may it be her talent or looks or even the men who come to listen to her music. Bai’s lifestyle means disgrace and Munnis craves for respectability. And to this purpose she denies her vocal talent and ability too.

Munnis struggles to achieve respectability is finally achieved in her youth when after marriage she becomes a common middle class woman Mrs Sheleja Joshi. Madhu says, “fighting with her back to the wall for the identity she wanted to have, the one she claimed finally, successfully denying her old one .Shailaja Joshi-a long way from Munnis, daughter of Savitri Bai and Ghulam Sahib”(SR,77)

Thus to Munnis her identity lay in being an ordinary woman belonging to a respectable family and for this she rejected everything associated with her mother- music, ambition, freedom and name. Munnis’s search for identity leaves Madhu saying, “But for all of us, there is a self inside which we recognize as our real selves. For Munnis the self that she saw as her lay in the future, it was towards that self that she moved with deliberation, it was that self I met in the bus-an ordinary looking woman with an ordinary family life and name so ordinary that it covers pages in the telephone directory”(SR,170)

Munnis’s life can best be seen as a form of rebellion, a repudiation of all that her mother stands for and it is indeed ironic that her death in the same bomb blast in which Aditya lost his life, she is recognized as Savitri Bai’s only daughter. Yet we perceive her as a strong woman who lifelong fought against her illegitimacy and sought the safe comfort of conventionality.

Small Remedies is thus a sensitive portrayal of women in a transitional phase. The characters offer us a glimpse of the divided self of women when they are confronted with the opposing forces of tradition and modernity in their quest for self identity.

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