

Remembering and Retelling 'Selves' In *Small Remedies*

Dr.Kavya.B

Lecturer in English
Karnataka

"...nothing in life comes "next" but....every thing exists together and at the same time within usthere is no past to be "brought forward" in a human being, buthe is his past at every moment andthe present is merely that which his past is capable of noticing and smelling and reacting to." (Arthur Miller)

Shashi Deshpande writes about Indian women with the authority of the universal female experience. When she embarks on journey through the sea of human relations, discovers at its depth the most complicated and hidden feelings of woman. These precious gems are transformed into a novel for the readers. Each of her novels is a unique experience for her readers. *Small Remedies* is a path breaking novel by Shashi Deshpande, which belongs to the second phase of her writings. This novel holds a mirror to the social transitions occurring in Indian society. Savitribai and Leela represent modern women with vaulting ambitions and courage. These women are devoid of feminine weaknesses and they aspire to masculine power and respect. Music and politics are the two fields through which Savitribai and Leela desire to establish themselves. They are aware of their oppression in society, as women and they want to claim equality in career. Though talented, gifted, courageous these women were sidelined as they were women. The party people subdued Leela though she worked for many years for the party. It is not easy for a woman to reach the zenith of success breaking the strong barriers constructed or prevailed from so many centuries. The discrimination of women is global. As Rajan says "Developing countries are also characterized by severe inequities in class, caste, community and gender relations, which generate the endemic violence characteristic of their social structures." Bai says, "Nowadays they become Ustads and Pundits even before they have proper moustaches." Uma Chakravarti opines: "Woman like other subordinate groups in society are among the muted or even silent voices of history. They have been excluded both as actors and authors from featuring in history as they should and remain one of its most neglected subjects. The exercise of rewriting the part has been confined to invisibilising women: their presence has only been negatively registered, mainly through a vast silence." *Small Remedies* also focuses on sexism at work places. Dalvi, the senior most employee of City Views, a magazine, denies to accept Madhu as an fellow employee and considers her as his opponent. His body language shows his lust towards Madhu. "Dalvi turns the office into a battle zone : the two hard working males working for a living, their families dependent on the money they earn, against one pampered founder who is here to pass her time."(85). The patriarchal domination is ingrained in Indian culture in an inescapable way, Jessica Benjamin observes: "The anchoring of this structure so deep in the psyche is what gives domination its appearance of inevitability, makes it seem that a relationship in which both participants are subjects – both empowered and mutually respectful – is impossible". Benjamin also observes the object status of women. It is always "man expresses desire and woman is the object of it" clearly suggests woman's sexual subjectivity and her recognition as his "Object of Desire".

Vikram Seth's third novel *An Equal Music* (1999), Salman Rushdie's *Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) and Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies* (2000) are woven around music. Meenakshi Mukherjee 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 where an Anthony Gonsalves (the reference to 'Amar, Akbar Anthony' is deliberate), a Hamidbai and Joe can all be part of Madhu's extended family, and the daughter of Ghulam Saab can opt, though not very easily to get accepted as Shailaja Joshi". Mukherjee further points out "Of the four remarkable novels I have read in recent times that deal with music Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music*, Salman Rushdie's *Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Bani Babu's Bangla novel *Gandharu*; and now *Small Remedies*. Shashi Deshpande, I think, faces the toughest challenge. This has to do with incompatibility between the discourse of Hindustani music and the English language.

In a male dominated society like India where women have been treated like a foot mattress for centuries, Shashi Deshpande makes a novel attempt to trace the position of women in 21st century. Till today though the status of woman has changed her fight for identity is not yet ended. Like the old wine in the new bottle her struggle has taken new faces. Shashi Deshpande's novels implore women to discover her selfhood not as a genderized being. As Barbara Berg Says: "It is the freedom to decide her own destiny, freedom from sex-determined role; freedom from society's oppressive restriction; freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely into action. Feminism demands the acceptance of woman's right to individual conscience and judgment. It postulates that women's essential worth seems to form her common humanity and does into depend on the other relationships of her life.

In 'Remembering and Retelling' the stories of Savitribai, Leela and Munni, Madhu discovers her moral and physical self. The self is the self; it is the pure identity just being our self not being somebody for others. According to Jungian psychologists the "ego" is merely the centre of the conscious personality while the "Self" is the unifying centre of both the conscious as well as the unconscious personalities. Jung defines the self as both the centre and the circumference of the psyche which "incorporates within its paradoxical unity all the opposites embodied in the masculine and feminine archetypes" (Edinger). The stories of Bai and Leela reveal this struggle in the opted career such as music and politics and even in their personal life. Bai with the craze towards music eloped with muslim guy burning her content married life. Leela a widow remarried Joe, with him she had to take on the problem of Paula. Both Bai and Leela accepted wholly the consequences of their actions; therefore there were no complaints. Their stories set glaring example of inequalities in gender in the fields of music and politics. But Bai and Leela were masters of their will, had great faith in themselves. Marianne Dekoven observes, "Public space, the traditionally masculine sphere, is still a new field for women, even though they now must traverse it, and finally can do so without being blown immediately to bits".

Even in this novel through Madhu, Deshpande deals with a wife's position, her struggle for identity in a patriarchal society and her delicate relationship with her husband and condemns the marriage system. Madhu feels marriage is one in which 'nobody can get hurt'. As a girl she felt funny about the marriage between a plant and a tree. Making a bridal wear, green bangles, mangalasutra and all the stuff. She feels very disgusting about the rehabilitation plans for the Devadasi women, which seem to centre on marriage. As if there are only these two options for the women – marriage or prostitution and to get away from one you need the other. As if happiness lies only in marriage. Deshpande emphasizes love and its importance in any human relationships. Each and every person searches for love and Ketaki, Madhu, Munni are not apart from them. Munni searches in the movies, Ketaki in her books and magazines and Madhu in her child Adit. When her boy started to grow and developed gap between them she was shattered. She is frightened by Adit's behavior. Som calls this as *Moha*, *Putra Moha*, a sort of obsession. Joe's words are reminded by Madhu, 'Love is an adult emotion'. In fact it is the story of all those who dare to endure the sufferings and come up in life struggling alone. As Jasfir says It's a tribute to those who accept the truth and "move forward to self-knowledge and acceptance of a 'flawed' self, past mistakes and future failures. The self-help is the best help, the inner strength, which sustains Savitribai, Leela, and Madhu to drive away, the grief pain and anguish. Though Bai was successful in fulfilling her dreams as a great singer according to Madhu she was an unhappy mother. Madhu is surprised to hear to story of Bai without any trace of Munni, an illegitimate child of Bai. Bai wants to discard her from her life so that she can portray a clean life story in front of the society. She wants to be accepted by the society as an image of Indian "Woman". Madhu is facing problems in her married life as she didn't accept the words of her stereotyped husband. Madhu blames her husband for the death of her only child Adit. Both Bai and Madhu are equal as a bereaved mother, while the former forgets in her music and sticks to silence while the latter strives to forget her pain in writing and sticks to the memories.

The day Adit is killed in the bus blast; he had left home in disgust after a noisy scene between his parents. Whatever man does is not questioned but if a woman does anything she has to bear the consequences alone even after many years. Madhu is not left out of it after many years of marriage when her son is 17. Madhu's husband Som is upset with the revelation of her only act of sex with her father's friend when she was a child. That man is no more, committed suicide soon after that; may be due to the guilt he suffered. But Som is stubborn to make Madhu accept her only act of sex before marriage when she was a child as adultery. Before marriage he had a full-fledged girl friend with whom he had enjoyed sex life but he can't accept a single act of sex from his wife. He either wants her to blame it as rape or surrender adultery. Her refusal to innocence or infidelity is hurting to his male ego and reveals the Indian mentality of man who wants his wife to be a virgin before marriage and *pativrata* after marriage. According to Janalowski, virginity in woman is "the legitimacy of heirs to a male bloodline essential for the reproduction of patriarchal society".

Madhu starts writing Bai's biography. 'Savitribai Indorekar, Doyen of Hindustani music. Belonging to the Gwalior gharana...' Madhu feels chronological narrative of Bai's life is not appropriate, as we don't live our lives this way. We see our lives through memory

and memories are fractured, fragmented, almost always cutting across time. She feels she can trap her into an image she creates, accord her a distinct identity and a discerning aura so that she could be recognised in the light of her talent. The power of writer is the power of the creator: She feels she 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 in the cause of her art. The woman who gave up everything - a comfortable home a husband and a family – for love. (116)

As a child Madhu felt Munni's mother is beautiful had a crush towards her. She was always elegantly dressed unlike other women. In Madhu's imagination Bai is far from trendy heroines, she is a young woman who had lived the sheltered life of the daughter-in-law of an affluent Brahmin family (38). A woman with this sort of background being a married Hindu woman eloping with a Muslim partner need a greater guts. Then her learning music from Guruji Kashinath Buwa, by living in a strange town among total strangers. She had to travel by the local shuttle train to get to Guruji's place, with a two-mile walk through the fields at the end of it. The house she lived in was a ramshackle arrangement two rooms with an outside toilet shared by others and no electricity is not an easy going for one who has come from a rich family. Being a woman she had to take this risk, as she was not allowed to stay in Guruji's establishment. Savitribai has no idea that Madhu was her daughter's childhood friend in Neemgaon and on the top of it she has mapped her story in such a way that Munni was out of her story, "whose existence Bai has obliterated" (168). Madhu says, "So there was no need to remind her: "I am Munni's friend Madhu. Remember me?" (29).

Savitribai's love for music was not nurtured in her orthodox family. Savitribai tells Madhu how she was hurt when her grandmother asked her to stop singing immediately during her performance at a family gathering. Madhu recalls, "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 then" (29). Bai as a woman though successful as a classical singer she was not accepted in the society as she had eloped with a Muslim tabla player and had a child from him. But Madhu's father and father-in-law were accepted by the society, as they were men. Madhu's father was a widower who brought up his daughter with a male servant at home. He never followed any rituals and indulged in drinking. "Being a man he could get away with much. He could live the way he wanted to without open censure or disapproval" (139) . Bai's father-in-law had a mistress who was well known Thumri singer. He went to her daily and though it was known to every one it was negligible, but Bai's interest in singing was taken in a negative sense and was treated as an untouchable. The indifferent experience is quoted in these lines: "But the subtle cruelty of persistent hostility leaves deeper wounds. There is always the temptation to succumb, to be back to the normal path and be accepted. To resist the temptation speaks of great courage" (221).

Bai's pursuit of a career as a classical signer and for her success there was a gossip of a love affair with a Station Director who had helped her get many contracts with the radio. As he had helped her and was a regular visitor it was taken granted that he was Bai's

lover. In course of time when Bai gave birth to a child Madhu recalled how children would tease her by calling the Station Director her mama, a byname for mother's lover. In the patriarchal setup Bai was "a woman who had left her husband's home" (222). So she was taken as an immoral woman without any reasoning. Though Bai in the way of success went against the norms of society by concealing the lover or Munni, born out of wedlock from Ghulam Saheb wants to be accepted by the society. She had also given Munni her name "Indorekar" which she gained as a singer, not her maiden or married one. She wants to gain respect and a fair name and that is why she denies to accept Munni as her daughter born out of wedlock in public. Even Munni hates her mother singing and her resemblance with Ghulam Saheb. She never accepted her biological father and as a child cooked up stories that her father was a lawyer living in Pune and this man had kidnapped her. She was heavily tortured by the questions "who lives with your (Munni's) mother?" (77). Finally she moves away from her mother and burning her past she makes new (life) as she is accepted by Bai's husband. When once Madhu meets her in a bus, she refuses to accept her as her childhood friend Munni and tells Madhu that she is not Munni but "Shailaja Joshi". When Munni rejects Madhu's link to her past she feels "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 of Munni, daughter of Savitri Bai and Ghulam Saab" (77). Finally Munni gained what she had aspired to in order to be a part of the society as an ordinary woman from a respectable family. Madhu observes: "But for all of us, there is a self inside which we recognize as ourselves. For Munni, the self that she saw as her own 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 a name so ordinary that it covers pages in the telephone directory" (170). Malathi Mathur writes: "At the other end of the spectrum is Munni, Savitri Bai's daughter who turns her back on her mother and all 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."

Shashi Deshpande through Madhu's story suggests how pre-marital sex could lead to disintegration of marriage. Though her husband Som had a relationship with a married woman before marriage he is not ready to forgive the lone act of sex by his wife. Madhu says "Purity, chastity and intact hymen – these are the things Som is thinking of, these are the truths that matter" (262). Bell Hooks observes: [b]etween women, male supremacist values are expressed through suspicious, defensive, competitive behavior. It is sexism that leads women to feel threatened by one another without cause...Sexism teaches women-hating and both consciously and unconsciously we act out this hatred in our daily contact with one another. The death of her only child makes her existence meaningless and futile. Madhu needs to share with her husband about their son as Benjamin says, "To transcend the experience of duality, so that both partners are equal, requires a notion of mutuality and sharing". When she accepts Chadru's proposal of writing a biography and stays with Hari and Lata. It is Hari who brings her back to the network of relations and calls her "Kaku". But all the efforts of the young loving couple to make her part of their life is in vain as she remains aloof. During the day time she engages in her work but the nights are torturous for her. Gradually she comes close to them and openly for the first time talks about Adit's death and her mindless waiting for her son. She revives her hope

of seeing Adit who had kept her alive and her frustrations in her failure to find him. Finally Madhu breaks down and speaks of the final movement of her absence during her son's death. She says, "I can't come to terms with my ignorance of those days, I am obsessed by the need to reclaim them from the darkness. 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, with those we love, we have a right to be with them, to travel part of the way, even if we cannot go all the way. But I was denied that right, I was deprived of it. I don't know, I will never know how he faced the moment?" (305). 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).

Hasina's song reminds her of the dreams; Som and she had together woven around Adit and realizes that she needs to share her loss with Som. She feels "We need to be together, we need to mourn him together, we need to face the fact of his death and our continuing life together. Only in this is healing possible. I think of how Tony and I, when we speak of Joe and Leela, bring them back into our lives for a while. Som and I have to do this for Adit, only Som and I can do it for him; between the two of us, we can recreate him, we can invoke his presence and make his existence real. And then may be, we can have our own ceremony. Som and I, we can wash away the darkness and ugliness, not only of Adit's death, but of what happened before, with our own oblations of sesame seeds and water" (323). This realization makes her get peace of mind and strengthens her to face life with new hopes.

Leela or Bai's desire to find their position other than wife is not looked upon by society as normal. As Jessica Benjamin observes: "[I]dealizing woman's desexualization and lack for agency.... preserves the old gender system, so that freedom and desire remain unchallenged male domain, leaving women to be righteous, intimate and caring. It is through the way of self-realization that Bai and Leela attain their freedom. And "[a] Person who achieves freedom becomes responsible for herself and for the society" for freedom "always comes with responsibility": (*A Quest for Freedom VII*). While writing about Bai, Madhu is reminded of Leela. Chandra Holm rightly remarks: "It is a novel about myriad feelings – love, courage, honesty truth, trust, about the power exerted by time and by words. It is a novel in which past, present are intermingled". It is through Hari she learns about her social activities. Leela was her mother's eldest sister and was also the eldest sister of Hari's grandmother. Leela was also a brave woman like Bai and she draws similarities between them. She says: "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 this 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 are in it together. But they paid the price for their attempts to break out" (284). Leela always supported herself. When her first husband Vasant died she took up a job and educated her brothers-in-law. Leela is a strong-minded woman who didn't care for the convictions of the society. She was an active member of the Communist Party and opposed the Gandhian methods of Ahimasa Satyagraha. She was an unusual woman ahead not only of her generation but the next as well. She believed in equality not in the

discrimination of people by their races. (M)en alone do not make society. Men and women do. If society belongs to all human beings, but some human beings cling to it with their fingertips, then they must tell society that they too have hands. Women too want to hold society in the depth of thin palms, to feel it, to nurse it, to savor it, and to know that it is wonderful to be alive. After becoming a widow she helped her brothers-in-law in their education and married Joe who was a widower with two children. Even after marrying. Joe, a doctor with a fairly good income, she continued to live on her own money. Leela and Joe made a wonderful companionship apart from their differences (99).

There were the things the family spoke of Leela's other activities did not matter to them, none of her achievements registered. Her years of teaching, her role in the trade unions, her work among the factory workers ---- there were blanked out, they didn't exist. Leela is an extraordinary woman who participated in the '42 Quit India movement, but people don't notice Leela's social activities. Even Bai's way to success was not a road of roses. She was first influenced by her mother towards singing and she was the one who sent her for learning music but her father was very furious. "Do you want your daughter to be one of those women?", he asked his wife. That was the end of the music. Even Bai was a very pampered child. As her father was the eldest of the three brothers, she was the first grand child in the family. But her craze for music was uncontrollable. She was very desperate. I was willing to disguise myself as a man and go for a public performance in her in-law's house her desires got colored. She was able to listen to performances from great vocalists. She had strong determination after she heard Pundit Kashinath Buwa to become his student, but the way was very hard. In the quest of her Guruji's she burnt her boats, left her husband and home started living with Ghulam Saheb, tabla player. Her Guruji was not ready to accept her as a student since he felt music was no profession for a respectably married woman. Finally he agrees to accept her as his student in Bhavanipur, but with conditions. She will live in Bhavanipur town, nearly ten miles from the temple and his home. She will come thrice a week in the afternoons. She agrees to everything, she regrets only the fact that she can't live near the temple like his other students, the male pupils. She was very studious and practised for nearly 10-12 hours a day. She was advocated artist, the woman in search of her genius, of her destiny.

Leela is an iron-willed woman who didn't care for the convictions of the society. As we already know, she was an active member of the Communist Party and opposed the Gandhian methods of Ahimasa Satygraha. She was an unusual woman ahead not only of her generation but the next as well. She believed in equality not in the discrimination of people by their races. After becoming a widow she helped her brother-in-law in their education and married Joe who was widower with two children. Aruna's words echo in the mind of Leela and Bai: "Just because I can't change the whole society, should I give up doing whatever I can? I have realized that I can't live without doing my bit...My work will give me satisfaction – the satisfaction that my life has meaning. Isn't that what freedom is all about? If at all I cared about was my own life, then I wouldn't need this freedom my freedom should have meaning. right now, finding that meaning is my goal.

Madhu learns herself from the stories of Bai and Leela, how these were able to acquire themselves the measure of freedom they needed. It is through their memory she finds her

way out of melancholy. Madhu's marriage was in crisis when her husband learns about her past sex with a man who later committed suicide. Though it occurred in her childhood, it was so deep rooted in her memory that she had even revealed it to her husband, who was like her friend but after hearing that he was no more a friend or husband. Madhu feels, "Blood ties, even if they are more complex, more difficult with their conflicting demands to cope with, are so much easier to explain."

Madhu acknowledges her penchant for writing, the capacity to draw the life of Savitribai as she wishes. Madhu sketches Bai's life not as Maya and Yogi wants it to be for consumer satisfaction, a biography of a great singer but Madhu wants to display the other of Bai's life as a woman and mother. Bai needs to be revealed as an unhappy mother. Madhu says, "whatever the reason, however successfully she has managed to turn her back on her past and her child, I have to wonder: what happens to her in the dark hours of the night? What happens when she wakes up in the middle of the night, that terrible time when you hear voices of your dead, when they come back to torment you with the wrongs you did them and confront you with your guilt, what happens to Bai then? Does she not face the stark truth at that time, the truth that confronts me every moment of my life – the futility of life without children?" (154).

In writing Bai's biography Madhu also writes the biography of Leela. There is similarity between Bai and Leela the way they rebelled against the traditions to achieve their goal. Both were aware of the gender discrimination but they overruled it and now Madhu doesn't like to surrender that too. "... 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" (224). It was not easy for them and they were aware "how much longer it takes for a woman to reach the top, how difficult it is for her to break through the barriers to get these" (224). At last Madhu is reconciled when she says, "How could I have ever longed for amnesia? Memory, capricious and unreliable though it is, ultimately carries its own truth within it. As long there is memory, there is always the possibility of retrieval, as long as there is memory, the loss is never total." (324).

Self-realization is the main theme of Shashi Deshpande's novels, which help her protagonists in discovering their identity. Rita Felski, elaborating on the narrative of female self-discovery, foregrounds that it is by itself an ideological site. "An active process of meaning production" and that since feminist ideology is "plural and heterogeneous", the narratives of female self-discovery are significantly different in their deliberations, reflections and emphases (126). Felski makes a broad division of self – discovery narratives into two distinct groups. In the first kind of narrative which is often linear in structure, female self-discovery and emancipation is depicted as a process of moving outward into the public realm of social engagement and activity, however problematic and fraught with difficulties this proves to be...The second depicts self-discovery as a process of awakening to an already given mythic identity on inner self and frequently occurs in nature or in a generalized symbolic realm from which the contingent social world has been excluded.

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). They went on with the dying desire towards their achievements facing the hardships while life threw upon them. They never looked back as they knew “that what we call truth has nothing to do with the truth that emerges through words”. (255). Madhu arrives at the conclusion that life has to move on whatever changes occur in the lives of people. She realizes this when she witnesses an *upanayanam* ceremony in the Bhavani Temple. The death of the father had not stopped the *upanayanam* of the boy and his mother is silenced with pain and grief. Madhu observes: "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). Shashi Deshpande observes that family is certainly “not a divine, sacred institution, but one created by humans for the benefit of all society; and therefore, it should be built, not on the sacrifice of some but on the cooperation and compromises of all its members.” (Margins 84). Shashi Deshpande in an interview with June Gaur, on Family says that family “is a timeless and universal institution, everything begins here, everything that happens outside the family mirrors what happens within it. I have always been fascinated by human relationships: the locale within which the relationships are looked at is immaterial.” (91).

As Deshpande has said in *A Matter of Time* “Life must be lived forwards, but it can only be understood backwards”(98). Madhu in remembering and retelling the story of Bai and Leela is bringing back her past to the present and acquiring knowledge to lead her future peacefully.

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