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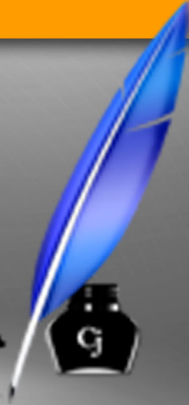
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Small Remedies: Roads to Recovery**Shaheena Akhtar**Deptt. of English,
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Abstract: Woman and woman's life has been the main domain of Indian women novelists wherein they tried to represent woman *the way she is* in the present scenario. The same representations are put forth by the novelist, Shashi Deshpande whose views came to the limelight in 1980's. Although her canvas stretches over the basic concerns and the issues of women in traditional, modern or rather at the brink of leaving traditionalist and accepting modernist approaches to life and various others forms. Right from *Roots and Shadows* till recently published novel *Ships That Pass*, she is truly a womanly writer talking about the feminine self always at the crossroads of stifling situations whatever the reason are. Indu, Jaya, Madhu or recently Tara all represents the typical Indian woman of today or yesterday fighting hard with their bondages and regain their positions.

Small Remedies, presents one such fight wherein the woman protagonist tries to attain her semblance with the twin loss of herself and her son.

Keywords: loss , suffering of woman , deception, lies, song , mangal sutra, dream, acceptance

Small Remedies (2000), is Shashi Deshpande's most confident novel, bringing the major themes of her previous novels to perfection. It is a novel with complex layers and diverse narratives; a work quite unlike her previous domestic stories, giving insight into the public arena of political activities. It is a kind of makeover on the earlier themes dealt in *The Binding Vine* etc. as to where do women stand in the political space? Where are feminist/female motives effectively presented and realized? No doubt, *The Binding Vine* had already made an effort to venture into this space, but not seriously enough. Interestingly, such issues are taken up more insistently in *Small Remedies*. Reviewing her works, Deshpande sees a shift and perfection of tone in *Small Remedies* which had already set in particularly after the novel *A Matter of Time* (1996):

The way I see my own work is that with *That Long Silence* I came to the end of one stage, *The Binding Vine* was a kind of trying to move on to another part. And with *A Matter of Time* I move with greater certainty into a new area: I was trying to get a wider perspective, more outwardness and less introspection.

(2000)

No doubt, *Small Remedies* is a novel of love and loss and of human bonding, a theme that she fully examines. In this novel, an attempt is made to find remedies to the problems of life big or small – the hurdles that restrict happiness in one's life. The novel is a sensitive portrayal of a woman's quest for identity in a patriarchal world and a confrontation with one's own self. While exploring an individual and universal female psyche under continuous torture on one pretext or the other, the novelist seems to have improved and developed her writing skills to perfection. It is for the first time that she has broadened the canvas of her novel to encompass a cross-section of people who belong to different communities. Meenakshi Mukherjee observes a noticeable change:

In *Small Remedies*, Deshpande is attempting much more than she did in her earlier novels – all of them different from each other – but smaller than this in scope. Her first novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1997) delved clinically into the pathology of a marriage where the woman was professionally more successful than the man. It was also a startling narrative experience that came to grips with guilt and sadism. *The Binding Vine* dealt with social issues that go beyond the middle class. *A Matter of Time* tackled history and memory, both of a community and a family foregrounding an inexplicable act-*vairagaya*. But none of them gathered up, as this new novel does, in one large sweep, the plurality, diversity and contradictions of our contemporary culture where an Anthony Gonsolves(the reference to 'Amar Akbar Anthony' is deliberate), a Hamidbai and a Joe can all be part of Madhu's family...

(2000)

No doubt, Shashi Deshpande portrays the average middle class women with their deeply felt experiences who are unable to explain life's little ironies - which ultimately make their existence unbearable for them. Somehow these women patch up their conflicting selves, paving the way for a new dawn to usher in their lives.

The same kind of characterisation is portrayed in *Small Remedies* where the story of Savitri Bai and Leela is presented by the protagonist-writer Madhu who has lost her eighteen year old son Aditya in the post- Babri Masjid bomb blasts throwing both Madhu and her husband Som off their emotional balance. The novel talks about loss – loss in every one's life e.g. Savitri Bai's loss of a happy married life for the sake of fame in the music world, Leela's loss of love and care of her family for the sake of freedom and the assertion of her own self, Munni's loss of motherly love for the sake of a traditional role assigned to women that has been already denounced by her mother Savitri Bai, Hasina's loss of freedom for the sake of achieving the position that her grandfather could not achieve. Deshpande herself asserts:

My novels are about women, they are about women artists ... they are not only about the marital estrangement but also about love, loss.

Small Remedies is 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.

(Deshpande, quoted by Nabar.)

Thus, the novel deals with various dimensions of life - love, loss, truth, suffering, silence, surrender, compromise etc.

The uniqueness of Deshpande is that she presents her women characters on the road to recovery – healing their wounds in one way or the other, paving the way for a re-appraisal of life and in the process the various simulations adopted by them to hide or to make apparent their real selves. A woman’s journey of self-discovery through the convergence of time – past and present - is well explored in *Small Remedies*. As Madhu shuttles between the past, present and even through the future, she tries to comprehend the nuances of time. Delving deep into the world of reminiscence, Madhu realizes that there are some memories she wants to preserve for they reflect her mental make-up, while there are others that better be cast away completely. Although the novel begins with the sentence, “This is Som’s story”, (*Small Remedies*. 2000:1. All the subsequent references are from the same edition and will be quoted as SR) it is in reality the story of Madhu’s journey in life. During this journey, Madhu comes across certain astonishing characters who suffer because of the odds in their lives – the rebels of their times. Bai, the subject of the narrator’s writing project, is a professional musician and Leela, the narrator’s surrogate mother, is a political activist and trade-union leader. Both of them have a dream – a dream pursued despite social deterrents. The assertion of this dream is voiced by Hasina, Bai’s student when she sings at Guruji’s anniversary:

‘I saw a dream, I saw a dream’, she sings, affirming the vision over and over again. ...It seems to me that it’s not the dead poet’s dream alone that Hasina is singing of, but her own as well, the dream for which she has given up so much, including, she hinted once, a marriage. She’s speaking of my dreams too, so many of them, all woven about Adit. And Som’s dreams for his son.

(SR: 319)

But these dreams are fulfilled at a certain price. Bai’s acquisition of a dream (a room of her own) is gained at the expense of traditional motherhood, yet she does not appear to suffer from the loss of that self to the degree that Madhu expects. The room gained, both real and symbolic, is the room in which she lived in isolation and some degree of adversity as a young student – a room far away from her family and from the home of her teacher. ‘It is the room of great poverty and a room of great richness’ (SR: 38) – a room where she grows to the fullest: ‘life was simple. Just one room to live in, nothing to think of or worry about except my class with Guruji’. (SR: 133) However, Madhu sees not a life lived out to the fullest extent of its

dream, but the version of a life ‘in denial’ (SR: 77) – denial, that is, of losses suffered – unnecessary husband, child and lover, in return for a scintillating, deceptive life but the public stage and personal accomplishment of Bai’s life is far from the ideal life which she really desires.

Bai’s revolt against her marriage is not because of marital problems but because of her dream to be a renowned singer, which could not be fulfilled while she remained the daughter of an affluent Brahmin family. She ultimately rejects her husband for Ghulaam Saab. Ghulaam Saab, who recognizes her talent and encourages her, ultimately becomes a means for Savitri Bai to realize her dreams. As Madhu later on recalls, their relationship was never one of equals. Ghulaam Saab always acquired a secondary position in events and the house. Madhu recalls, ‘I have seen the two of them together, she always the focus of attention’. (SR: 176) Her interests dominated their life and he devoted his best years to help the woman he held so dear. In the words of Hasina, Ghulaam Saab’s granddaughter:

Ghulaam Saab was the one who made Bai known. He met people on her behalf, he arranged her programs, he made the contacts for her; it was not easy for a woman to do these things then: it’s not easy even now, Hasina adds after a pause. Without Ghulaam Saab, Bai would never been able to manage this part of her professional life.

(SR: 274)

Ghulaam Saab’s sacrifice of his own ambition for the sake of Bai’s success speaks of his care and love for her. But later on, Savitri Bai feels complacent in abandoning this part of her lived life completely as if it didn’t exist. The same thing that she does with her own daughter, Munni, who has also been discarded by Savitri Bai in her gradual climb to ‘respectability’. This girl is a vivid and stunning presence in the novel as Madhu embark on her search and wants Bai to talk about her, which she never does.

As a confidant, Munni once had a brief but strange spell on the child Madhu and led her into adult secrets. Munni (calling herself Meenakshi) a twelve year old girl could enact Hindi film songs, dances, fabricate extended versions of stories about herself and do things forbidden to other children. Looking back, Madhu recollects and sees Munni’s fabricated lies as an attempt to create a life story according to her own dreams as Savitri Bai does in the present. Bai’s total ignorance of Ghulaam Saab’s contribution to her success when she talks to Madhu and her consistent avoidance of Munni shows her desire to attain the kind of ‘respectability’ that she once renounced. Her denial of his help and his love during the rough times of her life makes Madhu feel:

And yet there’s the other Bai I see as well, a calculating, ambitious woman, using the man for her own ends, abandoning him finally when her need for him is over. Was this how it was? True, Bai is a worldly woman, but when she sings, she transcends her own worldliness. Why not then in love as well?

(SR: 176)

Meenakshi Mukherjee notices:

It is trying to unravel the mystery of who the real Savitribai Indorekar is – is she just the brave Brahmin woman who dared to leave her traditional home and go after her dreams, is she the unfortunate mother who rejected her own daughter and was rejected by the same – then Madhu understands that truth is beyond the words by which one tries to portray it.

(2000)

Thus, Bai after achieving success tries hard to regain her lost respectability which only marriage could provide her in a tradition-bound society. As Madhu notices, after Ghulaam Saab and Munni's disappearance from her life, Bai once again adorns herself with 'mangal sutra', (SR: 167) the symbol of marriage and respectability for a woman:

But Bai is unaware of this. She clings fiercely 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 mangal sutra of the married woman, instead of the pearls she had worn until then. A respectably married woman. Both Ghulaam Saab, her lover, and Munni, her daughter, no longer part of her life.

(SR: 167)

However, Savitri Bai's daughter Munni always wanted to grab the name, her mother had left behind. She also severed herself from them as she refused to accept Ghulaam Saab as her father and invented a story about her father who is a lawyer and lives in Pune. She always wanted to seek the 'approval' of society. Munni wanted to live in the society within the codes of conduct which were always denounced by her mother. Malti Mathur, a reviewer writes:

At the other end of the spectrum is Munni, Savitri Bai'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 bars that society levels against those who dare to be different.

(2000)

Actually, she wants to live the life abandoned by Savitri Bai:

But Munni hankered for the name her mother had left behind, she yearned for the conventional life Bai had found so stultifying.

(SR: 169)

She is successful, like her mother, in realizing her dream of becoming a perfect housewife which is evident when Madhu says:

But Munni closed herself against her mother, against everything she was or stood for, and chose an ordinary life. I think of the girl I knew... And then Shailaja Joshi, the woman I met on the bus – another name, another person altogether. The result of Munni beating herself into shape with a savage determination, like dough being pounded into soft pliability, capable finally of taking any shape.

(SR: 225)

Thus, Munni's first and last craving is to achieve everything traditional which her mother has abandoned for her dream-success. No doubt, these acts of Savitri Bai and Munni show that after attaining success they try hard to achieve their lost 'respectability' which only marriage could provide in a traditional society. Urvashi Sinha and Gur Pyari Jindial draw attention to these women in Shashi Deshpande's novels who do not outrightly reject marriage:

Her novels based on submission and suffering of women does not necessarily end with the rejection of family values and marriage. Her bold and balanced heroines often face the challenges of life confidently. Mostly they return to their husbands with the realization that self-assertion and conformity to one's given role are not necessarily contradictory.

(2004:171)

Even though Savitri Bai initially flouts her marriage for her dream life, the same glittering life is abandoned by Munni for an ordinary married life. Thus, suggesting that women can never achieve a true sense of self by revolting against marriage. As it is a general belief, 'A woman who had left her husband's home – what morals would she have, anyway?' (SR: 223) but men like Ghulaam Saab after spending his whole life with another woman and fathering a child out of the nuptial knot can easily return to their family and deserted wives. And the wives of such men are often left with no choices but to accept their tattered lot.

However, the same kind of acceptance or understanding is not found among men which is evident from Som's reaction of not accepting Madhu the way she wants him to. Madhu innocently narrates the nightmarish experience of her life at the age of fifteen, 'He was a sculptor or something like that... he died young, he committed suicide, he hanged himself.' (SR: 269) and then she says, 'our lives changed in that moment'. (SR: 236) Although Madhu wants to share this experience with Som many times but she cannot because she herself asserts:

I did not speak of this incident to him, not because I wanted to conceal it from him, but because I had lost it, I had misplaced it in the chaos of my life after my father's death. Memory denied it, put it away.

(SR: 269)

Madhu expects her husband to be a friend, to understand and share the truth of her life. But, as Chandru (Madhu and Som's friend) says: '...men and women can never be friends. Men can be brothers, fathers, lovers, husbands but never friends'. (SR: 254) Thus the emotional bond, the trust between the two goes. Som, though an intelligent man is guided by society and questions Madhu's chastity, her composure. He questions her:

'Tell me the truth'. Som says, over and over again. He dismisses the truth of our life together, of our love, our friendship, our life as parents of a beloved son. What he wants is something separate and distinct from the things,... To him the part is the whole.

(SR: 255)

And then the lovers became strangers glaring silence at each other:

Som and I locked in a silent, fearful struggle that exhausts us. We are like two travelers embarked on a terrible journey rocketing at a dangerous speed, on the verge of going out of control, yet unable to stop, unable to help ourselves.

(SR: 258)

It is in one such terrible scene between them when Som punishes her (or punishes himself), their son Adit walks into the room trying to understand what was happening between his parents. On being told, 'Go away, Adit', (SR: 298) he leaves never to return. It is the time when Bombay is rocked with communal violence and Adit is blown to smithereens in a bomb blast. This gruesome incident throws Madhu into an emotional vacuum, who is shattered by her loss. The uncertainty of where her son is, waiting for him through the violence-ridden days, her search for him on the crowded streets of the city even when Som tries to tell her that Adit is dead, and her final acceptance of the inevitable truth are some heart-rending descriptions. It is this incident which leads her to write the biography of Savitri Bai. The loss is so great that she blames herself:

Adit's death need not have happened... *he would have died anyway?*
If guilt disappears, grief still remains. And the pain of being alive, of living the rest of my life without my son . . . of living on when he is dead. Hopelessness, childlessness, emptiness – none of these change their colours because guilt has gone.

(SR: 113)

And this problem is further accentuated by Madhu's zealous motherhood. She herself claims:

I remember everything. That is my problem. I remember everything. I have forgotten nothing. I remember, above all, my delusion about motherhood: a small centre, a vast exclusion – I thought this was love.

(SR: 144)

And as there is no regeneration in the brain, at another instance she says:

Hostility, suspicion and anger, which have become a part of my life at home with Som, are waiting for me when I go out of the house as well. There's a miasma, the smell of disaster in the air, but we are still free of it, still immune to it. Or so we think.

(SR: 299)

Again, she recollects what their (Som's and Madhu's) friends say after their son's death:

You cross a threshold and enter a religion of utter hopelessness. I've got into it, I'm trapped in it. I can't get out. I try, but it's impossible. How can I live like this? How long will I live this way? And what for, oh God, what for?

(SR: 306)

Again she recollects her friends telling her, "Cry for him, mourn him, but don't wait for him." (SR: 303) And the problem arises between the couple when they mourn the death of their son individually as Madhu recollects:

If Som hears me sobbing, he doesn't come to me, he leaves me alone, like I left him to himself when I heard him sobbing the first night after Adit's death. I face the grief of our son's death alone as he did.

(SR: 305)

Slowly she discovers her own condition:

There are neither dreams nor demons now, nevertheless, I wake up battered and bruised ... a thin new skin is ripped off again; the blood flows and the wound gapes red and angry once more...

(SR: 47)

Little by little and gradually, Madhu wants to forget these memories and everything related to her confined motherly world. She herself asserts:

Why I am thinking of these things? I have come here to forget, to get away from memories, to distance myself from Som, the one person who can connect me to those terrible days, to the horror of our son's death. Here, I'm safe. With Hari and Lata, I'm Madhu, I'm Kaku; in Bai's house, I'm the woman who's going to write a book on Savitri bai Indorekar. Nowhere am I *Aditya-chi-Aai*, Aditya's mother, the identity I've had, the identity I've drowned myself in for nearly eighteen years.

I long sometimes for tabula rasa of amnesia. Everything wiped out. A slate of virginal blankness. Starting like a baby, with nothing ... But this is not possible.

(SR: 153)

However, due to her efforts to search for her real self – she comes to redress her wounds and approach life afresh. She herself asserts, somehow one has to live life:

But when all is gone, there's still life itself, life pursuing its own ends of survival, of growth. Ultimately it's the body that dictates to us, coercing us into its purposes of living and growing; Survival is all, survival is what matters above everything.

(SR: 201)

Madhu concludes that this is the best way for women to survive: to conceal their grief and live as if it were a miracle of miracles. She tries to compromise with the untimely death of her son Aditya for death is as certain as birth in the cycle of human existence. There may not be complete and big remedies to bring a woman out of her claustrophobic existence, yet “small remedies” do exist and one has only to look for them. She tries to submerge her sorrows in Hasina's melodious voice as she sings a ‘vachana by Akka Mahadevi’, (SR: 309) a saint-poet of Karnataka or the warm hug given by Tony or even the whiff of hot oil and curry leaves frying in it or the churn of mustard seeds as the pangs of hunger grasp one. Memories come to the help of Madhu for she says hopefully:

As long as there is memory, there's always the possibility of retrieval, as long as there is memory, loss is never total.

(SR: 324)

which is quite contradictory to her utter hopelessness when she hopes for ‘collective amnesia’ (SR: 106) and introspects:

The truth is, we want to forget. Which is why we have cultivated a vast collective amnesia. In our individual lives too. We remember the wrongs done to us, but we forget our sins, we dye them with the colour of innocence, of good intentions. To remember is to make living impossible. And therefore it is that Som and I prefer to be apart...

(SR: 107)

Madhu is conscious that she herself has to find a means out of the morass as no one else can assist her. She realizes that her miseries are caused by misconceptions about life as well as by fuzzy egocentric perspectives and concludes that the authority to emerge out of these fabrications lie within her. Madhu's wound starts healing finally when she confronts her own self and says:

After all these days, after so many months, suddenly it's time for me to confront the chaos, to make sense of it, to speak of it, to convert the fractured images, the vague shapes and sounds into a coherent word pattern. Certain images still escape me; they whirl around in dark, chaotic maelstrom.

(SR: 298)

With time, she begins to recover the forbidding loss of life and also begins to accept it. Rashmi Gaur notices:

One should be open and receptive to life. Her constant anxiety is replaced by appreciative confidence and a desire to reassess her life in the context of its different relationships. Madhu's attempt to write the biography of the vocalist Savitri Bai Indorker proves to be an internal voyage resulting in her glorious surrender before the force of truth.

(2003:83)

Hence, Madhu's narration of her own life and the lives with which she is closely and tangentially related, reveals a painful progress towards self-confrontation. Her wounds start healing when she meets a young boy's family for an upanayanam ceremony at Bhavanipur temple and later she listens all night to a musical performance by Hasina. On being asked by the mother to bless the young boy, Madhu ponders:

What do I say? *Ayushman bhava? Chirayu bhava?*

May you live long? But what blessing can contend against our mortality? Mustard seeds to protect us from evil, blessing to confer long life – nothing works. And yet we go on. Simple remedies? No,

they're desperate remedies and we go on with them because, in truth, there is nothing else.

Sukhi bhava... 'Be happy.' That's possible, that's something we can hope to have some control over.

(SR: 315)

This recovery is accentuated when Hasina, a muslim student of Bai sings bhajans that Bai herself never sang, in a way curing the wounds of Madhu as mother and the wounds of those people who had their near and dear ones killed in the bomb explosion. Amrita Bhalla comments:

The ending is appropriate, coming as it does after opposition to Muslim singing and an account of the hindu-muslim riots and the bomb explosion that killed both Aditya, Madhu's son and Munni, Bai's daughter.

(2006:85)

The recovery is further quickened, when returning home after the concert Madhu receives a letter from Som. This time Som bids, 'come home, we need to be together at this time'. (SR: 323) Thus, Madhu agrees that life actually demands from both of them to recreate their son, to invoke his presence and make this real.

Meenakshi Mukherjee observes:

It is only in these details, in these meditative moments which heal, that *Small Remedies* carries the unmistakable stamp of being the work of Shashi Deshpande, like Indu in *Roots And Shadows*, Jaya in *That Long Silence* and Saru in *The Dark Hold No Terrors*, Madhu also leaves the home in which she has lived since marriage and tries to solve the problems on her own. Similar to the earlier novels *Roots and Shadows* and *The Dark Hold No Terrors* here also it is death that draws the final stroke that reveals the vulnerability of human existence and sets Madhu on the search for answers to her eternal questions.

(2000)

Again she comments on the steady resurgence of Madhu as:

The first step out of the familiar surroundings is also the step towards discovering one's true self, of recognizing the truth that sets the tune to one's existence. It is also the first step towards realizing that any healing process has to start within one's own self, that no keeping of Ganesha in niches, no meaning of clenched fists holding mustard seeds, no muttering of incantations can help to heal the wound, to ward off the evil.

(2000)

Anita Myles also draws our attention towards the same idea:

Madhu is aware of the fact that she herself has to find a way out of the mire as no one else can help her. While undergoing self-introspection Madhu realizes that all 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.

(2006:81)

Commenting on Madhu's awareness to move back to her family, Urvashi Sinha and Gur Pyari Jandial says,

The end shows them (women protagonists) as women, aware of the importance of family and marriage, at the same time, accepting their need to discover their 'self'.

(2004:171)

Thus, Shashi Deshpande's novel clearly brings the author's perception of the inequality between man-woman relationship and the position of woman in the middle class family of Indian society. The novelist clearly tries to correct this inequality while depicting the quest for self expression and identity in the emerging class of the new woman. No doubt, Madhu survives and rediscovers herself inspite of this inequality and the resultant loss of her son; Aditya. She, like other protagonists of Shashi Deshpande clings to her marriage and tried her best to bring a change in the social order. Towards the end, Madhu approaches her life afresh- with a new awareness. However, the numerous minor characters in the novel suffer in silence to accept their destinies without making any movement to gain their lost prestige and positions in their respective lives.

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