



A Transition from The Sentimental Vulnerability to Indomitable Spirit: A Review of Shashi Despande's *Small Remedies*

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Abstract

This paper is comprehensively reviewed how the focal characters Madhu, Savitri Bai and Leela are disintegrated from their normal social dogma and try for their small remedies to document their hidden talent rather than their emotional vulnerability. The author has projected them as rebellious who unbothered and transformed their miserable conditions and marginalization into celebrities as writer, singer and communist party leader respectively. They are the women of educated, talented, intelligent and courageous, besides the unbelievers of self sacrifice and conventional role models created by the society in the name of security or safe for the women. All of them come out of stereotypical bridles to prove and achieve their vision and fulfillment at the cost of sacrificing something. *Small Remedies* is the story of many educated and skilled women in India who marched out for their personal and professional empowerment.

Keywords: Transformation, empowerment, Sacrifice, Modernism, Conventional

Introduction

Shashi Despande is one of the prolific and versatile contemporary women authors in Indian Writing in English. Her intensive projection of realistic characters of middle class educated women is highly appreciative concept and need of the hour in India, still it is a democratic world in patriarchal society. Therefore her novels have an attraction for the practical women characters who have been confronting to adjust with the conventional family norms rather to exit from it. Her novels commonly revolve around the family malady, woman and man relationship, dilemmas and conflicts, gender discrimination etc. The *Small Remedies* focus about the urban middle class, sensitive, intelligent, educated women who are symbolized as redefined, reformative modern time individuals. Other notable women writers Kamala Markendaya, Nayantara Saghil, Kiran Desai, Aundhathi Roy too have contributed diverse aspects to shape the lives of Indian women, encourage the employment and empowerment of women, voice out to inner psyche of conventional women to fight against the patriarchal social set up. And Despande is one such feminist author of five short storey collections: *The Legacy* (1971), *It was the Dark* and *It was the Nightingale* (1986), *The Miracle and Intrusion and Other Stories* (1993), *The*

Stone Woman, her other remarkable works are *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980), *If I Die Today* (1982), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Binding Vine* (1993), and *Small Remedies* (2000).

Generally, the Indian myth and culture respects the women for their myriad roles as mothers, daughters and wives. But in action, majority of the men hesitate to accept and respect their feelings, accomplishments, commitments and treat them as subaltern. People preach the importance and valuable philosophy of life, women, morals etc, told in myth and even accept the concept of worshiping women as divine, rivers and more but unwilling to go along with the practical life. The so called orthodox family ignores the mistakes of that of such as having ill affair, drinking, smoking, remarrying, being polygamy and all but women of the family are restricted to even basic and essential rights. The core causes for their suppression are as quoted by Shakespeare in Act I, Scene II, "Frailty thy name is woman" (*Hamlet* 22).

Uniqueness of the paper

Generally, one could discern represent the problems and sufferings of the female persona in any works. But this research paper is the representation of the empowerment of female protagonist of *Small Remedies* who dismantle and conquered the old concept and prove as efficient to transform themselves as normal care taking women of family to social icons. Madhu is a motherless girl brought up in Neemgaon. She lives with her physician widower father who is addicted to tobacco "the smell of his cigarettes permeated my early life our house was always full of the fumes of tobacco" (173) but never fails in showing kindness and comforting her daughter with all her needs. In the novel she is introduced as a writer of Savitribai's biography, her memories from present to past reflects how was her childhood, married life and present position as a successful writer. At her young age, she resides near Savitri Bai's house and plays with her daughter Munni. Madhu wonders and compares her father with that of Bai's family who often does many religious rituals and performs pooja, but such holy activities are not arranged at her house. Her father the only companion has not been with her for many years, has died. After this inconsolable condition, she is under the care of her aunt Leela and Uncle Joe. Leela trains her to be confident, courageous and self reliant which is very well fascinated by Madhu. After having completed her undergraduate studies both her uncle and aunt offer their financial support to pursue her post graduate but she expresses her in curiosities as her father savings got subsided with her studies. Madhu further adds that she is interested to go for a job to get independent financial support.

The words of Madhu "But I have one good reason not to go on. My father's money has got over. I am determined, I will start working, I will earn my own money, become independent" (82-83) replicates her, self assurance, self reliance, self confidence and also training and encouragement of Leela. At the age of twenty, she establishes her individuality, stays in a rental house and got employed in City Views Magazine as a free lancer. Her decision also is another evident that she is not a sentimental dependence on men and other hegemony. The job is offered by Hamid Bhai, a friend of her uncle, with the job she enjoys the sense of independence and her friendship with Som who is introduced by her friend Tony, results in marriage. They are promoted parents with a boy child Adit, her motherhood days are also well spent and relished with her baby. Their happiness is shattered and devastated by the revelation of her past life to Som. The care, affection, and good understanding of one another intend to disclose her sexual assault by Dalvi, friend of her father. Her unexpected reaction of her husband transforms her to the realm of darkness where she has lost her peace of mind, self identity as mother and wife. Som constantly worries for the betrayal of Madhu and suspects her virginity and loyalty which cause for regular the argument, in the presence of Adit. Their continuous quarrel disturbs the young mind of their son who has come out the house to search for peace and happiness. As Shakespeare quoted in Act IV Scene V: "When sorrows come, they come not single spies but it battalions" (*Hamlet* 51), her ordeal continues with the death of Adit in bus bomb blast. It is incomparable loss but more intolerable punishment to her is the unarticulated violence of her husband Som. Then later she realizes that the reasons for such pain loss are because of the ego of male centric society. Madhu turns her grave life to prosperous and decides to sweep away all the memory with her Som and expresses her curiosity to write the biography of Savitri Bai, a classical singer.

Savitri introduces herself as the first and pampered child of her parents. She is the first grandchild to her grandparents. Her uncles, aunts, parents and grandparents make fuss out her and decorate her with ornaments. It

is her mother who imparts the beauty of music in her and has an inspiring and sweet voice. Further she adds that her mother teaches during the free time and once she is surprised with the verse from Ramraksha. Madhu's past memories reveal the elegant dressing sense, beauty and admiring unique accessories of Bai as she has observed from her childhood days. And her past thought discloses that Madhu is childhood friend of Munni daughter of Bai. But both Savitri and her daughter are unable to identify Madhu who also maintains her identity as writer. Her marriage with Sadashivarao orthodox Bramin subjugates all her desires for the sake of maintaining conventions.

Pune is a larger well established place for schools, colleges and even universities and also famous for the reformist movement. Her father-in-law unlike her father is liberal, believes in girls' education and encourages all the young girls at home to go to school despite much muttered criticism by the woman themselves. She could not retain her pretence for the conventional domestic responsibility as cook, wife or mother and so on and takes a bold step and writes a requesting letter to her father-in-law "pleading to be allowed to learn music. She went to his room, a room she had never gone into, her legs trembling, her heart palpitating and left the note on his table" (218). He permits her to attend the class with Pandit Kashinath Buwa who is far away from her house. She travels by train to reach the Guruji's house and spends ten to twelve hours to practice. Being a married woman who has sheltered life of the daughter in law of an affluent Bramin family is challenge to live in a Hindi or Kannada speaking environment. But she has learnt the language by her endless practice with lots of mistakes.

It is a scornful remarks that Bai's father in-law has a mistress, a famous thumri singer. It is a open known fact to every woman of the family. They all have made gossip and gogles about it but none of them has the courage to question about his ill affair with another woman of unorthodox. They never see the thumri singer and sometimes their curiosity instincts to know whether she is good looking, plump, short, tall, fair, middling fair etc through their servant. The society never questions the behaviour, misdeeds of the men who may also like her father-in-law indulge in music or any other time pass, keeps a mistress etc, but women are restricted even to think of such those desires. Her relationship with a tapla Muslim player has become talk of everyone and treats it as a social taboos and crime.

Ghulam Saab, the Muslim Tabla player and the only man in Guruji's music concerts, has a pivotal role in shaping the profession of Bai. After coming to the world of music, she expresses her happiness and liberty as "Bai entered another world far removed from the world of food, cooking, festivals, rituals, pregnancy, children that she had to inhabit as daughter-in-law of the house" (219). He has immensely contributed for arranging programs, contacting people and his motivations are reflected with professional accolades, reputation and identity. Munni, her daughter believes that Bai has lover as her friends point out a man as her mama. Bai refuses the charge against of her but to the town people doubt it "Why would he visit her so often?, why else would a man go out of his way to give her so many programmes? (223). Thus Bai is damned to others as she is one of those women. But Bai with her determined vision of her future neglects all such ill fated comments and humiliation. Her professional commitment and dedication lead to step across the threshold and come out of the patriarchal society and searches for her future vision. The pinnacle of her success is seen through photographs, pictures, awards with stalwarts like prime ministers, singers, dancers and writers. It is important to note that the relationship of Bai and Ghulam is not the story of love alone but more than his support for desire "I have seen this kind of thing too often not to know that their smiles are not the shared feelings of lovers, but a moment of rapport between a singer and accompanist" (175).

There is a similarity between Madhu and Bai, both have broken up the sentimental relationship to achieve their goal. They have lost their identity as mothers and wives. Munni never recognises Bai as her mother and even does not like to maintain the name Munni and calls herself as Meenakshi. Madhu has an intensive question about Munni during the interview but Bai neglects her question blindly. Munni constructs an image of her father as cruel and hates his presence in the life of Bai. "He's not my father, My father is in Pune. He is not here" (32). Munni desires for the respectability so she avoids anything associated with her mother: music, genius, ambition and freedom. But at the end of her life, the revelation towards her mother is disclosed, as Shailaja Joshi, mentioned as the only daughter of Savitribai Indorekar who has reached the pinnacle of her profession and becomes one among the great toppers.

Leela is well known as guardian, protector and motherly care taker of Madhu. She helps out of the inconsolable emptiness of her father's death. She is married to Vasant at the young age of her studies. She is one among the six daughters who are all pair of each other. It is irony to note that the daughters are named as rivers Sindhu alias of Leela, Narmada, Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Kaveri. Narmada is the mother of Madhu who is totally unaware of her family background. Leela and Narmada are the rebels of the family and threatened for their disobedient and troublesome behaviour. Her grandmother intends to spoil the future of Leela and selects the life partner from poor status background. Everyone is surprised, wondered and suspected why did not they find a better groom for her?. But Vasant and her two brother-in-laws give her education, freedom and happiness. When Vasant dies, she is frightened of her widowhood but never be aloof and helps her two in-laws to earn a living for all of them, till they complete their education. Her father has called her back home but her unwillingness to go with him causes her reasonable and comfortable life.

Her journey towards the self discovery is similar to that of Bai, both have become the public figures for their different aims. Unlike the other estranged widow domain, Leela has divergent thinking and effort to establish her emancipation. Her bold decision to come out of the clutches of marriage tradition and remarriage with a Christian man Joe has received contemptuous remarks from her own family members and also from the society. Her own family members call her "The black sheep of the family. A widow who remarried. And, what was worse, infinitely worse, married a Christian man" (45). They forget her activities, achievements, her years of teaching, her role in the trade union. She heads the communist party; her economic independence strengthens her will power to support the mill and railway workers and extends her hand for the tuber closes patient. She is extremely portrayed as unconventional and has faithless in the biased norms established for the women.

Conclusion

Shashi Despande has effectively violated the concept of Simon DeBeauvoir's " women as other who would never be the equals to men". Their life is carefully interpreted the loss and gain between the professional singer, writer, leader, mothers and wives. At the end of the story, they are realised by the family members and call them back to the normal life, Sam calls Madhu to perform annual rituals " Come home. We need to be together at this time" (323), Leela has been invite by her mother, she visits her mother but has not been with her, it proves her determination even at her old age. Bai is understood by her daughter atleast, when Munni died in a bus blast her corpse is identified as the only daughter of Bai. Through the characters, Shashi has portrayed the indomitable spirit of the modern women who have taken effort to establish themselves as equal to the opposite gender and efficiently discern alternatives for their happiness and identity. But it is also important to note their route through which they pass their journey of self discovery. Their intention of crossing the limit is not to violate the culture and tradition, not to choose the carefree luxurious life, not to neglect the family responsibility as mothers, wives, in- laws etc but for ascertaining their professional ability and talent.

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