

A Study of Shashi Deshpanday Self Restoration as Time Heals



Vinita Tanwar

Research Scholar, Dept. of English
Singhania University, Pachari Bari, Jhunjhunu (Raj.)

Dr. Uma Shankar Yadav

Research Supervisor
Vice-Chancellor, Singhania University, Pachari Bari, Jhunjhunu (Raj.)

India by the end of the Second World War was divided by all kinds of laws, caste and creed. There were social and psychological problems that were affecting women in the male dominated societies. There were also all kinds of myths about the female inferiority that summarized the collective historical perceptions of men about women.

The 20th century has witnessed women's experience explode as a critical form. Studies have been actively engaged with disrupting and denouncing practices that have trivialized and marginalized women. They sought to broaden interpretations and formulations so as to include all kinds of experience. Writers examined the nature of political oppression with an aim to dismantle social constructs that have ignored women's experience.

Until the nineteenth century the experiences of women were not considered important. Women were invisible and even if their experience was understood as different, it was unimportant and inconsequential. However, the emerging consciousness among women, that their experience was different, propelled them to actively engage in sensitizing women's experience over the years.

Their experience has become a critical force to contend with. Writers sought to throw light on the problems of women to bring awareness. Thus,

transgressive writing at subverting the established canons came into existence.

Right from the Vedic age women were objects of subjugation and suppression. Men suppressed women. In "*Manu Smriti*" the rules of social behaviour for women is stated clearly. According to the Laws of Manu it is learnt that women are dependent on men throughout their lives. The general perspectives about woman as a shadow-figure to a male caretaker be he a father, a husband or a son, continue to persist. Man's affinity with woman is not often the bond that exists between a master and a slave. It was believed that women should be kept in subordination to the male members of the family and should not have independence. Men dominate and domineer over women. They failed to understand the fact that both men and women are essential parts of creation. Thus woman is never considered an autonomous self, but as just incidental. This state calls for a concerted effort to demolish such notions and assert the dignity and equality of women in the family as well as in the wider social life.

Plato observes in his Republic that the only difference between man and woman is one of physical function. One begets and the other bears children. To quote Alfred Tennyson's The

Princess: "Man for the field and woman for the hearth; Man for the sword and women for the needle; man with the head, and woman with the heart; Man to command, and woman to obey; All else is confusion". (6)

In the late 60s women's writings gained prominence because the writers took it up as their bounden duty to discover their women's self entrapment in the patriarchal society. The urge to discover one's self and its relation to the world have become the important thrusts of these novelists. Most of them observed that culture and society is male centered be it familial, religious, political or social and economic fields. These writers began to articulate their observations and experience which had so far remained hidden secrets. As Gilligan observes, "when the observer is a woman, the perspective may be of a different sort" Gilligan, 1982:5. At this point of time it is essential to quote Virginia Woolf:

"It is probable, however, that both in life and in art, the values of women are not the values of a man. Thus, when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values- to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important." (75-81)

It would be unfair to refute the difference in gender which permits them to adopt different temperament and characteristic features.

Today woman's quest for identity and recognition and her struggle to assert her identity in an ancient tradition bound society and community has become the most important global phenomenon. Many women's liberation movements and organizations have come into existence. These movements expressed concern

for women and strong protest against the patriarchal society. They created awareness about the need for defining the roles of women in the society. This woman consciousness brought about a radical change in man-woman relationship and resulted in the new image and new concept of woman which moved towards the direction of emancipation. By doing so they do not refuse womanhood. Instead they try to redefine womanhood by rejecting patriarchal order. This paved way for the emergence of women writers.

Shashi Deshpande emphasizes that her novels centre around family relationship, and everyone has to live within those relationships.

"A human relationship is what a writer is involved with person to person and person to society. These are the two primary concerns of a creative writer and me the former is of immense importance, my preoccupation is with interpersonal." (252)

She seems to agree with Pro. C.D. Narasimñaiah who says that "it is a theme on which epics after epics can be written relationships-and human emotions." Deshpande says:

"We know a lot about the physical and the organic world and the universe in general but we still know very little about human relationship. It is the most mystifying thing as far as I am concerned. I will continue to wonder about it, puzzle over it, and write about it. And still find it tremendously intriguing and fascinating. (251)

Aru or Arundhati eighteen year old daughter of Sumi is upset over the issue of her father Gopal walking out on the family. She is a rebel and rebels against her father she is a keen "observer" of the events affecting the entire family. She could be said to be the most sensitive character

and reaches out to help others who are in similar predicament. Unlike Sumi and Kalyani she could not remain silent towards her father. She approaches him not expecting sympathy for her mother or for the family but wants to bring to light the reason for her father's irresponsible behaviour. She wants to go ahead with "a purely impersonal search". Both of them are restrained and unimpassioned. Deshpande writes:

She does not ask him any questions, she tells him-how it has been for them, the feeling of displacement, the questions and innuendoes they have to face, the sense of shame and disgrace. She speaks to him of Sumi, of the change in her, of Charu and her desperation, her feeling of having been let down. ... She calls him a callous father-it was Seema's birthday, you know that, you would have sent her a letter, she was waiting, we would all see that-a cruel husband, an unfeeling man. She questions Gopal. "why did you get married at all, why did you have children (AMT 62). Her searching questions makes Gopal reexamine his motive and reason for fleeing from the family.

Shripathi and Gopal create a tense atmosphere in the family. Gopal deserts the family and Shripathy isolates his wife from the family. The two families are troubled and the normal course of life is disturbed by the acts of these two men. The children, wives, women, mothers are the persons who bear the brunt when their life partners go back on their promises and violate the principles of the sacred institution of marriage. Paradoxically the society holds the women guilty and expects the wives to surrender and submit to men even when they have cast them out. Men are left free and no scathing remark is made about them or no one accuses

them daringly. According to Keerti Ramacliandra:

"A Matter of Time is about women and men. But it is also about renunciation, bonds and ties and about alienation. Introspective and concerned with understanding the varied responses of the characters to a given situation, the narrative is equally compelling, with the author drawing you into the lives of her characters completely. (21)

Gopal's departure from his family is viewed by Sumi as a blessing. All these while she had remained content to be a wife and mother, occasionally drawing insight into interpreting human conditions but mostly subordinating herself to the house hold chores, looking after to her husband's needs and bringing up her daughters. But now that she is on her own she decides in to enjoy her freedom, discover her potential for creativity, finds herself a job and above all to realize the purpose of her existence. Sumi accepts Gopal's decision to leave them placidly. Gopal leaves the domestic sphere because he cannot cope with life's commitments. He has an unexplained existential urge that tee leaves his happy family and renounces everything else behind in his quest for the self, like Gautama Buddha who abandons his family and home to find a solution to the emptiness and loneliness. His desertion is of quite different from Shripathis. Gopal speaks of past and present and the novelist has invested him with the qualities usually reserved for the female protagonists — the qualities of reflection and introspection. In fact the story begins and ends with Gopal.

Gopal's decision, to withdraw from responsibilities of the household, relinquish his role as a father and a husband because he is burdened with the fear of being unable to fulfill

his obligations as a husband and a father and an intense sense of loneliness and isolation from his family could only be termed as the coward's way out. Between Sumi and Gopal there is a basic incompatibility, a dissimilarity of temperaments. According to him it is his past. The insecure childhood, his knowledge of the ephemeral quality of happiness led him to renounce his family. He cuts off himself from all worldly pleasures and reduces his needs to bare minimum.

It is clear from Gopal's vague references to his past that his childhood had not been normal. It reveals that his father had married his brother's widow and the fact that he was born of that union proves disturbing for him particularly as an adolescent he draws several possible reasons for this marriage. The inner conflict within his mind makes him draw a parallel between himself and Hamlet's predicament:

Knowing nothing about him then, expect that he had married his brother's widow who became my mother; the possibilities had been innumerable and my adolescent mind had drawn various selves out of the protean being of the father I had imagined. So many of them:

A man who sinned against his brother by loving his wife. The brother dying of grief and the wife and the man marrying immediately after. A kind man moved by pity to marry his brother's widow, to make that brother's daughter his own. A Lakshman-like younger brother, keeping a promise made to his dying older brother to look after his young widow and child. (AMT 42)

It is evident from Gopal's ruminations about his parents' marriage as marriage of convenience, thinking of his father as his mother's guilty partner, that he and Sudha did not share the same father

leave a void in his life. Thus he had been for long nurturing a sense of loneliness. Gopal was struck by the truth that one is always alone he takes a philosophical stance and makes the observation that 'Marriage is not for everyone. The demand it makes-a life time of commitment-it is not possible for all of us' (69) He acknowledges that when he married Sumi he needed her womanhood, her warmth and her humanness (68). But soon after marriage he realized that it is only in losing one self in another human being, that men give up their dreams of freedom. The sacredness and values of marriage are totally lost on Gopal. For people like Premi and Devaki Gopal and Sumi were perfect model of lovers. But when the children grew up he dreams his failure as a husband and father. He considers responsibility as his enemy. He enjoys his married life but wants to be free of the bond of intimacy. He, by deserting the family ultimately severs the binding tie with his wife and children. Besides the responsibility of supporting the family especially the children and their education. But his fleeing from his family and his responsibilities does not bring him wisdom instead he is torn between opposing desires-relishing every moment of his life as a husband and father and dreadful feeling that he is a failure. Gopal's abandoning the family is not the result of worldly life, freeing himself from all bondages or renunciation due to contentment but withdrawal in pain and fear of being a failure.

In spite of all the hurdles and problems that Sumi faces she wanted to make life sweet, sublime and purposeful. She wanted to be independent in all respects earning a living for herself and her daughters, learning to ride a two wheeler, giving proper education to her children even moving out of her parents house, reviving her creative writing

and planning to rewrite the story of Surpanakha in the Ramayana expressing the progressive outlook of a new woman who wants to assert her individualism. Through the story of Surpanakha Sumi wants to give vent to her emotions she says: Female Sexuality, we're ashamed of owning it, we can't speak of it, not even to our own selves. But Supanakha was not. She spoke of her desires, she flaunted them. And therefore, were the men, unused to such woman, frightened? Did they feel threatened by her? I think so. Surpanakha, neither ugly nor hideous but a woman charged with Sexuality, not frightened of displaying it-it is this Surpanakha I'm going to write about. [AMT]

But women are judged on a different scale. Though Baiji was encouraged and supported by her father -in-law, she had to face the anger, derision, contempt, ridicule of all the women.

For Bai to develop a relationship with another man, a table player, a Muslim is unimaginable and it is a crime. Did anyone blame the father-in-law for this? As the head of the family, a position that was indisputable then, he was not accountable to anyone. Nevertheless, there must have been comments and criticism. Did he blame himself? For a man, a wealthy man and the head of the family, to indulge in his love of music even to have a singer as a mistress, was all right. But for a daughter in law to be learning music, and that seriously as if she was going to be a professional! Surely there was outrage; surely there was anger in the family. Rules could be modified for the daughters, sometimes they were, purely out of affections, but daughters-in-law carry the weight of the honour of the family its reputation its izzat (220). Thus it is obvious for any woman to swim against the usual tide is scandalous and unthinkable.

Deshpande writes:

To be set apart from your own kind, not to be able to conform, to flout the rules laid down, is to lay yourself open to cruelty. Animals know this, they do it more openly, and their cruelty towards the deviant is never concealed. But the subtle cruelty of persistent hostility leaves deeper wounds. There is always the temptation to succumb, to go back to the normal path and be accepted. To resist the temptation speaks of great courage. (221)

Thus Madhu is left confused and perturbed about Bai's courage or lack of it. She had the courage to lead the most unconventional life anyone in her society would ever imagine to do so. But behind such a courageous personality there was a woman who wanted to conform, to be accepted by society and tradition.

Bai's success does not make her a self-realized person. Even towards the end of her life, Bai struggles to find her identity by ignoring a great but important part of her life. She wants to successfully obliterate her relationship with Ghulam Saab, and her daughter Munni, born of Ghulam Saab, despite his contribution towards Bai's success. This maligned the character of Savitribai:

"A woman who'd left her husband's home- what morals would she have anyway! Bai was obviously damned by everyone. To the town she was one of 'those women' she speaks of now, women who were only doing what was expected of them. Professional singers were expected to accept a man's protection. So why not Bai? Women can never be free. Is that it? (SR. 223-224)

There was also a strong rumour that she had other lovers who too helped her in the success of her career. But she had to draw a line and erase the names of Ghulam Saad, Munni and some others connected with her journey to success and famed. She could attain her identity only through denial of

these things. Though her efforts point out to her achieved dreams yet she spends her life in struggle to gain the identity and the respectability she had lost. However to a biographer the real Bai remains elusive. Munni is alienated right from her childhood because of her parents unusual relationship. She strongly tries to detach herself from her original parentage by consorting a different story. She claims that her father is living in Pune, a famous lawyer earning a lot of money; and Ghulam Saab was only a tabla player for her mother. In fact her mother was Brahmin, a married woman who was living with a Muslim man made her misfit in the society. Munni starts living her life of illusion to convince the society that her life is separate from Bai and her lover. Munni strives to attain the life and identity of a respectable family which her mother had rejected. Denial made it possible for Savitribai to live with herself to gain her respectable identity. Savitri's ambition made her neglect her daughter; Munni was unloved and uncared for. She developed contempt for her mother. She detests everything about her, she had rejected everything associated with her-music, talent, genius ambition and freedom. She hated her mother's visitors, her performances. To her, her mother's life style meant disgrace. In her search for identity as a common middle-class woman named Shailaja Joshi, she successfully denied the old one, Munni daughter of Savitribai and Ghulam Saab. But her death neutralizes her life long struggle to attain an identity separated from her mother. Munni in spite of her determination faith to attain self-realization and in her death. She is identified as Savitribai's only daughter which she resisted all her life.

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. 'Shailaja Joshi- only daughter of Savitribai Indorekar.' The notice of her death- giving her back the identity she had resisted all her life. (SR 225)

In this novel Shashi Deshpande enters into the world of classical music. Madhu the narrator is writing the biography of the great doyenne of the Gwalior Gharana, Savitribai Indorekar. Deshpande seems to be on familiar ground in using they jargon and idiom of music effortlessly As Meenakshi Mukherjee opines:

Of the four remarkable novels I have read in recent times that deal with music-Vikram Seth's An Equal Music, Salman Rushdie's The Ground Beneath Her Feet, Bani Babu's Bangla Novel Gandharvi 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." (146) However, Somali Remedies is less about-music and more about the fascinating Vocalist, Savitribai Indrekar. Although, Savitribai appears to be physically a frail woman seemed petite yet she is imperious in her attitude. 'She had the tremendous grit and determination to revolt against the traditional norms and make a name for oneself in the field of classical music. Changed the derogatory words 'that singer woman' of Neemgaon Savitribai had led an unconventional life that no one in her society would imagine. Behind these acts of courage was Savitribai who wanted to be accepted by the society and granted an identity.

Music and creative writing are at the centre of the story as a small remedy for their problems they face Savitribai forgets herself in her music and Madhu

makes an attempt to drown her grief in creative writing. (In writing the biography) Madhu is trying to discover herself, constantly remembering her personal grief and sharing it with Savitribai's and asserts her solidarity with other suffering women.

Silence of generations of women cowed down by societal patriarchal norms is gradually being destroyed. Creative writing is a kind of breaking of silence. In *Small Remedies* the novelist once again explores the role silence plays in preserving the self from total loss. Similarly in *A Matter of Time*, though the three women Kalyani, Saru and Aru are victims of patriarchal dominance flimsy reclaim their identity and individuality ultimately when they break their silence. Sumi's controlled approach and her restrained resistance, Kalyani's strategy of defiance by her formidable impenetrable silence. Show that by and large women use silence as a powerful tool of resistance and protest but when it is broken it leads them to find their identity. Thus Sumi wants to make her life sweet and sublime even amidst various hurdles and problems. The portrayal of Sumi's character by the novelist show that Sumi wants to assert her individuality, in the male dominated society, no longer to be dependent but lead an independent and free life. This shows the modern concept of new woman who never compromise after losing her individuality.

It is clear that the protagonists of these two novels *A Matter of Time* and *Small Remedies* are women caught between tradition and modernity, who are conscious of their predicament. They are not exceptionally strong women who revolt against conventional morality. They are intensely aware of the need to articulate and find their identity. They no longer remain passive and silent. Silence acts as a barrier, and works as a powerful, potent tool of resistance. These are the desperate remedies -they

adopt. Jaya in *That Long Silence* admits at the end of the novel that it is not easy for a person to change, especially overnight. But it is possible to change over long periods of time. Thus Kalyani, Aru reposition their lives by regaining their identity. Kalyani feels empowered when in Shripathi's will is read out where in she is referred to as Vithalrao's and Manorama's daughter and not as his wife. As Usha Bande writes: it is as if the words have given her something more than the house, restored something she had lost; they seem, in fact, to have strengthened her (AMT 245). It is her identity, her individuality she finds ultimately.\

The heroines of *Small Remedies* Savitribai, Madhu, Leela and others may not assert yet they might appear to be rebels but they are strong women struggling to find their own way and own voice. Human beings have to find their own strength to stand firm and that strength lies within. These are the desperate remedies. It takes time to heal. It is this strength that sustains Savitribai, Madhu, Leela, through grief and pain, anguish and agony and help them to establish their identities.

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