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Research Article



## The Inevitable Hardship Journey of Women in Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies*

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### Abstract

This article explores the poignant depiction of the hardships faced by women in Shashi Deshpande's novel *Small Remedies*. Through an in-depth analysis of the characters, narrative, and plot, the researcher underscores how Deshpande skillfully exposes the societal structures

that lead to gender inequality in Indian society. Each individual in the world has experienced some form of hardship. There are wounds which cannot be mended or forgotten. Majority of a girl's life will be suffering, which will follow her around like a bad dream. When kids don't get the love they need, they feel worthless and a lot of them end up drifting away from their families and becoming rebellious adults. In order to get what they want out of life, they need to be directed, motivated and encouraged both by family and society. Women learn to approach the world more cautiously as a result of their painful experiences. They crave for their parents' attention and love while they are young. This study examines the impact of hardship and trauma on Savitribai and her daughter Munni in Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies*. The degree to which the pain disrupts one's life differs from person to person. The novelist consistently uses her characters to show the range of emotions that arise when living in a patriarchal society, including anguish, wrath, misery, disappointment and distress. Most of her protagonists are lonely introverts. This study emphasises the characters' disappointments and the childhood trauma that has left an indelible mark on their adulthood. This paper ultimately sheds light on Deshpande's narrative as a critique of patriarchal society, emphasizing the need for women's emancipation and self-determination. It offers readers an interpretative lens to understand the novel's thematic richness, its representation of gender dynamics in a traditional Indian context, and its call for reformative societal change.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Indelible mark, Wrath, Misery, Distress, Rebellious adults, Gender inequality, Female autonomy, Identity struggle, Patriarchal society

Age, gender, social class, skin, tone, racial background and sexual orientation are all irrelevant factors in trauma, because everyone can be subjected to a traumatic occurrence. It is evident that both men and women are susceptible to trauma, but it is a proven fact that psychological trauma and emotional trauma affect women more than men. The worst aspect, however, is that childhood trauma will have a long-lasting impact on the individual's entire life. This would appear as a scar and it frequently bothers them.

Shashi Deshpande is an Indian woman novelist who has written significant novels and short stories about various aspects of women's lives, especially the lives of middle-class women. She gives a glimpse into the life of a modern woman, who is smart, articulate and aware of what she is capable of, but is held back by male prejudice and discrimination. In most of her novels significant number of the protagonists went through difficult circumstances when they were children. This paper would investigate the dreadful experiences of Savitribai and her daughter Munni endured in their childhood as well as in adulthood. Those experiences have had an impact strong on them throughout their lives. According to Chandra Holm:

*Small Remedies (SR)* clearly bears the stamp of Shashi Deshpande's writing. In the manner typical to her writing the story is revealed through the inner consciousness of one central character, life around is focussed through the eyes of this character and understood through the mind of this one character. Not just in this aspect but also in

her special way of looking at details, love for imagery, in her deliberately slow manner of unveiling the plot that is full of sudden twists and turns, in her ability to look into the depths of human heart and give expression to the feelings buried in there, and in the very honesty with which her central character confronts her own life, in the importance given to dreams to unravel events, this is a Deshpande book. (*Commonwealth Fiction: Twenty-First Century Readings*, p. 261)

In Indian culture, mother is given a significant amount of responsibility for developing the skills and abilities of her children. Madhu has arrived Bhavanipur because she agreed to write the biography of Savitribai when Chandru offered her the opportunity to do so. When Savitribai was a young girl, her mother instilled in her an appreciation for the majesty of music by singing aarti songs, ceremonial songs, stotras and the Ram raksha. She would listen to her mother sing these songs. Her mother heard her daughter sing for the first time and her mother began giving her lessons in the afternoon without the use of instruments.

In general, children would be very eager to demonstrate their newly discovered ability in front of other people so that they might receive some admiration, which would encourage them with a source of energy. However, if anyone were to reject it, it would have a big impact. Majority of children will not be able to develop further after they are significantly traumatised during their early years. During one of the get-togethers with the extended family, Savitribai's mother invited her to sing a song. As a child, Savitribai started singing, but her grandmother forced her to stop. Her grandmother vehemently outbursts, "That's enough child. We don't need to hear anymore" (*SR*, p. 28). When a child is prevented from doing something, its response can sometimes leave it emotionally damaged and psychologically wounded. Vishwanath Bite declares, "From her childhood a woman is taught to suppress her wills, desires" (*Indian Writing in English: Speculations and Observations*, p. 81).

Majority of childhood suffering is brought to light by the denial of the child's desires. Many individuals will lack motivation and cease pursuing their goals, passions and ambitions, but psychological duress will persist. Very few people are able to reach their goals without sacrificing, struggling, feeling insulted or being harmed. Savitribai describes her difficult moments to Madhu. She acknowledges that her father-in-law's passion for music made her ambition a reality. In Indian culture, a man's childhood or adulthood objectives are expected to be pursued or attained without hindrance, even after marriage. However, the same does not apply to women, who are expected to stay at home to care for their families, perform household duties and nurture their children. If they wish to lead independent lives, contemporary women must do everything, including office work. To satisfy her husband's family, her own (parents') family, and her surroundings, a woman must either bury her unfulfilled ambitions or conceal her emotions if she has unrequited desires. Chitra & Balachandran pose the question, "Why do men treat women as scapegoats in a family and society? When will men accept and grant women the same rights they enjoy in the family and in society?" (*International Journal on Multicultural Literature*, p. 56). As a kind of reply they have observed:

Women need a lovable caring life partner. She does not need the money, property and luxurious life. She wants her life partner's attention to her. Men have misunderstood women often as they need money. In reality, a real woman wants her husband's presence, care and affection. For whom do women struggle? She struggles with her family, for her family and by her family. Women are not selfish with their family members. They do things for the welfare of their family members. Then it is men's duty to protect them, nurture them and make them feel happy always. (*International Journal on Multicultural Literature*, p. 54)

Majority of families in India emphasise the male child's preferences and priorities rather than that of a female child. Kate Millett states, "Whatever the "real" differences between the sexes may be, we are not likely to know them until the sexes are treated differently, that is alike" (*Sexual Politics*, p. 29). The irony is that this is also encouraged by women in the family or society. When a woman is not able to achieve her childhood or adulthood dreams, she can fulfil them if she is married to an understanding husband. But for a man, the scenario is completely different. Even if a husband doesn't get an appreciative wife, being the head of the family setup, he can attain his wish. Savitribai describes her father-in-law's obsession with music to Madhu in the following way:

His longing to be part of the world of music made him a student all his life. There was always a teacher to teach him- different instruments at different times. Vocal music, however, was part of his learning programme throughout his life. Sensitive as his ear was to good music, he must have been aware he would never be good enough. Yet he kept on, more to be in touch with music and musicians, to connect himself to the world he so loved, than to become an expert singer. (*SR*, p. 216)

Shashi Deshpande in her works, never fails to draw attention to the fact that some women are the ones who make themselves miserable. Her novel, *Small Remedies*, is no exception to this. The father-in-law of Savitribai noticed that she was listening to the performance of the musicians through the corridor window. He never yelled at her but instead left the window open so that the family's female members could listen. Savitribai initially valued the opportunity, but she soon became agitated by the women's chatter, the children's wailing and talking and her inability to see and hear the musicians. In Indian culture, daughters are regarded as more important than their daughters-in-law. Daughters of the family are permitted to do as they please, whereas daughters-in-law from other families must adapt, embrace and adopt their roles and refrain from voicing their opinions. Madhu could envisage how Savitribai felt as, "Anger, derision, contempt, ridicule - I can imagine that Bai had to face all these when she came out of the shadowy room back to her life among the women. I can imagine that it took enormous courage to face the jibes and the hostility" (*SR*, p.220).

It seems to attain greatness, women must pay a substantial price. When a woman decides to overcome the obstacles before her, she must be prepared to traverse the customs, rituals, practices, taboos, beliefs, roles and responsibilities that stand in her way. It would create numerous opportunities to give up unless they had the fortitude to persevere. In order to learn or practise any art or skill, a woman must have a room of her own. Virginia Woolf, in

her *A Room of One's Own* (1929) states, "All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point - a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved" (p. 4). The father-in-law took a radical step by arranging a music teacher for Savitribai. Madhu explains the condition and struggle of Savitribai's learning as:

When a middle-aged woman came to the house saying she was there to teach Bai music, at first it seemed a miracle to Bai. Then she accepted it and didn't think any more about the whys and hows of it. This was how her lessons began. They sat in a small unused room on the first floor of the house, a room that looked down on to the back courtyard, where the vessels were cleaned and the clothes washed. All the sounds of these activities flowed into the room, as did the women's ceaseless talk, their arguments, their laughter. Not the ideal room for music, certainly. (SR, pp. 218-219)

Women are expected to make many sacrifices, in order to attain greatness, including their dignity, honour, family, children and so on. People would only consider the accomplishments of women and not their struggles. Savitribai's grandmother prevented her from singing during her debut as a child. Although the agony may have subsided after so many years, the scar remains. Many Indian women tolerate their suffering and move on. Extremely few women accept suffering, never forget the scars and rejection they have endured and are willing to sacrifice anything to achieve their life goals. Dr. Ruby Malhotra opines that, "The women are particularly caught in the process of redefining and rediscovering their own roles, position and relationship within their given social world" (p. 133).

Fortunately, Savitribai has the backing and encouragement of her father-in-law, but she needs to struggle with the female members of her family as well as the ladies in her community. By abandoning her husband's home, she forfeits her reputation and social standing, but gains the freedom to do as she pleases. She elopes with her Muslim partner, a decision that is also unconventional. It is quite challenging for her and her Muslim spouse to live in a small village like Neemgaon since she takes her daughter Munni and her friend Ghulam Sab with her. The narrator comments, "For Bai to develop a relationship with another man, a tabla player, a Muslim- this must have been not only unimaginable, but the height of criminality" (SR, p.220).

Savitribai began her professional career after the death of Pandit Kashinath Buwa, when she was given the opportunity to sing and share the platform with the legendary Bismilla at the launch of a new radio station in Neemgaon. She then hosts a variety of radio shows in various stations. Bai's house is visited by the radio station director and she used to go with him for her shows and recordings to other radio stations. This also causes problems for her. U. B. S. Gour remarks, "In our society women are not as free as men. Being weak, women need the protection of men, on whom they depend" (p. 104).

Many of the rumours are created by people out of curiosity and creativity. They assume something and deliver many things by adding some decorative elements and making it true according to their conception and beliefs. Then the whole society would speak and ask

questions in different dimensions. It was rightly said in a Tamil proverb as, ‘Can you close the mouth of the city even if you close the furnace?’ (Ulaivayai moodinalum oor vayai mooda mudiyuma?) (<https://www.projectmadurai.org>). One should ignore the rumours, in order to attain great heights and concentrate on one’s progress. The narrator realizes the situation of Savitribai as, “Bai tells me she had no lovers. But to the town, it was very simple: why else would a man go out of his way to give her so many programmes? Why would he visit her so often? A woman who’d left her husband’s home - what morals would she have, anyway! Bai was obviously damned by everyone” (SR, p. 223).

Everyone experiences some form of suffering at some point in everyone’s/his/her life. Time should heal everything, but sadly, it teaches people to live with pain. Savitribai’s life with Ghulam Saab may have been successful and fulfilling because he was a part of her career and profession, eventually he leaves her and reunites with his family. Savitribai had to give up her family, her house, her dignity and even her daughter in order to achieve her life’s goal. Munni, her daughter disliked her mother and the celebrity she was gaining by her mother. Madhu, the narrator recalls an incident of Munni with her:

I remember all this. I remember looking at the singer too, admiring her beauty.

And this glamorous creature on the stage, the centre of attention, was Munni’s mother! But why was Munni not there to hear her mother sing, to enjoy her glory? I thought of it when I met her the next day, and asked her the question.

‘I hate music,’ she said. ‘I simply hate it.’ (SR, pp. 134-135)

Munni, Savitribai’s daughter appears to be free of any constraints, whereas Madhu, the motherless child is rarely supervised by her father but is closely observed by Babu, the servant. Munni also known as Meenakshi, addresses her father respectfully and mentions that he is a lawyer in Pune. Ghulam Saab is the man who plays tabla for her mother. However, Munni is plagued by social questions as a result of her mother’s relationship with Ghulam Saab. The kids in the neighbourhood maintain that they don’t know her name and ask her questions, which insult her. Madhu, the narrator recollects how she made-up a story about her father:

‘I’m Meenakshi,’ she proclaims.

‘But I thought your name was Munni.’

‘No, my name is Meenakshi.’

‘Then why does everyone call you Munni?’

‘I don’t know. My name is Meenakshi.’

She’s becoming stubborn now. I’ve seen this mood before, she won’t budge. They sense this, and go on to other questions.

‘If your name is Meenakshi, why does your father have a Muslim name?’

‘My father doesn’t have a Muslim name. My father’s name is Sadashivrao.’

‘No, it’s not. It’s Ghulam Ahmed.’

‘My father is Sadashivrao, he’s in Pune.’

‘If your father is there, why does your mother live here in Neemgaon?’ (SR, p. 35)

In order to persuade society, Meenakshi Indorekar (Munni) speaks about her father’s career as a lawyer. Because she is a child who was born as a result of her mother’s

relationship with another man, Ghulam Sab, she leads the life of a distressed child and is humiliated in her existence. Munni as a child never experienced a secure and healthy attachment to her mother; thus, neither of them has the opportunity to create joyful and contented relationships with others in their lives. But Munni becomes a cornered animal in society, which forces her to abandon her mother. Dr. Binod Mishra observes, “Munni’s avoidance of her mother’s bad name is her attempt to preserve her immaculate identity of being a woman with integrity and her respect to herself and society” (p.186).

Each child must be inspired and motivated to perform good deeds. This type of recognition and appreciation will encourage them to move forward and acquire confidence in their lives. Madhu participated in folk dance and fisherman’s dance as a child. Her father raised her hand to attract attention, which prompted her to devote all of her energy to the dance, which he enjoyed. Munni, the daughter of Savitribai was in the orchestra, but her mother was not present to applaud her, although the majority of parents were present for the school concert. Madhu recalls Munni’s mother’s absence by stating, “But Bai was not there to watch Munni play the jaltarang. After the concert was over, Munni walked home with my father and me” (SR, p. 135).

Savitribai, a talented musician and a person known for her female autonomy, has never spoken about her daughter Munni’s departure in her entire life. Later, while travelling in a bus in Bombay the narrator, Madhu notices Munni. Munni appeared to be a middle-class Bombay housewife and Madhu recognised her eyes. When Madhu called and introduced herself to Munni, she replied, “My name is Shailaja-Shailaja Joshi” (SR, p.76). A child who has a secure relationship with his or her parents learns to regulate his or her emotions in stressful and tough situations. But Munni, as a child and as an adult is helpless. Her quest for female identity, Madhu the narrator remarks, “Fighting with her back to the wall for the identity she wanted to have, the one she claimed finally, successfully denying her old one. Shailaja Joshi- a long way from Munni, daughter of Savitribai and Ghulam Saab” (SR, p. 77). Madhu also comes to know that she was not reunited with her mother and Munni died in a bomb blast of the Babri Masjid incident in Ayodhya.

In recent years, the status of women across the globe, particularly in India, has undergone an accelerated transformation. Sometimes women keep themselves isolated, unmindful of the vast changes taking place in the modern world. Woman is unaware of her potential abilities due to preconceived notions. “The India of my Dreams”, an extract from the book, *My Truth* Indira Gandhi affirms:

Men and most women are unaware of the potential ability of women. Their lives are entrapped by pre-conceived notions and attitudes from birth onward, at every level, in school, in college and in social life. This subtracts from the total. And women are not the only ones to suffer. A lower status for women, or lesser opportunity for women, is a handicap for the growth of mankind as a whole and for men as a whole. It affects the lives of men themselves. (p. 63)

## Conclusion

Savitribai is an emancipated woman to a certain extent but is still subject to the tyrannical control of patriarchy. Women like Savitribai have sacrificed their families and

their relationships with the people they care about in order to achieve their ambitions. Since there is no guidance available, a significant number of women wind up deciding to pursue an unsuitable path in order to attain their goals. Being married, Savitribai might have considered the revolutionary or rebellious steps she has taken to achieve her dream successful, but eventually her relationship with Ghulam Saab and her own daughter Munni leaves her to lead an isolated life. The fact that Munni's mother didn't attend the school concert may have hurt her feelings, but Munni never feels sorry for her mother. Even if parents like Savitribai are extremely busy with their careers, business or jobs, they should make time for their kids and speak and listen to them frequently so that they will feel comfortable disclosing their own emotions and life struggles. Similarly, women's wishes, aspirations, objectives, hopes and desires must be allowed to be fulfilled by society rather than being prohibited by socio-cultural practices, if women receive what they desire in the family, such as appreciation, recognition and affection, they will not abandon the family like Savitribai, allowing children like Munni to receive an abundance of affection and care and to spend their final years within the family rather than in a lonely state.

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