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THE JOURNEY OF ABSOLUTE SELF-REALISATION IN *SMALL REMEDIES*

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ABSTRACT

Usually, women are said to possess so called womanly traits alone in their character. But there are some women who exhibit those characteristics also which are generally defined as manly or masculine. A certain type of masculine energy seems to come out of them. But it is often covered up by social norms which they are expected to imbibe and live by. In fact, girls also live in the same socio-cultural atmosphere in which boys live. Like boys, they too observe their fathers and grandfathers exercising their authority and power over weaker ones. However, they are expected not to acquire the masculine traits of men in their milieu. But this process of suppressing these natural human characteristics fails to erase completely all of those natural impulses and attitudes which are regarded as distinguishing features of manliness. These suppressed traits are, at times, exhibited by women as per the demands of the situations they are in. Like men, they also feel pleasure while dominating others. They also want to control important institutions like society, economic systems etc. as men do. Because of women's natural capacities and energies, like those of men, they, today, feel disinclined to limit themselves to the feminine role or space, and, leaving no domain of work or achievement which men can claim to be theirs and theirs only. Whatever was conventionally deemed the province of men has been encroached on by women. It may be a bit difficult for a traditional man to accept women in their new roles, but this fails to inhibit or prohibit them from doing what they can and wish to do. In light of these views this paper attempts to trace the journey of absolute self realization of two prominent female characters in Shashi Deshpande's novel *Small Remedies*.

Keywords: Masculine energy, Womanly traits, Self-realisation, Gender roles.

Basically, women too can be said to have the capability of performing the same functions and of having similar qualities as are attributed to men. Indian history too speaks highly about them. The thrones were occupied by Queens and Begums as well. Their role in creating legendary figures has been no less crucial. Recently, the industrial revolution and expansion of education have helped women to enter territories which were previously reserved only for male. Modern women have access to education and have acquired some degree of financial independence. They also appear to be rational, judicious, and determined; they demand equality, freedom and dignity of self. In some cases, they perform the role of the provider and protector of their families. The niche they carve out for themselves in this way places them in a position of higher social status, power and

respect. But, at times, like strong and authoritative men, they too tend to become dictatorial, forcing their wishes on weaklings and subordinates. They can defy traditions and also become violent and rebellious to realize their goals. They do not tolerate the power of men over them, rather question and resist. Most importantly they also express their hitherto inhibited sexuality in a rather freer manner. All this goes to underline the presence of abilities and capacities associated with masculinity in women as well. It indicates that masculinity like femininity is not a purely biological category but a structure of consciousness which can exist in women also. Kamla Bhasin sums it up well when she observes, "Masculinity is about power, power over others. Those who surrender are feminine; those who dominate are masculine; but it does not mean that the former are always women, and the latter are always men."

Traditional societies define strongness and determination as inbuilt qualities of a man essential for achieving their goals in life. Generally, these traits are not believed to be present in women. But there are some women who exhibit these latent traits like those of a man. To achieve their goals, they defy traditions, reject relations, leave oppressing families, and even do not hesitate to use men as an instrument for their benefit. Like traditional women, they do not accept their conditions as naturally given. They fight against the odds of life and make their destiny themselves. With strong determination, they struggle to cross the social barricades in which they are confined. Some of them enter the area reserved for men and even surpass them. All these qualities are clearly visible in the character of Savitribai Indorekar in the novel *Small Remedies*. The protagonist of the novel, Madhu, who has experienced a trauma in her personal life, is set to write a biography of this famous singer, Savitribai Indorekar, popularly known as Bai. She collects the facts of Bai's life mainly through her interviews and partly through her memory. As a writer, Madhu can portray Bai in three ways and all of them make her a strong manly figure. She explains it:

The power of the writer is the power of the creator. Yes, I can do much. I 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 – a comfortable home, a husband and a family – for love.(166)

Bai's rebellious nature, her instinct to live her life on her own terms and her struggle and sacrifice make her a woman not inferior to men in any respect. Her life illustrates this as in a bid to achieve her goal she completely conceals and suppresses so-called womanly qualities and exhibits only those of a man.

Bai is very much particular about her career and status which are aspects of the consciousness of a man. Her determination to achieve her goal gives her courage to face the hostility of family and society. She takes music as a profession and expresses her feeling of love by selecting a Muslim lover who also plays tabla for her. In her quest for identity as a singer, she revolts against tradition and walks out of her marital house with her lover, Ghulam saab. Moreover, to realize her dream, she struggles through a life of hardship and ignominy and even gives birth to a daughter out of wedlock. In her single-minded pursuit to be the disciple of Pandit Kashinath Buwa, a renowned classical singer, she bears unaccountable hardships. Madhu reveals: "And so she lives in Bhavanipur, travelling each day by train, the shuttle service that moves between Bhavanipur and the next town, halting at the temple station only for a moment. And then she has to walk two miles from the station to Guruji's house..." (133). Her efforts bear fruits as she becomes a professional singer and gradually reaches the pinnacle of success. In pursuit of her dream, Bai has the unstinted support of Ghulam saab. "He was part of her career, of her profession, her success and her achievements. She couldn't do away with that"(75).

Although Bai reaches at her destination, but in the process, she sacrifices a lot. Though her success does not make her a self-realized person, her courage and will power are more than those of a common man. Obviously, her revolt against her marriage is not because of any problem with her husband. Her dream to be a renowned singer, which cannot be fulfilled while she remains the daughter-in-law of an affluent Brahmin family, has made her reject her husband for her status and love for music. Bai, a revolutionary in her own right, defies traditional definitions of femininity and shows the courage to live a life of her own choosing. She rejects the idea of traditional morality by living with a Muslim man out of wedlock. This act of hers is considered immoral in society but, ironically, the same traditional and biased society approves of the extramarital relationships of her

father-in-law. Through this, Shashi Deshpande points out the hypocrisy of our society in recognizing a man's sexuality and negating the same need in a woman. Bai, like a man, throws morality to winds and expresses her sexuality openly. The proof of her illicit relationship with Ghulam saab is their daughter, Munni. But Bai's determination to pursue her ambition even in disgrace shows her manly courage and strength which does not fail her even when her character is frequently questioned.

Bai exhibits her tough, calculating and rational nature in the straightforward pursuit of her goal. In this process, she does not even recognize the existence of her daughter. Paradoxically enough, Bai, who was courageous in defying the definitions of feminine morality, also proves to be vulnerable to the desire of social respectability. She is guilt-ridden and is now ashamed of her past indiscretions and wants to wipe off the memory of such acts from her mind. That is why, she does not reveal anything about it in her interviews to Madhu. Bai also turns out to be an opportunist. This is amply clear from the way she, after realizing her goal, wipes out Ghulam saab from her life. She uses him only as a ladder to climb to the top of success. Her biographer, Madhu, observes: "And yet there is another 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" (176). Thus, Bai leaves 'the part and parcel of her career' behind as soon as she achieves her goal of becoming a great singer. This shows that she is highly calculating and opportunist using men only as events in her life. Moreover, Bai's forgetting of her daughter Munni and her lover, Ghulam saab, is not because of loss of memory but conscious one. Madhu thinks:

Bai's forgetting, I think, is deliberate. She has drawn a line through Munni's and Ghulam saab's names and erased them from her life. This is something she did long back, when she turned to respectability, when she began her journey to success and fame. Perhaps, she thought that to attain these things, this denial of her lover and daughter was necessary. I imagine that the denial also made it possible for her to live with herself.(154)

Thus, the tougher side of the nature of Bai is revealed by the way she conceals some of the facts of her life from Madhu, her biographer. Unlike an ordinary woman, she manages everything as per her intentions.

Nonetheless, Bai pays a heavy price for her attempts of breaking out of traditions and society. She loses her daughter, married life and position in patriarchal society, but her life moves on. She does not regret and cry at her past as women generally do. She keeps her past deeply suppressed. In the last phase of her life, she is sick, old, dying childless and everything seems to have ended for her, but she is not wholly bereft. She crosses the barriers between sexes and thinks and acts like a man. Madhu comments: "Bai too—she may not know the phrase 'gender discrimination', but she knows how much longer it takes for a woman to reach the top, how difficult it is for her to break through the barrier to get there" (224).

As an independent and self-realized person in her profession, if Bai stands on a higher step, who sacrifices all to gain her personal interests, Leela stands still higher, who strives for the society of which she is a part. In our society, women are considered to be more suitable for domestic roles and men for social, political and outdoor life. Any deviation from the roles defined by myths and traditions is unacceptable and intolerable. But some of the women have the courage to tread successfully in men's field. This is made evident by Deshpande's creation of some women who refuse to remain confined to the feminine world of cooking and cleaning. They, like their male counterparts, frequently tread into the larger social and political world as well. Leela in *Small Remedies* is one of such women who exhibit strength and abilities of those of a man. Bai's life makes Madhu compare her with her aunt Leela. Trying to establish the identities of the real Leela and Savitribai amidst all the facts she has collected, Madhu sees parallels between the lives of these two women. She thinks: "I've begun thinking that in writing about Bai, I'm writing about Leela as well. 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..." (141). If Bai displays manly strength and courage in reaching her destination, Leela is in no way lesser than her. The reader notices that both are courageous women, that both work for and get the measure of freedom they need, that both are ready to accept the consequences of their actions, and that, more importantly, whatever happens, they still go on with their lives. Both defy conventions of their times and hear the call of their hearts and minds. But their goals are different. Bai struggles for her personal interests while Leela sacrifices herself for

the welfare of her country and countrymen by devoting her life to an impersonal service of the nation. In doing so, she tries to create her own world—a world totally different from the world of women living in traditional patriarchal societies.

Leela emerges as a woman confident and well aware of her needs. From the very childhood, she shows an inclination towards studies rather than domestic chores, considered most suitable for girls. Seen as a rebel, she is married off to a man of few means by her grandmother as a punishment. But for Leela, the punishment turns into a blessing as her husband encourages her to study and with his help, she clears her matric examination. Her husband's death due to tuberculosis further strengthens her resolve to be independent and answer to her callings. Instead of showing bereavement at being a widow, she shows manly courage in taking up a teaching job to support her family. She refuses to accept her father's offer of help as she wants to be independent and bold in order to face the oncoming challenges of life. While supporting her brother-in-law and the ailing mother-in-law, she plays the role of the provider of the house. She considers them as her responsibility, so she refuses the call from her parents' home. Like a woman of the next generation, she bravely fights against the adversities of life. Madhu reveals:

But there was Leela, part of a generation even before mine. She always supported herself. When her first husband Vasant died she took up a job and educated her brother-in-law... But Leela was an unusual woman, ahead not only of her generation, but the next as well; I'm realizing this only now when Hary and I speak about her, between his questions and my answers, she takes on the status of a heroine. (149)

Thus, Leela's struggle and efforts for making her self-reliant are exemplary even for men. Her active participation in the activities of outside world makes her a well-known figure. Like a man having strong determination, she is conscious of her desires and goals she aspires for. Thus, she transcends the limitations of her gender to achieve them. She works as a social worker and nurses tuberculosis patients. During the freedom struggle, she plunges into the Quit India Movement. She is also sent to jail for her activities. Although she is a woman, considered to be weak, soft and peace-loving, she fights by the side of extremists and thoroughly opposes Gandhian philosophy of non-violence. Her vigour, courage, revolutionary and violent ideas are thus depicted by the narrator:

She had been opposed to Gandhian methods of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*. I thought there was something ridiculous about letting oneself be beaten up, she said. It goes against the grain of human nature, she thought, to submit that way. A blow for a blow – that's how we're made of, that's natural. She told me this, adding, 'I was young then, my blood was hot. When your blood is boiling, you can't think clearly, you can't see straight.'(97)

Her efforts towards self-realization do not stop here as she keeps up her involvement in politics even after independence. Later, she protests against price hikes and also plays an important role during the period of emergency. Thus, all her life Leela tries to fulfil the desires of her true self transcending the limitations of traditions and sex. Not only in social and political arena, but also in her personal life she revolts against traditional definitions of a woman. In spite of being a Brahmin widow, she dares to marry a Christian. Her family reacts strongly against it and ostracizes her to make an example for other girls to avert such act. But her manly strength and courage for taking such an unconventional step is acknowledged much later. In this connection Madhu says:

The black sheep of the family. A widow who remarried. And, was worse, infinitely worse, married a Christian man. There were 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 – they were blanked out, they did not exist.... It was Leela's role during the Emergency that caught his (Hari's) attention, he tells me. Her involvement with the striking railway workers, with their families. Of course, all this came out only after the Emergency has been lifted. But even in the Emergency days, there was the grape vine on which Leela's name traveled.(46)

Both Leela and Bai get for themselves the measure of freedom they need and work for. Leela is a person who wholly accepts, like a man, the consequences of her actions. But Bai is totally different as she deals with the consequences of her choice in her own way. She has put it behind her. In fact, whatever they do clearly hints that in spite of the pressure of traditions and society, they cross the boundaries of their sex. No ordinary woman can dare to do as much as they have done. After bitter experiences in their lives, they construct their new identities by bringing into play many of the so-called manly traits which, in fact, is also the need of modern society, as N. Sethuraman argues, "The concept and image of women has undergone a positive change. No society can ever progress without an active participation of women who are an integral part of human civilization in its over-all development."

The foregoing analysis of two women characters of Deshpande indicates that masculine and feminine traits are not confined to sexes as against what the myths present and prescribe. Both, Bai and Leela, rise above the narrow and rigid constructions of femininity to be able to take control of their lives. They rise above the narrow and confining boundaries of their sex to achieve their desired goals in life. In Savitribai and Leela there is a voice that tells them to break the shackles of patriarchy and pursue their absolute self. Hence, in order both to gain equality and to realize their human potential, these women transcend their distinctive femaleness in order to lead the kind of life human beings do.

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