

Small Remedies

by Shashi Deshpande
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At the end of *Small Remedies*, the protagonist, Madhu reconciles with life with an epiphanic observation:

How could I have ever longed for amnesia? Memory, capricious and unreliable though it is, ultimately carries its own truth within it. As long as there is memory, there's always the possibility of retrieval, as long as there is memory, loss is never total. (p.324)

The ending is compelling and so is the novel. Before putting it down, the reader is tempted to go back to the beginning and ask 'what is it all about?' In fact, it is a multi-dimensional work with death at its foreground, music at its back-ground and the complexities of existence as its thematic basis. Structured as a biography within a biography, it is a profound piece of writing about love and loss, grief and hope, rebellion and sacrifice, and above all about the Promethean will to endure and survive.

It is through Madhu's eyes that we see Savitribai Indorekar, the successful singer, the woman who has rebelled, the mother who has been rejected by her own daughter, the aging matriarch who rules over her kingdom of music and musicians with impunity. But Bai is not the only one to have come under the searching gaze of the biographer. Madhu reveals the dark recesses of her own life and of the national life, and asks silent questions about the nemesis that play on us all. The communal violence which erupts in Bombay engulfs all, irrespective of any distinction of class or caste or religion. The violence that claimed Madhu's son Adit also devour-ed Savitribai's estranged daughter. The neglectful

mother who eloped with her lover decades back suffers the same loss as the over-possessive mother (Madhu) who estranges her son by her smother-ing mother-love. Suffering is at both ends. If Madhu has her bag of woes, the famous singer has her agony – the agony of rejection by her own child. Deshpande poses many questions: Who/what is right? Who/what is wrong? How do we ward off disaster? The answer lies in the text: Disasters cannot be warded off; one has to face them. We all have our 'small remedies' that make 'big disasters' bearable, those small, happy moments of life—"moments of laughter, affection, love, joy and support" (Shashi Deshpande in an interview with Chandra Holms in *Indian Review of Books*, 16 May-15 June 2000 pp. 5-9). Human beings have to find their own strength to stand firm and face life. The source of strength is within, the external remedies, "the Ganesha in the niches, the decorated thresholds, the mango leaf torans, the Oms, the Swastikas, the charms and amulets—all to keep disaster at bay, to stave off the nemesis of a jealous god" are but desperate remedies. The title *Small Remedies* thus stands for the strong inner source that we all have. One is reminded here of the epigraph to her earlier novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* exhorting human beings to look within for support.

The novel begins with a simple exposition: it is Joe's story. No. It is Som's story or rather Som's tribute to Joe. But No! it is the story of all of us caught in the web of life and the flux of time. "Time moves on relentlessly" (p.5) and human beings have to go along with it. Every experience is unique and single, but the final Reality is common to all. Madhu has

endured life's blows and is shattered by several deaths—of her father, Joe and Leela and finally Adit, her son. Now it is Bai on the verge of the great departure. Madhu wishes to forget it all but she has discovered through various experiences that grief, pain, tragedy, are part of life; one cannot run away from one's self. The author asserts in an inter-view that Madhu's "real philosophy comes to her later, at the end almost, after the *Upanayanam* in the temple. Seeing the grieving mother she thinks—so much tragedy, so many humans carrying this load of grief and pain within them, but they survive, they live. That's really the culmination of all her thinking" (op. cit. p. 59).

After the brief 'Prologue', the story begins. It is, we now know, going to be the biography of Savitribai Indorekar, the doyen of Hindustani music of the Gwalior gharana, to be written by Madhu because of her "Neemgaon association" (*Small Remedies*, p.15). Savitribai was once their neighbour; Madhu's father was a great admirer of her music; and her daughter Munni was Madhu's friend. Madhu feels unequal to the daunting task. "You know, I'm not a writer", she tells Maya and Yogi, dif-fident to venture into the biography. She, however, accepts the assignment as an escape from Som and the suffocation of her home. She has a grudge, a scar, a wound to nurse. She longs for time and distance to come to terms with her losses—the death of Adit and a marriage gone sour. The author whets our curi-osity but skillfully withholds inform-ation, disclosing the contents of her bag slowly. There come Lata and Hari (Madhu's host in Bhavanipur), Joe and Leela, Madhu and her father,

Madhu, Som and their son Aditya and then Savitribai, Munni and Ghulam Saab. The novel is further populated by Tony, Rekha, Phillo Chandru, Hasina and an elusive, absent relation—the non-existent being whose eerie presence wrecks Madhu's happiness. Through the labyrinth of these relations and connections, Shashi Deshpande leads us to the core theme—Savitribai Indorekar's biography, and Madhu's story.

Writing biography, Madhu realises, is a difficult art. It is not history to be told in a sequential order. It is life, and life has its own pattern. Deshpande makes some perceptive remarks about biography which defies narration in a temporal sequence:

We see our lives through memory and memories are fractured, fragmented, almost always cutting across time. . . . Invention, creation, is sometimes the greater, possibly the best part, of reality. Even to write our own stories we need to invent. Like fiction writers, like historians, the teller of her own story needs to construct a plausible narrative. How else do you connect but by imagining? (p.165)

After several weeks' efforts Madhu is able to collect all the required information about Bai. She could recast the great singer in the mould she wishes to. She has the pen and she knows "the power of the writer is the power of the creator" (p.166). "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" (p.166). Madhu stops here. She does not want to give in to Maya and Yogi's demand for 'the truth'; nor is she ready to churn out a story of 'heroism'. She is keen to discover Bai,

the mother, probe her silences and see the suffering mother in her. Probably, Madhu is trying to see the reflection of her own suffering in Bai. But Bai has drowned her pain in music as Madhu is trying to forget hers in writing. Isn't Deshpande proclaiming the sustaining power of art?

Music is, indeed, at the core of the story and so is creative writing. Shashi Deshpande says she is "fascinated by the woman creative artist." True to this assertion, she foregrounds music in the fabric of her novel. Music has an ennobling quality. It is beyond caste, class or religion. Savitribai Indorekar comes from an orthodox Brahmin family but her father-in-law, a great lover of music allows her to enter the forbidden territory and learn music. During her difficult days Ghulam Sahib, her muslim tabla-player supports her. Later, Hasina, Ghulam Sahib's grand-daughter, becomes Bai's close associate and on the musical soiree, she chooses to sing the Hindu Bhakti songs of Akka Mahadevi. All puny human divisions vanish in the field of music and human relations appear as smooth as the "sam" between singer and the tabla-player, as close as the relationship between melody and rhythm. It would not be out of context here to mention that during the late 1990s, two more novels, besides *Small Remedies*, were written with music at their base—Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music*. Speaking of music, one is also reminded of Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* in which the protagonist Bim is cleansed of all ill-will and melancholy on the musical evening at the Mishras.

The theme of violence and death also runs all through the novel like a thread. Deshpande does not make big of violence but it is there and it has harmed her characters. Madhu is traumatised by Adit's death in the communal violence. She also

experiences a violent attack before Hasina's performance. But, Madhu learns to come out of the trauma, discovering how human beings carry the burden of grief. One has to live one's life and let go off the dead. Urmi in *The Binding Vine*, Kalyani and Aru in *A Matter of Time* and Madhu in the novel under review find their own philosophy to endure and survive.

With flashbacks, fractured memories and stream of consciousness technique, Bai's story gets written; but is it really Bai's biography? It is Madhu's story and also Leela and Joe's. Savitribai and Leela were the rebels of their time; both dared to dream and translate that dream into reality. Transgressing the societal limits for women posed a threat to both, but they surmounted hurdles and achieved what they wanted to and left their foot-prints behind them. That Hasina should sing Akka Mahadevi's *vachana* "I saw a dream, I saw a dream" at the concert before Bai is lost in coma, is a befitting tribute to all those women who dare to dream and have the courage to realise their dreams.

Small Remedies is an insightful work of art celebrating human strength and will-power to face the assault of existence. The style is lucid and clear and the prose is elegant. However, too many characters walking in and out of the pages at frequent intervals make it difficult sometimes to grasp their significance and place in the story. Shashi Deshpande like her protagonist, Madhu, seems to suggest that she has to "discover her own truth which will encompass all the different bits of knowledge offered" to her. Is she celebrating that discovery?

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