

Exploring Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies*: A Journey Towards Female Identity

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Abstract

An intricate and introspective examination of female identity within the emotional and cultural context of patriarchal culture in India is presented in *Small Remedies* (2000) by Shashi Deshpande. A writer named Madhu grieves the brutal murder of her son when he was a teenager throughout the book. She starts penning the life story of Savitribai Indorekar, a legendary classical vocalist whose unusual lifestyle shatters conventional wisdom, as a means of facing her loss. Three women, Madhu, Savitribai, and Leela, all navigate the challenging terrain of personal desire and social expectation; their stories progressively interweave as Madhu reconstructs Savitribai's life. The analysis examines narrative, emotional healing, and memory to highlight the issue of female identity in the novel. The research further contends, using feminist literary views as a framework, that Deshpande shows identity not as a static

social category but as a dynamic process that is constantly changing. In a culture that often restricts women's independence, the characters' experiences show how women try to find their identity. The novel also highlights the healing power of storytelling: via writing, Madhu is able to face her pain and gain insight into the experiences of other women.

Keywords: Female Identity, Feminism, Subjectivity, Agency

Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, and Shashi Deshpande are just a few of the Indian English fiction authors whose works have recently focused on female protagonists' inward experiences. Deshpande stands out among these writers for the subtle way she portrays the inner struggles that women face when they are part of patriarchal systems. Her stories frequently center on slower, more introspective conflicts—moments of uncertainty, contemplation, and progressive self-awareness—rather than depicting overt acts of defiance. Some have noted that the intricacies of female identity are recurring themes in Deshpande's fiction. The protagonists in Deshpande's works often “move through phases of self-questioning before they arrive at even a partial understanding of themselves,” as pointed out by S. Prasanna Sree (45). In *Small Remedies*, this feeling of slow but steady self-discovery stands out.

The story begins with Madhu trying to deal with an unfathomable personal tragedy—the deadly communal riot that killed her son. When asked about the profound void this loss has created, she says, “There is a silence now that nothing can fill” (Deshpande 54). The narrative's emotional environment is set instantly by this statement. In an effort to make sense of this hush, Madhu starts penning Savitribai Indorekar's biography. At first glance, it seems like a business initiative, but it quickly turns into something far more personal. Madhu faces her own unsolved issues while piecing together Savitribai's existence. Deshpande is able to examine identity as a process impacted by memory and experience rather than a singular epiphany because to this narrative format. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to examine, via the intertwined

stories of Madhu, Savitribai, and Leela, how *Small Remedies* depicts the struggle for female identity.

The feminist literary discourse is significantly supported by the subject themes of Shashi Deshpande's literature, even though she has sometimes fought against being labelled as a feminist writer. Within social systems that value silence and conformity, her stories often explore women's efforts to stand out. Deshpande has stated in an interview that, rather than trying to promote an ideological perspective, her main goal is to show human connections as they really are (Mohan 89). Still, a lot of reviewers have pointed out that gender and power are constant themes in her work.

According to Khurana and Bhandari, "ordinary women caught between personal aspirations and the expectations of a patriarchal society" is a common theme among Deshpande's heroines (Deshpande 3). *Small Remedies* revolves around the fundamental theme of this conflict between individuality and social duty. This tension is beautifully illustrated by Savitribai's life narrative. She goes against the grain as a young woman, leaving her Brahmin family to study classical music under Ghulam Saab. Sotribai says, "Music was the only thing that mattered to me" as she thinks back on her choice. She has made it clear in this declaration that she will not compromise her artistic values for the sake of societal acceptance (39). But Deshpande does not just show Savitribai as a liberation icon. On the contrary, she experiences inner turmoil and isolation as a result of her independence. Deshpande prioritises actual experience over abstract ideological arguments, which reflected in her broader approach to feminist concerns, which is multifaceted.

The narrative voice of Madhu serves as a foundation for the novel's examination of trauma and identity. The loss of her kid has left her feeling helpless and bereft of direction. "The world I had known seemed suddenly fragile and uncertain," she says, revealing her inner bewilderment (67). It would appear that Madhu is trying to occupy herself with writing

Savitribai's biography after she loses her husband. But writing quickly turns into a very introspective activity. By telling Savitribai's narrative, Madhu is forced to face her own past and deal with feelings that she has never dealt with before. Writing about Savitribai caused Madhu to think on her own life, as she confesses in a deeply introspective moment. The novel's main narrative method is emphasised in this paragraph. The novel's biography serves as a prism through which Madhu views her own life events.

Instead of trauma being seen as a cause of misery, Bardewa contends that Deshpande portrays it as a stimulus for introspection (22). Thus, Madhu's work becomes an endeavour to piece together her disjointed self-concept. The difficulty of putting oneself in another person's shoes is something that Madhu muses about on multiple occasions. There is no such thing as a fully known life, she notes. The novel's understanding of the limitations of narrative and memory is shown by this statement.

The novel is mostly devoted to telling the story of Savitribai. The way she lives her life defies the established gender norms of Indian culture. Savitribai is expected to marry and take on domestic responsibilities as she is born into a traditional Brahmin family. She opts to focus on her music instead. "I could not imagine a life without music," she says with a subtle but resolute tone (78). Leaving her family and moving in with her Muslim music teacher, Ghulam Saab, breaks down long-established social norms. Rejecting strict gender and caste hierarchies, the act is both symbolic and very intimate. But Deshpande paints a very nuanced picture of Savitribai's existence. She becomes famous as a musician, but she often feels lonely because she is so self-reliant. Gupta and Shabharwal argue that the narrative of Savitribai illustrates the benefits and drawbacks of women's independence. "Freedom has its own loneliness," Savitribai says, revealing that she is aware of this conflict (45). Deshpande uses this figure to make the reader think about the complicated emotional fallout of questioning societal conventions.

Leela symbolises a different way of defining oneself—political commitment—in contrast to Savitribai, whose identity is moulded by her passion for art. Despite her commitment to communism, Leela rejects the traditional roles of husband and wife. Every part of her life is influenced by her ideological beliefs. After giving it some thought, she says, “The struggle for justice mattered more than anything else” (109). Gender and political identity intertwine in Leela’s character. She aspires to break free of the constraints that women have historically faced by immersing herself fully in political engagement. Although Deshpande does make this promise, he does so with some uncertainty. At times, Leela’s personal connections are strained due to her unwavering commitment to ideas. This intricacy implies that even simple actions can result in unforeseen emotional fallout. For Madhu, “Leela belonged more to her ideals than to the people around her” is an observation of this separation (76). The story shows via Leela’s story that one’s identity may be formed through ideological involvement as well as through personal desire.

The centrality of storytelling to the process of emotional healing is one of the book’s most notable aspects. As Madhu tries to piece together Savitribai’s life, she finds that doing so helps her face her own sadness. According to Devaraju, people are able to overcome trauma and find purpose in life through narrative reconstruction (4). There is a striking similarity between this remark and Madhu’s journey in the novel. “The past is never really gone; it lives within us,” she muses on memory’s inherent quality (76). That one’s identity is moulded by the ever-present interplay of one’s history and present is the novel’s fundamental topic, and this realisation encapsulates it. There is symbolic meaning in the term, *Small Remedies* as well. Healing happens gradually via contemplation, comprehension, and empathy, the narrative argues, rather than by providing drastic remedies. Upon reflecting about the matter, Madhu comes to her own realisation: “Sometimes the smallest things help us survive” (90).

In the context of modern India's social and emotional climate, Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies* provides a perceptive examination of female identity. This book explores women's struggles for autonomy and social duty from a variety of angles through the stories of three women: Madhu, Savitribai, and Leela. Deshpande presents identity as a dynamic process impacted by relationships, memories, and experiences, rather than a fixed or simply defined idea. Writing Savitribai's biography, in particular, exemplifies the narrative structure's emphasis on storytelling's transformational power. The strength of women who try to reinvent themselves in spite of societal limitations is ultimately shown in the novel. Deshpande so eloquently calls these 'small remedies,' and the book implies that finding one's identity is seldom a linear process but rather one that develops via a succession of little but significant actions of understanding.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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