

**Deepika Gupta**

**Research Scholar, Dept. of English**

**Chaudhary Devi Lal University, Sirsa, Haryana, India**

**Prof. (Dr.) Deepti Dharmani**

**Research Supervisor, Dept. of English**

**Chaudhary Devi Lal University  
Sirsa, Haryana, India**

## **Female Bildungsroman: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies***

### **Abstract:**

Shashi Deshpande is one such writer whose writings hold a universal appeal that clearly emanates from her rootedness in everyday India. The present paper aims to investigate how Deshpande delimits feminism from the restrictive practice of merely proving and re-proving its findings and how she advocates its use as a proactive tool to influence repositioning of women. As all Deshpande's novels deal with the pains and pleasures of growing up, not only in the early adulthood but also continue well into the middle age, the proposed paper attempts to study the journey of her female protagonists in her comparatively less reviewed novel *Small Remedies* in the ambit of Female Bildungsroman. Female Bildungsroman in contemporary literature explores the issues which were hitherto not dealt with like female body, sexuality, higher education etc. Deshpande explores such matters in a very realistic and comprehensive manner due to the changes in the present day cultural norms in *Small Remedies*.

**Keywords:** Bildungsroman, Female, Feminism, Women, Identity, Selfhood.

Indian writings in English are an outcome of the historical encounter between the two cultures- the Indian and the Western. The introduction of the Western education system created a class of a native literate class, the majority of which turned to their mother tongue thus, giving birth to a native literature, while a few of them adopted English to express their feelings and experiences. Though the medium of expression was English, but the portrayed saga of human activities, experiences, thoughts, feelings, hopes and dreams was very much Indian. Indian fiction in English, having grown over the years in variety and maturity, has

aroused considerable interest both in India and abroad. From the first-generation writers like Anand, Narayan and Raja Rao to the current breed of novelists like Arundhati Roy, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh etc., many Indian novelists have carved a niche in the global literary world by successfully projecting the growing trends in a highly complex, varied and rich manner. Shashi Deshpande is one such writer whose writings hold a universal appeal that clearly emanates from her rootedness in everyday India. She has steadfastly refused to compromise in order to suit the global market, never tried to portray India in exotic terms, never endeavoured 'presenting' it — as she puts it —, and certainly by not playing to the gallery. Though she acknowledges the impact of Western feminist writers like Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Kate Millet etc, yet her vision of gender equality is firmly rooted in true Indian context representing its socio-cultural and economic contour. She reframes her feminist insights to fit it into her own social requirements. The present paper aims to investigate how Deshpande delimits feminism from the restrictive practice of merely proving and re-proving its findings and how she advocates its use as a proactive tool to influence repositioning of women. As all Deshpande's novels deal with the pains and pleasures of growing up, not only in the early adulthood but also continue well into the middle age, the proposed paper attempts to study the journey of her female protagonists in her comparatively less reviewed novel *Small Remedies* in the ambit of Female Bildungsroman.

The feminist concerns of Shashi Deshpande do not correspond to that of the feminist women writers in the West. Whereas their concerns are individualistic, Deshpande's enterprise is purely and subtly human. She reframes her feminist insights to fit it into her own social requirements. So, Deshpande has a very lucid view of human issues and avoids being a propagandist. While critically evaluating her works, we cannot ignore her own views in order to place her into the theoretical framework available as a research tool. Mary E. John in her introduction to *Women's Studies in India: A Reader* supports the same idea by saying that while dealing with women's issues the framework provided by different theories must be deconstructed and a holistic outlook relevant to our lives should be formed (16). Contrary to the Western feminist theories Deshpande seeks a world where change in gender dynamics should be a common concern of both men and women. Her feminism is not narrow, it is very broad and open ended that seeks a harmonious balance in the society where men and women are equals in the drama called life.

Almost all Deshpande's novels are narratives of female self-discovery. Nearly all of the female protagonists in her novels go through some sort of journey inward as well as outward. They move from one sphere to the other to recognize themselves in the otherwise

oppressive and restricting world. As Jasbir Jain writes about Deshpande, “The experiential reality she focuses on and the traditional structures she opens out all land in two directions- one inwards towards the antahpura, the interior world of female space and female vision, and one outward, engaged in moving into public space looking for means of survival and new support structures” (264). The dichotomy of this inward/outward or private/public journey of the protagonist in fiction can be interpreted as novels of awakening and novels of Bildungsroman. Rita Felski has defined female Bildungsroman as different from the male. To quote Felski,

The Bildungsroman, it has been argued, has acquired a new function in charting the changing self-consciousness of women accompanying their gradual entry into the public domain. Whereas the male Bildungsroman survives only as parody, or in the form of a purely inward development which renounces all social activity, women’s literature has traced a trajectory in the opposite direction, from the world within to the world without, from introspection to activity. (134)

According to Felski, the feminist Bildungsroman involves the precondition for oppositional activity as against the male Bildungsroman which signals an acceptance of the existing social order. In traditional Bildungsroman, male is free to embark upon a journey for self-knowledge, whereas the female takes upon the journey because of oppression, degradation and powerlessness. For the female protagonist, the move from the private to the public sphere is a far more liberating process than is the case for the all-powerful and protected male hero. Female Bildungsroman involves a much wider range of ages as compared to the male that includes only childhood and early manhood. Women’s journey to self-discovery begins generally after the experience of marriage in the interior and the exterior world (137-138). Female Bildungsroman in contemporary literature explores the issues which were hitherto not dealt with like female body, sexuality, higher education etc. The modern women writers have shed off the inhibition to explore such matters in a very realistic and comprehensive manner due to the changes in present day cultural norms.

Published in the year 2000, Shashi Deshpande’s meta-fictional novel *Small Remedies* is the story of three protagonists who are involved in an act of hostile face-off not only in their private sphere but also in the public sphere. Written against the backdrop of the ill effects of communal violence and the suffering unleashed on the innocent victims of the aftermath of the demolishing of Babri Masjid in Ajothya, *Small Remedies* deals with the repositioning of three women characters- one passionate about music and the other a staunch

believer of Communism and the third Madhu, a writer who is caught in her own despair over the death of her young son. All of them are involved in a three-dimensional journey—firstly, in the tormented psychic inner self; secondly, in the private sphere of home and thirdly, in the outer public sphere. The really strong women in Deshpande's novels are the ones that cross boundaries, deviate from social codes and work their way to selfhood. They define their selfhood, freedom and personal space in highly individual terms irrespective of the compromises they may have to make. *Small Remedies* is truly the Bildungsroman of three women who break away from the shackles of the tradition-bound oppressive society to recognise their desires and fulfil them despite all opposition from family and society.

Madhu Saptarishi, the central character of the novel is compelled to set out on a journey after her only son's death and more than that her husband's reaction at her disclosure of a sexual encounter at the age of fifteen. The episode buried deep in the inner recesses of her unconscious, penetrates her present life when she comes to know about that man's suicide. She feels an urge to tell about this to her husband Som and expects him to understand her panic and the circumstances that led to this incident. On the contrary, Som considers this an act of betrayal and is tormented by the thought of his wife's sexuality. He begins questioning Madhu about her relationship with her friends, her cousins and even Tony, who is like a brother. Som, who had been a considerate husband so far, shared a good relationship with his wife and who himself had a full-fledged relationship with another woman before his marriage is unable to digest the revelation. Madhu realizes that being a woman she is not entitled to any privacy. She had not expected such a violent and hostile reaction from her husband to her disclosure. She is shocked to see Som changing into a suspicious and frantic person from a magnanimous and affable husband. Som turns out to be a typical husband who has internalised conventional male features. Here Neena Arora's words are quite pertinent to quote, "Man considers it as normal behaviour to satisfy his desires at both the emotional and the physical levels outside marriage, while it is ruthlessly condemned as adultery in case a woman indulges in it even though accidentally, the slightest hint of any deviation on her part which may not even involve sex, man turns violent towards his wife and starts prosecuting her. This condemnation is dictated by man's interest in preserving his property rather than by any moral consideration" (61).

After marriage Madhu had realized that for Som marriage was to play the assigned roles of husband and wife. Madhu clearly remembers: "This is baba. He is the father. He goes out to work. This is aai. She is the mother. She looks after the home and children" (103). There was clear-cut demarcation of boundaries of spheres for husband and wife. The husband

went out to earn and the wife looked after the house and the children. Any violation was unwanted and a cause of friction. Their quarrels and arguments have an adverse effect on the young mind of their son who leaves home only to meet death in a bomb blast in a bus. Later she reflects, “But it’s the single act of sex that Som holds on to, it’s the fact that he can’t let go of, as if it’s been welded into his palm” (262). It is pertinent to quote Usha Bande here, “Very subtly, Shashi Deshpande questions the adequacy of the accepted social norms, conceptual constructions of ‘woman’ in terms of recognizable images, models and markers; she critiques the politics of control and the socio-cultural determinants against women that require complete erasure” (201).

However, Madhu realizes that she has to trace her own strength to come to term with her grief and pain. Her response and her attitude display a woman’s strong will and she accepts the offer of writing the biography of Savitribai Indorekar. And here begins her real Bildungsroman. To quote Manpreet J. Singh:

It is Madhu’s subsequent shift away from home and her interaction with people living through shifting stages of gendered parameters, which gives her a comparative perspective on man-woman relationship. Her interaction with Lata and Hari, with whom she lives in Bhawanipur, and her analysis of the particular identity which the male system has imposed upon Bai, acquaints her, both with the possibility of changed equations and their necessity for making relationships more fruitful for men and women. (89)

Thus, Madhu’s journey in the outer world makes her understand her own life, her relationship with others and most importantly, her position in her relational world. She not only learns to tackle her own grief but also expands her concerns in the outer world.

In a typical Bildungsroman manner Savitribai Indorekar, whose biography Madhu has been asked to write, transgresses the familial and social barriers to chase and achieve her dreams. The social customs and traditions had made art of music and dance prohibited and below dignity and grace for a daughter of high class Brahmin family in which Savitribai had been born. After marriage when her father-in law arranged for her a female trainer and a Muslim tabla player by breaking many traditions, the rage and protest in the family forced him to withdraw her music lessons. It was her passionate love for singing and determination and the oppressive mechanism of the society that gave her the courage to step out of her marital home with her tabla player, Ghulam Saab. The journey ahead was not easy for her as she had to struggle through a life of hardships and disgrace. As Madhu comments:

In Neemgaon she was 'the signer woman', and there was something derogatory about the words, yes, I can see that now, about the way they said them. To my father, she was 'Savitribai'. But when he said the name, when he spoke of her, there was respect and admiration in his voice. To Babu, she was 'that Bai', by which he meant 'that woman'- the words accompanied by a movement of the head which said, 'the woman next door', as well as indicated a kind of rude contempt for her. (29)

However, after suffering numerous trials and tribulations she becomes a professional singer and reaches the apex of success. Shashi Deshpande brings to light the double standards prevailing in the society. Fifty years ago Savitribai was denied tutelage by Pundit Kushinath Buwa when she approached him within the precincts of marriage on the pretext that music was not a good profession for a respectably married woman. Ironically, she was allowed in this male sphere when she walked out of her marriage. Similarly, fifty years later Chandru, Madhu's friend, the modern man, having affairs with women even after marriage, advises her not to write of his father having been Bai's doctor as people would think otherwise. It is the notion of respectability that confines a woman's talents, desires and aspirations; and demands a heavy sacrifice from her.

However, Deshpande does not depict one sided picture of the society. She does not advocate a split in the family, abandonment of children and disruption of relationships. In the relationship between Hari and Lata, Madhu observes that Hari does not try to fit Lata into a role and does not mind adjusting to her life. Deshpande portrays repositioning of women in the society through Lata and Hari. Hari has not only retained his male role but also he cooks a meal, helps her in looking after her father, enjoys watching Lata cleaning her scooter and so on. This changed male response is actually the pillar on which the position of women in the society rests. While in the process of writing Savitribai's biography Madhu comes across the memories of her aunt Leela who is reminded to her by Hari. Madhu had spent a good deal of time with Leela and her family after her father's death as she was her mother's eldest sister. She tries to trace similarities between her aunt Leela and Savtribai:

I've begun thinking that in writing about Bai, I'm writing about Leela as well. And my mother and all those women who reached beyond their grasp. 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, my mother running in her bare feet, using her body as an instrument for speed- yes,

they're in it together. But they paid the price for their attempts to break out.  
(248)

Leela, the other strong woman in the novel is considered the black sheep of the family. She is a widow who remarried and what was worse, infinitely worse, married a Christian man. The family keeps these memories alive while Leela's good work as a teacher and social worker are easily forgotten. She is a woman who is ahead not only of her own generation, but the next one as well. Leela spends the best part of her life living in the chawls, wearing coarse saris, in very modest circumstances, waging war against oppression of any kind. She courts arrests. Unlike Bai she does not yearn for the limelight. Leela appears to successfully combine the roles of the public hero for Hari, and the personal hero for Madhu. The passionate, independence-loving Leela is the hope for the women of the future. Her heroism is the fixed symbol at the novel's centre of female potential and human possibility. She is a vibrant public figure. She balances that role superbly well with that of a loving wife and mother. And in this journey of her life her husband Joe is not a road block. He embodies relationships not as a possession but as a partnership. For him love is an adult emotion which requires respect for each other's independence and individual identities. Whereas Leela's earlier life is marked by oppression by her family members, her later life story symbolises economic independence, familial support and a dignity and poise that comes from her own grit and determination as well as the emancipation and equality that she shares with her husband. The trajectory of these female characters of various age groups belonging to different time periods portrays the hurdles and pains suffered by them in their voyage. Also, the novel depicts the impact of changed male response in women's search for their position in society. Deshpande seems to convey that female Bildungsroman should not be a reaction against oppression and suppression of the familial and social constructs, but it should be a liberating and strengthening journey where men and women are partners in the process and both are benefitted.

To conclude Deshpande's words from her short story "The Day of the Golden Deer", are in the true spirit of female Bildungsroman: "I have to fight now; the demons of fear, hate, self-pity and bitterness. Yes and anger too. Only when I have vanquished these will I emerge out of the forest of exile once more" (208).

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