



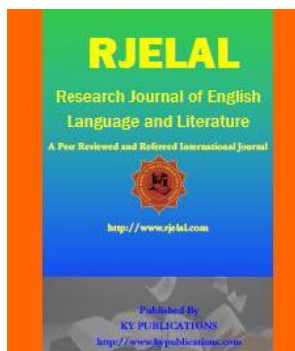
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EARNEST VOICE: AN ENCOUNTER WITH SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *SMALL REMEDIES*

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ABSTRACT

The traditional Hindu worldview saw a man's life as defined by four distinct phases and the roles he was required to play in each. The second of these four stages was the *grhasthasrama* in which he played the role of the householder. Marriage in turn made it possible for him to perform sacrifices to the gods and to procreate sons. It apparently did not seem to occur to anyone that if there were no daughters there could be no sons.

Therefore, the debate over equality, its meaning and how it may be achieved and its relevance to women's liberation is a debate which is difficult to overcome as its terms are not easily defined. Shashi Deshpande in her novel *Small Remedies* explores this earnest voice in a woman set on a journey of self discovery, a journey which will bring past and present within a single pair of brackets, which will heal the wounds even if it does not provide all the answers.

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Identity Crises and a Quest for self-definition are basic to the human world. Such is the concern for identity that it has become a charismatic term with its secure achievement regarded as equivalent to personal salvation. As in life, the crises and the quest have come to occupy a crucial place in Modern Literature also.

Identity includes the state of Becoming and Being. Self seeks to fulfil and realize itself at different levels and in varied roles. When self is hampered in its fulfillment through various roles, it generates identity crisis which is a state of emotional and intellectual chaos and confusion regarding personal life and the world around. This crisis brings alienation and alienation further aggravates the crises. Baffled by the existential questions and worldly queries, man takes up a quest to comprehend the core of experience and to attain the state where pluralities of self and experience end to give a vision of the eternal truth. In the process he tries to understand his internal and external world, to figure out his place in the scheme

of things and to win recognition for his unique self. The entire gamut of experience is ransacked afresh. He explores his mind, body, soul and relates himself to various areas of experience at the physical and the metaphysical levels. He delves into the mysteries of human life and participates in all the ups and downs, the hopes and aspirations, the fears and frustrations – to understand life and chalk out the right course. All this is a part of man's desire to understand and be understood.

Quest for self-definition assumes different forms in different individuals. At times even a single individual takes up the quest at different levels of being. At the personal level, the quest is for evolution of a personal value system and at the social level, it is a search for a faith which could bring order to the chaos. The purpose behind the entire quest is to attain a personal view of life and world which could make existence meaningful and give a sense of belonging. Modern Literature embodies the entire process of self-definition which

includes the crises of self, the quest and the subsequent discoveries.

In case of women litterateurs the crises is gender-generated, as it is a crises of existence in a patriarchal set-up which, for all its proclaimed liberal-mindedness, has not really accorded an equal status to women. Being woman and human are still mutually exclusive. In a third world country like India the crises assumes monstrous proportions where, not to talk of finer points like equality, the basic question is survival itself with heinous crimes like female-foeticide, infanticide in vogue and barbaric practices like bride-burning flourishing all around. Thus, Women-writing embodies this double quest- the quest for an identity and self-definition as a woman and the quest for an identity and self-definition as a human being. Modern Indo-Anglian women writers have also become increasingly conscious of their identity crises at various levels of being. Their identity crises as expressed in their writings is multiple and the quest for roots multi-dimensional. And the same is at focus in the fiction of Shashi Deshpande.

Shashi Deshpande is blessed with a gift of sharp psychological insight into the subtleties of human mind and society and aided by a richly evocative, unassuming and unpretentious style, is ideally suited to tread the labyrinthine tracks of human psyche and creditably present it in fiction. She, as a prominent novelist is well known in the literary circles for depicting the quotidian life of the average Indian and is strongly sensitive to the woman's predicament in a patriarchal setup. She writes about silent, sobbing women-mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, grandaunts, daughters and a whole lot of female. But her major preoccupation is to show how a housewife tries her level best to find a place for herself. Her main concern is the urge to find oneself, to create space for oneself, to grow on one's own. Thus through her fictional concerns and art, she has carved a niche for herself among Indian English Novelists.

Her novels present before us an enlightening study of the identity crises suffered by women emphasizing the need for roots, it is said that only a tree that has driven deep roots in the soil can put forth ample foliage and yield abundant fruit.

When this sense of belonging is disrupted, one suffers the identity crises. There is a need for an inward search to realize one's true self or a quest for self-definition. She is tuned to the voices behind the silence struggling to find a place for themselves. And the focus is on analyzing the voices behind the silence in her novel *Small Remedies*.

Through the novel *Small Remedies* (2000), Deshpande projects the quest for self-realization of Indian woman in a hostile patriarchal society. Using the stories of two woman – Leela, the trade union activist and Savitri Bai Indorekar, the ageing diva of the Gwalior Gharana- as the background, Shashi Deshpande explores her favourite theme of a woman set on a journey of self discovery, a journey which will bring past and present within a single pair of brackets, which will heal the wounds even if it does not provide all the answers.

The true meaning of *Small Remedies* is determined by the events which happen in the life of four female characters- Madhu, Leela, Savitri Bai Indorekar and Hasina. All of them have to confront various challenges and other complexities which are connected with their domestic and social life. The novelist graphically depicts Madhu as a doting mother and wife, Leela and Savitri Bai Indorekar as representatives of the new woman who symbolize independence. Hasina is portrayed as a woman who entertains a burning desire to exploit her latent virtues. This way she works very hard to attain a minimum level of perfection which is intertwined with the idea of female autonomy.

Madhu has been depicted as a motherless child brought up by her father. Soon her father also dies and in her grief she is guided by an uncontrollable impulse that makes her body respond to the confronting embrace of a friend of her father. But soon, she finds herself in a new town and a house full of new people, at her aunt Leela's place. The novelist shows how her bitter experiences with her cousin, Paula, make her feel extremely lonely. Madhu passes through a phase of complete loss of identity in her new surroundings. Madhu realizes that she is like a second rate citizen, an alien in their house.

Finally, Madhu decides to leave her studies and start working. She decides: "But I am determined. I will

start working. I will earn my own money, become independent" (SR 83). Madhu wants to lead a life of self-respect and dignity. She does not want to stick to the dependence syndrome. She believes that one should not be cowed down by the challenges of life. She emerges as a woman with indomitable courage.

On the other hand Leela is extremely unconventional and does not have any faith in the established norms set by the society for women. She is also called as the black sheep of the family. Being a widow she marries a Christian man. This clearly illustrates that the social codes prevalent in the society are not kind to women. A widow has to take a bold stand in order to survive in an otherwise hostile society. The novelist infact shows how a woman is subjected to the tyranny inflicted upon her. The novelist is of the view that widows should be allowed to lead their lives according to their will. That is why Leela refuses to submit herself before the will of the traditional society. She is assertive and tells her family members that she does not want to lead a "life of reasonable comfort". Leela infact wants to be a decision maker of her own life because she wants to lead an independent life. She wants to choose her own path. That is why she appreciates the independent nature of Madhu.

Savitri Bai Indorekar is another important female character who breaks the limits set for women by an orthodox society. Like a modern woman she asserts her independent will. Her well defined approach towards life is combined with realistic approach which defies the formal and institutional constraints in a very dextrous manner. She established new relationships in order to transform her dream of becoming a great classical singer into reality. Thus the character of Savitri Bai Indorekar raises certain vital social issues which serves as a telling comment on the present day Indian society.

Thus, Shashi Deshpande through her female protagonists, has artistically explored their quest for self-definition and self realization. These women weer away from their time worn function of bolstering the male ego by sublimation or debasement of self. They also abandon the falselessness and negation of identity which resulted from the masochistic pride which woman derived

from suffering at the hands of a brow-beating and oppressive male. These women do not care to be invested with 'the Halo of a Self-Sacrificing goddess'.

Thus Shashi Deshpande being a novelist of high order and fine sensibility has employed her writings as a vehicle to probe into women's lives and experiences. She confesses that only a woman writer can portray and tell the complete story of a woman; from the inside as it were. She presents the concept of a New Woman in the context of present day world situation in general and Indian society in particular. She believes that woman should know their true self and identity, otherwise she would be exploited by the selfish elements. She brings into focus not only the plight of women in society but suggests the solution of the problem. She advocates the plea of reformation to bring woman at par with men so that she is not exploited ruthlessly in a male dominated society. The underlying motive is to evolve a new set of values which could prevent them from cracking under the pressures of a chaotic world and to save the society from becoming an emotional and moral wasteland. Thus the Earnest Voice.

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