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On her own terms

To achieve something... you have got to be hard and ruthless... There is no other way of being a saint. Or a painter. A writer.' This unexpected first paragraph of *That Long Silence* gives us a clue to Shashi Deshpande's approach to writing, says well-known critic MEENAKSHI MUKHERJEE.



WHILE accepting the Sahitya Akademi Award about a decade ago, Shashi Deshpande had expressed her impatience with reviewers who routinely used words like "sensitivity" and "sensibility" if the writer happened to be a woman. She said she herself thought of her work in terms of strength. Unfortunately, the stereotype of a frail and intense novelist writing mainly about women's victimhood has dogged her far too long. The reason for this unfair labelling is not far to seek. Shashi Deshpande's early novels were published just at the time the post-Midnight's Children generation of writers was becoming big news. Since she refused to play by global rules, she could not be included in this league. The only other exportable slot the media could think of was the Champion of Oppressed Women. But anyone who has read her novels carefully knows that her special value lies elsewhere - in an uncompromising toughness, in her attempts to do what has never been attempted in English, her insistence on being read on her own terms and a refusal to be packaged according to the demands of the market.

"To achieve something ... you have got to be hard and ruthless... There is no other way of being a saint. Or a painter. A writer." This unexpected first paragraph of *That Long Silence* (1988) is the voice of the narrator, but it also gives us a clue to the author's approach to writing. *Small Remedies*, Deshpande's sixth and recent novel, is the most confident assertion of this strength and a deliberate denial of sentimentality. With total control over her unwieldy material, she weaves a fabric of intricate design in this novel in which music forms the organising strand. At the centre of the sprawling narrative is a woman called Madhu Saptarishi engaged in writing the biography of the singer Savitribai Indorekar, a living legend of the Gwalior

gharana. It is not voluntary labour undertaken for love or admiration, it is an assignment she has been asked to do. The biographer's detachment from her subject makes it possible to make clear-eyed inquiries into the larger problems of writing a life - anyone's life, even one's own. Madhu realises that a chronological account will not do because "we see our lives through memories, and memories are fractured, fragmented, almost always cutting across time". Mere facts do not cohere, only the glue of imagination can join them into a plausible narrative. Aware of the enormous power of words which can sculpt a life and congeal a person into a fixed image, Madhu is overwhelmed by her own omnipotence because she can create an infinite range of Savitribais - a great "rebel who defies the conventions of her time. The feminist who lived her life on her own terms. The great artist who sacrificed everything for the cause of her art" or the impetuous lover who abandoned a secure married life in a Brahmin household to live with her Muslim accompanist. Madhu's publishers want a trendy feminist biography: "Victim stories are out of fashion, heroines are in". But Madhu cannot impose the new concept of "heroinism" on an old fashioned woman who whitewashes her life through selective amnesia.

Each session with the Bai (as the great singer is called) triggers off Madhu's own memories, some of them connected with Munni, Bai's daughter by this Muslim partner who had been Madhu's playmate once; some entirely unconnected with Bai and to do with Madhu's own troubled life. We do not know the exact nature of her problems until quite late in the novel, but we do know that Madhu's friends feel that working on this assignment may be a therapy, helping her to come to terms with her own personal trauma. The author is in no great hurry to get on with the story. The narrative unfolds leisurely like a raaga, beginning with aalap, continuing with vistaar, gradually gaining momentum in a quickening spiral of suspense eventually to achieve a cathartic calm.

Of the four remarkable novels I have read in recent times that deal with music - Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music*, Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Bani Basu's Bangla novel *Gandharvi* and now *Small Remedies*, Shashi Deshpande, I think, faces the toughest challenge. This has to do with the incompatibility between the discourse of Hindustani music and the English language. Naipaul once said "Narayan wrote in English about Indian life. This is actually a difficult thing to do, and Narayan solved the problems by appearing to ignore them." (New York Review Of Books, March 4, 1999). Deshpande seems to do the same here as she has always done in the past while conveying with seemingly effortless ease the sense of a loose, yet precise, networking of extended families and their convoluted hierarchies and equations. It is a difficult task in English which not only lacks adequate kinship terms but is also unable to carry the emotional burden of these relationships. Her early novel *Roots And Shadows* (1982) and the more recent *A Matter Of Time* (1996) are extraordinary attempts at exploring the essential aloneness of an individual while simultaneously celebrating the amorphous entity called family, which can by turns be claustrophobic and supportive. In *Small Remedies* too, the motherless Madhu is at first overwhelmed by the inclusive warmth of her husband's family: "Relationships swirl about me in long endless tapes that bind

everyone in a confused inextricable tangle. I have never seen anything like it. I enjoy it." Immediately after this however, there is an ironical comment deflating this euphoria.

But the vocabulary, the frame of reference and ambience of Indian classical music must have been even more intractable. Yet the language of *Small Remedies* shows no strain and occasionally, as in the description of Hasina's recital at the end, rises to create a rich and resonant climax. Although Madhu refuses to get emotional about music, there is precision in her descriptions, as in the recounting of the first big concert she attended as a child where Munni's mother sang, accompanied on the tabla by a man Munni refused to accept as father: "I kept my eyes steadily on him I remember, hoping he would smile again, single me out for recognition. But his eyes, once the music began, were on the singer. I can see his hands resting on the tabla in an absolute stillness. And then, pushing up his sleeves, making tiny, flexing movements of his hands, the hands finally coming down with deliberation on his instruments. The first deep resounding boom, the fingers flying as if they had taken wings, the steady beat, the two of them smiling at each other."

Munni, the daughter of this famous mother, professed to hate music. Ruthlessly discarded by Savitribai in her subsequent climb to respectability, this girl is the most vivid character in the novel. As a neighbour and companion she had once cast a brief, but strong, spell on the child Madhu and initiated her into adult secrets. Twelve-year-old Munni could enact entire Hindi films, repeating songs, dances and dialogues exactly, fabricated stories about herself and did things forbidden to other children. Looking back, Madhu now sees Munni's unashamed lies as an attempt to make sense of her insecure existence, to create a life-story to suit her dream, as Savitribai is now doing for the benefit of her biographer.

If *Small Remedies* is a book about writing a book, reflections on the impossibility of ever capturing in words the truth about any life, it is also about how the enterprise can take on a life of its own. Bai told Madhu that you can never plan a performance - you may choose the raaga and the bandish, "then you find the right pitch and begin ...", but then "all kinds of unexpected things can happen. You yourself are surprised." Madhu realises this is what happens in writing a book too. Choices are illusory, "plans go awry, rules are scattered, new discoveries lie in wait". Skeletons tumble out of long-locked private cupboards, public events like bomb blasts damage individual lives permanently.

Nothing in this novel fits any prior expectation. The mother Madhu lost in childhood is remembered not as an icon, but through her photograph as a teenaged athlete with two long plaits. Aunt Leela, a brahmin widow marries a most unlikely person from another religion with whom she lives happily even though they share neither food nor language. This aunt, a political activist living in a Bombay chawl, can be seen as a counterpoint to Bai, another woman of the same generation who too "reached beyond her grasp". Madhu might as well have written the biography of this rebel, but she was too close to her, and love might have disrupted the tenor of studied

detachment Madhu needs for survival.

In *Small Remedies*, Deshpande is attempting much more than she did in her earlier novels - all five of them different from each other - but smaller than this in scope. Her first novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1979) delved clinically into the pathology of a marriage where the woman was professionally more successful than the man. It was also a startling narrative experiment that came to grips with guilt and sadism. *The Binding Vine* dealt with social issues that go beyond the middle class. *A Matter Of Time* tackled with history and memory, both of a community and a family foregrounding an inexplicable act *vairagya*. But none of them gathered up, as this new novel does, in one large sweep, the plurality, diversity and contradictions of our contemporary culture where an Anthony Gonsalves (the reference to "Amar Akbar Anthony" is deliberate), a Hamidbhai and Joe can all be part of Madhu's extended family, and the daughter of Ghulam Saab can opt, though not very easily, to get accepted as Shailaja Joshi. Yet communal riots and violence alter the course of individual lives, and Hindu hooligans attempt to prevent Hasina from performing in a temple. Although Bombay is the real city of Madhu's adult life, many incidents take place in two fictional small towns of north Karnataka, one of them "famous for its writers and musicians" much like the actual Dharwad where Deshpande grew up. With casual ease, she makes visible the bilingualism of the region where varieties of rough Hindi and English bridge the gaps between Kannada and Marathi. It is not easy to incorporate so many social nuances in an introspective novel dealing with abstract questions. But then "a fascination for what is difficult" has always been Shashi Deshpande's forte.

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