CHAPTER 5
5. WOMEN AT THE CROSSROADS

Women in Deshpande’s novels establish themselves as independent beings free from the restrictions imposed by society, culture, and nature and also from their own fears and guilt. The vital insight that Shashi Deshpande brings to readers is that women should accept their own responsibilities for what they are and see how much they have contributed to their own victimization. “It is only through self-analysis and self-understanding, through vigilance and courage, they can begin to change their lives. They will have to fight their own battles, nobody is going to do it for them” (palkar 134). Deshpande is primarily concerned with the woman and her eternal quest for life.

The concept and image of women has undergone a positive change. No society can ever progress without an active participation of women who are an integral part of human civilization in its over all development. Shashi Deshpande evinces keen interest in the empowerment of women in the multifaceted aspect of life. The women of Shashi Deshpande face formidable challenges to gain their rightful place in the society. They are culture-specific traditional. The major problems faced by Shashi Deshpande’s women characters are the psychological conditioning and the gender discrimination, which determine the adult personality of the female child. Her educated middle-class women achieve this feminist consciousness.
5.1 SAVITRIBAI INDOREKAR: ROAD FROM REBELLION TO SUCCESS

In Small Remedies¹ using the stories of two women-Leela, the trade union activist and Savitribai 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.

In spite of Deshpande’s repeated denials of being a feminist writer, she creates characters who often contradict such statements. Savitribai is one such character, vividly portrayed and brought to life by the author. Physically she appears to be a frail woman. Looking back, Madhu remembers her as:

“A small sized woman. Even from my child’s perspective she had seemed petite. Age and illness have so shrunk her that she’s a doll-sized woman now…. The skin is fine and delicate, even if it is crinkled like tissue paper. Her arms are slim and firm, but the hands, with their branching of veins, seem incongruously large for those delicate arms.”²

She is, however, imperious in her attitude to her servants, students, and even her biographer, often giving her instructions on how to conduct the interview. It needed tremendous grit and determination to be born in a traditional, orthodox Brahmin family and make a name for oneself in the field of classical music. Madhu observes the unspoken resentment in Bai’s voice when she recalls how she was abruptly asked by her grandmother to stop singing when she was performing as a child during the family gathering. Madhu herself recollects how “In Neemgoan she was ‘the singer woman’ and
there was something derogatory about the words, yes, I can see that now, about the way they said them"(29).

But Madhu refuses to pander to the publisher’s wishes to write a trendy feminist biography. They feel that “Victim stories are out of fashion, heroines are in”(167) Madhu, however, “Cannot impose the new concept of heroinism on an old-fashioned woman who whitewashes her life through selective amnesia”2. She records the life of a young woman who had lived a sheltered life, of a daughter-in-law of an affluent Brahmin family, a woman who even as a child had been part of a large family. For a woman with such a background to elope with a Muslim tabla player and live in a strange town among total strangers must have required immense courage.

That there are different yardsticks for men and women in our society is obvious to Madhu who, in her childhood, was a witness to the rejection of Savitribai by conventional society. She remembers how in Neemgaon “each family had its place marked out for it according to religion, caste, money, family background, etc.” (138)

She is aware that her father with his unorthodox ways was an oddity. Being a widower and bringing up a daughter on his own with only a male servant at home, observing no rituals or religious customs and openly indulging in a drink or two every evening, he obviously stood out in a conservative place like Neemgaon. But, looking back, Madhu realizes that while people were willing to overlook her father’s eccentricities and his foibles they were not so generous when it came to accepting Savitribai. “Being a man he could get away with much. He could live the way he wanted without open censure or disapproval”; (139). It is only when a woman dares to defy
convention that people are shocked. As Madhu observes, “in a sense, neither of us belonged. Muni’s family, with her singer mother, absent father and another man— a muslim-sharing the home, was of course radically, shockingly different.” (138).

Madhu also gives the example of Savitribai’s father-in-law, who had a mistress, a singer famous for her Thumri singing. It was common knowledge that he visited her regularly. The women looked on in amusement and gossiped about it. They wondered at his choice of a mistress but there was never any outrage over the fact. “That he had a mistress was accepted, a wife from one’s own class, a mistress from another— this was normal”. (220).

For a man to indulge in his love of music and even to have a singer for a mistress was alright. But, for a daughter-in-law to be learning music seriously, as if she was going to be a professional, was scandalous and unthinkable. Though Bai had the support and encouragement of her father-in-law, Madhu could imagine the anger, contempt and ridicule she had to face from the other women when she returned to her life among the women, after her music classes. She could imagine the jibes and the hostility and the way she would have been cast aside like an untouchable. She says:

“To be set apart from your own kind, not to be able to conform, to flout the rules laid down, is to lay yourself open to cruelty. Animals know this, they do it more openly, and their cruelty towards the deviant is never concealed. But the subtle cruelty of persistent hostility leaves deeper wounds. There’s always the temptation to succumb, to go back to the normal path and be accepted. To resist the temptation speaks of great courage. (221)
Madhu also remembers the gossip surrounding Bai in Neemgaon. There was a station director who frequented Bai’s house and got her many contracts with the radio, and was generally believed to be her lover. Madhu remembers the children teasing Munni and calling him her *mama*, a kind of euphemism for a mother’s lover. Bai denies the existence of any lover, while recounting her story to Madhu. But to the town, in Madhu’s childhood, it was very simple—why would a man go out of his way to do so many favours for a woman, why would he visit her so often? All such assumptions ending finally in the conclusion: “A woman who’d left her husband’s home—what morals would she have, any way!” (222)

Madhu is left quite confused at times about Bai’s courage or lack of it. She had, undoubtedly, led the most unconventional life anyone in her society would ever imagine. But behind these acts of bravado was a woman who wanted to conform, to be accepted by society.

Savitribai was not the stereotypical feminist with a devil may-care attitude. This is evident in her blanking out Ghulam Saab’s name while relating a story of her life to Madhu, her biographer. This reveals her anxiety to cover up her youthful indiscretions in order to present a picture of respectability. She even goes to the extent of hiding the details of her daughter born through her association with Ghulam Saab. Madhu herself is a doting mother, grieving over the death of her son.

Madhu feels that she can give Bai the immortality she desires only if she is willing to pay the price of revealing her daughter to the world—a daughter whose existences she had successfully obliterated until then. She cannot understand why, when she had the courage to walk out on her marriage
and family, she was so frightened to reveal the existence of her child. She wonders how:

“She gave that child the name ‘Indorekar’ – the name she adopted as a singer- not comprising either her maiden name or her married one. Meenakshi Indorekar. Making her out as her child alone, not the child of her marriage, not the child of her lover. This surely is a statement I cannot ignore?” (169)

Munni, however, desperately hankered after the name her mother had left behind and went to great lengths to dissociate herself from her father and, after a while, her mother, Bai had found conventional life stultifying, but Munni yearned for it all her life. As a child Madhu recollected how Munni refused to accept Ghulam Saab as her father and instead concocted stories about a lawyer father who lived in Pune. She also remembered how the girls in their neighbourhood tormented her with questions:

  What’s your name?
  What’s your father’s name?
  Where is your father?
  Who’s the man who lives with your mother? (77)

Years later when Madhu met Munni in a bus and recognized her, the latter refused to answer to the name of ‘Munni’ or even acknowledge her childhood friend. She declared that her name was ‘Shailaja Joshi’, trying as it were, to desperately wipe out any connection with her past.

Deshpande, while writing of people like Savitribai and Leela, people who dared to be different, has also created characters like Munni who desperately seek the approval of society. Malathi Mathur, a reviewer, writes:
“At the other end of the spectrum is Munni, Savitribai’s daughter who turns her back on her mother and all that she stands for, in a desperate desire to conform, having encountered early in life the poisoned barbs that society levels against those who dare to be different”. 4

Apart from Savitribai, Madhu’s narrative also includes the saga of another equally, or perhaps more, remarkable woman, her aunt Leela who was “ahead not only of her generation, but the next one as well.”(94) She was a fiercely independent woman and was strongly committed to the communist ideology. She had participated in the Quit India Movement, but was critical of Gandhiji’s principles of Ahinsa and Satyagraha and thought that it was ridiculous to allow oneself to be beaten up. As she grew older, however, she mellowed down and regretted some of her actions. It was evident that she was no run-of-the-mill activist, but a woman who had the courage of her convictions. She resigned from her party when she felt that the party’s reaction to a political situation was not appropriate.

Though Leela was a generation older than Madhu, she was financially independent and supported herself. When her first husband, Vasanth, died she took up a job and educated her brother-in-law. She lived in the crowded chawls among the cotton mills and worked for the welfare of the women afflicted with TB. It was this, which first brought her into contact with her second husband, Joe, a doctor who had established a clinic especially for TB patients.

Leela and Joe were poles apart and Madhu exclaims at the strangeness of Joe falling madly in love with her. He was a widower with two children, spoke impeccable English and was very widely read, quoting from his
favourite writers at the drop of a hat. Literature and music were two great forces of his life, in addition to medicine. Leela, on the other hand, wore ‘ayah saries’, according to Phillio, Joe’s housekeeper. She spoke no English and knew nothing of literature or music. She had no sense of humour, according to Joe. But theirs was a wonderful companionship and a beautiful relationship, according to Madhu.

Leela was a person who disapproves of a life that did not look beyond one’s own self. Madhu recollects her reaction to the film ‘Devdas’. When she remained silent for a long time after watching the film, Madhu thought that the film had evoked memories of her dead husband, who like the hero of the film had died of TB. But what Leela had to say surprised and amused Madhu, Joe and Tony: “Now I know,” she said, as if she had solved a puzzle. “Now I know why that poor man drank so much. He had nothing to do; he didn’t have any work at all…. If an intelligent man like him remains idle, what else can he do but take to drink?” (96)

Leela disliked the superior status her family gave itself and wondered what made them so special. She did not find anything even remotely worthy in their holding on to the lands, which they had inherited. She did not believe in the caste system and was the only one among Madhu’s relatives who accepted Madhu’s parents’ marriage and invited them to stay with her when they had no place of their own.

Leela was a passionate believer in the communist ideology but did not hesitate to speak up against the party when the need arose. After putting in years of hard work. She was sidelined by the party bosses and never reached the top of the hierarchy, while men who worked under her reached there easily
enough. Once, a widow of a sitting member, who was killed, was given a ticket to stand for elections. This provoked Leela, who had never earlier complained. To comment, "It seems you’ve got to become a widow for them to remember that you exist." (224) This is, indeed, a telling statement on the chauvinism that rules all political parties.

Savitribai too understood how much more difficult it was for women to rise to the top when compared to men. Madhu wondered if she had ever heard the phrase ‘gender discrimination’, but she had certainly experienced and accepted it as the normal course of things. Madhu remembers how she had once commented caustically speaking of a young instrumentalist who had reached the pinnacle in no time: "Now a days they become ustad and pundit even before they have proper moustaches". (224)

At the foreground of the novel is the story of the narrator Madhu herself. She is commissioned to write the biography of Savitribai. She had always been intrigued, even as a child by Bai’s relationship with Ghulam Saab and Mumi, their daughter. The novel covers that period of her life when she is grieving over the death of her only child, Aditya. In remembering and retelling the stories of Leela, Savitribai and Mumi, she presents the glaring inequalities in gender in society. The pity of it is that some of the victims are not even aware of the injustices heaped on them.

Madhu herself is a victim of sorts of which the reader is aware only towards the end of the novel. She had been brought up as a child by two men—her father and Babu, a male servant, but she had no complaints. On the other hand, she felt pity for the children who seemed to be constantly harrassed by their mothers. She says: "Motherless child that I am. Motherhood is an
unknown world to me. The mothers I see in my childhood are drab creatures, forever working, forever scolding their children, certainly they are not the women to arouse a sense of deprivation in me. (182)

Deshpande spares no effort to present the picture of life as it is, without conforming to stereotypes. This is all the more obvious in her portrayal of motherhood, which she seldom glorifies. Her protagonist, Madhu, says:

"I get some images of motherhood in the movies I see myself through the songs that speak of my ‘ma ka pyar’. But real life shows me something entirely different. Muni’s mother who ignored her daughter; Ketaki’s mother, stern, dictatorial and so partial to her son; Sunanda, sweetly devious and manipulating. Som’s mother, so demanding-none of them conform to the white-clad, sacrificing, sobbing mother of the movies. (183)

But Madhu herself, turned out to be a doting mother and ever perceptive of her son’s every need therefore it was all the more tragic when Aditya, her son, died in a bomb blast.

Madhu’s estrangement with her husband, Som, began earlier than this tragedy, when Madhu, waking up after a nightmare, one night, revealed to him a secret which she had locked up in the innermost recesses of her mind. She had slept with a man when she was only fifteen, a man who later committed suicide. Som is unable to accept this of his wife. As one who had been a good husband by any standards and shared a wonderful relationship with his wife, he is now unable to come to terms with this news. He is totally devastated. Madhu is unable to comprehend this: But it’s the single act of sex that Som holds on to, it’s this fact that he can’t let go of, as if it’s been welded into his
palm. Purity, chastity, an intact hymen—these are the things Som is thinking of, these are the truths that matter. (262)

It does not matter that Som himself had a full-fledged relationship with another woman before his marriage. It is a typical situation where a man may have any number of affairs but expects his wife to be a virgin. It’s all the more indigestible to Som that his wife had been willing partner. Madhu thinks “that he could, perhaps, have borne: that I had been raped, forced into the act, that I was a victim, not a participant” (260)

Our society has been so conditioned as to categorize women as immoral on the slightest deviation on their part from the normal course of behavior. Madhu observed how Hari and Lata looked at her when she returned after inadvertently spending a night in a hotel room with Chandru. She thinks:

It does not matter that Chandru is Som’s friend and Chandru and I had been friends as well for nearly twenty-five years. I remember the waiter’s look last night, when he brought us our dinner, the gleam in his eyes when they rested on me.

Men and women can never be friends. Men can be brothers, father, lovers, husbands, but never friends—is that how it is? (254)

Shashi Deshpande has repeatedly expressed her displeasure at being considered the champion on oppressed women. It is, indeed, a tribute to her that some of the reviewers recognize her for what she is. Malti Mathur writes: “In portraying struggles of these women for identity, Shashi Deshpande waves no feminist banners, launches into no rapid diatribes. She drives her point home with great subtlety and delicacy.”
5.2 MADHU AND LEELA: GENDER ISSUES AND SMALL REMEDIES.

In the preceding chapter we have discussed the gender discrimination that exist in our Indian society. The growth of a girl in Indian society is seen mainly in relation to her attitude towards her family and her duty towards it, coming into sharp conflict with the sense of family duty, is the girl's burgeoning feeling of self-identity. It is in the course of this conflict that the full identity of the girl is formed. The successful formation of this identity depends upon the delicate balance that a girl maintains between submission and revolt. Growth into maturity and selfhood is frequently tested in family situation in the course of confrontation with adults.

The burden of the female child is more irksome than that of the male child because aspects of her body, the function of her femaleness intrude upon the growth of her personality. Not only the parents but also the society as a whole is influenced by the physical appearance of a girl child. It is in the adjustment that the family makes to the changing biological processes, and the girls attitude towards the family and parents that the identity of a child gets defined and firmly established.

Madhu was a motherless child brought up by her father and a servant, Babu. But the love and affection she received from them gave her a secure childhood. Her father's death when she was fifteen shatters the adolescent girl. Her grief coupled with the knowledge of another woman in her father's life alienates Madhu. In her grief Madhu is guided by an uncontrollable impulse that makes her body respond to the comforting embrace of a friend of a friend of her father's. His effort to console her leads to a sexual encounter between
the two. But immediately after the incident Madhu goes to Bombay to see her
dying father, and the sorrow that engulfs her after his death blanks the incident
from her memory. The death of her only parent cuts her away from her roots
and Madhu finds herself lonely and alienated from everyone. Having no
knowledge of any relative Madhu is troubled when she knows that her father
left her in the care of an aunt. Her whole life changes when she finds herself in
a new town and a house full of new people. Her stay in her aunt Leela’s house
proves to be a strange experience. In the beginning she is unable to relate to
Leela’s husband, Joe as her uncle and his hostile children, Paula and Tony as
her half cousins. Madhu passes through a phase of complete loss of identity in
her new surroundings amongst strangers. As she later says

“It was not only the knowledge that I was merely passing through, that
I would be going to the hostel in a month; it was the unreality of the
situation I found myself in, which alienated me from my surroundings.
My father dead, Babu gone, I knew not where, the home that had been
mine ever since I could remember, no longer there- these things made
me suddenly a stranger to my own life. As if I had been moved
sideways, away from my place. My own life had ceased to exist and I
could only watch, from a distance, others living out their lives.” (44).

Madhu who introduces there two women into our lives are not a mere
passive story-teller like the chronicler in Pushkin’s “Boris Gudenow”. She is
very much of a mitgestalter, a creator with great potential. Though her
intention is to write the biography of Savitri Bai Indorekar, Madhu, in coming
to Bhavanipur, is attempting to unravel the puzzle that is past, present and
future, understand the vagaries of time’s hands and find remedies to the blows life so nonchalantly hands over.

Although Joe and Leela soon make her comfortable and loved, and she even develops a friendly relationship with Tony, Madhu decides to shift to a hostel. After finishing her graduation, waiting to be financially independent, she decides to take a job. Joe’s friend, Hamid Bhai’s offered to work for his magazine ‘City Views’ comes as a welcome opportunity for Madhu. To her, the job in, which she edited or rewrote most of the articles and the small room that Hamid Bhai rented her becomes symbols of her independent identity. The sense of fulfillment that Madhu gets from her new job and her home, small though it was, makes her overlook her colleague Dalvi’s hatred and his attempts to harass her. The appreciation and self-fulfillment that she receives gives her pride and a sense of self-satisfaction. And Madhu after long years of alienation becomes aware of her needs and aspires to fulfill them.

Tony’s frequent visits to Madhu’s room along with his friends brings her close to Chandru and Som. Gradually the three make her room their weekend haunt. Her friendship with Som blossoms into love and with her marriage to Som Madhu becomes the part of a real family for the first time. But it is her son Aditya’s birth that finally makes Madhu identify herself and find roots in this world. According to her “A child’s birth is a rebirth for woman, its like becoming part of the world once again” (88). Motherhood gives a new sense of worth and her whole self, her view, her desires all change according to it. She later recalls that period of her life as “Motherhood takes over my life, it makes me over into an entirely different person. The in-control-of – she Madhu is lost, gone forever. It’s my baby’s dependence that
changes me; my place in the universal is marked out now” (183). Adit becomes the center of her universe and she gives up her job to become a devoted mother. Her new identity brings in new fears and new dreams. She is overcome with the fear of Adit’s welfare. A book called ‘Small Remedies’, full of tips for child care becomes the bible for the motherless and inexperienced Madhu. For years Madhu lives with one ambition-the welfare of her son.

However the peace and happiness that she had been enjoying are interrupted by Madhu’s revelation of a past incident. A painting at an exhibition brings back to her mind that one incident from her past- her sexual encounter with her father’s friend. The knowledge that he committed suicide suddenly fills her with guilt and in a state of shock she tells Som about this incident of her life which she had consciously or unconsciously blacked out. But Som holds on to the single fact of her lost chastity. Madhu later recalls:

“ 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. Purity, chastity, an intact hymen-there are the things Som is thinking of, these are the truths that matter” (262).

Since that day Madhu’s impeccable world comes crumbling down like a pack of cards. Som is haunted by her past and becomes suspicious and loathsome towards her. Their days and nights are spent in fights, which exhibit nothing but hateful insinuations for each other. Troubled by his parent’s behavior Adit comes to interrupt one such fight during which he finds his father banging his mother’s head against the wall. Later Madhu cannot recall exactly who had shouted at Aditya to go away. But one of them had, and Aditya in a state of shock walked out-never to return. His death in a bomb
blast engulfs them in grief and emptiness. Madhu’s world is shattered, Aditya the centre of her life, whose needs and welfare had occupied her life for seventeen years is untraceable. She waits for him to return and in a state of shock she walks the streets of Bombay looking for him. She sits by the telephone waiting for his call. Completely out of touch with reality, Madhu’s days are spent in uncertainty and nothing makes her accept Adit’s death. Even when Som tries to tell her about the riots in the city, the various bomb blasts, Madhu does not care, as she remains pre-occupied with her search for Aditya. She wanders through the streets of Bombay and feels rewarded when she imagines that she has caught a glimpse of him. Only when confronted by Som at the end of one such day, does Madhu accept the truth that Adit was dead and he would never come back? But with reality comes alienation, of having lost her role of a mother that had been occupation for seventeen years. Tony, Rekha, Ketaki Chandru, Som all try to bring her out of her cocoon but nothing in life interests Madhu any more.

The novel opens with the sentence, “This is Som’s story” (1). It turns out soon that it is rather Madhu’s story. Madhu, who, enclosed in a fog of bereavement caused by the death of her only son, seventeen-year-old Adit, while mulling over past incidents, remembers her quoting once T.S. Eliot’s words, “In the life of one man, never the same time returns” (3). The occasion was a small gathering after Joe’s- Leela’s husband’s- death. Som was telling them about the party Joe’s students had thrown at the retirement of their beloved teacher. And how after a marathon party, Joe had remarked, “that was wonderful, absolutely wonderful. Shall we do this again tomorrow?”(3) It was then, out of the blue, that Madhu had quoted Eliot’s famous sentence fro m
The Murder in the Cathedral. Words which had silenced everyone assembled there showed them how ominously empty life can be. It was Tony who with a light remark had saved the situation, pulling them back from the abyss.

Thinking of this incident now, Madhu feels that you can neither undo nor repeat what has happened, that the past is irrevocable, that “Time moves on relentlessly and you have to go along with it” (5). There is no other alternative. Absolutely none. There is no cure to life’s ills, no prevention.

That the Ganeshas in niches, the decorated thresholds, the mango leaf torans, the Oms, the Swastikas, the charm and amulets- (are all designed) to keep disaster at bay, to stave off the nemesis of a jealous god (81).

Nothing like that will help. No mantra can ward off the evil eyes. Even thinking philosophically “to get happiness, you’ve got to accept the sorrow and the pain as well” (81) is futile; such thoughts do no make it any easier to bear the past, do not lessen the pain.

Madhu is like Kisa Gotami whose search for someone who can bring life back to her dead child had taken her to the great teacher Gasutama Buddha himself. On seeing the distraught mother fiercely holding the lifeless body of her child in her arms, Buddha had told her that he would be able to bring her back to life if she would bring a fistful of mustard seeds from one such home where there has been no death. Gautama Buddha’s Kisa Gotami had then gone- with a heart brimming with hope- in search of the mustard seeds that world revive her son. The people in all the homes on whose doors she had knocked upon were ready to give her a handful of mustard seeds but from none could she accept the life giving seeds, as there was no house, which was not visited by death. Kisa Gotami, who goes door to door, realizes, finally, that
in a man’s life death is as certain as birth, goes back to Buddha with a calm mind, joins his sangha, and finds peace. The search for tiny mustard seeds had acted like a soothing remedy to what had come across like an eternal pain.

She knows that even if there are no dreams left for her because of Adit’s death, life has to be lived. That nothing works against mortality. Mustard seeds to protect us from evil, blessings to confer long life—nothing works. Simple remedies? No, they’re desperate remedies and we go on with them because, in truth, there is nothing else (315).

Madhu’s attention is diverted from her grief when Chandru coerces her into taking the job of writing the biography of Savitri Bai. In Bhavanipur where Savitri Bai, the singing legend of Gwalior Gharana, lives, Madhu takes residence in the house of a young and loving couple Lata and Hari. She accepts the change as she tells herself that she’s here to forget the horror of Adit’s death. Lata and Hari fail in their efforts to make Madhu a part of their life, as she remains aloof. During the daytime Madhu engages herself in her work and remains an indifferent observer in the life of people around her. Madhu’s grief makes her night as most difficult to bear.

Even Tony’s visit does not help Madhu shed her grief. It is only gradually that she becomes more than a silent observer of Lata and Hari. Lata’s affection and sincere efforts pay off but it is Hari who reveals to Madhu his connection with her mother and begins to call her ‘Kaku’. Thus for the first time Hari brings Madhu back in the real world by initiating her to new relationship. Madhu comes out of her reminiscence of Adit as Hari quizzes her on the life of her aunt Leela. In spite of her desire to remain isolated and detached, Madhu slowly gets involved in the lives of the people around her.
Bai’s sudden stroke and Hari’s accident creates a crisis, which brings her in the centre of all action. Madhu’s final break down and her talking about Aditya’s death proves to be cathartic for her. For the first time since Aditya’s death she opens up and tells Hari of her mindless waiting for her son. Carefully avoiding the memories of her fights with Som she confides in Hari, telling him about her hope of seeing Aditya again, which kept her alive. And her final break down when she is frustrated in her attempts to find Adit. For the first time she speaks of the sorrow of not being there’re at his final moment. Voicing her anguish she says “I can’t come to terms with my ignorance of those days, I am obsessed by the need to reclaim them from the darkness. Sometimes I think I could have borne his death if I had been able to be with him, to see him die. We have a right to share it, the most profound human experience of death, with those we love, we have a right to be with them, to travel part of the way, even if we cannot go all the way. But I was denied that right, I was deprived of it. I don’t know, I will never know how he faced the moment?” (305-06). She finally speaks of her loss of identity and alienation from her life when she says, “How long will I live this way? And what for, oh God, what for?” (306). Indeed what for? As for seventeen years Madhu had no identity, no desire for self. But talking about the loss lifts the burden and brings in the realization of the despondency of her life.

Madhu’s wounds start healing when she meets a young family celebrating the “Upnayanam Ceremony” of a boy in the Bhavani temple. On being asked to give her blessings to the boy she wonders, “What blessing can contend against our mortality? Mustard seeds to protect us from evil, blessings to confer long life-nothing works. And yet we go on. Simple remedies? No
they’re desperate remedies and we go on with them because, in truth, there is nothing else” (315). This realization of the inevitability of death, and everyman’s destiny against which we cannot fight, makes her accept Aditya’s death. Hasina’s prayer on the stage of Bhavani temple where she recites, “I saw a dream, I saw a dream” reminds her of her dreams and Som’s dream woven around Adit. But it also gives her the strength to accept fate. She is not resigned to her fate but accepts it with dignity and once again recovering her own sense of self she becomes aware of her needs. She realizes that she needs to share her loss with Som. Now it is not only her sense of despair she is willing to share but also her joy and pleasure of having Aditya for seventeen years. Therefore she feels “We need to be together, we need to mourn him together, we need to face the fact of death and our continuing life together. Only is this healing possible. I think of how Tony and I, when we speak of Joe and Leela, bring them back into our lives for a while. Som and I will have to do this for Aditya, only Som and I can do it for him; between the two of us, we can recreate him, we can invoke his presence and make his existence real. And then, may be, we can have our own ceremony, Som and I, we can wash away the darkness and ugliness, not only Aditya’s death, but of what happened before, with our own oblation of sesame seeds and water” (323).

Thus the knowledge that Som and she have Aditya’s memory gives her hope to live and face life. Madhu in the end has attained self-realization and now hopes to accomplish her dream to recreate Adity in her memory and unburden her soul. Thus the novel ends on the note of affirmation as she feels “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, loss is never total” (324).

Madhu’s job of writing a biography of Savitri Bai Indorekar brings out in pieces, often selected pieces, the life and personality of Bai “Doyen of Hindustani Music, belonging to Gwalior Gharana”. Through the interviews in which Bai carefully gives a self-satisfying version of her life and Madhu’s knowledge of Bai’s life, which came from being her neighbour many years back, she tries to capture the real Bai. Savitri Bai, as Madhu learns came from an affluent Brahmin family of which she was the eldest grandchild, hence endowed with love. She was initiated into the world of music by her mother who was also gifted with melodious voice but had restricted her singing to devotional songs Overjoyed by Bai’s talent, her mother gave her lessons but her father prohibited Savitri Bai from pursuing music further. Tradition had made the art of music and dancing a talent in nautch girls and therefore it was below the dignity for a daughter of high class Brahmin family. After marriage Bai’s desire to pursue her dream sees hope when she learns about her father-in-law’s love for music. His encouragement gives her confidence and she begs him to let her learn music. A number of traditions were broken and a female trainer was arranged for Bai, soon followed by a Muslim tabla accompanist. But this breach of tradition created a furor in the family and gave rise to many discussions. It was Bai’s determination to achieve her goal that gave her the courage to face the jibes and hostility of family and society. Once again in her quest for identity she revolts against tradition and walks out of her marital house with her tabla player, Ghulam Saab. To realize her dream she struggles though a life of hardships and ignominy and even gives birth to a daughter out
of wedlock. In her single-minded pursuit to be the disciple of Pandit Kashi Nath Buwa, she bears unaccountable hardships. Her efforts bear fruit as she becomes a professional singer and gradually reaches the pinnacle of success.

However her success does not make her a self realized person as she struggles to attain her lost respectability. In pursuit of her dream Bai had the unstinted support of Ghulam Saab. A relationship like theirs in patriarchal Indian society was bound to malign Bai’s character “a woman who’d left her husband’s home- what morals would she have, anyway! Bai was obviously damned by everyone” (223). Apart from this there was also the rumour of her other lovers who helped in the progress of her career like the station director of the radio station in Neemgaon. Yet when Bai speaks of her life she does not talk of Ghulam Saab and her daughter, Munni. Madhu too is left unaware of what made Ghulam Saab return to his family. As Madhu realizes “She had drawn a line through Munni’s and Ghulam Saab’s names and erased them from life. This is something she did long back, when she returned to respectability, when she began her journey to success and fame. Perhaps she thought that to attain these things, this denial of her lover and daughter was necessary. I imagine that the denial also made it possible for her to live with herself” (154). Bai’s efforts show her desire to reclaim her lost dignity. Madhu even notices that it was after her separation from Ghulam Saab that she appears again as a married woman wearing her old mangal sutra. Her efforts signify that she may have achieved her dream but her life is spent in her struggle to regain the identity she had lost. Thus even towards the end of her
life, Bai strives to find her identity by ignoring a part of her life. But to Madhu her biographer, the real Bai remains elusive even to her own self.

Munni, the illegitimate child of Savitri Bai and Ghulam Saab, is alienated from her very childhood because of her parents' unusual relationship. The fact that her mother, a Brahmin married woman was living with a Muslim man made them a misfit in the society. In order to belong to the society she believes that her real father was Savitri Bai's husband in Pune. Munni grows up denying to herself and to others that Ghulam Saab was her father. Her assertion that "My name is Meenakshi" or "He's not my father".

"My father is in Pune. He's not here" (31-32) shows her futile attempts to disown her own father. Munni very strongly tries to detach herself from the illegitimacy of her parent's relationship. She is open in her dislike of Ghulam Saab. On the other hand she talks of Bai's husband with much affection. She tells Madhu that he is in Pune, in Shukuvar Path, that he is a lawyer, a very famous one and earns a lot of money, thousands of rupees. Ghulam Saab, she tells her was only a tabla player for her mother. Thus creating her own imaginary relations, Munni strives to attain the life and identity of a respectable family, which Bai had rejected.

Her imagination helps her lead a life of illusion and she creates stories to convince others of her life separate from Bai and her lover. To Madhu she says that Ghulam Saab had kidnapped her therefore she's not living with her father in Pune. She is forced to live here in Neemgaon and asks, "Do you think I'd have come here otherwise? (…My father would never have let me go" (64). And a reason that he cannot come to take her back is that if he comes Ghulam Saab will kill him. Full of hatred for him she calls him her enemy and
talks of his cruelty exercised on her through starvation and beatings. However no matter how much she rejected Ghulam Saab as her father her resemblance to him foiled all her efforts. Aware of her resemblance to her natural father" (...) she tried hard (...) to cover it up, deliberately cultivating a bedraggled ragamuffin look, far removed from his tidy elegance" (75) yet her eyes light gray in colour “(...) unmistakably linked her to the man she so strenuously disclaimed as father” (75). Later apart from her father, Munni’s relationship with her mother is also unusual. Madhu, her neighbor remembered Bai as stern and uncaring. Her ambition made her neglect her daughter, and Munni unloved and uncared for reciprocates in a similar way. She develops contempt for her mother and detests everything about her. From her talent to her looks Munni rejects everything. She even hates the men who come to visit or hear Bai sing. To her, Bai and her lifestyle meant disgrace. Therefore she openly rejects it and tries to cut herself from it.

All her life Munni struggles to reject her parentage. If she tries hard to make her resemblance with her father negligible she also deliberately denies her vocal talent, as it would link her to the two people she desperately wanted to detach herself from.

However, years later it is her light gray eyes that make Madhu recognize Munni. Munni’s childhood is spent in her struggle to attain a respectable status and some how she even succeeds in doing so. She is accepted by Bai’s in-law and after marriage becomes a common middle-class woman named Shailaja Joshi. Thus to some extent she achieves the identity she had striven to attain. As Madhu feels “Fighting with her back to the wall for the identity she wanted to have, the one she claimed finally, successfully
denying her old one: Shailaja Joshi—a long way from Munni, daughter of Savitri Bai and Ghulam Saab” (77).]

Thus to Munni her identity lay in being an ordinary woman belonging to respectable family for which she had rejected everything associated with her mother—music, genius, ambition and freedom. Through Munni’s search for identity Madhu learns “But for all of us, there’s self inside which we recognize as our real selves. For Munni, the self that she saw as her own lay in the future, it was towards that self that she moved with deliberation, it was that self I met in the bus— an ordinary looking woman with an ordinary family life and a name so ordinary that it covers pages in the telephone directory” (170).

Yet her past, the illegitimacy of her birth catches up with her. Madhu’s recognition of her after so many years pushes her a few steps back in her struggle. Finally her death in the same bomb blast, which killed Aditya and her recognition as Shailaja Joshi, only child of Savitri Bai Indorker, neutralizes her life long struggle to attain an identity separate from her mother. Thus, in death Munni is once again identified as the daughter of the woman she detested. Munni in spite of her determination fails to attain self-realization as instead of accepting her true self denies the truth of her birth, her identity given by her parents. Therefore, she leads towards a life of illusion and deception where she fails, as in death her identity claims her.

Leela, Madhu’s aunt, was a woman confident and well aware of her needs. From her very childhood she showed an inclination towards studies rather than the domestic chores considered most suitable for girls. Seen as a rebel she is married to a man of few means by her grandmother. Who wanted to punish her? But for Leela, the punishment turned into a blessing as her
husband encouraged her to study and she cleared her matric examination. Her husband’s death due to TB further strengthened her resolve to be independent and answer her callings. It rather gave her a direction and purpose, as she had to support her young brother-in-law and ailing mother-in-law. Considering them as responsibility, Leela refuses to return to her parent’s house. This serves her relation with her own family but her determination and strength makes her successfully take up a teaching career and support her in-laws. Thus Leela’s awareness of her responsibility towards her in-laws and her desire to fulfill it and not shrink away from it turns her revolt into affirmation. Hence Deshpande here gives a new dimension to assertion or ambition, which leads to revolt against tradition. She stresses that affirmation does not mean shrinking one’s duties and responsibilities; rather it is fulfilling these with courage.

Leela was aware of her needs and the goals she had been aspiring for. Therefore she fought against all odds and restrictions to achieve them. She worked as a social worker and nursed TB patients. During the freedom struggle she plunged into the Quit India movement and was also sent to jail. After independence she protested against price hikes. Thus all her life Leela tried to fulfill the desire of her true self-irrespective of the limitations of tradition. In her personal life too she revolted against tradition and being a Brahmin widow dared to fall in love with a Christian. She married him after fifteen years. Her decision to marry Joe after years of waiting for Joe’s daughter, Paula’s consent shows her resolve and her determination to attain her identity. Joe and Leela’s belief in each other and the love they shared made them marry in spite of Paula’s objection. Hence in spite of the barriers
of caste, religion, tradition, language, lifestyle and a hostile child they found fulfillment in each other. Thus through her determination Leela attains self-realization and fulfillment in the love and companionship of Joe. After his death she finds herself a little lost. It was her awareness of the needs of self that made her a more understanding person. She understood Madhu’s need to live alone in the hostel during holidays or her desire to work and live independently. However, it is Leela who reaches the stage of self-realization. All her life she had striven to attain various demands of self and her persistent pursuit of these eventually earns her happiness and contentment.

Hence, Shashi Deshpande through her novel *Small Remedies* projects the quest for self-realization of Indian women in a hostile patriarchal society.

She makes honesty an important tool in the quest for self and projects Bai and Munni as failure due to their denial of a certain part of their lives. Madhu’s and Leela’s ability to accept the facts of their life achieves them success in their quest. But what forms the crux of the novel is the fact that we are all alone in our quest for self. Madhu may learn from the experiences of Bai, Munni and Leela but she alone has to find her identity by understanding her life. As Deshpande’s epigraph of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* from The Dhammapada states this secret to self-realization,

“You are your own refuge;
There is no other refuge,
This refuge is hard to achieve.”
NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Shashi Deshpande. *Small Remedies* (Delhi: Viking Penguin Books India, 2000). *Parenthetical references are to this edition.*