



## International Journal of Research in Academic World



Received: 02/January/2023

IJRAW: 2023; 2(2):01-03

Accepted: 31/January/2023

# Obsession with Masculine Self: A Critical Study of Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies*

\*<sup>1</sup>Dr. Satish Kumar\*<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor, Department of English, Hindu College, Sonapat, Haryana, India.

### Abstract

Men's belief that they should be the controller of the sexuality of their wives is generally practiced in patriarchal societies. At the same time, the idea of being experienced in the field of sexuality is celebrated in the case of a man, but the same thing becomes a taboo in the case of a woman. The age old values of sexual purity are imposed only on women denying them the experience of wonders of their feminine self. However, in recent times, the traditional concept of love and marriage as sacrament and sex as a taboo is fast losing its importance. Sex is now being viewed by more and more men and women as a physical need. Now a day the negative attitude towards sex is losing importance. The condemnation of sex has also lost ground significantly and the positive attitude regarding sex as one of the needs of every human being is up-and-coming. No doubt, the attitude of many human beings towards sex is changing but this change is not fully accepted in patriarchal societies. It is hardly approved in the case of women because there it is perceived as a matter of honour of the family; on the other hand, it is regarded as alright with men. They can have pre-marital physical experience but when it comes to women, especially their wives, they want them to be virgins at the time of marriage. In this paper, Shashi Deshpande's novel *Small Remedies* has been studied from the above point of view to show how far a man can go to preserve his masculine self.

**Keywords:** Obsession, masculine, sexuality, self, social image

### Introduction

Traditionally male sexuality is generally considered as the only sexuality present in human beings. Most of the men tend to neglect the presence of this natural instinct in women. Many pseudo theories have given strength to the myth that considers female sexuality a 'dark continent'. This area is supposed to be reserved only for men and women's deviation from traditional norms is not accepted. Men feel threatened whenever women are expressive of their hitherto suppressed sexuality. In India, one can see how modernity has seeped through the Indian male only to a very shallow level, because deep down, they still hold on to traditional beliefs of superiority of men and subjugation of women. There are men who still feel endangered by female sexuality.

Men's belief that they are the sole proprietors of the sexuality of their wives has another aspect to it. The notion of being experienced in the field of sexuality is celebrated in the case of a man, but the same thing becomes a taboo in the case of a woman. The age old values of sexual purity are imposed only on women denying them the experience of wonders of their feminine self. However, in recent times, the traditional concept of love and marriage as sacrament and sex as a taboo is fast losing its importance. Sex is now being viewed by more and more men and women as a physical need. In this regard, Promila Kapur also concludes the same on the bases

of her survey. She affirms that "the negative attitude towards sex or that of condemnation has lost ground considerably and the positive attitude regarding sex as one of the needs of every human being is emerging." No doubt, the attitude of many human beings towards sex is changing but this change is not fully accepted in patriarchal societies. It is hardly approved in the case of women because there it is perceived as a matter of honour of the family; on the other hand, it is regarded as alright with men. They can have pre-marital physical experience but when it comes to women, especially their wives, they want them to be virgins at the time of marriage.

A man always remains conscious of the fact that by the definitions of societal norms and myths, he must remain masculine in his marital life too. This crucial position fills him with a sense of worthiness and pride. To keep his position intact in society and also in marital life, he must constantly prove himself sexually dominant over his wife. If he fails to do so, he is liable to lose his authority, dignity and self-esteem. In such cases, wife's steps in the direction of being expressive and bold in the matters of sexuality works as blows to his image of so-called ideal manhood. His feelings of being inferior to his wife, at times, can turn him so insensible and brute that he may try to prove himself superior by being violent. He even does not hesitate in using rape as a tool to regain his lost sense of superiority and masculinity. Frank

Hosken also seems to admit this when he says that “Rape is a sexual act that is seen as a potent tool to overpower, control and put women in their place by men. Men have been using sexual violence and rape as a means to wield control over women from time immemorial and across cultures.”

Shashi Deshpande seems to be very much animate to the imbalances between men and women which are clearly visible in their sexuality and behaviour. She uninhibitedly dramatizes this aspect of men’s life in her novel *Small Remedies*, and, in doing so, she stands out of the category of early Indo-English novelists who have left marriage and sexuality as a subject of study not sufficiently explored. Their works are overshadowed by various socio-political problems that dominated the milieu. In this novel, Deshpande vividly depicts how a man’s traditional mindset concerning sexuality affects his behaviour.

The example of the man who claims sex to be his own prerogative, and initiates and ends it for his own pleasure is Som in the novel *Small Remedies*. In this novel Madhu, the protagonist, reveals her marital life in detail. It seems that her husband, Som, has the knowledge of all the traditionally determined sexual codes as he always initiates the sexual act and whenever she objects or refuses, he becomes angry. He does not care for his wife’s preferences. Madhu tells:

After marriage, passion entered my life as well... ‘come on, come on,’ Som says, while I prepare for bed, going through my last-things-at-night chores. ‘Come to bed, Madhu, come to me.’

‘Damn you, damn you, damn you! Som says in a cold fury, when I turn away from him at night. The intensity of his anger frightens me--it’s so unlike him. I see something here that goes beyond the fact of my reflection. But I don’t really want to know what Som is feeling, or why he’s angry. That’s the way men are, I tell myself; when it comes to sex, they are totally unreasonable.(186)

Madhu believes that men know only one reason, that is, it is their field and they are the masters. It seems to be very hard for them to go beyond their traditionally shaped mentality.

Most of the men consider male sexuality as the only sexuality present in mankind. They often do not accept the presence of the sexual instinct in women. That is why, they feel shocked whenever women express their desire of sexuality. Shashi Deshpande seems to be critical of such patriarchal views as in her novel *A Matter of Time*, she has raised the issue of female sexuality through the writings of the female protagonist, Sumi. Sumi’s fascination with the mythical story of Surpankha makes her question the negation of female sexuality in the patriarchal Indian society. She says:

Female sexuality. We are ashamed of owning it, we can’t speak of it not even to our own selves. But Surpankha was not, she spoke of her desires, she flaunted them. And therefore, were the men, unused of such women, frightened? Did they feel threatened by her? I think so. Surpankha, neither ugly nor hideous, but a woman charged with sexuality, not frightened of displaying it.(167)

Though we boast of being modern but modernity has not changed our thinking to a great extent. There are men who still believe in traditionally accepted idea that a woman should hide her physical desire. The women who are expressive of their sexual desire pose a serious threat to the masculinity of many men. In such cases men tend to be violent and dehumanized.

Som is a man who seems to be a staunch follower of such cherished Indian values. Like majority of the traditional men, he too expects his wife to be a virgin before marriage. When

ignorant of Madhu’s past, Som lives happily with her and their son, Aditya. Like a responsible husband and father, Som provides all the comforts to his family. But the love, security and happiness she finds with Som and her son, Aditya, for seventeen years are destroyed by her honest confession of an incident of pre-marital sex. A painting in an exhibition brings back to her mind the trauma she went through while her father was on his death bed. Madhu, then fifteen, was shocked to learn that her father, her only guardian in the world, was breathing his last. In a state of shock and desolation, she finds comfort in the consoling embrace of one of her father’s friends. Guided by an uncontrollable instinct, they get carried away by the physical comfort in each other’s arms. And the man, old enough to be her father, later hangs himself due to guilt. Troubled by the knowledge of the man’s suicide because of her, Madhu after a nightmare confides her thoughts in Som. The revelation of this secret, which she had locked up in the innermost recesses of her mind, shatters Som. Unable to accept his wife’s ruined chastity, Som hopes that she was an unwilling partner. But Madhu’s honesty in declaring that it was not a rape kills Som’s faith in her and brings a change in his behaviour.

Som is a traditionalist whose obsession with the incident from Madhu’s past destroys their relationship. Destruction of his belief of having married a virgin brings a drastic change in his behaviour towards Madhu. Unable to understand that her physical intimacy with that man involved no emotions as she had even forgotten his existence, Som begins to doubt Madhu’s character. He questions her relationship with everyman she is close to. To Madhu’s surprise, Som changes from a generous and affectionate husband into “a sad and angry man, distraught, possessed by a madness that seemed to have no end” (257). Som’s allegation, in spite of her repeated denial, forces her to retreat into silence. His disappointment in loving and marrying a girl who has lost her chastity is the result of his belief in traditional ideas regarding sexual purity. N.K. Jain is very much to the point when he observes that “... sexual purity, both pre-marital virginal and marital fidelity are cherished Indian values sanctified by tradition and particularly enjoined upon women.” Som, too, feels himself insulted and cheated because of his wife’s ruined chastity. His feelings of insult and consequent disgust over Madhu’s past makes him savage in his love making. Madhu feels him to be a different man. She tells:

For a while he continues to sleep with me, though there is something savage in his love making. He throws himself at me in a kind of desperation and I sense a concealed violence that both frightens and infuriates me. I resist, but our bodies are so used to each other, they settle down, in spite of us, into a rhythm, a shadow of our earlier love making. He is careful to make no physical contact with me. (257)

Clearly, Som’s anger and sexual aggression is a direct result of the shattering of his belief of having a chaste wife. He is utterly disturbed. There is a vortex going on in his mind leading to a kind of madness in him. He wishes that somebody should tell him that all this is not true. Madhu again reveals:

And then in a moment, it changed. It was madness, a madness that overtook Som; this is the only explanation I can give for what happened to him. But even that is not entirely true. There was a logic in his madness, a logic that his increasing frenzy never lost sight of. He was looking for the girl he had known, the girl he had married, the woman he had lived with for so many years.... Now I know that with my revelations I destroyed the girl he had married. Suddenly I became a

stranger to Som, a woman he didn't know. And then it was he who changed. From a genial, easy-going man, he turned savage, destructive, hating me, hating himself. (230)

Madhu knows that the truth is that Som wants from her that it has not happened, that she was a virgin when he married her. But she cannot change the facts: "Som wanted truth in words; he wanted me to tell him something that he thought was the truth. I could not give him this, I could not speak the words he wanted to hear. And so it began, the change in Som, the struggle between us. He believes that the truth is somewhere with me, he imagines me to be the enemy obstructing him, preventing him from getting at it..." (256). She clearly knows the intention of Som when he repeatedly asks her to tell more about the incident:

This is what I'm speaking of to Som, this is what I'm sharing with him. But it is the single act of sex that he 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 matters. I know this when I see his face, when I feel the hurting grip of his hand, when he says, 'Tell me, go on, go on.' (262)

Som's hatred and violence increases day-by-day destroying Madhu's peaceful life. Haunted by her past, he becomes suspicious and loathsome towards her. Their days and nights are spent in fights, which exhibit nothing but hateful insinuation for each other. The culmination of his violence is reached when his son, Aditya, comes to interrupt on such fights in which he finds his father banging his mother's head against the wall. Thus, Som, hurt and crazed, expresses his feeling through physical and sexual aggression. He himself does not know what he is doing.

The men, who appear to be dehumanized in one way or the other, can be viewed as reminders of the modern Indian male's obsession with masculine self. They seem to be rooted in traditional values. They perpetrate acts of physical and sexual violence against their wives and other women, even though for different reasons, to achieve a similar end-assertion of their manhood. Most of these men have scant regard for the feelings of their wives and do not, for a moment, think of the consequences of their actions which are responsible for the failure of their marriages and relationships. The behavioural patterns of all these characters make it clear that modern Indian male has not completely shed his traditional mindset. His relationship to women is far from being based on equal terms even though in public spheres, one can see men talk of gender equality. Marital rapes and violence are still adopted by men as means to maintain their dominance. This, perhaps, confirms the reality that men are victims of social conditioning; nature has not played any role in making them so.

### Conclusion

On the surface, it seems that men benefit from sexism-from this system of male dominance, control and violence. On a deeper level, however, one feels that sexism harms men as well as women in their lives and, besides limiting their choices, it also keeps men from having positive and loving relationship with women. For women, countless daily acts of violence create a climate of fear and powerlessness that limits their freedom of action and controls many of the movements of their lives. The threats of male violence continue to keep women from stepping out from the traditional roles.

### References

1. Deshpande, Shashi. *Small Remedies*. Penguin India, 2000.
2. Deshpande, Shashi. *A Matter of Time*. Penguin India, 1996.
3. Jain NK. Ed. *Women in Indo-American Fiction: Tradition and Modernity*. Manohar Publishers and Distributers, 1998.
4. Hosken, Frank. Quoted in *Postcolonial Indian Fiction in English and Masculinity*. Eds. Rajeshwar Mittapalli and Letizia Alterno. Atlantic, 2009.
5. Kapur, Promilla. Quoted in Urvashi Sinha and Gur Pyari Jandial. "Marriage and Sexuality in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande," *Shashi Deshpande: A Critical Spectrum*. Ed. T.M.J. Indra Mohan. Atlantic, 2004.