



History as Metafiction: Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies*

○ Review : C. Vimala Rao

We often think about Indian society in terms of “before Independence” and “after Independence.” Perhaps we should now also consider it in terms of “before Ayodhya” and “after Ayodhya.” December 6, 1992, has become much more than just a date. How did the destruction of an old structure of brick, mortar, and mud - a destruction that took only a few hours to complete - ingrain itself into the minds of the people of the entire country? Not a day passes without some reference or the other being made to the Ayodhya issue in daily news reports.

In recent times, we have witnessed several film directors in our country imaginatively recreate the ill effects of communal warfare and the ensuing violence; the misery and suffering unleashed on innocent victims. Mani Ratnam's *Bombay*, Gulzar's *Maachis*, Mahesh Bhatt's *Zakhm*, and Khalid Mohamed's *Fiza* come to mind as examples. Perhaps the most significant literary treatment of the Ayodhya incident has now appeared in Shashi Deshpande's recent novel, *Small Remedies*. There is also an important short story in Kannada titled, “*Ondu Thundu Godae*,” or “A Bit of Wall” by Bolwar Mahamad Kunhi (see MANUSHI No 126). Kunhi's extended short story is extraordinary in that

he treats the explosive Ayodhya theme in a humorous, personal vein. He recounts the story of how the old woman, Roti-Phatumma, wanted to build her own house by acquiring what she believed to be a bit of the wall from the broken pieces of the Babri Masjid from someone. With tongue-in-cheek wit, Kunhi admirably balances the serious, comic, and poignant aspects of the story.

Whereas the movies depict the horror and brutal cruelty through searing images and violent action, in *Small Remedies* Deshpande brings out the intensity of the suffering in moving language. At first, the novelist uses language to withdraw from and to avoid the violence and terror that was unleashed by the demolition at Ayodhya. Whereas the art of imagery in the films makes vivid the terror, the anger, and the misery of suffering in a raw and open manner, Deshpande's verbal art reaches inward into the passions and emotions that are at the root of that terror. While the impact of visuals is immediate and momentary, the impact of words and language is indirect, but long lasting. The controlled formalism and the enmeshed, multi-layered narrative technique of *Small Remedies* lays bare the innermost, psychological consequences of violence, of death, and destruction, slowly but surely.

Although manipulation of time and memory contributes to the intricate structure of *Small Remedies* (which includes flashbacks, interior monologues, dreams, nightmares, surrealistic visions, and epiphanies), it should also be pointed out that this same style slows down the action of the plot, rendering it somewhat wanting in narrative energy. But, then, grief is hardly an emotion to be dramatised or enacted energetically. It can only be suffered and ultimately accepted, as shown in the rounded ending of *Small Remedies*.

The Ayodhya episode is not only present at the still centre of the novel, it is only the princess's pea in a thickly padded mattress so to speak, the small seed inside the core. But the theme of the novel is contained in this seed. What impact did Ayodhya, the subsequent Bombay riots, and the serial blasts have on the two women and their families? Madhu Saptarishi, the narrator of the novel, considers the events as they affected the life of Savitribai Indorekar, a reputed musician, as well as her own life. In the text, Savitribai has lost her daughter, her love-child, Munni, and Madhu has lost her eighteen-year-old son, Aditya, an only child, in the bombing of a bus in Bombay on March 12, 1993.

Basically, *Small Remedies* is about the grief of those two women.

In fact, grief is the one word that occurs most often in the novel, almost on every third page. To cope with the trauma of her grief over her dead son, Madhu undertakes to write the biography of Bai. There are several common bonds linking Madhu to Bai. They were, first of all, neighbours in the small town of Neemgaon. They are both also mothers who have lost their young children through violent deaths. In addition, they were creative artists: one a writer and the other a musician. And, now, they are biographer and subject.

Although the novel purports to be a biography of Bai, it eventually develops into an autobiography of Madhu. The novel is also a documentation, although an indirect one, of the historical event of the razing of the Babri Masjid to the ground in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992. While speaking about being a woman and about how she can never remain unnoticed, in the middle of *Small Remedies*, an exasperated Madhu says, "It's becoming increasingly clear to me that I cannot keep myself out of this book of Bai's, that I cannot be the invisible narrator Like fiction writers, like historians, the teller of a story needs to construct a plausible narrative biography that Bai expects..." In another context, she compares the biographer to the six blind men who are trying to describe an elephant. Like the blind men, the biographer must collect bits and pieces of information about one person from several people and must, then, string them all into a connected biography.

In *Remedies*, Deshpande shows how difficult it is for someone to write about another person's life, to pack into words the facts and the truths about the person. Although

Madhu is the writer of Bai's biography, she is at the same time writing about her own life. There are so many similarities between the life of the researcher and that of the woman she is researching. As a result of that interaction, the plot structure in *Small Remedies* is one of echoes and reflections. In a self-reflexive manner, Madhu tries to find the meaning of her own life in the lives of Savitribai and her aunt Leela. Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies*, is comparable to the novels of Canadian novels like Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Carol Shields' *Small Ceremonies*. This genre can best be described as "historiographic metafiction."

As it happens, there is not much of a life remaining in Savitribai after she has had a heart attack and a paralytic stroke. Madhu sees her after a gap of twenty long years, and the Bai that she now encounters at close quarters is an old woman who is devastated by illness. She has become a selfish, sick woman who is totally dependent on others. In her efforts to learn from Bai how she has been able to accept the violent death of her daughter, Madhu is disappointed. Bai has now rejected both her lover, Ghulam Saab, and their love-child, Munni. Perhaps the deterioration of her life as a musician was the result of those cruel rejections.

A number of images in the novel seem to suggest that to be human is to suffer a disease, and that to love is to suffer an illness. There are many references to doctors, illnesses, and maladies in *Small Remedies*, as the title itself indicates. There are also several deaths in the novel, many of which are violent. Joe's heart attacks and death; Leela's cancer and death; Madhu's mother's TB and death; and, later, Madhu's father's death.

There is also the suicide of a young man who is a visitor in Madhu's father's house. Above all, there are the deaths of Aditya and Shailaja in the bus disaster. Madhu who, herself, is in a spell of deep grief resulting from the violent death of Aditya, seems to hover in a borderline state of life and death, as indicated at the very beginning of the novel. While speaking about the Nazi Holocaust, the well-known, feminist critic, Julia Kristeva, points out that it was in the survivors, especially the women and children, that the true meaning of death could be understood. The public political event invades the personal domain and lets loose a "malady of death."

At the end of *Small Remedies*, we learn that when the consequences of a political event turn into a personal disaster, it is the individual that must take on the political power as enemy No.1 and confront it. When anti-social elements try to break up the musical prayer meeting at the temple of Bhavani, in which Hasina is to sing, Madhu attacks their cowardliness in an article that she writes for a newspaper. Wiser counsel prevails in the end, and Hasina, the granddaughter of Ghulam Saab, sings the *vachanas* of Akka soulfully at the feet of the goddess Bhavani. The healing power of music dispels Madhu's grief and mitigates its consequences. At last, she breaks free from her silence and talks to Hari about Aditya's death. Her catharsis comes as a result of this confession and acknowledgment, and she sets herself free to return to her husband, Som, and to riot-torn Bombay to pick up her life amidst the debris.

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