

## **Compromise or Co-optation? Respectable Femininity and Musical Practices in Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies***

**Dr. P. Muralidhar Sharma**, Assistant Professor, School of English, Gangadhar Meher University, Sambalpur (Bihar), India. [sharmamurali88@gmail.com](mailto:sharmamurali88@gmail.com)  
**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2026.26.1.20>**

### *Abstract*

*This article intends to examine how music's internalization of the continued ideological legacies of cultural nationalism and the consolidation of a dominant patriarchy combined to marginalize the woman performer, followed by a radical recasting in more acceptable roles that conformed to the newly constituted moral standards of the nation-space. Through a reading of Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies* (2000), the article interests itself in investigating the polemical interventions which ensured that the woman artist did not rise beyond her preordained role as a mere companion and consort to the central icon of the male musical progenitor, a guru or ustad of a gharana. Public representation of women's musical practices premises itself on a dynamic aesthetics of reclamation that reinforces their respectably married status through emblems like the mangalasutra, reinstating their conformity to conventional, heteronormative structures.*

**Keywords:** Women musicians, Hindusthani music, *Small Remedies*, gharana, cultural nationalism

### **Introduction**

Performance traditions in India experienced a set of irreversible transformations around the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Colonial modernity, with its all-pervasive cultural influence, entailed a 'revival' of hereditary performance practices, which came to be newly recognized as 'classical,' exuding the indelible stamp of antique civilizational ethos. The reclamation of performance traditions as indicators of cultural superiority over the colonizer led performance to be embroiled in the polemics of the colonial public sphere. Contingent upon the new performance ethos that was self-consciously emerging, the middle class voiced an urgency to resuscitate these art practices. This attempt at the co-optation of performance traditions by the middle-class resulted in the classicization of the repertoire of hereditary women performers like the *devadasis* and *tawaiifs*. Such initiatives at aesthetic standardization and 'cleansing' of art forms indispensably involved moral outrage against their disreputable associations with the hereditary performers. Heterogeneous, plural, musical traditions began to be re-designated as 'classical' and radical innovations were accommodated in the existing repertoire of music to appropriate it as representative of the newly emerging nation.

### Hereditary Performers and Classicization of Music

Self-appointed innovators and enthusiasts of music like Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande and Vishnu Digambar Paluskar emphasized the antique legacies of *Hindusthani* music and reclaimed ‘classical’ status through systematization of the existing repertoire. This massive project of classicizing music, as Janki Bakhle argues, reclaimed “the space of music for the nation”. Their ambitious initiatives aimed “to classify, categorize, and classicize music”, as also to “cleanse and sacralize it” (Bakhle 7-8). Through his Gandharva Mahavidyalayas, Paluskar transformed music into a permissible skill among upper-caste respectable women, which in turn curtailed the courtesans’ opportunities to perform. This “Hinduization” of music, with an explicit emphasis on its spiritual content, made the musical space conducive for women from respectable households, who could now profess music without the fear of censure (Bakhle 11). Through the contradictory attempts at secularizing and selectively spiritualizing it, music came to acquire a certain respectability hitherto denied. Music’s emblematic value as part of national cultural legacy was premised on the inviolable virtue of the chaste Hindu wife, who was conceived as its legitimate propagator. Musical revival was premised mostly on the notions of feminine chastity, and such projects at standardization usually involved the marginalization of hereditary women performers, reminiscent of supposedly loose sexual morals. Such women were gradually substituted as women ‘artistes’ with Brahmin lineages began to be admitted to the concert stage. The movements for revival of classical music and dance, spearheaded by the work of Rukmini Devi Arundale in the south and V.N. Bhatkhande and V.D. Paluskar in the north, ventured to establish the upper-caste Hindu wife as the sole representative of the traditions of ‘classical’ dance and music.

Implicit in the project of defining and delimiting the modern classical tradition was the compulsion to ensure the accessibility of the art form to the middle class. This required not merely a spatial relocation of the art form in a new setting or even a new pedagogical framework of transmission, but a re-evaluation of ritual performers and performing communities whose social position, function, and repertoire did not conform to the imperatives of the new patron and consumer. The redefining of the classical and its other became a convenient vehicle for marginalizing part of the repertoire that ritual performers specialized in (Subramanian 18).

These changes in the public sphere had several implications for women musicians, whose careers were shaped by its transformed nature. The emergence of new contexts for performance urged the transformation of the gendered performing selves. The altered moral economy and transformed cultural ethos of a newly independent nation entailed their self-fashioning as respectable housewives on the concert stage. Women’s marital status legitimized their appearance on the concert stage as performers. Through reformist initiatives and their acceptance of domesticity, *devadasis* and courtesans were rehabilitated as respectable women. This generation of women musicians that began appearing on the concert stage in the 20<sup>th</sup> century belonged neither to the ‘tainted’ pasts of music, which it desperately wanted to disown, nor its more modern, respectable present, that was denied them. This tension is creatively dramatized in Namita Devidayal’s inter-generational memory text *The Music Room*, which documents the cultural transition from ‘*bai*’ to ‘*tai*,’ as communities of erudite *tawaifs* were being replaced by married *Brahmin* women who professed music as ‘divine’ art.

*Devadasis* and courtesans internalized these changes as instrumental and indispensable in the advancement of their careers, and saw marriage as a prerequisite that sanctioned their

appearance in the public as performers. The noted Carnatic vocalist M.S. Subbulakshmi's meteoric rise as a national icon epitomizes this shift. Subbulakshmi, who was born in a family of *devadasis* traditionally 'dedicated' to temples, went on to marry T. Sadasivam, an influential man in colonial Madras. She later rose to unprecedented heights as a Carnatic vocalist and a cultural icon on the national stage, which would have been forbidden to her, had she retained her *devadasi* identity. Her biographer T.J.S. George shows how her inclination towards bhakti and her upward social mobility as a Tamil *smartha* wife became the precursors for her success as an artist on the stage. Her marriage to Sadasivam validated her status as a performer, an honour no other woman singer of her time could have aspired for (176-8). M.S. Subbulakshmi's success as a vocalist on the concert stage and her career in general is a consummate reflection of the tensions and contradictions inherent in the musical careers of an entire generation of women. T.J.S. George suggests that marriage might itself have been a strategy for her to achieve public acclaim as an artist and one way of 'sanitizing' her *devadasi* past. In an interview with the Tamil writer Vaasanti, Subbulakshmi confessed that marrying someone and leading a respectable life had been one of her ambitions. On being asked whether marriage brought her happiness, she replied: "Happy or not, I'd be safe" (George 247). The projection of their public images as respectably married Hindu housewives was one among the many strategies women musicians used to gain access to a domain that was supposedly 'tainted' by the courtesans.

### **Woman and Music in *Small Remedies***

First published in 2000, Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies* creatively intertwines the lives of two women, Savitribai Indorekar and Leela, who challenge conventional limitations set on them by breaking free from marriage. In the novel, Savitribai Indorekar is a vocalist from the Gwalior *gharana* of Hindustani music. In an effort to materialize her dream of pursuing a career in music, she elopes with Ghulam Saab, the accompanist. Years after Savitribai achieves fame as a singer, Madhu, her former neighbour at Neemgaon and the narrator, travels to Bhavanipur to write a biography of Savitribai. As Madhu consents to this proposal made by a friend, she believes that Savitribai is an embodiment of "enchanted femininity" (Deshpande 33) quite unlike other women in Neemgaon who were absorbed in the banality of their lives.

Writing the biography of musicians became an established trend by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as music's projected role as national cultural legacy and the lives of musicians themselves began to generate interest. The supposedly unconventional lives of women artistes and their conscious appropriation of the *gharanas* of classical music drew a lot of attention internationally. T.J.S. George's *MS: A Life in Music* (2004), Shiela Dhar's *Raga n' Josh: Stories from a Musical Life* (2005), Namita Devidayal's *The Music Room* (2007), Lakshmi Subramanian's *Veena Dhanammal: The Making of a Legend* (2009), Vikram Sampath's *My Name is Gauhar Jaan: The Life and Times of a Musician* (2012), Swapan Kumar Bondyopadhyay's *An Unheard Melody: Annapurna Devi* (2016), are only a few among an entire gamut of life-writing that significantly contributes to the discourse on women musicians that has gained ground in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Small Remedies* uses this emerging trend in biography-writing as a nuanced narrative device. For Savitribai, her biography is a strategy for self-justification; if carefully monitored, it can legitimize her life as an artist, thus restoring the respectability she aspired for in real life. Savitribai's deliberate evasion of her former acquaintance with Madhu, her neighbour in Neemgaon, is highly suggestive of her attempt at crafting her life around respectable femininity

in lieu of the disreputable narrative woven about her life. She interrogates Madhu in a professional manner and asks her to read only select articles on her. Madhu understands that Savitribai's "carefully guided tour" of her life and her "almost rehearsed speech" (Deshpande 27) will eventually defy the very purpose for which the biography would have triggered public interest. The publisher's interest in Savitribai's life is motivated by the fact of its unconventionality, potentially meant to attract a huge readership. In Neemgaon she was perceived as a morally dubious woman, owing to the ambiguity that characterized her marriage. She was perceived derogatorily as "the singer woman" or "that *bai*," indicating a collective social contempt for her (Deshpande 29).

As music came to be linked to certain modes of acceptable, permissible sexual conduct, it became necessary for musicians to project their self-images through recognized constructs of respectable conjugality. In opting to keep her relationship with the *tabalchi* hidden from public view, Savitribai attempts to conjure up a public image that would best fit into recognizable moulds of gender arrangement and sexual behaviour. In such recurrent silences, she embodies the tensions, dilemmas, and struggles of an entire generation of women musicians paving their way to respectability and recognition.

Writing Bai's biography, Madhu realizes, is challenging, since Bai offers selective details of her life, and manages to avoid the more controversial facts. In her carefully constructed accounts of herself, she evades the less respectable aspects of her career and life—the *tabalchi* Ghulam Saab and her daughter Munni. Scripting a biographical narrative out of these manufactured details, Madhu realizes, is a daunting task. Bai's reconstruction of her musical upbringing along the lines of her Brahminical lineage and a natural passion for music, that springs from her mother's inclination for devotional songs and *stotras*, reinforces the culturally sanctioned register of spirituality and piety. Tracing back her early musical training to her mother, she claims that she learnt "...the sort of songs women sang then, aarti songs, ritual songs, stotras" (Deshpande 27-8).

Later in the novel, Ghulam Saab's granddaughter Hasina, also a disciple of Savitribai and a Muslim, surprises everyone by singing the *Devi-stotra* and the *bhajans* of Akka Mahadevi. This convenient recourse of women musicians to *bhakti* ethos aligns with the politics of nationalization of music. In order to give music a completely Hindu orientation, the Muslim element in Indian musical lineages comprising of the compositions of *ustads* or hereditary musical experts was relegated to the periphery. In order to compensate for such exclusion, the *ustads* assimilated Hindu values in their performance, and began singing devotional compositions. Abdul Karim Khan, for instance, had immense veneration for the *Gayatri mantra* and began accepting Brahmin boys as disciples to avoid exclusion from the mainstream of Indian classical music (Bakhle 176). Savitribai, however, is reluctant to sing *bhajans*, because of her apprehension that she will defile the genre through her defiance of the sanctity of domesticity. Savitribai's self-justifying remarks about her childhood fascination for *stotras* as well as Hasina's choice of *bhajans* as inseparable to her performative repertoire align with project of defining music in esoteric, spiritual terms.

By reinforcing the idea of a mother who initiated her in to the world of music, Savitribai makes a conscious attempt at containing her art within the secure space of domestic piety and spirituality. Partha Chatterjee's assertion that in the context of burgeoning nationalism women were iconized as the protectors of the inner, spiritual domain could be extended to women's

pursuit of art and the rationalization of their roles as musicians with the rhetoric of spirituality: “Attainment by her own efforts of a superior national culture was the mark of woman’s newly acquired freedom. This was the central ideological strength of the nationalist resolution of the women’s question” (Chatterjee 127).

### Gender and Musical Self-fashioning

In *Small Remedies*, Madhu realizes much later that Savitribai eloped with Ghulam Saab primarily on account of her unrealizable desire to learn music professionally from Kashinath Buwa. Savitribai rationalizes Buwa’s hesitancy in accepting her as a disciple by suggesting that her Brahmin background was not conducive to musical training. Buwa’s reluctance voices the ambivalent stance adopted by Brahmin patriarchy towards music’s professional accessibility to women. Music’s potential as a career choice were restricted even when woman’s role as preserver of culture received collective communal consensus. As Savitribai’s controversial life illustrates, women could only take up music by choosing to step out of marriage. Guruji’s unwillingness to teach the ‘*todi*,’ a personalized musical piece, shows how a society’s gender arrangement affects its musical practice (Deshpande 133).

Kashinath Buwa’s possessiveness with the *todi* is an attempt to appropriate music as his own, turning the realm of culture to a site for exclusion. In her book *Women and Music in Cross-cultural Perspective* Ellen Koskoff suggests that musical performance provides one of the best contexts for understanding the gender structure of any society: “This may be so, because in many societies the underlying conceptual frameworks of both gender and musical/social dynamics share an important structural feature: they both rely, to a great degree, on notions of power and control” (5). This statement is of particular relevance to the Indian context where musical lineages or *gharanas* were always patriarchally constituted and presupposed a male heir who would take the tradition forward. Female progenitors were perceived as essentially peripheral to the perpetuation of artistic values around which a *gharana* was consolidated. Amelia Maciszewski, in her analysis of music and north-Indian women’s identity, argues: “... although *gharana* undoubtedly exists as an important paradigm for style in Hindustani music—as well as a point of discipular and aesthetic identity—it has been patriarchally constructed, to the extent that it often silences women’s voices in the production of knowledge through musical style”. She further argues that women in musician families serve restricted roles as biological progenitors for future male maestros. On the whole, they are expected to internalize music only passively, never actively like the male heirs who are trained to perform and perpetuate the repertoire and ethos of the *gharana* (Maciszewski 2-3). In her historiographical-biographical venture on north-Indian *tawaifs*, Saba Dewan relates how courtesan-artists had to cope up with a massive project of silencing and erasure from history:

Research into the history of music and musicians in India is necessarily based upon the retrieving and reading of fragments of oral memories and material traces. The histories of *tawaif* artists, not surprisingly, are even more fragmentary, since this is a community that has always stood on the margins of patriarchy and, therefore, necessarily its historiography. The process of retrieval is...also a history of erasure and silencing. (3)

Savitribai speaks of her marital life in great detail; it receives the maximum attention in her conversation with Madhu. Though separated from her husband and his family and having lived with a Muslim man for a major part of her life, her ‘marriage’ is an indispensable attribute of

her accounts of initiation into music. As she tells Madhu, it was her father-in-law whose passion for classical music she shared. Notwithstanding her culpability as a Brahmin woman pursuing music and living with a Muslim man, she longs for a symbolic reclamation of the security offered by marriage. This anxiety on her part is seen in the reinforcement of the *mangalasutra* in defining her appearance in public: “She clings fiercely instead to her respectability, the respectability she claimed in her second birth as a singer, when, after a gap of two years, she appeared in public view, wearing at that first performance the *mangalasutra* of the married woman” (Deshpande 167).

It is the *mangalasutra* that validates her appearance in public as a singer, aligning her with upper-caste domestic space without which, she would possibly be perceived as a public woman and a courtesan. The irony of Bai’s self-fashioning lies in the fact that through her *mangalasutra*, she reinstates her musical practices within the heteronormative institution of marriage, which in the first place had restricted her emergence as an artist. The novel foregrounds the contradiction between Bai’s rejection of marriage as an oppressive institution and her reclamation of its symbolic value through the *mangalasutra*. This manner of self-fashioning was common among women performers, whose marital status was the sole basis upon which their difference from the *tawaiifs* and the *devadasis* was predicated. In his celebrated work *Renaissance Self-fashioning* Greenblatt applies the term “fashioning” to a more thorough critical examination, to indicate a “way of designating the forming of the self”. Manifested in “a distinctive personality, a characteristic address to the world, a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving” (2), self-fashioning connotes a very complex mode of construction of selves in a given historical moment. Women musicians’ self-conscious adoption of a set of behavioral practices on the concert stage entailed a favourable reception of their persona in performance. In his biography of M.S. Subbulakshmi, TJS George pays particular attention to the fact that Subbulakshmi always wore the nine-yard *madisar* saree for her performances, since the *madisar* saree worn with the *pallu* taken over the right shoulder and brought around and tucked in the waist was the mark of the married Iyer woman. Her self-fashioning reinforces the idea of her being the legitimate perpetuator of a Carnatic musical tradition. TJS George sees it as the ‘Sanskritization’ or ‘Iyerization’ of Subbulakshmi. Through a study of the life of Hirabai Barodekar, the daughter of the *gharana ustad* Abdul Karim Khan, Janaki Bakhle theorizes the transformation of the public cultural sphere in 20<sup>th</sup> century Maharashtra and suggests how this transformation enabled ‘respectable’ women from the Brahmin households to enter the musical space as artists of national repute:

What was the nature of a public cultural sphere in which the female child of a nineteenth century Muslim court musician could imagine for herself a career in music that was both respectable and recognized as such? . . . When Hirabai began her career, she too had to battle the perception of women musicians as disreputable. By the middle of her career, she was known in musical circles by her family nick name, and she gave her last performance as a respected national artist. This could have happened only if the “woman question” had become central to the making of the public cultural sphere.” (Bakhle 50-51)

Hirabai Barodekar’s musical journey is an illustration of this massive transformation, where upper-caste Hindu women increasingly took the place of the disreputable *baijis* of earlier years. Women from courtesan lineages like Anjanibai Malpekar, Kesarbai Kelkar, Mogubai Kurdikar,

Menakabai Shirodkar, and Gangubai Hangal were replaced by upper-caste women such as Manik Bhide, Veena Sahasrabuddhe, Padmavati Shaligram, and Ashwini Bhide, thus restoring respectability to Hindusthani music.

*Small Remedies* critically engages with women musicians' attempt at self-fashioning in order to be able to perform in public without being identified as 'baijis', a derogatory term used to refer to disreputable women like courtesans. Bai's self-fashioning is accomplished partly through her public appearances, and partly through the story which she offers Madhu through her interviews. The massive silences and discontinuities in Bai's own version of her life invite attention to the gaps in the historiography of music. Bai's story enables Madhu as well as the readers to reflect critically upon the fractured, fragmented history of women musicians in India. What Bai deliberately withholds from Madhu is perhaps the unspeakable, less respectable details of her musical upbringing. Madhu's attempts to draw possible conclusions from the chunks of her life are all dampened, even as her speculations about the story of love and passion from Savitribai's life is doomed to failure. The apparently impermeable mystery surrounding her life with Ghulam Saab leaves Madhu perplexed throughout the process of writing. Writing the biography of the woman musician, the trajectories of whose evolution are embedded in larger debates and controversies surrounding feminine respectability, involves a thorough reading of silences. The trajectories of their growth as artistes spill over a period which witnessed large-scale contempt for woman's role as public performer.

### Conclusion

Although the relationship of the 'respectably married', upper-caste Hindu women with music was legitimized both as an attempt to disinherit the traditional performers and to glorify them as national icons, the terms and conditions of their engagement with music were clearly delineated by the patriarchy. Even as music came to be seen as one of the indispensable attributes of a Brahmin wife's 'cultured' identity, a reading of the lives of upper-caste women musicians of the time reveals how it became largely incompatible with the cultivation of a gendered female identity. A woman's role as an artist came to be perceived as necessarily antithetical to her role as a housewife. The woman musician's self-fashioning on the concert stage by embracing domesticity also presupposed Brahmin patriarchy's absolute control over her musical behaviour.

### Works Cited

- Bakhle, Janaki. *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian 'Classical' Tradition*. Permanent Black, 2006.
- Bondyopadhyay, Swapan Kumar. *An Unheard Melody: Annapurna Devi: An Authorised Biography*. Roli Books, 2016.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories. The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*. Oxford UP, 1999.
- Chaudhuri, Amit. *The Immortals*. Picador, 2009.
- Deshpande, Shashi. *Small Remedies*. Penguin, 2000.
- Dewan, Saba. *Tawaifnama*. Context, 2019.
- Devidayal, Namita. *The Music Room: A Memoir*. Penguin, 2011.
- Dhar, Shiela. *Raga'n Josh: Stories from a Musical Life*. Permanent Black, 2005.

- Ellen Koskoff, editor. *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Greenwood Press, 1987.
- George ,T. J. S. *MS, A Life in Music*. Harper Collins, 2004.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-fashioning*. Univ of Chicago Press, 1980.
- Hariharan, Githa. *The Thousand Faces of Night*. Penguin, 1992.
- Mac Iszewski, Amelia. "Multiple Voices, Multiple Selves: Song Style and North Indian Women's Identity". *Asian Music*, vol 32, 2001, pp.1-40. *JSTOR*. [www.jstor.org/stable/834248](http://www.jstor.org/stable/834248).
- Sampath, Vikram. *My Name is Gauhar Jaan*. Rupa, 2010.
- Srinivasan, Amrit. "Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance". *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 20, no. 44, 1985, pp. 1869-76. *JSTOR*. [www.jstor.org/stable/4375001](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4375001).
- Subramaniam, Lakshmi. *From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy: A Social History of Music in South India*. Oxford UP, 2006.
- . *Veena Dhanammal: The Making of a Legend*. Routledge, 2009.