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A STUDY OF SHASHI DESHPANDE'S ROOTS AND SHADOWS AND MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE EDIBLE WOMAN

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ABSTRACT

Literature is the medium to express the sufferings and agony of a person to the society. Most of the women writers throughout the world tried their hand to present the long suffering and unheard excruciation of a woman in the traditional and patriarchal society. This paper attempts to deal with the Indian woman writer Shashi Deshpande and the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood's presentation of a realistic picture of woman in the egoistical, hypocritical and entirely insensitive male dominated society. In Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* and Atwood's *The Edible Woman* the protagonists Indu and Marian are seen as docile and submissive women, who are ruled by the interests of Jayant and Peter. At last both the characters Indu and Marian break the silence and finds self-realisation. They become assertive tries to create space to themselves to lead an independent life.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper entitled "From Submission to Assertion: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* and Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*" is a comparative study made to array the place of woman in contemporary society as visualized by the two women novelists belonging to two different countries and cultural traditions. The study also takes into account the different interpretations and versions of the woman's identity. The women writers chosen here develop their own perceptions concerning the needs and urges of women on the basis of human equality and dignity keeping in view their actual social conditions. Although the common feature in each of the novelist is the deplorable condition of woman, each writer attacks the problem from her own cultural perspective. However, one factor which is common to both Canada and India is that both countries are colonial countries, but the history of expansionism is different in each colonial country.

Margaret Atwood and Shashi Deshpande inherit two different socio-cultural and religious traditions and one can discern marked similarities likewise differences in their approach to the complicated and continuing problem of man-woman relationship in the contemporary world. The woman in these novels is not only aware of her colonized status but is also in

search of her roots-the real image, whose concept was lost amidst the constrictions of the male dominated society. The woman today, seems to challenge the traditional notions of 'Angel in the house' and 'sexually voracious' image. Another reason for the protest is that it was a revolt against uselessness accompanied by distaste for the frivolity of upper class social life. They detested the idea of being reduced to a drawing room decorative piece and to doll up for the social gatherings where they were recognized only as an appendage to their more dominating spouses. Men were identified with the more domineering public realms. A double standard was thus created with two different measuring tapes.

It is against these social reforms that the woman in Canada is struggling to break away from the stranglehold of tradition. Today she is busy in reshaping herself in a more humanistic mould, emphasizing thereby the need for an amendment of marital relationships and for a better appreciating and sharing of affection and deference. Shashi Deshpande presents her female protagonists as women who are confined to kitchen and domestic chores, and who struggle between conventions and modernity, between illusion and fact. These women, however, disown an established and convention-bound life in order to explore their inner self.

Shashi Deshpande in her novel *Roots and Shadows* portrays the inner struggle of an artist through the character of Indu to

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express herself, to discover her real self through her inner and instinctive potential for creative writing. Indu wants to bid adieu to her monotonous service but her husband, Jayant does not approve to this idea. He is a barrier to her feminine urge for self-expression since he believes that a person like Indu can do nothing against the whole system by wielding her pen.

The belief in marriage varies to a man and to a woman. The value that they give to marital relation is different from each other, though one has the need of the other. A woman like Indu is allowed no direct influence, upon her husband. She has to reach out beyond herself towards the social milieu only through her husband, but he is impervious and indifferent to her emotional urges. Instead, it is Indu who has to cater to the needs of his inner urges and drives:

But my marriage has taught me this too. I had found in myself an immense capacity for deception. I had learnt to reveal to Jayant nothing but what he wanted to hear. I had my responses and emotions as if they were bits of garbage (Deshpande 38).

In such a situation, Indu feels alienated from Jayant. According to Ann Foreman, women themselves as the fulfilment of other people's needs:

Men seek relief from their alienation through their relations with women; for women there is no relief. For these intimate relations are the very ones that are the essential structures of her oppression (120).

A married woman like Indu is left with practically no choice and does what her husband wishes and desires. She cannot unburden herself and her feminine instinct is curbed and suppressed. Despite all these, she is reluctant to admit failure and drags on with her marital life, which only imprisons her true self.

The themes that have engaged Margaret Atwood's imagination is the place of woman in modern society and an exploration of her identity in the highly commercialized, technological age. Atwood finds fault with the social system that accredits roles to the different genders and then separately labels them as inferior or superior, immoral or celibate. She is intensely occupied with women fighting against the female norms of life-sexuality, dichotomy between career and the claims of the family. She wants her protagonists not to be solitary weepers, but to make decisions, perform actions, be ready to face the consequences whatever they are, and to be ambitious. Her woman refuses to be a victim, but in the process of rejection she still has to face humiliation and be docile.

Marian McAlpin the protagonist of Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman* expresses Atwood's feminist polemics against sexual and gender roles imposed upon women in paternalist society. Peter, Marian's fiance, not only emblemizes the archetypal male, imperialistic and subjugating, but also internalizes the consumer ethics of the male-world. For Peter, Marian is "the kind of girl who wouldn't try to take over his life" (Atwood 61). Nevertheless, it does not indicate that he would not try to take over hers. On the contrary, Peter, the hunter, armed with his camera, the gun-substitute, wants to forever fix Marian in an image of -his-of what she should be. Marian always ready to please others, acquiesces and is willing to reflect his image.

In most of Atwood's works her heroines initially appear as sufferers, and they exhibit their inability through their relationship with food. In *The Edible Woman*, as Marian's wedding approaches and she subconsciously feels herself being absorbed by Peter, she stops eating. As she loses her individuality and freedom, so she loses her capacity to eat. Her non-eating is an expression of her inadequacy and at the same time a revolt against that inability. Significantly, Peter's power is demonstrated by his ability to directly control what Marian eats. He chooses her order in the restaurant, and this is the moment from which Marian can no longer tolerate food. Duncan recognizes Marian's food refusal as a form of protest before she understands it herself. When Marian finally realizes what is happening to her, she herself prepares a cake to Peter in the shape of a woman and presents it to him to epitomize how he has tried to devour her. Immediately after she puts an end to her relationship with Peter, she reclaims her sense of identity and her capacity to eat.

As a married woman Indu in *Roots and shadows* has no choice but to go according to her husband's will and desire. She feels the loss of freedom not only in her marital life but also in her professional life. She clings on to Jayant inspite of her being subjugated, because she doesn't want to prove herself a failure in front of her family. Marian on the other hand could feel an intimidation to her individuality and freedom during various situations even before the commencement of her marriage with Peter. Though Peter proposed to marry her, she renounces it and attains her sense of selfhood.

There are instances in both the novels where the protagonists show almost similar feelings in certain situations dealing with sex, their behaviour towards their men, and in realizing their self at the end. Indu's love marriage degenerates into a mere psychological affair that makes her feel "as if there was something shameful in total commitment", (143) as if she has abused her body's sanctity. Jayant, the archetypal Indian husband, is shocked "to find passion in a woman. It puts him off. When I am like that", Indu laments, "he turns away from me", (91-92). By refusing to accept Indu's real self, her human self, Jayant forces in her a state of armed neutrality of life with him and mars the felicity of their relationship. She explains her frustration, her disappointment and her humiliation to Naren, the only person to whom she can open up:

'I've learnt my lessons now. And so I pretend I'm passive. And unresponsive. I am still and dead. Not a pure woman. Not a too faithful wife. But an anachronism. A woman who loves her husband too much. Too passionately and is ashamed of it' (92).

Women are symbolized by submissiveness and compliance, and considered that under male supremacy they have to develop "a tendency to prevail by passive means". Indu is contemptuous of love. To her "love is a big fraud, a hoax, that's what it is..... its false" (173). She submits to him since she does not want conflict" (159). She understands that marriage had dwarfed and restricted her individuality because she had accounted it as a 'snare' and not a bond.

The meek, docile and humble Indu of the early days finally emerges as a daring, challenging, sensible turbulent woman. She resigns her job, thus defying the male authority, hierarchy

and the irony of a woman's marked existence. Her self-discovery is the frightening vision of the feminine self struggle for harmony and sanity. She comes out of her emotional upheaval and decides to lead a meaningful life with her husband. The home she had discarded becomes the place of refuge, of solace and consolation. Her stay in Akka's house gives her ample opportunities to know about herself and her interests. It is here that she is able to discover the multifaceted personality of hers as an independent woman, a daughter, a mother and a creative writer. Indu asserts her individuality as a woman and as a partaker in the endless cycle of life. Indu lives to see life with the possibilities of growth. She has discovered the meaning of life in her journey to individualization.

Marian in *The Edible Woman* wishes to be like Ainsley, a caring mother and like Clara a loving wife when she falls in love with Peter. She views her relationship with Peter with ironic detachment as when she analyses the psychological implications of their odd love-making on a sheepskin on the floor, on a scratchy blanket in a field and in the bath tub (p.60). Just as Indu adjusts with Jayant, Marian too readily adjusts to Peter's moods and she maintains her autonomy of thought. For instance after love-making Peter always asks, "How was it for you? And Marian relies "marvellous". In reality she has the opinion that, "One of these days, I should say rotten just to see what he would do" (62). When Peter proposes marriage to her, there is a flash of lightning and she sees herself "small and oval, mirrored in his eyes." (85) This shows that, she will tackle herself to be the mirror image of the model that Peter has fancied.

Marriage makes her take in the role of a subservient wife. She agrees to the marriage by thinking that marriage to Peter means more than protection, that it means death! a form of socially accepted suicide. The first symptoms of anorexia are seen in Marian immediately after she agrees to the marriage proposal made by Peter. First her body anything that may at one time has been alive. She identifies herself with the lower forms of life and refuses to eat—first steak and all meats, then eggs, then carrots. Her identification with the hunted and the consumed reaches high point. She realizes that she is powerless to control her own life.

Peter continues to reshape Marian according to his own image of her. Two events bring Marian's subconscious rejection of the victim-wife role to the conscious level. The main point that disturbs Marian is, Duncan's way of merciless questioning: "You didn't tell me it was a masquerade, who the hell are you supposed to be?" (263). This makes Marian realize the inauthenticity of her appearance. The other is Peter's attempt to photograph her in that guise. She finds this, a threat to her real self, a delimitation and a dehumanization of herself into an image. Just as Naren and the old house act as the catalytic agents for Indu's self-realization, so also Duncan here serves as the catalytic agent to some extent that brings about this change in her. He insists on her making her own decisions. Marian finds that "Her image was taking shape" (295). The words are ambiguous. This refers to her new self, as a creative non-victim, which takes shape within her. It also refers to the shaping of the cake woman as an image of her former self as a victim the edible woman for man's consumption. When Peter comes, she offers the cake to him and says,

"You've been trying to destroy me. But I've made you a substitute something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it?" (299-300)

The cake woman is frightened at seeing it. It is clear that Peter does not understand Marian. But what succeeds is Marian's sense of self-determination, her recognition that she was being consumed by Peter and her desire to remain as a person. When Peter leaves her apartment and her life, her body returns to normal position. She relieves herself from that pressure of bond and suddenly feels hungry. She starts eating that cake which she has prepared for Peter and enjoys her new identity and freedom.

The closing image of the novel has caught the attention of many a critic. Robert Lecker feels that her final act of eating the cake is a form of reconciliation—a recognition that she is herself "a mixture of consumer and consumed". Keren Chemin believes,

"By eating up this cake, fetish of a woman's body, she assimilates for the first time her own body and its feelings. It is reenactment of the ritual feast in which, the eating of an animal's flesh or a piece of cake shaped like breast, signifies the coming together of human and divine, individual with a collective, a woman with own and its feelings" (64).

Marian's cake represents Marian herself as both doll and infant. It is also an indication of her recognition or her acceptance of her identity as a woman.

Thus Indu in *Roots and Shadows* and Marian in *The Edible Woman* have risen quite successfully from being docile and submissive women to empowered and assertive women. These women are seen as today's women who have not abandoned the traditional image but are evolving it, changing it, improving upon it.

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