

Cross-Currents of Marital Discord in the earlier novels of Margaret Drabble: An Analysis

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Abstract: The paper deals with the issue of Marital Discord in the novels of Margaret Drabble, one of the most significant contemporary British women novelists. For the purpose of analysis, I will look at earlier novels of Drabble like *A Summer Bird Cage* (1963), *The Garrick Year* (1964) and *The Millstone* (1965) which are popularly known as an early “trio”. All the three novels centre primarily round intelligent female protagonists struggling to search out their own “identity” within the class structure of twentieth century England – a class structure that strictly follows the “patriarchal” norms and values. And one of the major thematic concerns in these three is the internal struggle or conflict in the mind of blooming hearts – which in turn becomes the cause of conjugal disharmony. A woman undergoes sufferings, particularly because she is “woman,” not of course by birth alone but turned into that position by the social frame – a “patriarchal” iron-frame – that never leaves her for a while to breathe freely. She is in chains of conventions and traditions. For her, every male member in her life is a mighty patriarch. She is never in “a room of her own” – never fully self-dependent, always looking to others (including Fate) for help and assistance.

Keywords: Contemporary, Conjugal, Patriarchal, identity, Conflict, disharmony.

Discussion:

Margaret Drabble (1939-), now “Ma Drabble” (Tapaswi 102), is one of the most popular “contemporary” British women novelists who have their own church, their own chair, their own philosophy – their own outlook on life and its many sided problems. And she has authored – over a long period of time – quite a score of best-sellers, the most important of which surely include *A Summer Bird Cage* (1963), *The Garrick Year* (1964), *The Millstone* (1965), *Jerusalem The Golden* (1967), *The Waterfall* (1969), *The Needle’s Eye* (1972), *The Realms of Gold* (1975), *The Ice Age* (1977), *The Middle Ground* (1980), *The Radiant Way* (1987) and *A Natural Curiosity* (1989). And these popular works of fiction obviously cover a long period of half a century – for, her first novel appeared in 1963 and the last one just a couple of years ago. Over these long decades, Drabble seems to have taken note of almost every aspect of life that touched her existence as a woman – be it motherhood, unmarried days of puberty, tilt of fair-feelings leading to a fear in an outside marriage – pre-or post-marital – sex, childbirth and filial care, change of carnal attachment from this sweet-heart to that, flirtation, elopement, willing or forced, and what not?

The various themes that Drabble has thus concentrated upon in novel after novel are all “of women, by women and for women”. This is particularly because Drabble is first and foremost a woman – a daughter, a wife and a mother – and her interest in childbearing and childrearing has always been simply unsurpassed. She can go to any extent in her interest in the child, especially “her own flesh and blood”, a part of her own liver and heart. She seems to view her own being in every particle of the child’s body. Hence for a child, a little one, she has always been ready to take any risk in life. In novel after novel, she follows the straight path of her mental graph and presents a picture that suits her psychic frame. And she is every inch a novelist, a woman novelist of her own convictions, who never wastes her basic talents and never writes a word that is not in keeping with her sights and insights, her own views and reviews.

And in most of her novels, especially the ones referred to above, we can trace conjugal disharmony in one form or another, on this pretext or that, with one consequence or another. In her very first novel, for instance, she sets the grooves that keep her within a mental frame that guides the artist in her like well-designed neon-lights, the characters of which appear, disappear and reappear, page after page, all through her career as a woman novelist. “All her novels have a typical feminine insight ... She is, therefore, regarded as a women’s novelist” (Tapaswi 36), a famous artist. She is, in this respect, greatly influenced by Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), and is never unmindful of what the daughters of Eve have been undergoing since the very dawn of creation – and that too without any hope of any favour from any corner, whatsoever. A woman is, in Drabble’s opinion, a sufferer, a born sufferer. What Aristotle said of human beings in general, is, in Drabble’s opinion, more than equally true of a woman’s body, mind and soul: “We are born in chains. At the time of birth we are stitched in a swaddling cloth; we spend the living years in the chains of society, and are nailed, after death, in a coffin.” But to have an in-depth view of a woman’s painful plight, especially due to marital dissonance, a detailed study of some of her classics seems to be a must. Hence we turn to *A Summer Bird Cage* (1963), *The Garrick Year* (1964) and *The Millstone* (1965) for critical analysis of the problem in hand, keeping our eyes wide open to the special causes of disharmony vis-à-vis the cultural background Drabble is particularly rooted in. In our consideration of these works of fiction, we shall try to keep our eyes wide open to the sufferings a woman undergoes, particularly because she is “woman,” not of course by birth alone but turned into that position by the social frame – a “patriarchal” iron-frame – that never leaves her for a while to breathe freely. She is in chains – in chains of this sort or that – chains of conventions, for instance, and of traditions, and of rites and rituals – varying from age to age, country to country, religion to religion, caste to caste, and creed to creed – of which she is neither un-intimidated nor free. For her, every male member in her life is a mighty patriarch – whether son, or father, or lover or husband – never less than a “sheltering tree”. She is never in “a room of her own” – never fully self-dependent, always looking to others (including Fate) for help and assistance. Since the days of great-grand mother

Eve she has been vainly waiting for “good days” and a free and happy future! Times may change, circumstances may vary, situations may be different, but chains remain always there – whether of four walls or of emotions, or of sentiments or of frailty! A kiss she happens to give is never lost. For her, stolen kisses are ever sweet. And the lap she provides is never profane or polluted. For her, her child is always her own, whether legitimate or illegitimate. She is never without the chains of love that are, ironically enough, never, never without emotional weakness or frailty.

Though Drabble is almost everywhere most herself in this regard, her very first novel, *A Summer Bird Cage* (1963), provides a most appropriate starting point. Here “bird cage” has been used as an image of a trap in which a woman often finds herself when she realizes that the world around her strictly follows the “patriarchal” norms and values. Here the female protagonist, Sarah Bennet, is a young woman who is very intelligent, and good-looking too – a woman of sight and insight. But in spite of all these qualities of head and heart, she is in a tight corner. When at a cocktail party someone asks her: “And what will you be?”, “How should I know?” Sarah replies and hurries on to add: “I will be what I become, I suppose” (SBC 7). In 1963, very many women had already graduated from Oxford and other universities, almost equally grand and glorious. They had university degrees in hand. They were well-qualified no doubt – and far better than many a man around. But as “individuals” they were still nowhere. The road they were planning to take was still not straight. It took one virtually nowhere. The question was still the question of livelihood – of earnings, their own earnings! They were still not free – economically and socially. Where will they get “five hundred pounds a year”? “Five hundred pounds” that Virginia Woolf had so very expressly spoken of in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). They had degrees in hand but did not know how to make use of them? They were yet to cover a long distance of “blind” years, of decades, in fact! And there was no way out. Hence Drabble’s Sarah Bennet, a university degree holder has no definite answer to the question: “...what will you be?” She could not go beyond the thwarted response: “I will be what I become, I suppose” (SBC 7). Isn’t the situation still quite similar to our own Sarahs too? Where do our own Sarahs stand? With paper degrees in hand, they are blindly rushing about – from pillar to post. What will they be? None has anything better to say than Drabble’s Sarah does: “I will be what I become, I suppose” (SBC 7). Without any sense of vocation as they are, they are unable to decide what course they should follow. They are still in search of their true “identity” as in dependent human beings. They don’t want to be restricted to the four-walls of their in-laws’ houses. Sarah, the female protagonist in Drabble’s *A Summer Bird Cage* (1963) confronts the same situation and thus expresses miserably: “Men are alright, they are defined and enclosed but in order to live must be open and raw to all we comers. What happens otherwise is worse than what happens normally the embroidery and the children and the sagging mind. I felt doomed to defeat. I felt all women were doomed” (SBC 28-29).

Sarah ultimately picks up a job at BBC and begins to live with her friend, Gill, who is a divorcee. Here Sarah suddenly realizes that Gill, her friend, had made a blunder by involving in a love-marriage. That’s what our own Sarahs are beginning to realize: where do love-marriages take us to? They mostly fail and take our Sarahs nowhere. Now think of Lousie, Sarah’s own sister who falls for a rich man for the sake of his bank balance. She marries him in a fit of excitement; and what does it lead her to? The poor soul has to commit adultery. Sarah is shocked to know that Lousie has been sleeping not with her husband but with her lover – “whose is still a bed of roses for her”! But, to what purposes? Is life nothing more than that? None of the marriages Sarah sees is encouraging. It is the same dirty rubbish everywhere; the same dunghill of lust and “jug! Jug!” Her sister Lousie’s marriage in which she hoped to find a model of her own, too ends in a divorce at last. And she finds herself standing on the crossroads of confusion where she cannot decide what to do and where to go. Hence, “Sarah’s story illustrates the [senseless] secondary status of the educated woman within the patriarchy” (Beards 35-37). Is life nothing more than what Arnold once looked upon – a “dreary battlefield where ignorant armies clash by night”? What is after all the use of breathless toil and labour if a woman were still to be where our Sarahs are?

But this “lucky” first novel – *A Summer Bird Cage* (1963) – does not make an end to the theme in hand. It gives the novelist in Margaret only a starting that becomes more forceful in the next two – *The Garrick Year* (1964) and the *Millstone* (1965). It is not without reason that they are popularly known as an early “trio”. All the three centre primarily round intelligent female protagonists struggling to search out their own “identity” within the class structure of twentieth century England – a class structure that strictly follows the “patriarchal” norms and values. All these three novels are written in a first person point of view. And one of the major thematic concerns in these three is the internal struggle or conflict in the mind of blooming hearts – which in turn becomes the cause of conjugal disharmony. Thus Emma in *The Garrick Year* marries David after dating with him for quite a few months. But she fails to realize the significance of Shakespeare’s well known lines before it is too late – “The Men are April when they woo, December when they wed...”

She is very happy during the period of dating. But after marriage, the sky changes altogether. David miserably fails to perform his duties as a husband. He is only a “man” without any “manhood” about him – merely a parasite, looking to Emma for the household set-up, out and out a lordly “patriarch”, an overlord. He seems to have every divine right to ride a rough shod on Emma, his wife! Is Emma nothing more than a second grade citizen, only to serve David in any way he wants her to? Utterly disillusioned in no time, Emma finds herself deeply disheartened, disconnected and naturally falls a prey to temptations here, there and everywhere. The intelligent woman in Emma aspires to take up a job which may lead to her financial freedom and social upliftment, but all in vain. Failure of her aspirations, coupled with the demands of children and the pressure of her husband on her sexual life makes her feel constrained and congested. Thus confounded by confusion, she makes a mess of her life. In her effort to do something different from other housewives, she has an affair with Wyntham Farrah who is a producer-director of David, her husband. But Emma, as wife, pure and simple, maintains a strict self-control. She does not simply give herself away to Farrah. Little wonder, Farrah once remarks: “Trying to get a kiss out of you is like trying to get blood out of a stone” (GY 140). Emma knows no “compromise”. She is not ready to play with the purity of relations. She is not ready to fall an easy prey to what is known as new morality. A child of traditional morality, she is not ready to embrace new morality. This is how, in the process, Emma’s sexual life becomes a sad, mad and bad comedy of lucklessness and misfortune, particularly because she could neither enjoy sex with her boyfriend nor could she maintain conjugal harmony in her married bliss. “Stolen kisses”, she knows, “are all

very sweet, but, then, they are not every body's cup of tea". Every Eve is not for every Adam. Hence the disastrous course that she is led to embrace. As she herself desperately tells David "that the children and their sexual encounters are only legalized rape" (Tapaswi 42). When Emma realizes that the gap between what she hopes to get and what she gets in fact is great, she allows the mother in her to dominate and thus saves her marital life from utter doom.

Drabble's next novel, *The Millstone* (1965), centres round RosamundStacey, another "blooming" beauty, who is already half way through her Ph.D. thesis. She proudly follows the traditional middle class morality. She lives at her parental flat and is always suffering from the fear of a sexual encounter. But she does not want to reveal it to anybody, so she cleverly dates with two different men. And each of them thinks she is sleeping with another one. It is at this critical stage of her life, she comes in contact with George who is a "bisexual". But in a fit of overconfidence, she becomes pregnant in her very first sexual encounter with him. And this brings in the dilemma of her life – because after pregnancy she is unable to deny her femaleness. As she herself puts it: "It would serve me right, I thought for having been born a woman in the first place. I couldn't pretend that I wasn't a woman, could I, however much I might try from day to day to avoid the issue?" (M 16). The fact is that she is angry with her parents, particularly because she thinks her mother had brought her up as an equal and had also inculcated in her the middle class morality of self-sacrifice. What had thus been inflicted upon her was "a clash of opposites" – opposites that could become, at best, a cause of confusions, constrains and clashes of a type in a woman's life and could deprive her of what is virtually a must for growth and harmony in the contemporary world. But caring a fig for anything, she continues her work as a scholar and completes her thesis before delivery. This is particularly because the type of woman she is, she doesn't want her pregnancy to be an excuse for not working on the thesis. As she herself puts it: "I simply did not believe that the handicap of one small illegitimate baby would make a scrap of a difference to my career" (M 94). On the night she is taken to hospital for delivery she says: "I was glad too to be going from so good an address, I felt that by it alone I had brought a little difference..." (M 96). And she gives birth to a daughter. But see the irony of the situation! The child is already suffering from a chronic heart disease. Doctors do not allow her to meet the baby. But she is unable to suppress her desire of seeing her "flesh and blood". She goes to the hospital and during her "hysterical cries", she comes to realize that "there is a limit to equality, a biological difference that she cannot change (M 58). This is how she realizes at last that a woman is a woman is a woman. Try howsoever hard she may, she can't be a man, she can't take the place of a man – an overlord, a patriarch – a *patiparmeshwar*, a sheltering tree"!

After the publication of her thesis, she gets a good job in a reputed university. And one of the critics, Nancy Hardin, comes out with the comment: "RosamundStacey is basically a competent and self-reliant young scholar" (M 57). It is her privileged social position that allows her to keep Octavia, her daughter, in society, that otherwise viewed unmarried mothers with suspicion. Rosamund herself admits: "I was cashing in on the foibles of a society which I have always distrusted; by pretending to be above its structure, I was merely turning its anomalies to my own use. I would not recommend my course of action to anyone with a shade less advantage in the world than myself" (M 111-12). Thus the novel reveals the social network developing as a result of social class determinism and prejudices concerning marriage and illegitimacy. Rosamund is happy and successful as being an independent person. "The knowledge that she is equipped with earning her living as a scholar allows her the freedom to have a child. She does not want to get married and live under male superiority" (Whittier 197-198).

Conclusion:

As a feminist of her own type, Drabble is at her best in these novels, particularly for the situation that becomes the cause of marital discord. Though as a British woman, "a child of light and life", a fine-flower of progress that the "other sex" has made over the centuries, she has her own outlook on life. The causes of discord she has been subjected to and is controlled by; her biological strings are, in several respects, still very human to the core. Flesh is after all flesh, and blood is after all blood. And who is not aware of the "religion of the blood", of which D.H.Lawrence, the writer of *Women in Love* (1920) and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) was a strong supporter? A woman is after all a woman, irrespective of the climate or the country she belongs to and the cultural associations of the continental situation, the economic level or standard of life, or the mental IQ. The heart that throbs is the same in every living being. As Robert Burns says in one of his poems:

The rank is but the guinea's stamp,
The man is the gow'd for a' that ...

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