Woman's Quest for Survival: Margret Drabble's *The Millstone*

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Abstract

This study deals with *The Millstone* (1965) which is a dramatic depiction of a single mother heroine in a classic predicament. This novel is considered as representative of the age in which it was written. The primary theme is her intense preoccupation with questions of fatalism and will. The work also involves, both explicitly and implicitly, feminist concerns. Because the central protagonist is a woman and the society in which she lives is depicted, accurately, as deeply patriarchal and class-bound, the problem of the individual's capacity for self-determination is inevitably tied to the feminist perspective.

المرأ ة والصراع من اجل البقاء :دراسة ادبية للكاتبة ماركريت درابل

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الخلاصة

يتناول البحث "حجر الرحى" (1965) التي حازت الكاتبة ماركريت درابل عليها جائزة .وهي تصوير درامي لبطلتها كأم عزباء في مأزق تقليدي. حيث تعتبرهذه الرواية ممثلا للعصر الذي كتبت فيه . ان الموضوع الرئيس للرواية هو انشغالها الشديد بمسألة الايمان بالقضاء والقدر و الإرادة . ويشمل العمل أيضا الاهتمامات النسوية صراحتاً أوضمنياً لأن بطلة الرواية الرئيسة هي المرأة والمجتمع الذي تعيش فيه والذي يصور المشكلة بشكل دقيق قدرة الفردعلى تقريرمصيره ،في مجتمع ذكوري إلى حد كبير،وهو حتما مرتبط بوجهة النظر النسوية.

THE MILLSTONE

Margret Drabble, was born on 5 June 1939 in the industrial city of Sheffield, Yorkshire, England. Drabble grew up under the shadow of the Second World War. She was born into a family that at once reflected the breakup of old patterns and the power of conventions. Like many modern writers, Drabble decided to defend women's freedom and independence. In her works she highlights the restrains that confine a woman and delay her mentally, spiritually and emotionally. She deprecates the cripple destructive factors in the cracks of the modern societies represented by the lack of spirituality caused by the absence of faith, collapse of morality, the tremendous impact of the scientific technology, and the disastrous consequences of the two World Wars.

The Millstone takes place in London of the 1960s and tells the story of Rosamund Stacey, a shy attractive female Cambridge graduate. She is a young Londoner student who is writing her Ph.D. thesis on Elizabethan poetry. She lives alone in the flat of her parents who have left for a philanthropic mission in Africa. Her father is a Professor of Economics and has gone there with Rosamund's mother to work for a newly established university. The heroine is a lonely person. Rosamund becomes a single mother as a result of an incidental encounter with a young man with whom she has no particular strong feelings. She is determined to make her own way to emotional maturity.

The Millstone is a logical exploration of the heroine's problems. It suggests a change in the author's consciousness, and search for solutions. In this novel, Drabble presents another kind of character with a new form of hardship. She moves away from an unhappy traditional

married woman to an unmarried one outside the patriarchal values. For many novelists the emancipated woman and the mother are two sharply different types. Lidan Lin confirms this fact when she suggests that "one important change is the availability to women of equal opportunity for higher education and scholarships, a reality simply unimaginable for Austen and merely a dream for Virginia Woolf"[1]Drabble has shown that in the modern world the two roles are often combined in the same person.[2]

Rosamund is depicted to tell her own predicament. The novel is narrated in the first person by the protagonist, in a subjective personal tone. So with Drabble, the first person narration reveals Drabble's naturalist-realist method. For instance, her detailed account of the process of childbirth demonstrates her realistic art of fiction writing. Rosamund seems to be more than fictional member because she represents Drabble. She is graduated from Oxford like Drabble and similarly she has a complex relationship with her sister. Drabble can illustrate her major theme as a writer of women rights. Mostly, she is still looking through the eyes of the female protagonists. All the happenings, new experiences and different people are told in her eye throughout her pregnancy and afterwards.[3]

Some critics believe that the novel is concerned with other different problems. Jane Stevenson, for example, suggests that:

> *The Millstone* is critically observant of issues such as class-distinction, poverty, and the failings of National Health Service. It concentrates, however, not only this public sphere but on the private experience of a heroine struggling against the problems of her society, and against many counter-attractions, in order to achieve a balanced independence for herself — eventually helped, to surprise, as well hampered by the unplanned arrival of a baby daughter.[4]

Rosamund is still virgin in her mid-twenties. With her position as unmarried mother and career woman, apparently an example of modern feminism is firmly linked with its equivalent like Bernard Shaw's women who want children but no husband. The theme of The *Millstone* is a smart adaptation of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Both stories are "moral tales" describing how the heroines pay for their bad behavior[3]. But Rosamund's "sin" is of a distinctly contemporary nature:

> My crime was my suspicion, my fear, my apprehensive terror of the very idea of sex. . . .I had the additional disadvantage of being unable to approve my own conduct; being a child of the age, I knew how wrong and how misguided it was. I walked around with a scarlet letter embroidered upon my bosom . . . but the A stood for Abstinence`, not for Adultery. *(Millstone*, 21-22)

Drabble gives a precise description of the place of the flat where Rosamund lives. She profits from her parents' nice flat situated "... on the fourth floor of a large block of an early twentieth century building, and in very easy reach of Oxford Circus, Marylebone High Street, Harley Street, and anywhere else useful that one think of" (M 9), The location of the flat is important, as it contradicts with the financial status of Rosamund who lives on "the starvation line" (M 10). She says "...I was living at that time in a flat that belonged to my parents [who are abroad], which dangerously misrepresented my status." (M 9)

According to her, to live for another means no longer encompass complete control over one's life. She has inherited from her parents a sincere concern for those who suffer. However, fate and determinism are still closely connected with some other conditions in which the characters live. The state of dwelling, the location and the regional setting also rank among the determining issues because these are indicators of one's financial situation and

thus of the social class membership – which gives rise to people's expectations or prejudices. Living in a mansion in the heart of London, for instance, guarantees certainty and safety.

Nancy S. Hardin indicates that the title *The Millstone* alludes to the verse in Matthew 18:6, "Who so shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea."[6] Thus, the millstone here may be either the illegitimate infant or the society. Both are heavy burdens.[9] Thus, this novel scrutinizes the difficulties and hardships faced by women and the conflict of their minds as they face a war within whether to accept social order or act on their own will. According to Jita Tuzyline Allan,

> [I]n *The Millstone* the metaphor of concealment encapsulates the main character within the emergent ideology of single parenthood, thereby doubling the burden of the female identity.[7]

The sexual revolution in the 1960s marked the landmark in women's lives and sexuality, consequently the majority of women wanted to express their sexuality freely. Yet they could not do so, because they were not able to liberate their minds from the shackles of their Victorian nurture. The novel reveals the social networks developing as a result of social class determinism and prejudices concerning marriage and illegitimacy. Drabble opens the book with a scene where an unmarried couple demands a hotel room to have sex in, which becomes threatened after an accidental disclosure of the truth about their unmarried status. The receptionist's complaint "oh well, I'll have to go and ask" (M, p.7) proves that the morals were not very free at this period.

Rosamund is not the only female character who holds the widespread stereotypical Victorian notion of the British society in the 1960s. Rosamund's sister, Beatrice, who has a husband and three children, represents a respectable mother and wife living an orderly family life. She is bound by Victorian morality and class prejudices. Rosamund like Drabble has an important and complex relationship with her sister. When Rosamund becomes pregnant she writes a letter to her sister Beatrice. Beatrice is shocked and she urges Rosamund to have an abortion. One of the main reasons is that "through no fault of its own [the child] would have to have the slur of illegitimacy all its life" (M, p. 90).

Thus, some critics suggest that Rosamund deliberates to be a single mother, for her sister is a mother and a wife who is not happy deep down. She chooses to be alone and remains unmarried as a rebellious act against her sister's situation. She does not want to be like her: married and unhappy. Rosamund is also inspired by her mother who is a "great feminist". (M 29)She refused to be led by a male prejudice as she yearns to have her self-fulfillment and independence. Therefore, she wants to be liberal and feminist as her mother dictates. Nichole Suzanne Bokat points out that,

> Overcompensating for Beatrice's failure to live up to the unstated expectations of their socially concerned, feminist mother, Rosamund assesses the fate of the married of woman by observing her sister's situation. Rosamund's decision not to marry, although based largely on her fear of intimacy, is informed, as well, by her need of her own identity and independence. The crisis then — protagonist's unplanned pregnancy — is Drabble's way of resolving her character's guilt for having chosen a self-involved existence and her rage at having upheld her parents' notion of totally self-reliant, emancipated woman.[8]

Rosamund had an affair with a student from Cambridge University called Hamish. They went to a motel as all other students used to do. She says "In those days, at that age, such things seemed possible and permissible..." (M, p.7) But they didn't have a physical affair; "we liked each other's company". (M, p.7) According to Ellen Cronan Rose, Rosamund rejected love and intimate involvement with another human being. She wants "touch without contact. (M, p.30)" However, after some time Rosamund realized that she made a mistake about this kind of a relation which does not consist of sexuality[9].

> When Hamish and I loved each other for a whole year without making love, I did not realize that I had set the mould of my whole year. One could find endless reasons for our abstinence — fear, virtue, ignorance, perversion — but the fact remains that the Hamish pattern was to be endlessly repeated, and with increasing velocity and lack of depth, so that eventually the idea of love ended in me almost the day that it began. (M, p.7)

Rosamund met two other men, Joe Hurt and Roger Henderson She talks about this dating behaviour as a system which provides her with whatever she wants, which is attention.

> My system worked well for about a year, and while it lasted it was most satisfactory; I look back on it now as on some distant romantic idyll. What happened was this. I went out with two people at once, one Joe Hurt, the other Roger Anderson. (M, p.19)

Compared to other British women writers, such freedom seems to be of marginal interest for Drabble.[10] The only main male character of the novel is George Matthews. He is a radio announcer at the BBC. "He was a man much susceptible to the tender emotions of pity and sorrow, I suspected." (M, p.24) The typical commanding voice of the male characters of Drabble is heard when George walks down with Rosamund. Here, as an independent woman she immediately refuses the idea of being accompanied by a man, as she feels humiliated by the portrait of a woman who cannot go home without a man at that time of the night. But, George insists and they walk together. Then:

> ....we subsided gently together and lay there quietly. Knowing that he was queer, I was not frightened of him at all, because I thought he would expect no more from me... (M, p.29)

Rosamund realistically narrates George as if he was fitted for her own expectations. She underlines the exact core of her relationship with George: 'It was upon George that the whole delicate unnatural system was wrecked.' (M, p.21) However, in fact, it is impossible to call this unity a relation, because it is not a mutual relationship. There is lack of communication. Although she wants him to stay, she says nothing, so does George. He leaves. "Though he was the one thing I wanted to keep… and I might have had him, but I said nothing. And he said nothing" (M, p.31).

Rosamund is too shy to admit that she has fallen in love with him; she lets George disappear from her life. Even though George is the major male figure in this novel, he is quite vague. He is seen at the very beginning and at the very end of the novel. He is just the physical father of the baby to be born. [11] As seen in *The Millstone*, the figure of the father is shadowy and unimportant. When Drabble was a child her father was away and most of her childhood was spent with her mother and her eldest sister.[12]

When she finds out that she is pregnant, she first decides to abort her child but she gives up the idea as it is very expensive. Although Rosamund is a decisive woman, she

cannot control the flow of the events. Despite her critical situation, she changes her opinion and chooses to have her child as a single mother. Rosamund rejects abortion and marriage that could legitimize her pregnancy.Yet, when she announces that she is pregnant and that she is determined on giving birth, Joe wants to help Rosamund. He feels that he has a right to command her to abort this pregnancy, because he considers that it is a destructive thing to have a baby without being married.

Drabble criticizes the idea that women can attain respectability through men's existence in her life as proposed by this patriarchal world in which she lives.[13] Undoubtedly, Drabble has a special competence to write about the experience of motherhood. The interaction between mother and child is for Drabble the most beautiful relationship in the world bringing her, "the greatest joy in the world"[14]. She has a keen consciousness of the mixed delights and anxieties of parenthood. This relationship is something unique and emphasizes once again the feminine sensibility in her novels. This is obvious in Rosamund's relation with her child. As soon as Rosamund's little beloved daughter, Octavia, is born, she falls in love with her. She substitutes George with Octavia.[24]

However, Rosamund no more considers her child to be a penalty, though she has to go through some humiliating treatment in her prejudicial patriarchal society. At the hospital, she lies in the bed labelled by the letter [U]which stands for Unmarried. The baby changes her mother's life extremely. Rosamund, who has always tended to be an intellectual person," suddenly reveals the emotional side of her life. She thinks that living for another means losing control over her own life[15]. As Mary Moran states, it is her daughter through whom Rosamund finds out what it is like to be a real human being.[16]

Drabble's female protagonist is able to combine her motherhood with her work, just like the author herself. Rosamund's career achievements, for instance, make up for her uneasy single mother status when we realize that her "name would in the near future be Dr. Rosamund Stacey"[17] When Rosamund becomes pregnant, she does not give up her work. She successfully completes her dissertation about Elizabethan poetry.[18] She sees no reason why her study, her future career as an assistant lecturers should be interrupted by having a baby. "I simply did not believe that the handicap of one small illegitimate baby would make a scrap of difference to my career". (M 165)

> I do not wish to suggest, as perhaps I seem to be suggesting, that the irrational was taking its famed feminine grip upon me. My Elizabethan poets did not begin to pale into insignificance in comparison with the thought of buying nappies. On the contrary, I found I was working extremely well at this time and with great concentration and clarity heart. (*M* 78)

Still, Rosamund is incapable to resolve the conflict between the maternal and the erotic aspect of their personalities.[19]

Drabble naturally reflects this change of the state of affairs of that time and enables her heroine to have higher education, as the career structure predetermines one's position within the society. 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.[20]

Drabble also gives a moving picture of those who undergo poverty and illness. The change in consciousness of the protagonist is even more evident. As time passes, Rosamund faces the outside world and declares that she "had to face the problem of publicity". (M, p. 39) Before her pregnancy she was living in her shelter, she has always been an isolated person. However, she is pregnant now, broke and also living on her own without a family and close friends, she has to embrace the others by sharing them the same problem she

suffers. For Rosamund Stacey, the condition of pregnancy brings her into contact with the supernatural organization of reality.[21] Rosamund suspects that her pregnancy is a sign of "a different, non-rational order of things" (M, p.74).

Through her connection to other people due to her experiences with other pregnant women in the National Health clinic, she discovers unexpected things about her own physical and psychological makeup. This change is reflected in her growing sense of kinship with the other poor and uneducated women at the clinic. She observes pale, exhausted women who are worn out by numerous pregnancies and children.

Rosamund is deeply disturbed by this contact to facts of inequality, of limitation, of separation, of the impossible, heartbreaking uneven hardship of the human lot. She is convinced that life is not fair: "It is unfair on every score and every count and in every particular, and those, who, like my [Fabian Socialist] parents, attempt to level it out, are doomed to failure" (M, pp.93-94). Here she is "reduced almost to tears by the variety of human misery that presented itself" (M, p.64) But like the other women, although she feels on the verge of seeing into this order, she never does so:

> it was as though I were waiting for some link to be revealed to me that would make sense of disconnections, though I had no evidence at all that it existed. At times I had a vague and complicated sense that this pregnancy had been sent to me in order to reveal to me a scheme of Things totally different from the scheme which I inhabited (M, p. 75)

Although Rosamund's life is not easy, when she observes deprived ignored women she realises how lucky she is to have enough for everything she needs. Here, the title of the book reaches its meaning.[33] Although, Rosamund sometimes thinks that she should inform George about Octavia's existence, but then she does not because,

> .... I felt like ringing him up and telling him about her, but I never did; I fancied the idea that I knew enough about human nature to know that no amount of charm could possibly balance the quite unjustified sense of obligation, financial, personal, and emotional, that such a revelation would instantly set to work. So I spared him and myself. (M, p.116)

Rosamund eventually prefers her maternal love to man's love. She is unwilling to let George enter her life. This also proves that her physical desire is suppressed[22]

> It was no longer in me to feel for anyone what I felt for my child; compared with the perplexed fitful illuminations of George, Octavia shone with a faint, constant and pearly brightness quite strong enough to eclipse any more garish future blaze. A bad investment, I knew, this affection, and one which would leave me in the dark and cold in years to come; but then what warmer passion ever lasted longer than six months? (M 198-199)

According to Valerie Myer, Rosamund is incapable to shares Octavia with George. She does not want to extend her love to anyone but Octavia.[23] Rosamund for the first time mockingly admits about not having a husband. She says to Lydia, "Didn't you know, I am one of those Bernard Shaw women who wants children but no husband? It suits me fine, like this." (M, p. 106)

George never discovers that he is Octavia's father. He appears for the second time

at the end of the novel on a Christmas day. The conclusion comes when Octavia gets sick. Rosamund has to go out and buy the medicine that the doctor prescribed. She is surprised to see George. They did not see each other for two years "I looked at George, and wondered if it had ever really happened; he did not look capable of it, he looked as mild and frail and non masculine as he had appeared at our first meeting, when I had been so sure that it was Joe he fancied" (M 190).[24]"I wanted to say, stay with me, but my mouth was so dry I could not speak. So I gazed at him and smiled. (M, 162)

Her struggle and loneliness almost exhaust her. She is generally hopeless, unhappy and lacks confidence. But she wants to seem brave again. Rosamund invites George into her house again. Here, there is a similarity between the scenes when they first came together. Yet this time, the baby makes the difference. The striking shift presents itself when she is at home with George. It is George's part is to accept this independent and liberal woman. "You have got a baby, have you,' said George. 'I didn't even know you were married. I'm not,' I said and smiled, this time with true confidence."(M, p. 163)

Although Rosamund does not give George a role in her existence, his absence is felt profoundly in her life. Both of them try to suppress their need for each other. They cannot reveal their real needs clearly to each other.

> .... 'You never seemed to want a husband' `No,' I said, 'perhaps I never did. Though I sometimes think it might be easier, to have one. (M, p.171)

Drabble attempts to come to term with women's changing role in a modern society. Her focus on the woman's life is serious, thorough and significant. The last scene is like a minor climax, as reader is curious whether Rosamund will tell George about Octavia of being his daughter. But in the end as a result of her inner monologue she relinquishes the idea. She consciously rejects the chance to have a family. Rosamund limits George's role in her life forever. The passion that Rosamund has for her baby cannot be compared to anything. She realizes that there is no love which could be stronger than her maternal adoration for her baby. He becomes the unwanted person at home. He gives a cold pitiful excuse to leave: "I must be going now; I start work very early in the morning" (M, p.172)

The novel ends with three negative remarks "No, no, nothing" (M, p.172) by George. It ends with George's utterances indicating that male character has a significant role in her life. This significance stems from the fact that he played an important role in her life, when she had the chance to be a mother. According to her, motherhood has a positive aspect.

On the other hand, she felt that he was not suitable enough to be her husband due to his weak character. That aspect is a negative one. He is the source of her suffering and agonies. The novel ends with Rosamund pouring all of her passion for her child. She says, "There was one thing in the world that I knew about, and that one thing was Octavia."(M, 172)

Although Drabble claims that she successfully reconciles motherhood and scholarship, her heroine, Rosamund, ends up sacrificing all her personal affairs in favour of the essential relationship with her child. This sacrifice transcends her to spirituality since her struggle is a test of faith, and her devotion to motherhood provides her with self-awareness.[25] According to Annis Pratt:

> Through the motherhood, Rosamund attains true privacy, control over her own destiny, and her deep love for her daughter. She can do for herself, as her feminist mother has urged. ... Giving birth to Octavia is thus a vehicle for her coming to herself, her personal rebirth.[26]

Rosamund feels that the experience of maternal love has made her:

> One of the elected few, [who have] been permitted to glimpse something of the very nature of the harsh, mysterious processes of human survival: and she could induce in herself a state of recognition that was almost visionary. [Motherhood has given her] a kind of superior wisdom, a higher order of knowledge. [It is the one redeeming factor in her drab life] She fed off it: her maternal role. (M, p.45)

Previously, her academic side was vigorously improved, but her emotional side was ignored because she organized her life to shun intimate connection with others. However, her belief in free will and her intellectual approach to life collapse when her emotions and instincts of motherhood emerge.

Moreover, Rosamund is Drabble's first protagonist who accepts her fate. Her submission provides her with self-reality and endows her with a kind of what it means to be a human being. Rosamund is confused by her special inclination toward "some absurd belief in a malicious deity" (M, p. 74), which causes her to fear a disaster that may trouble her at any time. For this reason she will never "tempt fate by making plans or harboring hopes that could be knocked down by the whim of such a deity." (M, p.158)

Nancy S. Hardin, in "Drabble's The Millstone: A Fable for Our Times" (1973), argues that acceptance of fate, which for Rosamund takes the form of an unwanted pregnancy, is responsible for the protagonist's deepening of character and achievement of wisdom. Through Rosamund's recognition of the 'no choice' of her dilemma, she can find joy within the imprisonment of her existence. [27]

The traditional narrative mechanics of fate and free will, character and chance, are the driving forces of Drabble's fiction, and she commonly invokes the master of coincidence, Thomas Hardy. Drabble is highly affected by him, she is aware of the cruel ironies and accidents of life that would seem to imply such a deity. Rosamund reflects Drabble's own attitude towards determinism and deity:

> I thought for some time about life's little ironies, for the truth was … that they always moved me out of all proportion to their significance in any respectable philosophic scheme. I have always been stirred, sometimes profoundly, by newspaper comments such as Killed While Adjusting Safety Belt, or Collapsed Night before Wedding. (M 75-6)

The complication of Rosamund's pregnancy and motherhood make Rosamund question the Providence about the reason of causing her daughter stricken with fatal heart defect. Although at first she sees only the negative side of her situation:"I was trapped in a human limit for the first time in my life, and I was going to have to learn how to live inside it." (M, 65) Ultimately, the pregnancy is responsible for her psychological and spiritual growth. It forces her to recognize that she is a biological as well as an intellectual creature. Gradually she develops a respectful awe of the side of herself she had formerly dismissed as "trivial things like the workings of my guts" (M, p. *39*).

NOTES

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