



## A STUDY OF A FEMALE CHARACTER IN A MALE DOMINATED WORLD IN MARGARET DRABBLE'S *THE MILLSTONE*\*

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### Abstract

This is a study of female characters in the novels of Margaret Drabble, focused mainly on what they have to say about the condition of women in our contemporary society. The author being English, and her stories taking place in Britain from the 1960's onwards, it has been considered relevant to start with an appraisal of British society and of the way it has evolved in recent years.

Many of the points we make in a sober and descriptive manner have been taken up in a literary fashion by our author. This chapter reviews how feminist issues have been approached in England and tries to place Margaret Drabble in a perspective amongst contemporary women writers.

Then follows a detailed study of the female character of Rosamund. A complete resume of the book would have taken too much space, while the windings and sinuosities of the stories are either sufficiently known or apt to be deduced from the references made in the text. Emphasis, therefore, has been placed on those salient passages pertinent to our study.

The conclusions are offered as a synthesis of our reading and personal interpretation of Margaret Drabble's message. They formulate what we consider to be her views on the women question, while making allowance for parallel or complementary issues.

A judgement of Margaret Drabble as a feminist closes our study.

**Keywords:** Drabble, Feminism, Place of Women in a Male Dominant Society.

### 1. Introduction

The almost three decades during which Margaret Drabble has been active as a novelist have witnessed a number of radical changes in Britain. Some of these changes are recognizable at first sight: new towns, high-rise buildings, a proliferation of restaurants and wine bars, an increase in tourism, fast cars and stylish dresses, television everywhere, violence in the streets, hooliganism in the stadiums ... Other changes call for closer analysis and for a certain amount of subtlety when interpreting the contemporary outlook of the British, their morals and their habits. The point should be made at once of the existence of a tension between change and continuity in British society. While for instance, as a symbol of change, the urban landscape has altered considerably in the last thirty years, underneath lies a feeling of nostalgia for the countryside and for the traditional forms of life. A similar trend runs through the world of moral and social values. In a certain sense Margaret Drabble's novels are "condition of England" novels, illustrating the "social revolution" of the period and implying (as in "The Ice Age", 1977) that it has left untouched the centres of political or at any rate financial power (Phelps 1988: 200). It will be appropriate, then, to briefly review the changes and to note the correlative marks of stability in British society with emphasis on the position of women.

It is well known that the ultimate grounds for stability in British society are the facts that Britain is an island, and that since the Norman Conquest in 1066 there has been no successful invasion of Britain by a foreign power. Foreign institutions and customs have never been forcibly imposed on the British, although they may have been accepted tacitly and slowly through repeated contacts and persuasion. As a result, the insular mentality, broadly speaking, remains.

There seems also to be a general consensus that Britain has declined since the Second World War and the subsequent loss of Empire, thus following the fate of other imperial powers, like Spain and Ottoman Turkey, before her.

The economic decline of Britain, in relative terms, had been obvious before the War. But to a keen observer (Heren 1981: 109) the real decline of Britain, not only as a military and industrial power but as a country which had lost its way, began in the sixties. The confidence on an eventual comeback was dissipated

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and the national decline began to look irreversible. The turning point seems to have been the Suez conflict of 1956, the ill-fated invasion of Egypt after the nationalisation of the Canal by Nasser.

According to another writer on the subject (Colville 1977: 34), had it not been for the establishment of English as the most important of the world's languages, for her new opportunities as a member of the European Economic Community, and for her political contemporary virtues, Britain would have been relegated in the eyes of foreigners to a status lower than that of a second-class power..

Within that international context, which represents a fundamental restructuring of these societies, Britain fared particularly badly (Causar 1987: 1). The growing economic crisis of the 1970's and 1980's was responsible for deepening divisions in society with a widening of the gap between rich and poor, the employed and the unemployed, the North and the South.

Over the years Britain had derived pride and prestige from its social and political stability. When Irish bombs exploded in Belfast, Birmingham, Glasgow and even London, the public was profoundly shocked.

Grave criminality and unrest in the streets of great cities were already disturbing in the 1960's and become doubly so in the 1970's. There was violence organised by extremists during the picketing of mines, factories and power stations in a series of strikes in 1972 and 1973. Corruption in local Government was discovered in the 1970's, while there were almost annual scandals in the City. The racial riots of Notting Hill in 1958 were repeated in 1976, as the immigrants of Commonwealth origin (West Indian, Indian and Pakistani) reached almost 2 million, that is, 3% of the total population.

The initial tendency was to see these events as minority affairs and for the British public to face them with imperturbability and without panic, maintaining their faith in the eternal security of the country and its emotional stability. The advent of the Conservative Government of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 echoed the public call for domestic peace, but concern increased in 1981, and again in 1985, by serious outbreaks of rioting in inner city areas, by the violence and counter violence associated with the miners' strike of 1984-85 and by continuing increase in crime rates.

What have changed are social and cultural attitudes and behaviour: the way people regard themselves and each other. This shows both convergence and divergence. Young people of all classes have moved furthest towards a common culture. So too, in a more general and less complete way, have the older generations in matters of personal consumption, family life, and moral attitudes. But the cultural changes have pressed further in a more disruptive direction. The deferential structure of British society has been cracked wide apart.

Authority has no prerogative right in any sphere. The old can no longer expect automatic respect for their experience and knowledge from the young, especially as so much of that manifestly dates very rapidly, in an era of accelerated technological change. In asserting their right to personal, economic and cultural equality, women have thrown down what is perhaps the most fundamental challenge of all, aspiring as it does to reverse the pattern of some thousands of years of human history. Working-class groups too since the late sixties have shown a militancy and a determination in their economic struggles that go beyond anything experienced since the beginning of the century. In 1973-4 a miners' strike in effect brought down Edward Heath's Conservative Government. This is hardly Marxist class struggle: it is not that the workers want to run the society or abolish classes, but to show a clear refusal to be bound by the traditional conventions of "collective bargaining".

Increasingly in the seventies has come to evidence that racial minorities are no longer prepared to tolerate the second-class status assigned to them. In the summer of 1981 there were scenes in many English cities reminiscent of the American race riots of the sixties.

Some of the characteristics of the British, and their recent evolution, are better understood by looking at their institutions. We will only mention here the Monarchy, because both its permanence and its transformations throw light on the British mentality. Also because its present holder happens to be an intelligent and dedicated woman.

Today the public functions of the Sovereign are virtually ceremonial, although in relation to the Government, as opposed to Parliament, the Monarch retained power for a longer time, being Her responsibility to appoint the Prime Minister, who would form the Government, among those who could command a majority in the House of Commons. Until recently the Monarch exercised a certain freedom of action and could influence the issue in some cases, but this prerogative, which was of great political and practical importance, has today been reduced almost to vanishing point, as the political parties impose the leaders they elect upon the Sovereign.



On the other hand, Elizabeth II is a constantly travelling Monarch, showing a notable diplomatic value for Her country. But today the influence, and perhaps the very existence of the Monarchy rests on the personality and behaviour of the Sovereign and the Royal Family.

By the same token, a reference to the 'Thatcher phenomenon' should find a place in this study of a woman writer and of the women characters in her novels.

Margaret Thatcher, daughter of a lower middle class family, studied science at Oxford, later became a barrister and married a rich industrialist. Her career in politics was swift and self-assured: elected to Parliament in 1959, a member of the shadow Cabinet in 1967 and Minister of Education in the Tory Government of 1970. She chose a tougher kind of conservatism than Heath's and had little sympathy for the Women's Liberation Movement. In February 1975 she was elected leader of the Conservative Party, the first woman in its history. Since 1979 she has been the Prime Minister of Britain.

The 1960s in Britain, as in some other European countries and the USA, were a very chaotic and revolutionary period from the social point of view. Apart from new fashions in dressing, in music and the arts in general, also the way people behave changed drastically. Men and women could live together openly without getting married, something which in the past had been a social sin, absolutely immoral. Having children outsidemarriage or one-parent families became quite common, even if there remain difficulties especially for the unmarried mother. But at least the child no longer bears the 'illegitimate' mark. Contraceptive pills and family planning made possible the pre-marital sex. Homosexual people could live together openly and declare themselves as such.

"Americanization" which was in fashion since the World War II, and which had affected the language and the habits, diminished, except amongst the younger people. On the contrary, the British tried to produce English music, English theatre, English fashion.

In the world of art, the 1960s opened a period of unprecedented pluralism. Never before had there been such tolerance, or such great variation both in style, and in what was admissible art practice. The significant aesthetic shift was a result of the repudiation of immutable categories for expression, and of impatience with traditional critical values (Adams 1978: 7-8).

A distinctive phenomenon has been the apparition of a 'youth culture', something that simply did not exist before the 1960's. The phenomenon can be attributed partly to greater affluence after a long period of economic growth, partly to the need for working-class youth to establish an identity of their own in a society in which they felt little valued. It was ironic that British youth should have to look to America in order to establish a sense of their own identity. It started with the coming of rock'n'roll, followed by a succession of youth 'cults' (Teddy Boys, Mods and Rockers) in the 1960's and by the dance 'explosion' of the late 1970's and 80's. In the 1970's came the Punks, with their deliberately provoking mask-like faces, and in the 1980's the Skinheads (already present in the 1960's) re-emerged.

At a time of rising unemployment, the often violent hostility of white youth towards the black became more marked and was reciprocated, while ironically the music which was at the core of all the youth subcultures owed more to black music than to any other influence (Shaw 1988: 21).

To a certain extent Britain has become a 'racist' society, incapable of achieving the 'harmonious' assimilation of racial and ethnic minorities. Reference is made to persistent racial discrimination, and to the problems faced by non-white minorities in employment, education, housing and other areas of social provision, showing that the pervasive nature of racism in Britain is one of the most significant characteristics of the nation's contemporary social make-up (Jacobs 1988: 5).

A number of different factors have affected fundamentally social life through the period. The rich experienced a great diminution of domestic servants, compensated to some extent by new labour-saving devices 'upstairs as well as downstairs', that is, in the kitchens as well as in the living and bed rooms. The professional middle classes moved away from the cities and formed an army of commuters. The old city centres were vacated by their original inhabitants and colonised by immigrant families. Taxes, amounting in the upper brackets to confiscation, have been imposed on incomes.

## **2. Margaret Drabble as a Female Writer**

Margaret Drabble was born on June 5, 1939, in Sheffield, Yorkshire. 1960's was the period in which she was a teenager and she witnessed the 68 movement and she followed the first attempts of the feminists. Her novels portray mainly female characters who are intelligent, well-educated, have a strong personality but as for centuries women have been oppressed by the society and her virtues and talents have been underestimated, even in the female character with the strongest personality we sense the lack of self-confidence. Her characters are naïve, full of goodwill. Those who show traits of astuteness somehow pay for



it. Most characters suffer silently, few of them rebel. Drabble gives us the exact portrait of any Western society that is why readers find her novels very familiar and realistic. Every woman finds a common point with one or more characters in her novels.

Of all the contemporary English women novelists, Margaret Drabble is the most ardent traditionalist. Her sense of connection to female tradition, 'the sexual doom of womanhood, its sad inheritance' (The Waterfall: 184) comes first of all from her own past (Showalter 1977: 304).

At the same time she has been a forerunner of modern events:

A whole generation of women readers identifies with her characters, who they feel represent their own problems. Her heroines were preoccupied with the difficulties of fulfilment and self-definition in a man's world, the conflicting claims of selfhood, wifedom and motherhood, long before the women's lib movement really got going. (Grosvenor Myer 1974: 13)

Neither ivory tower artist nor academician, Margaret Drabble seems attuned to herself and to ordinary experience, vividly rendering the ordinary with the intelligence and learning, insight and humour (Creighton 1985: 14).

She is an elegant and often witty writer, with a sharp eye and a deftness at placing and pinning down her characters. But she was hardly great originator in subject matter, which is how her admirers saw her and how her public image had her. (Miles 1987: 162)

She is a popular writer because she writes on real events, real life around her. She offers the reader practical imitations of the real world. She has described as depressing all criticism of her concentration on the daily realities of life, that she humorously calls "the nose-in-the-washing-machine school of fiction". Many of her heroines do throw off the domestic trammels in favour of some version of personal freedom. Occasionally, though, "this represents the conventional provision of a happy ending too closely to be convincing" (Miles 1987: 124).

Her works are contemporary. She is a complicated writer because her novels seem quite plain but in reality she expects a lot from the reader. Her stories start in a calm atmosphere, then gradually gain interest capturing the entire attention of the reader as she works on her theme like a spider on its web, enlarging it slowly, in perfect circles.

Once used to her style it is possible to recognize it in the next novel. The psychological descriptions, the inner research are extremely successful. She reflects her own age group together with their problems within the male-dominated society in which they live. She is sincerely concerned with the problems women.

According to a well-known feminist, Ellen Cronan Rose:

There are those who would question whether all human life is there in Margaret Drabble's novels, at least in the early ones. For she is generally regarded not as a woman who writes novels but as a "Women's novelist".

Her novels are mainly sad and depressive. Especially in her first novels she is pessimistic in relation to love and marriage.

As she herself said in an interview with John Harder in "The Times":

It was about the painfully depressive side I wanted to write ... the side that can hardly cope with any aspect of living ... I was thereby able to confront my own worst fears ... My heroines have all been competent women, full of practical common sense. I wanted to write about a very different sort of woman ... I can't bear doing nothing; and this is why I have tried to face the pathological state of inactivity in "The waterfall". Also the fear of complete abandonment which sometimes goes hand in glove with extreme passivity. (Grosvenor Myer 1974: 23).

In later years, however, she seems to show a measure of optimistic inclination for the possibility of human change, as well as a belief in faith and predestination.

Like her sister Antonia Byatt, Drabble has been increasingly ambitious, serious and open minded; her work is the record of a feminine consciousness expanding and maturing (Showalter 1977: 307).

### **3. Rosamund - The Millstone (1965)**

The women figures in this novel are different because of the background of their connections. Margaret Drabble moves away from the traditional woman who stays unhappily married.

Rosamund is different. She is very isolated at the beginning. She has no parents, no relatives near her. With her immediate environment she has a conventional relationship. She finds her connections later on through her daughter. She is a sexless female don. She starts her sexual life with a college boyfriend, Hamish, with whom she doesn't have real sex although she appears to be having an affair. Later on she dates





with two men simultaneously. Both Joe and Roger believe that the one she sleeps with is the other, while she doesn't sleep with any of them. It is difficult to understand why these two men tolerate such a strange relationship but all we know is that Rosamund wants "Touch without contact" (Drabble 1965: 28).

Rosamund rejects love. Her inability to accept love makes her spiritually poor. These are all girls coming from a Victorian background to a permissive society. Therefore, they have problems of adaptation.

Rosamund is clever, pretty, self-disciplined, courageous, very independent and pregnant. She is working on her doctorate thesis on a remote subject. She is disconnected. She is ignorant of social life.

She is prejudiced. She is financially and socially independent but not emotionally. She is very attached to her parents who live far away from her. She complains about the education her parents have given her. She keeps on having this fight with them. Towards the end of the book she becomes more accepting of the facts and makes peace with her parents.

Her maturity is very questionable. Responsibility is very important to her. She is independent but she also expects something from the outside world, someone to fill a gap. When she talks with George we feel her need for another human being close to her:

And I stood there by the radio, looking at him, and he looked back, and seemed to indicate, though not precisely that I should go and sit by him, on the settee. So I did, and he took my hand and held it, and then started to kiss my fingers, one by one... After a while the radio closed down on us, and we were left there in silence, except for the hum of the machine. I started to pull myself upright and said, "I must go and switch that thing off, I can't stand that noise", but he held on to me and said, "No, don't go". I pulled away and said that I must, and before I knew where I was. I found myself thinking that I couldn't stop him if he really wanted to, because I liked him so much, and if I stopped him he would believe that I didn't: also that if ever, now: also that it would be good for me. So I shut my eyes, very tight, and waited..... (Drabble 1965: 28-29).

She took no precaution at all while George was actually asking her if there was any danger of pregnancy. Rosamund has a problem with sex:

My crime was my suspicion, my fear, my apprehensive terror of the very idea of sex. I liked men, and was forever in and out of love for years, but the thought of sex frightened the life out of me, and the more I didn't do it and the more I read and heard about it how I ought to do it the more frightened I became (Drabble 1965: 17-18).

She didn't know anything about sex. She only heard about it. She is perceptive, self-conscious but immature. She can talk about anything but sex. The baby is a girl. What would she have done if it were a baby-boy? Completely excluding men she has closed herself in a women's world. Did she really exclude George? George is not a complete man for her. He is queer as she tells us on page twenty-nine: "Knowing that he was queer, I was not frightened of him at all." She dreams about sex like a teenager. She feels in the same way towards George. She does the talking all the time. We don't know about George. She excludes him in the end. She meets with him and says "I don't need you anymore." She remains sexless. To remain without is her choice. Instead of growing up the natural course of childhood, she goes backwards. She reaches a certain completeness. For her this is her mature life and will be like that. She learns life like a child. She remains "a spinster". There are different connotations of "spinster" opposed to "bachelor". "Spinster" is sad, gloomy, lonely while a bachelor's life. The question of womanhood is very problematic to her. Woman as a human being, not as opposed to man. In the very first paragraph of the book she is talking about her career as a woman:

My career has always been marked by a strange mixture of confidence and cowardice: almost, one might say, made by it (Drabble 1965: 5).

The baby brings her closer to womanhood:

As I walked I thought about having a baby, and in that state of total inebriation it seemed to me that a baby might be no such bad thing, however impractical and impossible. My sister had babies, nice babies, and seemed to like them. My friends had babies. There was no reason why I shouldn't have one either, 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? (Drabble 1965: 16)

When she is pregnant she misses the looks of the drivers in the street. She wants people to think of her as clever, good-looking. She likes being looked at. She is humbled by her body which forces a reluctant admission of femaleness upon her. She does feel what other women feel but she tries to deny it. In the maternity clinic she feels her oneness with the women who wait with her for the doctor.



I felt a stranger and a foreigner there, and yet I was one of them, I was like that too, 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 (Drabble 1965: 58).

After the birth of the baby we find her in bliss:

I lay awake for two hours, unable to get over my happiness. I was not much used to feeling happiness: satisfaction, perhaps, or triumph, and at times excitement and exhilaration. But happiness was something I had not gone in for a long time, and it was very nice, too nice to waste in sleep (...)

I tried to explain the other day to somebody, no less than Joe Hurt himself in fact, about how happy I had felt, but he was very contemptuous of my descriptions. "What you are talking about," he said "is one of the most boring commonplaces of the female experience. All the women feel exactly that, it's nothing to be proud of, it isn't even worth thinking about." (...) if all the other women did feel it, then it was precisely what made it so remarkable in my case, as I could not recall a single other instance in my life when I had felt what all other women feel (Drabble 1965: 103).

Rosamund is entirely disconnected from everything.

Choice and fate (pregnancy) are the major subjects of this book. After she finds out she is pregnant she announces it to her sister who writes back recommending her to have an abortion. Rosamund wants to work according to logic, suddenly comes the baby. She realises what this pregnancy does to her. She has to admit that she has lost control of her own destiny. She had all the answers in her life but when it comes to abortion she cannot take a decision. A woman alone having a baby. She just has the baby. In our days single mothers are quite frequent but in many societies when Margaret Drabble wrote this novel- Rosamund's decision was really requiring a lot of courage on her part.

We can ask ourselves two questions:

Is it true that there was no decision at all?

Should we take it as a facevalue that she says "All right, I'll have it"?

Why does she get pregnant? We can try some answers:

Rosamund in reality is not disconnected. She is extremely rooted, connected in her education, in her will. See how she behaves with the foreigner, the neighbours, the doctor, the two boyfriends and with the friends of her parents. When she got pregnant she didn't tell anyone. She goes through her pregnancy thanks to the support and warmth she feels around her. She is an intellectual. She wants all these warmth and support.

That's why she gets pregnant. There are two kinds of connectedness in her:

A superficial, social one: she belongs to the Victorian mentality.

Intimacy: she does not realize in the first stage that she wishes to have the child for her.

Someone to continue herself and love her back. Self centredness and ego of Rosamund. Becoming a mother does offer her an opportunity to break down the walls of her isolation and connect lovingly and vulnerably with another being. But what she loves is "a small living extension of myself" as she puts it.

Gradually I began to realize that she liked me, that she had no option to liking me, (...) It was very pleasant to receive such uncritical love, because it left me free to bestow love (Drabble 1965: 115).

Rosamund doesn't make her own decision, the events make the decisions for her. She could still have adopted the baby as her sister had recommended her in her letter:

Through no fault of his own it would have to have the slur of illegitimacy all its life, and I can't tell you how odiously cruel and vicious children can be to each other, once they get hold of something like that. It's your duty to have it adopted by some couple who really want a child, and who are probably in a far more favourable position for bringing one up. I know that ideally, in a decent society, no child ought to suffer because of this kind of handicap, but this isn't a decent society, and I can't bear the thought of what you would have to go through on its account. Do please think about this and try to take a long term view (Drabble 1965: 78-79).

When Rosamund read this letter she became dreadfully angry. The letter made her determined to keep the baby.

We see that Drabble doesn't declare her position clearly in relation to abortion but one thing we observe is that she is not a Christian opposed to it. She criticizes the society in which she lives in accusing it of being incomprehensive and not decent enough to accept an illegitimate child.



Drabble is the novelist of maternity. For a Drabble heroine, a room of one's own is usually a place to have a baby (Showalter 1977: 58-59).

Uncritical and unrejected love from the baby. There is always a fear of rejection from George, the baby's father. There is an element of self-centredness. She has a very immature ego.

Rosamund cares for the baby very much but she realizes it only when the baby gets sick and she almost loses it:

We went to hospital and I handed her over, and she smiled at me, then cried when they took her away. The world had contracted to the small size of her face and her clenching, waving hands. (Drabble 1965: 127)

This novel was published just before the Women's Lib ideology in the seventies. Rosamund manages to be successful in her career in a man's world. On the other hand she is still at where all the other women are. Due to the lack of connectedness with herself, she behaves more femininely than any other woman.

She is a fatalist. The book doesn't solve her problem. She would like to behave like a stereotyped woman but her ideologies don't let her. She is different from the women she sees at the clinic. We are not told what she is going to tell the baby about her father and how she is planning to support the baby. Women don't think before they have children. They just have babies. Why? The book doesn't answer it.

There is a woman who becomes pregnant and doesn't know what to do about it. The baby is her creative act. She is a new kind of woman in our modern society. The single-parent. She is frustrated and abandoned in this type of society. George doesn't go to Rosamund to create a relationship. Rosamund is a clever young woman and she is for sure going to be a mother as good as any other.

George has no idea Rosamund is pregnant. Rosamund, in a way, has no right to withhold this type of information. Some readers can judge Rosamund in a negative way while others will sympathize with her. It is a selfish and immoral act but let's try to understand why Rosamund never told George about the baby. She even misleads him about the age of the baby at the end of the novel fearing that he might guess the truth. When she finds out about her pregnancy she doesn't call George because she thinks that it is an excuse to see George but then she changes her mind and decides not to tell him because he wouldn't understand.

If we look at the adjectives Margaret Drabble uses to describe George we see that he is too smooth. Rosamund realizes that it is not the type of man she would like her baby to have as a father. He is not like other men. He is 'camp', which means flamboyant in an effeminate way. Effeminate implies lack of aggressiveness. In fact he has not raped Rosamund. Everything went smooth according to her desire.

Dear George, lovely George, kind and camp and unpretentious George. Thinking of George, I even now permit myself some tenderness, now so much too late (...) (Drabble 1965: 21).

The novel is not a breakthrough. Rosamund is not growing. She chooses to be alone. She tells us the story, that is to say it is a first-person novel where we get only her point of view. Even the title of the novel is quite impressive: *The Millstone*.

In terms of character what Rosamund decides in the end is right but as an abstract moral issue what she does is wrong. But as a character it is completely all right. Margaret Drabble answered this question in this way: By splitting into two. Rosamund succeeds in both worlds. Drabble's characters, on the whole, are always successful, strong women trying to stand on their feet in a world made for the man. But it is also true that all these characters are inferior to her. It is an ironic element in these novels. Drabble's lack of intimacy, her ironic eye reflects on the characters in the form of lack of intimacy among the characters.

Due to the society in which she lives, Rosamund is a different kind of woman. She is stiff and disconnected. We can say she is very British. There are some points in the novel which show that the relationships in this world are so cut off. For example, when Rosamund's parents get to know about the illness of Octavia they decide to avoid a visit back home as explained by Rosamund:

For, extraordinary as it may seem, I was and I am convinced that my parents decided to go to India and to refrain from visiting England largely because they did not want to upset me and my domestic arrangements. I can see, objectively, how extraordinary it is to read such mighty meanings into what my father wrote, but nevertheless, knowing my parents, I am sure that I was right. They did not wish to cause me or themselves pain, embarrassment, or even mere inconvenience by their return, so they went to India instead (Drabble 1965: 144).

The flat mate of Rosamund, Lydia, not being told about the cardiac problem of the baby for almost a year:



Most nights I went in bed before Lydia got in, as her affair with Joe was at this time at its height. I tried to avoid her, deliberately, as I had not imparted the truth about Octavia and did not wish to be trapped in doing so (Drabble 1965: 124).

When Octavia tears and destroys some pages of the novel Lydia has been writing, Lydia gets upset but she doesn't show any anger. The first thing she is concerned about is:

'You mean you didn't look at it? You didn't read any of it?' she said, with some faint growing signs of animation.

'No, no, I assured her. 'Not at all. I just shut the door. I was so horrified. '

'Oh well, that's just as well,' she said.

Then she knelt down amongst the scraps and said, quite cheerfully,

'I'm sure I can put it together again. (Drabble 1965: 152)

So we observe that even if they live in the same apartment Lydia doesn't tell Rosamund the subject of her new novel. She is writing it about Rosamund. The two friends live in a very disconnected way. Rosamund is the victim of a certain type of environment. She is also lucky because she can live in her parents' large flat due to their absence. This helps her in the neighbourhood as she is an unmarried mother. When she gives birth to her daughter she notices at the end of her bed a label with the initial "U" which stands for the "unmarried". But Rosamund has no complex in relation to her unmarried status. When she goes to the maternity clinic for the first time she calls the midwife's attention to this fact:

"Hello, Mrs. Stacey" she said warmly, extending her hand from behind her desk, "I'm Sister Hammond, how do you do?"

"How do you do?," I said, thinking I had reached civilization at last, but feeling nonetheless impelled to continue, "but I'm not Mrs. Stacey, I'm Miss. "

"Yes, yes," she smiled, coldly and sweetly, "but we call everyone Mrs. here. As a courtesy title, don't you think?"

She was a civilized lady and she could see that I was civilized, so I too smiled frostily, though I did not think much of the idea." (Drabble 1965: 58-59)

The choice of the name of the baby is also very significant as Octavia Hill (1838-1912) was a prominent literary woman born in England. Housing reporter, philanthropist. Pioneered slum clearance also involved in women's education, the National Trust and the Poor Laws (Showalter 1977: 334). She was a feminist woman.

In the end I said I would call her Octavia. I said it as a joke having tried hard to think some famous woman to call her after, and finding none but Beatrice Webb whom my parents had already used; the name Octavia Hill came to my mind, and I said it loud, 'I'll call her Octavia' (Drabble 1965:105).

The novel ends with George in Rosamund's flat having a look at 'her' baby. She almost tells him the truth. She manages to control herself as she is determined not to share the baby. She has remained single and has had his baby and maintained her independence. As we have mentioned before, her independence - which for her is so precious- is highly relative. She is emotionally dependent on others and with the birth of Octavia she has been forced to break her social isolation and become more human. The baby doesn't put any obstacle in her career. On the contrary she spends much more time alone at home studying and finishes her thesis before the set date. After Octavia's birth she is offered a good job at the university. Many considered Drabble's pregnant, unmarried Ph. D. in *The Millstone* to be her most unusual creation. The idea of having to cope with an unexpected pregnancy had been anticipated in Lynne Reid Bank's *The L-Shaped Room* (1960) (Miles 1987: 162).

#### 4. Conclusions

The "women question", that is, the problems of recognition and responsibility within society of the contemporary woman, is the main subject of Margaret Drabble's writing, especially in her early novels. But it is not the only one. Human relationships on the individual plane, between women as well as between woman and man, receive ample treatment and are analysed in depth. The description of the surrounding atmosphere too, political and social, prevalent in her later novels, is made with precision and boldness, letting us watch like on a mirror the image of the last three decades with the extraordinary changes they brought about. Being a psychological writer and a discerning social observer she also gave her novels a distinctly personal tone, making the protagonists follow the course of her own life. It has been our purpose to concentrate on how Drabble's characters are revealed and developed in relation to female issues of education, sexuality, marriage, motherhood, economic dependence, resentment of early pregnancy,





housework, breastfeeding, personality clashes, love affairs, lack of vocation and so on. What it means being a woman:

Being a woman means playing a second-class role in society, which is fair only to men, while for women it is a bird-cage. Margaret Drabble's heroines are bright, intelligent, hard-working women, capable of dictating their own destiny, trying to stand on their feet in a men's world, some of them succeeding. But they suffer from lack of intimacy, lack of solidarity amongst them. Many of them are simply immature and they try to avoid growing up because they know that being an adult woman in a man's world is not pleasant. Others have their personalities split into two, in a sort of literary schizophrenia. They live together but disconnected. Being an "emancipated girl" brings no permanent solution either and in fact it is almost suggested that male tyranny is here to stay. One cannot help thinking that at least part of the trouble comes from the fact that these women are British and that their Mediterranean sisters would perhaps present a different picture.

Being a woman means having a sexual problem, as a woman cannot properly enjoy sex due to a defective, male-oriented education. Sex is never properly described in her novels. There is often a male counterpart (friend, supporter, companion) to the heroine, who sobers her down and explains things to her in 'feminist' terms. More often than not he is a 'queer' or homosexual, in truth or in appearance: queers are important elements in Drabble's novels. On the other hand the word 'husband' carries many negative connotations.

Being a woman means having babies, as a sort of monstrous, practical joke on feminists. ("It would serve me right", says Rosamund). And if a pregnant woman thinks that childbirth is an exhilarating event, a nearby 'queer' will always tell her that "it is one of the most boring commonplaces of the female experience".

It is recognized that a woman has an inclination to motherhood, and the situation is most enjoyable when children are small. When they grow up a kind of hatred develops; the 'mother figures' of Drabble's books are almost always despicable. For a woman to get married is succumbing to social pressure. It may even be a way of taking revenge from a male society, if one is decided to make a mockery of one's marriage. On the contrary to have a baby as a single mother is a sign of courage and a woman in that situation would be entitled not to share the baby with its father.

Being a woman means playing the game by a different set of rules, whether you like it or not. On the whole Margaret Drabble has avoided getting involved in feminist politics while protesting verbally against society. The practical response of the heroines of her novels are on the verge of submission to what may be thought feminine limitations. They would thus admit that being a woman means feeling gratified for the fact of being a woman, or having an interest in one's own looks, just for the sake of it or in order to use beauty as a means to a career, or to be subversive out of spite the way men resent. In her novels women are badly treated and underestimated by men but they are not the losers. On the contrary they seem to do as they please.

A woman can also be capable of great sacrifices for the sake of her children, even to the point of taking back the man she has already divorced. And a woman can give away her fortune following a religious inspiration, once again fulfilling the commands of a patriarchal society.

Finally, being a woman can mean possessing an inclination to vulgarity, or a tendency to "have your cake and eat it", in a society based on a sort of division of labour between those who are flesh-eaters and those who are eaten.

By the 1980's, furthermore, the heroines of Margaret Drabble are living in a world which is hardly safe.

While in her first five novels she emphasized the male dominance within society and the difficulties women face in order to secure their future and their happiness, in the 1980's the same heroines have to fight against a lot of new problems: race riots, poverty, strikes, war, joblessness, consumerism, drug addiction, and last but not least, AIDS. Things have changed a lot, also for feminists.

Many feminists would consider certain statements of Margaret Drabble as so many 'acts of treason' to the cause of women. She has tried to keep her own distance from feminism and has lately defined herself (Kirkpatrick 1986: 248) as a social historian documenting social change and asking questions about society rather than providing answers, which perhaps would have to be pessimistic.

For us, Margaret Drabble is neither a conventional nor a convinced feminist, although she may be said to write like one in so far as she hopes, with reservations but with seriousness, for a change in the condition of women.



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