

MARGARET DRABBLE'S NOVELS: THE NARRATIVE OF IDENTITY

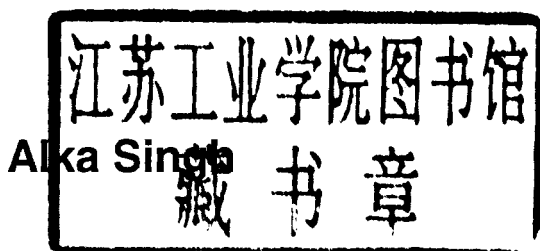
Alka Singh



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THE NARRATIVE OF IDENTITY**

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PREFACE

Margaret Drabble has established herself as one of the most important novelists of the present times in presenting the realities of womens' lives and thereby creating a feminist poetics. Using the form of fiction as a probe she highlights women's lived experience in search of identity in the contemporary social order. The search for 'self' and 'place' is the central problem of humanity and has been the subject of all great literature. She displays the different aspects of the women's psyche to show what it is to be a woman and motivates them towards establishing their identity as a meaningful human being.

Drabble's protagonists face the conflict of inner growth in dealing with the discrepancy between the reality of existence and the ideal image to which they have to conform. Through them she explores whether a human being is born free and whether the natural self and the social self are divorced from each other.

This work is a close analysis of Margaret Drabble's novels to present the mosaic of womanhood, encompassing her as wife, mother and a social being which is achieved by the integration of the natural self and the social self. It begins with the specific perspective of the situation of being a woman. Deriving strength from their experiences, which is an outcome of the realization of the joy of being a woman, Drabble's women further move out of the confines in search of a better independent life.

There is a distinctive departure thereafter from the subjective world of women to envision society as a whole where a career, meaning of life and their connection to something larger than the self preoccupies the protagonists. Having explored the various

aspects of the women's psyche an attempt is made to understand the responsibility towards something outside the self and establish a meaningful relationship with the community. Throughout these various relationships the protagonists struggle to survive, strengthen themselves and attain fulfilment.

Margaret Drabble's synthesis of tradition and modernity in her writings mark the emergence of the self defined New Woman who has forged an independent existence and voiced unspoken conflicts and experiences. Drabble has established herself as a unique writer in making literary articulation a responsible social function. By enhancing feminine consciousness, her novels project the feelings and perceptions associated with a woman's progress towards self definition.

The inspiration for having accomplished this mammoth task comes from my teacher, guide and mentor Prof. Sushila Singh, Principal MMV, Banaras Hindu University. I express my deep felt gratitude to her for having initiated me and for her meticulous guidance and advice at every stage of my work. Her selfless involvement and remarkable patience in my endeavour was a constant source of encouragement to me. I shall remain indebted to her life long.

To complete a project like this requires many kinds of help and support. It is most important that I thank Dr. Vijai Shivapuri, principal of my college for being so benevolent in giving the functional autonomy and making the work a lot more easy.

I extend my thanks to the Central Library, Banaras Hindu University. I extend my special thanks to the American Studies Research Center, Hyderabad which made my scholastic pursuit at the library a pleasant and memorable experience. I express my warm thankfulness to Dr. Isaac Sequeira for having taken a keen interest in my work along with the staff of ASRC which facilitated my effort considerably. I am also grateful to the American Center Library New Delhi, British Library, New Delhi and Lucknow and the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad for their help.

I received encouragement, support and love from all my family members and friends which was vital in completing this work. I lack adequate words to express gratitude to my parents, Late Mr. J.B. Singh and Mrs. Chanda Singh, whose guidance, inspiration and blessings have encouraged me at every step of my academic pursuit since my childhood. I cannot forget the indispensable help and cooperation of my brothers and sisters especially Alok and Poonam without which it would have been impossible to complete my work. To 'Bhaishaeb' goes my deepest appreciation for being there always to extend a helping hand. To little Anshaj and Manya goes the credit of giving me respite with their warm loving attitude making the task a worthy ordeal. Neha with her queries provided the basis of critical analysis grounded firmly in sensitivity to the minutest, homeliest events of our day to day lives. The manuscript turned to typescript with her labour last though not the least I bow in deep gratitude to the Lord Almighty for inspiring me to accomplish this task.

Alka Singh

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|-----------------------------|------------|
| <i>A Summer Bird- Cage</i> | <i>SBC</i> |
| <i>The Garrick Year</i> | <i>GY</i> |
| <i>The Millstone</i> | <i>M</i> |
| <i>Jerusalem the Golden</i> | <i>JG</i> |
| <i>The Waterfall</i> | <i>W</i> |
| <i>The Needle's Eye</i> | <i>NE</i> |
| <i>The Realms of Gold</i> | <i>RG</i> |
| <i>The Ice Age</i> | <i>IA</i> |
| <i>The Middle Ground</i> | <i>MG</i> |
| <i>The Radiant Way</i> | <i>RW</i> |
| <i>A Natural Curiosity</i> | <i>NC</i> |
| <i>The Gates of Ivory</i> | <i>GI</i> |
| <i>The Witch Of Exmoor</i> | <i>WE</i> |
| <i>The Peppered Moth</i> | <i>PM</i> |
| <i>The Seven Sisters</i> | <i>SS</i> |
| <i>The Red Queen</i> | <i>RQ</i> |

dedicated
to the
loving memory
of my father

Late Shri Jitendra Bahadur Singh

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1

Woman as a Writer

I

Margaret Drabble like all women writers, faces the problem arising out of the conflict between “woman” as a fictional construct and “woman” as a real historical being. Her novels are explorations of woman condition in the contemporary world. In this endeavour she is confronted with the identity question. The identity is constructed through a continuous process, an ongoing constant renewal based on an interaction with the world, which is defined as experience. In the case of Margaret Drabble, the quest for identity becomes inevitable as subjectivity is produced not by external ideas, values, or material causes but by one’s personal subjective engagement in the practices, discourses, and institutions that lend significance, value, meaning, and effect to the events of the world.

The English novelists have continued to write versions of the traditional realistic novel and have thus been distinguished from other American and European writers. They look for artistic sophistication not in the practitioners of modernism but in the great story tellers of the Victorian period. Margaret Drabble, a novelist, short story writer, literary critic and editor, firmly believes that the Victorian novel can be adapted to be an appropriate medium of contemporaneous writing.

Drabble was born on May 6, 1939 in Sheffield, England. She is the second child of John Frederick and Marine Bloor Drabble.

Her father was a successful barrister, then a circuit judge for Suffolk and Essex and later in retirement a novelist. Her mother was an English teacher at the Mount in York, a Quaker boarding school. The family of four children includes an elder sister, A.S. Byatt, a novelist, critic, and essayist; a younger sister, Helen, an art historian; and a much younger brother who is a barrister. Margaret Drabble followed her elder sister to the Mount and later, on a scholarship, to Newnham College, Cambridge, where she received a starred first in English in 1960. She was officially honored in 1983 as a Companion to the British Empire.

Margaret Drabble's parents all along nurtured and encouraged her and her two sisters to read early and inculcated the values of hardwork, conscientiousness, sincerity, a sense of achievement and ambition. Drabble has characterized her rearing as "very tolerant, liberal, middle class professional." None the less she feels close to her working class roots, and is acutely aware of her mother's difficult transition into the middle class. Her father engaged himself in his family business, a small sweet factory, to save money before studying law at Cambridge. Her mother's family were potters from the potteries in Staffordshire. Her father made a "perfect transition to the middle class barrister life; he spoke very good English; he had a very good presence; and a very social manner; he was very easy and affable and people thought him charming." In contrast, her mother "continued to speak loud Yorkshire and was the reverse of charming: she was aggressive, rude, difficult, shy, all in one, and that meant that their social life was terribly difficult... And I think there is more of that in English life than one would believe possible, more scorn from social encounters." It appears that Drabble suffered terribly as a child. She recounts "the home was a place to wither away in; there was no way you could have friends, and that made me very, very insecure. I mean, as a child I had a most terrible stammer. I could hardly speak."¹ She claims to have been very happy when she was away at boarding school.

Her own religious views were shaped by the Quaker schooling

and her parents' liberal attitudes. Although they were not Quakers at that time but were sympathetic to Quaker values and in later years joined the society of Friends. Both at the boarding school and at home, Drabble was infused with the belief that God "was in every man, making him equal and worthy of respect." They were taught to live their lives in contribution to the general good rather than for their own satisfaction. She says that the Quakers are "more liberal in their social values than the conventional girls' public school. They don't have rules. They believe in moral pressure, not punishment," and adds that "the moral pressures from my parents were probably very strong, too."² The belief drilled at the Quaker school, "Light of God" in everyone, is undercut in her thinking by a residue of Calvinistic belief in a deterministic universe where some are blessed and others damned. She concludes that "fate has really given me a wonderful deal, a magnificent hand of cards... I'm really egalitarian at heart. I think everyone should have the same hand of cards when they are born."³ The enigma over the inter-relationship of free will and determinism is one of the recurrent themes in her work.

"Fate and character are irreconcilable. That's why I write the books. The whole point of writing a novel for me is trying to work out the balance between these two, and there is no answer."⁴ Although not doctrinally religious she readily acknowledges belief in something larger than the finite, the individual and the material: "I don't believe that this material world is all. I can't bring myself to think that there's even a sensible way of looking at things."⁵ And certainly she subscribes to a religious consciousness, an ethical commitment to play a responsible part in the human community. A rare combination of beauty, intellect and acting skill made her one of the most glittering figures in the university.

Despite her brilliant performance in studies, to the surprise of many, she did not take up academic life. She deliberately veered away from an academic career and got married immediately after university in June 1960 to Clive Swift, a Cambridge graduate in English, who became a leading actor with Royal Shakespeare

Company later. She confesses to Hardin in an interview that she was enchanted and captivated by Clive's family life, a contrast to her own depressive family life. She presumed that marriage would bring her freedom and concedes that she was mistaken. On marriage with Swift her initial decision was to make a career of acting. "As a hopeful 21 years old actress with the Royal Shakespeare Company Miss Drabble spent much of her time understudying Ms Vanessa Redgrave. Bored with waiting, tired of doing occasional walk-ons (as a fairy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) she began to write a novel in her dressing room."⁶

Having soon realised that her real bent lay in writing, she gave up acting when she was expecting her first child. With the pressing demands of her role as a young wife and mother, writing appeared to be more compatible. She had three children two boys and one girl namely, Adam Richard George, Rebecca Margaret and Joseph before she separated from her husband in 1972 and was finally divorced in 1975. She remarried Michael Holroyd in September 1982, who is a distinguished biographer and a man of letters.

A house bound young mother at 21, and unemployed, Drabble speculated on the problems of an educated woman which became a crucible of creativity and prevented her to be silenced by marriage and motherhood. Drabble's fictional work constitutes sixteen novels till date, television plays like *Laura* produced by Granada Television in London 1969, *Isadora* (with Melvyn Bragg and Clive Exton), screenplay 1969, and *A Touch of Love*, screenplay 1969, *Great British Short Stories*(1974). Along with this she has to her credit a number of non-fiction and edited texts like *Wordsworth* (1966), *Virginia Woolf* (1973), *Arnold Bennett: A Biography* (1974), *For Queen and Country :Britain in the Victorian Age* (1978).*The Genius of Thomas Hardy* (1976), *A Writer's Britain: Landscape in Literature* (1979) ,edited the revised fifth edition of the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* (1985), *Safe as Houses*(1990), *Angus Wilson: A Biography* (1995) *The Concise Companion to English Literature* (1996). She has contributed to a number of British Literary Journals, to *Punch* and to *Vogue*. She is the proud

recipient of many awards at a very young age. She got the John Llewelyn Rhys Memorial Award (1966), James Tait Black Memorial Book Prize (1968), Yorkshire Post Book Award (1972), and E.M. Forster Award (1973), CBE (1980).⁷

Imbibing the moral vision of George Eliot, the social realism of Arnold Bennett and the psychological dimension of Virginia Woolf, Drabble aims at utilizing its resources as the basis for her own work. Her works are a reflection of her ability to re-use its procedures successfully. Being consistent in her respect for the traditional novel, she specifically points out to the women writers of the vast change in life. She highlights the increasing scope for further exploration of the implications of the new mode of living to be carried out in a basically realist manner befitting the new fiction. She asserts that "I and most women are writing about things that have never been written about really."⁸ Different narrative strategies have to be adopted because "the rules have changed; the balance of power has shifted... I am trying to find out where we are going."⁹ Believing that "life is an odd mixture of emotional experiences and self analyses..."¹⁰ she aims at capturing physical as well as psychological truth. She explicitly states to a BBC interviewer in 1967 that "I'd rather be at the end of a dying tradition, which I admire than at the beginning of a tradition I deplore."¹¹

She has brought about a slight variation in her own writing while using realism to produce a development of traditional fiction rather than replicas of nineteenth century novels. She does not assert that the experiences of contemporary society which she has explored are anything more than a collection, recordings of life as she sees it. Drabble has said "Books reflect one's life Inevitably."¹² If the corpus of her work is taken in its totality one can perceive Drabble growing and maturing as a woman and a writer with the wave of life from just a graduate in *A Summer Bird Cage* to a middle aged woman in *The Gates of Ivory*. She acknowledges that her books are expressions of "different aspects of me."¹³

Drabble's works are contemporary, confessional, and readable

with focus on the ordinary-particularly ordinary women's lives and thereby at times easily confused with ordinary work. This is erroneous as despite its simplicity, its heavily laden with a sophisticated sense of literary history and tradition. Actively indulging both in ordinary, middle class British life and in intellectual and literary circles, she writes with complete involvement with the culture in which she lives. The unique aspect about women novelists is that they present transmuted autobiographies of themselves. In Drabble's fiction her protagonists have more or less followed the course and concerns of her own life: young women leaving university, getting married and separated, giving birth, having affairs, bringing up older children, reaching middle age then wondering what to do next. Her deliberate choice is to have the freedom of an unaffiliated writer, untied to an academy, ideology or methodology. This calibrates her as a different writer lacking professional earnestness with an inquiring mind to the varying context in which she lives. Social problems concomitant with historical change is her main concern as reflected in her works.

She confesses to Peter Firchow in an interview that she was influenced by F.R. Leavis who taught her and she firmly believed in his Great Tradition as a novelist. However, as a fledgling writer she found it difficult to accept his dismissal of the contemporary scene as an insufficient source for serious fiction. Her own sense of "the tradition has undoubtedly been a good deal more capacious: The writers I admire are people who strive to retain their links with the community and not consciousness to such a degree that they become rarified."¹⁴ She is attracted to Bennett because she feels he has a great respect for "ordinary" life and ordinary people which is lacking in Virginia Woolf. "Arnold Bennett tells you things that Virginia Woolf simply didn't know." Her attraction for Bennett and Wordsworth centers in their "transfiguration of the everyday...this quality of writing about an everyday incident making it profoundly emblematic."¹⁵ This is emulated in her own works. Drabble's engagement with the real human being, indulging in the reality of character and the substantive nature of the world has distanced her

from James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson as well as Virginia Woolf. She is instrumental in re-directing fiction towards social and moral realism. Being deeply rooted to the line of British socio-moral fiction, she lays emphasis on the human community;

We are not free from our past, we are never free of the claims of others and we ought not wish to be ... we are all part of a long inheritance, a human community in which we must play our proper part.¹⁶

In resemblance to E.M. Forster she connects the personal and the social, the classes that make up a society, the land and human habitation. Like Forster, her works reflect a capacity for passionate romanticism, balanced and finally outweighed by common sense. Modern sensibility integrated with Victorian values gives momentary visions of complete and steady life. The coercive genesis of her art is a suitable moral and human habitation and that's why houses and landscapes play such a vital role in her fiction: the search for one's place. Such emphasis links her to the "temperate romanticism of Wordsworth, Austen, Bennett and George Eliot rather than to the romantic extremism of Blake, Byron or the Brontës..."¹⁷ Drabble oscillates between the traditional and the modern, the Great Tradition and other traditions, the literary and the real along with other contemporary novelists like Angus Wilson, and Doris Lessing. While at Cambridge she had read Simone de Beauvoir's, *The Second Sex* : "It was material that nobody had used and I could use and nobody had ever used as far as I could see as I would use it."¹⁸

Acutely sensitive to the experiences of women, Drabble questions the roles accorded to women laying emphasis on the discrepancy between the existing reality and the image of women to which they have to conform. She imposes on her fiction an explicit view of a changing world as she sees it-reflecting contemporary uncertainty. It mirrors the struggle of many contemporary women who are trying to define themselves within a patriarchal frame of reference. Her novels compel the readers to contemplate and surmise the unsaid and the unexplained.

Her early works of fiction are simple narrative of life as young women experience it finding an immediate response among women readers who were more educated and were finding it difficult to adjust to domestic life. By merely dealing with women's everyday experience she was asserting its importance. The novels reflect the persistent theme of preserving one's identity along with conforming to the role of a caretaker. Her protagonists make an attempt to deal with the internal conflicts of love, guilt, and power. She bridges the gap between fiction and reality by writing from her own experience, from information about people around her and elaborating the characters as if she has been personally acquainted with them. She is deeply rooted to the solid, classical education in English Literature and the treasure obtained from down to life, practical everyday experience enriches her work and leaves her feeling proud of being moulded by it. Drabble acknowledges that her earlier works were limited: "... I was also writing from the point of view of a woman who had a husband and small children- and my life is very confined as women's lives are and that was what I wrote about."¹⁹

Her first three novels were written while she was expecting her three children; so it may seem to have autobiographical element. It touches upon universal feelings and emotions and raises pertinent questions about issues of global interest. Her fiction is constantly nourished by her own personal development, making it distinctly feminine work. Using her own experience to reflect the contemporary women's predicament she has become a chronicler of society.

Her initial writing was an expression of her limited life. Her subjects were people close to her, young women adjusting to adulthood, marriage, child rearing, which helped her to understand her own situation. Her protagonists are often seen as daughters, sisters, wives or mothers within a familial context and so are in keeping with the established tradition of the domestic novel. Yet her work presents a discriminative vision and focus within it making it original and distinctive.