

Feminist issue of unmarried motherhood in Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone*

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Abstract

The issue of single mother or the marginal position of the unmarried mother provides a good perspective from which to consider changing gender roles and the values and institutions in society. A different kind of motherhood is dealt with particular reference to the contemporary unmarried mother narrative and to British women immediately before and after giving birth to babies. Margaret Drabble discusses in her novel how an unwed mother faces the problems but how still she is bold enough to bring out her baby without bothering about its real father. The woman stays away from her lover or ex-husband and becomes a single parent to her child.

Keywords: abnormal, illegal abortion, shotgun wedding, pathological, self-sufficient, independence

Introduction

The issue of unmarried motherhood would explore some representations of motherhood with particular reference to the contemporary 'unmarried mother narrative' and to accounts of women immediately before and after giving birth. The two decades of 1960s & 1970s are characterized by far-reaching changes in family structure and organization; increasing divorce and abortion rates, many more couples cohabiting and babies conceived outside marriage, and more people choosing to move out of the parental home and live on their own or to bring up children in non-traditional families. Attitudes to roles within the nuclear family also altered radically, often as a direct result of women's contact with feminist ideas, and their investment in sexual politics which made their relationship to their male partners difficult and the bringing up of sons a troubled experience. (Joannou, Maroula, 2000) ^[1].

The problems of premarital pregnancy and unmarried motherhood constitute a major concern in women's fiction today. Behind the very idea of motherhood, it is taken for granted that the mother is a married woman. In the west, however, the society is freer. Many relations are granted to women. So conceiving before marriage is a quite common phenomenon. But it does not mean that premarital conception is the celebrated norm and it is gladly accepted.

A contemporary novelist writing seriously about female experience, Drabble, in common with many English women born in the 30s and 40s, has an attitude to feminism which is best described by the word 'cautious'. She is also anxious to point out that feminism is not a discovery of the late 1960s, and she represents this in her fiction by the inclusion of female characters in their 50s who have a long record of feminist thinking and of professional activity.

The character Rosamund of the novel *The Millstone* is an unmarried mother and she realizes that she is pregnant while she is at work on her thesis in the British Museum's

reading room and the images of Elizabethan Sonnets are abruptly blotted out by those illegitimate pregnancies:

Gin, psychiatrist, hospitals, accidents, village, maidens drowned in duck ponds, tears, pain, humiliations. Nothing at that stage resembling a baby. (1967, P. 34.) ^[2]

Rosamund for the sake of self-identity and independence leaves George, her lover. She is a highly educated, young, self-assertive woman who doesn't believe in marriage, because she knows marriage means domination by all means. Therefore Rosamund does not want to get married and decides to live a life of single woman. But a true challenge starts in her life when she becomes pregnant. A woman can be mother easily, being married, but to be an unmarried mother is a question and a challenge.

Later Rosamund decides to give birth to her child and do child rearing as a single mother. No doubt there are lot many hurdles and problems in the society to be recognized as an unmarried mother. Being highly intellectual, she takes up all the challenges. To exist as an unmarried mother is considered to be abnormal in the society.

After the Second World War the image of the unmarried mother altered from someone who represented a moral danger to society to someone who was psychologically troubled but had the potential to be redeemed: In the 1950s and most of the 1960s it was possible to treat unmarried mothers as "abnormal", in terms of their immature personalities. Until the last quarter of the twentieth century the vast majority of unmarried mother were 'hidden away' or 'found refuge with kin'. (Kathleen Kiernan, Hilary Land, Jane Lewis, 1998, P.9.) ^[3] Only since the 1970s have the 'majority of never-married mothers joined the dramatically increasing number of divorced women living autonomously in the community,

often in social housing and often drawing state benefits'.(Ibid, P. 5.)

Margaret Drabble in the novel shows the experience of maternity in a clear and smooth way. The title *The Millstone* has its significant cause from Rosamund's accidental pregnancy and her experience as a single mother. The unwanted pregnancy threatens the heroine's seeming independence and confidence. Rosamund Stacey a young bright bachelor writing a doctoral dissertation on sixteenth century poetry is proud of her liberation as a woman. But when she realizes she is pregnant, she is for the first time in her life, completely at a loss. She thinks of abortion, but decides to have the baby. At that moment *The Millstone* change from a mere heavy object which always her down into a precious thing which awakens her to the reality of life and leads her to martially and true independence.

The fear and anguish that Rosamund cannot share with anyone when her baby Octavia had a heart operation also makes Rosamund aware of her own vulnerability. After the operation, when because of rules the nurses do not allow her to see the child, Rosamund demands to see her baby, screaming and shouting without caring about decorum and gets her wish. After this experience, she feels she has grown up and gained inner strength:

Up till that moment I had been inwardly convinced that too much worry would rot my nature beyond any hope of fruit or even of flower. But then, however fleetingly, I felt that I could take what I had been given to take. I felt, for the first time since Octavia's birth, a sense of adequacy. Like job, I had threatened with the worst and like job i had kept my shape. I knew something now of the quality of life and anything in the way of happiness that should hereafter receive would be based on fact and not on hope. (P. 142)

Rosamund's brother is a businessman and lives a typical middle class life enjoying bridge and dinner parties. Her sister, who studied economics at Oxford and was a pacifist in her university days, married a scientist just after graduation and stays home to raise her children. At first she suffered from a sense that she was not using her degree to its best advantage and was also distressed at the fact that her husband engaged in atomic research that is against her principle. She has, however, made a realistic compromise. She forbids her children to associate with a child from the working class because they might learn bad words and an unfavorable accent from them, and when Rosamund's sister she learns of Rosamund's unmarried pregnancy, she urges her to have the illegitimate child adopted. It shows she, too, has been swallowed in the conventionalities of middle class life.

The whole discussion acknowledges that self-realization or place in society with which heroines have traditionally been conferred in fiction is frequently predicated upon romantic love and marital union. The story of the unmarried mother is a rebellion against the dominance of romance and marriage plots, which show marriage as the conclusion of romance and marriage plots, which show marriage as the end of the heroine's quest for self-

knowledge and also as the closure of the novel. In formulating how best to live a life outside marriage the contemporary 'unmarried mother' narratives question the conviction of the novel as well as the social order.

The social and psychological construction of 'normal' mother runs counter to the reality of motherhood which many mothers experience. Some have been unable or unwilling to confirm to that construction, for example unmarried mothers. As a consequence, many mother's particularly those who have been very young, very poor or have opted to bring up their children without a husband, have been construed as pathological. (Maroula Joannou, 2000, P. 54) ^[1].

Until recently, the only ground on which it was permissible for a respectable unmarried woman to have sex with a man was love or the promise of marriage. For much of literary history the story of the unmarried mother has been, loved by a man, but has been separated from love by some accident, personal tragedy, misplaced trust, broken promise, or act of deception by the father of her child.

The baby in *The Millstone* is not conceived in passion, neither is the mother strongly libidinous, but on the contrary, is characterized by English emotional reserve. The moment of conception in is joyless and takes place with man for whom the protagonist feels very little. As Bell Hooks put it,

Early feminist motherhood alienated masses of women from the movement, especially poor and non-white who find parenting one of the few inter personal relationships where they are affirmed and appreciated'. (Hooks Bell, 1984, P. 134.5.) ^[4].

Rosamund is Oxford English major like Drabble and like her she has important and complex relationship with her sister.

Through a letter Beatrice suggests her sister about problems of single mother and that there would be a conflict in Rosamund's life in raising the child and her own independence because throughout the novel Rosamund's independent nature has been stressed. Secondly, the letter also shows that Beatrice truly loves her sister and does not want her to suffer because of wrong decision, she also thinks about the child and its welfare.

Rosamund's response to the letter is of full of anger because she feels nobody has the faintest right to advice about her child. She remarks:

Nobody had the faintest right to offer me any advice about my own child. Her letter revealed to me the depth of my determination to keep the baby. The determination at this stage cannot have been based, as it later was, on love, for I felt no love and little hope of feeling it; it was based rather on an extraordinary confidence in myself, in a conviction, quite irrational, that no adoptive parents could ever be as excellent as I myself would be. (P. 67-68)

The above response of Rosamund to Beatrice's Letter is rather crude. Beatrice is full of concern for her sister but

Rosamund's response to it is full of anger, showing the complex relationship between the sisters.

Because many of the younger women were attracted to the movement going on, they were anxious to avoid having babies, many did choose to become mothers at a later date because discussion of unmarried motherhood was often less fashionable than of contraception and abortion.

A number of well-known nineteenth-century novelists including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Elizabeth Gaskell, Margaret Harness, George Moore. Thomas Hardy, and Margaret Harness in the scarlet latter, (1850). Ruth (1853), A city girl (1887), Esther waters (1894), and Tess of the D'Urbervilles (1891), had depicted the unmarried mother sympathetically ostracized because of the sexual double standard, marginalized in society. These and other novelists serve as an icon of the ways in which all women suffered under novelists as patriarchal ideology. Many of their novels depict her as a loving women struggling to do the best for her child, and some like Tess of the D'Urbervilles, subtitled 'a pure women', insist that virtue has nothing to do with virginity. Until the late twentieth century illegitimate birth was a condition to which shame was automatically attached.

A single woman or unwed mother is like a field without a fence. If she has a baby and without marriage, her survival becomes a plight like a weak animal in a jungle infected with wild beasts. Lessing's women have objection neither for wifhood nor motherhood but for the restraints put on these roles.

In Britain the Social Security Act of 1966 deprived unmarried mothers who were suspected of cohabiting of their right to claim social security payments. During the 1970s, the 'problem' of unmarried motherhood was overtaken by the 'problem' of divorce. There was a brief period of public sympathy for the single mother in the middle of the 1970s when more liberal changes in welfare benefits were introduced. The number of women bringing up children alone rose, and with them the benefits bill. (Nancy Hardin, P. 55) ^[5].

Margaret Drabble has for years lived in a comfortable house at Hampstead with her children. While she has made some very skeptical comments about marriage she is very positive about motherhood. In an interview with Diana Cooper Clark she says:

I see motherhood in such positive terms that I feel almost embarrassed to state it. I think it's the greatest joy in the world. But it is also a very personal thing. I just happen to like it. (Interview with Diana Cooper Clark, 1980, P. 74.) ^[6]

Conclusion

Drabble has portrayed the mother- child bond in many of her novels and this has earned her the title 'novelist of maternity' and have drawn female readers empathetically to her work. The common assumption is that modern professional woman is liberated in all walks of life and this female liberation includes sexual emancipation as well. However, pregnancy of an unmarried woman is still regarded as odd and sin in modern days. Rosamund's position as unmarried mother and career women,

superficially a paradigm of modern feminism is firmly linked with its parallels like Bernard Shaw's women who want children but no husband.

The key changes have been brought up in the position of women and the family, which occurred in the 1960s and 1970s that are reflected and mediated in women's fiction. How motherhood is understood and how women come to regard themselves as mothers is very much part of the historical concern and the ideological circumstances in which ideas about motherhood are constructed.

Women like Rosamund do not want men to be co-sharers in these activities for fear of losing their power and authority. As stated earlier Drabble does not draw the sharp distinction made by Later feminists between 'Female' which implies biology, and 'Female' which implies biology, and "Feminine" which implies a cultural construct. She merely glimpses what is problematic in the term maternal instinct but leaves it for the women's liberation movement to make this subject explicit. She does not question how far women's desire to have babies and maternal love are 'innate' or 'constructs'.

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