

Rosamund: A Multitasking Mother in Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone*

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Abstract

Margaret Drabble is a novelist with a special capacity to write about the experience of motherhood. Through the centuries, the aspects of maternity have been represented in literature. Rosamund Stacey, the protagonist of Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone* (1965) is a young, attractive research scholar who is pursuing her doctorate in English literature, agrees to a one-night stand with a BBC radio announcer named George. She becomes pregnant with the only sexual experience of her life. At first, she considers an abortion but later determines to keep her baby and raise it on her own. Amidst the challenges of single motherhood, she completes her thesis and is also awarded various job opportunities. Though she had difficulties in raising her daughter as a mother, she has also managed to complete her thesis as a scholar. So, Rosamund as a scholar has balanced a life of a single mother.

Keywords: Motherhood, Self-sufficient, Independence, Illegitimate child, Unmarried mother, Scholar.

Margaret Drabble is a contemporary novelist and is often interviewed. She is the subject matter of several articles. Women and their suffering are the major themes of Drabble's novels. She is powerfully associated with the female tradition. Drabble was born on 5th June 1939 in Sheffield, Yorkshire. She is the daughter of John Fredrick, the barrister. Her mother, Marie Bloor Drabble was an English teacher at The Quaker School. Drabble and her sister attended this school. The relationship between mother and daughter is the major theme in many of Drabble's novels.

Drabble led her life comfortably with her children in Hampstead. She had made sceptical comments about marriage but was very positive about motherhood. In an interview view with Diana Cooper Clerk, Drabble 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" (74).

In many of her novels, Drabble has portrayed the mother-child relationship and because of this she has earned the title 'novelist of maternity'. She has also drawn several female readers empathetically towards her work.

In *The Millstone*, Drabble narrates the story of Rosamund Stacey who is a university graduate and is doing her Ph. D thesis. She stays at her parent's flat. She's dating two men; they all think she slept with one of them. In this way, she avoids a sexual relationship with either of them. She becomes pregnant as a result of one nightstand and decides to give birth to the baby Octavia against all odds and brings it up by herself.

Rosamund's experience in the maternity clinic is a shock. She did not expect that she have to wait so long at the clinic. She also slips her attendance card into the pile so as to be called earlier. Rosamund was shocked to be examined by five medical students. Eventually, she is drawn into conversation with the other pregnant women. She also felt so strong with the ladies in the clinic. She explains as

Birth, pain, fear and hope these were the subjects that drew us together in gloomy awe, and so strong was the bond that even I, doubly, trebly outcast by an unmarried status, my education, and my class, even I was drawn in from time to time, and compelled to proffer some anecdote of my own, such as the choice story of my sister who gave birth to her second in an ambulance in a snow storm. Indeed, so strong became the pull of nature that by the end of the six months' attendance. I felt more in common with the ladies at all clinic than with my own acquaintances (56).

Thus, Drabble through the protagonist Rosamund shows that pregnancy brings an awareness of the facts and feelings of maternity from her scholarly life. Though different in status it arouses a feeling of oneness with other women. In *The Millstone*, Drabble shows the scholar as a mother. Rosamund

discovers that her daughter Octavia has a dangerous heart defect and has to undergo a risky operation. This made Rosamund unable to sleep and was restlessly shifting on her bed. She was very much worried about her child. Rosamund's state of mind reveals the fact that women may have high education and be academically successful – here Rosamund is doing her Ph.D. but once she becomes a mother, her maternal instincts are the strongest.

Drabble in another situation describes the maternal instincts. After Octavia's operation, Rosamund is not allowed to see her for two weeks. She becomes restless and desperate. She tried to stay calm and polite, but was unsuccessful. It is her maternal instinct that comes above all and she starts shouting in a hysterical manner: "I don't care about anyone, I don't care, I don't care, I don't care" (133).

After Rosamund becomes a mother, her child is her only priority. Her intellectuality is kept aside. Drabble has a tremendous capacity to write about motherhood. The most beautiful relationship in the world is the interaction between the mother and the child. Rosamund, an intellectual, educated woman who wanted to continue her life as a scholar, disliked her pregnancy at first but was overwhelmed with joy and love when her daughter was born.

While Rosamund as a scholar was working on her thesis in the British Museum's Reading Room, she realises that she is pregnant. The images of the Elizabethan sonnets are marked by illegitimate pregnancies

Gin, psychiatrist, hospitals, accidents, village maidens drowned in duck ponds, tears, pain, humiliations. Nothing, at that stage, resembling a baby. These shocking forebodings occupied me for half an hour or more, and I began to think that I would have to get up and go, or to go out and have a cup of coffee or something. (30)

Her attempts to abort the baby with hot baths and drinking alcohol were unsuccessful. It is only then she realises that the baby is real and starts facing the realities of life.

Drabble wrote this novel when she was expecting her third baby. She says in an interview as:

I wrote it while I was expecting my third baby... In some way I wrote... to cheer myself up... and trying to resolve the problem of my something that it is so disagreeable and humiliating and at times painful and frightening should also be so important and rewarding. (273)

Rosamund as a scholar is working on her doctoral dissertation on Samuel Daniel's sixteenth-century sonnet sequence, 'The complaint of Rosamund'. The above work details the life of a young woman who has been put to death because of an illicit love affair. Nancy Hardin defines sixteenth-century complaint literature as a moral treatise on the consequences of transgression against socially accepted behaviours. The social transgression in this novel is Rosamund's, illegitimate baby. Her intellectual identity was in danger when she finds that she is pregnant with Octavia. Rosamund remarks "I was successful in my work, so I suppose other successes were too much to hope for" (10) and "I couldn't have everything; if I wished I decline, I would have to pay for it" (22). This illustrates Rosamund sense of justice, guilt and innocence. She also believes that everything works in a balance of right and wrong, innocent and guilty. She says:

I was guilty of a crime, all right, but it was a brand new, twentieth-century crime, not the good old traditional one of lust and greed. My crime was my suspicion, my fear, my apprehensive terror of the very idea of sex... I walked around with a scarlet letter embroidered upon my bosom, visible enough in the end, but the A stood for abstinence, not for adultery (21).

At last, we find that Rosamund emerges both as a scholar and as a mother. She bears and raises her child alone, unmarried finishes her thesis and is awarded a wonderful job and plenty of paid writing opportunities:

I had been offered a good job for the following autumn at one of the most attractive new universities, my thesis was at the publishers, and on the strength of it my name was in considerable esteem amongst those in a position to esteem it. I was gratified and relieved (172).

Similarly, Rosamund realizes that rather than being an object of criticism for having an illegitimate child, Rosamund's academic name provides the prestige and protection her daughter will need in the future: "It was gratifying, too, that my name would in the future be [Dr.] Rosamund Stacey, a form of address which would go a long way towards obviating the anomaly of Octavia's existence" (173). Finally, Rosamund somehow managed to balance between the life of a scholar and mother.

Children form a greater part of a woman's life and it is natural for her to love, care and feel for them because they themselves are the creators of the little ones. Margaret Drabble being a mother is able to write about motherhood with confidence. She is also an active vice-patron of the Child Psychology Trust, an organisation set up to observe and treat disturbance in children. This shows that mothers belong to the ranks of the caring. Motherhood has been the greatest joy in the world and Rosamund as a scholar has enjoyed it.

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