

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **THE MILLSTONE**

Margaret Drabble's third novel The Millstone also deals with the theme of the motherhood mainly, but with a difference. Unlike Emma of 'The Garrick Year', Rosamund, the protagonist of The Millstone is unmarried, and very boldly faces the experience of motherhood. She is educated and independent, with literary milieu around her. She is brilliant and is working on her thesis under the guidance of a don in Cambridge. She is the daughter of the rich socialist parents and is brought up on the basis of certain principles like equality and independence. Though her parents are rich they donot support her at all, beyond the rent - free accomodation. She gets an income of 500 pounds a year in the form of various research grants and endowments. She says,

They (parents) had drummed the idea of self-reliance into me so thoroughly that I believed dependence to be a fatal sin. Emancipated women, this was me : gin bottle in hand,  
opening my own door with my own latch key.<sup>1</sup>

But when this emancipated girl realises the fact that she is going to be a mother, her first reaction is fear, out of which she tries to abort the baby without any success. This ~~C~~owardice is the part of her personality. But another important aspect of her personality is also there to take over

the cowardice, and that is her confidence ! As she says in the first sentence of the novel:

My career has always been marked by a strange mixture of confidence and cowardice.

.... Confidence, not cowardice, is the part of myself which I admire, after all.<sup>2</sup>

Her pregnancy is the result of her first and the only sexual experience with George, and she never told anybody - even to George - that George was the father of her child. She says,

..... he was so incidental to my life that nobody even knew that I knew him. .... The whole business was utterly accidental from start to finish.<sup>3</sup>

As her pregnancy came to her unexpectedly and accidentally, she was afraid in the beginning and tried to do away with it with the bottle of gin. But at that time also she seems to be hesitant.

It (Abortion) seemed a violent and alarming thing to do, almost as violent and alarming as the act which had engendered this necessity.....'<sup>4</sup> ' ..... Contents of my bottle of gin. There was not very much left. Not enough, I thought. Not enough, I hoped.'<sup>5</sup>

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Though she is a modern, educated and independent woman, she also has the traditional value system. She believes in morality, a kind of archetypal moral values. She says, 'I was naturally chaste.'<sup>6</sup> After drinking gin she comments,

It was so thoroughly nasty undiluted that I felt the act of drinking was some kind of penance for the immorality of my behaviour.<sup>7</sup>

But when she thought about a baby, once again she felt that there was nothing wrong in having a baby. Being a woman it was her function.

..... it seemed to me that a baby might be no such bad thing, however impractical and impossible .... 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?<sup>8</sup>

In this remark I see in Rosamund the feminist with the modern views. She says,

My mother, you know, was a great feminist. She brought me up to be equal. She made there be no questions, no difference, I was equal. I am equal.<sup>9</sup>

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She wants, it seems, the equal status to the role of a woman in human life. To bear a child is the natural, biological function of a woman, married or unmarried doesn't make a difference ! As Sushila Singh points out in 'Recent Trends in Feminist Thought',

Feminism is committed to the struggle for equality for women, an effort to make women become 'like' men. But the struggle for equal rights historically and politically emphasizes the 'value' of women 'as' they are. The very argument rests precisely on the fact that women are 'already' as valuable as men. But in the situation of women's lack of equal rights, this value must be located as 'difference', not as equality. Women are of equal human value in their own way.

Rosamund appears to be of the same opinion. She is a modern woman in the real sense and has feminist ideology imbibed in her personality. She doesn't connect her motherhood to marriage. It is her biological demand. In this sense it is interesting to see the view of the State in relation to women and their motherhood. This is pointed out by Michele Barrett in her book very clearly. She states,

The legislation on sex discrimination at

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work contains elements that are inexplicable except in terms of state support for an ideology of the family and women's primary allegiance to it. For example, although it is illegal for an employer in Britain to discriminate against a woman on the grounds of her being married, it is not illegal - for instance in respect of maternity leave - to discriminate against her on the grounds that she is not married. At the time when the legislation was being drafted, a case was made, and the government accepted it, that institutions might want to withhold maternity<sup>11</sup> benefits from unmarried mothers.

In this situation it is very difficult for any unmarried woman to take the decision of bearing a child. But ultimately after lot of thinking, Rosamund takes a very bold decision to keep the baby. Though her feminist way of thinking is one reason, there are many other considerations that are responsible for the decision. As Lydia, her friend, says, perhaps she (Rosamund) wants it.

.... that you must really want it. On some<sup>12</sup> level, don't you think ?

Rosamund herself has explained her perspective in detail in

relation to this, when she says,

My present predicament would certainly qualify, I thought, as one of life's little ironies, and yet it did not seem to be a mere accident, not the effect of divine malevolence. Had it belonged to the realm of mere accident I would have surely got rid of it ..... But it did not seem that kind of thing one could have removed, like a wart or a corn. It seemed to have a meaning. It seemed to be the kind of event to which, however accidental its cause, one could not say No..... I did not feel, as Hardy felt for Tess, that events had conspired maliciously against my innocence. Perhaps I did not wish to feel this, for it was a view dangerous to my dignity and difficult to live with for the years which were to come. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that my state must have some meaning, that it must, however haphazard and unexpected and unasked, be connected to some significant development of my life ..... At times I had a vague and complicated sense that this pregnancy had been

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sent to me in order to reveal to me a scheme of things totally different from the scheme which I inhabited, totally removed from academic enthusiasms, social consciousness, etiolated undefined emotional connections, and<sup>13</sup> the exercise of free will.

This explanation shows two sides of her identity:

1. Like her creator, Margaret Drabble, she believes in Fate, just as Thomas Hardy, believed in.
2. Unlike Thomas Hardy, but, she thinks positively about her future. - 'some significant development of my life', and as per her expectation we find that she learns and achieves a lot of experience of human life, which but for her maternity she wouldn't have ! Pregnancy and motherhood open before her a totally new area of life , of which she had never imagined or thought before, and this experience definitely enriches her personality. When the baby was born, she felt unique happiness.

She (a nurse) put her (child) in my arms....and what I felt it is pointless to try to describe. Love, I suppose one might call it, and the first of my life. .... my happiness .....satisfaction, perhaps, or triumph, and at times excitement and<sup>14</sup> exhilaration.

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She gets a pleasant surprise in the form of Octavia's  
'uncritical love.'<sup>15</sup> She is also impressed by the generosity  
of Octavia who was kept away from her mother in the hospital.

I went up to her (baby) .... She had forgiven  
me for our day of separation, I could see, and  
such generosity I found amazing, for I am not  
generous. Fair, but not generous.<sup>16</sup>

In the hospital she also came into the contact of the  
women who were either pregnant or mothers, and this was  
totally new world for her ! For the first time in her life she  
realised the significance of the society, as she now was  
forced in such a situation where she had to take the help of  
the society every now and then. As she says,

I visited the doctor the next day. That  
visit was a revelation : it was an initiation  
into a new way of life, a way that was  
thenceforth to be mine forever.<sup>17</sup> I saw that  
from now on I, like that woman (the Italian  
Woman with two children), was going to have to  
ask for help, and from strangers too : I who  
could not even ask for love or friendship.  
..... So adverse was I to help of anykind  
that I could not put up with any form of  
domestic assistance: .....I could feel that

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my own personal morality was threatened : I was going to have to do things that I couldn't do. Not things that were wrong,.....but things<sup>18</sup> that were against the grain of my nature.

Though at times frightened, Rosamund faced new life with confidence, only because of the positive way of thinking ! As mentioned earlier Rosamund believes in fate - some philosophic scheme.

It was as though for too long I had been living in one way, on one plane, and the way I had ignored had been forced thus abruptly and violently to assert itself. Really it was a question of free will up to this point in my life and I had always had the illusion at least of choice, and now for the first time I seemed to become aware of the operation of forces not totally explicable, and not therefore necessarily blinder, smaller, less kind or more ignorant than myself..... topics as marriage and maternity, in which luck or blind chance play a large part..... She (my sister Beatrice) had commented thus : ' You don't decide to have children. They decide to be born.'<sup>19</sup>

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In her interview with Barbara Milton, Margaret Drabble has also confessed her belief in fate or accident. She says,

This is what is so interesting about life :  
choosing to be something and being struck down  
while you do it by a falling brick. The whole  
question of free will and choice and  
determination is inevitably interesting to a  
novelist..... Are your characters puppets in  
the hands of fate or are they really able to  
make free choices? I think we have a very  
small area of free choice.<sup>20</sup>

In case of Rosamund though initially it was not her  
choice to have a child, later she decided to keep it - except  
the incident of gin - bottle in the beginning. All her friends  
advised her not to continue the pregnancy. Her sister Beatrice  
advised her,

..... just think if you had it adopted you  
could forget about the whole business in six  
months and carry on exactly where you left  
off.<sup>21</sup>

Beatrice is worried about both - Rosamund and her  
child. According to her to keep the child was ' the most  
dreadful mistake.' It's interesting to see the reaction of

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her friend Joe. He had wrong impression of Rosamund. He says,

A very unwomanly woman, that's what you  
22  
are.

When he knows about her pregnancy, he is very much surprised. When he knows that she wanted to have a baby, he says,

You just can't. I forbid you. It'll  
ruin your life. If you want some money I'll  
lend you some ..... The whole thing'll be a  
23  
complete waste of time and emotion.

According to him, 'All women want babies. To give  
24  
them a sense of purpose ' Rosamund naturally becomes angry  
over him. She reacts :

' What utter rubbish,' .... 'what absolutely  
stupid reactionary childish rubbish. Don't  
tell me that any human being ever endured the  
physical discomforts of babies for something  
as vague and pointless as a sense of  
25  
purpose'.

But Rosamund neglects their opinions. She is determined and also free to make her own choice. Once again she displays her feminist views and she becomes the representative of a new woman of the modern age. As Elaine Showalter refers to Johnson in her book A Literature of Their

Own, Rosamund is a woman of the twentieth century . Johnson says,

The new woman, the female novelist of the twentieth century, has abandoned the old realism. She does not accept 'observed' revelation. She is seeking, with passionate determination, for that Reality which is behind the material, the things that matter, spiritual things, ultimate truth, and here she finds man an outsider, wilfully blind,  
26  
purposely indifferent.

Thus it was ultimately her decision to keep the child. She didn't go against the fate though it was possible for her. Whether right or wrong, good or bad it was the independent decision of an independent woman. Here we can compare Emma Evans of 'The Garrick Year' with Rosamund. In many ways they are different, though the motherhood is the common factor between them. Emma is a married woman who is a mother of two children, and is dependent upon her husband for her living. She has sacrificed her career and financial independence for the sake of children. On the contrary Rosamund is an unmarried woman who is involved in her career and who is independent financially. In her case there is no question at all of whether she should do a job or not. In fact

as she earns enough, every thing is fairly easy for her. Lack of marriage or lack of husband does not create any problem for her, whereas Emma's main problem is her marriage and her husband. For both of them children are not a problem, but in fact children are the source of pleasure and satisfaction. They (children) become the part of their mothers' existence. In this sense only perhaps the remark of Byron that Rosamund noted down is significant.

Love is of man's life a thing apart, it is  
27
 woman's whole existence.

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Throughout the novel Rosamund doesn't face any problem as such. Every thing is smooth for her, because of her own and her father's status, position in the society. She gets the advantage while facing the society. She doesn't bother about her being unmarried. Of course there are hints about the social acceptability of her child in future. But that doesn't come within the brief span of the novel. Still she is conscious about it from the beginning. How to deal with the people in this situation is her concern. But somehow she managed that. An interesting element in this novel is her confrontation with the ways of life which she did not know before and didn't imagine at all. She explores the new way of life related to motherhood. This adds to her experience. Emma's life has become like the stagnant water which has

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stopped flowing and has no further development within the confines of marriage and motherhood. But Rosamund has the scope to develop. She is really free, and this is mainly because of her financial position. According to Dee Preussner,

..... money is a structuring principle in her (Margaret Drabble) novels, too. Her characters are often shaped by money or a lack of it, and attitudes towards money form the basis for social ties between family members and friends, or play a part in tearing these social units apart.....<sup>28</sup>

Illegitimate child is not going to be an obstacle in the way of her career. She is sure about her talent and further prospects in her life. She says,

..... as far as I knew there was nothing in any of my endowments or scholarships about illegitimate children ... I saw no reason why my proposed career of thesis, assistant lecturership and so on should be interrupted.<sup>29</sup>

Only a small problem was there, and that was of publicity which she managed well without any complications. But before that she remarks,

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Once I had thus decided to have the baby - or rather failed to decide not to have it - I had<sup>30</sup> to face the problem of publicity.

She told about it only to Joe, Roger, Lydia<sup>6</sup> and her sister Beatrice. She was worried about her pupils. Curiously enough she didn't inform her parents about it. She didn't think it necessary, surprisingly enough, to tell at least George, who was the father of the baby and who was good and whom she liked and loved. At the end of the novel it seems that he liked her and would have married her if she wanted. Rosemund herself is surprised by her decision. She says :

George, George, I thought of George, and sometimes I switched on the radio to listen to his voice announcing this and that : I still could not believe that I was going to get through it without telling him, but I could<sup>31</sup> not see that I was going to tell him either.

I see some reasons behind this. 1. She doesn't feel the importance of marriage for motherhood. 2. She feels that he didn't like her as he didn't show any willingness to see her again.

..... the more I looked back, the clearer it seemed that he had expressed no liking or affection for me at all. .... had he liked

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me, he would surely have made some suggestion  
that he might see me again ?<sup>32</sup>

She didn't want to impose herself upon him. 3. Her pride keeps her away from him. She says,

I could have seen him, easily enough, .....  
but pride restrained me.<sup>33</sup>

Rosamund is proud and is conscious of her dignity constantly. She doesn't want to harm it in any way. But she is good. When she had to go through the unhappiness the week before the operation of Octavia, she says,

..... for in the same instant in which I  
wished that I had someone, anyone, George, to  
weep at, I found myself glad that George had  
been spared this quite unnecessary sorrow.<sup>34</sup>

As Margaret Drabble says in the interview with Dee Preussner,

.... Being truly good is being aware of other  
people's problems as well as your own.<sup>35</sup>

In this sense Rosamund is really kind and sensitive person. She is good not only to her daughter and George, but she is good to others also. We find her feeling very sorry for Sandra - a poor little girl who always wanted to play with Nicholas and Alexandra - the children of Beatrice - which they were not allowed to do. Rosamund didn't like this. She says,

.... I often thought of Sandra, square and

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yelling, and thought what a pity it was that  
resentments should breed so near the cradle,  
that people should so have had it from  
36  
birth.

She always sees beyond her in the society. She is not  
self-centred. She could establish her relationship with other  
pregnant women in the clinic. She says,

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 my unmarried status,  
my education, and my class, even I was drawn  
in from time to time, and .... 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 the clinic than  
37  
with my own acquaintances.

She feels sympathy for the pregnant Italian woman  
with her two children, in the clinic. Throughout the novel we  
can see her passion for equality. Her parents being  
socialists, she also is a socialist. She has given her  
38  
daughter - "this small living extension of myself" as she  
describes her (daughter) - the name Octavia after Octavia Hill  
whom George calls 'heroine of feminism and socialism.' Over

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this remarks of George Rosamund comments,

.... I think she was a socialist. I hope she  
39  
was a socialist.

In the course of her pregnancy and motherhood, she realizes the value of society. She says,

So, in a way, I was cashing in on the foibles of a society which I have always distrusted; by pretending to be above its strictures, I was merely turning its anomalies to my own  
40  
use.

She is a responsible citizen of the society. She was worried about her pupils, whom she had accepted, not for financial reason, but for the social reason. She says,

I suppose I taught because of my social conscience. .... I was my parents daughter, .... and I was born with the notion that one ought to do something, preferably something  
41  
unpleasant, for others. So I taught.

Thus Rosamund's identity has different levels. She is emancipated educated, socialist, unmarried mother, trying to reconcile with fate positively. She seems feminist, loving and caring mother. According to her the ten days in the hospital was one of the more cheerful and sociable patches of her life. So she feels that

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Beatrice had been .... mistaken by her fears<sup>42</sup>  
for the social position of my child.

But still later, we find her feeling the fear that no  
one in the society was going to accept her. She says,

I knew with piercing premonition exactly what  
everyone would say if Octavia were to die.  
They would say it was a blessing in disguise.  
.... there are some for whom no one cares,  
deserted, abandoned, unloved, unwanted, whose  
existence is a needless burden to the earth  
they lie upon. Perhaps I was obliged to make  
up for what Octavia lacked in quantity of<sup>43</sup>  
mourners by the quality of my caring.

Thus though Rosamund has many sided identity, her  
identity as a mother makes the lasting impression, just like  
Emma Evans of The Garrick Year. That is why perhaps Elaine  
Showalter says,

Drabble is the novelist of maternity, as  
Charlotte Bronte was the novelist of the<sup>44</sup>  
school-room.

By committing herself to her pregnancy and choosing  
to keep her baby as an unwed mother, Rosamund frees herself  
from the strictures of marriage, and defines herself in  
relation to non-patriarchal values. She transcends division

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and achieves authenticity based on human personhood, rather than on gender. From the patriarchal perspective one would expect the single woman to be a figure of derision, and social ostracism, but as Anis Pratt says,

In much of women's fiction she becomes a  
hero representing the possibilities of growth  
and survival.<sup>45</sup>

In this way Drabble's this protagonist defines herself in relation to values other than male superiority and female dependency of patriarchy.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- 8 Ibid, p. 18.
- 9 Ibid, p. 32.
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- 13 Ibid, pp. 76 - 77.
- 14 Ibid, pp. 118 - 119.
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- 18 Ibid, p. 82.
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- 36 Margaret Drabble, The Millstone, (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1965), p. 104.
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