

**CHAPTER II**  
**A SUMMER BIRD-CAGE**

A Summer Bird-Cage is the first novel of Margaret Drabble about human relationships and psychological reactions, observed and recorded with uncanny accuracy by the born writer. It is the story of two sisters, Sarah and Louise, both graduates from Oxford. Sarah, who narrates the story, records what happens to her and her sister within a year or so after the wedding of her sister. The novel begins with the reference to the wedding of Louise with Stephen Halifax, and ends with the determination of Stephen to divorce her. Sarah talks about Louise's ways of behaviour at different times with different people from her point of view, and that gives us the impression of contrast between the two in the course of the novel. Though they are sisters they are not psychologically attached to each other, and Louise is responsible for this detached relationship. But at the end they get reconciled, and come very close to each other. At the end of the novel Sarah says,

She's so nice to me now, so genuinely  
1  
nice : she tells.....

Thus though the story of the novel has its main focus on the two sisters, it is peopled by the other persons - men and women who include their family members and their friends. When Sarah looks at them and comments on them, it appears that

she is trying to explore her own self, and at the same time to explore the personalities of the others in the situations in which she observes them. Its her fine study of these characters including herself that makes the novel very interesting.

The novel opens with Sarah's coming from Paris to Warwickshire where her house is, for her sister's wedding. After the first glow of welcome she disliked being at home as usual because of the usual nags, complaints, demands and grudges. However, the wedding took place with Sarah as a bridesmaid. After the reception Stephen and Louise drove away to London and from there to Rome. Why Louise married Stephen Halifax was a mystery to Sarah, though later it becomes clear. Louise was, according to her an absolutely knock-out beauty'. She (Sarah) disliked Stephen Halifax, a novelist with four novels to his credit. According to her he was 'entirely negative' in his perspective. But he was very rich, and at the end Louise tells Sarah,

I married him for his money, of  
2  
course.

This throws light upon the nature of Louise. Sarah is in contrast to her sister. She couldn't have thought of marrying somebody for the sake of money, not for love. She loved Francis and wanted to marry him, and waited for him to

return from America after his studies. After her graduation she also had the problem : what next ?

I thought about jobs, and seriousness, and about what a girl can do with herself if overeducated and lacking a sense of vocation. Louise had one answer of course. She was getting married. Moreover she was marrying a very wealthy and, in a minor way, celebrated<sup>3</sup> man.

Sarah had the sense of vocation. So soon after the wedding was over, she decided to go London to get a job, though her mother was against the idea. In the end she got a job with the B.B.C. In the meantime none of the family knew anything about Louise.

She hadn't even sent my parents a postcard<sup>4</sup> to say she'd arrived in Rome.

The relationship between Louise and her family members, as it appears from the novel, is not close as such. The mother complains about her. Louise dislikes, and criticizes Daphne openly. She does not like Sarah also much. Sarah, when a child, wanted to be close to her sister, but Louise always neglected her. She always used her whenever she wanted her.

She had been expert at using me<sup>5</sup> and impressing me without my noticing it.

Both of them were in London later. But they did not have any kind of bond as sisters between them.

I wondered at the social meaninglessness of all our meetings. I never saw Louise except by accident or at parties. .... We never met each other with any purpose or any bond. .... What was so wrong with it all ? What was wrong was that she, not more than me, was flippant.<sup>6</sup>

There was no communication between the sisters. Sarah knew about her from the letter of her friend Simone who met Louise in the church in Rome. This news, though was not surprising, disturbed Sarah. Still Sarah tried to forget it. 'After all I said to myself, what had Louise and her marriage got to do with me ? She was merely and accidentally my sister whereas Simone was a personal person of my own'.<sup>7</sup> Sarah also was in love with Francis whom she forced to accept the scholarship and go to America. She probably would marry him.

I wanted to be a one man girl and faithful.<sup>8</sup>

Sarah had high sense of morality whereas Louise had an affair with John even before the marriage and continued it later also. Sarah had the doubt about it, but it was confirmed when Wilfred Smee tells her about it, and at the end of the novel the relationship between Louise and her husband breaks

off. He drives her out of his house as he found her with John in the bath. Then she came to Sarah who, though unwillingly, accepts her, and the novel ends on the note of unity between the two sisters.

To force a unity from a quarrel, a high continuum from a sequence of defeats and petty disasters, to live on the level of the heart rather than the level of the slipping petticoat..... My attitude to the petticoat is firmer than hers, but I am exhausted<sup>9</sup> nevertheless.

Then the novel ends with hope. 'Francis is on his way to home' ... John also loves Louise seriously. 'John has turned out to be deeply and devotedly in love with her (Louise)' and 'She (Louise) must at heart be quite fond of both John and me.'<sup>10</sup>

#### QUEST FOR IDENTITY :

While recording her experience, Sarah is constantly trying to relate herself with the world around her. It is her effort to fit in her existence in the surrounding society. What is her place and what she can do in that place, and most of all, what she is --- are the areas that bother her, and right from the beginning she appears to explore them. The first thing that we know about her identity - what she is

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- is that she is a graduate, and to be more precise a girl graduate. Her consciousness about her being a girl makes a lot of difference. In the second paragraph of the novel only we come to know that she is thinking about jobs. She has the sense of vocation, as well as of her girlhood.

I thought about jobs, and  
seriousness, and about what a girl can do with  
herself if, overeducated and lacking a sense  
of vocation.<sup>11</sup>

Louise did not have the sense of vocation and marriage was her solution. But Sarah couldn't have married for this purpose. Though she thought about marriage, marriage was not everything for her. She loved Francis very much, but she didn't marry him straight away. There was the possibility of her marrying Francis. Perhaps she wanted to prove her existence without relating it to marriage. She says,

The days are over, thank God, when a woman<sup>12</sup>  
justifies her existence by marrying.

She is a feminist. She wants freedom and love. But at the same time she is aware that it is very difficult -nearly impossible to get these things. On the wedding day when she looked at herself in the mirror, she records,

I looked at myself in fascination,  
thinking how unfair it was, to be born with so

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little defence, like a soft snail without a shell ..... I felt doomed to defeat. I felt all women were doomed. Louise thought she wasn't, but she was. It would get her in the end, some version of it, simply because she was born to defend and depend instead of to attack.<sup>13</sup>

Sarah's identity as a woman relates her with the other women also in the novel - her own mother, Louise, Daphne, Gill, Stella, and even their servant - a Swedish girl Kristin. When Michael told her about her father being rude to Kristin, she writes,

I would so like people to be free and bound together not by need but by love. But it isn't so, it can't be so.<sup>14</sup>

One of her friends, John Connell called her the high-powered girl.

You and your sort. The high powered girls, I would call you.<sup>15</sup>

Sarah felt that this was her proper description - fit to her self.

I was thinking of me as a high powered girl. For some reason the phrase .... seemed to say something true, something that



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connected up with me and how I had been, and moreover connected me with how other people were. It was this last connection that really mattered : it expressed one quality of living that I would really like to have. I would like to be high powered, in a way that I wouldn't like to be or to be called Bohemian, or bourgeois, or intellectual, or promiscuous, or any of the other charges that I had laid myself open to.<sup>16</sup>

When she thought about this more she reflected,

I .... am always more aware of the event making me than of me making the event. Whereas now, alone in the dark with this man,<sup>17</sup> .... I felt liberated, .....

Thus in the course of narration Sarah realises and knows more and more about her identity - with its plus points, and minus too. She was educated, and was in search of job. Her education has not given her proper perspective about career. There is a difference between her and her mother. The mother could not get education and the opportunities that Sarah enjoyed.

In my day education was kept for the boys, you know'.....<sup>18</sup>

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The conversation between her and her mother goes like this :

Me (Sarah) : I'll get a job ....

Mama : Just any sort of job ?

Me : Whatever there is.

Mama : Don't you want a proper career,  
Sarah ? I mean to say, with a  
degree like yours ....

Me : No, not really, I don't know  
what I want to do.

At one place Sarah says,

Sometimes it seems the only  
accomplishment my education ever bestowed on  
me, the ability to think in quotations.

According to Sarah her womanhood was responsible for the  
utility of her education.

'I 've always rather fancied you as a  
don,' said Louise.

' I used to fancy myself as one. But  
I'll tell you what's wrong with that. It's  
sex. You can't be a sexy don. It's all right  
for men being learned and attractive, but for  
a woman it's a mistake. It detracts from the  
essential seriousness of the business.'

Though she has not gained much from education so far, she has

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the affinity with it. She was the real student.

... I had the pure virtue of being  
the real thing, the real student with a real  
pile of books and a real gown and a real essay  
to write. It was my place, Oxford, and I was  
on my own ground, .....<sup>22</sup>

This is one more aspect of her personality. She has a  
great impulse for reality and moral values. She doesn't want  
to lose her identity by marriage and children, and at the same  
time she considers them. She believes in the sanctity of  
marriage. When she comes to know about the adultery of Louise  
from Wilfred Smee, she gets upset. Smee asks her,

Are marriage and babies practical  
questions for you ?<sup>23</sup>

and she told him that she was going to get married when her  
fiance got back from Harward.

'So you're going to be a don's wife ?'

'No. I'am going to marry a don'.

'And what will you be ?'

'How should I know ? I will be what  
I become, I suppose.'<sup>24</sup>

The high sense of morality is the part of her being and  
becoming - her identity. Though she is 'an emancipated girl'<sup>25</sup>

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she is concerned about it. She was shocked to know about Louise's affair. She explains :

.....My stupid cowardly little superego at it again. If I don't tame that nasty creature soon it will get the better of me ..... She (Louise) doesn't seem to hear any little whispers from the past, ages of morality during the long night watches....<sup>26</sup>

The word 'adultery' 'sends a real Old Testament chill through'<sup>27</sup> Sarah. On the other hand Louise 'likes drama'. Smee asks ,

'She's always been like this ?'

'Like what ?'

'Keen on provocation.'

'Oh, madly. She's one of those that enjoy it more than the real thing'.

' The real thing?'

' Love, That was what I meant, Love.'<sup>28</sup>

Louise is the person who doesn't take truth and honesty seriously. Once, when in Oxford she did, but not now—she is quite clear. Her affair is going on quite openly. Smee says,

A lot of people do know. She certainly makes no attempt to conceal it. In

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fact, she seems to display it to the world at  
29  
large, as though she enjoyed the situation.

She married Stephen just for the sake of money, and she never loved him.

..... and me straightforwardly and nobly and honestly admitting that I didn't love him - and I never said I did, never - and me straightforwardly and nobly going off with  
30  
John.... .

She refuses to marry John also. 'I really don't love  
31  
John enough to marry him.' This is the difference between the two sisters though they have so much in common. Sarah describes her :

She's a taker, not a giver .....  
She was far too intelligent to do nothing, and yet too beautiful and sexy to do all the first class things like politics or law or social sciences - and she was naturally afraid of  
32  
subsiding into nothingness ...

When Michael - Sarah's cousin asked Louise and Stephen how long their honeymoon was going on, Louise said it wasn't a  
33  
honey-moon, it was business. This shows the attitude of Louise. Sarah says :

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' My attitude to the petticoat is firmer than  
34  
hers,...'

Louise was sadistic, and taught Sarah the art of competition.

Perhaps Louise, by being openly  
sadistic, was merely being honest .... In the  
end she taught me the art of competition, and  
this is what I really hold against her : I  
think I had as little desire to outdo others  
in my nature as a person can have, until she  
insisted on demonstrating her superiority. She  
taught me to want to outdo her . .... And  
yet I don't want to imply that we never met on  
any grounds at all. In many ways we have much  
more in common than most sisters have : our  
interests, our intelligence, our paths through  
Oxford have been remarkably similar. In fact,  
in everything that is personal and not generic  
we tend to agree. There is just this basic  
antipathy, this long - rooted suspicion, that  
kept us so rigourously apart. And at times,  
talking of a book or a place or a person, we  
35  
would be in sympathy. At times .'

Thus Sarah's identity is distinct from that of Louise. Sarah  
had the inferiority complex.

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And I said to myself, Louise always wins. Whatever she does, she wins. And I lose. I've too much wit and too little beauty, so I  
36  
lose.

But at the end of the novel quite ironically Louise had to lose Stephen and his money and had to ask Sarah for help. Thus the harmony is established.

Whatever she was, Sarah wanted to live her life fully. She wanted to have job, wanted to marry and have children, with free will. According to her, '... perhaps people choose their own symbols naturally. She gives her own symbol when she says,

I should like to bear leaves and flowers and fruit, I should like the whole world, I should like, I should like, oh I  
37  
should indeed.

Louise's failure in achieving luxurious extravagant life - style through the matrix of marriage and money at the cost of moral values strengthens Sarah's prospects for meaningful identity in the context of moral values.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Margaret Drabble, A Summer Bird-Cage, (Weidenfield and Nicolson, London, 1963), p. 216.
- 2 Ibid, p.203.
- 3 Ibid, p.8.
- 4 Ibid, p.69.
- 5 Ibid, p.199.
- 6 Ibid, p 167.
- 7 Ibid, p. 76.
- 8 Ibid, p. 196.
- 9 Ibid, p. 215.
- 10 Ibid, p. 216.
- 11 Ibid, p. 8.
- 12 Ibid, p. 78.
- 13 Ibid, p.29.
- 14 Ibid, p. 31.
- 15 Ibid, p. 101.
- 16 Ibid, pp. 101 - 102.
- 17 Ibid, p. 103
- 18 Ibid, p. 66.
- 19 Ibid, pp. 64 - 65.
- 20 Ibid, p. 45.
- 21 Ibid, p. 191.
- 22 Ibid, pp. 60 - 61.



- 23 Ibid, p. 143.
- 24 Ibid, p. 143.
- 25 Ibid, p. 147.
- 26 Ibid, p. 148.
- 27 Ibid, p. 146.
- 28 Ibid, p. 146.
- 29 Ibid, p. 145.
- 30 Ibid, p. 210.
- 31 Ibid, p. 210.
- 32 Ibid, pp. 154 - 155.
- 33 Ibid, p. 161.
- 34 Ibid, p. 215.
- 35 Ibid, pp. 109 - 110.
- 36 Ibid, p. 194.
- 37 Ibid, p. 73.