

The problem of Rosamund and the growth – ‘*The Millstone*’

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Introduction

The Millstone (1965) written by Margaret Drabble (1939-) is her third novel. After this novel was published, she has come to be known and described as “the novelist of maternity.” One of the characteristics of her novels from *A Summer Bird-Cage* (1963) to *The Waterfall* (1967) is that the central character is not only young and beautiful but also intelligent (Washimi · Okamura 272).

The Millstone is set in London in the 1960’s and is narrated by a first person narrator and the protagonist, Rosamund Stacey, who is a Cambridge doctoral student from the upper middle class. She lives in an expensive flat in Marylebone owned by her parents as they are away in Africa for the moment. She becomes pregnant as a result of her first and only sexual intercourse with a man.

Nancy S. Hardin discusses it as follows:

Rosamund’s story is in no way a romantic and sentimental one. By committing herself to her pregnancy, by not telling the father, and by choosing, as an unwed mother, to keep her baby Rosamund is well on her way into self-knowledge. (Hardin 22)

This paper focuses on Rosamund, who has problems common with twentieth-century “new” women by analyzing the relationship between Rosamund, her parents and people around her.

1. The Problem of Rosamund

[...] they [Rosamund’s parents] believed in independence. They had drummed the idea of self-reliance into me [Rosamund] so thoroughly that I believed dependence to be a fatal sin. Emancipated woman, this was me: gin bottle in hand, opening my own door with my own latchkey. (Drabble 5)

Due to the influence from her parents’ principle Rosamund is obsessed with the idea of “dependence” which, she believes, is “fatal sin” and firmly thinks that she is an “emancipated woman”. It reflects her rigid state of mind and she entraps herself with it. The character of her parents is seen through the eyes of Rosamund as a “blend of socialist principle and middle class scruple” (23). It is clear from her remark that she has distrust in her parents values whereas Rosamund describes her mother “a great feminist”(24) Her

family, especially her mother brings up Rosamund according to her liberated idea of equality between man and woman. Consequently, Rosamund is always treated equal domestically, nonetheless this “freedom” ironically imposes a strain on her. In other words, she simply cannot follow her mother’s philosophy and value, elements which effectively oppress Rosamund.

When Rosamund finds that she is pregnant, she attempts to have an abortion which is eventually not carried out. She tries to persuade herself into having a baby, always trying to convince herself that she is in the right decision with a comparison to her friend’s cases. Her claims are:

My [Rosamund] sister had babies, nice babies, and seemed to like them. My friends had babies. There was no reason why I shouldn’t have one either, it [baby] 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? I might as well pay, mightn’t I, if other people had to pay? I tried to feel bitter about it all, as I usually did when sober: and indeed recently worse than bitter, positively suicidal: but I could not make it (12).

It can be seen that Subjunctive Mood is frequently utilized in this quotation. It is regarded as a manifestation of her indecisive state of mind. She is strongly conscious of the lifestyle of women around her. A heavy burden being imposed a heavy burden on her, she is caught in her thinking of “ideal situation of a woman.”

Nancy S. Hardin discusses :

“[...] the critics frequently commend Drabble’s prose style, finding it “crisp, ironic, beautifully heard and very conscious of its responsibilities to the sex honoured by Jane Austen” (*The Novel Today* 16). Others comment on “the perfectly sustained tone”(Punch 512). [...] Indeed, Drabble’s prose style is ironically humorous and understated, capturing the nuances of British speech in markedly effective way. Her protagonist is developed with accuracy so that she appears a convincing mixture of intelligence, independence, and humor along with some fear. The first encounter with Rosamund Stacey is a disarming one.” (Hardin 23):

“My career has always been marked by a strange mixture of confidence and cowardice” (Drabble 1). She mentions her kinky identities at the start of *The Millstone*. This quotation reveals the two sides of Rosamund, “Confidence” shapes her outside as a woman with independence and “Cowardice” shapes her inside as a woman who cannot build up a close relationship with others.

She deals with her life entirely through her intellect and reason and cannot express her honest feelings. She keeps problems to herself as she believes that this is what independent and free women should be.

This dual nature of her is apparent in the relationship between Rosamund, Joe and Roger. Rosamund explains:

It took me some time to work out what, from others, I needed most, and finally I decided, after some sad experiments, that the one thing I could not dispense with was company. After much trial and error, I managed to construct an excellent system, which combined, I considered, fairness to others, with the maximum possible benefit to myself (14).

On the one hand Rosamund needs heterosexual company but at the same time she is anxious to avoid having sex with men. She maintains a platonic relationship with two men, posing a fake sexual relationship as means of an “excellent system”(14). In other words, “I [Rosamund] went out with two people at once, once Joe Hurt, the other Roger Anderson, and Joe thought I was sleeping with Roger and Roger thought I was sleeping with Joe.”(14-15). According to this “excellent system”(14), she goes steady with Joe and Roger without involving sex and emotions. She says, “All I [Rosamund] had to sacrifice was interest and love. I could do without these things”(15). and by doing so, she manipulates man’s psychology.

It is burdensome for Rosamund to be a free woman who enjoys “freedom”. To create an emotional and physical relations with people means “dependence” for her. Hence, she simply thinks that she needs to lose her virginity in order to liberate her soul which entraps her “woman’s” body and therefore for agitated expiation she has sex for the first time with George, who is an BBC radio announcer, but who she does not love. She has to switch her full attention from her mind to her pregnant body as a result of liberation from virginity.

Adrienne Rich discusses it as follows:

To separate sense from emotion, body from mind, is hardly useful when we are trying to understand the whole of female experience, and in particular a function- childbirth- so charged with unconscious and subjective power, and so dramatic in its physical sensations (*Rich* 157).

Rosamund has been acting the role of being an independent woman, who tries to “separate sense from emotion, body from mind”, and it means that she, by doing so, avoids reaching self-awareness and she always justifies her self-righteous thinking.

2. A change of Rosamund

As is mentioned above, Rosamund who is a person with little social contact. However, she

makes an entry into a new world due to her pregnancy, which slowly begins to change herself. She starts to find out that there are a lot of women having a baby in the British Library where she goes to study for a long time. She comes to learn to be able to have a multifaceted perspective point of view by observing these mothers at intellectual work. Clearly a baby has an enormous influence on her.

By coming across a mother who has a sick child, Rosamund learns how emotional, passionate and protective a mother can be in expressing her concerns about her child. When she hears the young mother says, "I haven't the energy to go worrying about other people's children. They're nothing to do with me. I only have enough time to worry about myself"(136). (underlines mine) One more point which deserves mentioning in this quotation is significance of communication with people. When Octavia who is Rosamund's daughter breaks into a high fever, she has to go to a pharmacy therefore she has to resort to her neighbour family for help, the neighbours who "looked positively ill-natured and thoroughly dependable" (154). They take charge of Octavia with good grace. Their kindness makes Rosamund wonder why they show kindness to her. And she says "[...] it occurred to me [Rosamund] later that it was largely the fact that I had asked them a favour that had so warmed their demeanour" (156). Here she comes to realize that she has not communicated with her neighbours before, and when she says, "If I [Rosamund] asked more favours of people, I would find people more kind" (156). She becomes aware of the fact that the desperate need for help from others actually enhances mutual sympathy and understanding.

Rosamund also comes to know real nature of motherly love: "Love, I suppose one might call it, and the first of my life" (98). The important thing in this quotation is that she is awakened of another aspect of her thanks to an open and honest dialogue.

Rosamund attempts to meet Octavia in violation of the provisions of hospital.

So when she [nurse] started to push, I [Rosamund] started to push; I started to scream. I screamed very loudly, shutting my eyes to do it, and listening in amazement to the deafening shindy that filled my head. Once I had started, I could not stop (129).

This scene represents that Rosamund breaks thorough towards expressing her feelings, and a new aspect of Rosamund begins to appear.

Margaret Drabble says;

"Rosamund, through the baby, is forced to encounter the outside world. The idea is that once you're forced to make contact through your lover or your child, then it's all right somehow. The other people are there. They're not just part of the images of your own imagination" (*Hardin* 265-266).

This quotation shows that the birth of Octavia seems to put Rosamund under constraint physically but, the existence of Octavia makes her realize that people are connected in the community and liberates her from an oppression partly created by herself. Therefore, it is evident that Octavia opens a new door to society for Rosamund.

In here, we take a particular note of the title of this novel. Margaret Drabble explains the meaning of Millstone in an interview.

[...] I [Drabble] think it was a kind of double reference. The child was both a millstone and also a salvation because once it became obvious to Rosamund that she couldn't suffer any more harm from the child, the millstone was lifted from her (280).

The image of “millstone” in *The Millstone* plays an important role. It symbolizes the beginning of Rosamund's new life. In other words two stones of a millstone represent the working connection between people around her.

There is no doubt about the consequence of Octavia in the Millstone. Rosamund says “ [...] the name Octavia Hill came into my mind, and I said out loud, I'll call her Octavia” (101). In addition, she explains the derivation of her daughter's name when she has a reunion with George. “I'm not quite sure exactly what she [Octavia Hill] did, and once I'd chosen the name I didn't dare go and look her up in case she was unsuitable, or famous or something frightful. I think she was a socialist. I hope she was a socialist. [...]” (166) In this quotation, Rosamund mentions that she takes her daughter's name after Octavia Hill without really knowing about her, however, it is apparent that Drabble makes this choice consciously. Octavia Hill (1838-1912), who is one of the most famous female socialists and Hill's mother, Caroline Hill (1809-1902), who has a strong idea of morality and education based on her Christian faith.

Caroline Hill and Rosamund's mother's educational philosophy, philosophy which nurtures their children's independent spirit are similar to each other, However, there is a large difference in its approach to teaching between them. Octavia Hill and Caroline have an ideal mother-child relationship. On the other hand, Rosamund thinks that her mother's idea of education is “a disastrous experiment” (23) and as has already been mentioned, they do not have a good mother-child relationship and as a result, Rosamund forms a prejudice in her spirit of independence. Rosamund imbues a wish to develop a close relationship with her daughter into the name of “Octavia”.

As explained above, the name of Octavia seems to indicate a deep-rooted wish of Rosamund would be to establish an ideal relationship with her daughter.

3. The relationship with George

Rosamund has a reunion with George on Christmas Eve and invites him to her house to show little Octavia. When Octavia's biological father, George sees her, uninformed George says,

'She [Octavia] 's beautiful,' said George.

'Yes, isn't she?' I said

But it was these words of apparent agreement that measured our hopeless distance, for he had spoken for my sake and I because it was the truth (*Drabble* 167).

Here Rosamund expects George, who does not have a clue to the identity of the baby, to behave like a happy father. George's reaction is not what pleases her, and she decides to believe that there is "hopeless distance" between them. The important thing in this quotation is that Rosamund needs to share her emotions and interest of the child with George despite the fact that she does not disclose the truth that he is actually Octavia's father. In short, it seems that she expects George to be sensitive enough to suspect the real intention of Rosamund to let him meet Octavia without expressing her own feelings. Therefore, it is evident that her thought is in apparent conflict with her behavior.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper addresses the problems of the relationship between Rosamund, her parents and people around her. In dealing with Rosamund, who has difficulties in common with twentieth-century intellectual women, Margaret Drabble raises issues concerning what it is to be a free woman for Rosamund who aspires to meet the social and psychological eligibility as an independent woman. Kristin Bluemel points out the theme of Drabble's novel as: "What is a free woman? How can women become free? Free to do what? Free to be what?" (*Bluemel* 1)

As Nancy S. Hardin mentions "*The Millstone* can be viewed as an updated version of what might appear to be a humorously loving version of didactic literature for education and edifice of today's young women, as well as the portrayal of one young woman's growth of self-understanding" (*Hardin* 26). As many critics indicate that Rosamund gains self-knowledge as a result of the pregnancy, but Margaret Drabble points out Rosamund gets partial self-awareness and self-understanding because she cannot resolve the relationship with George. Nevertheless, Margaret Drabble shows the possibility of the coexistence in Rosamund's future.

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