

Narrator of *The Pure Gold Baby*

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Introduction

A British novelist, Margaret Drabble (1939-) was born in an intellectual family in Sheffield. The works of Margaret Drabble mostly deals with the sophisticated woman as protagonist. The narrative point of view Margaret Drabble's eighteenth novel, *The Pure Gold Baby* (2013), becomes an important key in this novel. Her previous novels mostly are narrated from a first-person perspective, that is, the protagonist is partly Drabble herself. But in this novel, she views her typical heroine and disabled child from the point of view of an aging narrator. It is a major change for her, considering her literary history. Mel Gussow states that "Early novels of Margaret Drabble deal with conflicts between maternity, motherhood, career and sexuality and the later novels have a broader social canvas." (Gussow) On the other hand, in 2009, Margaret Drabble confessed that her career as a novelist had come to a halt because she was afraid of "repeating herself" in her work, which was of writing herself into her novel. After a four-year interval, she resumed writing and published *The Pure Gold Baby*, resuming her career as a novelist. With the above situation in mind the purpose of this paper is to analyze the role of the narrator as a clue to Drabble's new attempt and perspective in her novel writing.

1. Jess

This novel deals with the period until when Jess' daughter, Anna reaches her 40's through the narrator, Eleanor's eyes. Jess is a classic early Drabble heroine, "who gets accidentally pregnant and has the child, which is what happened in *The Millstone*, the author's third novel, published in 1965." (Wolitzer). An accidental pregnancy has encompassed Jess as a result of her every Thursday night sexual intercourse with Dr. Lindahl, a married man who is Jess's teacher at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London). He suggests an abortion to Jess but she rejects it. After the child's birth, they keep on meeting until he learns of Anna's disability and then he leaves them for foreign lands with his wife. His heartless behavior toward Jess suggests that the relationship between Jess and Dr. Lindahl is only physical for him. On the other hand, Jess keeps the fabricated image of an ideal man by means of nicknaming him "the professor" until she finds out about his death on the internet. It seems that she wants to make him look

respectable to neighbors and friends and tries to keep her pride intact. In fact, she knew that he didn't love her as the next quote shows, "Maybe the Professor had loved her [Jess]? No, she thought not, she knew not." (233) But Eleanor constantly makes Jess talk about Dr. Lindahl. It is evident that Jess is still interested in him from Eleanor's narrative. Jess could not accept the lack of his feelings for her. Eleanor states Jess's apparent but deliberate lack of interest in Dr. Lindahl over the years as follows, "All the time she [Jess]'d carefully not been thinking about him [Dr. Lindahl], he'd been dead." (234) (underlines mine) This quote shows that Eleanor also notices Jess's hidden feelings. The phrase "carefully not been thinking" denotes that she, in fact, had been thinking about him. There is a dilemma for Jess and she keeps struggling with it. When she discovers the fact that "he [Dr. Lindahl] had been dead for years, for decades," (234) Eleanor points out Jess's real feelings as she is "... curiously relieved by this outcome. She [Jess] was pleased to have extracted a reply from the web, she was pleased not to have to worried about him any more..." (234). The word "curiously" implies Jess's sense of anxiety and liberation from it at an unconscious level. His existence has apparently haunted her and his death stands for Jess's freedom from her hidden attachment to him. According to Eleanor, Jess thinks of "herself 'madly in love' with the Professor" (116). But Eleanor points out this conception is mistaken and "she [Jess] had been sexually obsessed by the dominating Professor." (116) (underlines mine) The dominant relationship is expressly depicted by the following quote, "She [Jess] accepted it, just as she had accepted the advances of her 44-year-old lover ... and laid her upon the institutional professorial Turkey carpet. She not only accepted them, she welcomed them. She found him very attractive." (21) Jess's behavior toward Dr. Lindahl shows her willing passivity and sexual conservatism towards her lover. Pierre Bourdieu states that "they [women] choose to adopt submissive practices ('women are their own worst enemies') or even that they love their own domination, that they 'enjoy' the treatment inflicted on them, in a kind of masochism inherent in their nature." (Bourdieu 33-40) Bourdieu's view corresponds to Eleanor's opinion. A major reason why he is an unforgettable person for Jess is that she instinctively wants to be dominated by him. Moreover, Eleanor mentions other men in love with Jess as follows, "Zain, she [Jess] knew, had remembered her. And Bob still loved her. And Raoul had sought her out. She comforted herself with these thoughts." (232) It means that these men's attention and interest in her work as a device to calm herself.

Consequently, Jess has to bring up her daughter, Anna, by herself and supports her single parent household without the man's cooperation. In other words, she becomes a single mother by giving up her better career for the time being, "which she [Jess] and we had assumed she would resume more actively when the child was a little older," (6)

according to Eleanor. Unlike an ordinary single mother, highly educated Jess is in the position of resuming her career when her child-rearing is settled. As an anthropologist Jess has a prospect to go back to her study, the move which makes her “profoundly happy.” (8) However, to restart her career as a researcher is an absolutely unscheduled thing for her. Motherhood is less than convincing for Jess before her childbirth, but “attachment came easily.” (6) Yet Jess has worried about disabled Anna for forty years and the worries are growing with Anna’s growth. However, the existence of Anna occupies an important position in Jess’s life, that is to say, “Anna has been Jess’s vocation for forty years.” (164) Jess has a deep sense of commitment to bring up her daughter, who needs special attention. On the other hand, Eleanor notes that this is because Jess just wants to stay in a “comfort zone”, which is a world only of Jess and Anna, and Anna’s disability paradoxically makes their relationship closer and exclusive. They are united in ideas. Jess’s idea becomes Anna’s idea each and every time: “Her [Anna’s] trust in her mother was absolute.” (231) Absolute confidence from Anna creates Jess’s dilemma, a dilemma between Jess’s wish for Anna’s mental and physical independence and her desire to protect her daughter. It seems to Eleanor that this confidential relationship is supported by Anna’s condition which does not allow Anna to have any other choice but to trust her mother. In addition, Eleanor claims that Jess is “too close” to her daughter and therefore she only does “desk-bound” work to keep their life style. When Jess is asked about her professional prospect, Jess’s answer is “Anna, Anna, money, Anna” (201). The next quote also shows the same problem:

The word ‘over-protected’ snakes into Jess’s mind, unbidden. Maybe it is, after all, through selfishness that she has kept Anna at home. Through selfishness, through pride. (162)

In this quote, Eleanor attempts to make the reason why Jess has stayed with her daughter at home clear and criticizes her way of life centered on Anna. In spite of the fear of her over-protection of Anna in Jess’s mind, she does not give up the exclusive life style whatever anyone says about them. The mother and daughter’s mutual dependence is the result of their closeness. Eleanor thinks that it is a product of Jess’s “selfishness” and “pride”. Eleanor says that Jess just tries to play the role of an ideal working mother who maintains responsibility of bringing up a child. There is Jess’s pride as a mother and a career woman. In the dialogue between Margaret Drabble and Yuko Tsushima: *A Career and a Family* (1990), Drabble comments about the anguish of nurturing as a mother of three children herself and her struggle between maternal duty as a care-giver and her belief that mothers should be granted the right to pursue their careers. Drabble delivered her third baby and was able to launch her writing a novel with childcare in the 1960s, and it is the time when Jess also gives birth to Anna in the novel. This implies that Jess’s child-rearing

struggles with Anna, who seems to require three times as much commitment as that of a normal child, accords with the weight of Drabble's commitment to the care of three young children. A kind side of Eleanor, who apparently wants to be in favor of Jess, sometimes betrays her criticism of Jess, and yet she usually makes no attempt to make critical comments against Jess and Anna. As the novel progresses, the image of Jess seems to change from being an ambitious woman to being a dominating mother as Jani points out, "Jess also dominates her daughter, who undergoes Jess's soft violence" (Jani 18), as "Jess" means: "a short strap of leather, silk, or other material, fastened round respectively of the legs of a hawk used in falconry" (*Oxford English Dictionary*), namely, a collar for Anna.

Philip Speight, Jess's father, is a "tolerant, affectionate and kind heart man" (17) and a confidential adviser for Jess, whereas Jess's conservative mother is much less attentive to her grandchild, Anna. Eleanor secretly analyzes her attitude towards Anna as follows:

Anna's grandfather was much more attentive to Anna than Anna's grandmother. We speculated (but not in Jess's hearing) that this was because Anna's grandmother feared the suspicion of hereditary taint. Woman, irrationally but not surprisingly, tend to take the idea of genetic blame more seriously than men. (43) (underlines mine)

This quote denotes that Anna's condition may be caused by genetics. Jess's brother, Jack Speight had Down's syndrome and died when he was thirty years old. These facts have an effect on Jess's mother's fear of inheritance. She suspects that Anna's condition is inherited. In addition, Jess's unmarried sister Vee stays away from Jess and Anna. Vee's distance is a sign of her apprehension of genetic effects. Jess's mother's attitude towards Anna reflects a woman's weak position regarding the consequence of abnormal pregnancy and birth. In many situations, a child who is born with a disorder is seen as the result of problems from the mother.

2. Eleanor

These are some features in Eleanor's own narrative. Her narration is based on her secret observation of the life of Jess and Anna, while her own family affairs are not discussed. Her narrative is repetitive and meanders with persistence. One of the significant points with regard to Eleanor is the fact that she is about to retire from her job, which makes her conscious of her aging. Instead, the object of Eleanor's interest is directed to Jess's life. As mentioned above, this novel is written in the form of retrospection by Eleanor. At the present moment when Eleanor starts to write this story she is in her early sixties, widowed and her two sons have married and she lives alone in her own house in North London, which is a typical middle-class residential area.

According to data about charities in England, seven out of ten people are involved in some kind of charity activities. The U. K. is the world's charity leader and then charity had become a part of life for the British. The narrative is based on charitable compassion and commitment to a local community which Eleanor participates as an unofficial volunteer. The activities include: giving advice, transportation services looking after children and so on. Thus, Eleanor has helped Jess and Anna for forty years as a neighbor and a friend. On the other hand, the narrative throws a critical look at the relationships in terms of interdependence between Jess and Anna, and Jess and people in her environment. For instance, Eleanor suspects that Jess cannot put Anna's father out of her mind because she repeatedly mentions him in conversation, and Eleanor criticizes theirs. Jess's unconscious negatively nostalgia is presented by Eleanor. It means that we could note that there are two contrasting features of Eleanor's narrative. Jess is occasionally characterized as a person who exaggerates her turbulent story.

I [Eleanor] think Jess is looking for meaning where there isn't any. She's just a bit too inventive about causation. I'm more resigned to the random and the pointless than Jess (287). (underlines mine)

The important thing in this quotation is that Eleanor compares Jess with herself in her narrative, however Eleanor tries to make sure "... that is a Jess's story, and the story of Anna" (290). It seems that Eleanor writes a story of Jess with an awareness of the presence of herself along with it. If Eleanor wants to write only about Jess, she would not write something like "I'm more resigned to the random and the pointless than Jess." (287) In addition, her inferiority complex toward Jess's educational background is redeemed through her sons, as Eleanor privately compares them with Anna in terms of the difference in their academic ability. Eleanor cannot free herself from a feeling of inferiority. Eleanor explains herself as follows:

I [Eleanor] was a wanderer with not much aim in life. Although to others no doubt I appeared busy, with my part-time consultancy, my committee work, my friends, my scattered family, my grandchildren. I don't know my life seems emptier when one is older, even when it is full. It thins out, like the hair of one's head. (246) (underlines mine)

Eleanor describes herself as a "wanderer". She has worked as a part-time worker or full-time worker depending on circumstances of her life for many years; she has no other alternative but to leave office on the ground of generation transition. Voluntary work has given her something to live for because she misses her roles as wife, as mother, as grandmother and as worker. This situation has given her a sense of loss, which is similar to the distress one when one has realized that one's hair is thinning. Eleanor attempts to fill

the empty space by means of writing about Jess. It means that “the object of Eleanor’s interest is Jess.” (McAlpin) Eleanor primarily intended to write a Jess’s story and attempted to achieve a feeling of accomplishment in her life by taking advantage of Jess. Therefore, it is evident that the narrative is a device to earn an attainment of desire for herself as is shown in the following quotation:

Eleanor widowed and mostly retired from a worldwide charity organization, has chosen to fill her time, which feels thinned out “like the hair of one’s head,” by clandestinely writing about a friend from the close-knit circle of women who raised their children together in their North London neighborhood in the early 1960s. (McAlpin) (underlines mine)

Eleanor is a typical English middle-class woman: carried out her child-rearing, participates in charity activities and married her sons off. For Eleanor, charity and voluntary work represent her involvement in and contribution to society, as these are to confirm and secure the status symbol as a respectable middle-class woman.

Eleanor honestly talks about her own narrative; “I haven’t invented much. I’ve speculated, here and there, I’ve made up bits of dialogue, but you can tell when I’ve been doing that, because it shows.” (290) (underlines mine) This scene clearly indicates that the content which Eleanor has narrated is based on her considerable fabrication and calculation. This kind of concealed desires are imbedded all over her narrative when Eleanor makes the following remarks on occasions when she gives a lift to her friends. Here her driving symbolically reveals her desire and confidence in her control over her friends: “I [Eleanor] am in control. Sylvie, Jess and Raoul are my passengers, my puppets, I can take them wherever I wish. (192)” The words of “passenger” and especially “puppets” locate her in an upper position among her friends. Eleanor wants to dominate her friends in a car. It also denotes that Eleanor has written Jess’s story in a self-centered manner to achieve a goal as she would like to maneuver Jess to her advantage.

As explained above, through Jess’s story narrated by Eleanor, we can see the real picture of Eleanor in action. Eleanor has paradoxically brought herself into a sharp relief by narrating someone else’s life.

Some critics refer to a characteristic of Eleanor’s narrative, Elizabeth Day mentions, “... there were moments when I found Eleanor’s narrative voice grating and unstructured. The plot wavers confusingly and there is a lot of repetition.” (Day) McAlpin points out, “As a narrator Eleanor is repetitive and meandering.” (McAlpin) Similarly, Eleanor herself observes, “I’m more resigned to the random and the pointless than Jess.” (287) (underlines mine)

Jess meets lobster-claw children near a lake in Africa. Jess persistently reflects on

Africa, the shining lake, lobster-claw children and a shoebill according to Eleanor's narrative. For instance, Eleanor narrates, "There, a lifetime ago, Jess had seen the shoebill and the lobster-claw-children ... The small flat lake shines calm and blue and silver and pink, reflecting the clouds ... (Anna reminds Jess that this is the right word; it is a word she likes) ..." (270) These are impressive and unforgettable memories for her, and she correlates them to Anna. Eleanor analyzes, "Like the shoebill, she [Anna] was of her own kind, allotted her own genus and species." (25) The shoebill is a symbol of a lonely family; "It [shoebill] has own genus, its own species. (3)" The words of "shining lake", "lobster-claw children" and "shoebill" suggest Anna's metaphysical attributions. Drabble tells in an interview how this novel becomes an embodiment of the concerns in her mind as follows:

"I [Drabble] saw the SHSF ¹children (if that's what they really were) in Zambia ... They haunted me ... They seemed an image of something important, but I don't know what. Independence and difference, self-sufficiency and vulnerability – all mixed up together." (Stokes) (underlines mine)

The experience of meeting SHSF children in Africa becomes a springboard for Drabble to write this novel, and she reflects SHSF children in the portrait of Anna; Drabble also attempts to tell the reader "something important". Drabble explains about the significance of the SHSF children: "They stand for difference (as Anna will be different) and a difference that seemed completely accepted by the children." (Margaret Drabble Author Page) The significance of the relation between Anna and African children is shown by means of repeating. From her narrative, it seems that Eleanor undertakes some of Drabble's own voice.

Nevertheless, Eleanor's narrative lacks coherence. She speaks "I [Eleanor] liked to hear her talk about the shining lake, the children and the shoebill ..." (30), on the other hand, she says, "That sounds more like a false memory to me." (291) and claims that Jess has a tendency to search for meaning where there was none before. This quote reveals an ironic tendency that Eleanor's assessment of Jess's conducts is inconsistent and winding through her narrative. Also the next quotes present a characteristic of her narrative from the limited knowledge and understanding of each other as follows, "Jess and I talked a lot. We talked about everything." (31) "Jess and I talked a lot, but we don't tell each other everything. There are things in my life of which she knows nothing, and she has her secrets too." (290) Eleanor's unstable narrative reflects her state of mind; her narrative is related to her mind.

¹ According to National Organization for Rare Disorders, Split Hand Split Foot is a genetic disorder characterized by the complete or partial absence of some fingers or toes, often combined with clefts in the hand or feet.

It leads to jealousy over their unstable relationship.

Throughout the novel, Eleanor unalterably states and praises Jess's independence in raising her disabled child, but, in fact, she does not approve the consequences of it towards Anna. Anna remains with Jess and keeps on depending on her. Along with the forty years of Eleanor's attention to them, the protective mother and the dependent child are aging, and the environment around them is changing, but Anna does not change her life style. Drabble talks about this narrative style as, "I wrote it over a long period. The narrative problem lies with the fact that Anna doesn't develop or change. She lives in the present." (Stoke) (underlines mine) Anna is certainly getting old but cannot have an ordinary life due to her disabilities. It means that Anna's life is unchanging. Because "she lives in the present" and it has a huge effect on Drabble's forms of writing. The stability of Jess and Anna's relationship gives irritation and envy to Eleanor.

Conclusion

The first part of this novel begins with the descriptions about the nature of maternal love with an absence of Eleanor's narrative, who sometimes invents Jess and Anna's life. Here, through Jess's consciousness, Drabble attempts to appeal to the importance of essential human nature to society and attests the truth of Jess's love for Anna. "Through Eleanor, the lives of a group of north London women are documented as they negotiate career highs and lows, motherhood, infidelity, divorce and aging." (*The Independent*) This quote points out that this novel records the problem of typical middle-class woman through Eleanor. Drabble attempts to view a woman who takes over the image of Drabble's typical heroine and her disabled child from outside.

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