

The Assertion of Gender and Identity: A Critique of Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone*

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Abstract

Postmodern ideology is a new perspective to look at in the arena of Gender study. Exploring a long journey of 'womanhood', the post-colonial and post-modern aspects have transformed the notion of 'Gendered female' into the present status of 'New woman'. This new identity asserts to establish the female as 'female' by choice or by the role they 'perform'. Post-modern feminist like Margaret Drabble is quite successful in portraying the pen-picture of these 'New Woman' by giving voice to those 'modern women'; who prefers to be 'woman' as they are or as they like to be, but not by the influence of any social hegemony. Always, having both a career and a family was a very unlikely combination for a woman. The oppressive attitude of a patriarchal society which restrained women's ambitions certainly caused many a problem for independent-minded women. 'The Millstone' of Drabble has reflected such a story of 'oppression' which compels her to lead a life of 'single mother' against all odds of her life. This proposed paper aims to explore the individual identity issues of women based on their performance as human beings generally and especially, as gendered being as perceived by the society they belong to.

Keywords: Gender study, post-colonial, post-modern, 'female' by choice, new woman, patriarchal society, etc.

Struggling for a balanced civilized society, the human being has gone through various phases of development since the inception of human society. Throughout this journey, they have strived in various ways and manners. One such struggle leads the human being to 'power politics' i.e., the superiority of existence in terms of caste, creed, gender, and the like. The weaker section comes in contrast with the stronger ones to establish their homogeneity and mostly, the female side. The introduction of education has enlightened human societies which encouraged having a stable and equal society based on the equal status of all human beings irrespective of class, creed, and gender. Despite that, a particular group of people denied being civilized even after the realization of the need to live in a balanced society. They still practiced to hold superiority of status and impose their ideology on the weaker sections of the society. This cultural and social hegemony leads to movements like the 'gender equality movement' or 'feminist movement' in its various phases like the first wave, second wave, the third wave of feminism, and the like. In the post-modern era of human evolution, feminism has reached its post-modern stage inviting a new ideology that cultivates the idea of 'New Women' holding the side and sense of pro-human, though not anti-male.

According to post-modern feminism, the identity of the human being is dependent on the way they perform as a member of society. Based on their performance, they hold and assert their identity which is rather humanistic than feminist. Literature is the mirror of life, which gives a factual definition of the status of the human being in the contemporary scenario. As is the condition of the female part in the society, it encourages the writer to represent the same reflecting the long story of trauma and victimization upon the weaker section. Judith Butler, in her book 'Gender Trouble' (1990); draws on and criticizes the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan as well as Luce Irigaray stating that what we conventionally regard as 'feminine' is only a reflection of what is constructed as masculine. Those who draw attention towards further development of earlier stages of feminism view postmodern feminism as a mixer of post-structuralism, post-modernism, and French feminism. Post-modern feminism intends to destabilize the patriarchal norms entrenched in societies that have led to gender inequality.

This paper aims to explore the individual identity issues of women based on their performance as human beings generally and as gendered beings as perceived by the society they belong to. While going into details of this, Drabble's protagonist 'Rosamund's' plight of motherhood will be considered to represent her role as a member of society based on her performance. For the assessment of the issues of identity based on the gendered role they perform, some post-modern feminist writers will be taken into consideration, for the proposed study along with their observations and sensibilities they represent. The feminist approach of the 'The Millstone' of Margaret Drabble will be studied minutely and the comprehensive picture of the women from the social, political, economic, religious, and cultural angles will be perceived and interpreted. The methodology for this study will be analytical, evaluative, interpretative, and comparative as well. To state the place of women, the present study will make use of the post-modern outlook of some prominent feminist writers.

Feminist ideas are relevant in each generation of movements in their way. Modernism and post-modernism are not that strange to different phases of feminist movements, as the greater human get attached to science and technology, the lesser becomes the hold of traditional beliefs and ideologies. Although, there are various aspects to be talked about which are truly specific to feminist movements of different ages. If we consider the postmodern feminist era, the common assumption is that the modern professional woman is liberated in all facets of life and this female liberation includes sexual emancipation as well. But things differ in practice or practical life, for example, the pregnancy, of an unmarried woman is still regarded as odd and sin in the modern-day. This very aspect of the so-called liberated women, having different social constraints will be looked upon in this paper, with critical analysis of a character called Rosamund Stacey of 'Millstone' by Margaret Drabble.

Margaret Drabble, born on 5th June 1939; in Sheffield, United States is one of the best feminist writers of all time. She grew up at a time when traditional gender roles still seemed to constrict women to 'the domestic world of the home' and rather denied them a professional life. Having both a career and a family was a very unlikely combination. The oppressive attitude of a patriarchal society which restrained women's ambitions certainly caused many a problem for independent-minded women. Drabble had to witness the resulting frustration and unhappiness in her mother who once an aspiring Cambridge student gave up her dreams of a profession when

getting married. Drabble's mother like most women of her generation thus restricted herself to a traditional gender role, which placed her in a dependent and therefore, socially inferior position to her husband'.

Millstone of Margaret Drabble is a tale of sexual liberation in the swinging of 60th that retains its power to provoke, and lays a milestone, in the field of post-modern feminist study. *The Millstone* is written in the first person, in the voice of Rosamund, the well-brought-up and well-educated daughter of middle-class socialists, researching Elizabeth's sonnet sequences. The story talks about 'life's little ironies' centers on a particularly crucial one 'Rosamund's only sexual encounter results in her becoming pregnant.

Right after the birth of the baby girl, the nursing staff wheeled Rosamund Stacey off to a ward and put her to bed and gave her some sleeping pills, and assured the new mother that she would fall asleep at once and be out till the morning. But the proud mother didn't sleep; instead, she lay awake for two hours, unable to get over her happiness. She fails to describe in words, how she feels after being the mother of a cute baby girl. Rosamund was a woman and she played that role naturally and spontaneously, without anybody's help of any sort; both mental and physical. She was a complete woman and to prove her womanhood, she refused help even from her friend Lydia or Sister Beatrice or her parents or brother. She enjoyed the whole period of pregnancy until the child was born, and even her stay in the hospital was quite entertaining, fortified by the superior beauty and intelligence of her child.

These are the parallel experiences of Rosamund, along with motherhood, but, honestly and without harming others, she handled everything very carefully and skillfully, despite having a phobia for any medical treatment, injections, etc. Very skillfully and successfully, she gave birth to her baby, without the presence of anybody, of her family members and near and dear ones to boost up her and compensate the presence of a father of the newborn.

Rosamund Stacey preferred and decided to go with the nature and the natural process of womanhood of which procreation is an integral part. She dared to minimize the social rules and regulations in this process, which are not at all common phenomena to humans as social beings. From this, it seems Rosamund is a very strong lady and she wants to prove her feminist identity by any means without paying any heed to the social norms.

Her approach to life is not only against the system but with the greater system that is Nature. She is rather humanistic in her feministic approach to deal with life. The protagonist wants to show the world that, there is nothing wrong to accept the natural process. She has adopted the way, she liked to or what she felt she should do in the path of her life. If she is a woman, she has those organs which contribute to the procreation system of human, and she has just done her job as a woman, rather performed her role of womanhood. She has asserted her identity as a woman by accepting this process and simply nothing more than that.

Rosamund Stacey, the unmarried mother in her hospital bed, just after the childbirth when the nurse gives a medicine, she was expecting rest of her body in terms of a drowsy sleep after the childbirth, but she could not because, she was so filled with so many emotions, that is, love for the newborn and completeness within herself that she could not sleep. It reveals how happy the new

mother is, within herself! Margaret Drabble manages to describe the image of a modern woman in the most convincing details and full accuracy in the character of Rosamund. The protagonist was never in doubt about what to do or what not to do. There were many challenges in front of her while giving birth to her dream child, but she acted as a role model in women's struggle for choice; to live the life they want and decide on their own life.

The concept of 'family' has been rapidly changing over time. Nowadays, science and technology, have been changing the idea of the smallest group of a society called 'family' which earlier consisted of parents, grandparents, and children, now, transformed to mother-child or father-child like members. Father, though biologically identical in the process of procreation, does not play any role or in fact, can say that he is quite alien to the stages of development of a fetus in a mother's womb. It can be compared to language acquisition and language learning in that sense. Motherhood can be acquired but to be a 'father' one has to learn things or have to develop instincts extensively. So, what Rosamund Stacey has done to have the baby is truly natural, by probing that to perform the role of gender, it hardly needs the help of the opposite one, which traditionally taken as exigent. In that case, if Rosamund, decided to be a 'single mother', and dared to take the responsibility of the baby, it is not only a feminist, rather a humanistic approach. Postmodern feminism encourages humanistic ideas which try to establish an equal opportunity to all human being irrespective of gender, caste, and creed.

In near future or soon, a parent would be synonymous with 'Mother' or 'father' only, if we see the latest development of modern and post-modern familial values. As men have been on the way to progress, they have less popularity or less value of familial relations. They don't give much value to the co-existence of family members. They prefer to earn their bread, cook for themselves, do not like to share rooms, and many more. In that phase of life, there is nothing strange, if a woman like Rosamund, decides to be a 'single mother' even without the knowledge of her parents in whose house she was residing for long.

Above all, the plight of the protagonist was not under any compulsion, but, it was a choice of the courageous lady, who has English style not offend or disturb others at any cost. Even she did not inform her parents of her approaching motherhood. She wrote a letter to her elder sister but she was not expecting any help or assistance from her.

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