



The Ambivalence of a Mother in an Urban-world in Margaret Drabble's *The Needle's Eye*

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ABSTRACT

*This paper is an attempt to reassess English novelist Margaret Drabble in relation to women's issues. She has usually been termed as a writer who presents an unequivocal stance towards feminism, especially to the institution of motherhood. Rose Vassiliou, the protagonist of *The Needle's Eye*, is a mother trapped between the biological need and societal demands. The experience of mothering is impaired by the over-invasive patriarchy, which questions and condemns female self-efficacy and self-assertion. Thus a deep sense of despair and futility of life anguishes Rose. But by the end of the novel, she overcomes this sense of alienation and, moves towards achieving her goals in life. Drabble resolves the conflict by reiterating faith in individual reasoning.*

KEY WORDS

Performativity, Factice, Acculturation, Vagaries, Kitsch

The institution of motherhood underwent enormous changes due to the advent of feminist movements. Motherhood involved psychological and societal complexities. The patriarchal institution made motherhood a complicated task. Even though changes are possible at the psychological and cultural levels, the biological potential of women's reproductive capacity, which differentiates women from men, is unlikely to undergo a change. Trapped between the biological and societal levels to the mother's role, women realize that this role thrust upon them by the patriarchy, deprived them of the actual experience of mothering. The ideal mother image expected by the society has literally marred the actual experience of giving birth and nurturing a child.

There is a huge gap between the reality of women's lives and the mother-role to which they try to conform. Feminists like, Adrienne Rich questions the institution of motherhood. Though she believes motherhood bestows women with the power of reproduction, patriarchy has ensured that "all women – shall remain under male control" (Rich, 13). Rich's distinction is the difference between the experience of mothering and the institution of motherhood. While the institution of motherhood is natural and universal, it is promoted as the only and compulsory social institution by patriarchy.

Women are thus put in an ambivalent situation making them realize that their reproductive capacities shackle them within patriarchy and also place them beyond it. The social construction of motherhood restricted women in many of the domains yet begetting children provided growth and paved way for new perspectives. Nancy Chodorow, in her book, *The Reproduction of Mothering* argues that mothering was reproduced, "both at the level of social organization and at the level of individual development by a complex system that depended upon the family for its continuity." (Chodorow, 171). She points to family as the institution within which the economic and social requirements of the whole society are met by creating appropriate personality structures for the roles to be played within it. Judith Butler, whose work on performativity and gender has been deeply influenced by Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex*, explains the difference between sex and gender:

" 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.' Simone de Beauvoir's formulation distinguishes sex from gender and suggests that gender is an aspect of identity gradually acquired. ... sexis understood to be the invariant, anatomically distinct, and factice aspects of the female body, whereas gender is the cultural meaning and form that body acquires, the

variable modes of that body's acculturation. With the distinction intact, it is no longer possible to attribute the values or social functions of women to biological necessity, and neither can we refer meaningfully to natural or unnatural gendered behavior: all gender is, by definition, unnatural" (Butler 35).

Sex and gender dichotomy thus brings out the difference between being born as a male and becoming a man and being born as a female and becoming a woman. Similarly, one is not born a mother, but becomes a mother. Motherhood is thus more than the biological process of reproduction. As an institution it involves customs, traditions, beliefs, attitudes, rules and other norms of rearing a child.

Margaret Drabble, one of the most accomplished British authors, in most of her novels scrutinizes one specific female role – motherhood. *The Needle's Eye*, regarded by many readers as Drabble's finest novel, talks about motherhood and the complexities that lead to self-assertion and self-identity of the protagonist Rose Vassiliou, a rich young woman who compulsively divests herself of the benefits of her inheritance and who enjoys her flight into the lower classes.

Rose, a pale, timid girl, creates a tabloid sensation by marrying out of class. Her choice is the disreputable, seedy, sexy Christopher Vassiliou of Greek immigrants whose pragmatic financial dealings are not solidly within the boundaries of the law. Rose seeks to escape from the evils of wealth through Christopher, one of the downtrodden. Much to her consternation, however, Christopher is not a joyful man. He detests poverty and associates it, not with virtue but with humiliation and deprivation, both of which he has endured. Christopher's dreams to make big of him is strengthened by the birth of three children, for whom he seeks only the best.

Rose's war on wealth is nothing but perverse self-destructiveness for Christopher. He vents his anger through physical abuse. Rose is equally adamant in the protection of her children's future. To her mind, "the best" means freedom from possessions. Rose and Christopher become figures of tabloid fantasy in the urban world, but for a dramatic event like their divorce case.

Rose is working out her divorce settlement when she meets Simon. Simon is introduced to the reader on the same night that he is introduced to Rose; the reader first sees him in a store, buying liquor. Simon feels estranged from the lower-class types (who frequent and staff the store). Soon thereafter, this isolation is established as a sharp discontinuity in Simon's life, for he has risen from these ranks. He has been pushed upward by a mother who was embarrassed by the meanness of her lower-class life and was determined to see her son prosper in life.

Ironically, the essential gap in his mother's life is also left unfulfilled in Simon's, that is, the need for warmth and affection. Simon tried to marry into an inheritance of warmth and wealth through a good-natured girl of the comfortable upper middle-class, Julie Phillips. Their marriage however, only revealed her fear and insecurity, her essential coldness. What Simon has mistaken for warmth is merely superficial brightness, a by-product of Phillip's affluence.

Rose and Simon have attempted to gain what each personally lacked through marriage, as if one could graft onto oneself a human capacity with a wedding ring. Such marriages are doomed for failure. It also doomed Rose's attempt to meet human needs. She has given a huge portion of her inheritance to a schoolhouse in a lonely, little-known part of Africa. Within months, the school is demolished in the chaos of a civil war, along with approximately one hundred children. Rose does not attempt to deny the futility of what she has done.

Rose and Simon strike up a professional acquaintance, casually it seems, because Christopher has begun some devious maneuvers to get his children away from Rose. As he becomes increasingly involved in helping Rose, Simone realizes that he is in love with her. Rose reveals but a few of her feelings on this issue, but does indicate the joy she takes in his company. While Rose and Simon are running around Christopher, who appears to be in the process of abducting the children and taking them out of England, Simon tells Rose that, they were at liberty, he would marry her. He blurts out this sentiment as they are walking in a woodland setting. The moment of his revelation finds them in sudden confrontation with a dead stoat, hanging grotesquely in front of them, as a dried-up little corpse. According to the narrator, this is a "warning" to Rose and Simon.

Rose is portrayed as a woman struggling with the heritage of her family. Her relationship with her parents is tumultuous and she tries to establish a life for herself that is independent of them. She does not long for a grand romantic life, but hopes to build simple and comfortable life in which she takes pride. Her identity falls under crisis when she is unable to make sense of what she is, as a person and where she has come from. She also refuses the tangible evidence of her family heritage and, as a result, accepts her inheritance. She struggles to find a more natural connection between herself and her parentage.

Drabble portrays Rose as a woman with sheer courage and strong will power, who leads a life giving no heed to money. She also nurses her three children with the little amount she tries to fetch here and there. Her understanding of her situation clearly depicts her ideology of being aware of the conditions pertaining to her familial crisis. She is in no way gives up her own ideals for helping people. She feels that money becomes the subject of survival, is supposed to be serving the cause of someone else's survival purpose.

Delving deep into her action of giving away the only asset in the form of money, to the development of a school in Africa, is rather seen as an indictment of Rose by her husband and her parents. But for her, it is an act of regaining her lost identity in the first place. Being born in an upper class family, she has received unimaginable luxury during her childhood and youthful age before marriage. She does not know what suffering or pain is. But it is only after marriage and bearing three children; she gets accustomed to poverty and realizes the pain undergone by the poor. She does not believe in the notion of charity that mandatorily should begin at home.

Motherhood plays a vital role in Rose's transformation from a woman confined to the rural cocoons of her poverty to a woman showing a gesture of social goodness breaking out from the cocoon of selfishness in an urban world. The significant point in this transformation is her role of motherhood she plays in her home with her children. Being a mother, she is able to visualize

the traumatic situation of her children afflicted with poverty and left behind with no proper education and nutrition just because of their economic conditions. She also understands that a mother's duty is to dole out everything equally to children at the right time.

Her selfless attitude that is honed by her motherhood makes her look at the poor children of Africa to be her own children. Much influenced by her nanny, once again a motherly figure; she is able to give away her survival money for others survival. Though criticized and abused by Christopher regarding her generous act, Rose stays very much self-asserted and strong-willed in not regretting her gesture. This entirely changes her personality and identity. Seen as a poor lower-class housewife, she venerates herself to be an icon of a sacrificial mother.

An individual cannot fully develop their personality just by fighting their own nature. Drabble makes a reference to Rose's innate nature as a way of explaining her behavior or the path she has taken in life. Rose laments the 'complete and hopeless irredeemability of her own nature' (TNE, 47). It allows her to impulsively confide in Simon her personal problems even without much acquaintance.

Rose doesn't fight her nature; instead she settles and tries to go along with it and tries to link her state of poverty as a joy that is exclusively meant for mothers. She tries to take the poverty of her life not as a serious issue, but just feels it for its purpose. As the narrator states:

"She was settled now, and her nature, though it saddened her at times as it had done this evening. She had on the whole so accepted and understood that she felt she could look at its vagaries quite equably, she would watch it panicking over the choice between taxis and buses with something like a mental amusement. She was what she was. She had learned to go with it." (TNE, 53).

She looks at her problems with a sense of ease. Her maturity gradually develops throughout the course of her poverty-stricken life. Only with such kind of maturity, a woman can relate to her problems in a lighter vein. She does not want to complicate her state of poverty with her motherhood. Poverty for her is a temporary phenomenon that can be overcome with self-assertion and self-confidence. Being a mother, she naturally gets herself fine-tuned to the situation that she is living. She is also aware that she is surrounded by problems like insufficient money, her divorce, her children, her parents' rejection of her and also her involvement with Simon.

Rose, unlike many women, shows maturity and self-assertion that will not allow her to succumb to problems that surround her. She bravely confronts her situation though it is unfamiliar and hostile. The house where she lives has many issues and irregularities. Indulging in ways to mend the irregularities, she learnt to survive and develop a sense of hope. The narrative states, "the holes when filled did not look very elegant, but looking at her work, she began to feel that there was at least a possibility that she might learn" (TNE,62). She deliberately chooses an unassuming life-style contrary to her childhood.

As the narrative puts it, "her alliances with the objects around her has radiated her, transformed her" (TNE,63). She is grown into a woman first and now a mother. She tries to adjust to the things according to her likes. By doing so, she is quite at peace, and her entire level of confidence is raised to a greater magnitude. The situation does not threaten, rather teaches her to persevere for what she aims.

"In contrast to the sterile environment that she was brought up in, she constructed a livable space rejecting her nurturing home and ostentatious social privilege." (Alka Singh, 86). In this process, what is more poignant is her success. She succeeds step by step in transforming her house into her own. She blissfully states, "I carved it out, I created it by faith, I believed in it, and then very slowly, it began to exist. And now it exists. It's like God. It requires faith" (TNE,44). She develops a strong sense of faith that she cannot be uprooted from the house that she has built and she sees her house as a protection for her children more than her own pride in building it.

Her defiance towards her parents and her husband is in contrast with the intensity of unmatched love that she has on her children. Her three children, Konstantin, Marcus and Maria become the source of her existence. She refuses to apply for maintenance from Christopher and takes up some odd jobs to bring up her children. Though she is innately helpful, strong and determined, it is her children and her motherhood, which makes her more sensible, responsible and mature. Her children provide her solace even when she is flustered with her tumultuous divorce.

Rose is stunned and shocked when Christopher demands the custody of their three children through court. Children are the only asset she possesses and she knows that Christopher, who does not care for his children earlier, will not be able to keep them happy. She feels that she can bring up the children even though she has little money. Her anxiety increases even by the thought that her children would go with Christopher. She does everything possible to retain her children. She goes to the library to look upon matters dealing with the custody of children. Fear grips her; she knows people will not understand her rationale for keeping her children with her even when she is left with meager means. She is proud of her three children for their achievements and talents. She is especially proud of Konstantin and also worried for him the most. She knows that Marcus and Maria will survive. She says:

"They were adaptable, they were born survivors. But Konstantin, although he could be difficult enough on a trivial level, had truly alarming capacity for recognizing, seizing, embracing, enduring and surmounting a real sorrow... Time alone, doubtless would show, which of these children had been the most damaged, most affected." (TNE, 155).

As a mother, she understands her children completely. She knows each of their nature and their individuality. Konstantin was the one whom she worries about a lot. She feels sorry for distancing herself from him because of the worries she had over her divorce. She regrets for not going to his bedroom to see him sleep. But she says that she loves him passionately and the gap does bother her.

For the first time in her life, Rose feels defeated. Her every attempt to get rid of her children from the clutches of her husband goes in vain. She remorsefully remarks to Simon that "I must learn to give up. It's so hard, it's so hard, but there's no way. He is their father after all" (TNE, 279). She feels that she has selfishly denied her husband parental love and so selflessly

offers the children to him. This sacrifice of hers is the ultimate one. She is ready to give away the most precious possession of her life, the children. Here again she shows her self-assertion by consoling herself to overcome such a bitter reality.

But she once again feels defeated and starts contemplating on every action that led to her agony. Rose at first contemplates on her act of giving up all the materialistic values of life demanded by the urban world and finds the real vision. She then has a conflicting thought in her mind, a peculiar division of the mind, which refers to her division of the self. Alka Singh says, it is the division of the self “which did not obliterate but collided and co-existed with each other.” (TNE, 94).

The conflict between Rose, the martyr and Rose, the urban mother is heart rendering, full of pathos and anguish. Torn between the two, she ultimately gets rid of the vision of renunciation and becomes a mother. She becomes a more matured woman with pragmatic and logical views to confront her own unrealistic urban desires and overcomes them.

By the end of the novel, Rose takes a trip to her family home, and there she tries to uncover a piece of that ‘natural connection’ that she has been trying so desperately to feel. Simon accompanies her and he also understands that disconnection between Rose and her heritage. He wonders, “where had she come from, how had it happened? People do not grow out of nothing; they do not spring from the earth. Somewhere in this house, in these two disagreeable ageing people... lay the grounds for her fantastic notions” (TNE, 301).

When she departs she feels that she is not any closer to discovering that natural connection in the urban world, but she has come to understand quite a bit about who she is as an individual. “Her memories enable her to grasp the way in which the major ingredients of her childhood – her cold, aloof, wealthy parents and her obsessively religious, superstitious governess – combined to influence her personality development, and she no longer feels that her character is a freak accident.” (TNE, 70). Rose finally begins to feel like a complete person in the modern world.

In the novel’s final tableau, Rose looks at a vandalized lion outside a second-rate British edifice, the Alexandra Palace. The lion’s plaster head is broken, revealing a hollow inside. It has been spray-painted red with the name of a local gang, but Rose decides that she likes it. Although beginning life as an anonymous, mass-produced piece of kitsch, the lion has been worn into something unique: it had weathered into identity. As Drabble explains in her novel, “Mass-produced it had been, but it had weathered into identity. And this she hoped, for every human soul.” (TNE, 35). Rose’s final wish accepts the uniqueness of life, the beauty of its mere being.

She rejects the vision of life that continually holds up to an intellectual ideal, by which standards the lion, like her life, is an awful mess. Drabble feels that individuals must embrace their innate natures so that, as Moran says, “the personality will bloom and bear fruits.” (Moran, 38). This is something that becomes necessary step to be taken for an individual to truly reach psychological maturation. According to Drabble, an individual behavior cannot be judged too harshly if they are simply following the dictates of their true nature. “Just as poor environmental conditions can impede the growth of a plant, so unhealthy familial and social conditions can deflect a person’s proper development.” (TNE, 39).

At the conclusion of the novel, there is a final moment of personal acceptance and psychological maturation for Rose. Rose spends much of her time in the novel struggling with her sense of personal identity, and she continually rebuffs the attempts at reconciliation made by her former husband, Christopher, because she does not wish to see her sense of self lost in the cohesive unit of family, but Rose sees the allure of being part of family and she doesn’t want to lose her motherhood which leads to the ultimate reunion with Christopher and her three children, Konstantine, Marcus and Maria. Thus, it is motherhood that engenders Rose into a self-assertive and strong individual rather than her ideals in the urban world.

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