

A Feminist Interpretation of *A Summer Bird-Cage* by Margaret Drabble

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Abstract—The article focuses on the feminist interpretation of the women images in *A Summer Bird-Cage* by British female writer Margaret Drabble. Drabble shows special concern for women's, especially intellectual women's fate and living circumstances in the patriarchal society. Based on the feminism and historical and social background of feminist movements, the article analyzes intellectual young women's struggle to control the fates of their own in terms of marriage and love, cause and family as well as the economic independence and spiritual independence. Through the life experience of women characters, Drabble exposes females' predicament and dilemma in reality. It is truly hard for women to fulfill the social and domestic duties imposed on them. It is not wise for women to give up their own cause for the sake of family, while the society doesn't make it easy for them to stave off marriage and live on their own. To be independent, therefore, is a prevailing slogan for feminists but an everlasting question for women to find feasible solutions.

Index Terms—feminism, marriage, love, cause, independence

I. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Drabble is the prominent representative of the contemporary British female writers. As a prolific and assiduous writer, she enjoys a worldwide reputation for her special concern for the intellectual women's fates and circumstances in the male-dominated society. Margaret has published eighteen novels, ten short stories, and four plays, six books of criticism, five editions and innumerable articles. Her works have been translated into sixteen languages.

Drabble zeroed in on the intellectual women since her first novel *A Summer Bird-Cage*, which is indispensably related with her life experience and education background. Drabble was born in a highly intellectual family, whose father was an advocate and novelist, mother was a boarding school teacher, and her older sister A. S. Byatt was the famous novelist as well as the critic. Drabble received a major scholarship to Cambridge, where she was awarded a starred first. She joined the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1960, and she married her ex-husband. During the first marriage, she was such a totally devoted and scarified wife that she even gave up several job offers. However, they got divorced 15 years later. Drabble then married her second husband, the biographer Michael Holroyd. Drabble insists on using her family name Drabble in these two marriages, which symbolizes her steadfast pursuit of independence in every aspects. Unwilling to be a desperate housebound woman, Drabble takes up writing and expresses her insights and enlightenments as a woman, a wife and a literary worker. To reward her contributions to the English literature, Margaret Drabble was presented with an E. M. Forster Award from the National Institute and American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1973.

Drabble wrote *A Summer Bird-Cage* one year after her graduation from Cambridge. The title was quoted from John Webster's play *The White Devil*, 'Tis just like *A Summer Bird-Cage* in a garden: the birds that are without despair to get in, and the birds within despair and are in a consumption for fear they shall never get out". Drabble chose the title because it vividly distilled Drabble's thoughts on marriage and exposed women's awkward situation in marriage. The heroine Sarah Bennett graduated from Oxford for a very short time with a "lovely, shiny useless new degree" (Drabble, 1963, p.7). As a well-educated young woman not finding a career yet, Sarah is at a loss not knowing what she wants to do with her life in the future. She is at the crossroad and has to make a decision for her future, that is, to pursue her personal need for artistic self- fulfillment or public need to fulfill the prescribed role as wife and mother. Her advanced education, her life values and her consciousness of independence reject the stereotypes imposed on women in the male-dominated society. Especially after witnessing the lives of her sister and her friend, Sarah determines to identity herself as a new woman, not sacrificing her independence and talents to anything else. Sarah is the typical representative of young intellectual women in the modern society. It is even harder and of greater significance for the intellectual women like Sarah to balance marriage and love, cause and family, economic independence and spiritual independence. Reading and interpreting the novel will definitely give enlightenments to young female intellectuals as to how to solve the dilemma in real life.

II. FEMINISM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON DRABBLE

Drabble wrote *A Summer Bird-Cage* one year after her graduation from Cambridge. Two factors deeply influence her creation. First, the prevailing feminist movement in the mid-twentieth century inspired Drabble, and it was when the so-called "the second wave" of feminist movement was in progress. Second, Simone de Beauvoir, the French leading

feminist, profoundly influenced her. She once confirmed that during her university life at Cambridge she read Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, and it gave her insights and triggered her exploration of women's circumstances in society.

It is well acknowledged that Feminism is a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights for women. The words "feminism" and "feminist" appeared in 1910 in the United States, and it first appeared in France and the Netherlands in 1872. At the different historical moments, in different cultures and countries, feminists around the world have had different causes and goals.

The modern western feminist movements are divided into three "waves", each focusing on different aspects of the feminist issues. The first wave took place during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which included women's suffrage movements and promotion of women's right to vote. The second wave began from the 1960s, which was connected with women's liberation movement, to fight for social and legal equality for women. The third wave, beginning since 1990s, continued to the perceived failures of second-wave feminism.

When the second wave went on like a raging fire, Margaret Drabble then was a young educated woman who was willing to accept the advanced concepts and remained sensitive to the social issues. Beginning in the early 1960s, the second-wave feminist movement continues and coexists with third-wave feminism. Second wave feminism is largely concerned with the issues of equality other than the right of vote. It is true that some social improvement has been made in terms of women's rights. For instance, Coverture was abolished. Coverture had been enshrined in the common law of England for several centuries and throughout most of the 19th century, which regulated that a woman's legal rights and obligations were subsumed by those of her husband. There is no denying that the mid of the twentieth century witnessed the promotion of women's social status. However, women still lacked significant rights in quite a lot of European countries. For instance, in France married women didn't have the right to work without their husband's permission in 1965. This social fact was chosen by Drabble and well presented in *A Summer Bird-Cage* through Sarah's friend Gill's story. Therefore, feminists continued to fight for voting rights. They continued to fight for the reform of family laws to get rid of the control from their husbands.

Second-wave feminists take inequalities of women's culture and politic as inextricably linked. The feminist activist Carol Hanisch coined "The Personal is Political" and it became synonymous with the second wave. French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir provided a Marxist solution and an existentialist view on many of the questions of feminism with the publication of *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*) in 1949. The book expressed feminists' sense of injustice.

The Second Sex provides a theoretical basis to Margaret Drabble's feminist thought and it runs through *A Summer Bird-Cage*. Beauvoir analyzes the women's existence from the point of view of destiny, history and myth that affect Margaret's thoughts and motives. Till today, *The Second Sex* is generally regarded as fundamental to the development of the women's movement of the 1960s and also the discipline of feminist studies. Drabble once mentioned that *the Second Sex* seemed like a wonderful material and so important to her as a person. It was material that nobody had used she could use and nobody had ever used as far as she would use it. She admitted that she was thrilled to be writing a kind of female voice that hadn't been in literature before and participated in and gave support to feminists in the 1960s, the second wave of the feminist activity (Sadler, 1986, p78).

III. INTERPRETATION OF *A SUMMER BIRD-CAGE* IN THE SENSE OF FEMINISM

A Summer Bird-Cage is the first novel by Margaret Drabble. With the relatively simple plots, it tells the heroine Sarah's life experience after her graduation shortly from Oxford. As a well-educated woman, Sarah expected to own a dream life with a satisfying job, friendship and love. She looked forward to get into a new phase in life and enjoy equality with men in society just like when she was in the university. However, the fact is that she even couldn't afford her own life during one year's working in London. The unhappy marriages of her sister and friend showed her the fact that the perfect cause and love or marriage seemed out of reach. It turned out to her that life after graduation for the women like her was sliding back. Marriage seems to be a birdcage for a woman with pursuits. Sarah was confronted with the dilemmas because of her awareness of dream and reality. She made every effort to put off the time to enter the cage although she made it clear that she would get married sooner or latter.

A. *Marriage and Love*

Sarah is trying to figure out whether women should marry a man for love or money. Her elder sister Louise married Stephen, a successful and wealthy novelist with four novels to his credit. In Sarah's eyes, Stephen is a very sneering man, a social satirist who maintains that "everyone is either ridiculously rich, or poor, or mediocre or ridiculously classy. He leaves no possibility of being in the right, unless he means to leave himself as a standard, which would be logical, as he is almost entirely negative" (Drabble, 1963, p.7). Sarah cannot figure out Louise, with unbelievable beauty, should marry a man like Stephen.

However, it gradually dawns on Sarah that Louise and Stephen married not for love but for the sake of marriage. They married not because they regarded each other as soul mates but for their personal motives. The true relationship between Louise and Stephen exposed the nature of marriage that was out of Sarah's expectation. Louise deliberately married Stephen for money. Before and after the mercenary marriage with Stephen, Louise maintains an affair with a sexy handsome actor. Although Louise loves him very much, she shall never marry him. For her, money overweighs

love. Meanwhile, Stephen married Louise only because Louise was a perfect wife with all the obvious qualities that Stephen wouldn't marry without, beauty, popularity, and even notoriety. Virtually, Stephen married her perhaps because "she never looked ridiculous", and "perhaps he wanted a wife to be figurehead to his triumphal car, a public admiring ornament to his house" (Drabble, 1963, p.7).

Through Louise and Stephen's marriage, Drabbles aims to convey that marriage is definitely not the ideal destination for women if they marry for the sake of something other than love. Louise married for money instead of love and sacrificed her truly happiness. Her pragmatism flounders and mixes up about her life. For a woman as independent as Sarah who does not want to jump into the cage without self-consciousness, when faced with the cage, Sarah tries to explore a new way to gain a happy ending---stay away from marriage to avoid the same fate with Louise and Gill. It is an extreme thought that feminists hold during the second wave.

B. *Cause and Family*

Whether a woman should give up her cause and devote wholeheartedly to the family is the other subject the novel discusses. In another word, which matters more for a woman, cause or family.

It seems indisputably reasonable for a man to put all his energy into his cause, but unforgivably blame for a woman to do so. Stephen does his business all the time and even regards Louise as his assistant. "He had his thing about having to be quiet when he worked---not that he was working at anything, except this film script. He kept ringing up his director in Paris. I used to ring people up all over the country, everyone I could think of. When I was alone in the evenings, people were always ringing him up too, business people and publishers and tobacco factory people about shares. They used to think I was his secretary and give me message" (Drabble, 1963, p.184). Women are stuck in the dilemma: on the one hand, they are drowned in the trivial and even unnoticeable drudgery at home, taking care of children and husband all day long; on the other hand, they suffer from the ideology and social judgment that they don't work and entirely rely on their husband. Apparently, women fall victim to the prescribed roles imposed on them by the male-dominated society. Although they have done endless housework, not having a cause deprives of their economic status at home as well as the spiritual independence as a human being in society.

Unlike Louise, Sarah's friend Gill chooses to marry for love. However, according to Sarah's observation, Gill's marriage based on love is not necessary a happy ending for women. Instead, Gill's marriage serves as a warning for young girls to keep distance from marriage. Gill gets married as soon as she graduates from university. Gill and her husband are considered a lovely couple and Sarah believes that they would never to be apart in the world. There is not doubt that Sarah is appalled to hear the news of their divorce. Gill tells Sarah that they get along well with each other at first. Then, they start to quarrel over the stupid things like money and food. Gradually, the problem intensifies: at home, her husband forbids her to go out to work but require her to stay at home and take care of the family. "Tony made me feel so useless. Once I said to him, 'I feel like a still life, I want to do something', and he gave me a little bit of canvas and a few paints and said, 'you paint me then.' It was awful, I was so offended, it was just the same as when my mother used to give me a handkerchief to iron with my toy iron on washday, so I could be grown up like her... It used not to be matter but it dose now. Everything matters so much" (Drabble, 1963, p.38).

For Tony, he takes it for granted that he owns the central power at home and that everything, including his wife, should be under his control. As a man, he thinks he has been granted the right to play the role as lord and master; hence it is out of question that he should own the absolute right to issue commands. The worse situation is that Tony doesn't have the capability of supporting the family on his own. Gill often suffers from material difficulties apart from the spiritual oppression. They do not even have enough money to maintain their normal life. Even under the indigent circumstance Gill is still not allowed to go out working. Once a promising college graduate, Gill is now trapped in the miserable marriage, like a bird locked up in the cage and lost wings and unable to fly in free sky. Gill's experiences expel Sarah to wonder whether love is reliable. When true love fades away in the domestic trivia, marriage is nothing but a jail for women. Gill's marriage failed because her husband owned the speech of power in the family. Her husband is superior to her only because he is a man. It was Tony's male chauvinism that broke their marriage. His esteem and arrogance forced Gill to give up her cause but cannot secure the family on his own. It is truism to say that security can be found by a stable cause rather than an unstable marriage.

C. *Dependence and Independence*

To be independent or not is always a question for women. Both Louise's marriage for money and Gill's marriage for love failed, which gives Sarah a second thought on the nature of marriage and women's circumstances in the patriarchal society. No matter for what reasons women marry, marriage seems like a cage to lock up women and trap them in despair and deprive of their freedom. Feminists strongly suggest the runaway from the cage of marriage and family, just like Nora in *A Doll's House*. Economic independence is the first step while the spiritual independence follows after.

Witnessing what happened to Louise and Gill, Sarah thinks twice on her future life. She values her independence and determines to seek her self-fulfillment rather than bound in the routine trivia in daily life. Sarah observes the lives of others in her circles carefully before making her choice concerning her future life. In perception of the marriage and the relationship of her parents, sister, and her friends, Sarah realized how desperate females' fate are if she can't escape from the 'cage' of marriage or the traditional relationship between men and women. Marriage, no matter it is out of love or for the sake of money, no matter one autonomously chooses or one is passively chosen, seems a woeful destiny for

women. Sarah becomes sick of the idea of getting married. "The principle of marriage not binds those who don't want to be bound" (Drabble, 1963, p.130). She does not want to be bound in the married life and lost her self-independence, both economically and spiritually.

Feminists strongly recommend women to run away from 'cage' but don't foresee the prospect after runaway. People applaud when Nora slammed door and bid farewell to the past life but no one predicts what might happen to Nora after hence. Sarah decided to reject marriage, the reality is that single girls' situation is even worse for they are seen as poorer than those who get married. In the male-dominated society, the self-independence and self-realization are maintained at the expense of their self-abstinence and their self-restraint.

Eventually Sarah finds a job at BBC, a decent job that enables to support her life and pursue her dream of becoming a writer. By Staving off marriage, Sarah secured her economic independence and spiritual independence temporarily. However, there is still a long way to go for Sarah to fulfill her self-realization and achieve the dual selves. Sarah knows that she shall get married sooner or later, but she just deliberately delay her entering into the birdcage and be herself as she can be when she has the chance to do so.

Drabble discloses young women's struggle and predicament in reality and provides a comparatively mild way to ease the conflicts instead of solving the contradictories women confront. What marriage and love, cause and family, economic and spiritual independence mean to women? Questions are unanswered as to whether marriage is happy destination or despairing cage, and cause is an outlet for women to secure independence or another trap to fulfill social duties. It may be the reason why the feminists are still working for the welfare of women and call for the equal rights with men.

IV. CONCLUSION

Margaret Drabble's *A Summer Bird-Cage* mirrors women's, especially the intellectual women's predicament in the patriarchal society. The heroine Sarah is a young and talented girl with self-consciousness. In perception of the awkward situation her sister and friend face, She becomes aware of her values and cherishes her independence. She is on the way to realize her dream life although she cannot predict the future waiting ahead of her.

There is no denying that women are playing increasingly significant roles in the modern society. It is not rare to find some excellent intellectual women excel in their works and perform far more outstanding than their male peers. People call them professional lady and praise them for their excellence performance at work but judge them for their failure to fulfill domestic duties. At the same time, there are quite a number of educated young women who believe that wealthy and successful husband make their dream life. Despite the education and professional knowledge they receive from college, they are willing to give up their cause and find a profitable marriage a satisfactory harbor, no matter they feel truly happy or not.

To give up cause for marriage is pathetic for women, and to give up marriage for cause is not necessarily a good choice either. How to balance marriage, family and cause is an everlasting problem difficult to find answers. To pursue social values and personal values requires women to be powerful enough to fulfill their multi-roles as daughters, wives, mothers, employees or employers.

Margaret Drabble set a brand new image of liberated woman like Sarah. She is alive to the predicament women are trapped in marriage, and she has the courage to question the man-made authority and get ride of the traditional duties imposed on women. She is sensitive enough to observe life and owns ability to act upon her belief. No matter what Sarah might encounter in the future, at least she enjoys the happiness of being herself and embraces the freedom to choose what life she wants to have.

Sarah is the representative of New Women who own the courage to live for their own interests and benefits, and the courage to pursue the freedom and independence by all means. For Sarah, A New Woman will not lose herself and be bound to a marriage. It is not wise for a woman to give up her own cause and social values to spend all her energy to family and trivia in daily life. Cause is a stable support for a woman, which is reliable and can bring the sense of security. In consequence, Sarah devotes herself to her career and keeps distance with marriage.

Considering that the novel was created in the 1963 and Margaret Drabble was influenced by feminist theories, it is evident that staving off marriage is the best possible choice for young intellectual women like Sarah. In the modern society, it is worth praising for women to take a job and pursue the independence in society and family. However, to stave off marriage is an extreme behavior, which is revolutionary but not that wise. To be independent or not to be, therefore, is a prevailing slogan for feminists but an everlasting question for women to find feasible solutions.

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