

Relationship between the analysed books and feminism english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



CHAPTER 5

Margaret Drabble has been regarded a feminist writer since the beginning of feminine criticism. Indeed, she was writing feminist books even before feminist theory had been formally uttered. She was gathering the anxieties and realizations of the female voices around her, but her work cannot be simply considered as feminist:" I do call myself a feminist. I am a feminist. I'm not the kind of feminist that some feminists are, but I would say that I am a feminist. I want to get that clear. I'm not an anti-feminist or a post-feminist; I am a feminist. But I don't like some of the feminist approaches to my work because they tell me I should have been something else, and you shouldn't do that to people" (The Oklahoma Review, 2000). Her resentment to the feminist movement is summed up in her recall of an encounter with one of the writers associated to the woman's movement. Drabble had been writing for decades about women's problems and perspectives, gathering the evidence of fellow women that were discussing feminist issues long before the movement had any public visibility, allowing for their voices to be heard in the early British society of the 1960's:" Those kitchen table conversations were like cells of a bigger movement and some people went on and joined the bigger movement and became spokespeople in it. But I have felt very annoyed with the woman's movement as well. At one point an American woman novelist and her agent came over to England and invited me out to a smart luncheon at one of the most expensive restaurants in London, and I realized they were trying to get me to like her novel and give it a quote in England where she hadn't yet been launched. To me that was not what the women's movement was about. It was about thinking and being, not about

selling books. I think that's when I began to get a bit grimmer about certain aspects of market feminism. I didn't and still don't like the idea of women making careers or trading speculations out of what was to me a strongly unifying social movement in pursuit of justice for all, not the advancement of the few" (The Oklahoma Review, 2000). This account speaks about Drabble's commitment with the social inadequacies of her time. Reading her novels, it is impossible to claim that she is mainly concerned with feminist problems, for her characters are occupied with much wider issues that have all in common one thing: the preoccupation about western modern society and its imbalances, be it regarding gender, race, or social class. She has been praised as a writer whose books offer accurate accounts of British contemporary society, and thus social classes are to be a major part in her choice of a subject matter. Her characters do move across the class barriers, but always at a price and never being able to lose their origins and its implications. When regarding her views within feminist theory, Drabble is concerned with empowerment, action and creative solutions for the female subject, disregarded and ignored from so many realms in contemporary societies. Her characters struggle and survive, and their eventual happiness depends not so much on their gender condition but on their ability to cope with their fate, always determined in Drabble's accounts by nature and family. She does not enter the feminist debate of whether gender is constructed socially, she is not the kind of writer who would dwell on philosophical or theoretical discussions of that kind, she prefers to explore the world as it is through real life examination, focusing on her character's development through the choices they decide to make. In this sense maybe

she can have received criticism on the part of her neglecting this distinction that seems to be central at the development of feminist critical theory throughout the last part of the 20th century. But, what do her characters tell us on this regard? They have families, more or less stable but always straightforwardly traditional in the sense that gender responsibilities and roles are respected, more as a norm of social behaviour than as a matter of fact sexist consideration. Rosamund Stacey, the protagonist of *The Millstone*, might be the most detached of the characters analyzed in this study from that traditional view of family roles. Single mother, clinging to chastity up until the conception of her baby, her account of the life of a young girl in 1960's London does not fit into the standards of what life might have been for any girl like her at the time. The female protagonist of Drabble's third novel is overall concerned about the formation of her own self, her development as a person and the acceptance of her fate. This quest for self acceptance and the implications of one's own fate are also central themes in Drabble's works, and though she does not obliterate the gender condition of her characters, she refuses to make that the core problem or conflict in the narrative. Thus we could sum up that her relationship with feminism is natural and critical at the same time: being a woman writer in the mid 20th century there were many issues that she needed to talk about and had been unspoken up until then. She was a pioneer, if not in the terms other female writers would engage later in the 1960's, her choice of subject matter and the profile of her characters definitely challenged contemporary rules and conventions. She dared going further than any other female writers had been before. She is critical though of the feminist movement. Being herself a

committed person with the improvement of contemporary society, defending women's rights and voicing their concerns is one more aspect of her concerns as a writer, but not the main one. It has certainly been the aspect of her fiction that has most widely called critical attention, but sometimes for the wrong reasons, as she has expressed herself. In spite of her avoidance of the debate over essentialism as opposed to constructivism, Drabble's feminism is much closer to the so called third wave of feminism, started in the 1990's that focuses on empowerment, gender equality as the norm and looking at the world beyond the limits of repression. This view of equality as an assumption that should be taken for granted had already been expressed by Virginia Woolf, one of the earliest feminist writer's, whose essay *A Room Of One's Own* looks at the conditions that women during the early 20th century had to create and grow as artists. We find an illuminating analysis of this idea in the postscript written by Susan Gubar for one of the most influential reference books written about feminist critical theory: *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*. This section of the book closes up the analysis and points at the future of feminist criticism by recovering one of Woolf's accounts of the society she was living in; "An old word, a vicious and corrupt word that has done much harm in its day and is now obsolete' (Woolf, 1938/1966: 101). She meant, I suspect, that in a world of sexual equality women would no longer have to insist on defending their rights or decrying their wrongs, but could instead join with men in dedicating their combined efforts to combating those forces of tyranny and injustice so threatening to the wellbeing of humanity" (Plain and Sellers, p. 339). In other words, feminism should not be self contained and cannot be detached from all the

other instances of social discrimination. Quite the opposite, feminism should join forces against a bigger menace that casts its long shade over everyone of us: discrimination against women is but another manifestation of the manipulation of power by a few, and the interests of these few could even be benefitted by the lack of unity amongst the mass of individuals that they control. The postscript is titled Flaming feminism? And its analysis wraps up the book with a powerful image that expresses the kind of pursuit that feminist criticism should focus in the upcoming years: We need to apply rags, petrol and matches not to feminism or feminist criticism but to enduring inequities (Plain and Sellers, 2007: 341). Under this image we could examine Drabble's narrative and reflect: the author we have been discussing in this study is indeed concerned with feminist issues, but because the traditional discrimination of women in patriarchal society is but one of the many instances of inequities that she has observed as a writer in the second half of the 20th century. Margaret Drabble is indeed and above all a writer concerned with social inequities, and her discontent with feminist criticism comes from the pettiness and opportunism that some critics and authors have shown when dealing with the reality of women. Drabble has not lost perspective in the purpose of her fiction, and that cannot be isolated to discrimination against women. She writes to disclose human behaviour, and the relationships amongst the characters in her novels cannot be analysed simply in terms of gender, but other issues need to be addressed as well: class, education, background.