
**WOMEN'S LIBERATION AND MARRIAGE IN A SUMMER
BIRD CAGE**

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INTRODUCTION

Although the first Women's Liberation Conference in England was held in 1970, the movement was already becoming popular among the new generation. A woman can live a happy and purposeful life only when she is not pressurised to conform to the patriarchal norms. The Liberation Movement gave women the courage to believe in themselves and break free from the binding rules of patriarchy. The patriarchal society forces women to conform to the patriarchal stereotypes. Women are oppressed socially, economically, politically and psychologically when they are forced to act according to the customary gender roles. The only way to end this oppression is to eradicate the ideology of patriarchy. In words of bell hooks:

Many feminist radicals now know that neither a feminism that focuses on woman as an autonomous human being worthy of personal freedom nor one that focuses on the attainment of equality of opportunity with men can rid society of sexism and male domination. Feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression. Therefore, it is necessarily struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires. (25)

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There is a long history of male dominance over females that has not been completely got rid of even after years of feminist struggle against patriarchy. *A Summer Bird Cage* (1963) is Drabble's first novel in which she gives an ostensible portrait of life of women in the early 1960s. When Drabble was asked in an interview about where the idea for her first novel came from, she replied, "Perhaps it was about the purpose of education for women and the choices it offers." (Drabble, *Art of Fiction*). Drabble's fiction deals with the contemporary themes, she boldly writes about subjects such as menstruation, pregnancy, birth, children and maternity. Linked with this change in the social scene is the argument that the liberated womanhood has increased the burden on women. Expectations have increased as now she not only does her household duties, but also shares the living expenses. The woman is liberated in the sense that she can now pursue her career but she is still subordinated at the hands of the male. Although women are now given more freedom than ever before, their images continue to be constructed on the institutions of marriage and motherhood. They participate in the radical movements of the time but they find themselves to be the victims of the classic predicaments of male patriarchy. Drabble is aware of these remarkable changes in the lives of women and her fiction voices the female experience and thus gives a female interpretation of reality.

It was a time when women gained education, sought degrees but their career was not taken seriously. Women received formal education but there was nothing much for women to do. The patriarchal mindset that girls get married at a certain age leaves even the educated girls with little options. The potential of a woman is downgraded and being brought up in a patriarchal society, the education fails to instil the sense of vocation in a girl. And girls considered themselves to be over educated and did not know what job to seek. For those who wanted to work had limited options to choose from. The only vocations open to them were: teaching, secretarial job, nursing. Hence most of them ended up marrying wealthy men. Sarah's sister Louise also gets married to a celebrated novelist. Sarah reflects:

I thought about jobs and seriousness, and about what a girl can do with herself if over-educated and lacking a sense of vocation. Louise had one answer, of course. She was getting married. (6)

In this novel, Louise's marriage is seen through the perspective of Sarah. From the very beginning of the novel Sarah does not believe in the existence of love between Louise and Stephen. Louise's sudden announcement that she is going to marry Stephan Halifax comes as

a shock to most people since both of them were such opposites. It eventually turns out that Louise had married him for his money.

Sarah and Louise have been brought up in a family which was characteristically patriarchal. Their father determined all the fundamental conditions and made the key decisions. Their mother owed to this male authority with all the humble obedience. She sacrifices her aspirations for her husband and her children. Sarah feels bad for her mother and says:

I felt sorry for her as my father wouldn't co-operate at all: poor brave twittering Mama, pretending everything had always been so lovely, ignoring the facts because they were the only ones she knew. My father is a bit of a brute and that phrase really fits him; at such times he rudely dissociates himself from everything Mama says, and she has no retreat except repellent Louise and soft, dishonest, indulgent me. (18)

Sarah's mother never went to college but she always wanted her daughters to complete their studies. She encourages them to pursue their dreams and do what she was not allowed to do in her time. Education plays an important role in the overall development of a person. It gives the realization which inevitably involves becoming more aware of the situation. Education might not have done any good to Louise in terms of becoming financially independent but it did help her to place a higher value for herself. Louise holds herself in high esteem and never allows anyone to suppress her in any manner. She marries Stephan for his money and seemed to be happy for a while with the idea of honeymoon in Rome, she even hosts a grand party at her new big house which tricks Sarah into believing that she might really be happy. She invites her sister and many other guests to have a look at her beautiful house. She has a big beautiful house replete with antique artefacts, decorative pieces and expensive clothes, cosmetics and perfumes. She has everything that she could ever wish for. But her excitement and anxiousness about marriage ends really soon. Soon it is discovered that her life was drab and full of despair. As she accompanies him to Paris, she loses her freedom to meet other people. There she has to put up her civil behaviour all the time to his friends and business associates. It may be a small price to pay for a person whom one loves but since Louise was not in love with Stephan, it was a big deal for her. Such a situation can be a sheer wastage of a woman's potential. Society conditions a woman to depend on her male counterpart economically and in the process she loses her dignity. Louise feels smothered in her new married life. She is a woman who has lived all her life on her own terms and she would not suffer. She marries Stephan for his money and probably has very high expectations from it, not realizing that it is a cage that will deny her freedom. She is disappointed when marriage

reduces her to a secretary who has to take his business calls. On few occasions the clients who call at home mistake her for a secretary. She feels that she has not got enough respect that she deserves. She has all the money but she feels terribly bored. She admits, “Oh Sarah. I was so bored. So crashingly, terrifyingly bored” (181). She felt like a prisoner not getting many opportunities to socialise with people. She realises that he is a “horrid person” and she can no more sustain any interest in him. The marriage turns out to be a bird cage. Marriage offers her the security and comfort, but it eventually becomes a prison to her. Louise’s marriage to Stephan is a complete farce. Even before getting married she knew in her heart that it would put an end to her freedom. The night before marriage she becomes restless. Sarah describes the situation, “Louise walking firmly and regularly from one end of it, along the hall to the front door, and back again, backwards and forwards, like an animal in a small cage trying to take exercise” (18). The description of her walking instantly evokes the image of a helpless caged animal. In spite of her doubts, she gets married. Soon she is just as anxious to get out of the marriage as she was to get inside it. She would spend her day alone attending the phonecalls and most of the callers who did not know that Stephen was married used to mistake her for a secretary. She feels like she has lost her individuality ensconced in that house. It is interesting to note here that *Feminine Mystique* (1963) was also published around the same time in America and deals with the problems of married women. Betty Friedan in her book aptly documents such malaise among the American housewives. Friedan labels the housewives’ discontent “the problem that has no name” (19). Not just American housewives, but countless women across the world shared the same dissatisfaction. It is the dissatisfaction with marriage that leads Louise to have an affair with John with whom she has no intention of getting married or to have any serious relationship. She does it only to fill the emptiness in her life. Sarah admires Louise for accomplishing such an unprecedented task. She is fascinated by the way Louise has reversed the tradition. Sarah, “To force marriage into a mould of one’s own, while still preserving the name of marriage—it seemed an enterprise worth consideration” (164). Finally she moves out of Stephen’s house never to return. Thus, in a way she breaks away from her cage like marriage and regains the control of her life. She breaks the patriarchal rule of being faithful to her husband and has an affair with John Connel. So the changes in the society are quite evident. Gone are the days when scarlet letter A was embedded in the bosom of an unfaithful wife. In the early days a man could have an affair out of marriage and get away with it but it was unthinkable for a woman to do the same. The women in the late 60s and the 70s no longer felt obliged to the patriarchal norms

of being faithful. Patriarchy was losing its control gradually. When Sarah comes to know about Louise's illicit love affair with John Connel, she feels confused for being surprised at this news. She wonders, "Who would have thought that an emancipated girl like me should actually feel concerned about a trivial thing like this? I almost feel it my duty to feel concerned" (129). The entire town knew about Louise's affair but it does not deter her in anyway. She breaks away from the bondage of this cage into the emancipated world. The recurrent image of cage in the novel hints at the fact that the institution of marriage will remain a prison for many women until her needs as a woman are met.

None of the major characters in the novel have a happy married life which inevitably leads one to the conclusion that marriage has been presented in a poor light. Through this novel, Drabble highlights how wrong motivations lead people to marriage and why some people might choose a single life. The title *A Summer Bird Cage* clearly indicates Drabble's intention to describe how women feel about the confining nature of marriage. Sarah sees examples of bad marriages all around. Louise and Sarah's mother has given up everything to be a wife and a mother. Sarah's mother's situation is entirely different from that of Sarah's. Her mother lived in the times when women had hardly any right to have their say. The time period when this novel was published was particularly important for the transitions it witnessed. Women of this generation learned to reclaim their right to choose. The Radical Feminists have been infamous for holding a bleak view on marriage as they firmly believe that marriage is necessarily oppressive for the women. This novel was published when women were beginning to have little more freedom in terms of career and education. Sarah's mother was denied the opportunity to complete her studies while both her daughters are Oxford graduates. Sarah thinks, "The days are over, thank God, when a woman justifies her existence by marrying. Atleast that is true until she has children" (68).

Sarah's mother who belongs to the previous generation recounts the age-old story of male dominance. She narrates how she spent her entire life making sacrifices for her husband and children. Her husband would never cooperate with her, while she would never even complain about it. The obstacles and inequalities faced by the women at the time can only be imagined by the present generation. In her days women were not allowed to seek higher education and which is why she realises her dreams by sending her daughters to Oxford. She gives complete freedom to her daughters, Sarah and Louise to pursue their ambitions. Both the sisters were privileged in the sense that they could hope to find personal fulfilment in

ways that had been unavailable to their mother. The conversation of Sarah and her mother illustrates the social changes that came about in their time:

Haven't I just said that you must lead your own life? After all, that's why we sent you off to Oxford, it was always me who said you two must go --- I don't know what I wouldn't have given for the opportunities you've been given. Your father was any too keen, believe me. In my day, education was kept for the boys, you know. (57)

The feminists of the 1960's believed that the separate roles for men and women were not a product of nature or biology; instead they are a result of social construction. Vital changes came in the lives of women as women were now more self-sufficient and could concentrate on self-development but patriarchy still continued to impose certain social standards. The women in the 1960s were trailblazers in many respects. The newly emancipated women demanded more economic and sexual freedom. They were ready to take the advantage of social and cultural opportunities. The female characters in the novels of Margaret Drabble who represent the women of the 1960s also break many of the rules set by the patriarchy.

Apparently the condition has not changed much for all women. In her groundbreaking book, Simone de Beauvoir makes the classic statement, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (283). The statement has an universal appeal as it undoubtedly goes beyond time and place. The work probes into the condition of women based on sex-discrimination. The first phase of feminist movement succeeded in procuring the women's suffrage. It also provided women with opportunities to seek higher education and to work in all the fields. However, even in the twentieth century women fall victims to the male dominated society. The Radical Feminists observe that it is the patriarchal set up of marriage which creates an oppressive environment for the women. Patriarchy leads to the formation of exploitative and oppressive society of men as against the exploited and oppressed society of women. Family acts as the microcosm of this society. Man is the head of the family governing and controlling all its affairs. Women are entrusted with the household responsibilities, particularly those of cooking food and rearing children. Women were now increasingly growing sick and tired of their monotonous routine. *A Summer Bird Cage* was published in the early 1960s and it seems that Drabble had envisioned the gigantic Radical movement which was to come about in the coming years. It was not only the Radical Feminists who severely criticised marriage but many liberal feminists have also made bold and shocking statements regarding marriage. Drabble was deeply influenced by Simone de Beauvoir. Beauvoir states, "marriage is obscene in principle insofar as it transforms into rights and duties these mutual relations which should

be founded on a spontaneous urge” (4). Emma Goldman makes the shocking statement, "the institution of marriage makes a parasite of woman, an absolute dependent, ... It incapacitates her for life's struggle, annihilates her social consciousness, paralyzes her imagination, and then imposes its gracious protection, which is in reality a snare, a travesty on human character” (126).

Gill and Tony who appeared to be a perfect couple also end their marriage. Sarah comes to know about their separation at Lousie’s wedding and she is taken aback at this revelation. They seemed perfectly happy to her. Later Gill confides the reasons for the falling apart of their marriage. It turns out that Tony is just like any other male chauvinist who evaluates women in terms of their usefulness. Tony is painter by profession and often makes Gill as the subject of his painting. He makes her pose nude and paints her. He views Gill as some object and fails to see her as an independent human being with her own goals, needs, and desires. She says, “he seemed to think that I ought to be happy just sitting around in the nude and letting him paint me, and cooking him the odd meal” (35). Tony also fails to notice the discomfort Gill is going through in this act. She explains how it “got so bloody cold, posing especially when they cut the electricity off and the fire wouldn’t work” (35). He would order Gill to do all the odd jobs without a sense of gratitude. He takes her for granted. Gill explains how the situation got worse and worse. Once he said, “ ‘Put the kettle on,’ and I said, ‘Put it on yourself, I’m reading;’ and he said, ‘Put it on, what the hell do you think you’re here for?’” (35). Thus, in this way men’s violence becomes invisible and assumed as natural and inevitable. It is sometimes taken as inevitable aspect of their social behaviour. She has to take numerous responsibilities that a married woman is expected to take. A woman who worked was said to put her own selfish interests before those of her family. Women were expected to be in a subordinate position and they were constantly reminded that their marriage vow was to obey. Gill also tries to fulfil such expectations. In this process she is denied her right to pursue her dreams. In a way she could not follow the passion which she had in her heart for a long time. Gill wants to do many other things in her life rather than just obeying the orders of Tony. “Oh it was awful. I wanted to do things too, I didn’t like just waiting on him” (35).

Gill reacts to the traditional idea that a woman belonged in the home and who should only spend her time in raising children and taking care of her husband. Now that women have become self-dependent, they are less likely to stay with an abusive or controlling husband. Sarah’s mother puts up with the bad behaviour of her husband but Gill cannot take it more. Since women are the ones who suffer the most if the marriage falls apart, they try to save the

marriage by compromising their needs. The financial independence for women allowed them the means to survive on their own without a man and subsequently gave them the confidence to protest against the violence and get out of a bad relationship. To put an end to the unending miseries of married life, Gill decides to end the marriage. When she is about to walk out of marriage, she is shocked to discover that she is pregnant. Gill loved children but since at that point of time she used to hate Tony so much that she hated the baby too. She says about the baby, "I felt it was a leech sucking my blood" (37). So, by ending the unhappy marriage and aborting the unwanted child, Gill regains the control of her life and body in her own crude way. She decides to abort the child mainly for two reasons. Firstly, the pregnancy was without her consent and it was Tony's child and secondly she knew that she would not be able to provide the baby the comforts it deserved. She explains, "I did want a baby so, but I wanted it to be all proper and intentional with pink nurseries and flowers in hospital, you know. Not tied up in bits of old nightgown and smelling of turpentine" (37). Gill realizes that she does not have to be subservient to Tony and be miserable for the rest of her life. Instead, she can go out and make a life for herself. She moves in a flat in London with Sarah.

The title of the novel *A Summer Bird Cage* aptly describes the confining nature of marriage. It was a time when women were beginning to have more career and educational opportunities. Sarah did not want to hamper her future prospects by getting married. She realises that marriage is another kind of societal structure that tries to mould women to fit a pre-ordained pattern. She does not want to follow her mother's footsteps and feels disgusted at the very idea of getting married. Sarah's father never treated her mother well and this makes her disapprove of the very idea of getting married. She is in fact not comfortable about her sister getting married. One evening, after Sarah was contemplating about her mother's married life, and she goes to bed, "feeling sick" with herself and "sick with the whole idea of marriage" (18). She seems to be contended with her single status which she calls the "spinterish delight" (15). It is interesting to note that Sarah herself is in a relationship but she does not reveal it until the fifth chapter. She never elaborates on her plans of getting married. She admits that she is no sure about the nature of their relationship and their future. It seems that she does believe in love but does not have much faith in the institution of marriage. This is why she keeps delaying the marriage otherwise she could also have got married like Gill and Louise. Her relationship with Francis is long distance. She encourages him to pursue his studies at Harvard in America which shows that marriage is not her agenda. Here again the emphasis is more on career than love. There is no doubt that she loves Francis and calls him

her “true love” but at the same time she procrastinates the formal wedding that would unite them. It seems that Sarah cannot decide what she actually wants. For instance, she is in relationship with Francis, but she enjoys the company of other men. She gets quite intimate with Jacky Almond. But when it comes to settling down she feels that it is not her niche. Her ambivalent feelings for marriage can be summed up in the following thoughts:

It is only now, at the time of writing (or rather, indeed, rewriting) that it occurs to me that I may have been simply delaying the problem of marriage...in fact I suppose that I will marry Francis. I have always supposed so. It's unlikely that I could ever love anybody else. But don't take this as meaning that all was straight and tidy between us--- all was on the contrary tears and separation, and I had never so much as mentioned the idea of marriage to my family. (68)

Sarah is ambivalent about marriage and then she witnesses tales of unhappy marital lives which leads her to discount the whole idea of marriage. She says, “I began to wonder if I myself would ever dare to get married. There were so many dangers” (171). She does not explain the reason for her dilemma. Sarah loves her freedom and would not like it give it up at any cost. Her observations on other's relationships throw light on her own views. She loves to make her own choices and live an independent life. She would not allow anyone to take control of her life. She likes to be independent and do all the tasks all by herself. On journeys, she never gets a porter and prefers to carry the luggage herself. She further says, “I'm a menace on holidays or journeys, I can't enjoy myself unless I do everything the hard way” (8). These could be the reasons for her fear of getting married. One evening when she sees John putting his arms around Louise, she gets nostalgic and goes down the memory lane. She remembers how much comforting it was when Francis used put his arms around on a cold night. There are times when she feels needy but she overcomes such thoughts and feelings and reminds herself how much she likes to be single. She reflects:

I felt acutely lonely: everyone had lovers and babies and husbands but me. But the loneliness didn't make me feel miserable: I almost enjoyed it, as the dreary edge was taken off the sensation by the darkness and glamour of the night, and the strangeness of being with my sister and her man. Nothing so strange is ever really unbearable. (163)

Sarah feels that her life is fulfilling even without husband and children. Sarah is ambitious and she knows that she has to move to a big city where there are job opportunities. Her mother also encourages her to go so as she always wanted her daughters to have all the freedom which she could not get in her times. She moves to London where she takes up a job.

She shares a flat with Gill. So, two single women share a flat, one who is separated from her husband and the other who is single by choice. As the convention goes, most of the women seek happiness and fulfilment through marriage and motherhood. But Sarah defies this law of society by not stepping into a life of conformity. Such an arrangement was unheard of in the early years. She cannot give up her freedom of choice. This becomes clear when she gets into a skirmish with Stella over a trivial issue regarding some household chore. When she sees the tragic end of Gill and Tony's marriage and the miserable life of Bill and Stella, her decision to stay unmarried gets strengthened. Thus the female characters in novel *A Summer Bird Cage* portray the new outlook of the liberated women regarding marriage which shakes the age-old strong patriarchal foundation. Louise and Gill gets separated from their husbands and Sarah is contented with her single status.

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