CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

Not in entire forgetfulness
And not in utter nakedness
But trailing clouds of glory do we come

(Wordsworth, Immortality Ode)

In the contemporary world where there is no
dearth of women novelists, and most of them are taken
for granted to be feminist propagandists, it is
refreshing that there is a particular brand of women
novelists who, though not wholly able to extricate
themselves from feminist concerns, have yet moved far
beyond its narrow frontiers. This phenomenon has
silenced those critics who would plead that women's
writing is at the most propagandist or most often
second rate. These novelists have proved themselves
master psychologists by assessing and ascertaining
the root cause of human problems, especially the
problems of women. So even though they have begun
with the so-called feminist position and the
exploration of feminine consciousness yet with
them, it is a sort of premise to be established or
demolished with the experiential support of the protagonists in a dense socio-personal context. The themes they have dealt with, therefore, grow out of new experiences. As Gail Cunningham points out in her essay, that Margaret Drabble's literary roots are clearly victorian and Edwardian, but her heroines provide a careful portrait of the contemporary women with crises and conflicts unknown to her predecessors. This is not to say that their personal conflicts are greater or any more frustrating, but they do reflect a much more complex engagement with the social and economic order.¹ And to my mind this order includes even divine order in case of Doris Lessing and Margaret Drabble. These novelists bring to the fictional worlds an obviously wider range of experience from the world outside.

The cataclysmic social changes and radical cultural alterations in the last twenty or thirty years have brought new freedom and along with it awesome responsibility to women. The changes in socio-cultural

and economic patterns are so pregnant with significance that they have both expanded and altered the nature of reality for women. This entire phenomenon has raised some of the deepest philosophical and psychological questions of our age and inevitably these questions have been embodied and probed in the fiction of the period.

These years have witnessed tremendous changes in the ways in which particularly educated women had been living their lives. The changes set up has opened up new opportunities to the fair sex. And such opportunities have generated a diversity of choice for women. But the enlarged paradigm of experience and awareness has its dark side too. Like all revolutions this revolution too has been marked by as much pain as joy, as much guilt, frustration and set back, as triumph, freedom and promise. The questions of identity, career, motherhood, marriage, sexual and economic freedom are all the more complex as they become matters for active decisions rather than merely subjects for hope and speculation. These were only a few of the questions with which a new generation of women are confronted as they enter the
public world and face responsibilities which did not perplex the earlier generations of their sex. Today's woman inevitably clashes with the macrostructure of pre-defined social roles and values and as a result constructs her own microstructure of values and the roles possible thereof. She thinks of culture as a system of stable instabilities, that is, as containing within them, the necessary violation of their own principles of stability, such that change, development will occur and produce a result that will not be in conflict with the central stability, producing values of that culture. The feminine social world portrayed in Virginia Woolf's novels, for example, with its sophistication was not much larger than that of Woolf's immediate predecessors. A Room of One's Own was a meagre ambition in the light of female experience today. The turmoil, the triumphs, the commotion and the anguish of those new circumstances have become the subject matter of some of the most important novels written by women during the last three decades. The subjects and themes, and the characters in these later novels reflect a far larger world with its shape much less
clearly defined. The women are depicted not in some image to conform or to conflict with the masculine world but clearly as themselves.

Chief among these novelists are Doris Lessing, Susan Hill and Margaret Drabble. They, in their characteristic ways, are imperceptibly questioning the postulates of feminist position which ignores the basic feminine nature or broadly speaking, human nature and its demands, and asks for absolute equality of the sexes and independence for women from maternity, domesticity and so on. The heroines in their novels make a return back to home, husband and family; in fact, they are shocked into an awareness of communal consciousness, of a way of life which is perennial, pre-industrial and pre-individual. As it is industrialism and wrong worship of unlimited individualism, more precisely, solipsism, or from another point of view, feminism, which has led humanity, in their opinion, seemingly, to the verge of dissolution, shattered the natural bond between man and man, mother and child, husband and wife and sister and sister.
Margaret Drabble seems to undercut in a very subtle manner the myth of absolute freedom for women. Such freedom, as she shows in her novels, the root cause of their misery, alienation, cynicism, indifference and apathy, in short, something that cuts the contemporary women off from not only the main springs of life but also from the external communal rhythms of life. So the progression of most of her early novels is towards ironically breaking the fold of this freedom, bringing the protagonists out of themselves, out of their solipsism and selfishness and harmonising them with their society. Drabble deeply probes the inbuilt contradictions in Beauvoirist and the feminist position, the difficulties it presents, and the rebellion against natural and biological needs implied in that position. While granting a woman the right to be herself, she would like her to be a part of communal life— a mother with infinite solicitude, a wife with a tremendous sense of sacrifice, fellow—feeling and sympathy for others. Hence in her novels, she explores human nature with emphasis on feminine nature. The question is: why
does she stress so much the need to cope with the external world? The answer, perhaps, lies in the fact that industrialism and its off-shoot, capitalism, individualism, and solipsism have had devastating effects on humanity as a whole, leading to new definitions of history, culture, civilization, and culminating in the individual's alienation from society. In literature, it led to the indulgence in the interiority of experience in the 'moderns' because of the breakdown of the culture which presupposes a commonly agreed upon norm of living in the society. This has consequently given rise to new literary and critical stance called postmodernism whose main point of departure from other stances is that it believes literature to be an interpretative act with no responsibility whatsoever to the society. It is not a representation but an interpretation of life and reality and hence implicitly encourages a free interplay of interpretation which is, in the ultimate analysis, harmful to the society and its valuable institutions. Drabble has inherited this context but she works through the crisis postmodernism presents to achieve an affirmation of basic human
nature in its changeless permanency, with its attendant human values and its need to have contact with what is other than itself. In this endeavour she has affinity with Iris Murdoch whose central theme is the necessity to admit the reality of the other person, and "the repeated warning about the dangers of solipsism."  

Doris Lessing began with an exploration of feminine consciousness and a struggle for sexual definition in her novels, but being baffled by the complex nature of the issues, has shifted her attention away from such concerns to the future of humanity about which she makes some bleak predictions.

In *Children of Violence* (1969) and *The Golden Notebook* (1962) she appears confused by these contradictory issues, their demands, fears and the anguished pain these have given her. In *The Briefing For a Descent into Hell* (1971) she makes predictions...

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about things to come while in *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973) she returns to the earlier concerns but not to the same questions. It is not a retreat but a circular return breaking through the depersonal phenomena and almost approaching the transpersonal. Roger Wescott's definitions of the states of consciousness could be used as a guide here toward understanding it. Wescott recognises three kind of impersonality: 'Pre-personality', 'depersonality' and 'transpersonality'. 'Prepersonality' is the impersonality of non-hominian animals and of hominian infants. 'Depersonality' is the alienated condition of human beings in the contemporary world in which personality has been eroded by excessive regimentation and the 'transpersonality' is that state of consciousness where the illusion of ego is shattered and a person achieves universal impersonality, the communal consciousness of a people, a way of life, "time of being, unique but also impersonal yet certainly not depersonalised." It is a relatively sudden and transitory experience of.


spiritual growth, too dramatic in nature to be called "learning" in any ordinary sense and yet, not as rare as James' 'epiphany' or Woolf's 'vision.' Because the 'transpersonal' results in an "illuminated self always... larger, more cosmic, and less personal than the common self." 5

It is perhaps Drabble's awareness of the depersonalised culture and her deep-felt unease with the social and personal dissolution arising out of it, that impels her to concentrate so much on the vital importance of interpersonal relationships in her novels that sometimes one wonders whether she is still working in the Victorian context. But the very fact that she emphasizes on forging stronger bonds with the community indicates that something has gone wrong somewhere which she wants to rectify in a very subtle manner. And the rectification has to begin at the level of man—woman relationship which forms the basis of any societal or communal setup. The harmonious relationship between man & woman has been

disturbed not only by a too exclusivist view of female independence but by solipsistic view of life in general encouraged by 'modernism' in literature. Because all Drabble heroines are conscious of their literary tradition past and present and its impact on them.

Susan Hill is another novelist who began with the feminist concerns but ended up in her novels, so to say, in the enemy camp. And what better way there could be to show the disillusionment with the hollowness of women's sloganeering than to bid farewell to writing itself which she ostensibly identifies with the extreme form of female independence. Susan Hill's abandonment of writing fiction in the late 1970's is a gesture towards less etiolated, less enclosed activity, and a more respectable female role - maternity. In doing so she has made explicit certain assumptions which had been latent in all her writing. It is no accident that her work has been so well received by a liberal literary tradition, for it ends by silencing its own timorous interrogation of some of the fatal and crippling effects
of a patriarchal 'male' culture and retreats into a familiar female enclosure of defeatism. 6

Throughout Susan Hill's novels and stories, the same themes and motifs have recurred and have led gradually towards a resolution of the problem of withdrawal from adult experience which she sees as related to artistic detachment and retreat from writing as a woman. In the Spring time of the year, with its ending of minor triumphs, Hill makes her protagonist move towards self-discovery which means in her context re-entry into community life. But feminist questions are conflated with metaphysical ones, as is evidenced by the way in which Ruth learns the value of her own life through an apprehension of grace and love. Hill's posing of metaphysical questions and the priority she gives to aging characters facing their own extinction means that basic feminist issues are elided. Because of this, any optimism is the result of grace, of religious faith,

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and not the conviction that human beings have the absolute power to control their own destinies.

It is perhaps this belief in the grace and love and scepticism about human being's absolute power to control their own destinies that relates Margaret Drabble to Susan Hill's liberal tradition. It is ultimately 'graces and miracles' and human love that save her characters from disaster and the recognition of the illusion of choice and free will which pulls them out of themselves and alters them beyond recognition. They are gradually forced to make the best use of the 'chinks of possibilities' fate makes available to them and willingly follow the pattern fate has chosen for them. As Jane Gray clarifies in *The Waterfall*:

One is not saved from neurosis, one is not released from the fated pattern, one must walk it till death and walk through those recurring darknesses but sometimes by accident or endeavour (I do not know which, in writing this I try to decide which) one may find a way of walking that predestined path
more willingly. In company even one might find a way of being less alone, and thus confining the dangerous outward spreading of emotion, the dark contaminating stain, which when undirected and unaccepted kills and destroys all around it.\(^7\)

... in seeking to avoid my fate, like Oedipus, I had met it. In seeking to avoid the sin of treachery, I had embraced it. It had forced its inevitability upon me.\(^8\)

What provides for artistic richness is her apparent inability to reach a clear cut conclusion in her experience. But this inability is not exhibited in any sort of anguished panic over being bombarded by so many conflicting feelings, perceptions, possibilities in experience, fears and unresolved crises, she accepts them on a higher plane of understanding and experience, a plane on which are incorporated all the possible points of view of a given experience.


\(^8\) Ibid, p.227.
II

That much for Drabble's themes and subjects. But the actual reception of her work on the part of readers and critics has not been quite uniform. And what has most teased the critics out of patience is the form of her work. For Margaret Drabble is not only akin to some women writers of her times but also to the early nineteenth century romantic writers who tended to give primacy to emotion over reason and who honestly trusted their inner perceptions. She seems to be equally in tune with those later nineteenth-century novelists whose world involves pre-destined paths and fate. Yet she also seems very much of her own time and her characters and their self-confrontations are burdened with choices relevant to 1960's and 1970's. Besides her novels also display the postmodernist concerns in that her writing is a highly self-conscious act. Most of her novels are in a sense about writing novels.

Because of this affinity with various periods, the critics and readers have been baffled by the form of her novels and have, therefore reacted to her work in various ways. The earlier critics have often dubbed her a feminist writer. She has
consistently refused this label asserting that her novels are essentially studies of human nature with emphasis on feminine nature.

Ellen Cronan Rose, the first cultural feminist critic in Drabble criticism, argues in her book *Margaret Drabble: Equivocal Figures* (1980), that Drabble seems to press too enthusiastically for compromise with patriarchy: Rose charts chronologically the ambiguities in Drabble's so-called feminism. Drabble has acknowledged that in her first three novels - *A Summer Bird Cage* (1963), *The Garrick Year* (1964) and *The Millstone* (1965), she used the 'wonderful material' of Simons de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* as a frame to understand what it means to be a young woman, trying to enter the adult patriarchal world. The succeeding novels, Rose maintains, explore variations on the fundamental questions: 'Is it possible or desirable to be autonomous and transcendent? Is it possible to be a woman and...autonomous, transcendent and a writer? "What does it meant to be not only a woman but a woman and a writer?" (Waterfall, p.61). The book poses questions to which feminists need to give some
sustained consideration. To some critics Drabble is a traditional novelist while for others she is not as traditional as she seems. Mary Hurley Moran belongs to the group that seeks to refute, those who denounce Drabble's conservative methods as well as those who suspect that a subversive attack on convention and patriarchy lies below Drabble's surface. In her book, *Margaret Drabble: Existing Within Structures* (1983), she claims that Drabble's stories are all the more universal for their insistence on human beings lack of free will and the necessity of submitting to given external structures. Moran further claims that Drabble's narrative methods show a similar acceptance of convention, imitating the fatalism that dominates the stories she is telling. Yet there are other critics who have pointed to Drabble's ambivalent attitude to religion and morality. Chief among them are Susanna Roxman and Valerie Grosvenor Myer who have expressed this view in their books *Puritanism and Permissiveness* and *Guilt & Glory* respectively. Other critics and reviewers maintain that while Drabble's characters are open to experience,
they are confronted with the opposites of a given experience, as though they are both created and destroyed by diametrically opposite forces. Rosamund is a mixture of confidence and cowardice, Jane does not know whether her relationship with James is one of salvation or damnation and so on.

However, how readers imagine the author, helps determine what they look for in his or her work, and what they look for can severely limit what they find. The myth of Drabble’s public image seems to have given rise to such a limitation and to have obscured some of the important aspects of her work. And although her novels have been widely praised, reviewers have frequently revived the once discredited distinction between ‘form’ and ‘content’ in order to acclaim the content while remaining uneasy about the form. Their hesitations are occasioned by Drabble’s use, in her later books, of what seem to be old-fashioned omniscient narrators, by plots that turn upon one coincidence or another, by suspense that owes more to obvious artifice of narration than to any cogent logic of events. In
short, Drabble is widely seen as a late twentieth-century novelist who writes, what many reviewers have taken to be good, solid nineteenth-century novels. Donald Davie applauded her attempts to grapple with the problems of contemporary England in *The Ice Age* but nevertheless declared that "Margaret Drabble, has no doubt read Henry James' Prefaces. But if she has, she has suppressed the knowledge for the sake of this book - a book that one has to call a novel", though it is as if James had never written his 'agonised disquisitions' about, and experiments in composition and narrator's point of view.  

Other reviewers have tried unconvincingly, to represent this use of old-fashioned technique as a virtue. Maureen Howard in her *New York Times* Book Review piece on *The Ice Age* spoke of Margaret Drabble's "Pure, old fashioned narrative

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skill" and likened her to Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens and Charlotte Bronte.¹⁰

She concludes that Drabble "respects literary conventions as riches of the past" and so gives that "outmoded form, the novel, new life," but she does not specify how Drabble gives outmoded novels new life unless it is simply by continuing to write them. Perhaps she felt that a stronger argument was necessary since she went on to associate Drabble with Thomas Pynchon and Valadimir Nabokov but significantly the most she could claim was that all the three wrote novels. She states her viewpoint thus:

It is a remarkably fine book that takes its life from the best traditions of the nineteenth-century novel: elaborate plotting, coincidence, meaningful resolution—and it has a surface vitality that comes from Margaret Drabble's pure, old-fashioned, narrative skill... The social context is like

Hardy, the interlocking lives she's borrowed from Dickens, the chain of circumstances from Charlotte Bronte... Her structure does not have the energy of Thomas Pynchon's, nor her inventions of coincidence the imaginative delight of Nabokov's but she shares their belief in the form. 11

Clearly this will not do because what is being questioned is the form of Drabble's novels and it is so unlike that of a James' novel let alone a Pynchon extravaganza that Donald Davie is reluctant to call her book a novel at all.

Margaret Drabble herself seems to agree with the general embarrassed judgement of the form of her novels, for she has openly declared that she would rather be at the end of a dying tradition she admires than at the beginning of one she deplores. 12 Yet the fact that she perceives her own novels in these terms, however, defiantly, is the greatest demonstration of the power of the

11 Maureen Howard, p.40.

public image Drabble enjoys. She believes it herself and so acquiesces in the judgement that she is "a traditional novelist." \(^{13}\) Who writes "solid pieces of direct realistic fiction" \(^{14}\) This judgement is however, misleading, in so far as it implies an unthinking, uncritical acceptance of Victorian conventions and techniques, for there are crucial differences between her novels and the tradition to which critics so quickly assign them. The world she represents may superficially resemble the "densely imagined realistic social world" \(^{15}\) of the Victorians, but its apparent "realism" is not something that Drabble naively takes for granted. Her realistic social world is something painfully and with difficulty constructed by the author and her characters, something not assumed but affirmed in an act of faith, achieved at the end of an Odyssey through a foray of doubts and questionings


\(^{14}\) *Bonfond*, p.41

\(^{15}\) Dickstein, p.5.
of both the world and the self. The scepticism is inbuilt within the texture of the novels. But in spite of that her attitude to the experiences she posits is unmistakable. Her faith in certain human values is unambiguously present. True, she does break the surface of objectivism, the supreme virtue which the modernist novel strove for, but she does not replace it with her own idiosyncratic subjective truth. On the other hand, she presents the non-interpretability of the world, which is our reality now as its interpretability once was. This non-interpretability is not only of the external reality but of inner psychology as well. Yet more often than not, there are lucid moments when we are able to understand a thing for what it is. Critics are right to see that her novelistic strategies differ from those of Henry James, that her style is closer to George Eliot's than to Virginia Woolf's but they are wrong to conclude that in so far as she is unlike the 'moderns' she is old-fashioned. It would be more accurate to call the 'modernists' old-fashioned; the strategies that constitute

16 Dickstein, p.5.
Margaret Drabble’s novels and the thinking that informs them, are those of our own time, not those of the early twentieth century. The form inevitably emanates from the view of reality the novelist professes and since her work defies the kind of categorization the critics are used to, the view of reality that shapes her novels, has often been misunderstood. The attempts the critics have undertaken to get at the heart of her novels have failed to a degree as they do not try to understand the view of reality, or the sensibility that informs them.

For the first time in Drabble criticism Michael F. Harper in his article, "Margaret Drabble and the Resurrection of English Novel", pointed out that Drabble is actually questioning the conventions of modernism by re-incorporating the workings of fate and chance or accident in her novels and that she is very much of her own time as with her writing is a highly self-conscious act; her world is not given but constituted by her and her characters. Accordingly one could place her

later experimentation in form within the framework of literature's slow dialogue with itself.

I agree with Harper in so far as he points out Drabble's questioning of the conventions of modernism as they symbolise a particular ideology. But I would not agree with his position when he adds that to Drabble modernism symbolises "the hegemony of men" and hence she is uncomfortable within this rubric as it does not encompass feminine experience or feminist view of reality. If Drabble is questioning modernism because it encompasses only a limited view of reality, then certainly Harper is himself making the mistake of putting Drabble's work in the readymade tight jacket of feminism i.e., within the confines of feminist ideology where she is seen as breaking the "hegemony of men" by questioning the modernist concept of reality and replacing it with the feminist view of reality. This is nowhere testified to in the text of her novels and only a close examination of them will substantiate my view and that is the burden of the chapters on early novels selected for this study. I
see that kind of iconoclasm nowhere at work in her fiction. In fact, her novels explore without any inhibition or restraint the basic human nature with all its bewildering possibilities.

Drabble is certainly no radical, she exhibits an awareness of the devastating implications inherent in radicalism. Her chief concern, perhaps, is with here and now, of humanity in general. However, Harper's viewpoint does serve a purpose. It marks a beginning for the shift in stance of the Drabble criticism. It answers those critics who have brought to bear upon her work, implicitly or explicitly, rules of modernist theory and practice as also those who maintain that she is a traditional novelist like Dickens or George Eliot. However, before proceeding on to an examination of the novels, I feel it necessary to highlight the full force of the charges brought against her form. For that purpose I will quote Harper at length:

The high modernist position was summerized nearly twenty years ago by Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of*
Fiction. He says, 'since Flaubert, many authors and critics have been convinced that 'objective' or 'impersonal' or 'dramatic' modes of narration are naturally superior to any mode that allows for direct appearance of the author or his reliable spokesman. Sometimes... the complex issues involved in this shift have been reduced to a convenient distinction between 'showing' which is artistic, and 'telling', which is inartistic, 18

It is commonly thought illegitimate for a modern author to use the techniques and devices of the past because the resulting novel is not just old-fashioned but false, radically false to our modern view of the world, to our experience in it and of it. An omniscient author is to be deplored, since no real human being can occupy such a point of view. So a modern narrator must be a character who speaks in the first person, or an unnamed or unspecified voice who may speak in the 18

third person but who pretends to no wider knowledge than may be plausibly attributed to a single consciousness. To know others thoughts and motives may have seemed simple in an age with a naive conception of psychology but is problematic after Freud; hence the narrator will not claim to know securely much more than can be inferred from outward signs - from behaviour, speech and dress.

Plots that turn upon coincidence are also ruled out. They may have been appropriate for Henry Fielding and his readers, since their conception of reality involved divine providence, and the hand of God was visible in the workings of chance; but such plots cannot command the willing suspension of disbelief of a modernist whose idea of causality derives from science, not theology. The high modernist position is manifestly not a rejection of realism but a demand for a new realism, for a novelistic rendering of a specifically modern experience. This leads to the insistence that 'form' is 'content', for the way in which a story gets told must be an imitation of how we
ourselves come to know whatever it is that we think we know. Novels must avoid 'telling' because any narrator as an individual consciousness, is unreliable; he has a limited and inevitably partial point of view. Instead "the story must articulate itself in presentation of concrete detail, so that its 'meaning' shall not be a statement about the world by an intrinsically untrustworthy speaker but rather the world uttering itself, its 'meaning' a function of its 'being' and indivisible from it." In other words, the high modernist position claimed for the novel what Archibald MacLeish claimed for the poem; that it should not mean but be. Truth lay not in predication but in presence. This explains the high modernists' tireless experimentation with language; so-called ordinary "speech" was rejected as the language of predication, unable ever to speak the truth about the world because "its very grammar and syntax were arbitrary conventions, not structures isomorphic with the Real."
The modern artist, therefore, had to violate grammar and syntax, wrenching words out of their accustomed patterns and "fitting them into new structures through which Reality might directly express itself, squeeze itself out. In this cause Joyce spent a day re-arranging the words of two sentences." 21 Eliot developed the doctrines of impersonality and of the objective correlative, both attempts to banish authorial statement and "Pound launched an assault upon the iambic pentameter", because poets were forced to falsify their experience in accommodating it to an arbitrary and conventional metrical scheme. To this cause we owe both Ulysses, which Pound admired as a monument of realism, and Finnegans Wake which he did not admire at all but which Joyce defended as a realistic and 'natural' presentation of "a state which cannot be rendered sensible by the use of wide awake language, cut

and dry grammar and goahead plot. This ceaseless quest for the Real led Pound "to reject English syntax and to spend the best part of his lifetime composing his *Cantos* on a principle derived from (he persuaded himself) a Chinese writing founded upon natural law, not arbitrary convention."

The rules for novel writing that Drabble's critics have brought to bear implicitly or explicitly, on her work, are all abstractions of high modernist theory and practice. They derive from the high modernist's dream of capturing Reality in language, of making it in Joyce's word 'sensible' and not merely intelligible. This ambition is self-contradictory, since it would use the medium of language to conjure up "an immediate experience of the real, would demand of language a self-annihilation, a melting into pure transparency."


23 Harper, p.152.

24 Ibid.
To call this self-contradictory is to make explicit what is implicit in Harper's account of it, - the sheer impossibility of such an aspiration. This is hardly a new discovery, discussions of the difference between the order of language and the order of a postulated Reality are as old as Philosophy. Yet this difference is frequently ignored, and in The Rhetoric of Fiction, Booth felt it necessary patiently to demonstrate that fiction is always a 'telling' that the author's judgement is always present, always evident to anyone who knows how to look to it."25

Reviews of Margaret Drabble's novels show that Booth's proposition did not immediately become critical currency. It is only in recent years that a critique of language and referentiality, marching under the banner first of 'structuralism' and then

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Booth, p.20. To have made naturalness of technique an end in itself was, perhaps, an impossible goal in the first place. Whatever verisimilitude a work may have always operates within a larger artifice; each work that succeeds is natural - and artificial- in its own way",p.59.
of 'poststructuralism' has made any substantial impact upon a critical practice founded upon the assumptions and aspirations of modernism.

Paradoxically, this critique insists not upon the difference (assumed by Booth) between Writing and Reality but upon their identity. Unlike the Moderns, however, poststructuralists do not believe that language can be made isomorphic with a Reality which exists and is available independently, but maintain that our 'reality' is constituted by language, that "the play of difference which structures the order of the signifier is also inevitably the structure of the signified since signifier and signified are indivisible in the sign." 26 The enterprise associated principally with the name of Jacques Derrida thus claims not merely that language is always an interpretation of reality but that the reality to which language supposedly refers is itself an interpretation, a

26 Harper, p.152.
writing rather than a 'given' present to our senses. In this account there is no such thing as perception in the sense of a passive registering of an external world that is objectively 'there'. The world is not a given which we perceive but, a text, an order of signs, which we have always already interpreted. 27

Language is not a medium in which we encode experience but itself the structure of our consciousness and therefore, that which produces, out 'experience'. In S/Z, an analysis of a Balzac story, Roland Barthes identifies the strategies, the codes, by which a particular 'realism' is produced showing how a so-called re-presentation of reality is an interpretation of it - and qua interpretation not value free but involving an

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ideology, a politics. 28

This critique has generated the writing loosely known as "postmodern": authors such as Thomas Pynchon attempt to demonstrate to the reader the force of poststructuralism by producing "texts" which are 'unreadable.' They refuse the reader the illusion that he is in contact with an author's true intention by means of transparent language; they make the reader aware of his own interpreting activity by preventing him from 'making sense' of the text in terms of the accustomed conventions or codes. For Pynchon, this is a matter for celebration and affirmation. Freedom in his view appears to consist in the free play of interpretation that follows the breakdown of the normal codes; social control and oppression are possible when they, the controlling powers,

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are able to enforce uniform modes of interpretation and thereby create a society whose members think and act alike. However radical Pynchon's writing, he is securely within an American tradition which distrusts society; like Huck Finn he is determined to light out for the territory to escape civilization, but the frontier to which he escapes is that of language.

Margaret Drabble's is a quite different tradition, and for her social collectivities are not in principle evil, however much she might wish to change particular social practices. She is certainly no poststructuralist and is far from joining with Pynchon to celebrate the anarchy which (in his view at least) is the social implication of poststructuralist theory. Yet Drabble's fiction is postmodern rather than modern in that it is informed by some of the same concerns as Pynchon's. If her novels are formally so different from his, it is not because she is unthinkingly old-fashioned but because her values are different and dictate a different response to the epistemological problems
she faces. Society, in the form of community, is not for her a conspiracy to be resisted but a good to be treasured, and its very foundation seems threatened by the free play of interpretation that Pynchon celebrates.

Society consists of individuals with a community of interests, founded upon sympathy and understanding, and this becomes problematic if the speech and behaviour of others are not reliable indicators of thought, emotion and intention. It is even more radically threatened if, as postmodernism would have it, there are no individuals at all in the sense of independent, solid "selves" like the characters of old-fashioned 'realistic' fiction but instead mere collections of inconsistent behaviours and interpretations determined finally by language and social practice. Drabble faces these problems from a position quite unlike Pynchon's, but face them she does and she works through the crisis they present to achieve affirmation diametrically opposite to his.

This crisis begins to take shape in her
first novel *A Summer Bird-Cage* and continues to recur in novel after novel and she suggests implicitly varying solutions in different novels with obvious tentativeness which is indicated by her use of ("Perhaps", 'Seems' etc) language and by her explicit statement that she does not see the ending [as the last word on her characters' lives:  

What I cannot stand about some novelists is the way they seem to imply that there's a fixed and finished truth that their characters reach at the end of the book. There is no end to learning. You're bound to learn more; what you know at each point of life is relevant to you then yet it isn't quite enough, because you have got to go on learning.  

Therefore, I do not mean to suggest that she has a sort of frame work in her mind and in the subsequent novels she is either filling the gaps or offering arguments in support of that framework. Her writing is essentially of an exploratory

29 Nancy S. Hardin, "An Interview With Margaret Drabble", Contemporary Literature, 14,3(1973), 275.
nature as she herself has indicated in another interview with Jean Pickering that she feels engaged in the search for a pre-existent reality, "I write towards a point in the middle because I never know the end, the end depends upon the middle situation, the conflict in the person or the group of (persons) people, the conflict that in one way or the other has to be resolved. But I never know the ending. If I knew the ending, I'd never bother to write the book. It's as though I knew I was going to start here and go up to a midpoint, and then it can come down in several different directions. By the time you have reached the top of the hill, you ought to be able to see the way down. But usually there is a point at which the ending is glaringly obvious or inescapable."30 Hence what seems a possible solution of the problem in one novel may as well break down in the next as she grows more and more aware of the dense complexity of the problems she encounters. The novels arrive, therefore, at different conclusions. That knowledge is never

certain, that language does not represent or clearly and infallibly communicate, that personal identity is a fiction and that our belief in other 'selves' rests upon shaky evidence - these 'facts' are not for her grounds for celebration as for Pynchon, but neither do they plunge her into an abyss of nothingness from which there is no return. Despite all this, a life of sorts seems to go on and something like community can be erected upon knowledge that is always questionable. It is a narrow community, stretching with difficulty from lower middle class to upper middle class but unable to comprehend radically different contexts. Still community is possible, Drabble suggests. It is always a fiction, but one that can be constructed by its members who are its only authors. Hence the infamous challenge to the reader "so there you are, Invent a more suitable ending if you can", is not what it has so often been mistaken for, a coy piece of self-congratulation by Drabble upon her own superior powers of artistry. It is a serious...

31 Eric Koran, "Archaeology begins at home", Times Literary Supplement, 26 September 1975, p.1077: "There is an old-fashioned and obtrusive narrator who flaunts her omniscience in a most distracting fashion... As the end approaches, Margaret Drabble becomes positively skittish, 'So there you are. Invent a more suitable ending if you can! It reads like a gauche dissimbling of character, as though Jane Austen had taken to stream of consciousness..."
invitation to the reader to create a different fiction, by creating, through compassion and understanding, a different society.

The exploration and the simultaneous demystification of the myth of exclusivist personal identity and other fictions reaches its climax in her later novels where all the nineteenth-century plots governed by one central protagonist are fractured and deconstructed which have perpetrated the myth of heightened individual consciousness culminating in the extreme form of narcissism in the 'moderns.' This is perhaps because Drabble has become increasingly conscious of an infinitely ever-expanding interdependent network of humanity where the individual inevitably recedes in importance and appears more cosmic and less personal.