CHAPTER VII
CASUISTRY THAT CAUSES HAVOC
THE NEEDLE'S EYE
The impact of a misinterpreted sermon that "it's being easier for camels to get through needles' eyes than for rich people to get into the kingdom of heaven" (85) on the tender mind of an eight-year old girl forms the basis of the novel The Needle's Eye. The eye of a needle is "a Hebrew phrase meaning a gate in the walls of Jerusalem, and of course camels could get through it, or small ones anyway, though it was a bit of a squeeze" (85). The heroine, Rose Virtue Vassiliou, is a dreadfully religious child who gets corrupted by her governess Noreen, who nags endlessly about Vassiliou's "wickedness in being so rich and usury and interest rates and gambling and shares and the stock market" (85). Under the influence of Noreen, she listens to the sermon wrongly interpreted and this casuistry "was like the Road to Damascus" (85) to her. Soon after coming back from church, she overhears her parents' discussion of a burglary and takes a vow never to possess anything that she fears to lose.

Born in a rich family and brought up by a succession of nannies and governesses, Rose grows up into a fine girl without developing any attachment for her parents.
They're a funny couple, you know, they brought me up very oddly .... my father made all this money, and married my mother when they were both quite old .... She doesn't really do anything. She hasn't got any friends or anything.... She's a very sad person. Bored all the time. My father's quite different, he works all the time, he never stops, I can't see what there is in it for him now but he just can't stop. So neither of them had much time for me .... he wouldn't talk to me because all he could talk about was business and I didn't understand about it ... I suppose I was a disappointment to them, but on the other hand it's hard to imagine what they could actually have wanted me to be, they never tried to make me take an interest in anything, they didn't try to encourage me to go out or do anything. (99)

The preceding citation unmistakably suggests the unhappiness of Rose, who never enjoys parental affection. Her analysis of her parents and their behaviour throws light on her discontent. Unable to receive any affection either from her sad and idle mother or from her busy father who, perhaps, tries to find escape in his hectic work, she holds wealth responsible for the gap between them. Their failure to play their roles properly as parents and their indifference and inability to communicate with their daughter create a gulf between them and
Rose, which widens with the passage of time. She suffers solitude even as a child and she has company only when they send her to a boarding school. Though she hates it at first, things look bright with the entry of Emily, who proves a good friend.

The sermon of the needle and the camel and Noreen's ranting about the wickedness of rich people remain green in her memory. The massive allowance given by her father makes her a spendthrift. Her thoughtless donation of a large sum to a political magazine irritates her father, which results in a cut in her allowance. She meets Christopher for the first time in the office of that magazine and falls in love with him. Provoking parental opposition, she makes "a bit of a stir" (104) going to night clubs and restaurants with Christopher. Their photograph and the headline "Tycoon's Red Daughter Rose with Greek Croupier" (105) enrage Vassiliou and he makes her a ward-of-court to prevent her from marrying him. His attempt to buy Christopher off fails and it strengthens Rose's love for him. The moment she becomes a major she defies her parents' disapproval and marries Christopher. As the narrator comments, "they were faithful to one another, they were undivided, fate had not separated them, they had swum the Hellespont" (125).
Rose's deep rooted aversion for money lands her in unsurmountable difficulties. Her belief that "one couldn't get rid of money, that it would stick like a leech or a parasite, and breed and breed even if one tried to cut it out" (105) comes true as she inherits a part of a Trust Fund amounting to thirty thousand pounds. She, however, donates most of it to an African Charity in Central Africa for constructing a school. Christopher feels that she has no right to alienate so large a sum of money from their children and it causes the primary rift in their relationship. She behaves in an outrageous way which enrages Christopher. He considers her a "histrionic bitch" (92) and even resorts to physical violence, which leads to their divorce and "that spontaneous joy and that effortless renewal . had come to an end, it had died between them, it had been brutally murdered" (125). Talking about Rose, Drabble says, 

She's a girl who hungers and thirsts after righteousness and how difficult it is to be righteous, particularly, when you have small children. Duty can be terribly confusing once you've got children and husbands and you're personally involved with the other people's sense of righteousness, especially when it conflicts with your own.
Clash of personalities results in a conflict which turns one violent and the other virulent, effacing love for each other. Right or wrong, Rose chooses to walk on what she considers the path of righteousness. Her belief "if one has an image, however dim and romantic, of a journey's end, one may, in the end, surely reach it, after no matter how many detours and deceptions and abandonings of hope" (61) gives her the courage to proceed further.

Noreen's influence on Rose seems to be very significant and "Noreen is to be blamed for Rose's marriage and all its preceding and succeeding sorrows and embarrassments" (90). Making the guidelines given by her as foundation, Rose builds a new self and a new world. She believes that "wealth had destroyed her mother.... if her mother hadn't been so utterly idle, she might not have been so completely bored. So Rose psychologically saw her salvation in getting rid of the money." Sticking to her decision "not to make the mistake of most revolutions" (111) and revert to what it is that she is fighting not to be, she rejects everything and everyone, to live with her children in a working-class district. She works through her values as opposed to those of her parents at a considerable
cost of herself. She rebels against her wealthy background and settles in a squalid North London suburb in a badly built house and sends her children to the state school nearby. She feels happy looking after the children. All the other connections seem to her just part of being human "whereas being here, being myself, is something quite different, it's taken me so long to learn it and now I can't lose it. I'm happy in it. It seems to me right" (112).

After facing several problems, Rose settles in and slowly becomes "what she had once so long ago willed herself to be" (59). She chooses an unassuming and innocuous life style. Without being affected by the dissolution of their marriage, Rose tries to create her own reality, building up "brick by brick the holy city of her childhood, the holy city in the shape of that patched subsiding house" (63). She says to Simon,

I hated it at first, I hated it for years, but I believed in it, and now I love it .... I created it for myself. Stone by stone and step by step. I carved it out, I created it by faith, I believed in it, and then very slowly, it began to exist. And now it exists. It's like God. It requires faith. (43-44)
The preceding citation is a part of Rose's confession to Simon. She admits that she had found it difficult to accept the locality and the neighbourhood in the beginning, but the ideal and the real had merged gradually, resulting in her thorough transformation.

To some extent, Christopher is responsible for the transformation in Rose. His insistence that children should be brought up by the mother, and his refusal to help her in child rearing make a virtue of necessity. She takes the children entirely upon herself and sets up a solitary life with them in which she takes "sole charge, sole responsibility" (149). She learns to love the hardship of dealing with them, and she says "I do them all with love. Getting up, drawing the curtains, shopping, going to bed" (112). She confidently says, "All alone .... I arrest the course of nature. I arrest it. I divert the current" (117). Doing a variety of odd jobs — "I did dinners at the school, and I supervised the laundrette, and stuff like that — bloody badly paid jobs" (51) — she brings up the children and does not allow Christopher to re-enter their small world. Rose's image of domesticity being a nice little cozy working-class house, she chooses a simple life style and transforms her new house into a
reflection of her new self. The unexpected jolt she receives from the court shakes the foundations of her humble house, and she decries it:

I seem to have been struggling through legal nightmares all my life, first that awful business when I wanted to marry him, and then the divorce, and the rows about the money, and then this business. I can't face any more of it. (41)

This is the cry of Rose, a divorcee and young mother of three children. The law, one of the most fundamental of patriarchal institutions, seems to counter every move of hers. When she had fallen in love with Christopher and had decided to marry him, her father had made her a ward-of-court. When Rose and Christopher had found their marital life no more congenial, they had sought the shelter of law, which had proved to be a humiliating experience to Rose. After the dissolution of marriage, when she has moulded her life successfully according to her own design, Christopher sues for the custody of his children on the plea that he can provide them with better amenities than Rose. This unexpected bolt from the blue shatters her peace and batters her boldness. She feels that she cannot face legal wrangles anymore.

To counter Christopher’s contention that Rose is wilfully denying the children material benefits and
educational advantages, living in a decaying house in a working-class neighbourhood, Rose solicits Simon's help. She knows that the material benefits that Christopher is talking of are nothing when compared to the spiritual benefits that the children are reaping of simple life. The truth that she cannot prove it in a court of law depresses her, resulting in a gradual loss of self confidence. Realizing that "the law too and its processes, far from drawing ends and lines and boundaries, were also self-perpetuating, that they, like blows, answered nothing, they solved none of the confusions of the heart and the demands of the spirit, but instead generated their own course of new offences, new afflictions, new perversions" (198), she announces to Simon her wish to give up her custody case. Rose's inner conflict gives rise to several visions:

I will voyage into that dark interior,
I will satisfy this spiritual craving,
I will see what it is like, that other world, the world of destitution, I was made for it. ... there I should see it, the unimaginable. It is there, it calls me, I have only to walk towards it,
I myself, It is in me to go that journey, so how can I refuse it? .... I cannot survive my own rejection of this image. It gathers in the darkness of my soul,
It is my only chance to appease God himself, who so pursues one with these suggestions, who sends after one his fierce angels with their clattering wings. It is sacrifices that God has always demanded. He demanded Isaac. On the hilltop, the innocent. He shall have my children. On that dingy airport, where I shall be ill, and wretched, and lonely, he shall have myself. And there I shall find him. It is the only way to find him. (286)

The preceding citation reveals a visionary experience of Rose which is the outcome of her inexorable desire to devote her life for the cause of the destitutes. Watching her "holy city" crumble, she feels miserable. Trying to find an escape, she thinks of going to Africa, renouncing her children in accordance with her visions. To satisfy her spiritual craving, she wants to be with those destitutes and serve them. Deeming it a call from God, she seriously considers the issue in terms of sacrifice, and, unable to resist the spiritual urge, decides to renounce her children. She wants to follow the footsteps of saints. Becoming a victim of despair and reckless irrationality, she experiences division. She is saved as "the two sides did not obliterate each other, they collided, they continued to co-exist" (287).
Sometimes Rose considers her thoughts of renunciation pointless and silly, and looks forward to the decision of the court. Thoughts of renunciation, however, do not leave her and, time and again, she craves for it: "I gave some money away, but that's nothing. There are still plenty of things I wouldn't like to part with. The children, for instance" (86). Her inability to renounce her children pricks her and, after a long struggle, she makes up her mind and tells Simon, "I must learn to give up, I must learn to give up. It's so hard, it's so hard, but there's no other way. He is their father, after all, and I know it. I know that he's sane and I'm mad" (279). When Simon pleads against it, she says,

I can't tell you the agony I've been through, knowing that there was no way out .... Like being in a trap, in a hole, on a tight-rope, and every way I moved would be death. But not everyway. Because if I give him the children - if I did, if I did, then, there would be a way out. I could move, it would be different, it wouldn't be the same trap. It's all I can do. It's the only move. And I can't bear not to move anymore. (281)

She rejects outright Christopher's proposal of her moving to his house with the question "How can I move house?
It's my whole being that's there" (281). The preceding citation presents the inner conflict of Rose. The necessity to renounce the children and her desire to keep the children with her prove equally strong, and she fails to come out of the dilemma. When Christopher abducts the children, she sees to it that an injunction is served on him. When the court's final verdict is in her favour, she circumvents it, accepting Christopher back and reviving their relationship. As Ellen Cronan Rose observes, "Drabble seems to suggest, through Rose, what it might be like to live on the boundary of other patriarchal institutions, such as religion and the law."3

Christopher's assessment of Rose, "she panicked as soon as she married me, she only did it to give herself a real fright, and then she couldn't face it when I turned out all right, when I was loyal to her" (253), presents Rose in a different angle altogether. His belief that "she's demented" and his statement that "she can sit in a bus shelter for the rest of her life if she wants to," and his decision not to leave the children to sit there with her (254) show his vexation with Rose and concern for his children. On the other hand, in pursuit of her principle, Rose deprives herself and her children of several things in life. Her realization that "it had
been narrow, her conception of grace, it had been solitary, it had admitted no others, it had been without community" (395) brings a change in her. Critical of Christopher, she says, "he's as stubborn as I am. You'll never get him to change anything. He's fixed, he's set" (282). At the same time she is not unaware of her drawbacks, "I'm a hopeless mother, I know I am, I'm mean and mad and selfish" (280). After going through "some bad moments and some long trials" (360), she finds that "her whole nature is placid" (394). The validity of Drabble's statement that Rose "couldn't bear the torment of her conscience about what she had done to Christopher and she couldn't bear the torment of living with him either"\(^4\) can be perceived in the light of the above citations and also in the immense relief Rose experiences when Christopher announces his trip abroad on business for a fortnight, after their reunion.

The epigraph to The Needle's Eye consists of the following lines from Yeats' "The Fascination of What's Difficult": "The fascination of what's difficult/Has dried the sap out of my veins and rent/Spontaneous joy and natural content/Out of my heart." Rose's longing to remain righteous even at the cost of her marital life shows her fascination for the difficult. Christopher
sums up Rose's behaviour in a few words: People become wicked and selfish "when they get hold this idea of being good. They destroy everything about them. They end up in a burning desert" (234). Rose's pursuit of the idea of being good drains away her life and strength, and she feels as though she is stuck in a hole. After a long struggle, she succeeds in freeing herself from the good, Philistine life and its illusions. It has been observed that "If the early novels are, as Drabble has said they are, about the situation of being a woman, The Needle's Eye is about being a woman in a world of patriarchal ideologies and institutions."^5

Rose seems to face problems similar to the ones faced by Drabble's earlier protagonists: "Drabble continues to explore the problems confronting contemporary women and to seek models for the future. Earlier thematic concerns — the causes and effects of bad marriages, the responsibilities and joys of motherhood — still preoccupy her especially in the character of Rose Vassiliou."^6 Korenmann's observation is valid in view of the protagonist's frustration with her parents, her thoughtless love marriage and the consequent divorce, the joy she experiences as a mother and the responsibilities she shoulders single handed, and the resultant problems.
Simon Camish, the chief male character in the novel, stands in contrast to Rose in a number of ways. Like Clara Maugham in *Jerusalem The Golden*, he had been brought up in a working class home in the North of England by a fanatically self-righteous and socially aspiring mother. He is as introspective, contradictory and intriguing as Clara, but whereas Clara's sense of achievement gives her satisfaction, he realizes the price he has paid for his success a little late. His strong "sense of obligation" proves harmful to his emotions and he spends most of his time doing what he ought to do, ignoring what he might have wanted to do: "It was for her (mother), in a sense, that he had become a barrister, for her that he had married Julie, for her that he had accepted that stinking dirty money" (136). His mother "had done her best for him, wanting nothing but his escape. She had nourished dreams of escape, herself, once: she had looked forward to a brighter dawn" (132). To expiate his guilt over his mother's self-sacrifice, he tries to fulfil her ambition: "The two major decisions of his life, his career and his marriage, had both been made through default, through guilt, through a desire to appease and placate, brought on by a lack of spontaneous love" (131).
Simon confesses that he did not marry Julie for money; he had fallen in love with her way of life which seemed the very opposite of his own cold, overwrought, conscience-stricken, guilt-ridden childhood. He had been drawn to her like one "attracted, compelled, to approach one's own doom, to live out one's own hereditary destiny" (70). He finds Julie different after marriage, a bigoted, cold, and irrational person: "The gaiety had revealed itself as a manic fear of solitude, the gregariousness as an inability to make any friends at all, the desire for a fast life as a symptom of a profound, irredeemable crippling social ambition founded on the insecurity of her own provincial background (68). Julie sulks and moans and makes herself intolerable to live with. He never objects to her way of spending money or her insistence on living in London. Still, "she was profoundly, painfully, evidently unhappy" (69).

Simon never expresses his repulsion for her "ostentatious vulgarities"; he holds himself responsible for her unhappiness — "he had failed her, he had been inadequate, he had not even been able to satisfy her simple needs" (69) — but the pointlessness of his loyalty to her depresses him. However, the feeling that "she needed him, he was indispensable to her" stops
him from taking any drastic step. He sacrifices himself to her needs, though "he did protest. He said nothing, but he eternally protested: he could not accept, he could not reconcile himself" (71). He finds himself a helpless victim of a nagging feeling of bitterness, and he feels that "there was nothing to be done about it, nothing, there was nothing in himself that could save him: there was nothing to be alone in life, but to keep going, keep working" (19). Like Frances Wingate, in The Realms of Gold, he tries to drench his bitterness in work and forget himself:

He also thought that perhaps there was a natural progression, an inevitable progression, for people like himself, from his background, who had grown up amidst too much physical intimacy — houses too small, settees too narrow, bedrooms too full, kisses (like his grandparents'). too brutal and forceful—from this world they could only wish to grow apart, into the thinner air of non-touching, into larger rooms and spaces. And having reached this clear, empty space, they would wish once more to find touching, to find chosen, not accidental warmth, to find intimacy and contact. And it would no longer be possible, the world of touch would be lost for ever. (54-55)
The above citation throws light on Simon's state of mind. Respecting his mother, who had pulled him out of the northern working-class mire, he becomes a member of the upper-middle class society, which stands in contrast to what he considers a cozy and comfortable background. He suffers alienation from others and from his environment and fails to find any affinity to the new society.

The new life looks empty, distasteful, and disgusting, but Simon falls a helpless victim to it without any hope of escape. He grows exceedingly depressive and introspective. He feels that "His whole life — the clothes he wore, the car he drove, the way he spoke, the house he lived in — was an act of misrepresentation" (138). His helpless spending of time with people he deeply dislikes and talking about things that bore him rise a "cry of mute anguish and lonely fear" (186). Their unnatural and artificial life style provokes him into thinking that "He and Julie had over-reached themselves, they had set their sights too high, and therefore it was that they clashed and bled, and that their faces were lined with the furrows of an unsuitable strain" (187).

Creighton notes that Simon is "a man who feels hopelessly shaped and maimed by a hereditary and environmental conditioning inimical to personal wholeness and
integrity.... a man unable to reach out to others, a man shockingly cut off from his own children, a man who is finally resigned to passive endurance of the unsatisfactory life he has made for himself."7 Sadly estranged from his children, Simon suffers silently. His reflection that "people endure not one lifetime but many, layers and layers of evolved suffering handed down, worse than anything Freud had ever proposed in the way of predestination" (30) reveals the depth of his sorrow. He does not think of parting from Julie with the thought "if people cannot accommodate each other's prejudices, then what was the point in attempting to live together? No point at all, and yet it had to be done" (71-72).

Embittered through failure of one kind or another, people resent the more fortunate. Simon hates everyone for one reason or another and though he notices the danger of growing cynical, he suppresses this base impulse knowing well the continual suppression of impulses is an unredeeming activity. Dry as a bone, he wants everything to be as dry as himself so that he will not be reminded of thirst.

As mentioned earlier, the lives of Simon and Rose stand in contrast to each other though both of them construct their lives in opposition to their childhood
worlds. Spiritual to the core, Rose gives away all her money to the poor and courts poverty. Simon marries money and lives in spiritual aridity. Though he loathes his wife and her ways, he gropes in darkness without hoping to come out of it. Drabble says,

He is completely trapped.... he is very representative of a lot of people who have good intentions but are completely trapped by their career, their family positions, their wives, husbands, domestic responsibilities and their own character which has created the circumstances and put them there, really.... He is the kind of man who could never walk out, he was bound to stay there to the bitter end.  

Like John Stuart Mill, Simon conceives the right end but despair without any hope of reaching it (189). He realizes that "man had been formed too low in the scale of possibility, with just enough illumination to suffer for failure, and too little spirit to live in the light, too little strength to reach the light" (189).

In the very first meeting with Rose, Simon forms a high opinion of her and he feels very insignificant in comparison with her. Her words sound to him like the language of religion. Rose's rebellion against her parents' personal and social values and her divorce
appear right to him, and he feels that "she had found happiness, and a life that she could peacefully live, and usefully" (197). The authentic aristocracy of Rose and her renunciation of wealth attract him, which results in his introspection. He feels as though he had sold his soul, and his suffering is revealed in his words "I am embittered" (18). As Nancy Poland observes, "everything seemed to be going for him. He's miserable. He's as introspective as proust. He should have been a writer but he becomes an establishment lawyer. He has a rich wife and children he cherishes and pseudo friends and a fine career and from all this he has no escape." He is trapped and he seems to be too good to escape it and thus he experiences death in life. One can understand his attraction to Rose as opposite poles attract. Both of them believe in righteousness but only Rose succeeds where Simon fails.

Simon attempts to forget the monotony and meaninglessness of his life in Rose's company, but Julia counters it by denouncing him for coming home late and by accusing him of cruelty and rudeness. Pointing out his inadequacies as husband and father, she asks him, "what did you marry me for, what for, what for?" (91). Trying to find escape in his profession, he remains a
frustrated, resigned, and incomplete man. Rose proves a source of delight and a light in Simon's dark life. She appears to him "an everlasting flower never to open, never to die, a witness, a signal, a heroic pledge" (80). He finds "some inexplicable grace" (164) in her way of life and longs to "arrive at such a state of grace" (113). Simon seems to derive vicarious satisfaction observing every move of hers. He honestly attempts to understand Rose but fails. Considering himself far inferior to Rose, he asks himself, "a man like him, how could he ever guess correctly, at what she truly felt?" (393). Simon interprets "Her circumspection of the law in taking Christopher back as a gesture of selfless renunciation motivated by religious belief." He believes that "she is winning some victory in there, behind those threadbare curtains. She is sticking it out, meaninglessly faithful she is loyal to her vows" (385). Like a watchdog, he observes her and her house to reassure himself that she is still on her chosen path. With a temperament that finds renunciation more natural than enjoyment, he wants Rose to be righteous all through. Finding Christopher's effect on Rose to be disastrous, he fears that "he was losing her: she was being destroyed, before his eyes" (384). His observation of Rose brings him close to a religious experience, "an encounter with
Thus, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese puts it, The Needle's Eye is about parents and children, mothers and children, Rose's determination to retain custody of her own children, the conflict between her 'ambition' to live as she chooses and her ability to hang on to her children, and her ultimate reconciliation with her husband because of the children .... about morality, moral difficulty, virtue, souls, salvation, and the potentially corrosive, corrupting nature of even professional and moral ambition.

To conclude, the novel seems to convey, through Rose, the message that "Life is real, life is earnest, and the grave is not its goal, dust thou art to dust returneth was not spoken of the soul" (398).
REFERENCES


5. Ellen Cronan Rose, *The Novels of Margaret Drabble: Equivocal Figures* 73.


