CHAPTER XI

THE ABANDONED WAY

THE RADIANT WAY
Talking about the title "The Radiant Way" to an interviewer, Drabble states, "The title is ironic in that it reflects the loss of the old confidence—we thought we were on the radiant way. But there was, through many decades of this century, a belief in education, a belief in progress, a belief in a harmonious progress for the whole population towards a better educated, better fed society, better health, better hospitals and we have now abandoned that radiant way; we have abandoned that idea, we don't even think it is a good idea. So the title is an ironic title."

Drabble's interviews indicate her unhappiness with the society in transition which fails to accept the old values and which is unable to form its own ideology. This trend affects every section of society. Like blind people, they grope in darkness, having abandoned the way which was supposed to take them to the heights of progress. The novel is largely related from the points of view of three central characters—Alix, a woman of acute social consciousness, Esther, who dissociates from all political events and becomes a—political, and Liz, a success woman of the eighties, who is able to make money from both private and public sectors. The meeting of the three in Cambridge where
they had gone for an interview had been accidental and the sense of freedom from all restraints which they had been experiencing at that time was coincidental. Liz’s escape from the world of a "domestic ghost" (90), her mother, Alix’s escape from the small boarding school world of her parents, and Esther’s escape from deprivation and splendour and their sharing of dreams and aspirations had resulted in their "fortuitous friendship" (86).

The Radiant Way begins on a New Year’s Eve with Liz Headland getting ready for the party to which they have invited nearly two hundred guests. Following the stream of consciousness technique, Drabble makes her protagonist follow her racing thoughts that reflect her personality and also contemporary society — we get a lot of information about the people who would attend the party "in the hope of a midnight transformation, in the hope of a new self" (1). Liz’s thoughts move from her make-up material to her mother, to whom she ought to ring as she "sits alone, ever alone, untelephoned, distant, incomprehending, incomprehended, remote, mad, long mad, imprisoned, secret, silent, silenced, listening to the silence of her house" (6). New Year’s Eve "had possessed for her (Liz) a mournful terror : she had elected it to represent the Nothingness which was her
own life" (4). Liz's comments on her marriage and marital life throw light on modern marriages. This party may be, in a way, a sign to indicate that she and her husband Charles are entering "a new phase of tranquility and knowledge of acceptance and harmony" (6) after weathering so much of married life. Twenty one years of marital life is an occasion to celebrate though they do not mean it as "a landmark in the journey of their lives" (6). Though they are able to sustain their marital relationship for such a long time, it is not without its "battle, bloodshed and betrayal" (9). Charles' new appointment had taken him to New York but that had not altered their lives in any way:

Nobody expected Liz to uproot herself, like a woman, like a wife, and follow her husband to America: she was expected to stay where she was, pursuing her own career and pursuing her own inner life, whatever that might be. A modern marriage. (9)

The preceding citation is not without its ironic implications. It reflects Drabble's unease with the modern marriage which does not demand constant companionship, full time cooperation, and perfect understanding between the wife and husband. It is not expected of a wife to accompany her husband even if it means a long separation.
She need not sacrifice her ambitions and pursuits for his sake, and that is what Liz does:

Liz knew how they were regarded: as a powerful couple who, by breaking the rules, had become representative. They represented a solidity, a security, a stamp of survival on the unquiet experiments of two decades, a proof that two disparate spirits can wrestle and diverge and mingle and separate and remain distinct, without a loss of brightness, without a loss of self, without emasculation, submission, obligation. (9-10)

Liz experiences the strain of living up to the lofty concept of marriage that they had invented. In spite of her disapproval of a great deal of Charles' life — his misplaced ambitions, his dangerous methods, and deplorable political alignments — she remains loyal to him. They know that their past, "with all its secrets, is solid behind them, and cannot be disowned" (10).

The name Ivan on the guests' list stirs her mind and Liz reflects on their association. She invites Ivan to the party taking pride "on her tolerance of Ivan's appalling behaviour" (11). She derives secret satisfaction from the knowledge that all the men with whom she had slept will be present at the party. After the
sickening shock of the rapid deterioration of her first childish marriage with Edgar Lintot, perhaps, due to her domestic incompetence and his male chauvinism, she had learnt to deal with people in a pleasant way. She maintains friendly relations with Edgar too, pulling him out of the "dreadful hinterland of marsh and bog and storm cloud" (13). As a woman of maturity and as an efficient psychotherapist, she is able to achieve pleasant relations with Edgar, Roy, Charles, Philip, and Jules, though, as a child, "she had wondered how women could bear to renounce their position in the centre of the matrimonial stage, the sexual arena, how they could bring themselves to consent to adopt the role of chaperon" (14). Unlike many women, she welcomes the signs of age and the process of ageing. She is wise enough to know that it is all part of the plan: "There is a goal to this journey, there will be an arrival.... It is only by refusing to move onwards that we truly die" (15).

Busy with trivial matters, Liz does not find time for important things like ringing up her mother. Only when daughter Stella greets her from Florence does Liz impulsively ring up her mother. The telephonic contact "with the tiny scratching clicking silence of
the voiceless house of the long ordeal of her childhood" (29) lessens her velocity. Adding to it, the sight of Lady Henrietta fills her with a subdued and dreary panic: "A chill, heavy waste of water lay between them, and in it floated the drowned empty skins of past attempts at rapport" (30). Somehow she represents pain, failure, and tedium to Liz. Her frigid style and vapid conversation make Liz sick and she thinks that Charles might have invited her as "she is the kind of person that people ask to parties, because her name inscribes itself by automatic writing on guests lists" (31).

Liz's premonition that something unexpected would happen that night comes true when Ivan, "who has the ability to raise the temperature of any social gathering to conflagration point" (8), blurts out the intention of Charles to marry Lady Henrietta. Though shocked at the sudden revelation, Liz rises to the occasion and gives the impression that she knows everything. Finding the stability of their marital life at stake, that night she corners Charles, who says,

I don't know what I thought. I thought that was what you thought. I knew you'd rather have been off on your own, if it hadn't been for the children. You've been very good with the children. I wouldn't deny that. But I knew you were getting restless, wanting to be off. (43)
The above citation reflects the failure of the couple to understand each other. As Charles says, Liz's listlessness has led to this drastic step. He entertains the thought that she has been with him for the sake of the children only. Now that the children are grown up, he feels that there is no need for Liz to stay with him against her wishes. As the narrator says, "Charles had married Liz in order to provide the three motherless babies with a proper family life" (17). Liz's anger provokes him, and he says, "you've always made it quite clear that you were staying here and that I could fuck off to the other end of the world for all you cared. You're too busy to speak somedays. You won't even notice I've gone" (44), thus reflecting on the modern working wife's behaviour. Her hectic work as a psychotherapist keeps her away most of the time. He bears with her in spite of his disappointment as, perhaps, he thinks his children need her services. Though he never voices his discontent, it is clear that he is unable to adjust with a working woman. It is not love but need that binds them for such a long time.

Liz accuses that Charles too had not had much time for domestic life. His busy life as an architect-entrepreneur and Liz's hectic work as a psychotherapist
leave them with no time for proper understanding. Charles' decision to divorce her proves "the most shocking, the most painful hour of her entire life" (45). Though there had been times when Liz, herself, had entertained the thought of dissolving their marriage: "She had often thought of it herself, had once or twice in low or high moments suggested it. But was nevertheless outraged, outraged, that the suggestion should have come from Charles" (68). It is not a sense of frustration but her badly hurt ego that moves her to tears. Her emotional outburst gives rise to a sense of tranquility and she decides to consider the entire affair as a petty offence of Charles, which has caused a minor irritation without any serious damage. She pities Charles for his decision to "embark on a new life in New York with the most boring woman in Britain" (42). Her thoughts centre round her children: "She did not worry about Sally and Stella: they were hers, her blood and body, for ever. But Jonathan, but Aaron, but Alan. Her boys, and not her boys. What was her claim to them now?" (66-67).

The womanly instinct — the mother in her — finds it difficult to part with her stepchildren. She hates Henrietta for the present predicament and feels she has no right over them. Encountering a number of questions
about her future, she indulges in introspection to find out whether she really neglected Charles. She concludes "How could one neglect a man who was never there? Was he never there because she neglected him?" (69) Thinking over the past, she says that it was not love but lust that had bound them together. They had connived with one another in "the satisfaction of the body" (142). She thinks that "It is only the sexual self that has been undone, and the sexual self is only a part of the whole" (143). Even after the calamity, Liz renders service as a psychotherapist but not with the same confidence. She suffers from a nagging sense of false­ness and faithlessness.

Charles too introspects and tries to justify himself:

... he wanted a proper wife who paid him attention, a wife who did not mock him and boss and tease and vanish .... She had spoken sharply, foreknowingly, of his own thoughts, of the thoughts and actions of his colleagues: she had treated them and him with scant respect, as though his world were trivial, superficial.... she had made him feel that his was hollow, time serving, transcendent.... She had excluded him from her knowingness, had indulged him with titbits, in passing. She had sapped his energy: he had felt it begin to wane. (115)
The preceding citation throws light on Charles' hidden thoughts. Though he manages to live with her as a partner, he seems to suffer from inferiority complex. He feels that he had never received the attention expected of a wife from Liz. Her sharpness to see into his heart and mind and her frivolous talk about Charles' activities and friends rub him on the wrongside and he decides to leave her. In fine, she gives a death blow to his ego and he turns to Henrietta, who is happily willing to accompany him to New York, thus restoring "his vision of himself as a man of power, of action" (116). He hopes she "would entertain him and entertain for him" (117). He is happy that "The battle was over, though who had won it, he could not say. His children were grown, his wife could have her freedom, her independence, and he could start a new life, with Henrietta Latchett" (116). The passage presents a society where the longevity of marriages seems to depend on the age of the children. After the death of his first wife Niami, he marries the "ill-born, ill-bred, brilliant Liz Ablewhite" (148). Fed up with the eccentricities of Liz he looks forward to marrying Lady Henrietta — daughter of a marquess — whose social style and art of conversation attract him. He is
frustrated with Liz and hopes for a better future with Lady Henrietta.

Henrietta's feelings about Charles are mixed. She would marry him because he had asked her to marry him. She is sure

Whatever Charles Headleand did to her, he could not turn out worse than the Hon. Peter Latchett. And if he did turn out badly, she could always leave him. Meanwhile, she would do her best to keep him. Most of her education had been devoted to the art of getting and keeping a man. She resented this.... She would like to make a success of things with Charles. (119)

The above passage exposes the weakness that underlies the modern marriage. Marriage, one of the most important social institutions, seems to have lost its significance. Henrietta's views remind one of Drabble's statements in an interview by Nancy Poland. She laments the behaviour of modern women:

Women formerly didn't dare to do anything but behave themselves in a very conventional way. Now they know, on a very basic and rather crude level, they know there is an enormous pool of divorced men going around. Therefore, if you leave your husband, or
he leaves you, it doesn't matter all that much, you go and find another man — if you want to. It's normal. There is no stigma attached. The threat used to be that if you weren't good to your husband he would leave you. If he leaves you, well, so what?²

Henrietta views marriage as a gamble and takes it in a very light vein. She will be happy if her marriage proves a success. If not, she will lose nothing and she can divorce him any moment.

It is difficult to hold either sex responsible for the miserable plight of the institution of marriage. Alix's and Esther's analysis shows that Liz cannot escape blame:

Had she not exploited him when it suited her, ignored him when it suited her, used him arbitrarily, selfishly, as shield, as butt, as banker, as status symbol, as scapegoat, as excuse? And he had rebelled, at last, he had stood up and declared himself, had taken her manifesto of independence at its face value and had walked away. (126)

The preceding citation presents the critical opinion of Liz's friends about the whole affair. In spite of their dislike for Charles, they do not remain blind to the
drawbacks of Liz as a wife. They hold her responsible for the unexpected turn in her life. They find "something two-faced, double-valued, hypocritical, about her use of Charles as a husband" (126).

Liz does not want to attach any importance to the house she had lived in for twenty years just because it reminds her of her mother's attachment for the semi-detached frozen house in Abercorn Avenue. The thought that her mother would never emerge out of it makes her take a decision to ignore the strength of her attachment to the house and not to cling to it. Like many other protagonists of Drabble, she had an unhappy childhood. She faced boredom as a child and yearned "to crowd her life with people, with voices, with telephone calls, invitations, children, friends of children" (31). She hates to remember "the dread of solitude, the dread of reliving her mother's unending, inexplicable, still-enduring loneliness" (31), which seems to be the reason behind her unwillingness to visit her sick mother. She tells her sister, "there's no need for you to take her meals. There's no need for you to see her at all. You have a right to cut yourself off. She has no right to coerce you. You must do it only because you choose to do it. If you choose to do it" (224). Liz fears that
"the break-up of her marriage to Charles might portend a life of solitary, uninvited, ostracized, divorced neglect" (257), but even after Charles leaves her, Liz doesn't find life really empty.

"We are all very, very sick, and it does not matter much" (108), is the motto of Esther Breuer. She is little affected by the tremendous changes in social values. She has no social conscience. Unlike her two friends, Liz and Alix, Esther remains unmarried but enjoys her life. She leads a slightly less straightforward social life, which is "ecclectic, fragmented, secretive" (93), and she becomes notorious as she is seen with a number of people. She pursues her studies and remains happy. She enters into a liaison with an Italian anthropologist. She does not want to leave London and so she declines to pursue a proper academic career. Teaching, writing and lecturing, she gains reputation.

Esther concedes that "her interests were pointless but harmless. I am not ambitious. I do not seek answers to large questions" (83). Her pursuit of the connection between the nature of quattrocento pigmentation and lichenology as a method of dating the antiquity of landscape signifies nothing. It is only a search for
itself. She is at times accused of eccentricity or indeed pervasity of vision. She is after precision and to her, depth is more important than breadth, and, like Jane Austen, she would like to have "intimate knowledge of a corner more valuable than a sketchy acquaintance with the globe" (84). Through the character of Esther, Drabble seems to point out the meaninglessness of research being carried out in many institutions. It appears as though it is research for the sake of research rather than for the benefit of society.

Alix Bowen is a liberal humanist who takes a fifteen mile drive across London once a week to teach a bunch of delinquent girls, a bunch of criminals. The remuneration she gets out of it does not cover even her petrol. She likes anyone who likes her, and "her natural kindness made it almost impossible for her to refuse any overture, however offensive, however louche" (91). She had met her first husband, Sebastian Manning, at a political rally, "who introduced her to a world in which socialism, far from being ridiculous, was natural, chic, colourful, confident, artistic" (87). He had appeared to her to believe that the world was a place full of sunshine and enjoyment, and "Alix loved this
new climate. She basked in it, she took off her clothes and drowned herself in it" (92). Nervous, sycophantic and diffident, Alix had found in his undemanding ease the simplicity of paradise: "He was a child of nature, a romantic, not an elitist. His happiness made others happy" (92).

For Alix, marrying Sebastian had been an alternative to a job. Though well versed in great writers like Wordsworth, Blake, George Eliot and the like, she had been ignorant of the ways of the world. Her happiness had rested on the fact that "she would marry Sebastian, she would never have to go back to cold and sooty Leeds to drink brown soup and eat gristle stew with dark greens and mashed potatoes" (95). But in no time she had realized her mistake in marrying Sebastian. She had felt extremely unhappy and learnt that she should not have married him: "She had betrayed herself and Sebastian by marrying Sebastian" (97). His good nature had irritated her almost beyond bearing and she had even contemplated suicide. The arrival of the baby had brought a change in her life and she had fallen "helplessly, hopelessly, recklessly in love with the baby. He was all the world to her" (98). In the meanwhile, Sebastian had started spending most of the time out of the house.
and, finally, had been drowned in a swimming pool, smoking dope. Alix had felt guilty for not acting as a perfect wife and for having ceased to love him: "Maybe her love would have kept him alive" (99). Her attempt to enter "the world of light" (99) having failed, she devotes her life to the service of the people: "Alix, old fashioned, had been out her not very distinguished career, never staying off sick, never taking a day off when Nicholas had been ill, attempting to prove single-handed that women were as reliable, more reliable, than men" (153). Her hunger for absolutes remains and to the question that had intrigued her in her childhood — "where does space end?" — she adds another question — "what happens if people go on demanding pay rises and getting them?" (103).

Alix, who had decided against remarriage, marries Brian Bowen as he stands as a symbol of the new and of the classless society of which she had dreamed. She starts teaching

... law-abiding young Asian girls seeking a few qualifications; middle-class women attending evening classes in order to get away from their children or their husbands or the emptiness of their homes; elderly autodidacts of both sexes and all classes: an illiterate, handsome, paranoid building-site manager; a refuse collector; and, of
late, the criminal inmates of Garfield — heroin addicts, thieves, prostitutes, muggers, infanticides, a couple of forgers — all of them selected because they are considered suitable for the experimental psychiatric approach of Garfield unit. (108)

The end of Jilly Fox baffles Alix and she is worried about the change in Brian, who has grown absurd. She neither approves nor understands the militant socialism he espouses. Shocked at the ideological change in Brian, Alix drifts away from him emotionally, and it might account for her attachment for Otto Werner. Transition leaves her with no desire to stay in London.

Much of the social criticism in the novel comes from Alix. Drabble admits that "a lot of it is social commentary; it is describing what we see in the streets, what is happening in the newspapers, it is a sort of collage, if you like, of contemporary life." It is about the society in transition, with a hope that the new populist and popular medium of television would help to bring the Brave New World into being, anticipating a forward-looking, forward-moving, cooperative, dynamic and classless society, full of opportunity, Charles makes a TV documentary about the beginning of a comprehensive education and classless society. In the eighties, no
one believed that education made one better and classless. In fact, education reinforced class distinction. People looked more and more for money. Corruption, materialism and vandalism disillusion Charles and he resigns. He never makes another film. He forms an independent programme-making production company, but within eighteen months is back with his old consortium, at a greatly increased salary as Executive Director. As Drabble points out, "The ideal figure in our society is the entrepreneur who doesn't have to be educated, or idealistic, or compassionate, but is out to make money and thereby bring money into Britain. If you make money it doesn't matter what you make it out of, if you make it you are OK. And this is a complete reversal of the standards of the earlier decades."4

Jilly Fox is a criminal who loves crime for its own sake and commits it for its thrill and excitement: "It was boredom that had driven her to drugs and crime; and in her case, the crime had not been wholly in pursuit of the drugs, it had been embraced for its own sake. For thrills, for excitement, for a sense of being alive, for a momentary freedom from the tyranny of time" (278). Alix finds her in Garfield, where she teaches delinquents once a week. As a social reformer, she
strives to bring change in Jilly Fox, but dissuades
Jilly's attempts to come close to her after her release,
accepting the view that it is "unethical, unprofessional,
for staff to maintain personal relationships with ex­
inmates outside the institution" (272). The "desperate
harm" (273) grows and surges in Jilly and she requests
Alix to allow her to go and live with her. Alix's blunt
refusal results in Jilly's threat that she would cut her
head off with an electric carving knife. Jilly's bitter­
ness and sadism may be due to the illtreatment she had
received in prison, where law and order hardly prevailed.
Thrown into the arms of parasites, pimps and pornogra­
phers, she becomes a reckless and cruel girl. Her letter
and request to Alix indicate her hidden love for her and
an irresistible urge to be with her. People advise Alix
against entertaining Jilly and she changes her phone
number to avoid Jilly. Alix's last meeting with Jilly
in Lykewake Gardens shatters her. The gruesome murder
of Jilly opens Alix's eyes to her failure as a social
worker. Her inability to change the criminal minds makes
her feel that she is defeated.

Jilly Fox presents a cross section of society,
and as Drabble observes, things in society are worse
now than they were a decade ago:
I think that the educational ideals of the comprehensive system are now under great threat. One sees it in all public sectors and state education, the national health service, and it looks as though people have abandoned the ideals of a welfare state. We have at the moment this row about the National health service which is very seriously under-funded, we have education — more and more people are sending their children to private schools — we have public transport which is very seriously under-staffed. And it makes the fifties and sixties look like a time of plenty and yet people are wealthier now than they were.\(^5\)

Society is very uncomfortable at the moment. Drabble pleads that what happened in the seventies was not viable — there was something wrong with the trade unions and, perhaps, people's expectations. She states,

... I am not really interested in narrative art, but I am interested in being an accurate witness of the society that I don't understand.... Although I can't see the solution or even see what the illness is, I think I can stand there as a writer and say, these are what I saw, these are the attitudes I observed, these are the casualities I witnessed and maybe somebody in the future can explain this.\(^6\)
As Drabble says, she might not have succeeded in her attempt to portray the shift of the eighties properly. As in her other novels, she focuses on marital lives of many characters. This novel seems to differ from her other novels in the sense it projects people moving from one person to another in marriage as if the marital discontent is solely because of the other person. It throws light on the discontent children feel with their unpleasant parents and their ways. The deep-rooted discontent in the three central characters keeps them away from their aged parents. The response of the grand-children to their grandparents leaves the novel on an optimistic note. Maybe it implies their decision to walk on the abandoned way and make their lives radiant.
REFERENCES

1. Margaret Drabble, interview, by C.T. Indira, 
   Literature Alive 2.2 (September 1988) : 20.

2. Margaret Drabble, "Margaret Drabble : 'There Must 
   Be a Lot of People Like Me,'" interview, by Nancy 
   Poland, Midwest Quarterly 16.8 (Spring 1975) : 256.

3. Margaret Drabble, interview, by C.T. Indira, 
   Literature Alive 2.2 (September 1988) : 21.

4. Margaret Drabble, interview, by C.T. Indira, 

5. Margaret Drabble, interview, by C.T. Indira, 
   Literature Alive 2.2 (September 1988) : 18.

6. Margaret Drabble, interview, by C.T. Indira, 
   Literature Alive 2.2 (September 1988) : 19-20.