CHAPTER II
A DISCOURSE ON MARRIAGE
A SUMMER BIRD-CAGE
In *A Summer Bird-Cage*, Margaret Drabble expresses her concern about women who are not sure of what they can do with themselves "if over-educated and lacking a sense of vocation" (8). As Ellen Cronan Rose observes, "It seems clear... that what Margaret Drabble was doing in her first and perhaps second and third novels as well was 'using' the 'wonderful material' she found in *The Second Sex* to try to understand the predicament girls face when they leave what Sarah Bennett calls the 'womb' of college — how and on whose terms to enter the adult world."¹ What would she be is the one problem which keeps Sarah "strung together in occasionally ecstatic, occasionally panic-stricken effort, day and night, year in year out" (146). As marriage has traditionally been an answer to that problem, most educated women enter into the bond of marriage without any idea of the concept of marriage. The novelist presents four couples — Louise Bennett and Stephen Halifax, Gill and Tony, Stella Conroy and Bill, and Stephanie and Michael — and examines the lives of the women in terms of their marital relationships, through the protagonist, Sarah Bennett.
Sarah, with "a lovely, shiny, useless new degree" (7) from Oxford, goes to Paris to tutor French girls privately. Her purpose seems to be, "in a faute-de-mieux middle-class way, to fill in time" (7). But the irony is that when Sarah says she went to Paris to teach young girls only to fill in time, she herself does not know till when this indecisiveness on her part makes her reject a university career, because in her view, a woman

'... can't be a sexy don. It's all right for men, being learned and attractive, but for a woman it's a mistake. It detracts from the essential seriousness of the business. It's all very well sitting in a large library and exuding sex and upsetting everyone every time your gown slips off your bare shoulders, but you can't do that for a living. You'd soon find yourself having to play it down instead of up if you wanted to get to the top, and when you've only got one life that seems a pity.' (183-184)

The above passage clearly shows that Sarah is a woman "blessed with intelligence, good looks, articulateness, and humor, whose sense of expectation, aspiration, and promise is coupled with a disturbing lassitude, an
inability to know what to do as a female person."²
In other words, Sarah seems to be caught in the bird cage of female identity. In her view, marriage is only "one way of escaping the secretarial course-coffee bar degradation" (8). But she cannot imagine herself married to a man like Stephen. She is surprised that her sister is marrying him. She projects one of the main themes of the novel, the difficulty of knowing another person, even one's sister. As the novel progresses, Sarah comes to know more and more about Louise but does not feel that she understands her.

As mentioned earlier, Stephen Halifax and Louise Bennett form the first couple. In Sarah's words, Louise is "far too intelligent to do nothing, and yet too beautiful and sexy to do all the first-class things like politics or law or social sciences and she was naturally afraid of subsiding into nothingness" (149). She has no idea of what to do with herself and is not interested in any career. After messing around for a year in and out of people's beds, she finds a job in an advertising firm but fails to stick to it. Her intention in marrying Stephen Halifax, a wealthy homosexual novelist, seems to be to buy whatever she wants: "I suddenly realized that if I married Stephen I need never think about need or want again. About wanting
things I couldn't buy" (196). She takes complete advantage of her being an "absolutely knock-out beauty" (9). She looks at love and marriage as two different things to be used for two different purposes. She says that she loves John but does not love him enough to marry him. Love for her is not the ideal love we find between true lovers, but only a faute-de-mieux. She reveals her views on marriage when she says,

'... oh, when I married him I thought we were going to be sophisticated all right, me marrying him for his money, and he unrequitedly but gratefully worshipping me, and me straightforwardly and nobly and honestly admitting that I didn't love him - and I never said I did, never - and me straightforwardly and nobly going off with John, and us all sitting and discussing these things cleverly over large drinks....' (201)

Thus she marries money and chooses adultery. But in the end she realizes that the cynical and cold exploitation of her marital relationship helps her in no way. After telling Sarah why she married Stephen, she says, "God, what a fool I was, what fools women are, What fools middle-class girls are to expect other people to respect the same gods as themselves and E.M.Forster ....
anyway, I'm through with it all now, through with all that" (201).

Stephen is no different from Louise. His attraction for a particular brand of high-powered, pretty girls leads to his marriage with Louise, who has all the obvious qualities — beauty, popularity, and notoriety. About Stephen's intention in marrying Louise, Wilfred Smee says, "Perhaps he hoped to catch a little of her intensity. To live off her energy. Perhaps he hoped she would understand him. Perhaps he simply wanted to get hold of her, to appear as her owner, when she'd turned down so many others. Including John. It must have looked to him at one point as though he'd beaten John" (150).

Both Stephen and Louise fail to achieve what they wanted to in their married life. Though the reason for the break-down of their marriage is their failure to understand each other, the two sisters attribute their own reasons for the separation. Louise suspects that Stephen, himself, is in love with John and "when he saw that he had a chance of getting me, when I was what John wanted, it must have seemed to him a chance of evening off a lot of old scores, and of getting a sort of vicarious satisfaction at the same time" (200).
According to Sarah, "Perhaps he wanted a wife to be a figurehead to his triumphal car, a public admiring ornament to his house" (9). On Stephen's side, his hope to catch a little of her intensity, to live off her energy, proves disastrous. He cannot bear Louise's adultery with their closest friend, John, and her display of it to the world "as though she enjoyed the situation" (139).

Stephen feels humiliated, falls sick, and fails to write a word and is on the verge of break-down. He becomes neurotic and needs "someone self-sacrificing and devoted....Somebody more interested in him than in herself" (148), since to Louise "her own life is so much more interesting than anyone else's that she has a right to sacrifice others" (149). She is so much in love with her life and herself that she declares, "I want my life, I want it now, I don't want to give it to the next generation" (205). As Sarah puts it, Louise is like a schizophrenic child who refuses to "recognize other people as people at all" (151). Her "narcissistic nonchalance" (14) results in her even ignoring the existence of Sarah completely. She is highly critical of her husband's behaviour, but never indulges in introspection. She says that Stephen is "a nut-case, but the
most selfish, the most specious, the most mean kind of maniac that was ever let loose" (197) who " sins against every kind of human relationship" (201). Thus their marriage becomes meaningless and tortures both. An interesting point to be noted is that though money and status seem to be the primary concerns of Louise, she does seem to have feelings suggestive of human emotions. When Sarah asks her why she married Stephen, Louise says, "I really don't know. I thought he wanted to because he loved me - he used to go on and on about how much he loved me, and how I was the most beautiful woman in the world, which I was only too ready to believe, and how important it was that I should marry him.... he made me feel it was my duty to marry him, so it wasn't all money and self-interest, a tiny bit of it was a feeling of pity and obligation on my part...." (198)

When, in fact, Stephen catches Louise with her lover and throws her out of the house, Louise confesses to Sarah that she hates him and cannot stand the sight of him. It seems to be more because of her inability to accept the limitations of her middle-class aspirations than because of her anger at Stephen.
Gill and Tony form the second couple. They meet at the university, fall in love with each other, and marry hastily soon after completing their education. The difference between the first couple (Stephen and Louise) and the second (Gill and Tony) seems to be that while for the former, marriage is only a means to an end — one's status in society — for the latter it is an end in itself: "They (Gill and Tony) were everything that Stephen and Louise weren't, spontaneous, happy, comprehensible and so forth" (38). Love leads them to marriage and they enter into it blissfully, ignorant of other factors. Another difference between the two marriages is that while the former is based entirely on monetary benefits that it gives, the latter is based entirely on passionate love and has no room for economics. But to their disappointment they find poverty and practical problems darken their happiness. Unable to face the sordid realities of life, they start quarrelling with each other.

Gill's resentment at Tony's demand that she "ought to be happy just sitting around in the nude and letting him paint me, and cooking him the odd meal" (39) grows deeper day by day. She feels as though she herself were a still life, which she doesn't like and "wanted to
do things too. I didn't like just waiting on him" (39). When she expresses her wish, Tony gives her canvas and paint and says, "You paint me then" (42). When Tony asks Gill to paint a picture of his, it suggests not only his view of himself as a superior painter but his male ego as well. Gill feels awful and offended as she is treated as an incompetent child and her talent is not encouraged. Once her female ego is hurt, she begins to view even simple things through a magnifying glass. For instance, his retort "what the hell do you think you're here for?" (40) to her refusal to put the kettle on enrages her. She finds it difficult to accept "his total lack of responsibility and social conscience and his habitual promiscuity" (43). Feeling humiliated and degraded, she insults him. Her unexpected pregnancy — "the crowning insult" (41) — irritates her and she decides to "get rid of it" (41). She says,

'... I'm one of the only people I know who really wanted children. But I didn't want them like that. Sort of accidentally and without my consent. Poor kid, I hated it so violently, it almost stopped me hating Tony — I felt it was a leech sucking my blood. Is that abnormal? I suppose it's not, really. I did want a baby so, but
I wanted it to be all proper and intentional with pink nurseries and flowers in hospital, you know. Not tied up in bits of old nightgown and smelling of turpentine.' (41)

The above passage clearly shows how poverty can kill a woman's motherly instinct. Gill's fear of poverty weighs more than her love for children. She gets her pregnancy terminated and walks out of Tony's life. Thus while pure materialism separates Stephen Halifax and Louise, abject poverty plays the villain in the lives of Gill and Tony. In both cases unforeseen circumstances and uncongenial atmosphere play havoc. In Gill's case, failure to think properly and view the situation in the right perspective results in emotional imbalance, whereas in the case of Louise it is lack of any emotion that results in the incompatibility. While Louise's decision to leave Stephen is final, Gill even at the time of separation has a ray of hope. She still loves Tony and expects him to stop her at the time of final parting. She realizes that mere love cannot be depended on for a successful marriage in a world where her belief that "facts counted less than principles" (39) is proved wrong.
The third couple are Stella Conroy and Bill, who lectures at the polytechnic. They marry in haste and suffer a lot. This couple seem to be equidistant from the other two couples in the sense that they do not lack love, unlike Stephen and Louise, and they do not separate in spite of their poverty, unlike Gill and Tony. In fact though they make their lives more miserable by begetting two children, they manage to drag on their lives somehow. In a way, the married life of Stella and Bill is taken as a warning by Louise, who takes an oath never to marry a man without money, and, more than that, never to beget children.

An interesting point to be noticed is that even in a society filled with unhappy marriages, we do have a few exceptions, the couple Stephanie and Michael being one of them. They form one of the steady couples in Oxford, with a predictable career marked before them. But while everyone wants to be like this couple, Sarah is not happy with that kind of married life. She thinks, "Both she and Michael are, separately and as a couple, the sort of people one might very much like to be, if one didn't suspect that through thus gaining nearly everything one might lose that tiny, exhilarating possibility of one day miraculously gaining the whole
lot" (85). Thus while for others this couple is a spur, for Sarah it is a deterrent from marriage as such a life lacks thrill. Another aspect in their life that suppresses Sarah's interest in marriage is their belief that life can be brought into a regulated pattern with changes wherever necessary. Saran's belief is that "people can't be changed: they can only be saved or enlightened or renewed, one by one, which is a different thing and not one that can be affected by legislation" (85).

Sarah's account of the four couples shows that she is unhappy with the lot of women, especially educated women. When Lowell, a friend of Francis', invites her to lunch with a few academicians, she feels "the impulse to tell everyone that I had got a degree too, as good as any of theirs, which is always a danger signal" (110). In fact, Sarah is not happy with her own life: "I felt as though everyone else was leading a marvellous, progressive life except me, and that I had been subtly left behind" (110). Her problem is that though she has high aspirations and a sense of possibility, she never articulates what exactly she wants in life. Cataloguing the various tastes of her friends, she thinks,

... people choose their own symbols naturally, for Gill always has in her
room vast masses of green leaves, any leaves, chopped off trees or hedges, whilst Stephen and Louise have dried grasses in long Swedish vases. Simone, the flower without the foliage, and Gill, the foliage without the flower. I should like to bear leaves and flowers and fruit, I should like the whole world, I should like, I should like, Oh I should indeed. (70)

The above passage shows Sarah's sense of expectation. Unlike her friends Simone and Gill, she refuses to be satisfied with smaller things; she wants the whole world. The passage also shows her passionate concern for life. She expects more from life than others do and wants to make something of her life though she does not know what exactly it is.

Perhaps it is this sense of expectation that is the hurdle to her settling in life. She admits that she and Francis are "most inseparably in love" (73). But she does not marry him straight away, as Tony and Gill do. She forces Francis to accept the commonwealth scholarship and go to Harvard to study political theory. Though she says she is in love with Francis and "it's unlikely that I could ever love anybody else" (74), she is not confident about her love for Francis nor is she
sure of Francis' love for her: "the fact that he went meant that he didn't love me, the fact that I drove him to it meant that I didn't love him" (74). But on introspection she realizes that the fault lies with her, and it is her failure to understand herself. Sometimes she thinks that she suffers from acute loneliness because "everyone had lovers and babies and husbands but me" (179), but she immediately counters it saying that her loneliness does not make her feel miserable. To her, life is not just love and marriage; she wants something more than that. She considers herself an emancipated woman and believes that "the days are over, thank God, where a woman justifies her existence by marrying" (74). To her "a woman being nothing without a man" (187) sounds stupid. She wants to take the road not taken when she says that she "takes refuge in things like chance, unchartered encounters, cars in the night, roads going anywhere so long as it's not somewhere that other people know better" (128). But when she says that she is not interested in the kind of life other people live, she does not mean she wants to lead a spiritual life. She observes, "Only when one has got everything in this life, when one is eaten up with physical joy and the extreme, extending marvel of existing, can one trust oneself on the subject of the soul" (128).
In spite of her views on love and marriage, Sarah wants to remain a one-man girl. Unlike Louise and Gill, she is "prepared to suffer in order to gain a sense of hope" (18). Her behaviour makes others call her selfish and insensitive, which, of course, does not hurt her because she experiences the joy of understanding many unintelligible things. For instance, when Jackie Almond calls her a high-powered girl, it dispels "a little of the isolation of behaving as I do, a little of the classlessness and social dislocation that girls of my age and lack of commitments feel" (96). The pattern of behaviour in which Jackie catches her triggers off her thoughts and she feels amazed at her social loneliness. She is aware of a "hinterland of non-personal action, where the pulls of sex and blood and society seem to drag me into unwilled motion, where the race takes over and the individual either loses himself in joy or is left helplessly self-regarding and appaled" (71).

As mentioned earlier, Sarah expects a lot from life but does not know what exactly she wants. Her statement "Driving along a street I'd never seen with a man I'd never met in the dark of considerable understanding was worth a lot of the rest of life."
I am never really happy unless lost in this way, and connected in this way" (97) reveals only a part of her nature. Though she feels liberated, she seems to be not sure of herself: "I don't know what I am missing in my life of permanent and valuable contact, though I feel its absence, but at least from time to time I get something that I would never get were I not so displaced — the sudden confidence, the momentary illumination of feeling, ships passing and moreover signalling in the dark" (98). She seems to be full of contradictions. For instance, though she wants to be a one-man's woman, when strung with loneliness, she invites Jackie to her house one night, proving to be true the comment of people that a part of her's is like her sister Louise.

Insofar as her relationship with the members of her family is concerned, Sarah seems to be under Louise's spell for a long time. Sarah waits on Louise and "yearns for the crumb of her company that never fell my way" (101). Everytime Louise ignores her, she feels disillusioned. She is not insensitive to her blankness but swallows her disappointment. Louise hurts her by being openly sadistic: "Until I went up to Oxford I always believed that the defensive, almost whining
position that she invariably pushed me into was entirely the fault of my own miserable nature, as I admired her fanatically" (20). It seems as though she suffers from inferiority complex in spite of her superior intelligence. Her mind is always pre-occupied with the thought of Louise being superior to her, and she mutely pleads with Louise to "teach me how to win, teach me to be undefeated, teach me to trample without wincing. Teach me the art of discarding. Teach me success" (25). All this leads her to grumble at the inequality and the injustice in life. She feels that life is unevenly distributed "to make physical charm so immediately apparent or absent, when one can get away with vices untold for ever" (32). It is at Oxford that she realizes her mistake and comes out of her sister's domination.

Another aspect of Sarah's character is that she likes "people to be free and bound together not by need but by love" (31), though she knows pretty well that it can't be so. But a point to be noted here is that before she goes to Oxford she is so thoroughly dissatisfied with the members of her family that she becomes restless and hates the very idea of staying with them for a long time. This attitude of her's makes her mother say,
You just use home as if it were a hotel, you two, you don't seem to remember I'm your mother and have always been on your side whenever your — and then all you want to do is to get away to your horrible dirty friends and horrible poky little flats.

All I am is a servant, that's all I am, just a household drudge, and when I think how I respected my mother and carried things for her, and the years 'I've sat in for you two, all those nights when your father was away .... (64)

In the above passage, Drabble seems to point out a tragic fact of the middle-class families in England — children's failure to love their parents, which desperately affects everything, "whether marriage means anything, and whether one ought to have children, and all sorts of practical things like that" (137).

Drabble presents "a world where old values are no longer tacitly accepted and new views are unclear. Knowing only too well that they have been shaped and aimed by forces larger than the self, they question whether they can impose a shape upon their lives at all."³ Sarah is almost depressed over the shapelessness of women's lives, which is evident in her words
I looked horrifyingly pregnable, somehow, at that moment; I looked at myself in fascination, thinking how unfair it was, to be born with so little defence, like a soft snail without a shell. Men are all right, they are defined and enclosed, but we in order to live must be open and raw to all comers. What happens otherwise is worse than what happens normally, the embroidery and the children and the sagging mind. I felt doomed to defeat. I felt all women were doomed. (28-29)

Sarah is indecisive but her nature is due to her misunderstanding of the new world. She refuses to define herself in terms of marriage or a good career: "I feel like someone living in a paper house surrounded by predatory creatures. They believe the house is solid so they don't attack, but if I were to move they would see the walls flutter and collapse and they would be on to me in no time" (80). She seems to be on her guard and waits for ever to take a decision. But in spite of her contradictory and ambiguous statements, she seems to go in favour of marriage.

Though the focus of the novel seems to be narrow, it captures the sense of drift and dislocation
that women just leaving universities feel. In a hurry to settle in life, they take wrong steps, which bring misery to, if not ruin on, their lives. To Sarah, the disintegration of Gill's marriage illustrates the folly of blindly leaping into a marriage of love. She does not like the marriage of Stephanie and Michael, a life of domestic order and harmony, as such a life lacks thrill. The twisted motive of Louise in marrying Stephen is disastrous. To get her pound of flesh from society, which advocates marriage and which does not let her live as she pleases, Louise jumps into the fray of marriage only to taste defeat. She advises Sarah not to marry for love as it does terrible things to people. In reality, it is not love but her perverted thinking and way-ward life that brings ruin on her. It is generally believed that faithfulness to each other is the binding principle that keeps the marital ties in tact. As Sarah says, the "principle of marriage" does not bind "those who don't want to be bound" (141). On analyzing the marital lives of Louise, Gill, and Stella, Sarah wonders "If I myself would ever dare to get married. There were so many dangers" (187).

Drabble's fiction at its best is a virtual "double-voiced discourse," a term used by Susan Snaider
Lanser and Evelyn Torton Beck. In this discourse on marriage she exemplifies the tension experienced by many contemporary women who are struggling to define themselves within a patriarchal frame of reference. As Drabble says,

> We do not want to resemble the women of the past, but where is our future? This is precisely the question that many novels written by women are trying to answer: some in comic terms, some in tragic, some in speculative. We live in an unchartered world, as far as manners and morals are concerned, we are having to make up our morality as we go. Our subject matter is enormous, there are whole new patterns to create.\(^5\)

Drabble examines the marital lives of a few contemporary women and exposes revolutions in values, without making any comment. She says, "I have lots of questions, endless questions. I don't really pretend to have any answers, so I am not a teacher, I'm an explorer."\(^6\) She, by her depiction of modern marriages, tries to help readers find patterns for a possible future and know how to behave, what to hope to be like.
REFERENCES


