



A Psychological Perspective of Margaret Drabble's *The Red Queen*

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Abstract

Butler's Gender and Performativity theory help us to analyse the complex situation of woman in Drabble's *The Red Queen* (2004). In this novel, numerous instances echo Butlerian thoughts. It makes us think in a way why gender is binary, why certain traits are assigned to males and females, and why one is bound to be a masculine male and feminine female. The female characters in the novels were not bound to act in an anticipated manner. In performativity and behaviour, these characters show resistance against the assigned norms of culture and society. Women's performances are restrained by cultural factors that cause gender discrimination. An implicit critique of the traditional concept of gender is presented in the novel. The most critical issue of Butler's gender theory is that women are stressed because of the performative norms prevalent in the culture and because of the male-dominated society. It is better to understand Drabble's novel with the help of Butler's theoretical concepts.

Keywords: Butlerian Ideas, Gender, Performativity theory, Cultural factors, Psychological Problems.

Margaret Drabble is listed among the accomplished postmodern writers of the twenty-first century. In the 1960s, Drabble's early novels were concise, first-person narratives of educated women in conflict with the social situations of Britain. Simone de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* argues that "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one" (281). One becomes a woman only under a cultural compulsion. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler says that for Beauvoir, "gender is constructed" (12). She also extended Beauvoir's statement that woman is something we do rather than something we are. Butler says "The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of

'identities' cannot 'exist' – that is, those in which the practices of desire do not 'follow' from either sex and gender" (24).

In the twenty-first century, Drabble is listed among the most powerful, interesting, and accomplished post-modern women writers. In 2004, Drabble published *The Red Queen*, a unique novel blending post-modern and supernatural element. This fiction deals with relating women's lives to the social culture and environment. In *The Red Queen: Margaret Drabble's (Auto) Biological Pastiche*, Milada Frankova says that Drabble "was compelled by the uncanny power of the autobiographical story and its voice to carry on the message across times and cultures" (81). *The Red Queen* is divided into two sections concerning ancient and modern times. The first section "Ancient Times" deals with the story of the eighteenth-century Korean Crown Princess, Hyegyong. She is a widow and a grieving mother. Dr. Barbara Halliwell, a British professor of self-awareness, is the subject of the second part of Modern Times. A copy of the princess's memoirs has been sent anonymously to Barbara who reads it on her plane to Seoul, where she goes to present a paper in a Conference at Seoul. She reads the mysterious memoir of the crown princess. Dr. Barbara Halliwell finds her own situation like that of the princess.

The Red Queen (2004) deals with the loneliness and frustration in women's lives because of cultural factors. If men and women are one soul who can establish a harmonious environment and can make good sexual chemistry, then why is a women's love, honour, and identity seized by a male-chauvinistic society, where women must suffer alone from stress, abuse, injustice, insult, and oppression. The principles, ideals, and norms constructed by a male-dominated culture are responsible for the stress and mental agony of women. Gill Jagger in *Judith Butler: Sexual Politics, Social Change and the Power of the Performative* (2008) says that Butler explains the situation as:

Gendered subjectivity is thus achieved and maintained through a primary and continued submission to the operations of social power and regulation. These are crucial to the formation of the psyche and the continued existence of the subject who is passionately attached to them and who is indeed dependent on them for "recognition, visibility and place. (95-96)

The theoretical perceptions of Judith Butler are widened in *The Red Queen*. The eighteenth-century Korean Crown Princess always stays with mental conflict and psychological fear. She was a young girl from a Hong family before she becomes a princess. Her aim was to wear a Red coloured skirt. She says, "when I was a little child, I pined for a Red silk skirt... Woven into it was a design of little summer flowers and butterflies, all in Red. I loved it and I fingered it. That skirt spoke to my girlish heart. I wanted one like it (3). Her desire for a Red skirt made her life stressful and brought disaster. Though her wish for a Red skirt was accomplished, she was not happy. She says, "I used to wonder, childishly, whether it was my longing for Red silk that bought all these disasters upon me and my house. For my desire was fulfilled, but no good came of it, and it brought me no happiness" (3). Throughout her life, it also brought depression, fears, worries, and tension and it was impossible for her to overcome them in her life. In short, the Red skirt was a curse for her.

Her married life, instead of bringing happiness, joy, and freedom, brought her fears, tension, and stress. The union between the prince, Sado, and the princess was hard. After her marriage to the Prince, it was mandatory for her to follow the courtly behaviour. But she was not convenient in that way of life. She explains herself as:

Strange foods were offered to me, but I could not eat. I was robed in stiff and uncomfortable court clothes of green and violet, and a slave of the bed chamber painted my child's face into an adult mask with unfamiliar cosmetics. I did not recognize myself. I longed to go back to my parents. (16)

The crown princess did not like the courtly lifestyle and she cannot escape. She says:

I wished to die, and so to avoid my fate. I cannot describe the intensity and the terror of my apprehensions. I felt like a criminal, though I did not know what offence I had committed. I cried and cried, and would not be comforted. I was only a child and had not learned the concealment. (16-17)

Her life was like a jail. "But fate marched towards me, with an army of regulations" (17). Sado, the prince, after his marriage with the crown princess also had two secondary partners, both of whom he got children. It was very common among their customers and there was nothing unusual. The Crown Princess could not accept this custom. She found it difficult to accept this practise. She says, "I will not say I did not suffer some jealousy and resentment, for I did, but I did not indulge them inwardly or reveal them outwardly" (61). The Crown Princess suppresses her feelings in her marital relationships.

The Crown Princess in *The Red Queen* is married to the Crown Prince, Sado. Both were children and their marriage was consummated when they only reach the age of fifteen. The Crown Prince Sado is the only son of the king. The King exaggerated about his son and gets disappointed by his constant disgrace. It results in Prince Sado's violent and murderous behaviour. Because of this, the king condemns his son to death in a rice chest. The young prince Sado died ill-fated for eight days without a drop of his royal bloodshed. Fifty years, his wife survives with him as the mother of their son, the new Grand heir, and later king. As required by the protocols and tradition of the Royal Palace, the crown princess during the seventy years of her life, never left the palace. She passively obliged to that culture. Her mother taught and trained her on how to behave in a marital relationship. So, she surrendered herself passively before her husband as a slave. The crown princess had to live in a male-dominated society. She considered herself as a helpless woman and tolerated everything that was happening in and around her.

The crown princess was not able to save her husband and her son. She says,

I think now that my first baby Ūiso suffered from a weakness of the immune system. We did not then know that such a system existed. There was nothing that could then have been done to save him. Even had these diagnoses been possible, no cure would have been available. Cures for these weaknesses are not readily available now, even though so much more is known about genes and heredity. Even in this age of transplants and gene therapy, some weaknesses remain incurable. (46)

Thus, she was not able to save her first son Ūiso. Again, her second son, Chongjo also died. She was very distressed about the death of her second child and it broke her heart. In grief, she lamented as "no turf would cover her; no grass would grow over her" (46). This shows the grief of the crown princess. She had a stressful life. Sado, the Prince was abnormal. He was a very strange and mad person and he behaved in a rude manner towards his wife, children, and his parents. The Crown Princess narrates the abnormal behaviour of Sado:

I remember in particular the terrible scenes on Prince Sado's twenty-fifth birthday in 1760. Sado lost his temper most violently, and I cannot say I blame him. He hurled abuse at both his parents, and threatened yet again to kill himself. He yelled even at his own children, who had dressed themselves up for the occasion in dragon – embroidered robes and formal blouses. When they come into the room to make the congratulatory bows, he shouted at them to get out, crying out that he knew neither father nor mother, nor son, nor daughters. They were frightened by this and turned white a ash... I felt completely impotent, shrunk to nothingness. I wished to turn to stone, to

vanish from this world. Poor children, poor little dolls in their best clothes. What harm had they done to him? They tried so hard to please. (95)

The Crown Princess wished to save her husband from his madness. But she was not efficient to do anything. She tolerated everything happening around her patiently. She lost her husband and her sons. After their death, she also lost her status as the crown princess. She says, "I have no name, and I have many names. I am a nameless woman. My true name is unknown to history. I am famous but nameless" (25). She also adds, "I did not know how to look to the future at this point. No clear path lay before me. I had lost my role and my purpose and my status at court" (140). These instances prove that the life of the Crown Princess was full of fear, grief, and mental agony. It is the female gender that suffers a lot in the male dominant society. She was worried and thought of ending her life. She states that:

Many thought I was fortunate to die in my bed, an old woman of eighty years. Indeed, it is remarkable that I managed to live so long, in such turbulent times. But how could I have allowed myself to die earlier. Many times, I wished to die, and sometimes I thought it my duty to die. But in universal terms, in human terms, it was my duty to live. My life was needed. My son and my grandson needed me. I could not abandon them. I survived for them. (5-6)

So, here in *The Red Queen*, we find the crown princess as an unhappy woman. She assumes the traditional role of a submissive wife. In her lifetime, she had never raised a single question. She was living silently in the male-dominated culture. Her feelings were suppressed.

Barbara Halliwell is portrayed as a depressed woman. The social regulations in the culture compel her to behave according to the established norms of society. The role of women has been changing over the past decades. Nowadays a change is coming in the psyche of women. They have found out that their oppressive and stressful situation is because of the gender stereotypical norms that are assigned to them by power, culture, and society that favours males. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* says that women must change their situation. The modern woman should be active in all the spheres of life. She also wants women to be equal with men. Butler's Gender Performativity theory helps a woman to overcome stressful situation. In *Judith Butler: Sexual Politics, Social Change and the Power of the Performative* (2008), Gill Jagger elaborates: "This psychic regulation is social and historical and therefore contingent. This allows the possibility for change and transformation" (89). The theoretical insights of Gender Performativity theory are found on Drabble's select novels.

In *The Red Queen*, the memoirs of the crown princess to some extent undermine the gender stereotypes. In eighteenth-century Korea, education was chiefly available to men. The right to education is not granted to women. "Learning was not forbidden to women, but nor was it freely offered to them" (35). She was also very eager to get learning. She informs:

When I was young, I read everything I could lay my hands upon. I stole learning from my clever young aunt, who was willing to teach me. I stole from Prince Sado, who in those early years was willing to talk to me about history and about literature and about the Confucian texts. I was an eager and a secret scholar. (35)

In this instance, the crown princess became a source of inspiration for other women and she also tried to challenge her gender stereotypical role. Drabble through her protagonists clearly depicts her views on female intelligence and the importance of female education. Drabble through her protagonists, depicts the female desire to upgrade themselves in the field of education and to hold a successful career.

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