

## TWIN STORIES OF DEFEATED ASPIRATIONS IN THE WORK OF MARGARET DRABBLE

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*Abstract: The present paper aims at identifying those universal transcultural human characteristics that can be encountered both in the court memoirs of a Korean princess of more than two centuries ago and in the existential journey of a 20<sup>th</sup> century English academic.*

*Drawing a rather obvious parallel between the destinies of two women situated so far apart from the historical, cultural and national point of view, Margaret Drabble has created a subtle intertwining of voices and motifs that transcends time and space, coming closer to the postmodern concept of Bakhtin's "dialogic novel". Dialogism is present in the novel through the voices of many commentators and translators, all of whom have brought their own interpretations and imposed their personalities on the two heroines. Besides illustrating this postmodern concept, the novel unfolds against the constantly shifting dialogue of cultures, 18<sup>th</sup> century Korea versus 20<sup>th</sup> century Great Britain, without any of the two getting the better of the other.*

*Taking into consideration the feminine/feminist approach dominating both the memoirs of the Crown Princess and the academic exploits of Babs Halliwell, the English lecturer, the paper aims at emphasizing those universal aspects lying at the core of all human beings, all over time and space, aspects that transcultural dialogue alone is likely to evince.*

*Keywords: transcultural, dialogue, feminism, dialogic, postmodern*

From the very beginning of the novel, M Drabble announces her intentions to write a transcultural tragedy and to ask questions about the nature of survival and about the possibility of the existence of universal transcultural human characteristics. Using the real memoirs of 18<sup>th</sup> c. Korean Crown princess Hyegyong as her source of inspiration, the author creates her own version of these memoirs, drawing subtle parallels between ages and cultures whose red thread is the feminine/feminist discourse. *The Red Queen* is the tale of two women situated centuries and miles apart struggling for survival in a patriarchal world, dominated by insanity, death and oppression. The first part of the book is narrated by the red queen herself, a Korean woman married to the crown Prince as a child and forced to navigate through a series of political and familial struggles which ultimately lead to the prince's insanity and death. The second part centers on Babs Halliwell, an academic who has also lost her husband to insanity and who seeks not only to escape from her past but also to embrace and exploit her present. Babs reads the memoirs on the flight to a conference in Korea and the spirit of the red queen haunts her throughout both her physical and spiritual trip.

In the prologue Drabble writes: "I have not attempted to describe Korean culture or to reconstruct real life in the Korean court of the late 18<sup>th</sup>.century". (Drabble, IX) What she has done instead was to construct a sometimes disconcerting hybrid in which the princess does

indeed remember her life (being entered as a child in a royal-wife lottery by her ambitious family) but with occasional jarring modern accents. All the traditional Oriental stops are present here: the gauzy silks, the claustrophobic women's quarters, the meaningless hours spent in changing clothes with nowhere to go in them, the mincing and guileful measures the princess must take to stay in her in laws' good graces, the makeup, the embroidery, the debauchery, the general female debasement. But the princess, when she has a child, suffers from "postnatal depression. She discusses her husband's "phobias". She speaks of anorexia, indoctrination, social protest, obsessive compulsive disorders and refers to herself as a "battered wife". Moreover, she considers herself an intelligent and articulate woman by any relativist and multicultural standards that you may choose to invoke. What the reader is confronted with is therefore a member of 18<sup>th</sup> century Korean royalty addressing an English-language-speaking, middle-class reader familiar with the psychological and sociological jargon of the 21st century. The author sheds light, therefore, on "the sense of the clarity of the individual self, speaking clearly and directly and personally, across space, time and culture. The Crown Princess speaks with dramatic urgency, as though willing posterity to listen to her."(Drabble, IX)

The memoirs of the Korean princess and their afterlife transcend the peculiarities of her age and may be ascribed to recent uses of autobiography as "the text of the oppressed"(Anderson, 104), addressing the issues of difference in terms of class, race and sexuality. Placing the narrator as a subject all but annihilated by circumstances and crushing events, the text draws closer to the feminist view of "autobiography as a forum of testifying, to be distinguished from confession" (Anderson, 127) particularly in relation to trauma. Subjected to deeply traumatic losses ( the loss of her first-born baby, her husband's mental deterioration and death, the constant battle for survival among the dangers of palace life), the Princess's memoirs become emblematic of a generic human /feminine condition strangely resumed by the early twenty-first century.

The generic condition of the Crown Princess is further enhanced by the way in which her first-person voice appears strangely selfless and nameless in her confession about her status after her husband's death: "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. And I was never a queen in my lifetime, red or otherwise. I became a queen after my death. So much happens after death."(Drabble, 2004:25)

Apart from reviving the Princess's voice in the novel, Drabble has given her an extra voice, as her ghost roaming in our time. The role of the ghost is that of negotiating the time and geographical distance and cultural difference between the original autobiographical story from the eighteenth century and the reader's time in the twenty-first century. Both Drabble and her created ghost seem to claim that "this posthumous revision is done in the belief that the universal exists" (Drabble, 8) with a view to bridging the gap between then and now. The Princess's autobiographical questioning voice is in continuous comparison with our time, in order to respond to the plea:"collaborate with me in my undying search for the meaning of my suffering and my survival." (Drabble,6).

From the narratological point of view, the merging of narrative voices is but a common place in the postmodern discourse, so much accustomed with the dialogism of Michael Bahktin. The carefully observed ontological boundaries of realistic fiction are therefore deliberately transgressed by the author of the novel. As the narrative unfolds, the Princess's voice of the memoirs and the commenting ghost voice are separate, intertwined or merged into a single one, unpredictably and repeatedly. The sustainability of the voices is further enhanced by the fact that

the ghost voice of the Red Queen, however fantastic, remains firmly anchored in realism and provides a link to contemporary reality. Moreover, all three narrative voices in the novel testify to following one single aim : “The pursuit of truth is a noble aim. One lifetime is too short to discover truth. Therefore, I persevere.”(Drabble, 2004, 78)

The second half of the novel, entitled “ Modern Times”, abandons both first person voices of the autobiography and, through an omniscient narrator, tells the story of Dr. Barbara Halliwell’s stay at an international conference in Seoul, South Korea. On the plane to Seoul, she reads and is strongly affected by the memoirs of the Princess having been sent to her by an anonymous donor .Once in Seoul, she visits the appropriate tourist sites to walk in the Princess’s footsteps and cannot help being affected by the similarities of two defining features in their adult lives: the loss of a baby and the madness of a husband. The postmodern academic cannot help being overwhelmed by the Princess’s astonishing insight into her condition and by the way it echoes her own insecurities and doubts: “The acuteness of the Crown Princess’s comments on Prince Sado’s mental state strike Dr. Halliwell as implausibly, uncannily, ahistorically perceptive. This woman must have been hundreds of years ahead of her time. Indeed, time has not yet caught up with the Crown Princess. Had she been one of those few rare souls born out of time?” (Drabble, 189)

This question seems to be emblematic of the novel’s whole endeavour, since Margaret Drabble herself points out the strange parallelism in the Prologue:

“What struck me most forcibly about the memoirs, when I first read them, was the sense of the clarity of the individual self, speaking clearly and directly and personally, across space, time and culture. This seemed even stranger to me than the sensational nature of the events described, and made me ask myself questions about our modern ( and postmodern) doubts about universalism and existentialism. The Crown Princess speaks with dramatic urgency, as though willing posterity to listen to her. After death, she is no longer confined by the culture that imprisoned her. She speaks out from it. She represents a peculiar version of the phenomenon of life after death. Like Dr Halliwell, I do not believe in ghosts. But I do believe that in some sense the Crown Princess is still alive.”(Drabble, 2004, IX)

What the reader actually witnesses is the subtle revelation of the common predicament of the Crown Princess and the contemporary academic, a predicament whose essence transcends time and space, embracing both cultures under discussion, however far apart they might seem. In both 18<sup>th</sup> century Korea and 21<sup>st</sup> century England a male-chauvinistic society sentence women to suffer from stress, insult, abuse, oppression and injustice. What the novel reveals in its uncanny transgression of temporal and spatial boundaries is the revelation that loneliness and frustration in women’s lives have been brought about by cultural factors. One of the most important factor that is responsible for stress and mental agony is represented by the sum of principles and norms that are constructed by a male-dominated culture. An illustration of this point is provided by the following statement:

“Gender subjectivity is thus achieved and maintained through a primary and continued to the (unacknowledged) 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.”(Butler, 2008,95)

*The Red Queen* provides thus an insight into the psychological (and not only) suffering of women. Both women protagonists are subject to the distressing effects of the institution of marriage. The Crown Princess sees her life as a jail, due to the army of regulations she has to

face, to the passive surrender to her husband and to the suppression of feelings she undergoes. Her confession after his abusive behavior to herself and to her children testifies to this: “I felt completely impotent, shrunk to nothingness. I wished to turn to stone, to vanish from the world.” (Drabble, 2004, 87). Consequently, the heroine embarks on the traditional role of submissiveness, without any room for raising questions and discharging her suppressed feeling.

As paradoxical as it may seem for a liberated and liberating age like the contemporary one, Dr. Barbara Halliwell is equally stressed and mentally upset. Her husband had never forgiven her for the death of their son: “He has seized her by the throat and yelled at her that she was a murderer.”(Drabble, 2004, 196) Just like her 18<sup>th</sup> century counterpart, she had tolerated passively, without challenging her husband. Her submissive behavior is once again prompted by the cultural and social regulations compelling her to function in accordance to established roles.

If submissiveness seems to function as a unifying link between two male-dominated cultures centuries apart, another common trait is provided by the attempt to undermine gender stereotypes that characterize both heroines. Definitely, the 21<sup>st</sup> century academic is much more aware that the source of her stressful situation resides in the gender stereotypical norms assigned by forms of power favouring the male. A successful career-oriented woman, Dr Halliwell has a freedom of choice that “would have been unimaginable to the Crown Princess or to any of the Crown Princess’s female contemporaries”. (Drabble, 2004, 173) The condition of passive resistance is gradually leaving room for and active, free will, for change and transformation. In her case, expressing her newly achieved freedom is tantamount to experiencing sexuality according to her own desire: “She had a healthy sexual appetite, an appetite condoned and indeed encouraged by late twentieth-century Western culture.”(Drabble, 2004,173)

The same process of growing awareness, even if at a lower extent, can be inferred in the memoirs of the Crown Princess, particularly in her undermining certain gender stereotypes concerning education. In 18<sup>th</sup> century Korea, learning was not freely available to women, it was chiefly available to men. The Princess says:” learning was not forbidden to women, but nor was it freely offered to them ”. (33). As she was eager to get learning and become a source of inspiration to other women, she confesses: “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 secret scholar.”(Drabble, 2004,33)

Consequently, the portrayal of women characters in the novel enlarge on the premise that women are to be liberated not only from men but also from their own psychological fears, worries and resentments More obvious in the case of Dr. Halliwell, the reader can conclude that women’s stressful situation is due to secondary roles and performative norms that are assigned to them by culture, no matter the century .

An avowed feminist, Margaret Drabble has chosen women’s predicament as the core element of her attempt to write across cultures. But a limitation of her endeavour to the feminine/feminist discourse would mean a serious imposition on the multifarious message of the novel. In a recent interview, the novelist comments on the significance of the red silk dress, in the opening sentence of *The Red Queen*: “When I was a little child, I pined for a red silk dress.”(Drabble, 2004,3) In her answer to the reporter’s question, Drabble suggests that the red silk dress would symbolize the individual oddity of each human being, individuality, caprice, the universality of oddity which communicates itself even across time and space. Her statement further enhances the idea that the novel explores questions of cultural relativism and cultural identity that transgress the barriers of time and space, in a unique dialogue of cultures.

Furthermore, what seems to lie at the core of the novel is an identity quest that cannot help being ascribed to each and every age, to each and every culture. The author herself insists on the validity of this interpretation:

“Perhaps I need to spell out my intentions, for attempting to write across cultures is dangerous and liable to interpretations. This is not a historical novel. The voice of the Crown Princess, which appears to speak in the first person in the first section of the novel, is not an attempt to reconstruct her real, historical voice....I have not attempted to describe Korean culture or to reconstruct real life in the Korean court of the late eighteenth century. Instead, I have asked questions about the nature of survival, and about the possibility of the existence of universal transcultural human characteristics.” (Drabble,IX)

The sometimes controversial nature of the discourse does not make her attempt less valuable and illuminating. Drabble’s rewriting of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Korean memoirs can easily be defined as a postmodern mixture of genres, a patchwork of styles, voices and metafictional intrusion. But one cannot help noticing that, behind the playful experiment, entrusting *The Red Queen* narrative voices with axiological significance and stressing shared human values, no matter how different the countries and times, represent the genuine goal of the author’s endeavour. In spite of many controversies as to her style and choice of literary discourse, a point has been made, a conclusion can be drawn, namely that human nature functions according to similar axiological values, regardless of time or space. This conclusion should allow one to admit that, in a world dominated by intolerance and discourses of superiority, the clash of cultures can always be overcome by mutual acceptance and the dialogue of cultures should always prevail.

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