

## CHAPTER 1

### MARGARET MITCHELL : HER LIFE AND MIND

One writes out of one thing only- one's own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art.

James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son

The life and times of an artist play a great role in the making of his work of art. The course of a writer's life is often directly or indirectly reflected in his creation. The influences governing the life of a writer are also effective in shaping his work. Therefore, sometimes a study of the personal life of a writer enables us in understanding his work. In the case of Gone with the Wind, the study of the author's life is the first step towards a deeper understanding of the book because here the relation between author's personal life and the life depicted in the novel is very close. For this reason a brief study of Margaret Mitchell's life becomes a point so very crucial in the understanding of her novel.

Margaret Munnerlyn Mitchell was born in Atlanta, Georgia, on Tuesday, November 8, 1900. Daughter of Eugene and Maybelle Mitchell, she came from a well-to-do family. Eugene Mitchell was a lawyer specialising in real estate and patent. The Mitchells had migrated to America a few generations ago from Scotland. Her mother's family- the

Fitzgeralds had made their way from Ireland. Margaret Mitchell's early life was shaped by stories of Atlanta's history and the Civil War. These stories were told to her by her grandmother Annie Fitzgerald Stephens. Annie's father Philip Fitzgerald had come from Ireland as a young man, and had prospered in the United States. Both he and his wife Eleanor were ardent believers in Catholicism. Philip had gained a reputation for toughness and outspokenness. Annie and her husband James had seen the burning of Atlanta. While most of the families fled to other palces, Annie and James remained to raise Atlanta out of the ashes. Annie Fitzgerald was a strong, civic minded woman. Annie's daughter Maybelle was the mainstay of Mitchell family. Maybelle was the president of one of Atlanta's most militant groups of suffragettes. As a child, Margaret attended many meetings of the suffragettes with he mother. She saw her mother speaking with all intensity and courage in these meetings. Her mother carried a strong influence on Margaret's life.

The early years of Margaret Mitchell's life were heavily influenced by stories of the war fought four decades earlier. Her parents and relatives talked about the Civil War as if the war was a live event. When she was taken to call on the elderly relatives, the Civil War was the main topic of conversation. In the South, most of the people were still confederates at heart. April 26 was a major hooliday commemorating Atlanta's confederate dead. Margaret was taken by her mother to see the parade on this day. The old timers

who had fought the war were treated as the heroes. Atlantans gathered in huge number on such occasions. Confederate flag was still honoured by the Southerners. Margaret Mitchell was brought up in such an atmosphere. Her own kith and kin had fought the war. Grandfather Mitchell had walked the distance of nearly fifty miles after the Battle of Sharpsbury with two bullet wounds in his skull. Many such incidents were narrated to her by the eyewitnesses. Her childhood summers were spent at the Jonesboro farm of her spinster aunts Sarah and Mary. These aunts made her acquainted with the Southern plantation life.

Margaret Mitchell started writing stories by the time she was nine year old. These stories were usually about bandits andd frontiersmen, and heroines (usually named Margaret) threatened by some imminent danger but ultimately bravely overcoming it. Sir Walter Scott and Charles Dickens were among her favourite writers. One day she dramatized Thomas Dixon's The Traitor and enacted the play with her friends at her home. Writing romances was a source of solace for her. The titles of some of her stories give us a sense of the flavour of her writings at this time: "Phil Kelly: Detective", "A Darktown Tragedy", "The Cow Puncher ", "In My Harem", "The fall of Roger Rover". She kept a notebook in which she quite often listed probable themes for her stories. Some of these themes were: "Crook, Civil War, Smugglers, Shipwrek, Sepoy Rebellion". She had her school education at Washington Seminary. Mrs. Eva Paisely was her English teacher who recognized her talent. The year

she was in Mrs. Paisely's class, Mitchell decided to write a novel. It was called "The Big Four". This novel was about the adventures of four close friends in a girls boarding school. It covered four hundred copybook pages and divided in fourteen chapters. On the back inside cover she wrote : "There are authors and authors but a true writer is born and not made. Born writers make their characters real, living people, while the 'made' writers have merely stuffed figures who dance when the strings are pulled- that's how I know I'm a 'made' writer. "1 she completed this novel but when she read it again, it did not seem a good novel to her.

In 1917, United States declared war on Germany. Margaret Mitchell's elder brother Stephens joined the Army. At this time many young army officers used to come to Mitchell's house. Margaret made friends with these officers. She used to entertain these officers and attend many parties arranged for them. At one of the parties she met Lieutenant Clifford West Henry from New York. Clifford Henry was a graduate from Harvard. He was slim and fair, rather effete looking. He could recite freely passages from Shakespeare. In one of her interviews Margaret Mitchell described him as looking "so sadly handsome in his officer's uniform"<sup>2</sup>. Before Clifford was transferred, he and Margaret became secretly engaged. After graduating from Washington Seminary Margaret joined Smith college, Northampton in 1918. Clifford Henry was sent to Europe to participate in World War I. In this period, they exchanged

many letters. In October 1918 Clifford Henry died in the war. This was a shock to Margaret. Stephens has claimed that Clifford Henry was the great love of his sister's life but Anne Edwards has a different opinion:

Margaret did maintain contact with the Henrys for many years but probably she had been more in love with a romantic fantasy than with Clifford Henry himself. She had admired his intellect, his golden good looks, his poetic nature, and his gentlemanliness, but it is doubtful that Margaret truly understood the young man she thought she loved. Clifford Henry's friends had recognized and accepted his homosexual tendencies, but Margaret had seemed icompletely oblivious to this side of her fiance's nature.<sup>2</sup>

After Clifford Henry's death, Margaret Mitchell maintained relations with his parents for many years.

In January 1919 Margaret Mitchell's mother died of pneumonia. Whe she went to Atlanta she saw that her father was deeply shocked by this death. She decided to discontinue her education and returned home the same year to take charge of the house. Her relatives wished that she should make a formal entrance into Atlanta society where she could meet people of her age. After much insistance from her brother and father she became a member of the elite Debutante club. But she did not feel comfortable in Atlanta's society because she had a rebellious nature. She went to a costume ball in unconventional costume where she met Red Upshaw (Berrien K. Upshaw). Upshaw was the eldest son of a respectable old Georgia family living in North Carolina. Although no one seemed to know any of the detials, there were whisperings of scandal regarding Upshaw. There was a mystery which surrounded Upshaw and this

interested Margaret Mitchell. Upshaw was attracted by the rebellious quality in her. He admired her courage when he saw that she did not leave the dance in spite of being ridiculed by others. Soon they became close friends. They always seemed to be on the brink of violent argument. They teased each other unmercifully but always found some bond of attraction between them.

In the twenties, women had won the right to vote in America. This granted them a new place and freedom in society. Margaret Mitchell considered herself as a true flapper of the twenties. She often flouted the old conventions of society. But she also had a puritanical element in her personality. This made her position confused. Anne Edwards observes

She was unsure of what she should or should not do as a new woman. She smoked, drank, read the most controversial books, and flirted outrageously. But she still thought that sex before marriage was unthinkable, and that although it was acceptable for a bachelor to have sexual needs, her own desires were cause for guilt →

She was not a religious woman either. She had left the church. This added to her confusion. Margaret Mitchell always criticized the way the the affairs were run by Atlanta's society women. Finally, her Apache dance at a Ball excluded her from the society. She was not granted the membership of the Junior League. This was a sign of her exclusion from Atlanta's high society.

In 1921, the Ku Klux Klan became active again in Atlanta. The number of Klan supporters increased. Many

major city jobs were under the charge of Klan followers. It created a wave of anti-black, anti-Jewish and anti-alien demonstrations in the region. This wave gradually spread throughout the country. In Atlanta only there were over six million Klansmen. Margaret Mitchell had a deep-rooted affection for the blacks. Therefore, she did not seem to support the Klan and their ideology.

In 1922 Margaret Mitchell started seeing Upshaw a great deal. She was attracted to Red Upshaw because he was different from other men who had come in her life. All other men had needed mothering and had made her feel superior. Red Upshaw's masculinity made her uncertain of herself. He was not impressed by her self-righteous poses. He liked her when she was being unladylike. Upshaw claimed that he had played the role of a secret agent in the World War I. This has been proved false. He had entered the naval academy but did not complete the training. He lived his life like a rich man. This was possible only because he was involved in bootleggery. Upshaw's roommate John Marsh had also become a friendly person to Margaret. Marsh was soft-spoken, conservative and trustworthy. He loved Margaret. He was liked by Eugene and Stephens Mitchell. They did not approve of Upshaw. Upshaw and Marsh were entirely different persons in every respect. Finally Margaret decided to marry Red Upshaw against the wishes of her family members and relatives. They were married on September 6, 1922. This marriage lasted only four months.

After abusing and physically assaulting Margaret, Red Upshaw separated from her in December 1922. John Marsh tried to save the marriage but it was not possible. Stephens claims that at the time of her marriage to Red Upshaw, Margaret realised that Clifford Henry was the only true lover of hers and no one else.

John Marsh helped her in her moments of crisis. She got a job as a reporter for 'Atlanta Journal'. She also became a good friend of Medora Field Perkerson, assistant editor of 'Atlanta Journal'. John Marsh helped Mitchell in editing her stories. She did a series of stories dealing with women in Georgia's history. As she was very much interested in the history of Georgia, she enjoyed this assignment. She interviewed women and collected information from the Carnegie library. Unconsciously, she started collecting material for her novel at this time. Meanwhile, Upshaw returned and assaulted her physically. She was admitted in the hospital. Few days later she was separated legally from Red Upshaw. The fact that Upshaw had assaulted Margaret was kept a secret. Only few persons like John Marsh knew this. John Marsh came closer to Margaret after this incident. This resulted in their marriage which took place on July 4, 1925.

Although her features in the 'Atlanta Journal' were enthusiastically received by the readers, she wanted to write something more enterprising. John Marsh recognized the talent in his wife and always insisted that she should write. But she was not confident about her abilities. A



magazine named 'Smart Set' had rejected her stories. After reading Barren Ground by Ellen Glasgow and The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald, she thought that she could never write like them and that John was wrong about her writing potential. Somehow she decided to write a novel dealing with the Jazz Age. After writing thirty pages of this novel, she ceased writing any further. In May 1926, Margaret Mitchell left her job at the 'Atlanta Journal' but still continued to write for it as a columnist writer on freelance basis. As John was always pressing her to write a novel she began writing a novel on the theme of miscegenation. It was called "Ropa Carmagin" and the story was set in the 1880's. This was actually a novella. After finishing it she showed it to John who did not think it worthy of his wife's talents and so told her to give a second thought to it. Affected by this Margaret met an accident while driving to Jonesboro. Her leg was severely injured. The same leg had been injured twice perviously in her horseriding accidents. After these incident she was in bed for several weeks and gave up writing for 'Atlanta Journal'. John used to get her books from the library to make her seclusion tolerable. One day he came home saying that there was hardly any book left in the library that she could enjoy. Giving her a stack of copy paper, he said now she would have to write a novel herself. She put aside "Ropa Carmagin" and began a new novel. She knew precisely what story she wanted to tell and she very much wanted to

execute the ideas she conceived. As far as the historical background of the novel was concerned, she had all the needed information. She had collected it from the library. The people she met or interviewed for the journal also contributed substantial information regarding the Civil War and its trauma. While doing research for an article on confederate generals she came across the story of General Bennings' wife Mrs. Bennings who was a woman of remarkable endurance and strength which she demonstrated during the War days. Mrs. Bennings had looked after her large family on the plantation when her husband was on the battlefield. Margaret Mitchell was impressed by her life and had decided that her novel would have one character like Mrs. Bennings. She had at the back of her mind four main characters, two men and two women. The two men were to be modelled after her two lovers - Clifford Henry and Red Upshaw. Out of the two women, one was to be noble like Mrs. Bennings and the other would be someone who would fuse into her personality the character traits of Mitchell and her grandmother. Interestingly enough, this other woman would love the noble lady's husband.

This was how the genealogy of Gone with the Wind was determined. The last chapter, as it was her writing style, was written in the beginning. After completion of this chapter, she dealt with the rest of the story in the chronological order. Some chapters were set aside to be researched later. These chapters had outlines and explanatory paragraphs. Index cards for each of the

characters were maintained. Margaret Mitchell worked in an organized fashion. John Marsh's skill as a copy editor was helpful. He made sure that she wrote clearly, precisely and to the point. He corrected errors in usage and spelling. Never was the book written continuously. She resumed her writing after long intervals. There were many reasons for the lapses. Margaret suffered from Arthritis and from time to time this made her bedridden. Her illness as well as the illness of her husband who was epileptical made it impossible for her to write the book in a continuous manner.

Secondly, Margaret Mitchell had a peculiar temperament. Whenever she read fine works on Civil War, a sense of inadequacy often tormented her soul. She felt dejected after reading James Boyd's Marching On and stopped writing for three months. When a friend read to her Stephen Vincent Benet's epic poem "James Brown's Body", the novel had to wait for another three months because she thought nobody could have the courage to write about the war after Mr. Benet had done it so excellently. Margaret Mitchell herself didn't want to finish the book for a number of reasons. She feared professional criticism that would follow once the book was published. She was not confident about herself as a writer. Then there was the fear of lawsuits as many of the characters were based on people who lived that time. Belle Watling was modelled after a famous madam in Laxington. This woman Belle Breazing was still alive. Archie and Tony Fontaine were based on real men.

And ofcourse, there were Red Upshaw & Grandmother Stephens from whom two major characters of the book were derived. Margaret felt a risk of being sued for libel as there were chances that any one of these people could file a lawsuit against her when the book would come out. On the other hand, she had the desire that her book should be published. She had worked hard on it. She had taken quite some pains to make the background of the book authentic. She had made a careful study of the events in Atlanta's history in order to picture them perfectly and realistically in her book. But when the completion of the book came in sight she did not want to continue her writing for the reason that she was afraid of failure. She and her husband had kept the book a well guarded secret from most of their friends. Not many people knew about the book before it was finally published. She did not want people to discuss it partly because she was not sure whether she would ever publish it.

Margaret Mitchell created an impression of being a writer who did not seek publication. Macmillan company's Harold Latham had gone to the South to scout for manuscripts. He had come to know about this book from Lois Dwight Cole, who was a freind of Margaret Mitchell. Lois Cole had worked in Atlanta for Macmillan. Latham asked Margaret Mitchell about her book and in the beginning she denied of having written a book. But later she promised that she would give her book to Macmillan aftter its completion. Surprisingly, she gave the manuscript to Latham in his same visit. When Latham was about to leave Atlanta

Margaret visited him with her manuscript. She had taken the decision in a fury aroused by the comments from some of her friends. It was the biggest and clums looking manuscript Latham had ever seen. More than two thousand pages of it were stuffed into soiled manila envelopes. It was quite unorganised and disorderly. Sometimes two or three versions of the same chapter were included in one envelope.

Harold Latham read the manuscript and was very much impressed. John Marsh was of the opinion that Margaret should not have given the manuscript without having it edited, corrected and completed. So they asked latham to send the manuscript back but Latham had given it to Professor C.W. Everett of Columbia University. Latham wanted Everett's suggestions about how the novel could best be revised and completed. Professor Everett predicted that the novel would be a bestseller. His synopsis of the novel ends with his critique:

This book is really magnificent. Its human qualities would make it good against any background, and when they are shown on the stage of the Civil War and reconstruction the effect is breathtaking. Furthermore, it has a high degree of literary finish.<sup>5</sup>

Everett suggested Latham to take the book. He felt that the literary device of using an unsympathetic character to arouse sympathy was admirable. Latham sent the manuscript to Mitchell alongwith Everett's suggestions and critique. Macmillan accepted the book for publication.

Now the work to revise the manuscript was started. As the novel was not in a finished form, there was a lot of

work to be done at this stage. There were two or three versions of some chapters and the right one had to be selected. Grammatical errors were to be corrected. There were a few loose ends in the story, pointed out by Professor Everett. Repeats were to be eliminated and the book had to be condensed. At this point John Marsh's contribution was of a great value. In the words of Anne Edwards, "He was not only acting as her editor, but as a teacher and coach." Mitchell's research had been meticulous in all areas of the book except in the area of military strategy. But now she felt that her book should not contain any mistake regarding history. Wilbur Curtz and Annie Curtz were Atlanta's most revered historians and she sent her chapters to them for correction of the mistakes. The Curtzes could find only one noticeable mistake in the book. The book was correct in all its historical details. Two major decisions were taken at this stage. The name of the central character was changed from Pansy to Scarlett. The name Pansy was not proper in the opinion of Harold Latham and Lois Cole. There was a possibility of finding a woman in south who had the name Pansy O'Hara. The name Scarlett had a significance as it was derived from the ancestral name of the O'Haras in the book. The Scarletts were Irish freedom fighters and the central character of the book is also a rebel. The second major decision was about the title of the book. "Tomorrow is Another Day" was previously decided as the title but it had to be changed subsequently

because a book of the same title was already published and furthermore there were innumerable titles with the word Tomorrow. The title "Gone with the Wind" was derived from Ernest Dowson's poem "Cynara". This phrase has been used in the novel to describe Scarlett's feelings after the burning of Atlanta. This title referred either to times that were gone or to a person who went with the wind rather than standing against it.

The work of revising the book which began in August 1935 was nearly over by January 1936 and threefourth of the manuscript was sent back to Macmillan. But the opening pages of the first chapter were still to be written. More than forty versions of the first chapter were written and Mitchell was very much confused about the most suitable one. The first chapter focussed almost entirely on Tarleton twins who become minor characters later in the novel. It was necessary that the central character be introduced in the first chapter in a powerful way. Finally it was done in a succesful manner. Similarly, the last chapter was also to be given shape. Professor Everett had suggested to revise the end of the novel but Mitchell did not do it. She made the end more effective instead.

It became evident that the book would be a succes before its publication. Owing to the large number of orders from the booksellers there were 100,000 copies in print initially. The book was published on June 30 ,1936. Most of the reviewers upheld the book. The Book of the Month Club selected it as the book of the month. The

immediate response of the people was overwhelming. In three weeks after publication 178,000 copies were sold out. By May 1937 , 1,370,000 copies had been lifted from the market. When the book went off the bestseller list for the first time in the twenty one months it had sold over two million copies in U.S.A. and one million copies abroad. The book brought both fame and money to Margaret Mitchell. She became an overnight celebrity. She was awarded the Pulitzer prize in 1937. The film rights were sold to David O. Selznick. He released the film in 1939. Like the book, the film also was a great success. Gone with the Wind created a record in the history of publishing. It has outsold any other book in hardcover excluding the Bible. It has been translated in twentyfive languages. The 1980 figures of sales indicate that till then nearly six million hardcover copies were sold out in the U.S.A., one million in England. More than nine million copies of translated versions were sold out in other foreign countries. Worldwide, it continues to sell over 100,000 hardcover copies annually, and 250,000 paperback copies are sold every year in the U.S.A.

Red Upshaw did not give Margaret Mitchell any trouble about the book. He had contacted her after the book was published but there was not lawsuit as she had feared. No other person seems to have filed a lawsuit stating that any of the novel's character was based on him/her. Red Upshaw died in January 1949. He jumped from the fifth-story



fire escape of a building. On August 11, 1949, Margaret Mitchell was hit by a car while crossing a road. She died in the hospital five days later. John Marsh died on May 5, 1952, from a heart seizure.

All this reveals that the link between Margaret Mitchell's life and the world of her novel operates strongly in the final evaluation of the work. Not only were the main characters in the novel based on real people in her life but many incidents in the novel have been taken either from her own life or from the life of the people she knew. Bonnie Butler (Scarlett's daughter) falls from horseback in the same manner in which Margaret Mitchell herself did. Gerald O'Hara's reaction after his wife's death is pretty similar to the reaction of Lugene Mitchell made after the death of Maybelle. There are a number of parallel incidents like these which have been pointed out by Anne Edwards in her biography of Margaret Mitchell. The events portrayed in the novel such as the War, burning of Atlanta and emergence of Ku Klux Klan were also the events repeated in Mitchell's own life time. The emotions experienced by Scarlett, the protagonist of the novel, are so intensely portrayed that they appeal to the reader's mind deeply and overwhelmingly. Margaret Mitchell could achieve such a feat because she wrote the life she herself lived.

**Notes :**

1. Anne Edwards, Road to Tara-The Life of Margaret Mitchell, (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1983), p.41.

2. Ibid. p. 47

3. Ibid. p. 54

4. Ibid. p. 72

5. Ibid. p. 167

6. Ibid. p. 177