

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

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### **CONCLUSION**

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Muriel Spark has, in her early works, very effectively progressed from fantastic themes to a preoccupation with the weighty. Throughout she has been impressive in the way that has made each of her novels stand out. In W.H. Auden's words :

"I will merely say that I find Miss Spark's novels beautifully executed - she seems to know exactly what she is doing - funny, moving and like nobody else's." [1]

There is no sense of monotony in her novels because of the considerable diversity in the themes. Though they are funny at times, the themes are not at all trivial but rather serious when one delves deep into them. The most common characteristic about these early novels is their economy. These books are short, neat and concentrated; with their witty tone and rich plot, highly engaging. There are parallel patterns, echoing situations, vivid details of cities and periods and multiplicity of characters running through them all.

In her works there is violence and social chaos. However, it does not obtrude the work as a whole because of the precision and economy of style which has a decisive total effect and meaning. Her sense for wholeness and coherence in the novels are conveyed through pointed and thrifty dialogues. The time span of the narrative is also sometimes short-

ened to a few days. The movement of the narrative from one chapter to the next is often abrupt but that is the pattern Spark likes to follow. We soon learn to take these sudden unsignalled changes of scene or tone or point-of-view in our stride. Those surprising pieces of information are deliberately given because the author loves to knock the readers off balance and unsettle them mildly.

There are comments on the times, too, in her novels and this stand of the author leads, at times, to something like the pose of the satirist. Another important aspect of her novels is the subject of Death. Spark is compassionately aware of life's uncertainty and transience - in the process she makes her readers aware of it as well. Her work also conveys significant absences, a feeling of omission but Spark does that deliberately because, on her own admission, she does not like to "spell things out." Her reality includes the unseen and her novels are peopled with diabolic characters and inscrutable forces which exercise mysterious powers over human activities. Spark offers no explanation for any of these events, in fact, she is content to leave things that way - mysterious.

These are novels of a particular time and place (the exceptions are Robinson an island story, and The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, which moves from London to Edinburgh and back from postwar period to the thirties). They are somewhat limited in their characterisation but generous in their complexities of

plot. Spark relentlessly exposes simultaneously the laughable trivialities of behaviour and the darker motives of the soul through some of the eccentric personalities that she sketches and the odd events that these characters participate in. Her early novels are also notable for their brilliant dialogues. Particularly notable for this excellence is Memento Mori and The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie. The former is a tale of aged persons reminiscing and revealing inadvertently their earlier "animal" selves. The latter is the story of the relationship over a decade between six favourite pupils and the dominating, unorthodox school teacher Miss Brodie, whose "educational policy"[2] is typified in her statement : "safety does not come first. Goodness, Truth and Beauty come first. Follow me."[3] The novel's wry disclosure of the teacher's betrayal by her "most dependable"[4] pupil is also a ruthless exposure of a woman's own self-deception. Spark's novels "comprise a serious attempt to probe the dark moral heart of man."[5] They tell us of human fallibility and shake us out of our complacency. Each of these novels insistently tells us those things which we feel most uncomfortable about - that men are divided, prone to deceit and treachery; that they are lonely and that they die and yet do not want to. Peter Kemp rightly remarks :

" These books may be elegant, but they are elegant disturbers."[6]

The society depicted in each of these novels, though precisely and humorously portrayed, refers to something more signif-

icant -- it deals with human limitations. The characters pose, deceive, act corruptly but the futility of their behaviour is put across the readers by the novelist's continuous stress on the transience of life. These characters who err and are ridiculous at times, are also "figures of important truths".[7] The significance of human choice or action is that everything is necessary. Kemp says that Spark's fiction "postulates a scheme of things in which nothing is wasted".[8] The situations in these novels aim to alert the protagonists (and the readers), and to undergo self-scrutiny. Muriel Spark often uses fantastic events to violently shift perspectives, thus forcing re-examination of circumstances which had long since been taken for granted. Differing from novel to novel, these events also force the protagonists to confront the terms of their existence : a character's involvement in the process of writing the novel in which she is part (The Comforters); an airplane crash on a lonely island (Robinson); a series of telephone calls reminding the elderly recipients that they soon must die (Memento Mori); a diabolical intruder descending upon a working-class community (The Ballad of Peckham Rye); the trial of a medium for fraudulent conversion (The Bachelors); the betrayal of a charismatic school teacher by her most trusted disciple (The Prime Of Miss Jean Brodie); a catastrophic fire at a boarding house for single girls (The Girls of Slender Means). Spark's characters do not develop in terms of their relationship with others, but in terms of their own

encounters with a particular challenge. The most impressive account is that of the personal experiences of her characters -the various ways that they are able to cope with life. The people she creates react to their fate in a compellingly interesting way; sometimes with dignity and courage, sometimes with bad faith. By doing so Spark is portraying an experience of life to which the individual-will contributes. The characters she presents in the most sympathetic light have a high standard of honesty and integrity. Those who manipulate others and are nefarious and dishonest are reviled by Spark's narrative. Judy Sproxton points out :

"Spark presents her characters and situation with mastery, never faltering in her control, and adding a dimension of wit and appreciation of irony which makes her prose sparkle." [9]

Some of these novels combine a familiar surface realism with intrusions of fantasy or the supernatural: a character has vestigial horns on his head; Death makes anonymous telephone calls; the disappearance of Mrs Hogg, when alone. Sproxton states :

"Sometimes, in order to show how substanceless is a reliance on the predictable, Spark uses an author's licence in giving her narrative a surrealist, metaphysical dimension." [10]

Such incidents or ideas are deliberately left unresolved. We are encouraged to think that all things are possible. By presenting life as "an essential incoherence", [11] Spark is really trying to awake in the readers an admission that life is baffling and mysterious. David Lodge says that Spark points to

some divine providence at work: "but providence remains ultimately mysterious and incomprehensible because the world is a fallen one and not even the novelist can claim to understand it fully." [12]

The engrossing tales that she tells in each of these early novels make Muriel Spark "a bewitching story-teller" [13] that she is. E.M. Forster asserts in Aspects of the Novel that "the fundamental aspect of the novel is its story-telling aspect" [14] and Spark seems to have honoured this. Her story-telling method is utterly unconventional. She creates suspense not by hiding a secret and building toward its discovery but by giving all her secrets away. We know the fate of Nicholas Farrington, the hero of The Girls of Slender Means very early and the climax of The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie is disclosed before the novel is half over. Spark has said :

"suspense isn't just holding it back from the reader. Suspense is created even more by telling people what's going to happen... Wanting to know what happened is not so strong as wanting to know how." [15]

Though critics have been, understandably fascinated by the original and confident way in which Spark writes, yet there is no consensus on Muriel Spark's standing as a novelist. While there are those who prefer to stress her limitations, there are also those who regard her as the best living British writer of fiction. Witty in her style, and entertaining her readers all the time ("Really, I love to give pleasure. I like people to laugh and cry ... to give artistic pleasure is a very big

thing.") [16], Muriel Spark is surely one of her kind. Reading her becomes an act of journeying by symbolic sea, always trying to explore what lies between the lines. One rereads her novels in the hope of coming a little closer to their meaning and in the certainty of repeated pleasure and as Spark says concluding her autobiography, Curriculum Vitae, go "on my way rejoicing". [17]

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