

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I. BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH AND A SURVEY OF MURIEL SPARK'S
MAJOR WORKS :

Variously hailed as a comic, Catholic, "an otherworldly", [1] mysterious, moral fabulist and ironic writer, Muriel Spark who moved into the field of fiction rather late, has come to occupy a unique place in the contemporary English literary scene.

Muriel Spark was born in Edinburgh in 1918. Her father, Bernard Camberg, was a Jewish engineer whose parents had settled in Scotland; her mother, Sarah Camberg, was a Gentile Presbyterian who came from Hertfordshire. As a child Muriel Spark went south to spend holidays with her maternal grandparents, Tom Uezzell and Adelaide Uezzell who kept a small shop in Watford. Adelaide, who according to Spark was "a high-spirited character"[2] provided a model for 'Louisa Jepp' in The Comforters as well as for Memento Mori:

"I think my experiences in minding and watching my grandmother formed a starting-point for my future novel, Memento Mori, in which the characters are all elderly people."[3]

This mixed ancestry has been seen as a vital shaping influence in Muriel Spark's life. Allan Massie says :

"It is Muriel Spark's Jewish-Scottish inheritance and upbringing that makes her the moralist she is...It is her Jewish-Scottish heritage that allows her to combine a sense of moral responsibility of action with the determination." [4]

Muriel Spark attended James Gillespie's School for Girls in Edinburgh and the account of her schooldays is found in the writing The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie. Spark's feelings for the city of her birth are ambivalent :

"Edinburgh is the place that I, a constitutional exile, am essentially exiled from...It was Edinburgh that bred within me the conditions of exile...It is the place where I was first understood. James Gillespie's Girl's School, set in solid state among the green meadows, showed an energetic faith in my literary life. I was the school's Poet and Dreamer, with appropriate perquisites and concessions." [5]

She left Edinburgh in August 1937 and arrived in South Africa (Southern Rhodesia), her first place of exile where she married Sydney Oswald Spark a month later in September 1937. Muriel Spark was only nineteen then. Her only son, Robin, was born in 1938 before her divorce. Africa is the setting for some of her short stories ('The Go-Away Bird', 'The Dry River Bed', 'The Portobello Road', 'The Seraph and the Zambesi') and it seems likely that, for instance, 'The Gentile Jewesses' and 'Bang Bang You're Dead' contain autobiographical elements, as indeed much of her work.

It was 1944 before she returned to Britain and was reunited with her family in Edinburgh. But soon she went to London to find a job and stayed at the Helena Club which,

according to Spark, was the original 'May of Teck Club' in her novel The Girls of Slender Means. Later she was employed to do intelligence work in the Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office based at Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire. Some of the experiences here have been used with fictional variations in The Hot House by the East River.

After the war, Spark found a job on a quarterly magazine called Argentor. Here she would mainly research in museum, libraries, art galleries: "a truly refreshing occupation"[6]. Working as a journalist, Spark settled in London and in 1947 became the General Secretary of the Poetry Society. Shortly afterwards she started editing the Society's journal, the Poetry Review. Here she found practical use for her developing interest in poetry. She was now aged twenty-nine. The new employment brought her more closely in touch with the literary life of postwar London. Some of her novels reflect this period of her life, for example, Loitering With Intent and A Far Cry from Kensington:

"I transferred a number of my experiences in the Poetry Society, as I usually do, into a fictional background, in my novel Loitering With Intent." [7]

A conflict led to the end of this job and ultimately to the publication of her own magazine Forum in 1949 with the help of Christmas Humphreys. But to keep herself going, she also had a part-time job in a magazine European Affairs. She continued

writing articles for the magazine on a freelance basis even after she left the job. Spark's love for writing is evident in her words: "I had a love of writing which was becoming an imperative in my life. With an idea developing in my head, a pen in my hand and a notebook open before me I was in bliss." [8]

In the early 1950s, Muriel Spark and Derek Stanford, her friend and literary partner, jointly edited and published a book on Wordsworth to mark the centenary of his death in 1850,

a book on Emily Brontë and collections of letters of Mary Shelley and Cardinal Newman. During this period Spark's individual efforts as critic and scholar took centrestage with the publication of a collection of the Brontë letters, selection of Emily Brontë's poems and studies of Mary Shelley and John Masefield. She also published in 1952 her first book of poetry The Fanfarlo and other Verse.

While working on Masefield as a freelance writer in London in 1951, she had a new part-time "survival-job" [9] at Falcon Press where she was secretary to a retired major Walter Meade: "Much of this environment goes into my novel, A Far Cry from Kensington" [10], says Spark. During this time, Muriel Spark entered and won a Christmas competition for a short story announced by The Observer newspaper. The story was 'The

Seraph and the Zambesi' wherein she "felt a compulsion to describe the Zambesi River and the approach to the falls through the mysterious Rain Forest as a mystical experience." [11] It was a unique experience which had affected her greatly while in Rhodesia. This event of winning the competition was, according to Spark, "the first real turning-point" [12] in her career. However, even then Spark was far from thinking of herself as a novelist and when in 1954 Alan McLean of Macmillan asked her to write a novel for the firm, she was not very sure. In her autobiography Curriculum Vitae she writes:

"I didn't feel like 'a novelist' and before I could square it with my literary conscience to write a novel, I had to work out a novel-writing process peculiar to myself, and moreover, perform this act within the very novel I proposed to write. I felt, too, that the novel as an art form was essentially a variation of a poem. I was convinced that any good novel, or indeed any composition which called for a constructional sense, was essentially an extension of poetry... I think of myself as predominantly a poet." [13]

While Muriel Spark was trying to convert herself gradually from poetry to prose, a different kind of conversion was taking place within herself - a more profound spiritual one. Finally in 1954 she became a Roman Catholic:

"In 1953 I was absorbed by the theological writings of John Henry Newman through whose influence I finally became a Roman Catholic. I tried the Church of England first... But I felt uneasy." [14]

In an important essay, 'My Conversion' published in 1961, she

looks back at these crucial years that immediately preceded her flowering as a creative artist. She writes: "there is a connection between my writing and my conversion ... Certainly all my best work has come since then." [15] While waiting for her first novel, The Comforters to appear, Spark worked part-time at Peter Owen, the publisher where she enjoyed herself a great deal. When the book was finally published, things were never the same again for the writer. She says : "everything changed ... My years of hardship and dedication were now bearing fruit." [16] She was now able to give up her job with Peter Owen and "write creatively, full time" [17].

Spark was nearly forty when her first novel The Comforters appeared (1957), an unusually late start for a novelist but to make up for the lost time, she went on to produce novels at "an extraordinary rate" [18]. In 1962, Muriel Spark moved to New York, partly in order to escape the pressures of London literary life and the growing fame that was threatening to impose upon her. But soon she began moving in the literary circles that emanated from The New Yorker magazine. In New York, she lived in an apartment close to the United Nations Building and the only important literary outcome of this period is the novel The Hothouse by the East River.

When success of The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie renewed her claustrophobia, she fled again, this time to Rome in Italy where she lived for a long time. Some of her later novels have

Italian settings, others reflect in some ways her expatriate experience: "I went because I thought it was exciting," Spark says. "They're very amusing people, mostly expatriates or Italians, sometimes the nobility. They are very amusing to watch and to write about." [19] Later Muriel Spark moved from Rome to Tuscany where she still resides with friend, companion and assistant, Penelope Jardine.

At the outset of her career as a novelist, Muriel Spark wrote her first book called The Comforters (1957). The young heroine Caroline hears voices and clicking typewriters which seem to be composing a novel about her life as she lives it. It is an experiment in form. The heroine is reminiscent of the author - in fact, several critics have pointed to the parallels between Caroline's and Spark's hallucinatory experiences.

Early in 1956, Spark had started writing her second novel, Robinson which was published in 1958. The novel projects an island where a group of survivors from an aircrash struggle to coexist peacefully. It is a brilliant story about an island that sustains hopes of life after death. The writing is consistently amusing and the movement lively.

Memento Mori (1959) is another interesting novel where a number of old people receive inexplicable telephone calls reminding them that they must die. The grim practical joker may

embody the insistent reminder of imminent mortality already present within each aged subconscious mind. In reading this novel, one can only marvel at the author's familiarity with the ways of the aged.

The Ballad of Peckham Rye (1960) introduces to us a strange character, Dougal Douglas who was born with horns on his head. He is the devil who disrupts the working-class community for the sheer deviltry of it. He does it all with a light laugh and soon becomes a legend in Peckham. Spark makes fun of business management in her own delightful style in this book.

In The Bachelors (1960), Spark presents some assorted charlatans who get involved in a court trial which is beyond their control. Yet the main character, Ronald Bridges makes some effort to struggle against his sinful impulses and comes out a better person. The author's explosive satire comes in forefront in the novel.

Muriel Spark's next novel The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie was first published in 1961 and since then it has been adapted successfully as a play, a film and more recently, a television series. The book has been translated into many foreign languages. The novelist's brilliant and questing imagination has evolved a story of Edinburgh in the 1930s which has delighted her many admirers for many years. This book tells with wit and insight the story of those anxious prewar years when Miss Jean Brodie is in her prime and the group of her favourite pupils,

"the Brodie set"[20], who are growing up in a world which contains Hitler as well as love.

The scene is London, 1945, in The Girls of Slender Means (1963). Although the novel ends in horror and tragedy, its portrayal of the impoverished inmates of a wartime hostel for young women of good family is delectably funny. Lightly and wittily, Spark sets us among the girls of slender means as they fight it out to the last clothing-coupon.

Known as "the most complex, most ambitious of her novels"[21], The Mandelbaum Gate (1965) takes us to Jerusalem where Freddy Hamilton meets Barbara Vaughan. Her pilgrimage to the Holy Places in Jordan's Jerusalem becomes one of flight, disguise, pursuit, abduction, murder and espionage. The novel is full of suspense and drama. Though the critical response to the novel was relatively cool initially, Muriel Spark won a prestigious award, James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1966 for this novel.

The Public Image was produced in 1968. It is about Anna ble Christopher, an actress who lives in publicity-mad Rome. Her public image is everything to her but her husband cannot bear this. His sense of drama being far greater than hers, he stages a scandal -- his suicide -- in an attempt to destroy her image. The events are narrated with irony and satire and at times a lot of wit.

In 1970 Spark published her next book The Driver's Seat which is the study of a willing sacrificial victim. Lise, a bored and loveless office worker leaves everything and flies south on holiday only to get herself killed and make the crime as spectacular as possible. Thus Lise has assumed the driver's seat to choose her own destiny. The end is revealed in the early part of the novel, a flashforward device which Spark uses very artfully to catch the readers.

Spark's Not to Disturb (1971) is another portrayal of people who simply go through the motions of living. Written with an ironic view and a sense of fun, the novel is intellectually provoking. The Hothouse by the East River (1973) has an American setting. It concerns a group of ghosts who have been brought into collective consciousness by the restlessness of one of them. The Abbess of Crewe (1974), satirised American politics, particularly the Watergate Affair, by depicting the underhand ways of a Nixonian abbess. This novel as well as The Driver's Seat have been recreated as feature films.

The Takeover (1976) effectively undermined the success-oriented superficialities of the 1970s. The novel is set in Italy, with a dazzling cast of characters who are concerned in one way or another with the taking over of Maggie's beauty and wealth. Spark's unique gifts of wit and glorious storytelling is applied with great effect in this book. Venice, with its fading palazzos, its promise of sexual intrigue and its count-

less hiding places for secrets best kept hidden, is the setting for Spark's next novel, Territorial Rights (1979). Robert tries to escape a complicated affair but is ensnared in a plot as intricate and ingenious as any Spark has devised. Loitering With Intent (1981) offered, as heroine, the novelist Fleur Talbot who resembles Caroline Rose in The Comforters. The novel is remarkably rich and entertaining in its reflections on the links between life and art.

In The Only Problem (1984), the central character is a hapless scholar vainly seeking peace and seclusion in order to wrestle with interpreting the Book of Job. The daily problems of his own life increasingly impinge upon this task. A funny and a profound novel, it is also entertaining and full of fascinating characters that only Spark could create.

Muriel Spark's eighteenth novel A Far Cry from Kensington (1988) appeared in the year in which its author was seventy. Like many of her earlier novels, it is concerned with evil as manifested in everyday life. It also seem to return to the autobiographical mode of some of the early books. Spark's latest novel Symposium (1990) rank with her finest.

Her most recent publication is her autobiography, Curriculum Vitae (1992) which is painstakingly researched. The book has Spark's characteristic elegance and also her usual clarity. She writes with great personal charm of her childhood in Edinburgh,

she describes her Jewish parents, the original Miss Jean Brodie, her marriage and her time in Africa which was the inspiration for 'The Go-Away Bird' and so much of her most vivid early writings. She also gives a direct account of the people and places which inspired so much of her work. It also catalogues Spark's gripes against those who did her wrong during her formative years, all of which make interesting reading.

In her autobiography Spark says : "My poetry was rather more sophisticated than my prose. I was deeply interested in rhythms and curious about what one could make them mean in poetry... The steel and bite of the ballads, so remorseless and yet so lyrical, entered my literary bloodstream, never to depart." [22] She had started writing poetry at an early age and published some in local magazines while she was in Rhodesia. One of the poems called "The Go-Away Bird" was about the haunting cry of the grey-crested lourie. The other books of verses that Spark has published are The Fanfarlo and Other Verse (1952), Collected Poems 1 (1968), Going Up To Southeby's and Other Poems (1982).

Muriel Spark has also written a number of short stories. The Go-Away Bird and Other Stories (1958) was her first book of short stories to be published. The others include Voices at Play (1961), Collected Stories 1 (1967), Bang-Bang You're Dead and Other Stories (1982), The Stories of Muriel Spark (1985). She has also published a play in 1963, Doctors of Philosophy

and a book for children, The Very Fine Clock apart from innumerable articles in various magazines.

II. A REVIEW OF THE CRITICISM ON MURIEL SPARK'S NOVELS:

In the literary circles Muriel Spark's popularity as a critic and poet had already started flourishing. Her reputation as a novelist began even before her first novel The Comforters was published. Evelyn Waugh on reading its manuscript wrote to his friend Ann Fleming :

"I have been sent proofs of a very clever first novel by a lady named Muriel Spark. The theme is a Catholic novelist suffering from hallucinations. It will appear quite soon. I am sure people will think it is by me. Please contradict such assertions." [23]

On publication Waugh wrote an interesting essay on it in the Spectator :

"Miss Spark has attempted something very difficult... at a time when 'experimental' writing has quite justly fallen into disrepute, her book is highly exhilarating." [24]

With Waugh's first response, the other critics followed suit and for Spark there have been no looking back since. The adverse criticism of the next novel Robinson did not dampen her enthusiasm to write on and she brought out one book after another which further enhanced her literary reputation and reviewers began writing about her. Critics are generally agreed upon the fact that she is one of the most talented novelist

writing. Many have compared and contrasted her approach and technique to other writers. Judy Sproxton comparing her with Greene and Waugh, says :

"Spark's ability to portray the ridiculousness of some of her characters revealed by their absurd pretensions is not far from the acerbic wit of Waugh...Spark has in common with Greene a reluctance to identify with the Roman Catholic Church in terms of its instructions and demands." [25]

Norman Page says that in her fondness for parodying the conventions and structures of established modes of fiction, Spark resembles her contemporary William Golding. Bernard Harrison compares Spark to Jane Austen saying that both are moral satirists and in some sense anti-Romantic writers. But noting that the disparities between them are numerous, he says: "readers feel that they 'know where they are' with Jane Austen, whereas with Muriel Spark they don't." [26] More or less the same idea is shared by Stephen Schiff :

"In a sense, everything about Muriel Spark has to be read between the lines; nothing about her is quite straightforward." [27]

Spark's work has attracted a good deal of critical attention in recent years. David Lodge in The Novelist at the Crossroads offers a useful discussion of the narrative stance she adopts with reference to her faith. He comments that Spark's novels are distinguished by "a highly original and effective exploitation of the convention of authorial omniscience." [28] But it is equally unpretentious : "for most of the time", writes Lodge, "her stories are narrated from some human, limited point of view." [29]

For Malcolm Bradbury in Possibilities, the essence of Spark's narrative is close to Waugh's detachment. He says that she has no sympathy for her characters, and the wholeness of coherence of her works derives from her intelligence and her sensitivity to form as a poet. Alan Bold, too, thinks that the singular achievement of Muriel Spark has been to "synthesize the linguistic cunning of poetry with the seeming credibility of prose." [30] Peter Kemp asserts that Spark's artistry is not dependant merely on aesthetic economy and tautness of plot; for him there is a rigorous moral dimension implicit in all that she writes. Judy Sproxton says:

"Her themes are deeply disturbing; they cast a spotlight on the moral shortcomings of people's behaviour." [31]

Harrison is of the same opinion. He agrees that Spark's novels are "preoccupied with morality." [32] He goes on to say that her fiction departs from the canons of the traditional novel.

Margaret Willy draws a parallel between Spark and Angus Wilson saying that like him "she is a moral fabulist of the contemporary scene who works through the medium of comedy; and like him, she is often most in earnest when at her most entertaining." [33]

Muriel Spark became a popular and commercially successful writer only with The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie though her early novels achieved a modest critical success. On the whole, critics have been fascinated by the original and confident way in

which Spark writes. Her novels are often spoken of as if their theological aspects were paramount, but some novels can be viewed as reflecting the changing political and economic climate of the period. Frank Kermode writes that her novels may have the sense of sameness, of her having written the same book over and over again, but it is only illusory. A casual reading may suggest this but a closer scrutiny shows new problems,

aesthetics and moral at work in the familiar settings, character types or plot devices. W. H. Auden seems to think in the same lines :

"the milieu of each of Miss Spark's novels is different from the others and no reader could conceivably guess the setting of the next." [34]

Vergene F. Leverenz, Samuel Hynes and Granville Hicks consider Spark operating within the framework of Catholic belief. Hicks compares her with Greene and Flannery O'Connor, calling her "a gloomy Catholic... more concerned with the evil of man than with the goodness of God." [35] Critics like Elaine Showalter and Judy Sproxton see in Spark's novels a feminist approach. Showalter believes that we are beginning to see in the fiction of Muriel Spark a renaissance in women's writing which provides "woman's view of life, woman's experience." [36] Sproxton says that though Spark is not a feminist in the sense that she asserts specific rights for women, yet she has depicted "women in a search for a dignity and possession of mind

which, in its own way, vindicates a woman's spiritual integrity." [37]

William McBrien and Malcolm Bradbury have written about the macabre quality of Spark's fiction but McBrien declares that she also has her eye and ear for the "merry" [38]. Gilbert Phelps observes that her novels may be apt enough reflection of the spiritual emptiness of modern society but he cannot help wondering "what it all adds up to, what it is about." [39]

Some critics have related Muriel Spark's work to folklore, fairy tale or myth. Peter Kemp, for instance, says: "it comes close to allegory" [40] but Spark herself compares her art to parables. She says :

"Fiction is not the truth. It's an illusion. It's a kind of lie." [41]

At the heart of what her critics call cruelty, ("People say my novels are cruel because cruel things happen and I keep this even tone" [42]) is an insistence that the world be seen as it is. Spark says :

"The wind bloweth where it listeth. That's how the Bible puts it. I'm often very deadpan, but there's a moral statement, too, and what it's saying is that there's a life beyond this, and these events are not the most important things. They're not important in the long run. You don't know why the things that happen happen. You have to live with the mystery. That's the answer in my books." [43]

III. JUSTIFICATION OF THE TOPIC:

Muriel Spark began her career as a poet, short story writer and critic and only later as a novelist. But once she began, she started writing one book after another at an astonishing rate - sometimes more than one a year - and she has not stopped since then. Her early novels achieved a modest critical success and soon she became a popular and commercially successful writer. An accomplished and prolific writer, Spark has brilliantly carved a niche for herself in the literary world.

Her early novels were often criticized as being "sportive", even "frothy" which is difficult to accept. They are certainly examples of a new kind of novel. The pleasure that Spark takes in writing them ("I love to sit there writing something. It's the happiest thing I could do" [44]) is quite visible in her novels. There is pleasure for the readers too: a pleasure in the intricately patterned plots, the comic tone, the fast pace and a pleasure in the concealment of motives and meanings. This combination is what makes Spark's novels so mysterious and so unique.

No doubt, the hallmarks of Muriel Spark are projected in many of her novels: the interplay between illusion and reality, her wit in observing human oddity and weakness. However, she does retain in them the wholeness of experience which makes her

works so fascinating. The present dissertation aims at analysing the themes in Muriel Spark's early novels which shows an important deviation from the modernist model. With new dimensions of wit and humour, her realism shows an important reaction against symbolist excesses of modernist novel. The present study is a modest attempt to locate these deviations in her early novels.

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