

CHAPTER THREE

OF MAN AND SOCIETY

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OF MAN AND SOCIETY : THE BALLAD OF PECKHAM RYE; THE BACHELORS

With the multicharactered complexity of Memento Mori behind her, Spark continued her artistic endeavour and produced an extraordinary character Dougal Douglas, "a moral catalyst"[1], an antihero, in her next short novel The Ballad of Peckham Rye. The writing of Memento Mori seemed to have strained Spark enough to turn to something she considered less demanding. She says :

"Next, I wanted to give my mind a holiday and to write something light and lyrical - as near a poem as a novel could get, and in as few words as possible." [2] ✓

The Ballad of Peckham Rye was the result in which the force changed from death on the telephone of the earlier novel to a devil in London. W.H. Auden states that it is about "the vulnerability of the inarticulate and semi-educated to manipulation by clear-headed evil." [3] Dougal, the protagonist is also the villain, "who apparently offers freedom and life, but is really the bearer of death and destruction" [4]. This is a kind of character who turns up in most of Muriel Spark's early novels. In The Comforters, the devil acts through Mrs Hogg who is shown as a pious church woman ; in Robinson, Tom Wells has the evil tendencies and in Memento Mori, the devil acts through a blackmailing housekeeper, Mrs Pettigrew.

In this novel, Spark focuses her attention on Dougal, a graduate of Edinburgh University, who is a diabolical character. Like so many of her major characters, he is also "a maker of fictions"[5], even using two names, a mirror image of the other. The story traces his arrival in Peckham where he has been hired by Meadows, Medde and Grindleys, manufacturers of nylon textile, "to bring vision into the lives of the workers"[6]. Instead, Dougal intrudes upon the peaceful life of the community, unsettling the ordered society. He is an ambiguous figure, assuming different guises whenever he pleases. In chapter two and three of the novel, this peculiarity of Dougal is hinted at, where at one point he "changed his shape and became a professor"[7]; at another "leaned forward and became a television interviewer"[8]. He also passes himself off as "an interested archeologist"[9]. Apart from this, he is also a ghost writer of the biography of a retired actress and singer Maria Cheeseman. He claims also to be an expert researcher into the human problems. Again, while walking through a cemetery with Merle Coverdale, he "posed like an angel on a grave... He posed like an angel-devil, with his hump shoulder and gleaming smile"[10]. He even openly declared himself to be "one of the wicked spirits that wander through the world for the ruin of souls"[11].

In fact, Dougal gleefully shares a secret with his friends, a physical peculiarity which is not noticeable : two bumps on his head, remains of horns, he claims, which were shaved off surgically. Norman Page comments:

"this simple story of suburban alarms and excursions, deceptions and confusions, is also a commentary on the nature of fiction and its power to deceive and lead astray." [12]

Spark has depicted Peckham very realistically, putting in the "period" touches for authenticity. It is the typical world of the fifty's, a world of television and popular songs. The heroine, Dixie Morse dances "to the rhythm of Pickin' a chicken" [13], even Dougal dances the Highland Fling and insists, "I'm fey, I've got Highland blood" [14]. Meticulously portraying Peckham with its pubs, cafes and dance halls, Spark even flavours the language with the current slangs and jargons, thus providing the naturalistic solidity:

" 'Got any rock and cha-cha on your list, Tony?'
'Rev up to it, son. Groove in.'
Tony turned, replaced his beer on the top of the piano, and rippled his hands over 'Romona'.
'Go, man, go.'
'Any more of that,' said the barmaid, 'you go man go outside.'
'Yes, that's what I say.' Tony's the pop's.'" [15]

According to Alan Bold, T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land had "a powerful poetic influence on Spark's novel... From The Waste Land too, perhaps, comes Spark's interest in the comical aspects of working-class dialogue. Eliot's pub conversation captures the self-congratulatory yet conspiratorial tone of the proletarian monologue ... Spark's ballad has several such passages." [16]

Peckham has another textile manufacturing firm run by Drover Willis where Dougal has also taken up a job but going under the name of Douglas Dougal, an alter ego of the other, as

it were. Mr Weedon, a character in the story points out that "Dougal Douglas is a diabolic agent, if not in fact the Devil"[17]. Dougal captivates some characters in the story but most of them view him with suspicion and hatred.

Spark's accent is satiric as well as comic in her detailing of life in Peckham, where the community is shown as full of self deceit, ignorant and immoral. Dougal, in the basic contrivance of his "human research"[18], goes on to sketch and analyse the different types of morality in Peckham Rye :

"There are four types of morality observable in Peckham ... One, emotional. Two, functional. Three, puritanical. Four, Christian."[19]

The people living in this society are afflicted by an epidemic lack of honesty. Lack of awareness and a dullness which pervades these individuals is typical of a life devoid of any meaning. Alan Bold finds a similarity between the scene of T.S.Eliot's typist and her guest in The Waste Land and the visit of Mr Druce in Merle Coverdale's flat and the eventual mechanical sex. Perception of the world around for these characters is also minimal. Taking Merle Coverdale for a walk, Dougal points to a baby's pram stuck out on a balcony:

" 'It's only a doll,' Dougal said.
'How do you know?'
'I've seen it before...'
'Oh, it gave me a fright.'
'How long have you lived in Peckham?' he said.
'Twelve and a half years.'
'You've never noticed the pram before?'
'No, can't say I have. Must be new.'
'...In fact the pram has been there for twenty-five years. You see, you simply haven't noticed it.' "[20]

Into such a society full of prejudice, hypocrisy and unconcerned personalities, we witness the entrance of Dougal, paid by the two textile concerns "to take the pulse of the people and plumb the industrial depths of Peckham." [21] The way he goes about conducting this "human research" is highly theatrical. With his capacity for mischief, Dougal in fact undermines the authority of his two textile employers by goading employees to take days off as a matter of policy. By advising unrestrained absenteeism in the workers, he is actually "urging uninhibited expression of inner feelings" [22]. Indirectly, therefore, he is preaching the respect that one must have for oneself which should precede the respect for others. But since he suggests no discipline with which to direct this new freedom, he does maximum of damage to them instead. Thus, he is skillfully able to bring out the worst in individuals he encounters. Dougal points out himself that he acts as an exorcist :

" ' I have powers of exorcism,' Dougal said... 'The ability to drive devils out of people.'
'I thought you were a devil yourself.'
'The two states are not incompatible.' " [23]

Dougal sets out to discern the "fatal flaw" [24], the weakness, in the various persons he meets and brings out into the open their truths which had remained latent till then. According to Peter Kemp : " the way in which people are given to muffling truth with inauthentic words, editing reality for their own consolation, is the novel's major theme." [25]

Dougal leads Mr Druce into temptation by advising him to live separately from his frigid wife, thus striking at his furtive sexual perversity. He even knows about Merle Coverdale's loneliness and fear of her employer lover, Mr Druce. He unsettles the neurotic Mr Weedon quite intentionally. He is aware of Miss Frierne's guilt about her long-lost brother; goads Trevor Lomas into violence; sows seeds of discontent in Humphrey Place so that he despairs of Dixie's dream of married bliss in a model bungalow. In fact, Dougal makes Humphrey see Dixie as she is.

Unable to tolerate other people's moral illness, Dougal seems to be jolting them to reality, to overcome the suppressed aspects of their personality and thus brings a new perspective to their lives. The moments of truth are created by Dougal having engineered situations in which the characters are forced to experience sharp facts of life. What he actually does is "through stressed lies, emphasized distortions, makes a plea for truth and honesty"[26]. But the result is drastic, "psychologically and morally devastating"[27] because many cannot face this. Kemp adds :

"A fiction about the way that people hate cold fact and try to stave it off with fictions of their own, The Ballad of Peckham Rye parades its unreal nature, fits, like a pot its mould."[28]

Spark has very characteristically complicated her plot with blackmail, robbery and violence. There are narrative twists to the story as well. Merle Coverdale is murdered by Mr Druce; Dougal is blackmailed by a schoolboy; Trevor, Dougal's chief

antagonist, steals his notebooks - just as Tom Wells steals January's manuscripts in Robinson. There is a final confrontation between the two in a tunnel, where Dougal fends off Trevor by shining a light in his face. This scene reminds us of the climax scene in Robinson where January fends off Wells in a similar fashion.

The novel's nearness to the ballad technique has been pointed out by many critics. Peter Kemp states that the title of Spark's novel and its procedures underline this fact. The various devices she has used being "the emphasis on dialogue and marked reliance on the 'he said - she said' formula"[29]. Calling The Ballad of Peckham Rye "a supernatural ballad", Alan Bold says that the method of its construction is derived from the popular ballad: "Spark wants her story to have the swift pace of a traditional ballad, the abrupt action of the oral idiom"[30]. Norman Page, too, comments in a similar note. The fact that Spark had a poetic technique in mind while writing this novel is clear from her own remarks about writing "something light and lyrical - as near a poem as a novel could get." [31]

On the penultimate page of the novel, it is revealed that in "Dougal's subsequent life... he gathered together the scrap ends of his profligate experience...and turned them into a lot of cockeyed books, and went far in the world." [32] In this book Dougal seems like an author of the the novel in which he features, "a storyteller within a story" [33], like Caroline Rose

who is both a protagonist and ultimately the "author" of The Comforters.

The Bachelors resemble the other novels of Muriel Spark with an abundance of characters and with its heavy plot. Written rapidly within a year after The Ballad of Peckham Rye, The Bachelors deals with "the existence of evil in a world"[34] filled with "spurious religions"[35] and Spark goes on to expose the emptiness prevailing in them. There are three false faiths in this novel, according to Alan Bold, Bachelorhood, Spiritualism and Homosexuality.

Starting the book with Bachelorhood, Spark braids the plot of the novel around a group of solitaires, "a generous assembly of the unattached"[36]. Muriel Spark has said :

"I wrote a book about bachelors and it seemed to me that everyone was a bachelor."[37]

There are a number of unmarried men in this fiction, "bachelors of varying degrees of confirmation"[38], including widows, a divorcee and single girls. They are all "lost souls at sea in London"[39], in "the great city of bachelors"[40]. Although they are grouped in a community seeking a union with other men, basically they remain very much alone. Thickly populated with unusual characters, The Bachelors introduces us to Dr Mike Garland, clairvoyant, homosexual and a petty criminal; Patrick Seton, a confidence trickster and spiritualistic medium; Father Socket, the unscrupulous pseudo-priest; Ronald Bridges, epileptic and graphologist and a host of other individuals.

Patrick Seton practises his Spiritualism with the Wider Infinity, a group which has its headquarters in Merlene Cooper's flat. There he impresses gullible women and takes advantage of them. He is a "fraudulent make-believe"[41] who claims to put his incredulous clients in touch with a world of spirits. He has also convinced his pregnant mistress, Alice Dawes, who is a diabetic, that he intends to marry her whereas he plots, on the sly, to kill her by overdosing her with insulin. Patrick sees his scheme, not as murder, but as a process of disintegration, taking the soul from the body's dross. He says: "I will release her spirit from this gross body." [42]

He thinks of her death as "the liberation of Alice's spirit"[43]. Moreover, Patrick also urges Alice to agree to an abortion. This process onced improperly performed had brought about the death of Gloria, Dr Lyte's mistress in the past. Taking his opportunity, Patrick blackmails Lyte, obtaining drugs and money in return for keeping the doctor's secret about the illegal and fatal operation.

Dr Lyte, Seton's half accomplice in the plan to murder Alice, has a dulled conscience. Frightened of Seton of bringing When Patrick asks the doctor if he may borrow his chalet in Switzerland to take Alice on holiday, Lyte realizes slowly the actual intention but feels utterly powerless to intervene.

Judy Sproxton calls Alice Dawes, Patrick's mistress "an unconscious victim"[44] in this novel, more so because she is

"unaware of the malevolence which has penetrated her life"[45]. She is portrayed as an attractive but simple-minded girl. Her love for Patrick is total, so is her trust in him. In fact, she is completely within Seton's power as Elsie observes to Matthew, the Irish journalist who is besotted with Alice. She often defends Patrick against Elsie's criticism: "He's got something... he's got a soul,"[46] Alice declares to her friend, Elsie. She resists him only once when he asks her to go through the abortion. The fact that she is unable to sense her lover's true character makes her strangely innocent. She views the trial as a test of God's justice: "If Patrick doesn't get off I don't believe in God," she says[47]. In the end, ironically, it is the verdict that saves her life, though we are told little about her feelings regarding it. Eventually she marries Matthew, who had waited patiently for her throughout the ordeal. Spark presents Alice rather superficially in the novel. It is obvious that her main intention is to draw the reader's attention to the two opposed forces in the characters of Seton and Ronald Bridges. Karl Malkoff points out about these two individuals :

"they are, in the mode of Dostoevsky and Conrad, doubles." [48]

The importance of Ronald Bridges, a Catholic and a would-have-been-priest in the book is greater than his incidental role as a handwriting expert would suggest. Ronald suffers from an affliction, epilepsy. His acceptance of his misfortune and his self-knowledge leads him to exercise penitence and self-rebuke

often. He even learns special methods of emotional control. Ronald "knew how to compose himself for a fit. He cultivated his secret methods of retaining some self-awareness during his convulsions." [49]

His dignified acceptance of suffering suggest "a kind of spiritual pilgrimage"[50]. Drawing inspiration from his faith, he establishes an understanding with other people, who often consult him on various subjects. This creates "a polarity : the antithesis of Patrick Seton"[51]. Though he is more genuine than Seton, yet they are linked by a resemblance, the epileptic fit of one to the spiritualistic trance of the other - upturned eyes, twitching limbs, frothing mouth. Thinking of his fits, Ronald feels himself to be one " possessed by a devil"[52]. Later we are told, after he has had an epileptic attack :

"This often happened to Ronald after he had made some effort of will towards graciousness, as if a devil in his body was taking its revenge."[53]

According to Malkoff, the diabolical overtones of The Bachelors are "a carry-over"[54] from Spark's The Ballad of Peckham Rye. Not only Seton and Bridges have diabolical connotations, but Matthew Finch, another character in the novel, calls all spiritualists heretics because they are dualists who refuse to recognize a morality of the flesh. He also includes bachelors in this category :

" 'I'm afraid we are heretics ... or possessed by devils ... It shows a dualistic attitude, not to marry if you aren't going to be a priest or a religious.' "[55]

At the outset of the novel, Patrick Seton is about to face a charge of fraudulent conversion as he had forged a letter cheating Freda Flower, the widow, out of two thousand pounds. He has actually abused his impressive powers as a medium and cheated many of his devotees who had joined the group, with his pretensions to fake spirituality. His power is so immense on those susceptible to him that even Freda, who knows that Patrick has forged the letter, is confused about the truth. She has lost her confidence and is in a dilemma whether to proceed with the case: "He can look you in the eyes," said Freda Flower to Mike Garland, and make you believe it's you that's telling the lie."[56]

At the trial, Ronald who operates a handwriting museum, is called as an expert witness to look into the forged letter. Ronald's unpretentious self, wisdom and understanding make him Seton's exact opposite, though there are many similarities. Norman Page states that the novel is less "a tale of crime outwitted than an allegory of the struggle between the forces of light and darkness."[57]

Like a ripple in a pond, the case that had begun starts stirring the lives of many people in the various localities, and Elsie Forrest is one of them. Alice Dawes's friend and fellow worker in a coffee bar, Elsie does typing for Father Socket, a spiritualist clergyman. Her faith and half-wilful blindness lets Socket dupe away her time. Yet it is she who

tumbles upon the unexpected. She discovers the homosexual games that the clergyman is playing with a former inmate of Maidstone prison, Mike Garland. With heavy irony and witty conceits, Spark reveals the flimsy foundation of Socket's religion, a clergyman who has exploited the sexual weakness of his associates:

"Father Socket had...bestowed larger thoughts on Mike, who began to experience a late flowering in his soul... Mike felt secure with Father Socket... He was no longer an aimless chancer sliding in and out of illegal avenues, feeling resentful all the while. Mike was now at rights with the world, he was somebody. He had a religion and a way life, set forth by Father Socket."[58]

Mike Garland, once a common criminal is Father Socket's homosexual partner. They are later revealed as conmen who run a cinema showing Nudies and featuring live girls who entertain afterwards. So much for spiritualism, Spark seems to say. Allan Massie says of Spark :

"No modern novelist has a sharper sense of evil; none is more alert to the many forms it can take, of the deceptively attractive guises it assumes."[59]

Elsie, a highly sexed woman herself, is rather lonely and is eager for Ronald to become her lover or her friend. She steals a letter from him, which is actually forged by Patrick Seton and which Ronald had brought home to examine. She tries to use the letter as a weapon to manoeuvre him into involvement. But Ronald somehow gets past all her efforts and instead treats her with charity. This strengthens her self-respect and thus begins a process whereby in the interest of truth, Elsie exposes perjury, ensuring Seton's imprisonment and unknowingly saving

the life of her friend, Alice. Janet Menzies observes that Spark "manipulates her characters like a chess player -- schematically. As the characters plot amongst themselves their actions are prompted by Muriel Spark's greater scheme." [60]

Writing in a delightful manner, the novelist makes her reader take a peek at the bachelors and their friends who are perpetually scheming amongst themselves, changing sides constantly from plot to counterplot. The novel with blackmail, deceptions, betrayals, perjury, forgery and a stolen letter move towards its climax in the trial scene. The court scene is technically indispensable to the plot, according to Menzies: "I may not be sent for trial; if it comes to court; the case may not come off." [61] This constant refrain among the bachelors "reiterates the preoccupation of their enclosed little world" [62]. They wander to and fro within their narrow circle which suggest their aimlessness and spiritual emptiness. The exception is Ronald, the "truth-teller" [63] who is viewed by both Peter Kemp and William McBrien as a character closest to the novelist and who has many resemblances to his creator. The others seem to be out of contact with the rest of the life and the court room put them in their true perspective.

The dynamism in Spark's language and narrative can be witnessed in these last pages of the novel where she reveals herself as a seeker of truth. During the trial, the judge says:

" 'I only want to get our definitions clear so that the jury can see what it is dealing with. There has been a great deal of mystification in this case.' " [64].

The author through the judge seems to be telling us that if we get our "definitions clear", we can penetrate the "mystification" of her novels and disclose a repeated search for what is true. As rightly pointed out by Malkoff, The Bachelors, then, is a novel "involved with the problem of correct vision, of true insight; to see God in a world of devils." [65]

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