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The Characters of Muriel Spark and their Universal Experiences

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Abstract

The paper discusses some universal experiences and worldly phenomena which Mrs. Spark very beautifully reveals through her characters. But these experiences are universal in this sense that they are applicable not to a particular person but to every human being of the world. It also studies the reactions of Mrs. Spark's characters to these universal attributes. The universal phenomena explored by Mrs. Spark are Death as a natural phenomenon, jealousy, decaying materialistic civilization, moral degradation, suffering etc. Her novels; *Memento Mori* depicts the importance of Death which is inevitable part of our life, *The Bachelors* presents the problems and shortcomings of celibates and *The Only Problem* reveals the significance of suffering which is ever mixed with pleasure. Generally, the world of Mrs. Spark's novels is a fallen one and she emphasizes the revelation of degeneration of worldly men. *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* and *The Public Image* are such novels as depict the worldliness materialism and loss of spiritualism of the modern human beings.

Keywords: Solipsism, Epilepsy, Celibacy, Degradation, Alienation, Spiritualism, Mendacity, Rivalry

Muriel Spark is widely recognized as one of the most important contemporary novelists. She is a writer endowed with extra-ordinary perception. Her career as a novelist evinces a steady growth and her reputation as a novelist has remained firm; her popularity has been too recent to be finally covered by any amount of full-fledged critical reviews and evaluation. Muriel Spark depicts some universal human experiences in some of her important novels, and the reactions of her characters to them. Her attempt to reveal universality through some of her characters makes her characters unforgettable. She explores some universal phenomena which are applicable to everybody. Some of her protagonists are types rather than individuals and we feel their unity with the rest of humanity. They stand out in the open air of universe. Mrs. Spark's universality lies in broadening the narrow world to broader perspectives. She deals with powerful elemental passions of joys and sorrows, common to all humanity. Consequently, each one of us shares vicariously the fate of her characters. Thus, they belong to the category of type characters who represent a general outlook, applicable to the whole society. Her Characters have the complexity, fulness and variety of humanity itself. She depicts common attributes like old age, celibacy, jealousy, suffering, etc., which are applicable to the whole mankind. Hence, it is worth analyzing some of her important novels that reveal the universal experiences through the characters and also seeing how characters react to those universal experiences.

Memento Mori is a complex, witty, macabre novel in which Muriel Spark uses a limited canvas: she studied comparatively few characters and selects them from the confined group of the aged. The novel is predominantly about old people. Mrs. Spark observes about this novel, "I decided to write a book about old people. It happened that a number of old people I had known as a child in Edinburgh were dying from one cause or another, and on my visits to Edinburgh I sometimes accompanied my mother to see them in hospital. When I saw them, I was impressed by the power and the persistence of the human spirit" [1].

Thus, Muriel Spark describing the genesis of the novel, reveals its great concern with old age and death. She is concerned here with the reactions of the old people to the message: "Remember you must die" [2] and to characterize the foibles and weaknesses which are the prerogative of age no less than of youth. We live, of course, said an aging population but though the physical and social sciences are growingly attentive to old people in contemporary society, the twentieth century novel has not done full justice to this subject. Mrs. Spark's novel offers a compassionate, yet altogether unsentimental look at old people and how they confront death. Mrs. Spark is bewildered to see why one should be surprised by what is common knowledge. The voice alters appropriately as it addresses the various respondents. In this respect Alan Bold rightly observes, "If the disembodied figure of death dominates the novel from a distance; Spark closes in on her characters to examine the precise details of old age and illness" [3]. In the novel the authorship of the calls is not the focus of interest. Death telephoning is simply the witty updating of a literary convention, which puts into plain words a message already sounding, at one level or another, in the minds of the hearers. What is important and most

authentic is the nature of response to the unpalatable fact broadcast so widely and disturbingly. Each character reacts to this anonymous call quite differently. Dr. Alec Varner, an amateur sociologist has studied the problems of old age with the aid of a complicated system of notebooks and index cards. Formerly Jean Taylor's lover, he is now completely objective, detached observer, amiable but obsessed with death. The most two important recipients of this anonymous call are Jean Taylor and Mortimer who accept this death call as an inevitable aspect of life. Jean Taylor is closer to the novel's moral center. Once Charmian's maid, she converted to Catholicism after her mistress but is now more serious minded in her beliefs. It is she who first entertains the idea that the telephone calls are made by Death. Her estimate of situation is accepted by the reader; for he participates with her in the experience of the novel, and knows that her view of events is pro founder and more valid than that of the other characters. She considers the period of old age to be a battle field: "Being over seventy is like being engaged in war. All our friends are going or gone and we survive among the 14 dead and dying as on a battle-field" [4]. It should be made clear, however, that *Memento Mori* is not simply about death but old age as well. The physical decline and weakness in old age are clearly visible: "How primitive-life becomes in old age, when one say be surrounded by familiar comforts and yet more vulnerable to the action of nature than any young explorer at the pole" [5]. Fittingly enough, disease and medical concern pervade the novel; it is dedicated to a nurse; the doctored and professional or smelter attendants are almost the only middle-aged or younger people in it. The mortality rate is high; six characters dying during the course of the novel are finally and clinically accounted for.

Muriel Spark is often concerned with the vices of modern life. She very skillfully tells that in modern age we have become self-centered and confined to ourselves. Besides, she also depicts the vacuum of modern life in which we have been diverted from simplicity, sympathy, honesty and spirituality and are leading a false and pretentious life. In her next novel, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* Muriel Spark is preoccupied with the vices of modern life. She observes here the decaying materialistic civilization of London people; their moral degeneration and boredom. The novel vary beautifully depicts the degraded London life, inadequacy of human love, greed for wealth, commercialism, monotony and aimlessness. The vacuum of modern life is stressed throughout the novel, and this hollowness is prevalent in all walks of the life of modern people. In this novel the acone changes from death on telephone to a devil in South London. It is appropriately called a ballad because of the predominance of the super natural in it. Muriel Spark presents the upheaval of Peckham Rye not as a continuous sequence of events by the presence of its supernatural character, but as a series of rapid flashes depicting action and movement. She weaves a narrative framework which is an essential part of the best ballads. She narrative of the novel is very simple. Dougal Douglas, the diabolic Edinburgh Arts man comes to live in Peckham Rye to work for Meadows, Meade and Grindley, textile manufacturers. He is appointed in the firm to bring vision into the lives of the workers and later takes an identical position for rival company Drover Willis, under the name of Douglas Dougal. He ultimately creates a general ferment in the community of Peckham aye that subsides only after his departure.

The central figure of this novel is certainly Dougal Douglas who is engaged in Meadows Heade and Grindley to correct the vision of the workers, who are morally decadent. These workers have lost spiritual insight and have become worldly and materialistic. Dougal apparently offers freedom and life but is really the bearer of death and destruction. When he is appointed in Meadow Meade and Grindley Company to bring breadth and vision into the workers' lives, he claims that he will need to do research into their inner lives and into the real Peckham, "I shall have to do research, Dougal mused, into their inner lives': Research into the real Peckham. It will be necessary to discover the spiritual well-spring, the glorious history of the place before I am able to offer some impetus" [6].

Dougal's real nature is made evident throughout the novel. Dougal's arrival brings a spark of life and fervor. He gives the impression of being a fallen angel, having incurred the wrath of God. He appears on the earth in human shape with an obvious view to disturbing the existing order of events and the natural pattern of everyday existence. Muriel Spark depicts the universal experiences in such a way as they become universal truths and it seems that every one of these universes has to share them. These universal facts are applicable not only to a particular person, but to the whole class also. Now in her *The Bachelors* (1960), Muriel Spark, as a true psychologist, studies the condition of all bachelors. She is mainly concerned here with noting down the weaknesses and flaws of all bachelors in this world. Here, again Muriel Spark is pre-occupied with the vices and false-pretensions of London bachelors. She delineates these bachelors and their sterile way of life. The novel like *Memento Mori* is a clear instance of fiction as obsession. This novel is almost completely populated by unmarried men and women. The chief characteristic of Mrs. Spark's work is that the specific evokes the universal; the characters are bachelors in the sense of people alone, searching for union with other men, or with something larger than themselves. However, the problems and weaknesses of the bachelor's explored in this novel are applicable to all celibates in this world. The bachelors in the novel are all members of the middle classes, living in Chelsea, Kensington and Hampstead. They are: Ronald Bridges, an epileptic graphologist, Catholic, Matthew Finch, Irish Journalist, Catholic, obsessed by girls, original sin and family duty; Martin Bowles, barrister, of fraudulent emotions, Walter Prett, Drunk, art-critic and quarrelsome snob; Time Raymond, only twenty-three, too young to be a real bachelor, dominated by his aunt; Ewart Thornton, school-master, and spiritualist; and the key figure in the plot, Patrick Seton, aged fifty-five, 'a spiritualist medium on trial. The plot of the novel is stronger and deals with Patrick Seton's impending trial on the charge of obtaining money by false pretense, from Freda Flower, a widow and member of the spiritualist group, with his relationship with Alice Dawes, a beautiful girl who works in a coffee bar and who is pregnant by him. Alice Dawes, Seton's mistress wishes to marry him. Seton seeing this as a burden, looks forward to his acquittal so that he can take his fiancée to the continent end liberate her spirit with an overdose of insulin. Ronald Bridge operates a handwriting museum, and is often called upon by the police as an expert witness in his specialty. At Seton's trial, he denounces the spiritualist as a forger. After the investigation, Seton is found guilty and he is sentenced to jail for five years.

In this novel Muriel Spark has confined her bachelors to their problems as she did in *Memento Mori*. Allan Massie remarks, "The Bachelors' condition isolates their problems as does old age in *Memento Mori*" [7]. Ronald Bridges, through whose eyes much of the action is conveyed, and who is allowed understanding of it in his interior voice, has been brought up against himself by his epilepsy. He believes that it unfits him for marriage, though what in fact has prevented him from marrying is not the epilepsy as such and the fear that he might transmit it to a child as his sense of how it sets him apart and his resentment at the use that might be made of it in a relationship as demanding as marriage. The girl whom he meets tries to mother him and to love him as a child, because she takes him as a mentally sick person. Allan Massie opines, "It is here notable that Muriel Spark is concerned with solipsism - a particularly twentieth century deviation" [8] All her bachelors incline to a solipsistic view of the universe, as Miss Jean Brodie in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* takes her pupils only as an extension of her personality. Only Ronald Bridges and Matthew Finch in *The Bachelors* are to some extent saved in as much as they evince a readiness to let God in. In *The Bachelors* there are two distinct poles of interest: Patrick Seton and Ronald Bridges; because the notion of the novel moves chiefly around them. Patrick Seton is a medium on trial for fraudulent conversion. Not only in his impending trial the occasion for most of what happens, but he himself, the spiritualist, bachelor and criminal sums up all the qualities of other characters and takes them to extremes. Patrick is indeed a genuine medium; he does go into trances; he does reveal what he does not consciously know. Patrick's appearance and physical qualities convey of other worldly power, and his moral idiocy, the total lack in him of any moral development. His voice seemed to fade away at the end of each sentence. He deceives Alice being constantly affectionate to her and she considers him true and faithful to her. He has beguiled Freddy Flower and has misused the money-cheque given by her. Alice's friend, Elsie recognizes the hidden villain in Seton and cautions Alice of this. But Mrs. Spark's mouth-piece in the novel is certainly Ronald Bridges. He is the prophet of the world of devils. It is he who accurately analyses the condition of bachelors. He contemplates the bachelors of London.

Thus, the bachelors in this novel are applicable to all unmarried people in the world and their vices and follies become the symbolic means conveying the degradation and fall of the world from right path, morality and virtue. Muriel Spark, herself, has stressed that, " I wrote a book about bachelors and it seemed to me that everyone was a bachelor" [9]. The bachelors are isolated, vulnerable and thrown back upon themselves. Muriel Spark's portrayal of this circle of bachelors falls heavily upon the sterile and unproductive, upon homosexuality, contraception and abortion, all of which are treated with distaste as a breakdown of modern life. She very accurately analyses the mundane realities of celibacy, marriage, separation and divorce.

Muriel Spark deals with worldly phenomena very skillfully and her ability essentially is an important ladder in the evolution of her cosmic vision. In this respect she is comparable to her contemporary, Doris Lessing who points out the problems of mental disbalanced, nervous breakdown, hysteria, disillusionment and also the possibilities of women's emancipation in this world. treats of these threads as inseparable aspects and pitfalls of

confused and problem-ridden modern life. Her novels like *The Golden Notebook* and *The Grass is Singing* very clearly convey the problem of apartheid, the problems of women's liberation in man's world. We also find her ideas clustering round abnormal consciousness, fragmentation, self-division, breakdown and the subjective distortions of perception. Muriel Spark often deals with worldly vices and evils like death, corruption, suffering, moral breakdown, jealousy etc., which are common to everybody. Her novel *The Public Image* is such that very subtly explores the most prominent and inherent shortcoming of human beings. Here Muriel Spark is chiefly concerned with jealousy, hate and deception. She, very skillfully, has exhibited how one person is jealous of another when the former finds the later rivalling. She, as a true psychologist, has discovered jealousy and hatred as the main weaknesses of human beings. Rivalry in social, political, religious and in film life always led to jealousy among the people. *The Public Image* discusses jealousy and hatred between husband and wife, who appear to be rivals in the field of their work. The novel deals with the false public image of Annabel, the heroine of the novel. She is married to Frederick and having a baby. Annabel professionally a film-star is always very careful of her image, particularly dealing with the public. Frederick, though himself an actor has always been jealous of the popularity of his wife. With the passage of time Annabel grows more successful, so Frederick grows more desperate and at last, sick of living a lie, he decides with vicious logic to die, using suicide, he strikes savagely after death at his wife's reputation. Annabel anyhow tries her best to preserve her image, but meanwhile she is blackmailed by Hilly O'Brien, the friend of Frederick, and consequently she publicly shatters her image. Annabel's self-image is comparable to that of Barbara Vaughan in *The Mandelbaum Gate*. In the case of Annabel, her image is also different with the image, visible to the world. But, whereas Barbara, an intellectual and religious woman, hated seeming other than she was, Annabel is professionally dedicated to the preservation of an untrue image. Peter Kemp rightly observes, "in *The Public Image* mendacity swells into the outrageous and grotesque" [10].

Muriel Spark studies human nature in general and on the basis of this study she frames their rules of conduct in life. In this way she tries to establish a moral tradition which should take practical effect in the activities of daily life. She also makes mutual phenomena, the objects of her attention and speculations. Now she moves on to the problem of suffering of mankind in her very recent novel *The Only Problem*. It is the outcome of Spark's many years of thinking about *The Book of Job*. She is of the view that suffering is a natural phenomenon of life and it is an inevitable part of our life. Suffering and living cannot be separated and without suffering life will be intolerable and imperfect. The novel is set in Vosges where Harvey, the hero, has gone, partly drawn by the painting, to write a commentary on Job. He is a rich man who has walked out on his wife because he cannot stand her naive radical views. His wife Effie takes another lover and ultimately becomes the leader of a terrorist-group and shot dead by police in an encounter. Mrs. Spark, concentrates in this novel mainly on the suffering of Harvey and his suffering to some extent resembles the suffering of Job who was deprived of all his wealth and property in order to be tested of his righteousness by God. Harvey's suffering starts the moment he deserts his wife who is got involved in a terrorist gang to smuggle out prohibited things, consequently Harvey is defamed and his good image is undermined. And in the end of the

novel, he is shown to be left alone with his daughter Clara. This restoration of his daughter refers to Job's daughter, restored to him, along with double his cattle and other possessions. While comparing Harvey to Job of the Bible, Alan Bold truly says, "Harvey (like Job) accepts his ordeal philosophically. He is, like several spark protagonists, self-centered to the point of solipsism. Everything that occurs is grist to his mill" [11]. But if we start from the other end and try to imagine a world without suffering, we see that it would be an intolerable world. Job's real tragedy Harvey comes to see is the happy ending. God robs Job of his due by making it all come right in the end, so that it is as though the suffering had never been. But this does not apply to Harvey's case. When the possibility looms, that Effie may after all not be a terrorist and murderer but may have been safely in California all the time, Harvey confronts the bitter truths and the dead body is Effie herself.

This brief survey of Muriel Spark's five novels leads us to conclude that her main concern in these novels is to reveal universal experiences and moral phenomena, which she conveys through her characters. She also studies the reactions of her characters to the universal experiences. In *Memento Mori* Death, which is an inseparable part of life, is originally presented in the terms of old age. She has tried to depict that death is sure to come to everybody and we should accept it very boldly. In *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, Mrs. Spark is mainly concerned with the hypocrisy, fear and loss of religious faith that have severely affected the lives of British people. *The Bachelors* shows the vices, futility as well as reactions of unmarried people. Here Mrs. Spark as a psychologist analyses the problems and conditions of celibates. The *Public Image* gives a vivid picture of jealousy, hate and deception arising between husband and wife; how the husband is jealous of his wife when he finds the latter superseding in the field where he himself is working. And lastly, *The Only Problem* represents and insists on the significance of suffering in life and it alludes, though not directly to the suffering of Job. Obviously, Muriel Spark has attained a remarkable success in defining universal situation and expressions and the characters' attributing reactions to them.

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