

## EXPLORING THE ENIGMATIC LIFE OF MURIEL SPARK: DELVING INTO HER BIOGRAPHIES AND BEYOND

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### Abstract:

Centenaries are ideal biographical occasions, and Muriel Spark was good at biographies and centenaries. She loved to celebrate the lives of those writers she admired most. She won a poetry competition for Sir Walter Scott's centenary in 1932; published A Tribute to Wordsworth for his centenary in 1950; wrote a centennial biography of Mary Shelley, who had died on Spark's birthday, 1st February 1851; and praised Robert Burns to the heavens on the occasion of his bicentenary in 1996. As a poet and poetry editor in the late 1940s Spark was always on the lookout for literary landmarks. According to her biographer, Martin Stannard, 'she had a practical eye on the market. Tribute (to Wordsworth) and Child of Light (the Mary Shelley biography) had both been produced to coincide with their subject's centenaries'.

In her study of Wordsworth, Spark begins the blurring of boundaries between life and literature that would become her trademark: 'More than is the case with most poets, Wordsworth the man and the poet are interdependent, and Wordsworthian criticism during the twentieth century has been marked by a narrowing of the distinction between the functions of biographer and literary critic'. This blurring of boundaries between biography and fiction goes to the heart of Spark's writing. She was a biographer-turned-novelist. And in speaking of her biographical subject, Spark lays out an artistic theory of life and literature: 'Mary Shelley was reticent about her own work, and disliked talking about it. Allusions to her novels in her letters and journals are few, brief and factual. The aim of the article is to explore the life of Muriel Spark through her biographical studies as clues to her own life and art.

### Keywords: -

Muriel Spark, biographical, fiction, literature, life, novelist, criticism, biography etc.

## Introduction:

Muriel Spark (1918-2006) was Scottish novelist, short story writer, poet and essayist best known for the satire, and with which the serious themes of her novels are presented. Spark's novels are often set in England, British colonies in Africa or European location her works reflects. Novel of Muriel Spark began to produce fictional published in the year 1957 with most popular novel the *'The Comforters'*. It is a novel that reveals the uncomfortable life that leads to chaotic society. It is a meta-novel where the narrator Caroline is also novelist and student of fiction. It is well notice that Caroline falls in a disturbing predicament as he hears a voice in chorus and further proceeded by the sound typewriter which is recorded her own thoughts. It is also noticed by Ruth Whittaker who says-

*'For Mrs. Spark the physical world is irradiated and made significant by spiritual dimension.'*  
(35)

Spark's biographical writing is complex. She complicates both the life and the work by making it difficult for the reader to see where fiction ends, and fact begins. In the introduction to her biography of Emily Bronte she gives the example of an everyday encounter with someone unexceptional who later proves to be a celebrated artist: 'Which is the more accurate portrayal, that of the real man whom we chanced to meet, or that of our reconstruction – the legendary figure, in other words? The second impression is the more real. The first merely prefigured the legend. But the legend alone is not enough; we need concrete as well as legendary impressions to bring us somewhere near a true picture of the man'.

In the 1950s, Spark was transitioning from poetry to fiction and in her 1953 biography of John Masefield she articulates her developing sense of the capacity of a writer of fiction to capture life and language with the finesse of a poet: 'John Masefield's achievements in fiction are, essentially, a poet's. He uses words with the utmost sensitivity. He occupies himself and engages the reader in the minutiae of every phenomenon he undertakes to write about – the smallest details of any profession or craft of mankind belonging to any period in history or any place are not overlooked by him. In this way he gets at the essentials of a situation, perhaps paradoxically. That is Masefield's secret. Some novelists lay bare their story by making the broad, generalizing sweep. Some concentrate on dialogue to bring forth the essence of their tale. Masefield goes into

detail after detail until the reader is closely acquainted with the subject of the story, and until the relevance of those details, carefully, deliberately chosen after all, becomes apparent, and the essence of Masefield's world, simple and noble, emerges'.

Here, Spark is not merely praising a writer she admires, but commending a poetic approach to prose fiction as a path that she herself would choose. Spark's biography of John Henry Newman appeared in 1957, the same year as her debut novel, *The Comforters*, and three years after her conversion to Catholicism, the life event she later said opened the door to her as a novelist. Spark's account of Newman's life and work allows her to home in on the questions of faith and fiction that exercised her at the time: 'It has been said that as a history of his religious opinions the *Apologia* is at times not accurate. How could it be, in the hurried circumstances? It is a document of memory at white-heat; as an autobiography it is artistic in nature; as a work of art, it is autobiographical in kind'.

Creative autobiography and autobiographical creativity would be the key to her own development as a writer. When Spark emerged as a novelist and began to put pieces of her own life into her fiction, there was inevitably curiosity about her life before she became famous. Derek Stanford, her long-time collaborator and sometime lover – on the rebound from Howard Sergeant – considered himself well-placed to take on the task. Spark had dedicated her early collection of short fiction, *The Go-Away Bird and Other Stories*, to Stanford in 1958, but as her star rose, she saw him as part of a past that she wanted to write herself. Her collaborative days were done. In 1963, Stanford published *Muriel Spark: A Biographical and Critical Study*. It was not a book that Spark welcomed: 'If Mr. Stanford had applied to me, I would have advised against this undertaking'. It told tales out of school at a time when she was becoming increasingly protective of her private life, and at a time when she was taking control of her past and drawing on it for her remarkable fictions.

Stanford's early – one might say premature – biography of Spark is sympathetic, gossipy, mischievous, and for Spark extremely annoying, not just for its at times ponderous prose but for its indiscretion. Stanford could really get on Spark's nerves, and in the end, she cut him out of her life, but in his memoir of her he says a lot of favourable and some quite fascinating things about her work and life: 'To off-set the image of a person one privately recalls against a fashion plate photo, is commonly an intimidating business. As one of the leaders of English fiction, Muriel Spark carries with her an imaginary train of maids-in-waiting, courtiers and graces.

## Main Thrust:

Here Spark, this account for the mundane life, the light of another wish to unify the two. *'The Comforters'* is well placed where supernatural element seems invisible typewriter exposes the mindset of novelist. Caroline experiences the haunted typing ghost. She is curious enough to identify the mysterious voice. In this text farther Jerome and her boyfriend Laurence Manders responded her optimistically and taught Catholicism through which she could find comfort and reach to peaceful zone. It is also observed and experienced by the readers that Caroline revealed by the situations in such a way that her friend Laurence declared such sound as a hallucination which recur or obsesses the mind of Caroline. Majority of opinion seem at strange happening or occurrences in the novel without author's explanation as well as puzzling to the readers and the characters themselves. The protagonist, Caroline, begins to speculate on the issue of reminiscent sound by popular critic David Lodge-

*'Spark was one of the first modern writers to expose the authorial role and exploit the authorial voices... This novel with the convention of the omniscient narrator is connected with Spark's religious faith, which assumes an omniscient God who work in mysterious and paradoxical ways.'*(35)

Taking account of the novel by the readers, it is not wise fitting as comfortable solution to an uncomfortable problem as it is now well specifically verified by spark herself. It seems that the whole novel is more supernaturalistic than naturalistic. Whenever and wherever we go to review the novel, the novelist, herself says that unless we have a clear grasp of the essential reality, we are merely moving in the world of whirlpool and the different kinds of relative truth. Here she says, 'Is the world a lunatic asylum then? Are we all courteous manic discreetly making allowances for everyone else derangement?'

In the end, Caroline determines to exercise free will and invades the plot, as well trying to change it. In the novel *Comforters'*, Spark herself assess the effect of conversion and the problem of living as Roman Catholic. Its religion is the central theme of this novel, she exposed it though her character, Caroline who describes the problems and difficulties of adjusting with Roman.

Catholicism. Caroline managed as Catholic reluctantly. We find that this novel is intimately related to religious from Catholic, Non-Catholic to nonbelievers in God. The actions of characters are portrayed in the divine framework. She outlines the characters as her belief in God which dictated the angel of her moral vision.

Sparks another novel *'The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie'* tells the story of a teacher, Jean Brodie, 'One of the great character-creations of modern fiction.' Jean Brodie is such a teacher who prefers to be friend, philosopher and guide for an individual pupil. She formed a group of ten years of above age girls known as 'Brodie Set' who are nursed, nourished and nurtured differently. A group of six pupil called Jean Brodie. A protagonist, who prolepses and analepses the action in the novel. She is one of the very few post-war fictional characters to have attained household name and status.

One of the most important techniques is Meta fiction which co-relate the internal and external dialogue that carry forward the movement or motion of the characters in the novel. In this novel Sandy is an errant character who revolt and resist at certain stages that reveals metafictional strategy somewhere internal monologue is also noticed. In keeping view or observation of her novel's action, emotion and insight study of characters inner recesses of the novelist who wish to filtrate the social mindset towards the prevailing society. Notwithstanding, the novelist Murial Spark established fresh formulae to study the framework and the social standard where all seniors withstand the identity whatever be acknowledged by society. The novel "*Aiding and Abetting*" is rich for various postmodern techniques and elements. Some of them are: -

- **Metafiction and Self-Reflexivity:** "*Aiding and Abetting*" employs metafictional techniques, blurring the boundaries between the fictional world and the act of writing itself. Spark plays with the reader's expectations, making self-referential comments and questioning the nature of storytelling and the role of the author.
- **Fragmented Narrative:** The novel utilizes a fragmented narrative structure, presenting multiple perspectives and non-linear timelines. Spark's use of different narrative voices and perspectives adds complexity to the story, reflecting the postmodern idea that truth is subjective and reality is multifaceted.
- **Intertextuality and Allusions:** Spark incorporates intertextual references and allusions to other works of literature, historical events, and popular culture. These references create a

rich tapestry of interconnected meanings and invite readers to engage in a dialogue with various texts and contexts.

- **Blurring of Reality and Fiction:** In "Aiding and Abetting," Spark blurs the line between reality and fiction, challenging the reader's perception of what is real. The novel explores themes of identity, deception, and the constructed nature of personal narratives, reflecting the postmodern skepticism towards fixed notions of truth and authenticity.
- **Satire and Irony:** Spark's characteristic wit and irony are prevalent throughout the novel. She satirizes societal norms, cultural conventions, and the human condition, exposing the absurdities and contradictions of contemporary society. This use of satire aligns with the postmodern skepticism towards grand narratives and the deconstruction of established systems.

Muriel Spark's novel '*Aiding and Abetting*' serves as a prime example of the expression of postmodern ideas in her literary works. Through metafiction, fragmented narrative, intertextuality, and the blurring of reality and fiction, Spark challenges conventional storytelling techniques and invites readers to question the nature of truth, identity, and narrative construction. Her use of satire and irony adds depth and complexity to the exploration of postmodern themes. By incorporating these elements, Spark contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding postmodern literature and its engagement with the complexities of human existence. Taking into consideration all works written by Muriel Spark, they demonstrate her ability to incorporate postmodern elements such as fragmentation, metafiction, irony, and self-reflexivity into her narratives. Through her innovative and unconventional storytelling techniques, Spark challenges traditional literary conventions and invites readers to question the nature of truth, reality, and narrative itself.

## **Conclusion:**

Muriel Spark's literary contributions demonstrate a rich expression of postmodern ideas. Her works challenge conventional narrative structures, employ irony and parody, interweave intertextuality and allusions, and explore the subjectivity of truth and the role of the author. By

embracing these postmodern techniques, Spark's writings invite readers to engage with complex narratives and reflect on the constructed nature of reality and language. Her contribution to postmodern literature continues to inspire and influence contemporary writers, making her a significant figure in the literary landscape of the twentieth century. Muriel Spark is a multi-dimensional novelist, she conveyed and communicated.

Although only a minority of Muriel Spark's novels overtly engage with Catholicism or faith in general, an 'explicit or implicit expression of faith in a divine order' remains one of 'the consistent factors' of her fiction (12). Spark's conversion, which by her own admission triggered her creativity by providing her with a comprehensive framework of beliefs, also determined her notion of reality. The protagonist of her first novel *The Comforters*, much like Spark at that stage of her life, is having a breakdown related to her conversion. During this time of turmoil in her personal life, Caroline is writing a book on the contemporary novel and experiences problems with the chapter on realism. Despite the fact that the protagonist keeps hearing a mysterious typewriter recording the story she herself is in, the setting and characterization are too realistic for the novel to be relegated to the sphere of fantasy. This peculiar interpenetration of the natural on the one hand and, on the other hand, the supernatural, the bizarre and the extraordinary was to be a hallmark of Spark's many subsequent novels and short stories.

In the words of Norman Page, '*Muriel Spark is less interested in 'pure' realism or 'pure' fantasy...than in the intersection of or blending of the two*' (31). Spark's implicit insistence in her fiction that however strange and incomprehensible certain occurrences may appear, they must be accepted as part of the phenomenal world stems from her conviction regarding the existence of a higher, divine order which occasionally makes itself felt by thwarting the plans and scenarios that human beings produce, and by challenging their limited perspectives. Muriel Spark, *Existentialism and the Art of Death* is an engaging and thoughtful study of the influence of existentialism on Spark's fiction. While its emphasis on Kierkegaard provides a useful narrative focus, it occasionally over-relies on his philosophy at the expense of other Christian existentialist thinkers such as Jacques Maritain, whose influential book *Art and Scholasticism* – which contends that art is not the product of an 'angelic mind', but is embedded in historical circumstances – is an important influence on Spark's metaphysics.(3) Nevertheless, Craig does make a strong case for an 'existential Spark' through his compelling readings of her novels and short fiction, and as such, this is a valuable contribution to Spark scholarship. In doing so, Craig



resolutely shows that despite her abundant sense of humour, Spark was thoroughly aware of and engaged with the key philosophical debates of the mid-century, making it more difficult than ever to disqualify her as a trivial writer.

The events and phenomena of life in a colloquial language. She wished to tell the truth of life which a person experience and see with naked eyes. The first theme of the novel *'The Comforters'* is expanded as 'Is the world a lunatic asylum? A second theme involves the redefinition of narrative form. Her novel is more realities as well as modern. Finally, her novel brings an outline of moral and preaching the base reality of life as job did in the book of job, Caroline, a character reveals the mysterious and ultimate reality of life. Her novel *'The driver seat'* is probably a darkest novel of all, concerning a lonely woman, every novel of Spark provides multi-dimensional picture of life and character. It focuses on the loge where one could go pondering over different angles of theme and life.

She reveals the life in the form of physical philosophical, philanthropist as well as optimistically view. In all Spark's novels, certain characters weave their own plots, which are typically at some point thwarted by other characters, fate – or perhaps a superhuman agency. On one level, they are all certainly thwarted by the writer, who will not leave hubris unpunished. Bryce Christensen notes that in Spark's books *'Narratives are born of merely human desires, vanity, or imaginings – threaten to ensnare us in destructive, if beguiling, falsehoods; such narratives fall beneath rather than transcend rational understanding'* (144). In an interview with Frank Kermode, Spark asserted:

*"I don't claim that my novels are truth – I claim that they are fiction, out of which a kind of truth emerges...there is absolute truth, in which I believe things which are difficult to believe, but believe them because they are absolute".* (133)



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