

## SELF-IMPOSED VIOLENCE IN MURIEL SPARK'S *THE DRIVER'S SEAT*

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### Abstract

Ms. Muriel Spark is a strong voice of feminism in the realm of literature. She is a significant signature to raise the voiceless voice of women of her time and has given prominent meaning to the vacuum of female perspectives in her fictional world. Her *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is a much discussed novel where the protagonist has been given intellectual shades and her character is a direct challenge in the patriarchal set up of society. Her novella *The Driver's Seat* is also one of her favorite creation which provides us to examine the changing human psyche in the chaotic world of post-World War. My paper is a sincere attempt to explore the enigmatic character of the protagonist and her act of self-imposed violence that perplexes the reader. I have tried to unveil the interesting layers of untold and hidden articulation of female world and a peculiar kind of violence in this novella. In this creation of Muriel Spark, it is not important how the incident is happening rather why it is so, that makes our perusal alive and vital.

**Key-words-** *violence, female, self-imposed, post-world war, perspectives.*

In the modern age of 20<sup>th</sup> century Ms. Muriel Spark emerged on the monitor of English-fiction as a strong voice of an intellectual female novelist. She seems not only to be proud of being a female but embraced feminism as an ideology in the sense of consciously held set of beliefs which aims at understanding this world and human existence from her own perspectives. She believed in her own actual female perception of human problems and its intricacies. In her fictional territory she let her woman characters wander through the world releasing them from a kind of confinement of patriarchal set up and prepare them for an entirely new gender role of 'she'. Muriel Spark is the name of a popular novelist of English arena who has a strong, dynamic and firm authoritative zeal and genius well expressed in her works.

Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat* was published in 1970 which is known as a novella. It is also described as 'metaphysical shocker' in the literary circles. Undoubtedly, it is a narrative of psychological state of mind of a woman which shocks, thrills and leaves the reader with a profound thought to explore the enigmatic character and bizarre milieu of our postmodern world and culture. This is work of fiction where we find tone and temper of alienation and isolation also. Lise, who is the protagonist of the book has been given the mission to chase the mystery of death. It is a story of violence-self-imposed violence but it is also a tale of freedom of a woman who is independent enough to be involved in the quest of self and psyche. It is also a narrative of loss of spiritual values in the humdrum of materialistic growth and extremes.

Muriel Spark was born in Edinburgh in 1918 and became famous as a poet, novelist and biographer as well. Ms. Spark was aware of her responsibilities as a female writer and tried her best to be a feminist writer by paying much attention to the gyno-text. She wrote *Child of Light in 1951* which is a study of Mary Shelley and *Selected Poems of Emily Bronte* in 1952 to focus on her poetic talent too. She wrote a biography of Emily Bronte entitled *Emily Bronte: Her Life and Work*. She brought forward letters of Mary Shelley in her *My Best Mary* in 1953; in 1954 again she brought The Bronte Letters. She also tried her pen in the realm of poetic world, in plays and in short stories too. Through multiple uses of literary activities in multiple genres she tried to excavate the true sense of human existence from different perspectives.

Muriel Spark has been twice shortlisted for the Booker Prize, in 1969 for *The Public Image* and in 1981 for *Loitering with Intent*. She wrote a number of novels in her literary career as *The Comforters* (1957), *Robinson* (1958), *Memento Mori* (1959), *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960), *The Bachelors* (1960), *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963), *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965), *The Public Image* (1968), *The Driver's Seat* (1970), *Not to Disturb* (1971), *The Takeover* (1976), *The Only Problem* (1984), *A Far Cry From Kensington* (1988), *Symposium* (1990), *Aiding and Abetting* (2000), *The Finishing School* (2004). Her literary works following one another show her obsession with writing and passion for expression of life in art and literature. Muriel Spark received the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1965 for *The Mandelbaum Gate*, the US Ingerall Foundation T.S. Eliot Award in 1992 and the David Cohen Prize in 1997. She became Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1993, in recognition of her services to literature.

Muriel Spark seems to be very well aware of her postmodern world where uncertainty and fragmentation reigned in life and living of human beings. She was very well aware of the cruelty and violence prevailed around her. Therefore, her characters live and speak believably, passionately and sometimes ridiculously. She explored more and more her innermost memories of her experiences that displayed the absurdities of human behaviour. In her writings her dimensions of awareness never forget evil as regular visitor, violence as indispensable part and death an inevitable truth. She believed that the world is running crazy and therefore anything can happen in course of life. She adopted the grotesque and gothic element in her works, which may be influence of Mary Shelley and Emily Bronte to explore and debunk the gruesome reality of her time.

Ms. Spark was a fearless novelist but she was betrayed by her friend by exposing her personal things in public and therefore, she reached on the verge of breakdown, she has fits of madness, it is said about her too. But even though she became successful to sustain herself in those situations and revealed like anything in her life and always endeavored to raise and uplift esteem and dignity of a woman by making us realize the woman power. Eventually, she assured her identity as a strong female author in the realm of English fiction.

Ms. Spark was also a product of post-World- War. War in itself is organized violence. Both World Wars were episodes of carnage and massacre without parallel. Violence released by the wars brought destruction of human relationships too. Human -self exist in definite relationships to other selves. Spark's life was also disturbed due to the hefty blows of world- war and she herself got crushed under the violent outburst of her husband's behavior. She had to leave him. But she integrated herself in her creative literary activities and built a new identity without any pillar of patriarchal or male-centric support. In post-war literature individual strains and collisions have been seen from a strongly standpoint and inflamed like a savage boil. Like

any other writers of post -World-war era violence also became a spontaneous flavour of her works.

Women themselves are taught in the process of being socialized to internalize the reigning patriarchal ideology and so are conditioned to derogate their own sex and to cooperate in their own subordination. Female writers, though, have been struggling for their identity since they picked the pen to raise their own voice, directly or indirectly, implicit or explicit. Behind it, however lie two centuries of struggle for the recognition of women's cultural roles and achievements. Muriel Spark in her era recreates the classical feminist heroine Jane Eyre –a shy and plain governess living in an isolated house-into a dynamic modern woman-an exotic, good looking confident witty teacher who moves freely about a large city and holidays alone on the continent. The characteristics of the male lovers are exactly paralleled to underscore the analogy with Charlotte Bronte's novel, which the girls also rewrite in their own style. How inconsequential are human assumptions of knowledge and power when viewed in the light of eternity. This is Ms. Spark's point of view that she offers to her reader.

In the novel *The Driver's Seat* Lise, a woman in her thirties, single from Northern Country is looking for a man who will kill her. Her behaviour is enigmatic and erratic. This kind of chase and desire is bizarre. Ms. Spark's is really an awesome writer who manages to tell a complex story in minimum length. Spark is concerned with mystery of human existence, mystery of identity and particularization of woman identity and its definition. Lise is a hyper version of Brodie. She seeks to control people and situation to a great extent as Brodie does but for a different reason. Lise is not searching for life as Brodie is Lise is given up on life and seeks instead death. If Brodie willfully attempts to dramatize life, Lise attempts to dramatize death. Lise is explorative development of Brodie whose life revolves around mundane city office and lonely flat. We do not find clue to the fact why Lise is in search of someone to kill her. This novel is generally taken to be a 'metaphysical shock' and deals with the theme of isolation and, alienation in an impersonal society.

Ms. Spark's novels explore and catch our attention not on what happens but always on why all is happening. She provokes disturbing questions about the nature of woman empowerment and degradation of social and spiritual values in modern society. This book specially requires and invites for rereading because of its gradual revelation of the facts. Sometimes we do not know which language she is speaking or in which country she lives in. Some critics takes this work as a fine product of postmodernism and others as surreal work of art but to most of all it seems to be a non-conventional and observational concern of the author.

She focused more on depicting the minute complexities of female psyche. We notice an undercurrent of violence in its several forces disturbing the characters life and leading them towards shattering identity. We should not forget that Spark's novels are not exempted from the pressures of her time period where society is distracted and fragmented. Self-diminishes and identity evades self. Lise is also embroiled in the same situation but she tries to take over her situation and therefore she starts from death. This is an amazing fact of M. Spark's novel that ending is a beginning. *The Driver's Seat* is often taken to be tale of violence where the heroine herself commits violence against herself. It can be named as psychological violence or self-imposed violence. Lise's mission is to find her 'type' of the man who will kill her. She does things that do not make sense. She seems to be sometimes insane and crazy. She talks to the telephone although there is no body at the other end."Oh, of course: Lise says, and when she has hung up she laughs heartily...She has now stopped laughing and now breathing heavily, says to the mute

telephone, ‘of course, of course.’”(17)She tells lies to different people and speaks contradictory things. She does not seem to be trustworthy character and remains mysterious.

“Being in Lise's presence is frequently excruciating. We are encouraged to laugh at her – but constantly reminded that to do so is awful. Especially when Lise herself mirrors that laughter with her own mad hilarity: "Dressed for a carnival' says a woman looking grossly at Lise as she passes, and laughing as she goes her way, laughing without a possibility of restraint, like a stream bound to descend whatever slope lies before it."(TheGuardian)

Lise is not searching a man to spend her life with her but who is going to make an end of her life. Lise says of a man at the department store:”Not my man at all. The one I’m looking for will recognize me right away for the woman I am, have no fear of that.”(95)The first man attracts her attention is Richard who turns out her murderer at the end. In her relation with Richard she subverts the conventional notion of woman. With him she is a strong and man is weak, she is attacker and man is prey. She proceeds with her plan but in the course of events she is raped by Richard, realizing the fact that nothing happens according to our plan. Spark relates here the issue of sexuality with more serious issue of identity. Lise is sexually confused. She is compared with prostitute too. But the image of prostitute is used to focus on the advantage of woman taken by men and they become victim of men’s aggression as Lise is not only raped but murdered. In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* it was the continuation of past but in *The Driver’s Seat* future blends with present. Spark wants to show the confusion about things amid different shades of violence which is the status of her time and she is making the issue more sensitive by involving woman. If people are confused about their identities and morals, women are going to be the most suffering beings in our society.

How one perceives oneself affects one’s attitude, emotional behaviour, one way of thinking and reacting. Perception leads one towards self-concept, esteem and self-dignity. If one has a high degree of self-awareness, one can develop self-perception with individual interpretation of one’s situation in society. Spark let her woman characters to be conscious of self-concept by making them her protagonists. She beware her sex not to be a victim of imposed defined identity but to liberate themselves from the confinement of conventional norms and to prepare them for gender roles. Learning is powerful and not imitation but learning by discovery decides and confirms our identification as she.

Ms.Spark made woman ‘first sex’ and not the ‘second sex’. Her protagonist gives a fertile ground to explore the issues related to the existential problem of mankind from female perspectives. Ms. Spark’s works are representative of a strong voice of female world and feminism and articulate new gender role of ‘she’ where her heroines search for a solution to the complexities and intricacies of life.

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