# CATHOLIC BELIEFS IN MURIEL SPARK'S FICTION

***Ajit Kumar,***

Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of English
Kurukshetra University,
Kurukshetra, India

**ABSTRACT**

It has become critical orthodoxy to view Spark solely within the contexts of Catholicism or postmodernism. Yet Spark's writing is full of the influence of Romanticism. Because she uses it as a spring board from which to launch her more modern concerns, Romanticism is overlooked, simply a point of departure, subsequently jettisoned for the more fashionable ideologies of postmodernist and theoretical analysis. But this does scant justice to her use of Romantic topic and the Romantic imagination, and it fails to address how and why she uses the Romantic, and to what end. Critics like Alan Bold, Cairns Craig, Frank Kermode, Paddy Lyons and Alan Massie have explored the catholic issues in Muriel Spark's fiction and found that Catholic concepts may be existing in her novels but it is surely with the sole of Romanticism.

**Keywords:** Jettison, Ideology, Romanticism, Subsequently.

## INTRODUCTION:

Muriel Spark's fiction can arguably be characterised as the attempt to resolve the problem of having Catholicism as a belief and influence. Throughout her work, Spark interrogates Catholicism. In many ways, the disparity and resulting friction between the Enlightenment and the Romantic epochs that she identifies in *Child of Light* (1951), her study of Mary Shelley, allows the readers to understand her writing as the attempt to navigate the frictions of her own disparate ideological concerns in much the same manner as Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein* (1818), some hundred and forty years before. This uneasy coexistence is evident from Spark's first novel *The Comforters*, with its metafictional structure and consideration of layered authorship, and the resultant debate on authorial authority. But within the meta fictional concerns of its novel-within-a-novel structure, it also interrogates Romantic notions of the self, of the poet or author as a prophet figure, of the role of reverie, illness, and madness in artistic creation, and of the Romantic artist and the extent to which this is a self-constructed persona. The notion of the poet as hero or protagonist is central in *The Comforters*, and the autobiographical material of Spark's conversion to Catholicism and her mental breakdown are evident in the experiences of Caroline Rose. *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965) is less overtly concerned with postmodernist literary techniques than preceding novels such as *The Comforters*, *Memento Mori* (1959) and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), yet Spark still uses the technique of prolepsis to reveal the Gardnors as the double agents midway through the novel. As with *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *The Driver's Seat* (1970), and *Not to Disturb* (1971), this shifts the emphasis from what will happen to why it will happen, from action to internal psychological motivation. This disruption of the linear narrative can be read as a postmodern device, recreating the fragmentary nature of experience and the irregular, fractured way in which we receive information.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

This clash of the subjective and the objective is common to the patterning of Spark's novel. Francis Russell Hart reads the central dilemma as a battle between self-assertion and self surrender, emanating from romanticism's appropriation of Calvinism's focus on the self: The characters of a Spark novel are a gallery, an obsessive plenitude, representative of a cultural situation. Their behaviours defy their collectivity by various forms of absurd self assertion, romantic, anarchic, antinomian. The theologian must see these self-assertions as diabolical forgeries of true individuality, which is found only through the self-surrender of the orthodox Christian. Yet the artist cannot help but show a creative sympathy for – a humorous nostalgia for – her illusorily 'free characters'. She sees the cult of character-worship as an anarchy generated by the romantic egoism that grew from Calvinism.39 For Hart, Miss Brodie's catalogue of romantic and antinomian self-assertions are bizarre, from her self-election to grace to seeing herself as the muse and courtly lover figure Beatrice to Teddy Lloyd's Rossetti. Marshall Walker echoes this, noting that 'in the eyes of God and Muriel Spark, as in James Hogg's, the wickedness of egotism, however damaging it may be, is basically absurd'.40 Yet the problem for the reader may lie in the attempt to understand Sandy's behaviour. The quandary is whether her actions, from her betrayal of Miss Brodie to her conversion and subsequent treatise, are to be viewed as similarly absurd forms of self-assertion, as self-surrender to Christian orthodoxy, or as something else entirely. Despite Calvinism being identified as a diabolical forgery, its similarities with Catholicism – the orthodoxy of self-surrender for Spark and, if only she had the vision to recognise that "she was by temperament suited only to the Roman Catholic Church" (Spark *Jean Brodie* 85), Miss Brodie – are highlighted by John Henry Newman. Valerie Shaw says that 'Cardinal Newman's observation that Calvinism's "sharp separation between the elect and the world" contains much that is "cognate or parallel to the Catholic doctrine"(Shaw 281).The result for the reader is the difficulty in identifying "which (if any) of the fictional characters is in a state of grace, even in the non-theological sense of simply earning the novelist's and reader's approval and goodwill"(Shaw 281) Gerard Carruthers echoes this position, stating that "The final moral implications of the novel are not clear. As in all her novels, Spark refuses to offer readers secure conclusions" (O'Connor 184).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

For Spark, her motivation has its roots in her belief of an omniscient God who sees all without impinging upon the free agency of mankind. Romantic themes are prevalent throughout *The Mandelbaum Gate*. Predominant are those outlined by Spark in *Child of Light*, "where she talks of the clash of 'fixed religious beliefs with science', and of imaginative and emotional substitutes for religion with scientific rationalism" (Spark, Child 139). Boundaries, such as Barbara's identity, are blurred in this novel; is she Jewish or Catholic, or partly both? The borders between territories are in constant dispute. In contrast, the line between science and religion remains clear, 'If you are looking for physical exactitude in Jerusalem it is a good quest, but it belongs to archaeology, not faith" (Spark, Mandelbaum 198). The conflicts that define the Enlightenment and Romantic eras are the same conflicts that arise in *The Mandelbaum Gate*; faith versus reason, emotion versus science, , or

put more simply; what we believe versus what we see.

Spark portrays these thematic tensions on the personal, intimate level. Barbara's lover Harry Clegg is a renowned archaeologist, searching for "physical exactitude"(Spark, Mandelbaum 198). While Barbara searches for her faith. Yet Harry's scientific quest has consequences for Barbara's faith as he is searching for the Dead Sea Scrolls, and they find an uneasy resolution, enabled to marry by the end of the novel. This archaeological uncovering of the physical exactitude of material reality is also played out in the novel's depiction of the spying and counter-espionage that takes place throughout, contrasted with Barbara's search for religious truth, for a truth that lies beyond scientific proof. As Fr. Ballantyne states, "There's no need for faith if everything is plain to the eye" (Spark, Mandelbaum 199). This also signals a predominant mode of thought in Spark's work. While these disparate ideologies are often in conflict, they repeatedly coexist uneasily side by side, effecting a negation or impasse that problem any over-simplistic reading of the moral, theological or ideological dilemmas at the core of the text. Speaking of Victor Frankenstein, Spark says that he is reminiscent of "those eighteenth-century geniuses ... whose too-perfect balance of imaginative and rational faculties did in fact so often disintegrate and ultimately destroy them" (Spark, *Child*, 138), and all of Spark's fiction is concerned with the consequences of these imbalances of emotion and intellect, faith and science, aesthetics and empiricism.

*The Mandelbaum Gate* is also concerned with the romantic concept of the poet as heroine, with Spark's own hyphenated heritage and her trip to the Holy Land reflected in the experiences of Barbara Vaughan. Along with Caroline Rose in *The Comforters*, Fleur Talbot in *Loitering With Intent* (1981), and much of *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963) and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, this autobiographical inward-looking tendency involves "typically, solitary figures engaged in a long – and sometimes infinitely elusive –quest" (Abrahms 116). Caroline's writing and her attempts to understand the voices she hears, Fleur's efforts to manoeuvre through blackmail and counter-blackmail, ironically while compiling so-called biographies of the famous, and Barbara's pilgrimage can all be viewed in these terms. These autobiographical tendencies have their origin in romanticism, and the notion of the poet-heroine also raises the central concept of the romantic artist. Just as the French and American Revolutions provided the Romantic era with a political and poetic reaction to the authority of Augustan, Neoclassical and Enlightenment modes of thought, so too does *The Mandelbaum Gate* interrogate the concepts of political, moral, religious and cultural authority. The political fight for authority over the contested territories and the associated struggle for recognition of religious authority revolving around the heart of Jerusalem are played against Barbara's struggle to understand her own contentious identity. Who has the right to act with, or to use, authority becomes increasingly problematic in such a highly volatile and contested political, religious and cultural arena. The Ecclesiastical Courts are considering the validity of Harry Clegg's marriage, and this is contrasted on a wider scale with the ongoing Eichmann trial. God is always present in any discussion on authority in Spark's work, and the setting provides numerous subplots which are all to be considered in light of Spark's belief in the ultimate authority of God. Barbara states this explicitly, saying that "Either the whole of life is unified under God or everything falls apart"(Spark, Mandelbaum, 198).This investigation of ultimate authority is present throughout Spark's fiction.

With the publication of *The Driver's Seat* and *Not to Disturb*, Spark's novels take on a distinctly contemporary feel, embracing elements of the nouveau roman movement by dispensing with insight into the characters' thought-processes. Indeed, these novels are pivotal points in Spark's career in that they dismiss the interiority of her previous work in favour of a typically postmodernist focus on act and dialogue. Her favoured technical reliance on flashback and flash-forward is present, and here the focus is on individual motivation, but also on the inevitability of any course of action. Speaking of *The Driver's Seat* and *Not To Disturb*, Valerie Shaw notes that "Lise's death is preordained-indeed self-ordained – and so is the murder which will make the servants their fortunes" (Shaw 286). The thread that links these novels to the romantic themes in Spark's other work is authority and submission of the self, and authority and submission to external hegemonic structures such as education, police and state, and – as ever with Spark – religion. It is in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* that all of these themes and concerns coalesce to the greatest degree. It provides the most fruitful basis for discussion due in large part to what David Lodge calls "the uncontrolled romantic sensibility" (Lodge 132) of its central character, and the way in which she subsequently clashes with those around her. Throughout the novel, Romanticism comes into violent contact with opposing ideologies. This is played out in the conflicts between science and art, reason and emotion, the sacred and the profane, and the individual against a variety of hegemonic power structures. Miss Brodie's Romantic sensibility manifests itself in a number of ways, and in particular, the Romantic artist is a central figure in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*.

Inspired by the works of Rossetti, Botticelli and Giotto, and the writing of Tennyson, Hogg and Burns, Miss Brodie is fascinated by the artistic process and fashions herself as muse to the art teacher Teddy Lloyd. She allows all artistic figures a leniency of behaviour on account of their creative abilities. Teddy Lloyd's smashing of a plate is dismissed because 'He has the artistic temperament, of course', while the great Pavlova screaming

at her chorus 'is permissible in a great artist'. The novel depicts the ways in which Miss Brodie Romanticizes her own life experiences, showing her substituting artistic passions for religion and raising her everyday surroundings to the sublime via a process of imaginative aesthetic elevation. The aesthetic of her everyday existence is part of the novel's central theme, "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace" (Spark, *Jean Brodie* 35). The title of Sister Helena's "odd psychological treatise on the nature of moral perception" ( Spark, *Jean Brodie* 35) alerts the reader to the conflict at the core of the novel. On one hand, the transfiguration effects of art on Miss Brodie are clear, as it enables her to elevate her day-to-day experiences to the level where she sees herself, and those she elects, as artistic figures, re-enacting great artistic works through their own experiences. This is Miss Brodie's attempt to elevate the banality of her existence by a process of aesthetic self-elevation. Yet the title of Sister Helena's treatise implies a religious or spiritual and sacramental element to everyday existence that Miss Brodie rejects, while "moral perception" (Spark, *Jean Brodie* 35) is concerned with the individual's ability to understand the nature of a moral dilemma before deciding which course of action to pursue, a perception that seems beyond Miss Brodie. These contradictory elements return us to the core of Spark's attempts to resolve the problem of the Romantic, the spiritual, and the modern coexisting. At the heart of this conundrum is the way in which the echo of Calvinism in Edinburgh seeps into Miss Brodie's particular strain of self-realisation and subsequent self-absolution.

Rejecting Catholicism as a religion for people who cannot think for themselves, she also rejects any notion of anyone else's spiritual authority despite her evening classes in comparative religion, and instead elects herself to grace, seeing herself as "the God of Calvin" (Spark, *Jean Brodie* 120). What is unclear is whether Spark sees Miss Brodie's inability to accept a higher reality as a lack of vision, or as a misinterpretation of the Catholicism. In perhaps the most direct investigation of Muriel Spark's use of Romanticism, Paddy Lyons invokes the words of D.H. Lawrence, "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale" (Lawrence 08). The premise of Lyons' article, 'Muriel Spark's Break with Romanticism', is that the notion of the sublime artist whose work was "elevated through Romantic gesturing towards the sacred" (Lyons 85) is anachronistic in the twentieth century. Rejecting the idea that the modern author resembles the sublime artist of the Romantic era, Lyons states, "throughout her novelistic career Muriel Spark ... was lucidly opposed to the elevation of authorship as the lynchpin of writing" (86). Lyons emphasizes "Propelling this argument is opposition to the Romantic embrace of authorship" (86) and he cites a number of authors, including Borges, Nabokov, Samuel Beckett and Flann O'Brien, who correspond to Spark's position, writers who reject this notion of artistic sublimity. Randall Stevenson notes the similarity between author and protagonist in their roles as storytellers and character manipulators. He says that Miss Brodie's penchant for forcing reality into accord with her vision for fictions, art, and "making patterns with fact…generally …also contributes to a role as an author analogue, raising questions about the nature and ethics of writing familiar to the …postmodernist literature generally"(Stevenson 232).

Spark has acknowledged the influence of the *nouveau roman*, and the manner in which Miss Brodie attempts to control or manoeuvre her girls undoubtedly resembles that of an author. Indeed, Vladimir Nabokov - one of Lyons' examples – delineates an authorial position that somewhat resembles the messianic tendencies of Miss Brodie, "The design of my novel is fixed in my imagination and every character follows the course I imagine for him. I am the perfect dictator in that private world insofar as I alone am responsible for its stability and truth"(Appell 133). While Nabokov is not expressing a position that accords with that of the sublime artist 'gesturing toward the sacred"(Lyons 86) he is outlining an authorial stance which is similar to the narrative structure of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie,* and which parallels the themes of power and authority which run throughout the novel. Margery Palmer McCulloch reads Spark's novel in just such a way, where the author retains control over her characters in the dictatorial manner that Nabokov outlines. McCulloch states, "The fact that some of Miss Brodie's girls do not reach the heights of achievement she has intended for them is the consequence not of fictive character development but of Spark the author asserting her supremacy over her characters, making her role as creator/manipulator manifest and overturning the erroneous assumptions of her principal character Jean Brodie"(90).However, rather than seeing her in terms of postmodernism – as Randall Stevenson, above, does – McCulloch claims that "what we see here is Spark as modernist novelist, foregrounding the narrative process and the fictive nature of her work"(99). This subsequently refines the question posed at the outset – what kind of novelist is Spark? – and more specifically, is Spark to be regarded as a modernist or a postmodernist? Given that Stevenson and McCulloch arrive at alternative definitions, it is not surprising that this is a contested area in Spark criticism.

Matthew Wickman provides some much-needed clarity, noting that 'our difficulty arises not only from asking whether Spark's work corresponds with features of postmodern fiction, but also from uncertainties about what postmodernism is', before observing that 'the polarities of modernism and postmodernism often inhabit the same text'(Wickman 63). As readers are therefore alerted to the contested critical territory and the dangers in being too rigid in applying critical terminology to Spark who, for Wickman, defies such attempts. He notes that

"Spark's writing is less about its conformity to elegant paradigms than the havoc it wreaks on them" (66) echoing the words of Joseph Hynes who states that 'Spark is decidedly a "both/and" writer, rather than an "either/or" writer" (66). Negotiating the territory between Lyons' view of Spark as a 'post' or 'beyond-Romantic' writer, Stevenson's 'postmodernist' and McCulloch's 'modernist', will – alongside Spark's use of Romanticism and the positioning of her beliefs, and an awareness of the critical acuteness of Wickman and Hynes – be a focus of discussion below. Returning to *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, Margery Palmer McCulloch identifies the same author-analogue as Randall Stevenson, but sees this as Spark's investigation of Calvinist predestination as embodied in the author-God analogue. For McCulloch, this is seen through the filter of Spark's Scottish identity.

Spark's novel, consequently placing her within a defined Scottish tradition. Bold takes this Scottish literary antecedent one step further, narrowing the focus to Edinburgh and its own particular version of a dualistic Scottish psyche as embodied within the structure of the city itself. He says that the novel creates its own claustrophobically close world in which the characters move with moralistic deliberation. It is a real world whose hoped-for ethical purity is destroyed by internal division and external threat. "It creaks with the contradictions native to Edinburgh"(Bold 223). To have a great primitive black crag rising up as it does in the middle of populated streets of commerce, stately squares and winding closes, is like the statement of an unmitigated fact preceded by "nevertheless"(Hynes 180). So Spark's Edinburgh is seen as part of the structure of the novel, its paradigmatic conjunctions of the old and new, poverty and wealth, the primitive and the enlightened, jostling for supremacy and coexisting despite, perhaps because of, each other. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, Or The Modern Prometheus* looms large throughout *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. The relationship between Miss Brodie and Sandy closely resembles that between Victor Frankenstein and his creation the Monster, and the thematic content of Spark's novel bears an overwhelming resemblance to that of *Frankenstein*. Mary's investigation of the Romantic imagination and the danger when imagination and reason become fractured are identified explicitly by Spark in *Child Of Light* and are central to understanding *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, and indeed all of Spark's fiction. Alongside Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* stands as a key text in the attempt to understand *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Hogg's novel makes great capital from the fragmentary elements inherent within Smith's 'Caledonian anti-syzygy" (Smith 04) as manifest in Stevenson's novel, and it occupies the same territory of reason versus emotion and science versus faith that Shelley's novel interrogates. Indeed, Hogg's novel is set partly in the schizophrenic world of Spark's 'nevertheless' Edinburgh, and it stands alongside *Frankenstein* as one of the great works of the romantic period.

Margery Palmer McCulloch also acknowledges the importance of Edinburgh as the setting and its influence upon the novel. However, she sees the most important aspects of the novel within the context of Spark's "response to Calvinism and the way in which this has shaped both narrative method and philosophical theme" (McCulloch 92) in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Crucial to this is the way in which Spark herself is from Edinburgh, yet in exile from it. Spark's "status as an outsider ... and therefore out with the prevailing Scottish Presbyterian ethos"(McCulloch 92) enables her to utilize and critique these particular strains of the Scottish religious and cultural identity deeply embedded in the Edinburgh setting. McCulloch continues, saying that "Calvinism becomes part of the narrative process of the novel, the sharp, witty, and ambivalent tool of her fiction, as opposed to the source of an overt and intense moral battle"(McCulloch 92). She sees this as central to the novel's structure and use of flashback and flash-forward which, arguably, resembles the Calvinist belief in predestination, illustrated by Spark when she reveals the fate of the characters long before the novel's end. Spark's disjunction of linear narrative and chronology readjusts the reader's focus in order that, in the words of Gerard Carruthers, 'the moral dynamic of the action rather than simply the action itself is placed in the foreground" (Carruthers 514). In doing so, Spark problematises and undermines any attempt on the reader's behalf of finding any clear moral stance, or any obvious distinction as to who is right or wrong.

**CONCLUSION:**

So, there have been very high level criticism over the issue of Catholicism in fiction. Flannery O'Connor talks of the danger of the need for definite answers as a misunderstanding of the Catholic novelist's theological motivation. She says, "We Catholics are very much given to the Instant Answer. Fiction doesn't have any. It leaves us, like Job, with a renewed sense of mystery" (O'Connor 181). St. Gregory wrote that every time the sacred text describes a fact, it reveals a mystery. This is what the fiction writer, on his lesser level, hopes to do. It is Spark's very mysteriousness that can therefore be seen as central to her methodology as a writer whose concerns are religious and theological. O'Connor's quote reverberates with a sense of the unknown, of the beyond, echoed by Spark when she says, "I don't claim that my novels are truth – I claim that they are fiction, out of which a kind of truth emerges...I am interested in truth absolute truth and I don't pretend that what I'm

writing is more than an imaginative extension of the truth" (185).This imaginative extension of the truth is the revealing of a mystery that O'Connor identifies. A mystery can be revealed, just as a truth can be, but not the absolute mystery or the absolute truth. These answers are available only to God, and the novelist writing from a Catholic perspective will always be aware, in the words of Alan Massie, "There can be no definitive answer; human truth and religious truth march out of step"(51)Nonetheless, both O'Connor's 'renewed sense of mystery'and Spark's imaginative extension of the Catholicism align with Romanticism's emphasis on the imagination as the conduit to seeing beyond the surface of the everyday, and into mysteries and kinds of truth that await illumination. The place and function of Romanticism in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, alongside the influence of Spark's Catholic beliefs and the impact of the Calvinist atmosphere of Edinburgh, will – in conjunction with her employment of literary devices such as prolepsis. So, Muriel Spark may be called a proud catholic novelist.

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