

The Forces Of Evil And God's Divine Plan In Muriel Spark's Symposium

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In these troubled times, the contemporary world might be hailed as thoroughly secularized, but vices and sins are human tendencies and together with virtues are very much present in the modern era as they have been in times immemorial. The moral degradation of individual men and women may vary, as does the magnitude of evil forces, which may change over a period, but they can never be completely eradicated or suppressed. Since literature reflects the happenings in society, it can also said to be a framework of our society and the people residing therein. Muriel Spark, the modern Scottish author whom I have selected for this research article, sums up the preoccupations of her novels thus: "I don't see what else you can draw on your fiction but your life, not only your own life but what you've learnt or read from other people's lives. It's one's own experience after all." The wholeness of this very experience that she talks about and which she actually retains in her novels makes her work so fascinating. Her wit in observing human oddity and weakness, her concealment of motives and meanings makes her novels so mysterious and unique. She deals with the incomprehensible, the supernatural, thus startling her readers constantly. The overwhelming image that continues to get illuminated in them is her notion of a hellish world full of vices. This, then, is a projection of a realistic world full of problems that is faced by mankind. In her poem 'Elementary', Muriel Spark speaks of an "odd capacity for vision" – it is this vision encompassed with a moral dimension (where God is the central figure working in his inscrutable ways) that I intend to analyze here in this paper based on her novel *Symposium*.

Published in 1990, *Symposium* speaks volumes on several concerns weighing deeply in the mind of Muriel Spark. The setting is typically Scotland and so is the author's Scottish awareness of the forces of evil. The novel is also inundated with the usual Sparkian stamp of violence and criminal conspiracy which are the hallmarks of her other novels as well. In this novel, however, the author combines her social perceptiveness with a sense of otherworldliness with great élan.

Symposium is a strong and witty story which begins and ends at a dinner party hosted for a newly married couple, William and Margaret, by Hurley Reed, a painter and Chris Donovan, a rich widow who live together. Margaret Murchie, the new bride, has a "moralistic tendency" we are told and supposedly never speaks ill of anybody. She has so much of goodness and honeymoon sweetness that even her husband, William, starts having heretical and treacherous thoughts: "I'm bound to put my muddy boots on the vast soft carpet of her character. One of these days I'll err..." So far so good! But curiously, Margaret has got, what the author describes as "the evil eye". She has a strange affinity for tragedy, whereby people close to her have unnatural deaths. It gets even more mysterious from here on. Spark takes us on a flash back mode and lists a number of eerie happenings in her life: while in school, Margaret's close friend had drowned; her teacher, who had taken her to an outing, had simply disappeared without a trace. That's not the end of matters. Later we learn that her grandmother gets murdered under suspicious circumstances. It gets immensely difficult for Margaret to cope up with the continuous turn of events, especially when she herself is questioned by the police. So to get away from the scandal surrounding the murder, Margaret joins a nunnery, Convent of Good Hope, as a novice. But an incomprehensible event occurs even here: a nun gets killed under mysterious conditions.

At this point, the author assures us that Margaret's capacity for being near the various scenes of tragedy was "truly explicable in any reasonable terms". Understandably, Margaret is tired and frustrated of being the passive carrier of disaster. For her, the problems of good and evil are now of peculiarly personal matter. She confides in her mad uncle, Magnus, "I almost think it's time for me to take my life and destiny in my own hands, and actively make disasters come about." And she does. On her uncle's advice, she picks her husband "with a pin". Spark's subtle dig at the institution of marriage is at display here, as is her tongue-in-cheek humour.

Once married, her schemes, as discussed earlier with uncle Magnus, start to germinate and fructify. Soon, Hilda Damien, William's very rich mother, begins to sense the ill-will oozing out of Margaret, her brand new daughter-in-law, towards her. Naturally concerned, she speaks about it to her friend Chris, "It seems to freeze the air between us...what malign vibes that girl gives out! Do you think she could plot some evil against me?" Hilda's intuition is spot on! For Margaret indeed plots against her mom-in-law, Hilda, as she now strives to be an active perpetrator of evil instead of forever being a passive one. Her argument is that compared to the

charge of the evil-eye that has been labeled against her, what she had in mind really was “just healthy criminality”: She tells her uncle Magnus, “Why shouldn’t I really do it? I’m tired of being made to feel guilty for no reason. I would like to feel guilty for a real case of guilt.” So now her intentions are to get her millionaires mother-in-law liquidated, with a wee bit help from her mad uncle Magnus.

Unaware of the planning that is unfolding in Margaret’s mind, some of the guests who come to the dinner wonder about her strange behavior. It is obvious that she wants to be known as a goody-goody type of a girl, having cultivated “an exterior sweetness which was really not her own”. The guests deliberate over her in their minds – is she for real? They muse. However, Hilda was always unsure of Margaret’s ways. A great believer of fate, Hilda was sure Margaret was plotting something against her, “Destiny, my destiny...is she going to poison me?” In the end, it is Hilda’s intuition which proves right, though it is not Margaret who kills her but a member of a random gang, a group of house robbers who were active in the wealthy suburbs. They had been briefed by the domestic informers, Charterhouse and Luke about the new flat of William and Margaret which Hilda had recently gifted to the newly married couple as a wedding present together with a painting by Monet. The robbers had expected the house to be empty, unfortunately for Hilda, who meets her tragic death here.

So, once again, Margaret loses out against destiny; her determination to “feel guilty for a real case of guilt” falls on the wayside – a plot she had carefully crafted, snatched right out of her hands, much to her utter bewilderment. Thus, we are left with a shrieking Margaret, who has obviously lost her mental balance and an assorted group of characters thoroughly shocked and shaken. Destiny, Chance or God’s own plot, call what you will, has willy-nilly, taken over the lives of these characters. A passing comment by Andrew Barnet, whom Hilda had met on a plane once, seems to hold good here: “Destiny is destiny, after all”. Margaret had been fighting against Fate for a long time and thought she was very close to getting her wishes fulfilled, but she fails once again, for God has other plans.

Apart from the central theme of the divine power or God’s master plan, as it were, that holds humans in awe, Spark dwells on her other concerns as well. She speaks at length on the nunnery and Liege where Margaret had been packed off quickly after the murder of her grandmother. The novelist’s keen observation about these places and her tongue-in-cheek commentary about the characters who reside within are an eye opener. We are told that these sisters were not cut to measure like the ancient monastic orders. For them, religion, pure and simple, was not enough. At one point, the short skirted Mother Superior speaks to one of the crew members of the BBC television, who is doing a profile of the Sisters of Good Hope: “We are extremely individualistic in our tastes, in our personalities, in our backgrounds, in our views on life and society, including religion and politics”. Some of these nuns are supposedly “fairly unprincipled”; in fact, one such sister is known as the “four-letter nun”, someone who propounds the theory of Marx. She believes that the old fashioned dogmas will not prevail and the repressive colonial missionary system of upper class will not work: “...the four-letter words were the lifeblood of this market place, the people’s parlance and aphrodisiac, the dynamic and inalienable prerogative of the proletariat...there is no power in Church or State that can stop the inexorable march of Marxism into the future”. Spark’s view about the kind of life that exists within the four walls of these missionary houses becomes quite obvious. She’s almost provoking them to come clean on the matters of faith and not hide behind ecclesiastic designs of the hypocritical kind.

Elsewhere it is revealed that the Vicar is the trendy sort who moves with the time – he wears one earring while his boyfriend serves at the altar. It is also stated that the Bishops cannot do much about the goings on since “half the time they’re just as bad”. Spark’s caustic comments do not end there and at one place, she makes one of the crazy characters, Magnus, state very gravely: “...madness commonly takes the form of religious mania”, when he is told that Margaret is very sincere about her latest venture of joining the convent. The changes in the church, especially the *Charismatic Revival of the Church* is mocked at by the author when one of the characters very candidly admits: “I can’t admire a religion that causes an upset and embarrasses people”. Muriel Spark’s aversion for anything deceitful in matters of religion is evident in these lines. She minces no words about the duplicity of the church in their dealings on various matters. She questions their two-facedness and lays bare many of such dishonest practices of these religious institutes for her readers to witness and judge accordingly.

Spark’s oft references to class consciousness can be noted here in *Symposium* as well. There is Hilda who is acutely aware of her riches and her own great prosperity, behaving in a manner which is disgustingly egoistic: “She sat back in her chair, knowing herself to look splendid, and aware, as they must be aware that she was very rich and altogether an independent person”. By exposing the laughable trivialities of human behaviour, in this case, Hilda’s, Spark seems to be saying that such self conceitedness doesn’t last long, for God plays the final card and death erases all your vainglory, as He did with Hilda. Spark ridicules those characters who seek out their ancestry to see whether they are “descendants of some distinguished house or family or person...they wanted some form of crest and motto to put on their dinner forks and spoons or have engraved on their signet rings”. This distinct awareness of their class and status is not restricted to the rich alone and can be

seen also amongst the working class. It is stated how even the butler, Charterhouse, shows haughtiness in the company of the chef, whom he considers a rank below his own. Human propensity for such false vanity is meaningless in the greater scheme of things, Spark constantly reminds her readers to shake them out of their complacency.

However, Spark's major concern seems to be the absurdities that prevail in the society, as one of the characters observe anxiously, "The world is going mad". Pulsing with sensibility, she writes about the moral aspects of the world that she sees around her which strikes her with most force. Yet, all the events are stated very matter-of-factly, as one who stands outside and watches without much sentiment, very detachedly. There is a sense of ambivalence in her characters – they are morally ambiguous, in many cases. This mystery is left unresolved because, Spark believes that one must be able to distinguish between the two and leave the rest to God, as one of her characters reveals. The novelist provides us no solution to the chaos that has encompassed the world either. The extraordinary and the supernatural things occur, as they do, because of reasons beyond one's understanding. Things happen randomly; but as Ian Rankin queries, "...how random is random?" In her autobiography, when Spark talks of an access to knowledge that she couldn't possibly have gained through normal channels (her beliefs of Judaism, Calvinism, Scotch Presbyterianism and Catholicism), but of being aware of a definite something beyond herself – she is really acknowledging the awesome presence of some otherworldly power in our midst. In the realistic description of her novels, we find elements of illusion in more occasions than one. She seems to sense the presence of some spiritual being – a power beyond reach that seem to pull all the strings. Life then, in her moral vision, must be looked at as one which has all the evidence of God's presence and therefore something naturally supernatural as well. All the realistic details that she tries to paint, having natural moments, are actually brimming with mystical overtones.

But when Muriel Spark looks around, she observes a world where people seem to be at loose ends, where they are confused about the existence of God, in some cases; they try to play God themselves. It is also her acute moral perception that makes her understand the difference between true religion where God exists and false religion where people worship falsehood – a dreadful parody of the real thing. In some cases, people re-mould the world in their own image, to suit their view of things; to please their own self esteem – in other words, they play God, as Margaret tried to do. For many of her Catholic characters, the world sometimes seem strange, even uncomprehending.

One way of trying to come to terms with *Symposium* is to see how it achieves a deliberate kind of randomness by bringing about a strange commingling of the commonplace and the extraordinary; the quotidian and the supernatural; criminality and destiny. In the kind of strange fictional mosaic that emerges from the commingling of the polarities, one sees Spark's moral vision perceiving a whole set of contradictions of social consciousness of class, individual criminality, Marxism and destiny, without sacrificing her sense of the divine. So finally in the end of the novel, an absolute truth emerges. Spark seems to be saying that it is as it is, because of God's divine plan – because God Himself works in mysterious ways.

References

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