



Theme of Morality in Muriel Spark's Novel: *The Bachelors*

Priyanka, Research Scholar,

Department of English, Baba Mastnath University, Rohatak

Email : duhanpriyanka1997@gmail.com

Abstract

The present paper examines the theme of morality in Muriel Spark's *The Bachelors*, focusing on the moral complexities of central characters like: Elsie, Ronald, and Matthew. Set against the backdrop of post-war, the narrative explores how their ethical dilemmas reflect broader societal changes and personal struggles. Elsie embodies the tension between duty and desire, while Ronald represents the conflict between social conformity and individual integrity. Matthew, as a moral compass, grapples with existential questions and the meaning of true friendship. By analyzing these characters, this study highlights how Spark critiques traditional moral frameworks and presents a subtle understanding of morality in a rapidly evolving post war world.

Keywords: morality, ethical dilemmas, post-war literature, solipsism.

Muriel Spark is recognized as one of the most important contemporary novelists. Her novel *The Bachelors*(1960) deals with the sterile way of life of the bachelors who frequently visits the London clubs. It provides a rich exploration of morality through the lives of its characters in post-war world. These characters have the complexity, fullness and variety of humanity itself. The storyline gains momentum when a spiritualist medium named Patrick Steon is to be put on trial for defrauding Freda Flower, one of his followers, of her life savings. This paper focuses on three pivotal figures: Elsie, Ronald, and Matthew, each representing distinct moral challenges and perspectives. Spark's portrayal of these characters illuminates the complexities of ethical decision-



making in a society undergoing significant change, prompting a reevaluation of conventional moral values.

Elsie, a key figure in the narrative, embodies the conflict between duty and personal desire. Her relationship with Ronald exemplifies the struggle between societal expectations and individual happiness. She faces conflict between her responsibilities and her longing for a fulfilling life, reflecting the broader tension experienced by many women of her era. She recognizes the hidden villain in Patric Steon and cautions Alice about this. Spark presents Elsie as a character who seeks autonomy yet remains ensnared by societal norms, highlighting the moral complexities faced by individuals striving for self-identity.

Elsie's decisions often pit her sense of obligation against her personal aspirations. Her reluctance to fully embrace her desires illustrates the internal conflict that arises when one's moral compass is influenced by external pressures. The moral implications of her choices serve as a commentary on the limitations placed upon women in a patriarchal society, questioning whether true fulfillment can exist within such constraints.

In contrast to Elsie, Ronald represents the struggle between social conformity and personal integrity. He grapples with the expectations placed upon him by his peers and the community, leading to a series of moral dilemmas that challenge his sense of self. Ronald's character serves as a critique of societal norms that prioritize appearances over authenticity, prompting readers to consider the cost of conformity.

Ronald's interactions with Elsie and Matthew reveal his internal conflict. He often navigates situations that require him to balance his desire for acceptance with the need to remain true to his values. Spark uses Ronald's character to explore themes of authenticity and the moral implications of sacrificing one's principles for social acceptance, ultimately questioning whether true morality can coexist with societal approval.

Matthew Finch stands as the moral center of *The Bachelors*, embodying the search for meaning in a morally ambiguous world. He is the London correspondent of Iris Eco. His

personal life is highly influenced by his religious beliefs. He likes the company of girls and harbors a desire to sleep with them. After the departure of his previous girlfriend to America he feels lonely in London. He comes in contact with two girls in London. Of the two girls, Alice is one he likes for her beauty. But she is tied up to Patric Steon and loves him. So decides to have a relationship with Elsie, who is less attractive but more accessible. He invites her to his flat. Before her arrival he has a dilemma in his mind. By temperament he is weak with girls but had a great conscience about sex. He believes in spiritualism and considers these affairs as sin. When she is about to arrive, he prays: “*God help me with my weakness*”(43). He plans to remain aloof from her by the smell of onion:

It was for this that he had prepared the onion for he had found that the smell of onion in the breath invariably put the girls off, and so provided a mighty fortress against the devil and a means of avoiding an occasion of sin. (43)

There is a state of ambivalence in his mind. His inclination is more towards Alice than Elsie. But Alice is blindly in love with Patric and in his support as a husband she says: “Patric is a poet beneath the skin”(119) He immediately responds and says: “I am a poet in the morrow of my bones”(119)His contemplative nature makes him to reflect on the ethical dilemma ,that he undergoes. His religious beliefs and practices are deeply entwined with his personal life, including his sexual relationships. These beliefs raise profound questions about friendship, loyalty, and the essence of morality.

Through the character of Matthew, Spark explores the philosophical dimensions of morality. His contemplations on friendship and the nature of ethical behavior challenge the reader to reflect on the deeper implications of their actions. Matthew’s moral integrity contrasts sharply with the struggles of his peers, illustrating the complexity of human relationships and the often elusive nature of ethical clarity.

In *The Bachelors*, Muriel Spark skillfully examines the theme of morality through the characters of Elsie, Ronald, and Matthew. Their individual moral dilemmas reveal the intricate interplay between personal desires, societal expectations, and ethical principles.



Spark's nuanced portrayal of these characters invites readers to engage with complex questions of morality, ultimately suggesting that true ethical understanding transcends rigid frameworks and is shaped by personal experiences and relationships.

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