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# A Deconstructive Study of the Theme of Betrayal in Muriel Sparks Novel: *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*

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**ABSTRACT:** Dame Muriel Spark (1918-2006), a postmodern Scottish writer, is known for her unique literary style, marked by satire, irony, and wit. Her novels frequently explore themes such as betrayal, hallucination, madness, religious hypocrisy, and death, often presenting an incomplete or distorted version of reality. Among her notable works, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) stands as a representative novel that encapsulates Spark's narrative style and thematic concerns. Set in 1930s Edinburgh, the novel revolves around Miss Jean Brodie, an eccentric teacher who exerts significant influence over her selected students, the "Brodie set." However, the novel takes a critical turn as Sandy Stranger, her most insightful student, ultimately betrays her, leading to Miss Brodie's forced retirement.

This study deconstructs Sandy's betrayal by analyzing her interior monologues as mini-narratives, uncovering the psychological and ideological forces driving her actions. While traditionally perceived as an act of disloyalty, the research argues that it is, in fact, Miss Brodie who first betrays her students by imposing her flawed ideals and excessive self-confidence upon them. A psychoanalytic reading of Sandy reveals that her independent thinking, coupled with jealousy and a growing awareness of Miss Brodie's manipulative tendencies, leads to her decision to inform the school authorities. The novel's meta-narratives challenge the established discourse, suggesting that Sandy's "betrayal" is, in reality, a necessary emancipation from Miss Brodie's ideological entrapment.

By employing deconstructive analysis, this paper undertakes to study the student-teacher dynamic in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, subverting conventional interpretations and shedding light on the interplay between power, influence, and individual agency. The study ultimately asserts that Sandy's actions reflect a complex process of self-realization, demonstrating that true betrayal lies in the failure of a mentor to uphold genuine intellectual and moral responsibility.

**KEYWORDS:** Transfiguration, prime, betrayal, insight, instinct.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Dame Muriel Spark (1918-2006) was a Post-Modern, Scottish writer, best known for employing the techniques of satire, irony and wit in her novels. The recurring themes of her novels include- betrayal, cold rationality, hallucination, death, madness, blackmailing, religious hypocrisy and adultery etc. These thematic concerns do not reflect the complete truth and reality; rather foreground lop-sided and incomplete view of reality. Her best novels include *Robinson* (1958), *Memento Mori*(1959), *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), *The Girls of Slender Means*(1963), *The Driver's Seat*(1970), *Loitering with Intent*(1981) and *The Finishing School*(2004) They mark the originality of her writing style and thematic manifestation. Critiquing and subverting the dominant themes can bring to light the reality imbedded in these texts. The most obvious feature of her writing style is that she has created a lot of interesting characters to illustrate the given themes.

Sparks remarkable novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is a representative novel of the fictional world that she has created. Set in Edinburgh during the 1930s, it describes the ups and downs in the career of an eccentric and egotistical Miss Jean Brodie; a teacher at the Monica Blaine School for girls, and her "Brodie Set".that includes- Monica Douglas, Rose Stanley, Eunice Gardner, Jenny Gray, Mary Macgregor and her favorite, Sandy Stranger. She controls the group on the basis that she is in her prime; for her, prime being the point in one's life when he/she is at the height of wisdom and insight. She believes that she has entered her 'prime' in 1930s, and this perception influences her teaching work, which becomes all the more idiosyncratic and personal. She ignores the standard curriculum and teaches her students about art, culture, and politics in line with her own proclivities. For her, "Art is greater than science. Art comes first and then science"(Spark: *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*,25).

Miss Mackay, the headmistress of the school harbors a feeling of hatred and jealousy against Miss Brodie, for being popular among the students and her methods of teaching which do not fit well in this orthodox school. Education for

Miss Mackay is putting in something which is not there ,whereas for Miss Brodie it is leading out what is already there in pupil's soul:

The word "education" comes from the root *e* from *ex*, out, and *duco*, I lead. It means leading out. To me education is leading out of what is already there in pupil's soul. To Miss Mackay it is putting in of something that is not there, and that is not what I call education, I call it intrusion...(36).

The 'Brodie set' is very popular among the girls and most of them crave to be a part of it. Joyce Emily Hammond is one such girl who always cherishes to be a part of 'Brodie set' but she is never quite well accepted. Inspired by the teachings of Miss Brodie, Emily lives the school and runs away to the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). Unfortunately, the train she is riding is attacked and she is killed. Sandy Stranger, her most trusted student goes to Miss Mackay and gives her the clue for Brodie's removal for which Miss Mackay is very desperate. As a result Miss Brodie is forced to retire on the grounds that she has been teaching fascism in her lectures. Leaving the school, Sandy converts to Roman Catholicism, enters a convent and becomes Sister Helena. This betrayal by Sandy has been an enigmatic issue for both, the readers and the researchers like the 'problem of delay' as focused in Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. The novel has been studied from the angles of religion, feminism, conformity and non-conformity. The present study attempts to deconstruct and trace the covert reasons of betrayal by Sandy, the most trusted student of the most dedicated teacher; through the analysis of her interior monologues. These monologues form the mini narratives to study the mind and motives of Sandy.

The first and foremost reason can be ascribed to the nature and temperament of Sandy Stranger as she is a girl with an independent thinking. She observes that the kind of education that is imparted in the school does not allow one to think independently. So she revolts against her domineering teacher. Her surname 'stranger' suggests her peculiar nature and strange behavior. When Jenny says that they like Miss Brodie's class, for she gives too much freedom; Sandy immediately retorts: "She is not supposed to give us freedom; she is supposed to give us lessons."(25).

Another reason that is responsible for Sandy's seeming strange behavior is the feeling of jealousy. It stems from the psychoanalytic study of her character, more particularly her sexual life. She is a highly imaginative girl. Miss Brodie is in the habit to discuss her love life with her best students, the Brodie set. She describes to them not only the love life of Charlotte Bronte but also her first love affair with a young man named Hugh Carruthers. Sandy and Jenny takes so much interest in her love life that they start writing their own fantasized version of this story in their notebook: *The Mountain Eyre* by Sandy Stranger and Jenny Gray. They called it 'research' (17).

Miss Brodie keeps a firm conviction that her teaching method is the best, though it is not in line with the Monica Blaine School's methods. This is why the head mistress Miss Mackay asks her to resign the post and join some progressive school. Instead of concealing it, Miss Brodie shares it with her with her students and says with determination, "...I shall not resign."(9). She says that there had been previous plots to remove her from Blaine, which had been foiled. She tells her students:

It has been suggested again that I should apply for a post at one of the progressive schools... but I shall not apply for a post at a crank school. I shall remain at this education factory...give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life. (9)

Alike Hamlet Miss. Brodie over estimates her role to write the lives of the girls of her 'set' but her excessive amount of self-confidence leads to her downfall. At first her ideas about beauty and goodness dazzle and seduce the students but in the end these ideas lead to her dismissal. She justifies her ideas because she is in her prime. "For her one's prime is the moment one was born for"(12). When the girls shift to senior level they visit their art teacher, Teddy Lloyd as models for his paintings. The girls know that Mr. Lloyd and Miss Brodie love each other. The fact that Sandy is a girl with insight, is said by Miss Brodie many times. Sandy notices that all his paintings resemble Miss Brodie which gives birth to jealousy in her mind. She questions Mr. Lloyd, the drawing teacher regarding the painting of Rose, "Why it's like Miss Brodie!...It's terribly like miss Brodie"(99). Rose is only fourteen at that time and she has a large- boned pale face, whereas Miss Brodie's bones are small. With her power of insight and small eyes Sandy senses that Mr. Lloyd is obsessed with Miss Boride . Like Freudian slips the deep rooted image of Miss Brodie gets reflected in his paintings of other girls. Out of this jealousy Sandy tries to take the place of her teacher, Miss. Brodie and poses nude for his painting. She goes too far and even sleeps with Mr. Lloyd. But in the attempts to write the love life of her favorite girls Miss. Brodie has some different plans. By the time the girls are sixteen Miss Brodie says to her 'set' at large: "Sandy will make an excellent secret service agent, a great spy;...Rose will be a great lover"(109-110). In her opinion, Sandy is a girl with insight and Rose is a girl with instinct: "Rose... is like a heroine from a novel by D.H. Lawrence. She has got instinct"(110). D.H. Lawrence's heroines are often portrayed with their sexual instincts, reflecting his exploration of



the intricate interplay between human relationships and desires. Clara Dawes, a central character in *Sons and Lovers*, vividly embodies this theme. An independent and sensuous woman separated from her husband, she enters into a passionate relationship with Paul Morel, the novel's protagonist. In contrast to Miriam, who symbolizes spiritual and intellectual love, Clara's connection with Paul is predominantly physical, driven by raw passion and instinct. This point is supported by a quote from the research article by John W. Haegert: "...some of the forces impelling Lawrence's characters into erotic partnership, the fateful steps which constitute its "consummation," and the persistence of these same forces and steps..."(2)

A close reading of the mini narratives of Sandy subverts the binary equation of the influence between the teacher and the taught. The most accepted discourse after the reading of the novel comes to the fore that it is Sandy who betrays her teacher, giving the clue to Miss Mackay, and leading to her dismissal. But, the fact is that it is Miss. Brodie who betrays her students by her false ideals. As Sandy grows by watching the casual betrayals of her teacher with her small eyes and exceptional insight, it leads her to conclude that her teacher does not deserve the loyalty of her students. At the end of the novel Monica visits Sandy, who now bears the name of Sister Helena as a nun, and tells her that Miss. Brodie thinks that it was you who betrayed her. In response to it Sandy says, "It's only possible to betray where loyalty is due." (127). A deconstructive analysis of this mini narrative also suggests that it was Miss. Brodie who first betrayed the emotional trust of her students. This argument is further reinforced by her another statement when an enquiring young man comes to see Sandy in response to her book of psychology, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. The young man asks her, "What were the main influences of your school days, Sister Helena?"(128). Sandy clutches the bars of her grille, more desperately than ever and says, "There was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime."(128). Further, the way she clutches the bars of her grille in a desperate manner also suggests that Miss. Brodie had a baneful impact on her mind during her formative years.

## II. CONCLUSION

Thus, Sandy undergoes an emotional and spiritual Transfiguration which is reflected in her betrayal. Now she does not consider Miss. Brodie as an ideal teacher. The hope which Miss Brodie infused at the beginning appears to be vain in the eyes of Sandy and it is a break of promise in her eyes. Since early childhood she had a notion that the break of promise might ruin the life of a child. On her tenth birthday when Shandy was taking tea with her friend Jenny in her house and her mother disturbed them; she became furious:

Sandy gave her mother a look of secret ferocity which meant: you promised to leave us all on our own, and a promise is a promise, you know it is very bad to break a promise to a child, you might ruin all my life by breaking your promise. (18)

After the unfortunate and premature death of Joyce Emily Hammond, Sandy's belief, that Miss. Brodie is not an ideal teacher becomes more concrete. She feels that she is dangerous for her students as she creates far more questionable situations, with damaging outcomes for her girls. When she comes to know from Miss Mackay that Miss Brodie has formed a new set; she takes her final decision to put a stop to Miss Brodie. She gives her the clue, "...You won't be able to pin her down on sex. Have you thought of politics?"(124). Her insightful idea works and Miss Brodie is dismissed. Here Miss Brodie's statement: "If only you small girls would listen to me I would make of you the crème de la crème" (14) proves ironical. Rose, another girl of the set who was favorite of Miss Brodie, and was supposed to take her place as a lover of Teddy Lloyd; married soon after she left the school. Spark ironically writes: "She shook off Miss Brodie's influence as a dog shakes off pond water from his coat"(119). Thus all these metanarratives hint towards the flip side of the discourse that it was not Sandy who betrayed, rather Miss Brodie, with her ideals and a false sense of pride, betrayed her favorite girl students.

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