# Postmodernism in The Girls of Slender Means by Muriel Spark

In virtually all pieces of literature material in the world today, the authors strive to be as unique as possible. This move is aimed at ensuring that their message- either entertaining or educative- is conveyed in an interesting manner. Through the use of various stylistic devices like humour, satire, sarcasm, or euphemism, authors manage to get an upper hand in their diction and compositions. On a different scope, authors become motivated by certain schools of thought, or writing techniques for that matter. One common literary movement is postmodernism. Developed in the era towards the last half of the 20th century, postmodernism encompasses a literary and artistic movement that focused on aspects after modernism. Ideally, it is mostly based on the ironic, sceptic, and disruptive perspective of the modernism era (Ruland, et al., 2016). In this regard, therefore, this paper will present a comprehensive analysis of the use of postmodernism on Muriel Spark’s *The Girls of Slender Means*.

As an art and literary movement, it is idyllic to understand its impact on the author. As such, taking a closer look at Muriel Spark’s style will shed light on the postmodernist motivation in writing the novel. Muriel Spark has, over the years, thrived to make her writing unique as compared to other Scandinavian authors. Her style is characterized by witty allusions, the smart circumvention of sentimentalities, and her effective use of dialogue in most of her works. In *The Girls of Slender Means,* Spark uses a contextual environmental awareness in an omniscient manner in the wake of the postmodernism culture.

Written in 1963, *The Girls of Slender Means* revolves around the story of a group of girls living in London. Unlike the others who- by the societal norm at the time- were motivated by money and love, this group was triggered by a much different slant. The plot is set at The May of Teck Club- a building that was established after the First World War as a social protection unit. The club’s core aim was to provide an opportunity for ladies below the age of thirty who went to London in pursuit of a suitable occupation, away from their parents. The plot of the novel depicts the push by the ladies to meet their objectives in the immediate post-war situation in Kensington. From the post war wreck, the girls living in the Club become an emergent force from the Blitz. The residence of the ladies in the May of Teck Club was ideal for the post-war situation in London. While the ladies at the time were mostly motivated by love and money, the occupants at the club had a different form of motivation. Being motivated to help their families to succeed, these women left their homes to find reasonable employment opportunities in London, releasing the upkeep burdens from their parents. Follow the generally low income levels at the time, Spark describes the May of Teck Club as a dormitory, where the women who cannot afford quality accommodation. Through flashbacks, the story focuses on the martyrdom of Farrigndon- an anarchist who was killed in Haiti for his beliefs as covered by Jane Wright- a journalist and former inhabitant at The May of Teck Club.

Typical of postmodernism authors, they focus their literature on the notion that the world has lost its meaning. This is attributable to the absurdity that surround several situations in the world today hence the lack of need to create meaning for anything (Lucy & Hartley, 2016). As such, authors like Spark’s have adopted an ontological approach in *The Girls of Slender Means,* which is against the traditional epistemological approach that was typical of the modernism era. In *The Girls of Slender Means,* it is not shocking as to how the author- through the protagonist- shows an evident embracing of the absurdities that define the world today. However, the Spark also strives to spark some elements of hope against the acknowledgement of absurdities by trying to create a new world based on the mistakes of the modernism era.

Having a critical analysis of *The Girls of Slender Means* will shed more light on the literary modus operandi of most postmodernism authors. The book portrays the postmodernism point of view when the author uses fragmentation effectively to deliver the plot. The characters in the plot as well as the themes are fragmented across the novel- a common feature in most postmodernism novels. Various flashbacks to Nicholas over time are described in the story with the aim of trying to find out the reasons for his martyrdom. One of the flashbacks reveals Nicholas character as an insurgent. The text shows that Nicholas was an insurgent that was bound to bring division among people including his own family. Yet, this description does not fit in any way with the character of the slain Catholic priest, thus Muriel tries to allude to the fact that Nicholas had changed his character over time. The death of Nicholas due to his beliefs loosely alludes to the postmodernist assumption that the current world is dehumanized. However, the flashback disrupts the sequence of events in the story as Spark’s continues to explore the lives of the girls at the May of Teck Club in the story.

Additionally, the effective use of flashbacks provides the context of the stories. Postmodernism literature is associated with the happenings of World War II, a dark period that greatly influenced the thoughts of many literally writers. Spark flashbacks to the war and relates to the aftermath effects of the fighting on the lives of her character in *“The Girls of Slender Means”*. These scenes provide the fundamental background of the story, and explain the challenges faced by the characters in their daily lives. Spark continues to describe the state of the country including the dilapidated building, ruins destroyed by bombs, hanging toilets, and staircases in the destroyed houses. Moreover, the people living in the post-war period were extremely poor, and their only wealth was their positive spirit. The flashback is critical in understanding the primary reason why girls and women decided to stay in the May of Teck Club. Due to the poor economic conditions in the country, the women could only afford to pay for accommodation in the hostel irrespective of their age and physical appeal. It is notable that despite the rough situation, The May of Teck Club survived the ordeal and stood strong as a symbol of the reconstruction period. Spark uses the symbolism of the Club to illustrate the need for the change in ideologies into postmodernism. Besides, the flashback prepares the readers for the imminent emotional scars of war that are later revealed in the text. As a postmodernist, Spark uses the flashback technique to portray the world radically as a disjointed and chaotic place.

Omnipresence is a major postmodernism theme in The Girls of Slender Means. In most novels that are written in either a first person or third person point of view, the reader can easily identify the perspective. Noteworthy, the use of an omniscient point of view is not affected by the character of any of the people in the story and hence the novel secures its unique and -most importantly- indifferent tone to the actions of the characters. This approach detaches the narrator from the happenings ion the story causing them to describe all the important aspects without involving their emotions. For example, the narrator describes the poor state of London in an emotionless tone as if aloof from the sufferings of the people. As such it is possible to question the authenticity of the storyteller because he appears as if isolated from the tragic happenings in the environment. However, the distance allows Spark to present the comical side of the story and the tragic events affecting the girls living in the May of Teck Club. For example, the narrator depicts Ferringdon’s behaviour as that of a disappointing young boy without considering the impact of his conduct on Jane, who holds the man in her affections.

Postmodernism represents the transition into a more microcosmic world. From the postmodernist perspective, humans are considered to be the miniature models of the universe regarding their diversities and contradictions. After staying together at the May of Teck Club due to similar economic constraints, the occupants have many contradictions that shape their relationships. The three old ladies that had been permitted to overstay in the hostel without being turned out by the management attempted to insert their influence over the young ladies by telling them what is appropriate and inappropriate. It is notable that the spinsters frequently interfered with the activities of other residents willing them to adhere to the rules and regulations of the facility. For example, Greggie cautions Anne against throwing cigarette ends on the floor saying that the behaviour was not permitted (p 15). In spite of the warning, Anne went ahead to throw the cigarette in a dark corner, and Greggie was indulgent of her behaviour. The ability of the two characters to put aside their differences and maintain a friendly relationship was essential for the residents to survive in the post-war period.

In *The Girls of Slender Means,* Muriel Spark uses the concept of historiographical metafiction. A common feature in most postmodernist works, historiographical metafiction covers the representation of actual events as fiction. In the case of *the Girls of Slender Means,* the author uses the wars- which are actual historic events- as the core basis of the plotline revolving around the May of Teck Club, which manages to survive the bombardment of London during the war. While the plotline is fictitious, the shattered economy that followed the war is similar to the situation that faced the girls at the Club. This is evident when the author notes the ladies earned meagre salaries and could not afford reliable accommodation and hence residing in the hostels in pursuit of their dreams. Since the girls did not have any options, they were forced to tolerate each other’s opinion and share their most prized assets. For example, Selina often gave her soap products to Anne when her personal supply was depleted. On the other hand, Anne lent out her Schiaparelli taffeta to Selina. Besides, the girls also tolerated Greggie, who was considerable bossy attitude without acting out on their frustrations with the older woman (p 34).

The end of the Second World War marked the onset of the gradual transition from the modernism school of thought to the postmodernism movement. Based on the casualties recorded from the war as well as the indiscriminate destruction of property, most survivors believed that humanity was at its decline. Following the war, most postmodernists believed that humans are reduced to mere characters with irrational motives. In this regard, therefore, Spark dehumanizes her approach to the narration of the story in *The Girls of Slender Means* through an omniscient point of view. This way, the author believes that she becomes detached from humanity, offering a different perspective to the occurrences in the lives of the ladies that once lived in The May of Teck Club. Using this approach, Spark smartly succeeds in detaching the traditional focus on the characters in the story to a new approach where the omniscient approach detaches the reader from the characters to focusing more on the plot.

A critical analysis of the novel reveals that it lacks in the depth of narration. The depthlessness of the novella is based on the notion that words only describe a situation on the outer part and that it is the thoughts of the reader that count in the evaluation of the depth of the content in question (Ryan, 2017). As such, Spark uses the omniscient perspective that denies the characters the opportunity to project their feelings as well as consciousness. This way, the reader is left to decide on the particular impact of the various actions by the characters. In this regard, therefore, the depthlessness in the novella is a core feature pointing to the classification of the book as a postmodernism work.

*The Girls of Slender Means* is a captivating novel that goes out of its way to ensure that the communicative and entertaining objectives of the author are met effectively. A critical analysis of the novel asserts that the work is indeed a depiction of the postmodernism school of thought in literature. The author uses an omniscient point of view to radically dehumanize the characters. Also, the post-war setting of the novella is a depiction of the adverse impacts of the actions of men and hence the need for ideological changes, justifying the postmodernism approach taken by Spark. Through a contextual fragmentation by the use flashbacks, the novel manages to stand out as a postmodern work.

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