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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## THE PARADOX OF AUTONOMY: IDENTITY, CONTROL, AND SELF-DESTRUCTION IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT AND THE PRIME OF MISS JEAN BRODIE

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### Abstract

This research paper interrogates the complex and often contradictory nature of female autonomy in the fiction of Muriel Spark. By juxtaposing two of her most acclaimed novels, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) and *The Driver's Seat* (1970), the study explores how the pursuit of absolute control over one's identity and destiny paradoxically leads to self-destruction. In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, the protagonist's attempt to play God with her students' lives results in her own betrayal and displacement. In *The Driver's Seat*, the protagonist Lise exercises the ultimate autonomy by orchestrating her own murder, collapsing the distinction between victim and aggressor. This paper argues that Spark challenges the liberal humanist ideal of the free subject, suggesting instead that the drive for total narrative control is a form of metaphysical rebellion that inevitably ends in tragedy. Through a close reading of character dynamics, narrative structure, and theological underpinnings, the research concludes that for Spark's women, the "driver's seat" is a perilous position where the assertion of selfhood becomes indistinguishable from the annihilation of the self.

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### Introduction:-

Muriel Spark's literary universe is one governed by a rigorous, almost ruthless, economy of truth. Central to her oeuvre is the tension between the "God-like" author who controls the plot and the characters who struggle for free will within it. This tension is nowhere more palpable than in her exploration of female autonomy. In a mid-twentieth-century context where feminist discourse was increasingly championing women's liberation and self-determination, Spark offered a darker, more ambivalent vision. For Spark, autonomy the state of being self-governing is not merely a path to liberation; it is a metaphysical trap. This paper examines this "Paradox of Autonomy" through the lens of two seminal texts: *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *The Driver's Seat*. Though tonally distinct one a school story set in 1930s Edinburgh, the other a psychological thriller set in a nameless European city both novels feature protagonists obsessed with control. Miss Jean Brodie seeks to mold the minds of her "set" into her own image, asserting a fascist control over the future. Lise, the enigmatic heroine of *The Driver's Seat*, seeks to script the exact circumstances of her own death, asserting a nihilistic control over her end. The central

problem statement of this research is: How does the pursuit of absolute autonomy in Spark's fiction transform into an agent of self-destruction? The hypothesis posits that Spark views the desire for total control as a usurpation of the divine role (whether God's or the Author's), an act of hubris that creates a "fissure" in the character's reality through which destruction enters. By analyzing the narrative trajectories of Brodie and Lise, this study aims to demonstrate that in Spark's moral universe, the only escape from the chaos of modern life is often a terrifying plunge into a scripted fatality.

#### **Summary of the Selected Novels:-**

Set against the backdrop of rising fascism in 1930s Europe, the novel focuses on Miss Jean Brodie, a charismatic and unconventional teacher at the Marcia Blaine School for Girls in Edinburgh. Brodie selects a group of six girls the "BrodieSet" to whom she imparts her idiosyncratic views on art, politics, and love, explicitly stating her intention to put "old heads on young shoulders." She is in her "prime," a period of intense vitality and authority. She manipulates the girls' lives, attempting to vicariously live out a romance with the art teacher, Mr. Lloyd, through her student Rose, while casting Sandy Stranger as the intellectual observer. However, her control is shattered when Sandy, realizing the dangerous moral implications of Brodie's influence (specifically her admiration for Mussolini and Hitler), betrays her to the headmistress. Brodie is fired and eventually dies of cancer, wondering to the end who betrayed her.

*The Driver's Seat* is a sparse, terrifying novella that inverts the traditional "whodunit" structure into a "whydunit." It follows Lise, a woman in her thirties who takes a vacation to a Southern European city. From the outset, Lise's behavior is bizarre and aggressive; she purchases a garish, stain-resistant dress and behaves erratically toward those she meets. It gradually becomes clear that Lise is not looking for romance or escape, but for a murderer. She is hunting for a "type" a pathological male who will kill her exactly as she wishes. She rejects men who want to sleep with her and eventually identifies Richard, a convicted sex offender. She manipulates him into driving her to a park where she provides him with the weapon and instructions for her own murder. The novel ends with her death, executed precisely according to her plan.

#### **The Architect and the Nihilist:-**

Miss Brodie is the archetypal figure of the "author-character." She believes she has the right to author the lives of others. Her declaration, "Give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life" (Spark, *The Prime* 9), reveals her desire for total possession. Brodie's autonomy is dependent on the subjugation of her students. She defines her identity through them ("I am in my prime," she repeats, as if convincing herself). However, Brodie's flaw is her lack of self-awareness regarding her own Calvinistic nature. She believes she is a liberating force, freeing the girls from the drudgery of the curriculum, but she is actually a predestinating deity, assigning roles (Rose is "famous for sex," Sandy for "insight") that trap the girls just as effectively as the school's rules. Her self-destruction comes from the very tool she sharpened: Sandy's insight. By teaching Sandy to see through convention, she teaches Sandy to see through her. Brodie's tragedy is that her autonomy was always a performance, dependent on an audience that eventually outgrew her.

If Brodie is an autocrat, Lise is a nihilist. In *The Driver's Seat*, Lise pushes the concept of autonomy to its horrifying logical extreme. Traditional autonomy implies the preservation of the self; for Lise, autonomy is the destruction of the self on her own terms. She is described as being in the "driver's seat" literally and metaphorically. She rejects the role of the passive female victim common in crime fiction. When she encounters a man who tries to assault her, she escapes not out of fear, but because he is not the "right" man for her final scene. Lise's character analysis reveals a woman deeply alienated from a society that commodifies women (symbolized by the consumer goods she buys). Her identity is a void she fills with the plot of her death. She is arguably the most powerful character in Spark's canon because she successfully usurps the power of death itself, turning it into a service she procures. Sandy Stranger serves as the foil to Brodie. Her journey is one of wrestling autonomy away from Brodie. However, Sandy's assertion of control the betrayal is also an act of self-destruction. By destroying Brodie, she destroys the central figure of her youth and retreats into a convent, clutching the bars of the grille. Sandy trades the psychological prison of the Brodie set for the literal enclosure of the nunnery. This reinforces Spark's thesis: absolute freedom is unbearable; one merely trades one form of confinement for another.

#### **The Paradox of Autonomy:-**

Both novels interrogate the binary of victim and aggressor. In a conventional narrative, Lise would be the tragic victim of a sex maniac. In Spark's hands, she is the aggressor. She bullies, commands, and terrifies the men she

meets. When she finally corners Richard, she screams not for help, but because he initially refuses to kill her. Spark writes, "She seems to be acting... as if she were a woman in a state of terror" (Spark, *Driver's Seat* 103). The "as if" is crucial; it is a performance. Lise appropriates the script of violence against women and directs it. Similarly, Brodie portrays herself as a victim of the school administration ("assassins!"), but she is the aggressor against the girls' psychological independence. The paradox lies in the fact that to be fully autonomous in these texts, one must victimize others (Brodie) or oneself (Lise). There is no "innocent" autonomy.

Spark's Catholicism deeply informs these narratives. The desire for autonomy is framed as a theological error. In Calvinist doctrine (which permeates the Edinburgh of Jean Brodie), individuals are predestined; they have no control. Brodie attempts to override this by playing God. Sandy realizes this, noting that Brodie thinks she is "the God of Calvin," seeing the beginning and the end of her girls' lives (Spark, *The Prime* 120). By asserting this control, Brodie commits a heresy that leads to her downfall. In *The Driver's Seat*, the absence of God creates a vacuum. Lise attempts to fill the role of Destiny. In a godless world, the only way to ensure certainty is to script one's end. Lise's autonomy is a grotesque parody of divine providence. She ensures that everything happens "according to the plan," but the plan is death. Spark suggests that human attempts to replicate divine control are destined to end in grotesque failure or madness.

Both novels present identity not as an innate essence, but as a construct. Brodie constructs her identity through her "Prime" and her stories of her dead lover Hugh. Lise constructs her identity through her bizarre clothing—a "psychedelic" dress that ensures she is noticed, marking her as the intended target. Lise's dress is a symbol of her fabricated self. It is chosen to clash, to offend, to signal her separation from the herd. It is her costume for the final act. The "Brodie Set" is a collective identity. When the girls grow up and the set dissolves, Brodie loses her identity. She is nothing without the reflection in her students' eyes. The paradox here is that in striving to construct a unique identity (Brodie as the unique teacher, Lise as the unique victim), both characters alienate themselves from humanity. Autonomy leads to isolation.

### **Findings:-**

1. The analysis finds that in Spark's fiction, the moment a character achieves total control is the moment of their destruction. Lise achieves her goal (death), and Brodie achieves her goal (making Sandy insightful), but both achievements destroy them.
2. Asserting narrative authority over one's life or others is an inherently violent act. It requires the suppression of other wills (Brodie suppressing the girls, Lise suppressing Richard's hesitation).
3. Spark critiques the modern secular belief that we are the "captains of our souls." Her novels suggest that we are driven by forces we barely understand—psychological, theological, or narrative. To claim to be in the "driver's seat" is the ultimate delusion.

### **Conclusion:-**

The research yields the result that Muriel Spark's vision of womanhood is radically different from the optimistic feminism of her contemporaries. She does not equate autonomy with happiness or liberation. Instead, she presents autonomy as a heavy, dangerous burden. For Lise, autonomy is the freedom to choose the time and method of death, a dark existential victory. For Sandy, it is the burden of moral judgment, leading to a life of penance. For Brodie, it is a delusion that masks her irrelevance. The "Driver's Seat" is ultimately a lonely place. The result of taking the wheel is a crash. Spark's fiction warns that the desire to be the sole author of one's life is a rejection of the necessary contingency and interconnectedness of human existence.

In conclusion, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *The Driver's Seat* offer a chilling examination of the costs of female autonomy. Muriel Spark dismantles the romantic notion of self-determination, revealing the dark undercurrents of control and manipulation that often accompany it. Miss Jean Brodie's attempt to fix the identities of her students results in her own erasure, while Lise's attempt to fix her own destiny results in her annihilation.

The "Paradox of Autonomy" is that the more these women strive to assert their individual will against the world, the more they become instruments of destruction. They are tragic figures not because they fail to be free, but because they succeed too well. Lise gets exactly what she wants; Brodie moulds exactly the student she intended. Their tragedy is the tragedy of answered prayers. Through these narratives, Spark asserts that true freedom may not lie in the driver's seat in the desperate, white-knuckled grip on the wheel but perhaps in the passenger seat, in the acceptance of mystery, grace, and the limits of the human will.

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