

Being a Minority: Colonial Africa in Muriel Spark's Short Stories Cycle

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Abstract Muriel Spark in her works drew heavily on her lifetime experience, especially that gained in exile—while she was living in Africa (1937-1944). It is especially visible in the cycle of her short stories to which the following titles can be included: “The Seraph and the Zambesi,” “The Pawnbroker’s Wife,” “The Portabello Road,” “The Go-Away Bird,” “Bang-Bang You’re Dead,” and “The Curtain Blown by the Breeze” . In all of the works we can see how Spark’s feeling of alienation transcends the pages of her works, how she discusses the issues connected with being a minority—a white woman in Africa. She also pays attention to problems with assimilation between and among the races. It all serves not only literary purposes, but also enables the writer to deal with her past and the feeling of not belonging to a place she is in, which is often the problem of her protagonists.

Key words Muriel Spark; Short Stories Cycle; Africa; minority

Muriel Spark (1918 – 2006) had a very tempestuous life. From her autobiography and biographies we may sketch an image of a woman who experienced a lot but never lost her wit and insightfulness. Experiences connected with World War II and the years she spent in Africa (1937-1944) left a lasting impression on her oeuvre. Memories from the time spent in Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, are captured in many of her works; most intensely in the African cycle of short stories to which we may include the following titles: “The Seraph and the Zambesi” (1951)—this work launched Spark’s career after she had won a short story competition in *The Observer*; “The Pawnbroker’s Wife” (1953), which draws heavily on the period when Spark was waiting to return to England in 1944; “The Portobello Road” (1953), an extremely peculiar ghost story; “The Go-Away Bird” (1958), “Bang-bang You’re Dead” (1958) and “The Curtain Blown by the Breeze” (1961), all of which discuss the position and role of women in the Empire. All the stories, although quite distinctive, share certain characteristic typical of Spark’s writing. They all include the supernatural, eagerly

explored by the writer in most of her works, as well as numerous autobiographical references based on the time Spark spent in Zimbabwe. In all of them the author raises the issue of being a minority, whereas she, herself, may as well be perceived as a member of various minority groups—as a woman writer creating fiction during the war-time, as a woman whose husband tried to force her to abort a child and as one who opposed it, as a Catholic convert with parents of different religions (her father was Jewish while her mother was Presbyterian), as a woman who was addicted to food suppressants and, most importantly, as a Scottish living in Africa.

Africa inspired Spark's writing in numerous ways—from various themes, most vividly discussed among them is the role of women, through beautiful landscapes, the most memorable being a trip to Victoria Falls, to situations which exercised her imagination—the result of which we may see in “Bang-Bang You're Dead”. In Zimbabwe, Spark was removed from her element—away from family and friends with a man, as it turned out, she barely knew and who suffered mental problems. When she wanted to return to the home country, the war broke out. Once she finally returned to England, she tried to make a living for herself, suffering many hardships along the way—she kept having financial difficulties, got addicted to Dexedrine which resulted in anorexia and nervous breakdown during which she believed that T.S. Eliot was sending her encrypted messages. Throughout this period she received a lot of help and support from her friends, she converted to Catholicism and continued her literary career writing poetry as well as shorter and longer fiction in which she frequently reflected her life.

“The Seraph and the Zambezi”

The short story which advanced Spark's career is also one of the most peculiar in her oeuvre. It is treated as a masterpiece of magic realism.¹ The action takes place around Christmas near Victoria Falls, Africa, in the proximity of Samuel Cramer's house. Cramer is an author of a Nativity Masque playing the character of a seraph who is confronted by an actual angel. He is recognized by the narrator as a figure from Charles Baudelaire's novella “La Fanfarlo” (1847). This, from the very beginning, proves that Cramer is different—his longevity, mixed origin (his father was German, his mother—Chilean), being a European in Africa, ascribes him a minority status. He is well assimilated (he speaks some “Kitchen Kaffir”), very distinctive and extremely condescending.

“The Seraph and the Zambezi” explores the human world and nature, as well as the juxtaposition between the natural and the supernatural. In this story, the African experience of the author is reflected most strongly through images. We can also notice the tension between the whites and the natives. The whites are “arrogant, snobbish and

vengeful” (Aly, “Exile” 94), they keep together. Although they are in minority, they believe they are superior to the natives—they frequently shout at them and treat them as subordinate human beings. It is worth noting that this short story was written three years before the author converted to Catholicism. The work “[o]n an elemental level, ... is a struggle between the forces of good and evil, told with what would become one of Spark’s distinctive narrative voices.... It expresses a devil-may-care attitude characteristic of all Spark’s work, derived from her religious faith” (Hosmer 459).

Spark not only wrote “a highly experimental piece,” but also embedded her interest in Baudelaire’s story and her experience of South Africa (Stanford 57). As a converted Christian, we may view her reason behind creating such a story in a way which was described by Derek Stanford. He believes that “[t]he nativity masque represents the commercialisation of the spirit of Christmas—of all which the modern world understands by that term. In addition, the masque is not being performed to the greater glory of God, but to the greater profit and aggrandisement of Cramer and the Fanfarlo” (117), which puts the representative of the whites, the protagonist, in a negative light.

“The Pawnbroker’s Wife”

This story is set in Cape Town, which Spark mentions in her autobiography as a city with the community heavily divided into coloured, white and black (Spark *CV* 135). The story focuses on the title character, Mrs Jan Cloote, and her manipulative power. Mrs Cloote’s husband left her, he allegedly lives with a coloured woman, and abandoned his business. The pawnbroker’s shop is now run more successfully, although Mrs Cloote denies the vocation by underlining that she is only the pawnbroker’s wife. The title character is not only a white woman living in Africa, but she is also in a minority group of women left by their husbands who now live with a native women. Abdel-Moneim Aly believes that “Spark transforms many of her real experiences into the fictional ones of the narrator of ‘The Pawnbroker’s Wife’ and in Mrs Jan Cloote and her three daughters she shows how the white South Africans refuse to ‘face the human facts around them’ ” (Aly, “Exile” 99). The author, in her autobiography, stresses that these whites were in “ ‘a world of their own’ ” (Spark *CV* 135).

The pawnbroker’s wife is so bored by her life in Africa that she starts to invent stories, not only to explain and conceal doubtful morality of herself and her daughters, but also to liven up their life stories. The work depicts, on the one hand, a slow, not fully conscious process of assimilation with the locals, through picking up their habits, such as placing the word ‘eh’ at the end of sentences. On the other, we learn, through various remarks, that natives are treated as second category citizens. Mrs Cloote’s

husband was known for his two passions—yellow advocaat and black girls (105). The use of the colours ascribed to people and alcohol in one line may present marginal treatment the natives received and that they were regarded more like a property, commodity. Yet again, in this story the whites are put in a negative light, especially taking into account the title character—a manipulative, deceitful, vindictive woman.

“The Portobello Road”

This story’s focus is on Needle’s encounter with two of her friends, a few years after her death. She was killed by one of them because of a secret they shared in Africa. George, Needle’s killer, goes to Africa to take over his uncle’s tobacco farm. He keeps in touch with his friends, two of them, Needle and Skinny, visit the country because of Skinny’s research expedition. They meet George’s mistress who is a native. Later, in confidence, George reveals that he married the girl and he has two children with her.

In this story, Spark reveals a lot about the connection between and among the races. The narrator, upon learning about George’s mistress, declares “I must say I was myself a bit off-put by this news about the brown woman. I was brought up in a university town to which came Indian, African and Asiatic students in a variety of tints and hues. I was brought up to avoid them for reasons connected with local reputation and God’s ordinances” (6). When George reveals his secret, Needle’s immediate reaction is: “How dreadful!” (10). The older settlers, however, are tolerant of this relationship, though they are not aware of the marriage. Nevertheless, they cannot bear George’s method of raising tobacco which they perceived as “disloyal to the whites” (6).

Not only the three friends belong to the minority of the whites. Also George’s mistress is not a typical native—her father was white and she had different upbringing from other coloured. Nevertheless, she was treated as a servant even when she was four months pregnant. George does not even pretend that he has any deeper feelings for her—he needs her for sex, especially since, which is stressed in the story, there are three white men to one white women in Africa. The whites are quite patronising when referring to the mistress as “George’s Dark Lady” (16). Regardless of what they think of her, she is a clever woman who got a lot of money for letting George leave Africa and for promising not to tell anyone about their marriage in the Congo. Her financial condition disturbs “respectable coloured girls in their neighbourhood” (16), which causes tensions. When George’s friends do not have any news of his whereabouts for a long period of time, they assume that “[h]e’s probably gone native. With his coffee concubine and a dozen mahogany kids” (13). Needle, although she got on well with the natives and had many friends, keeps in touch just with a family which is representative of all the others.

The protagonist was killed because she wanted to reveal George's secret when he told her he is planning to propose to their mutual friend, Kathleen. Upon seeing Needle's ghost, George is driven to the verge of insanity. Vern Lindquist believes that "[t]he repeated sightings of Needle's ghost on the Portobello Road drive George mad not out of guilt, but because he mistakenly believes she has come back to tell Kathleen about his bigamy". I would argue, however, that George is not so much concerned with Needle revealing his secret, as by the mere fact of her appearance, since she is long dead. In this story, again, the most violent turns out to be the representative of the whites.

"The Go-Away Bird"

This story, set in Africa, is divided into three parts. In the first, we meet the protagonist, Daphne du Toit, whose uncle, Chakata, had an affair with Old Tuys' wife. Old Tuys now seeks revenge, thus it is advisable for a young girl to go to England. The second part portrays the trip to England which proves to be a failure. In the third part, Daphne is brutally murdered by Old Tuys shortly after her return to Africa. All the events are linked by a foreshadowing sound, 'go-away,' made by a loerie. This story, as the previous ones, can be linked to Spark's life. She, as well as the protagonist, could not find a place for herself, a place she belonged to, neither in Africa, nor in England. They were unhappy with both English and African existences. Daphne's search for her identity fails miserably and the girl's end is tragic, although the narration is conducted in such a way that the reader does not necessarily feel compassion towards the character.

Daphne, throughout her life, is an outcast. Her father was Dutch, her mother —English. After their death she moves to a relative, James, who goes by the name Chakata, which shows his love for natives. Nevertheless, although he understands and can speak Afrikaans, he refuses to do so. He prefers to use English and is offended if addressed in Dutch. He married a woman born in the Colony who speaks English and who is now, because of Old Tuys' plan for revenge, forced to sleep guarded and with her gun. Daphne used to play with the only other European children in the vicinity — the Coates. She had a native friend but he died after being attacked by a wild animal. The situation in the Colony is often compared to what is happening in England. It is explained that love affairs, like the ones in Africa, does not happen in Europe and 13-year old girls do not know much about sex or rapes.

It is not only a story about a community but, most importantly, about looking for a place for oneself, unfulfilled expectations and inability to belong somewhere. The author embeds many African words in the story to strengthen the local colour. It is the work which most strongly gives us a taste of colonial Africa. Daphne's search

for a place where she would belong ends up tragic. Neither Africa, nor Europe, gave her a chance to put down roots. It is similar to Spark's situation. In the story, the reader may find remarks which make them think of the natives as savages. They have animalistic qualities, it is stated that they are, as leopards, 'under control.' Nevertheless, the conclusion unifies the races with the statement "we haven't got *the savage in ourselves* under control" (241).

"Bang-bang You're Dead"

In this story, Spark echoes the Gothic motif of the double—two women share uncanny physical resemblance. This story was also inspired by events in Spark's life. Africa is presented as a dangerous place—not only because of wild fauna, but also because of the people who live there, not necessarily the natives. The tribulations between the whites result in the biggest number of victims. The protagonist, Sybil, mentions at one point that she had no problem with the black, only with the whites (68). Shooting affairs were quite common in the Colony and all the people Sybil was close to are now dead. They were all white Europeans who treated natives as servants although the whites were in minority. Also during watching a film presenting Sybil's life in Africa one of the guests is enchanted by "those adorable shiny natives all over the place" (53), as if they were a landmark or a tourist attraction.

"The Curtain Blown by the Breeze"

As Aly summarises it: "The story is set in a remote part of the Southern African Colony and we are shown how the alien environment puts pressures on the characters that result from the tension between the natives and the whites as well as between the Africans and the British" ("African Short Stories" 4). The main protagonist's husband is sent to prison for shooting a young native who was peeping through a window when his wife, Sonji, was breast-feeding their baby. While he is in prison, his wife discovers the wealth her father left and changes her life in Africa—starting from redecorating her home (to make it more Europeanised), through changing her social circle and her name from Sonji to Sonia, to becoming involved with other man. When the husband is released, he kills his wife and her lover and this time meets much severer punishment—one may wander—is it because it is his second offence or because this time he killed white people. "As in many of the African stories, the culture of violence seems to be a part and parcel of life in the Colony" (Aly "African Short Stories" 5).

In this story, a strong division is stressed not only between the natives and the whites, but also within the whites—the wealthy and the poor. Sonia would not have an access to a higher social group, since she was thought to have some coloured blood, if it was not for her wealth. The protagonist, due to all the changes, feels she "made a

corner of civilization” for herself. A native is referred to, at one occasion, as “a blerry nig” and a servant in Sonia’s house has “huge ape-like hands,” which again ascribes animalistic qualities to the ones treated as minority by an actual minority group. This all stresses the division and different possibilities and opportunities of the two races. It also depicts how one can change and what one can do in order to fit into a community. In this story, yet again, a white person proves to be the most violent.

The analysis of the African short stories cycle provides us with numerous areas of further research and stresses motifs which were particularly interesting for Spark. Apart from “The Seraph and the Zambesi,” all the protagonists are women, often shown as ones struggling to find a place for themselves. Spark frequently presents the whites as conceited and prone to violence. They are the minority but they often feel and act as superior human beings treating the natives with disrespect. The author presents the divisions between the whites and the natives and draws heavily from her own experience—of a white woman living in Africa. She often depicts women who take charge of their own destiny, such as Mrs Cloote or Sonia; but, at the same time, shows their failure and often tragic ends, as it happens with Daphne.

Spark easily moves through settings, African and English, which is especially visible in “The Go-Away Bird” and “Bang-Bang You’re Dead”. In the latter story “we see violence as a principal factor of life in the Colony. There are tensions not only between the white and the coloured but, especially in “The Go-Away Bird” (as in “The Curtain Blown by the Breeze”) between the English and the Dutch” (Aly “African Short Stories” 5). Martin McQuillan notices that:

Spark’s writing on Africa, unlike the rest of her fiction, is marked by the number of murders that take place in the stories, notably of white women. The violence done against them by white men brings questions of the role of white women in the colonies sharply into focus. Many of the women that inhabit Spark’s short stories set in Africa, demonstrate a diastase for any ideological commitment to colonial culture. They are women who return continually to the question of their own conflictual negotiations with, and attempts to transgress, the confines of strongly defined, indeed often menacingly policed, roles available to white women in the colonies. (118)

The country as seen through the narrators eyes is perceived as savage and inhospitable (Aly “Exile” 103) with numerous threats of various natures. But, unequivocally, the biggest threat lies within the human being, regardless of colour or origin.

Spark’s characters suffer because of their alienation, they are outcasts, not

only as the minority of the whites in Africa, something the author experienced first-hand, but also they are unable to fit anywhere within the society. They are trying hard to find a place for themselves, but they are failing. They are unable to assimilate into a new culture because they cannot find their true self. The stories are not devoid of humorous elements, witty comments and remarks. Nevertheless, the reader may discover a gloomy picture of unhappy life of people who do not belong anywhere—a feeling that, for a long time, was not strange to Spark.

Note

1. The source is “Dame Muriel Spark” (*The Telegraph* 17 Apr. 2006: n. pag. *Telegraph.co.uk*. 17 Apr. 2006. Web. 15 June 2012.)

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