The African Short Stories of Muriel Spark
by Abdel-Moneim Aly

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SCOPE OF TOPIC
Muriel Spark has written scores of short stories but she started them with a story on an African theme. Six of her short stories are about Africa and tackle themes that she dealt with in her later novels. This Bookmark examines these stories and aims:

(i) to show how Spark exploited the African settings.
(ii) to indicate that the short stories carry the embryos of her later fiction
(iii) to communicate some of the pleasure that any reader would find in them.

STORIES TO READ:
“The Seraph and the Zambesi” (1951)
“The Pawnbroker’s Wife” (1953)
“The Portobello Road” (1953)
“The Go-Away Bird” (1958)
“Bang-bang You’re Dead” (1958)
“The Curtain Blown by the Breeze” (1961)
All to be found in:

NOTES
Muriel Spark (1918-  ), is a Scottish-born writer, of Jewish-English descent. This mixed ancestry and her early residence in Edinburgh were a vital shaping influence on her life and career. She attended James Gillespie’s School for Girls and soon after leaving school, her exile from Scotland began. She travelled to South Africa and spent several years in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), where she married Sydney Oswald Spark in 1938. The marriage was dissolved and she returned to England in 1944 to work in the Foreign Office on anti-Nazi propaganda. Her novels are wryly satiric commentaries on modern life observed in various locales; they are coloured by her Roman Catholic faith (she converted to Catholicism in 1954) and the question of good and evil is a preoccupation found in many of her works.

Spark’s African experience gave her the opportunity to become a writer. Her stay in the British colony provided her with valuable material that she made use of in the stories she wrote about Africa and the colonial era there.
In the first of her African stories, “The Seraph and the Zambesi”, Spark strikes a bizarre note, with a protagonist of indeterminate age, somewhere between one hundred and fifty and forty-two years old and the strange manifestation of a Seraph. The plot centres on an apparently supernatural event which interrupts and changes the course of the ordinary story that seemed to be emerging.

The use of the strange and the supernatural is almost a hallmark of Spark’s work. Strange events occur in several of the other African stories and, at greater length in a number of her novels. The second story, “The Pawnbroker’s Wife” is a good example of the use of quite a different aspect of the bizarre; there is no supernatural intervention but Mrs Jan Cloote and her family appear to live on two planes at once - in the physical world and at the same time in an extraordinary imaginary world which everyone else is expected to believe in.

Spark is particularly interested in narration and a number of her stories follow a precedent set by Joseph Conrad (1857-1924). These are the ones told, not by an omniscient narrator, but rather by one who is involved in some way. In “The Seraph and the Zambesi” the narrator, who appears to be a woman, takes little part in the action but she knows the principal character and is present throughout as an interested observer. It is typical of the uncertainties in this particular story that Spark does not clearly establish the narrator’s gender.

There is a somewhat similar narrator in “The Pawnbroker’s Wife”, slightly more involved in that she asserts that the compass which figures in the story once belonged to her; as she tells this only to the reader, however, her part in the story remains that of the interested observer.

Samuel Cramer from “The Seraph and the Zambesi” is the only male protagonist in the six African stories. He is not a colonial settler in the usual sense, having apparently spent a large part of the nineteenth century in France; in this story we find him running a garage and petrol station and engaging in amateur dramatics in a Nativity play which he himself has written and in which he intends to play the part of a Seraph.

From what we see of him he is arrogant and bullying. He treats the native population roughly and is certainly not morally fit to play the part of the Seraph.

The only other significant character is the Seraph, a supernatural character who conforms to the biblical picture given in chapter 6 of Isaiah. It is perhaps useful to know that “Seraph” means “Burner”, for it helps to clarify the events in the story.

Physically, the scene is set close to the Victoria Falls on the Zambesi River; it is around Christmas time. The story establishes the African background in various ways but the most dominant aspect of the incident which comprises the story is the stifling heat. This leads us on to an awareness of the even more intense heat emanating from the Seraph and finally to the conflagration which destroys Cramer’s garage in which the Nativity play was to be performed.

We are perhaps meant to assume that the fire which burns the garage down cleanses if from the sin of sacrilege which had been about to occur there through Cramer’s glorification of himself in the Nativity play. Certainly, the Seraph appears to think that he has done his job, for once the fire begins he leaves the scene.

This story is probably the least successful of the African stories, for not only does it prove difficult to suspend our disbelief enough to accept Cramer as a real character but also it appears to demand from the reader an acquaintance with matters outside the story. Though the narrator assures us that we need not know about Cramer’s previous life, or about his association with the Fanfarlo, or the connection with Baudelaire, we are left with far too many uncertainties.

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The later stories are handled more confidently. “The Seraph and the Zambesi” and “The Pawnbroker's Wife”, are the shortest of the African stories and Spark did not give herself space to develop the characters and the settings. The stories which follow are longer, are more involved in the colonial aspects of African life and the characters are better developed.

“The Portobello Road” and “The Curtain Blown by the Breeze”:

Spark uses a variant technique in both “The Portobello Road” and “The Curtain Blown by the Breeze”. The two stories are told by first person narrators who are the protagonists and deeply involved in the plots. They are more intelligent and responsible than the protagonists of the other stories.

In “The Portobello Road”, the authorial voice, has a double persona represented in the double role of Needle, first as the protagonist and secondly as the ghostly narrator. The use of the supernatural element in the story helps to emphasise the strangeness of George’s behaviour and double crime. The story begins with a flashback to an episode from Needle's childhood, in which she acquires her nickname, which refers to the proverbial “Needle in a haystack” and which, simultaneously foreshadows the end of the story.

The opening of the story is set in Scotland. When the action moves to Africa, we are faced once more with the unsettled, troubled life of exile which is always suggested by Spark's presentation of an African setting. Of the four childhood friends, three - Needle, Skinny and George - meet up in Africa and only Kathleen remains behind. It is in Africa that George goes off the rails and marries a coloured woman not for love or stability but to give him physical and sexual comfort. The fact that he confides this as a secret to Needle seals her fate; for later, back in England, having deserted his African wife, George proposes to Kathleen. At this point, Needle is unwilling to keep the secret from her friend and to allow Kathleen to become involved in a bigamous marriage.

As George is determined to marry Kathleen, he decides to kill Needle and her murder thus becomes the centre of events in the story. It is well prepared for from the start. The needle in the haystack which pricked Needle in the opening episode prepares us for the death of Needle which also takes place in a haystack as George kills her by stuffing hay into her mouth until she is suffocated.

After her death, however, Needle’s ghost decides that there are still a number of odd things she must do and she gives us an account of her life after her death until the moment when, one Saturday morning as she wanders down the Portobello Road, she encounters George, now married to Kathleen. “Hello, George!” says her ghost to her murderer and now, for several weeks in succession, the ghostly Needle sets out to haunt George, who becomes obsessed with the Portobello Road, until he is confined to a “nursing home”, clearly turned mad by his guilt. Whilst he is in this state, neither Kathleen nor the police are willing to believe his confessions of bigamy and murder.

Like “The Portobello Road”; “The Curtain Blown by the Breeze” is told by a first person female narrator who is deeply involved in the plot. She is more intelligent and better educated than the protagonist and has followed her brother to Africa, where they are involved in research on tropical diseases.

Sonia der Merwe is the protagonist who longs to change her way of life after the long absence of her husband, Jannie, in prison for killing a coloured boy who had peeped through the de Merwe’s living room curtain while Sonia was breastfeeding her baby.

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.
As in many of the African stories, the culture of violence seems to be a part and parcel of life in the Colony and here it erupts tragically when Jannie, released from jail, finds that Sonia is having an affair with one of the English medical staff.

Just as in “The Portobello Road” needle and haystack have symbolic significance, so in this story the “curtain blown by the breeze” which both conceals and reveals, in a significant symbol to the narrator and her reflections upon it lead to her abandoning her African life by returning to England.

“The Go-Away Bird” and “Bang-bang You're Dead”:

These are the only two of the African stories with third person, uninvolved, omniscient narrators. Here, the narrators remain apart, detached, self-possessed and very conscious of the underlying significance in the action.

The two stories directly address the relationship between England and the Colony and move easily between the two settings. As in all Spark's African stories, the settings are involved in the action from the start and the African settings involve a malignant threat apparent in the elements of its rivers, bushes, rains and heat, all of which intensify the white settlers’ suffering.

In both stories, Spark introduces us to idiosyncratic characters in idiosyncratic situations. From the start, Spark pits the main characters against one another. Chakata Patterson, an archetypal colonialist, in “The Go-Away Bird”, has settled in Southern Rhodesia and has adopted an African name. Barry Weston, in “Bang-bang You're Dead” lives in a fantasy world, believing himself to be a great poet and a great lover.

From the very beginning of “The Go-Away Bird”, the bird’s cries “go-away, go-away” vocalise the innermost desire of Daphne, the protagonist child of a Dutch father and an English mother. She wants exactly that - to go away and leave Africa for what she thinks of as a more civilized country, such as England. Though the bird’s calls are always present, no one else hears them and to Daphne they seem to be advice to her alone.

Again, we see violence as a principal factor of life in the Colony. There are tensions not only between white and coloured but, especially in “The Go-Away Bird”, (as in “The Curtain Blown by the Breeze”) between the English and the Dutch. Mrs. Chakata always keeps a gun by her side and advises Daphne to carry one for self-defence.

All the more, Daphne sees the lourie or “go-away bird” as a supernatural agent of fate. It orders Daphne to leave the Colony when she fails to acclimatise to life in it or when she is in danger. For instance, when she is followed by Old Tuys, and just before he catches her unaware, she hears the bird’s call “go'way, go'way”. Even when she goes to England and leaves Africa behind, she cannot leave the bird behind. Its calls echo in her ears, especially when she is in distress or is being rejected by people around her. However, in the end she falls victim to the vicious feud between her uncle and Tuys.

This story becomes a diatribe against the inhospitable and evil feelings innate in the human soul. Daphne feels alienated in Africa and suffers from the same predicament, even when she goes to England. Though she thinks of England as home, she is unable to fit in there. Spark’s solution to this problem comes through the tragic death of her protagonist. The climax of the story and of Daphne's misery reaches its peak when she goes for a walk and behind the cries of the bird “Go-way’ she calls aloud, “God help me. Life is unbearable.” The echo of this prayer is savagely answered by a shot from Old Tuys, who pretends to mistake her for a deer. Many Afrikaan words such as “veldt”, “kopji”, “stoep”, “kraal”, and “dorp”, permeate the language of the story. Dutch and African names are adopted such as de Toit, Tuys and Chakata. This helps to aggravate the sense of alienation which overcomes the protagonists.
Whilst Daphne was in Africa, the main characters in "Bang-bang You’re Dead" came to the colony as adults. The action of the story is framed at beginning and end by a showing of film reels from Sybil’s time in Africa and the whole story moves forward in a succession of effectively contrasted scenes that follow each other with the flow of cinematic montage. The story contains three “time planes”: the flashbacks to Sybil’s childhood; the African experience and the present of the story. Of these, the African experience is the most complicated, for the films which would appear to be straightforwardly factual are a complete misrepresentation of Sybil’s life; furthermore, during her time in Africa she lived a double life - the superficial social life which everyone could see and the intense, intelligent personal life in which she hid all her thoughts from those around her.

At the end of the story violence erupts again with the deaths of Desiree, Sybil’s “double” and of David Carter.

**Conclusion:**
Spark draws on her knowledge of the heritage of the exotic short story writers in English. She shows the influence of writers like Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, Somerset Maugham and others. Like Conrad’s, her stories place heavy emphasis on death, human isolation, inadequacy of communication between people and on the bitterness of experience.

To some extent, the African stories, like many of her stories seem to be a rehearsal for the much wider range of artistic development in her novels for many of the themes and characters discussed in them are drawn upon in one or another of the novels which follow.

**Further reading:**
The following books will help you enlarge your knowledge of Muriel Spark’s work:

**CRITICISM:**

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The English Association
University of Leicester
University Road
Leicester LE1 7RH
UK

Tel: 0116 252 3982
Fax: 0116 252 2301
Email: engassoc@le.ac.uk

Potential authors are invited to contact the following at the address above:

Series Editor
Victor Hext

Shakespeare Bookmarks
Primary Bookmarks
Secondary Bookmarks
Kerri Corcoran-Martin
Louise Ellis-Barrett
Ian Brinton

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