

Boarding Houses and Bedsits in Muriel Spark's Writings

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ABSTRACT

Boarding houses and bedsits are crucial to the life and literary career of Muriel Spark. Temporary accommodation has provided her with source material and space to write in. This article examines both Spark's life experience in boarding houses, bedsits and rented rooms and her literary representations of these spaces. Through reading Spark's work alongside Foucault's theory of heterotopia, it investigates the transitory, precarious but also potentially transgressive nature of the boarding environment. This article argues that Spark's fiction reveals Spark's treatment of the estrangement and oppression endured by social outcasts. It also notes that these alternative living spaces are shown to be potentially liberating, as they provide opportunities for vulnerable groups to claim agency, asserting control over their precarious lives.

KEYWORDS

Muriel Spark; Boarding House; Bedsit; Foucault; Heterotopia; Gender; Race; Class

1 Introduction

According to the *OED*, "boarder" refers to "one who boards, or has his food, or food and lodging, at the house of another for compensation; one who lives in a boarding-house or with a family as one of its members, at a fixed rate". A boarding-house is "a house in which persons board" (*OED*). The earliest reference appears in 1728 in *Memoirs of a Royal Chaplain, 1729-1763, the Correspondence of E. Pyle with S. Kerrich* (1905), in which boarding-house refers to the communal living space kept by a landlady for many years. "Bed-sitting-room", according to the *OED*, means "a room or apartment serving both as a bedroom and as a sitting-room". As Alistair Cartwright's historical research into rented accommodation in post-war London shows, the term bedsit suggests "a relatively self-contained form of accommodation, often with a sink or even a modest kitchen *en suite*" (24). Both boarding houses and bed-sitting rooms are popular housing options in mid-century Britain. Cartwright observes that "private renting remained the single largest tenure category in Britain until the mid to late 1950s" (30).

Narratives set in British boarding houses have received some critical attention in recent years. Emily Cuming and Julieann Veronica Ulin have addressed the link between boarding houses, class, and gender, particularly the cohabitation of strangers in such temporary lodgings (Cumming 77, Ulin 385-411), and Terri Mullholland and Ruchi Mundeja have explored "women's changing social roles" reflected by women's accommodation in the interwar period (Mullholland 1, Mundeja 87-119). Despite these studies, British women's literature set in boarding houses and bedsits, particularly in the post-war period, remains an under-examined topic. Muriel Spark's writing set in boarding and lodging houses has received little sustained critical attention, although literary scholars such as Susannah Thompson and Paul Delany have written on Spark's bedsit life and

writing, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s (Thompson 44-63, Delany 63-73). Their research mainly focuses on Spark's own experience and her portrayal of spinsters in these settings, rather than her fictional representation of the encounters with racial and social others.

To deepen our understanding of Spark's understanding of boarding house and bedsit life, then, firstly, this article examines Spark's own life experience in boarding houses, bedsits and rented rooms and her literary representations of these spaces in the same period. Secondly, it looks at boarding houses and bedsits in Spark's fiction as arenas for representing encounters with socially marginalised groups, such as bachelors, migrant workers, working women, colonial returnees, and foreign refugees in post-war London. Reading Spark's novels alongside Foucault's theory of heterotopia, this article explores Spark's literary representation of dislocation, displacement, and multicultural and multiracial encounters in the blitzed city as part of a marginal but important form of collective character-led fiction.

2 Spark, Boarding Houses and Bedsits

Boarding houses and bedsits are crucial to the life and career of Spark. She was, as she said, "a cuckoo in other people's nests" and "a go-away bird" ready to take flight (*The Biography* 433). Spark was "born in a small rented flat at 160 Bruntsfield Place, in the Morningside district of Edinburgh" (*The Biography* 1). Later, as a mother and daughter, she experienced a sense of dislocation. According to her biographer Martin Stannard, her 1962 essay "Edinburgh-born" was "written after her son had kicked her out of the family flat, and she had moved to the North British Hotel, to a 'room meant for strangers' while awaiting her father's death" ("The Crooked Ghost" 1530). Spark's semi-detachment from her family and her city of birth is presented through the surname of the Judas-like character Sandy Stranger in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), Spark's only novel set in Edinburgh.

Boarding houses and bedsits were alternative domestic spaces for single, low-wage working women like Spark, particularly in colonial Africa and post-war London. During her stay in Africa, Spark lived in boarding houses in what was then Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, and in bedsits in Cape Town (*Curriculum Vitae* 34, 130). Stannard comments that Spark was like the heroine in her story "The Pawnbroker's Wife", who languished in "a lodging house at Sea Point, Cape of Good Hope" (*The Biography* 58). When Spark returned from Africa, her London bedsit life began. She was "established at 82 Lancaster Gate, the Helena Club, which was founded for 'Ladies from Good Families of Modest Means who are Obligated to Pursue an Occupation in London'" (*Curriculum Vitae* 143). The Helena Club was the model for the "May of Teck Club" in her novel *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963). From 1949 to 1954, when Spark worked as the editor of the *Poetry Review*, she stayed in many boarding houses and bedsitting rooms in Kensington, including "a flat at 1 Vicarage Gate, Kensington", "a fourth-floor room" at 8 Sussex Mansions, "a tiny, sparsely furnished room" at 1 Queen's Gate Terrace, and "a smaller, cheaper room" at Sussex Mansions (*The Biography* 98, 113, 134, 137, 139, 150).

In 1955, when Spark was working on her first novel, *The Comforters*, she rented the attic of Tiny Lazzari's house at 13 Baldwin Crescent, Camberwell, South London and stayed there for ten years. This experience proved valuable to Spark, as she recalls the meagre furnishings of a single bed, a gas ring and a sink or washbasin in these bedsitting rooms, and the simple decorations over curtains, bedcovers and floorboards in her 1998 essay "Bed-sits I Have Known" ("Bed-sits" 26-7). It is very likely that the landlady Milly Sanders, a talkative and independent Irish widow, in *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988) is based on the "protective, motherly, and sympathetic" Tiny (*The Biography* 172). She protected Spark from intruders and travelled to Paris with her ("Bed-sits" 27). Spark "loved Tiny

Lazzari dearly as a kind of surrogate mother and as her first 'dragon' gatekeeper" (Stannard, "Spark"). Tiny's room provides affordable accommodation, solitude and working space for an emerging female writer and girl of slender means. As Spark comments, "hers had been the best bed-sitter any hard-up working author could wish for" ("Bed-sits" 27). Later, Spark set her numerous stories and novels in bedsits, recreating the experiences of her own and those of people she met in rented accommodation.

3 Alienation and Displacement: Living in Rented Accommodation

Much contemporary British literature, including Harold Pinter's play *The Room* (1957), and the novels *The L-Shaped Room* (1960) and *The Boarding-House* (1965) by Lynne Reid Banks and William Trevor respectively, uses boarding houses or bedsits as settings for explorations of the estrangement and alienation faced by social outcasts, such as Africans, foreign refugees, and women in post-war London. In Spark's fiction, boarding houses are the choice of accommodation in colonial Africa in "The Pawnbroker's Wife" and "Bang-Bang You're Dead"; home for the Scottish travelling worker Dougal Douglas in the London suburb in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960); and halfway houses for the socially marginalised groups in London, including debutantes like Daphne Du Doit in "The Go-Away Bird"; war widows like Mrs Hawkins in *A Far Cry from Kensington*; girls of slender means in *The Girls of Slender Means*, a group of bachelors in *The Bachelors*, as well as foreign refugees and immigrants like Wanda Podolak in *A Far Cry from Kensington* and Lina Pancev in *Territorial Rights* (1979). Bedsitting rooms allow the protagonist-writer and Catholic convert Caroline Rose in *The Comforters* (1957) and Fleur Talbot in *Loitering with Intent* (1981) to have a single room at an affordable rent in order to write and live without family ties in mid-century London.

Spark presents the living conditions of migrant workers, women, and refugees who reside in boarding and lodging houses to explore the moral situation in 1950s and 1960s London. In her fourth novel, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, Spark deals with the industrialised and materialistic society of this neighbourhood. The Scottish bachelor Dougal Douglas, who had formerly taken the part of Rizzio in a play about Mary, Queen of Scots at the University of Edinburgh, takes up three different jobs in Peckham: as an arts man who conducts human research into the industrial life of Peckham at two competing textile firms, and as a ghost-writer who pens a "crooked" autobiography for a retired actress and singer Miss Cheeseman, full of clichés and jargon. Dougal's vitality and versatility pose some challenges to the social norms of the insular and self-contained community he inhabits.

Dougal lodges at the boarding house of Miss Belle Frierne, a spinster "who had known all Peckham in her youth" and had lived in this house all her life (*The Ballad* 516). With his new office job at Mr Druce's firm, Dougal is considered by Peckham residents as an ideal tenant for Miss Frierne's house. However, his twisted shoulder and two small lumps on his head make him look like a devilish misfit. Echoing Dougal's deformity, Miss Frierne's house is a "crooked" house, "a labyrinth" and a Gothic place overshadowed by death (Gorak 36). As Dougal "stood in Miss Frierne's wood-panelled entrance hall, holding on and looking around him", this place seems like a puzzle to him (*The Ballad* 523). This hall "which was lined with wood like a coffin" foreshadows the upcoming death of Miss Merle Coverdale, the manager of the typewriting department in Mr Druce's firm, as her visit to Dougal in his room gets entangled in the narratives about her sordid six-year sexual affair with her employer Mr Druce and Dougal's connection with the police. Mr Druce is suspicious of Merle's affair with Dougal and is afraid of Dougal's report of his business misdeeds to the Board and the police. Out of despair, Druce visits his rage upon his social inferior Merle by stabbing the corkscrew into Merle's long neck nine times and killing her at her flat, which he had bought for her in exchange for sex. Mr Druce's murder of Merle suggests that he is more afraid of

the loss of his position and the secular power of the police than the guilt of committing murder. The narrative of this incident is juxtaposed with Miss Frierne's death from a stroke at her boarding house, a "coffin" like place that ironically saves her the expenditure of a funeral (*The Ballad* 610). Miss Frierne's boarding house forms a contrast to the offices with glass partitions in the firm of Meadows, Meade & Grindley. Spark uses the setting of a glass house as a side joke, echoing the idiomatic caution that "people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones", and hinting at the sin and hypocrisy of her morally flawed characters.

Norman Page remarks on Dougal's role as a demonic and chameleon-like figure who unsettles the lives of others to serve his own advancement (29). In contrast, Jan Gorak argues that Dougal is "not so much an organic, internally consistent character as a device for prising open heterotopic space" (30). According to the third principle of Foucault's definition of heterotopia: "The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 6). Peckham is a heterotopic space, since it juxtaposes historic places like cemetery, underground tunnel and Miss Frierne's house with modern places such as textile firms, pubs and Findlater's Ballroom. Joyce Willis, the wife of Richard Willis, managing director of Mr Druce's rival firm, comments sarcastically and with racist prejudice on the peculiarity and reclusiveness of Peckham from the outsider's perspective: "There are simply no people in the place. Our friends always get lost finding the way here; they drive round for hours. And there are blacks at the other end of the Avenue. [...] it's so silly" (*The Ballad* 603). Her remark reveals that Peckham is a heterotopic space, "a placeless place" which could not be easily found by newcomers (Foucault 4). The mixture of people with different class and racial backgrounds and of newcomers and local residents in Peckham echoes the transitory, precarious but also potentially transgressive nature of the boarding environment. The bisexual and fun-seeking Mr Druce also invites Dougal to restaurants in Soho rather than local pubs for "a chat", possibly a hidden sexual affair (*The Ballad* 577). The mirror on Dougal's dressing-table reflects the influence of Peckham on his conduct: "Already it seemed that Peckham brought out something in him that Earls Court had overlooked" (*The Ballad* 524). As Dougal comments: "Peckham must have a moral character of its own" (*The Ballad* 562). These instances signal the difference in social environment between Peckham and other parts of London.

The cupboard in Dougal's room serves as a device of disguise adopted by Peckham residents. Ironically, the cupboard is now used as a shelter by the refrigerator engineer Humphrey Place to have sex with his seventeen-year-old girlfriend Dixie without being detected by Miss Frierne. Through having Dougal mimicking the noise made by Humphrey's amoral behaviour, Spark satirises the dissolute life of Peckham residents in the Americanised post-war society. Other male tenants have a habit of making their own beds on Saturday mornings and on Sundays, indicating their undetected sexual affairs. These practices are ironically welcomed by Miss Frierne: "Today's bed was a landlady's delight. Full marks in your end-of-term report!" (*The Ballad* 523) Miss Frierne's boarding house thus resembles a brothel or a house of ill repute with herself as madam rather than landlady.

The courtyard of Miss Frierne's house consists of a neat long lawn, and "the row of gardens on the near side, with their borders and sometimes a trellis bower" (*The Ballad* 523). This well-maintained courtyard and the Victorian bedstead that are central to Victorian domestic ideology make Miss Frierne's house look old-fashioned. Its courtyard forms a sharp contrast to "the back gardens belonging to the opposite street of houses", which "were neglected, overgrown and packed with junk and sheds for motor-bicycles" (*The Ballad* 523). The presence of motor-bicycles in her neighbourhood suggests that Miss Frierne's Victorian house does not fit into the Americanised post-war world. This world, according to Stannard, consists of "a divorced GI bride, glass fights, new white goods (refrigerators, spin-dryers), tyre slashing, rock-and-roll and trad jazz, coffee bars, short

skirts, bright lipstick, [and] 'lusty, dancing, fighting youth' " ("The Crooked Ghost" 1535).

Like the protagonist-spinster Miss Emily Grierson who is obsessed with the past "stored" in her house in William Faulkner's 1930 story "A Rose for Emily", Miss Frierne is constrained by her memory of the past and is oblivious to the on-going development of Peckham. Her courting days start and end with her brief "shameful" encounter with a Gordon Highlander and an exhibitionist at the age of twenty-seven (*The Ballad* 537). Miss Frierne's sole memory of this incident indicates her seclusion from the community outside her house. Due to her obstinate and traditional perception of boyhood, she mistakes the thirteen-year-old Leslie Crewe for a good boy who only wants to run errands for Dougal and earn some extra money to help his mother. She innocently gives a doughnut to Leslie, the accomplice of the burglar and a member of the youthful tearaways, who repays her kindness with a crime. Neither does Miss Frierne enjoy the company of her family. Her brother who had left home in 1919 for Lyons, was very likely to be a British volunteer who fought on the Western Front in France against the German Empire during WWI (*The Ballad* 516). Miss Frierne's refusal to accommodate her brother forms an ironic contrast to her hospitality for Dougal, a National Service reject and Leslie, who goes with the Rover Scouts on Sundays. Miss Frierne still refuses to claim her brother as her only relative who died in a car accident, due to the possible damage to her reputation and her business of running the boarding house in Peckham (*The Ballad* 607). Her ruthless behaviour signifies a betrayal of her brother's heroic spirit in this materialistic society. Living as an alcoholic spinster, Miss Frierne dies alone of a stroke. Her death symbolises the end of the boarding house narrative and the impossibility of cohabitation with outsiders in Peckham.

Spark is also preoccupied with the living conditions of single men and women, who live outside conventional family structures. Her fifth novel, *The Bachelors* (1960), opens with a description of "houses containing single apartments from Hampstead Heath to Greenwich Park, and from Wanstead Flats to Putney Heath; but especially in Hampstead, especially in Kensington" (*Bachelors* 321). These single apartments are home to some bachelors, including Ronald Bridges, the epileptic graphologist and Catholic truth-teller; Matthew Finch, the correspondent of the *Irish Echo* and thirty-two-year-old Catholic who is afflicted by sex and constrained by family duty; Martin Bowles, the barrister who lives with his mother and her housekeeper Carrie and appropriates Isobel Billows' money like a "financial wizard" (*Bachelors* 477); Walter Prett, the bad-tempered middle-aged art critic, sponger, and drunk; Ewart Thornton, an ill-qualified schoolmaster and spiritualist; Francis Eccles, the unemployed Anglo-Catholic bachelor who lives in a basement; Tim Raymond, a twenty-three-year-old man controlled by his aunt, Marlene Cooper, the investor of the spiritualist groups; and Patrick Seton, the fake spiritualist medium and blackmailer.

These bachelors are famous for their dismissal of marriage. In a conversation between Ronald and Matthew, marriage is dismissed as neither an official religious doctrine nor a legal obligation: " 'It isn't official doctrine', Ronald said. 'There's no moral law against being simply a bachelor. Don't be so excessive' " (*Bachelors* 382). Despite Ronald's role as a truth-teller in this novel, he refuses to acknowledge his psychological egoism. Ronald ends his relationship with his girlfriend Hildegard Krall to avoid being too reliant on her and "overwhelmed by her in the years to come" (*Bachelors* 331). Ronald thinks that Hildegard tells "patronising lies" with "an indulgent and motherly tone of voice" and expresses his contempt for her physical and intellectual superiority (*Bachelors* 331). In her story, "A Member of the Family", Spark exposes how Richard Seeton, a bachelor and schoolteacher, shrinks from marriage by inviting all his girlfriends to attend weekly gatherings at his mother's house, as if "they've become members of the family" (*Collected Stories* 209). For these bachelors, single apartments are heterotopias.

Spark's bachelors also act with murderous motives to avoid the responsibilities of fatherhood. Patrick attempts to murder his pregnant girlfriend and diabetic Alice Dawes by taking her to a remote chalet in Austria and depriving her of insulin or giving her an overdose; Doctor Lyte killed his

lover Gloria after he performed abortions; and Walter Prett had run away from his pregnant lover. As Allan Massie remarks on the motive behind these murderous schemes: "murder denies the existence of others; fatherhood confesses it" (125). These bachelors' refusal of fatherhood is demonstrated by their practice of birth control.

This view is reiterated by the protagonist Lise in *The Driver's Seat* (1970). Lise's name echoes the word "lease", insofar as Lise imagines herself to be the owner of her destiny, but only has her life on lease from a higher power. As the narrator remarks on Lise's rented flat: "the tenants have long leases", implying Lise's lack of ownership of her residence (*The Driver's Seat* 246). Other spaces in this novel, including the Northern department stores in which Lise carefully picks up her new clothes for her upcoming trip to the South, the prejudiced and suffocating work environment at her office, the Pavilion where she dies, and the airport where she boards on her trip are all dangerous and heterotopic spaces for Lise. Spark builds up Lise as a marginalised character in these heterotopias to reveal the social norm and the patriarchal oppression of women.

Like Irish novelist William Trevor who portrays a group of social outcasts and petty criminals who plot against each other in *The Boarding-House* (1965), Spark presents her group of bachelors as criminals and schemers who disguise themselves as well-respected doctors, barristers, spiritual leaders, and poetry lovers, echoing Stevenson's portrayal of the conflicted character in *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). The absence of ethical, and legal regulations makes the boarding house a hotbed for criminal and sexual affairs. Spark exposes the fake spiritualist Father Socket and his apprentice Mike Garland's schemes to capitalise on the boarding house. They employ the widow Freda Flower to provide free accommodation for three trafficked women in her boarding house. These anonymous women, whose values are "more or less thrown in with the price of the ticket", are hired to entertain male filmgoers when they watch pornographic films, *The Truth about Nudism* and *Nature's Way* (*Bachelors* 448-9). In Father Socket and Mike's schemes of blackmailing the subjects for profits, they hire hotel staff to provide information about the subjects' personal lives through eavesdropping and observing them from "the back stairs of hotels and boarding houses" (*Bachelors* 448). As clairvoyants, they claim to use their mystic power to obtain inside knowledge of their subjects' secrets and to avoid legal sanctions. Spark exposes these bachelors' immorality in their illegal and commercial use of the boarding house.¹

Like the boarding house in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* and the single apartments in *The Bachelors*, the May of Teck Club in Spark's seventh novel, *The Girls of Slender Means*, offers a temporary solution to the cohabitation of girls from different social backgrounds in London. The Club has been adapted from a Victorian private residence and "resembled in its plan most of the women's hostels, noted for cheapness and tone, which had flourished since the emancipation of women had called for them" (*Girls* 144). Many tenants were employed as typists and secretaries in "the temporary Ministries" connected with WWII (*Girls* 137).

Housing female workers was a social issue from the late Victorian age when women entered the workplace. In 1910, Mary Higgs and Edward E. Hayward published a pamphlet titled "Where Shall She Live? The Homelessness of the Women Worker" for the Association for Women's Lodging-Homes in England to highlight the housing issues faced by low-paid women workers. Emily Gee responds to this question by studying the women's lodgings that "took the model of the middle-class Victorian home" and hostels that house working woman in Late Victorian and Edwardian London (107). The May of Teck Club is a fictional example of the adapted hostel for working women

1 Likewise, in both Spark's 1958 story "The Pawnbroker's Wife" and James Joyce's 1914 story "The Boarding House", rented accommodation features as a profit-making space where the landlady trades her own daughter for profits and uses their sexual affair with the tenant as a bargaining chip for their marriage (Joyce 219). Both Joyce and Spark use the location of the boarding house to satirise the misogyny and trafficking of women in Dublin and Cape Town.

in London with “the Rules of Constitution” drawn up during the Edwardian era (*Girls* 130).

Girls has received the most critical attention in terms of its use of spatial settings and its portrayal of communal life. Paula Michelle Derdiger observes the demand for “the subordination of character” in this boarding house (77); Jack Arden notes the “Club’s suggestion of an annihilation of individuality” (44); and Kelly M. Rich argues that the Club functions as “a literary test case for the warfare-to-welfare state” (1189). Nina Auerbach notes the absorption of the “rapacity of history” and “the resonance of myth” in Spark’s communities of women (166).

Girls opens with detailed physical descriptions of the fractured building of the Club, evoking national dislocation in the aftermath of war. The Club is situated among a row of bombed buildings, and “stood obliquely opposite the site of the [Albert] Memorial” – a memorial that shows “Prince Albert holding the catalogue of the Great Exhibition, held in Hyde Park in 1851” (*Girls* 129).² It witnesses the decline of Kensington from the venue of international cultural events and symbol of the Victorian age to ruins and remnants of a vanishing era. The Club is a refuge for girls of slender means among the “houses like giant teeth in which decay had been drilled out, leaving only the cavity” (*Girls* 129). The interior structures of these destroyed buildings – wallpaper, “a lavatory chain” and “the staircases” – are visible to passers-by, indicating the blurred boundary between domestic life and the war going on outside (*Girls* 129).

For Spark’s girls, the Club’s ghostly existence as a surviving architecture among the ruins in 1945 suggests that it is, in Foucault’s term, “a heterotopian place”, or “a placeless place”. Its function is like that of the mirror, as Foucault puts it:

It makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there (4).

Like Elsa’s ambiguously non-existent apartment in *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973), the Club is real, due to its connections with Kensington Gardens and its women tenants, and unreal, since it has collapsed in 1945 and is non-existent from the vantage point of 1963, the time of writing of the novel (Rich 1186-87). The tottering building of the Club functions like the mirror that reflects the lack of living space and the constant threat of danger to life endured by civilians on the Home Front.

As a social organisation, the Club is structured hierarchically. The top floor is occupied by five attractive girls like Jane Wright, Selina Redwood, and Anne Baberton. The third floor is inhabited by Joanna Childe, Gregg Macgregor, and Pauline Fox and “most of the celibates, the old maids of settled character and various ages” (*Girls* 146). The second floor provides accommodation for spinsters like Collie Coleman and Jarvie Jarman, as well as “young women in transit, or temporary members looking for flats and bed-sitting rooms” (*Girls* 146). The youngest members, “girls between the ages of eighteen and twenty” who hold romantic fantasies towards soldiers with wartime experience, like “the air heroes of the Normandy landing” live on the first floor (*Girls* 145).

The Club’s unstable infrastructure suggests that everyday life in this boarding house is a survival test. The Club is adapted by “the Committee of Management” from a spacious Victorian house into a female hostel to maximise its capacity for board and lodging and to capitalise on women’s living space. The enormous ballroom on the first floor is replaced by a huge dormitory and “was curtained off into numerous cubicles” (*Girls* 145). The austere style of the Club, symbolised by the mud-coloured wallpaper in the drawing room is similar to Lise’s economical one-room flat in *The Driver’s*

2 Introduction of ‘The Albert Memorial’, on the website of ‘The Royal Parks’ <<https://www.royalparks.org.uk/parks/kensington-gardens/things-to-see-and-do/memorials-fountains-and-statues/the-albert-memorial>> [accessed 21 March 2023].

Seat, where all furniture is stackable and disappears into coffin-like pinewood interiors (*The Driver's Seat* 246). The regular window climb test in the Club indicates the disciplinary power that regulates its women lodgers' consumption of food and use of other resources: "It was known all through the club that thirty-six and a quarter inches was the maximum for hips that could squeeze themselves through it" (*Girls* 222). This regulation reflects working women's restrictive diet under the British rationing policy during WWII (*Girls* 177). As Elspeth King and Maggie Andrews note, "the introduction in 1940 of food rationing, followed by clothing in June 1941 and the removal of the small petrol ration for private motoring in March 1942 significantly extended the war into the domestic sphere, the 'Home Front'" (King and Andrews 185). In this context, the slender body of the most attractive tenant, Selina Redwood, is regarded by her lover, the aspiring writer and American intelligence worker, Nicholas Farrington as a virtue. Selina's economically furnished body, for Nicholas, is the embodiment of the "lovely attributes of dispossession and poverty" (*Girls* 198). Nicholas's aesthetic conception of poverty is incomprehensible to Selina, who only sustains this relationship to satisfy her selfish greed for rationed commodities that are obtainable by Nicholas, such as "a packet of hair-grips which had just then disappeared from the shops for a few weeks" (*Girls* 198). Selina's rescue of Anne's "Schiaparelli taffeta evening dress", whose coat-hanger dangled like "a headless neck and shoulders" in the hotel fire indicates her internalisation of the instructions of "Two Sentences" (*Girls* 151, 224, 163). This action fulfils Selina's much-desired private ownership of a shared property, evoking a mockery of the Club as a communitarian society built upon the girls' sharing of resources.³

On the one hand, the Club symbolises a female-dominated accommodation, where the girls' undernourished bodies, their saving efforts and sharing of the Schiaparelli dress are viewed as their contribution to the war effort. On the other hand, the Club is "a microcosmic ideal society" in the eyes of a sometimes anarchist Nicholas and Jane, or the Welfare State rebuilt under the supervision of the 1942 Beveridge Report in Britain (*Girls* 175). After the Club collapsed, "it looked now like one of the familiar ruins of the neighbourhood, as if it had been shattered years ago by a bomb-attack, or months ago by a guided missile" (*Girls* 233). Joanna's father and Nicholas revisit the ruins for reminiscence and introspection, but Joanna's father comments: "there's really nothing to see" (*Girls* 223-4). As Rich observes, "Joanna's father offers a commentary on Britain's wartime self-mythologizing, and the transformation of the Second World War into Britain's 'People's War'" (1200). The collapse of the Club reveals the impossibility of the peaceful cohabitation of women workers in post-war London.

Like the Club in *Girls*, *A Far Cry from Kensington* features another London bedsitter with its cast of tenants at 14 Church End Villas in South Kensington. Tenants include the landlady Milly Sanders who lives on the ground floor; the Carlins, the Polish refugee Wanda Podolak, and a district nurse Kate Parker on the first floor; the war-widow Nancy Hawkins, the jobseeker Isobel Lederer, and the medical student William Todd on the top floor. The story is narrated by Nancy Hawkins from the first-person perspective and the spatial settings move from Milly's bedsitter to Mrs Hawkins's offices at the publishing houses. These two spaces are linked by the schemes of Hector Bartlett, a terrible and parasitical writer nicknamed by Mrs Hawkins as "pisseur de copie". Bartlett conspires to revenge himself upon her by manipulating her housemate Wanda to inflict a curse through operating a small black box with "a row of different coloured lights and a few knobs" in it (*Far Cry* 76). The box is borrowed by Hector from one of Mrs Hawkins's superstitious employers Ian Tooley, who claims that the box has the power of healing.

3 Hilary Mantel's novel *An Experiment in Love* describes a similar scene: Karina "was holding something over her arm; it was a strange draping softness, something limp and slaughtered. My hand crept out to it: Lynette's fox fur. In this light, you could not see its colours; it could have been the corpse of a dog" (Mantel 244-5).

Like Patrick Seton in *The Bachelors* and Jane in *Girls*, Hector's trademark is forgery, as he fabricates documents, tells lies and invents stories about his acquaintances. Hector also publishes falsified biographical writings at his own expense on the imprisoned publisher Martin York, his former lover and writer Emma Loy and his victim Wanda for his literary success. With its indication of the maliciousness Wanda might have absorbed from her surroundings, Hector's letter turns the bedsitter into a space of suspicion and guilt. Mrs Hawkins remarks that "the letter, lying on Milly's table, was a thing of guilt, arising from guilt, causing it" (*Far Cry* 34). Like the castaways who suffer from mutual suspicion in *Robinson*, Milly's tenants examine each other for their criminal motives, indicating the spread of distrust in this transitory community. Mrs Hawkins observes that Wanda "had come from a world of bureaucratic tyranny infinitely worse than ours. In a way, I felt she wanted to embrace this suffering; she was conditioned to it" (*Far Cry* 28). Wanda has the experience of totalitarianism that has driven her to her irrational fear of the State. Instead of being afraid of the income tax, Wanda is terrified by her lack of British citizenship and the likelihood of being evicted. She represents a precarious newcomer, an outsider from Eastern Europe and a victim who still suffers from the aftermath of WWII in London, long after the VE Day (Victory in Europe Day) on 8 May 1945 and the VJ Day on 14 August 1945, as discussed in *Girls*.

Mrs Hawkins is haunted by Wanda in the reminiscence of her past life. *A Far Cry* looks back at her time in London in the early 1950s, particularly 1954 to 1955 from the vantage point of the 1980s. As Donald Cameron Watt remarks, "this backward-looking posture is seen as the justification for the study of contemporary history" (72). Wanda's sense of dislocation reflects the problems related to post-war Polish settlement in Britain. As Delany comments, "Wanda fits the stereotype of the rootless bedsit dweller" (67). According to Keith Sword's historical study, "the origins of the 'political emigration' in Britain – the change of status from combatant to exile – are usually traced to February 1945, the date of the Great Power conference at Yalta" (25). Wanda, "whose capacity for suffering verged on rapacity", represents one of the Polish refugees who struggled to survive with an unstable national identity in post-war London (*Far Cry* 3). As Sword notes in a study of the Polish community in Britain:

As early as 1951 almost a quarter of all Poles living in Britain – some 33,000 out of a total of 140,000 – were living in Greater London. [...] (So crowded did west London become with Poles that bus-conductors facetiously referred to Kensington's Cromwell Road as the "Polish Corridor") (36).

The cheap accommodation of the bedsitter facilitates Mrs Hawkins's encounter with Wanda. With her "long, loud, high-pitched cry which diminished into a sustained, distant and still audible ululation", Wanda was like a musical instrument with her narratives of human suffering (*Far Cry* 25). Most of Wanda's exchanges of "émigré survival-lore" with other Polish refugees were narrated by Mrs Hawkins through her observations: "Wanda and her friends certainly knew far more about how to tap the resources of post-war Britain than I did" (*Far Cry* 23-4). Here, Mrs Hawkins's admiration for their survival skills suggests that they have endured more hardships than British and Irish war widows, but her bewilderment at their daily practices indicates their marginalised status in British society. Similarly, in *Territorial Rights* (1979), Lina Pancev, a Bulgarian defector once lived in a hovering attic room with dangerous staircases and "dim and puddly privies on every landing" in a roughly three-century-old building in Venice (11-2).

Unable to endure the spiritual conflict between her Catholic faith and her unorthodox practice of radionics under Hector's instruction, Wanda commits suicide with an "unsound mind" by jumping into the Regent's Canal (*Far Cry* 145). Wanda's suicide evokes Princess Wanda's suicide by getting drowned in the river (Kruszewska and Coleman, 19-35). Like Hector who pastes Wanda's face on another girl's shape into the photographs, Spark borrows the legend of Wanda, the only daughter

of King Krak, Kraków's mythical founder during the 8th century in her characterisation. Princess Wanda is reputed to have refused the marriage proposal proffered by the German Prince the "Rytygier (Ruediger)" and stopped the subsequent war between Kraków and Germany by confronting the marching armies in the nude on the battlefield ("Legend of Wanda"). After the loss of her innocence, Wanda commits suicide, because she can no longer bear the scorching male gaze and the continuing threats of military invasions of her home country. Spark's portrayal of the distressed, delusional, and deflowered Wanda implies her critique of the trauma and suffering caused by WWII and of Hector's malicious use of this traumatic narrative to cause suspicion in the post-war London bedsit in his pursuit of his literary fame.

Apart from Wanda, *A Far Cry* features many other migrants, such as Cathy, the bookkeeper and survivor of a German concentration camp in the thirties; the homosexual editors of *The Highgate Review* and "a group of American refugees from Senator McCarthy's political persecutions"; as well as Milly's Cypriot neighbour Marky (*Far Cry* 152). Their constant rows with people around them suggest their difficult settlement in 1950s London. Marky argues with his English wife and sister-in-law in terms of the true paternity of his baby boy. The problem is "solved" with the exclusion of Marky's wife and their baby from the household. As the narrator observes: "another girl, still 'my wife' to Marky, with two children and a young sister had taken their place; the first sister-in-law remained" (*Far Cry* 68). This story echoes the query of a brown baby's paternity in a white Catholic family in Spark's story "The Black Madonna". Unable to confront the racist views in the community, the white couple abandons their own much-desired baby, begotten after their prayer in front of the statue of the black Madonna for adoption. Both stories reveal the prejudice against interracial relationships in post-war London (*Collected Stories* 38-57).

Through her post-war fiction set in boarding houses and bedsits, Spark investigates the link between these temporary lodging houses, from the perspectives of gender, class, and race. Previously living as a girl of slender means, Spark reflects critically upon the marginalisation, discrimination and oppression experienced by women in these precarious and mixed houses and in the patriarchal and misogynist society in which they are located. Conversely, these alternative living spaces also provide some opportunities for vulnerable groups, including debutantes, spinsters, female students, and refugees, working women and war widows to live and work independently in mid-century London. These spaces are thus potentially liberating as well as being places of confinement. Spark and her heroines, like Lise, Mrs Hawkins, and the girls, use their boarding and lodging house narratives to turn traumatic personal experience into art of living and reclaim agency in their lives.

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