Divine Intervention and Performative Experience: Postmodernist Reexamination of Subjectivity in Muriel Spark's The Ballad of Peckham Rye

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Abstract

This research examines the portrayal of human subjectivity in postmodernist writings through a reading of Muriel Spark's The Ballad of Peckham Rye. It incorporates close reading of the novel alongside philosophical criticism of René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, and works of literary critics such as Georg Lukács, Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon. These criticisms provide the basis for exploring how subjectivity is regarded through the modernist realm of thought and how it has been debated and altered in the platform of postmodernist thinking. The study aims to locate what contributes to the lack of subjectivity in The Ballad of Peckham Rye and identify the techniques which Spark uses to produce the discussion based on this idea. It argues that the concept of subjectivity is being reassessed in postmodernist writings to identify the role of external authority which has become an increasingly powerful figure that determines human subjectivity, identity, and existence.

Keywords: ***postmodernism, subjectivity, performative, The Ballad of Peckham Rye, Muriel Spark***

Human subjectivity has long been significantly explored and portrayed in literature. Several critics have employed subjectivity in their debate on what signifies modernist and postmodernist writing. Georg Lukács (1996), in his critique of modernism, identified modernist writings as "the rejection of narrative objectivity, the surrender to subjectivity" (p. 147). He exemplified by discussing, among other modernist works, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which we might consider one of the most representative of high modernist writings. One technique that distinguishes *Ulysses* from what Lukács called "'traditional' writing" (p. 142) is the monologues of the characters. He regarded interior monologue as something which allows "the negation of outward reality" (p. 148) and puts emphasis on human consciousness. He believed that this kind of narrative demonstrates the modernist focus on subjectivity (p. 145), the concept which, as critic Stuart Sim (2001) argued, has for the past few centuries been one of the fundamental parts of Western thinking. The subject, Sim suggested, has been placed at the foundation of cultural process in Western tradition:

> Humanism has taught us to regard the individual subject as a unified self, with a central 'core' of identity unique to each individual, motivated primarily by the power of reason. **Modernity** encouraged the notion of the entrepreneurial subject exploiting the world of nature and bringing it under his […] domination. Rights and privileges could be ascribed to that subject, whose development of self-realization came to be regarded as a central objective (if not *the* central objective) of Western culture. (p. 366)

One of the most significant ideas which influences modernist thoughts on human subjectivity is René Descartes's concept, "I think, therefore I am." Descartes reexamined the formerly held notion that there is an external authority, such as God or divine beings, who determines human existence. He came to the conclusion that human consciousness, the fact that the "I," or the subject, "think", acts as evidence that one exists and, hence, is proof of subjectivity. However, by going further to find the source of truth which guarantees our experience in the process of "I think," Descartes maintained that God is the provider of the truth and "'[f]or as God is no deceiver, it follows necessarily that I am not deceived'" (as cited in Malpas, 2005, p. 59). This means that for our thoughts and ideas rationally to agree with the outward 'reality,' an unquestioned belief of divine providence is required to serve as a guarantor that our experience is true. In this way, ironically, to make rational sense of the world, one needs to have no doubt in the belief that one cannot rationally validate (Malpas, 2005, p. 59).

Descartes's ideas were later reassessed by Immanuel Kant, whose purpose was to examine the connection between human thoughts ("I think") and their outward reality. While Descartes believed that the reliability of our source of knowledge, which provides the basis for human thoughts, can be guaranteed by God, Kant argued that the source of knowledge must be located in human experience through objective knowledge, which he saw as limited. He aimed to prove that human experience "is universal and rationally consistent, and thus capable of providing the basis for arguments about reality" (p. 60). For Kant, the "I think" does not automatically lead to the "I am." Human thought cannot act as pure evidence of their existence but only the "place-holder" for their experience. Thinking can be a representation of human existence but this representation always will be different based on each human's experience. As Simon Malpas concluded, "although the identity of the modern subject (the 'I think') remains intact, who that subject is becomes much more a function of the experiences generated by the environment in which it exists than some natural or divine eternal essence or soul" (p. 62-63). Malpas pointed out that Kant's ideas are

prevalent in modernist literature. By analysing William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, he also introduced memory, one aspect of human experience, as a key constructor of human identity: "[t]hrough memory, the modern subject is capable of constructing a personal narrative of identity, grasping the present and judging how to respond to the future […] memory generates identity and allows each of us to become an individual and unique human being" (p. 64). Memory is one major concept presented in modernist writings, as evident in works such as Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*.

Nevertheless, the humanistic ideas of subjectivity draw concerns from several critics as they pose a risk of ignoring differences between human beings which render them impossible to be easily understood. In addition, as Malpas also suggested, the ideas "giv[e] a false sense of the power of the subject to determine its on conditions of existence" (p. 65). These concerns are reflected in the majority of postmodernist work whose focus is on deciphering human existence which has been shaped from the outside, not the inside. For instance, several postmodernist writings portray characters whose identities are determined by class, ethnicity, gender or even their occupation. These characters do not "subjectively" choose who they are but are being "objectively" defined by external forces which seem to possess superior authority to them. This essentially conveys the decline of emphasis on subjectivity in literary work, or at least the reconsideration of the belief in the subject or the individual as unique and having total control of themselves and the world around them. In his notable essay, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," Frederic Jameson (1984) criticised postmodernism for its "'death' of the subject itself," "the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual" (p. 63) which also causes "the end of the psychopathologies of that ego" (p. 64), the element which Georg Lukács deemed to be prevalent in modernist writings.

This study aims to explore human subjectivity in postmodernist literature through a reading of Muriel Spark's (1999) *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, first published in 1960. The novel tells the story of Dougal Douglas, a young man from Edinburgh hired as an "Arts man" to do "human research" in the community of Peckham Rye. The advent of Dougal affects the community greatly; it causes some residents to rethink their way of life, their place in the community, and what they perceive as reality. In other words, Dougal's arrival leads them to question their existence and subjectivity. *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* demonstrates Spark's complex examination of human subjectivity through the techniques of what I will call "divine intervention" and "performative experience." Through grotesque and uncanny portrayal, the novel conveys the sense of concern that human subjectivity is becoming more incomprehensible and difficult to pin down in the postmodern world.

1. Divine Intervention

It is interesting to think that if modernism adopts Kantian subjectivity and rejects the intervention of divine beings in human experience, postmodernism has brought Cartesian subjectivity back to re-evaluate. In this sense, I am not asserting that postmodernism advocates the existence of God. I want to instead argue that postmodernism recognises the divine intervention in human experience in its new forms. The notion that there is some kind of puppeteer who manipulates our experience is vividly portrayed in postmodernist writing. In his monograph *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale (1989) suggested that one of the examples is Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* where, in the process of imagining his identities, the Unnamable reveals to us the existence of the puppeteer(s):

> First, he can only imagine an undifferentiated they, a chorus of voices constituting the discourse that he transmits to us, and that makes him exist for us; but then he speculates that surely they, in their turn, must be determined by some being ontologically superior even to them, whom he calls the master; but surely the master too, in his turn, must be determined by some still more superior being, some "everlasting third party." (p.13)

The Ballad of Peckham Rye demonstrates this idea through its construction of characters and narrative. For Decartes's "I think, therefore I am," God acts as the provider of truth and knowledge that humans employ as the materials in their process of thinking. In this sense, although God has control over the truth and knowledge, humans still possess the freedom to think and generate their sense of identity and existence. However, the idea of the puppeteer undermines this freedom as can be seen through the symbolic representation of the human as "a puppet," a non-living object whose movement is determined solely by the puppeteer. The image of the puppet also connotes the lack of consciousness, which is essentially the core of human subjectivity for Descartes. In *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, Spark created many levels of puppeteer, each acts as a divine figure who intervenes to determine the identity of the characters, suppressing their subjectivity. One is the community of Peckham Rye: the occupation, the social norms within the community and the judgement of other residents. The other is Dougal Douglas, whose depiction reflects a cunning and malicious divine figure.

1.1 Peckhan Rye

> If you look inexperienced or young and go shopping for food in the by-streets of Peckham it is as different from shopping in the main streets as it is from shopping in Kensington or the West End. In the little shops in the Peckham by-streets, the other customers take a deep interest in what you are buying. They concern themselves lest you are cheated. Sometimes they ask you questions of a civil nature, such as: Where do you work? Is it a good position? Where are you stopping? What rent do they take off you? And according to your answer they may comment that the money you get is good or the rent you have to pay is wicked, as the case may be (p. 18).

The description of Peckham by-streets illustrates the nature of Peckham Rye whose residents are judgmental and likely to interfere with others' business. They observe, ask questions and give advice regardless of what their relationship is to the person. It is worth noting that what they consider to be "questions of a civil nature" are those about work and money; two subjects which seem to be the motives of the story. In his introduction to the novel in the 1999 edition, William Boyd suggested that *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* depicts "London life of the 1950s at its most unglamorous and run-of-the-mill. A steady job is the dominant ambition amongst the men; marriage and kids are the best the future holds for the women" (p.v). Thus, it is not surprising that the turning point of the plot is triggered by Dougal being hired to help increase work efficiency at Meadows, Meade & Grindley. It could be argued that occupations provide identity for the residents of Peckham Rye. Humphrey is identified as a refrigerator engineer and Dixie a typist. Both are obsessed with their occupations. For instance, Humphrey's ideas are greatly influenced by the labour union and he deems his work ethics as high morality, rejecting absenteeism. Dixie works at more than one occupation to save up money for her wedding and has almost no leisure time to adopt any hobby, a kind of activity that usually distinguishes one person from another. She is so preoccupied with the money she makes from her occupations that even after Humphrey rejects her at the wedding ceremony she seems to care less about their relationship and more about looking at her savings book. Several characters are first introduced by their occupations, including "Dawn Waghorn, cone-winder, Annette Wren, trainee-seamer, Elaine Kent, process-controller…" (p. 13). Spark depicted the way occupations and work turn humans into puppets, motivating them to conform to the system without questioning in order to earn money and gain

acceptance in society. The image of puppet workers is portrayed quite literally in Mr Druce's description of how the firm is run:

> Motion study did marvels in the factory. We had a man from Cambridge advising on motion study. It speeded up our output thirty per cent. Movements required to do any given task were studied in detail and he worked out the simplest pattern of movement involving the least loss of energy and time (p. 16).

Here, the workers are programmed like robots to move in certain ways in order to create the optimum efficiency for the work output. The portrayal of these robotlike workers representing their loss of autonomy to even determine their own bodily movements creates a grotesque image which points to the loss of subjectivity. An employer such as Mr Druce acts as a puppeteer, a superior figure in the form of divine providence who intervenes to manipulate the workers' lives.

One aspect which Boyd identified as representative of London in the 1950s is the role of the male as the bread winner and the female as a wife and mother. The issues of work and money are also at play to keep these roles intact. In the novel, marriage, relationship, work, and money are seen as factors which enslave the women, as well as the men, preventing them from expressing individuality. Through Dixie, Spark portrayed the preoccupation with the institution of marriage and raised the issue about its power over human life. Dixie's identity is greatly influenced by her determination to save up for her wedding with Humphrey and for their married life. She overworks herself, resulting in her poor performance at Meadows, Meade & Grindley and her deteriorating relationship with Humphrey. She does not realise that even once they are married, she will not be able to stop this cycle of savings as she will need to pay for expenses in the household and their future children. In this sense, she is portrayed as a hamster in a wheel, trapped by the expectation of society to have a perfect wedding and a perfect married life. Another character whose identity is trapped by the norms and expectations of society is Merle Coverdale. Her parents only care about her position as the head of the typing pool and not who she really is. Regardless of her superior position in the firm, Merle is dependent on Mr Druce because she is his mistress. She hopes to receive help from Dougal, another male figure, to leave Mr Druce. Once Dougal suggests that she is free to find another job and cut off from Mr Druce herself, she admits that she is free "as far as the law goes" (p. 98), but after her long period of working at the firm and being with Mr Druce combined with her age, she would not have a chance to find another job; she also needs his help to pay for her flat.

Thus, she is stuck with continuing her present job and being his mistress. Although the law proclaims that all humans are free, those such as Merle are entrapped because of their social circumstances. If she is exposed as his mistress, she also would be criticised by the community. This criticism, in turn, might cause her to lose her position, and this additionally forces her to keep their relationship a secret. It is not only Merle but also Mr Druce who is trapped. It would be a public scandal if he left his wife for Merle, even though it is "immoral" for them to still be together without feelings for each other, and money is also the factor that makes him stay with her. It is apparent that these characters are forced to make a choice not based on their free will, but on what external forces, social norms, and economic circumstances expect of them.

The sense of entrapment is vividly portrayed throughout the story due to the fact that the characters regularly are being observed. In one scenario, Mr Weedin, the Personnel Manager, while rising to hit Dougal, "was prevented in the act by an overwhelming sense of being looked at from all sides" (p. 75) because of the glass walls of his office. These glass walls, although they allow the employers to monitor their workers, in turn make them the objects of scrutiny. In order to maintain his authority, Mr Weedin has to avoid negative criticism from his employees by acting as if he conforms to the image of an ideal employer. In this sense, it is not the power of those superior in rank, but the power of the masses that can manipulate humans. Several postmodernist works employ the image of the masses as the prominent figure because they stand for both the external force from the society which postmodernism believes shapes the identity of the subject and the social norms which influence the actions of the characters. The close-knit community of Peckham Rye serves as a suitable setting for Spark to demonstrate these ideas as its nature allows the judgement and the norms of the community to have strong effects on the residents. The lack of privacy hinders them from freely attending to their personal matters, let alone expressing their subjectivity. For example, while having a fight with Arthur, Mavis wants to "turn on [the] wireless" as she is "not letting the neighbours get to know" their private affair (p. 93). In a community where everyone knows everyone else and where one is constantly being looked at, it is difficult or even dangerous to stray from the norms.

The sense of being continually observed is illustrated in the aforementioned description of Peckham by-streets. In a similar scenario, Dougal's experience buying cheese from a shop in the area reflects this lack of privacy. A group of people gather around to give him advise and criticise the grocer, attempting to help him decide what to buy. They tell him where to rent an accommodation and ask intensely about his occupation. Compared to the main streets, the small space of the area enables these customers easily to observe and interfere with others' business. This creates an awareness of an external authority who is always acting as a judge and providing guidance,

allowing no chance for any subjectivity to emerge. What this means is that a person's identity is determined by what others think of them. The novel is full of conversations where people discuss how they think of other characters. For instance, whenever Dixie speaks of Dougal, it is often followed by her summary of who in the community likes or dislikes him. Always being watchful of others' judgment, it is difficult to determine whether these characters present themselves or act based on their own nature or what they think will be acceptable for the community. The pressure from being observed affects the characters in many ways. Ultimately, the series of mishaps later in the story, some of which lead to the tragic death of Merle Coverdale, are caused by the characters misunderstanding that they are being watched by Dougal, a policeman in disguise.

1.2 Dougal Douglas

The discussion of Peckham Rye brings into perspective the roles of social norms and the community (the masses) in determining the identities of the characters. The next act of divine intervention is conducted by a God-like figure whom Spark placed as the protagonist of the story, Dougal Douglas. Being hired to conduct human research to improve productivity in the firm, he is given freedom to determine what should be done to these employees in order to boost their performance. This task, by itself, puts him in a somewhat God-like position. He is able freely to investigate the employees and uses this opportunity to manipulate them. In addition, although being assigned to work by the firm, Dougal never seems to be controlled by his employers; instead, he manages to dominate them psychologically and exploit them for his own benefit. Dougal's portrayal as a divine figure is connoted in several scenes of the novel. In an early scene, the account of his mission in Peckham calls up the image of God who takes control of human life: "'[t]he world of Industry,' said Dougal, 'throbs with human life. It will be my job to take the pulse of the people and plumb the industrial depths of Peckham'" (p. 17). This image conjures up the feeling that the pulse, which symbolises life and death, of those in the community will be taken into his hand. The feeling eventually turns into solid evidence at the end of the story after the results of his influence on the community are revealed; Dougal does manage to control their life and death.

Although it could be argued that Spark portrays Dougal as a kind of divine figure, his identity in the novel could not be more complicated. One of the scenes that reflects his complex identity is his description of a dream which illustrates the advisor on motion study from Cambridge choreographing movements of the factory girls. The choreographer assumes the identities of the Devil, the man from Cambridge and Dougal:

> I see the Devil in the guise of a chap from Cambridge who does motion-study, and he's the choreographer. He sings a song that goes, "We study in detail that movements requisite for any given task and we work out the simplest pattern of movement involving the least loss of energy and time." While he sings this song, the girls are waggling and winding […] of course this choreographer is a projection of me. I was at the University of Edinburgh myself, but in the dream I'm the Devil and Cambridge (p. 50).

The scene resembles a kind of ritual with factory girls as devotees and the choreographer as the leader of a religious sect. Only this is not a religion that influences its devotees merely spiritually. The choreographer has the power to manipulate even their precise physical movements. This manipulation is assigned by the firm, who is a superior master that stands even further above the choreographer. The presence of the Devil evokes the sense of a villainous divine who anonymously intervenes with human life. All of these figures, however, ultimately become the projection of Dougal himself.

Other descriptions of Dougal which strengthen the hypotheses that he represents a kind of divine being further complicate his identity by presenting him as both a devil and an angel. As he talks to Humphrey in one scene, Dougal stares at him "like a succubus whose mouth is its eyes" (p. 28). He later shows Humphey the two little bumps which he claims used to be his two devil horns. Walking in a cemetery with Merle, "Dougal posed like an angel on a grave which had only an insignificant headstone. He posed like an angel-devil, with his hump shoulder and gleaming smile, and his fingers of each hand widespread against the sky" (p. 30). The implication of Dougal as both a devil and an angel creates the uncanny sense of ambiguity which is prevalent in the novel. It brings forward the idea that there is a divine providence who takes control of our life, but who is so unknowable and cannot be pinpointed as malevolent or benevolent. As this figure determines our existence, its unknowability causes confusion in our identity, the same feeling that occurs to the characters in the story. At one point, Dougal claims to be "one of the wicked spirits that wander through the world for the ruin of souls" (p. 77); at another point, he identifies himself as an exorcist who has "the ability to drive devils out of people" (p. 102). What is worth noting is that Dougal himself views being a devil and being an exorcist as "not incompatible" (p. 102). It could be interpreted that while Dougal the devil curses Peckham Rye with disasters, such as making Humphrey refuse to marry Dixie and Mr Druce to murder Merle, Dougal's arrival causes Humphrey to realise the problems in his relationship with Dixie, that she desires to save up money for their wedding not because she really loves him but because

it will compliment her image in the community. He is thus set free from their false relationship. Moreover, although Dougal's lie that he is a policeman results in Merle's death, the murder manages literally to set Merle free from Mr Druce. In other word, both Humphrey and Merle, through disastrous events, are liberated from their bondage. This, however, is only triggered by the intervention of Dougal Douglas, the divine figure who descends to Peckham Rye, hovering over the community, and taking control of their life.

2. Performative Experience

As discussed earlier, Kant emphasised that human subjectivity can be based firmly on their experience. He believed that the rationality and consistency of human experience render it suitable to be the foundation of reality. The Kantian location of subjectivity in human experience, however, was later reassessed in new aspects. It is true that postmodernism acknowledges that human beings, consciously or unconsciously, are affected by outside forces such as race, gender, culture, history and politics. The identity of the postmodern subject is constructed and manipulated by these external authorities. However, several postmodern writings also are self-conscious that these external authorities might only be illusions, a constructed or performed reality. In this sense, if modernism questions the existence of outward reality, postmodernism casts doubt on whether reality exists at all. Brian McHale, in *Postmodernist Fiction*, suggested that modernist fictions are concerned with *epistemology*, the desire to fathom the depth and meaning of the world, while postmodernism's concern is on the *ontology* of the world itself (9-10). This ontological doubt on the world destabilises the belief that writers employ literature as a tool to find meaning about the world and human beings through human experience. As Alain Robbe-Grillet (1989) pointed out, "[w]e had thought to control [the world] by assigning it a meaning […] [T]he world functioned as a trap in which the writer captured the universe in order to hand it over to society" but now "[…] not only do we no longer consider the world as our own, our private property, designed according to our needs and readily domesticated, but we no longer even believe in its 'depth'" (p. 23-24).

What we seem to know about the world now becomes illusory. The established thought that one can rationally attempt to understand and present human beings as they are is rendered invalid as there is nothing left to be examined. Modernism's goal, as Lukács believed, to depict human's alienation from the world also is made impossible since there is nothing "authentic" to be alienated from (Eagleton, 1985, p. 61). In this way, the notion of human subjectivity, seen as the core of modernist thought, can be undermined. Terry Eagleton (1985), in his article "Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism," thoroughly summarised this phenomenon:

> [W]e might come to recognize that desire is here and now, fragments and surfaces all we ever have, kitsch quite as good as the real thing because there is in fact no real thing. What is amiss with old fashioned modernism, from this perspective, is just the fact that it obstinately refuses to abandon the struggle for meaning. It is still agonizingly caught up in metaphysical depth and wretchedness, still able to experience psychic fragmentation and social alienation as spiritually wounding, and so embarrassingly enmortgaged to the very bourgeois humanism it otherwise seeks to subvert. Postmodernism, confidently post-metaphysical, has outlived all that fantasy of interiority, that pathological itch to scratch surfaces for concealed depths; it embraces instead the mystical positivism of the early Wittgenstein, for which the world— would you believe it—just is the way it is and not some other way. (p. 69-70)

Eagleton's assertion that there is no real thing, meaning, or depth opens up a discussion which has become increasingly debated in postmodernist writing: how *real* is the narrative, how far can we trust the narrator in a story we read? Muriel Spark's narrative in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* draws great attention to this debate. Linda Hutcheon (1988) argued that the typical style of postmodernist writing "refuses the omniscience and omnipresence of the third person and engages instead in a dialogue between a narrative voice […] and a projected reader" (p. 10). This might be true for several postmodernist works, but it is not the case in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*. The narrator is omniscient and omnipresent, as well as unsympathetic, with an ability to see through the past, the present, and the future. Several elements in the narrative call into question the reliability of the narrative and the authenticity of the characters' experiences, which undermine the sense of subjectivity that one might attempt to find among them.

2.1 The Ballad

Consider for a moment the title of the novel. The term "ballad" reflects a kind of narrative where the narrator is detached, uninvolved, and unsympathetic towards the story he/she is telling. Ballad is a form of folk narrative transmitted orally and usually tells a story from "a tragic incident in local history or legend" in "a direct and dramatic manner" (Baldick, 2015, p. 35). The broadside ballad is a type of ballad printed on a large sheet of paper which formerly served as newspaper (p. 46). The first chapter of the novel is a good example that depicts the elements of ballad employed in the narrative. First, the story starts close to the climax; although in a typical ballad the story

begins *before* the climax, not in this case where the story starts *after* Humphrey has rejected Dixie. Second, the impersonal language of the narrative resembles newspaper report or a recount of a legend. There are several parts of the first chapter where the language employed is that used in newspaper. For instance, in the portrayal of Dixie and Humphrey's wedding, the narrator states that "Arthur Crewe was reported in the papers next day as having said: 'I had a feeling the wedding wouldn't come off'" (p. 8) Here, the story being told is what is literally reported in the newspaper. In addition, the introductions of characters are formal and impersonal: for Humphrey, "[h]is name was Humphrey Place. He was that fellow that walked out on his wedding a few weeks ago" (p. 7); and Dixie, "Dixie Morse, aged seventeen, daughter of the first G.I. bride to have departed from Peckham and returned" (p. 9-10). These examples present how distant the narrator is from the characters and the story that he/she is telling.

The distance between the narrator and the characters undermines the trustworthiness of the narrator. When the narrator is telling the story from a second-hand experience, his/her credibility becomes more doubtful. In the first scene of the novel, it is apparent that the narrative is a report of incidents which have been witnessed. As Humphrey asks to get into her house to speak to Dixie, "[Mavis] was seen to slam the door in his face, and he to press the bell, and she to open the door again" (p. 7). The verbs "was seen" create a distance between the narrator and the story, producing a sense that the narrator did not personally witness the incident but is describing what has been told by others. In the same event, as Humphrey walks away from the door, "he appeared to consider the encounter so far satisfactory" (p. 7). The verb "appeared" reminds us that it is impossible to know what he really thinks since what is described is only what the observers think he feels. This technique is employed by Spark throughout the story; the narrator appears omniscient and omnipresent, but there remains a sense that he/she cannot gain access into the psyche of each character, or that the narrator chooses not to reveal to us everything. Moreover, one of the important elements of a ballad is that it is orally transmitted, which causes the details in the story to be altered as they are passed from one orator to the next. Thus, it could be that in *The Ballad of Peckham* some of the information has gone missing from the story. Spark portrayed in several parts of chapter one that the story being told might not be true or as accurate as the actual event. For instance, Marvis's account of the incident when Humphrey comes to her door is different from what is described by the narrator. The ending of chapter one vividly portrays the ballad element where a tragic event becomes a legend orally transmitted in the community. It is stated that "within a few weeks, everyone forgot the details" of the occurrence when Humphrey rejected Dixie in their wedding ceremony. The incident then becomes "a legend referred to from time to time in the pubs when the conversation takes a matrimonial turn" (p. 14). We do not know what really happens, whether Humphrey and Dixie ends up

marrying in the end, or if Dixie marries Trevor Lomas, or if the outcome is as dramatic as Dixie dying from grief and Humphrey shooting himself. Even when it is stated in the end that they eventually get married two months later, the reader's trust has been broken that it is difficult to identify which story is real or unreal.

By considering the novel as a form of ballad, one interesting aspect that should be mentioned is the time shifting in the story which is also common in ballad. In the first few pages of the novel alone, there are several points of time shifting, starting from Humphrey meeting with Mavis, driving back to the Rye Hotel, and encountering Trevor Lomas in a bar. Then, it shifts back to the wedding ceremony, forward to the previous bar scene, and back again to the moment after Humphrey leaves Marvis's door. The narrator's power to transcend time is marked by David Lodge (1994) as "a typical postmodernist strategy, calling attention to the artificial construction of the text, and preventing us from "losing ourselves" in the temporal continuum of the fictional story or in the psychological depth of the central character" (p. 77). The fluidity in time reflects the artificiality of the narrative, rendering the narrator powerful but dubious, and thus, undermines the credibility of the narrative itself. It is as if this narrator is a counterfigure of Descartes' God, who is "no deceiver." The idea of the untrustworthy narrator aligns with Hutcheon's (1988) argument that in "postmodern inquiry into the very nature of subjectivity" the traditional belief in the nature of perspective is confronted. "Narrators in fiction become either disconcertingly multiple and hard to locate […] or resolutely provisional and limited – often undermining their own seeming omniscience" (p. 11). If we, the readers, were to grasp the subjectivity of the characters from what they experience, we would be hesitant as it is unclear how we can even locate their experience.

2.2 The Artificial Memory

As discussed earlier, memory is a crucial element which allows humans to create their "personal narrative of identity" and become a unique individual. In *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, however, memory is seen as inaccurate (as discussed in the previous point) and artificially constructed. The autobiography Dougal writes for Miss Maria Cheeseman vividly demonstrates the constructedness of memory. It is ironic enough that her "autobiography" is written by someone rather than Cheeseman herself. Hiring a "ghost" writer might not be uncommon, but Spark made the act more bizarre as Dougal gathers stories from people in Peckham Rye and arbitrarily asserts that they are parts of Cheeseman's memories. There are several lies in her autobiography: first, she did not spend her childhood in Peckham; it is Miss Frierne who encounters the Highlander and Nelly Mahone who used to work in a shoe factory. It is also worth noting that Dougal views writing autobiography for Cheeseman as

making "a work of art" (p. 76) and thinks that all these artificial memories will "help to sell the book" (p. 89). His identification of her memories as a piece of artwork and a commodity further emphasise its artificiality. The autobiography has become not the honest record of her life but a story custom-made to suit the appreciation of the masses as a work of art and to satisfy the buyers as a commodity.

This calls into question the nature of life writing. While modernism advocates that internal reality is most significant in depicting human subjectivity, postmodernism see all kinds of reality as illusions. This does not mean that postmodernism abandons the task of portraying life. Instead, it seeks to find the extent that we can truthfully depict subjectivity and whether it is possible. In the case of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, Spark drew attention to a rather uncanny aspect of life writing. After Cheeseman reads her autobiography, she becomes miraculously familiar with its made-up stories. As she states, "'[y]ou must have known. You've got all the details right, except that it wasn't in Peckham, it was Streatham. It all came back to me as I read it. It's uncanny. You've been checking up on me, haven't you, Doug?" (p. 89). It is again ironic that she does not wish someone who is writing her autobiography to *know* about her life. However, what is more intriguing is the uncanny feeling that the readers do not know if Dougal did find out about her life, if it is a coincidence, or if Cheeseman has come to believe that the artificial story is the truth. The last assumption evokes the Aesthetic style of "life imitates art" which caricatures the belief in truthful and earnest depiction of life in art. It instead seeks to argue that art cannot reflect life, but it is life that takes its form after art. *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* reflects the possibility that even one's own memories can be artificial. It also underlines the nature of life writing not as a true recording of life, but as a fiction manipulated by its writer and readers. This sense is conveyed through Cheeseman's remark that "[i]t makes [her] creepy to think that people can find out all about you" (p. 89). The irony lies in the fact that she wishes her life story to be read but does not want the true story to be discovered. Like people in Peckham Rye who are always being observed, the knowledge that Dougal is writing her story and that people will be reading it after the publication make Cheeseman feel manipulated and judged. That is why she is reluctant to allow a completely truthful record of her life. The belief that life writing can reflect human subjectivity is here rendered doubtful.

2.3 Performative Experience

One significant element of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*'s narrative style is the fluidity of the characters' identity and the lack of emotional involvement within the narrative. Instead of attempting to create believable characters as some novels might do, Spark's portrayal of these characters is highly performative, highlighting their roles as characters in a book or actors on

a stage. First of all, the performativity of self-identity, essentially, is depicted through the character of Dougal Douglas. Possessing more than one identity and one name (Dougal Douglas, Douglas Dougal and Dougal-Douglas), he embodies a postmodernist character who performs several different roles and whose subjectivity can be shaped and reshaped. One of the scenes that demonstrates the performativity of his identity is his interview with Mr Druce. Dougal is able to transform himself into different identities, selecting and performing the roles that will serve his speech or situation. He "sat like a monkey-puzzle tree, only moving his eyes to follow Mr Druce" at the start of his second interview, but when he wants to appear serious, he "changed his shape and became a professor." Later, to underline his intention to investigate Mr Druce, he "leaned forward and became a television interviewer" (p. 15-16). He also transforms into "a man of vision with a deformed shoulder" (p. 17), which suits to benefit him not only because Mr Druce is looking for that quality in his new employee, but also emphasises his deformity, which he uses to evoke sympathy in other people. While giving advice to Mr Druce about his relationship with his wife, Dougal adopts a persona of "a lady-columnist" and a speech which reflects the style of writing in a column for relationship advice on magazines: "'[p]ut your arms around her, […] and start afresh. It frequently needs but one little gesture from one partner—'" (p. 66). Dougal's interview with Mr Willis also illustrates the malleable nature of his identity when "[o]n hearing Mr Willis's voice Dougal changed his manner, for he perceived that Mr Willis was a Scot" (p. 68). All of these examples serve as evidence that it is impossible to grasp Dougal's true identity since what are presented to us seem to be just the roles he performs.

By not revealing his psyche, the narrative projects an image of Dougal as an actor who simply acts out his roles assigned by a director. This problematises the quest to locate subjectivity since even the experiences we see are all performative and manipulated. The same idea is depicted through the narrative of other characters in the novel. The narrator is indifferent and unsympathetic towards every character; these people are portrayed as robotic and their actions lack any kind of personal emotion. One example is the sexual intercourse between Mr Druce and Merle:

> Then they went into the bedroom and took off their clothes in a steady rhythm. Merle took off her cardigan and Mr Druce took off his coat. Merle went to the wardrobe and brought out a green quilted silk dressing-gown. Mr Druce went to the wardrobe and found his blue dressing-gown with white spots. Merle took off her blouse and Mr Druce his waistcoat. Merle put the dressing-gown over her shoulders and, concealed by it, took off the rest of her clothes, with modest gestures. Mr Druce slid his braces and

> emerged from his trousers. These he folded carefully and, padding across the room to the window, laid them on a chair. He made another trip bearing his waistcoat and jacket which he placed over the back of the chair. They stayed in bed for an hour, in the course of which Merle twice screamed… (p. 53-54).

Notice that there is no evidence of emotion involved in the description, which appears like a stage direction for a play. The obsession with details of the clothes overshadows the main point of the narrative, which is that these two people are about to have sex. When it comes to their actual intercourse, the narrative only provides a short report now focused on time, emphasising how long they stay in bed and how many times Merle screams. The account serves not only to demonstrate the dullness of their relationship, but also the performativity of the relationship itself. It is unclear and never revealed to us whether they have any loving feeling towards each other or if Mr Druce just puts Merle on the stage to perform the role his wife never performs for him and Merle is just playing her part in order to receive his favour at the firm and his money to pay rent. Another scene which provides more supporting evidence is the murder of Merle towards the end of the novel: "[Mr Druce] came towards her with the corkscrew and stabbed it into her long neck nine times, and killed her. Then he took his hat and went home to his wife" (p. 136). A scene that is supposed to be dramatic and climactic is instead presented in a dispassionate manner, an anticlimax. The lack of emotional engagement serves to emphasise the performativity of the narrative. At the end of the story Dougal leaves Peckham Rye, taking no responsibility and expressing no sympathy for any character, like an actor who finishes performing his part and leaves the stage as the curtain rolls down. Mr Druce, also, performs his role and leaves the scene not showing any emotion towards his action.

3. Conclusion

Ultimately, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* is presented as a play on a stage. The characters are actors who perform the script written by the director in an attempt to please the audience. Dougal's dream about the factory girls reflects an ensemble cast performing their roles on the stage, "doing a dance with only the movement of their breasts, bottoms, and arms as they sort, stack, pack, check, cone-wind, gum, uptwist, assemble, seam, and set" (p. 50). These verbs convey their position in the firm which forces them to move in a certain manner and provide them with a role, an identity. Another scene where the group of characters who were previously fighting suddenly starts singing and dancing highlights this image very vividly:

> In a few seconds everyone except Dougal was singing, performing the twisting jive, merging the motions of the fight into those of the frantic dance. Dougal saw Humphrey's face as his neck swooped upwards. It was frightened. Dixie's expression was, with a decided effort, bright. So was Elaine's. A one-sided smile on the face of the strange boy, and the fact that, as he bent and twisted in the jive, he buttoned up his shirt, made Dougal look outside the group…(p. 47).

Their singing and dancing manages to trick the police and conceal the fact that they were in a fight, as they realise they are being "observed at a distance of three minutes' police-pace" (p. 47). The strange boy also buttons up his shirt to look appropriate in front of the police. Here, the police serve as a form of authority observing and judging their acts, adopting the role of divine providence who requires to be satisfied, the same as the audience in a play. The singing and dancing resemble a ritual performed by these devotees to please the God. Furthermore, without the police's arrival, the group would still be fighting. The police are now the figures which manipulate the performance, acting as the director and the playwright.

The Ballad of Peckham Rye portrays the perspective of subjectivity in postmodernist writing where human existence is intervened with and dictated by some forms of superior authority, the divine being in disguise. It also accentuates the performativity of human experience, destabilising any sense of subjectivity by depicting human beings as existing to perform their roles. Postmodernist writing, however, does not necessarily serve to convey that humans have lost their subjectivity altogether. What could be argued is that it draws attention to the increasing power of outward influence in shaping the inward individuality, making it more and more difficult to grasp what is inside. It also underscores the complexity of human identity which could be shaped by various kinds of external influence, be it class, ethnicity, gender and many other factors. As Dougal wisely points out, "[a]ll human beings who breathe are a bit unnatural" (p. 74). One cannot be too quick to generalise or standardise anything, as there is the risk of labelling something as unnatural when in fact there is no such thing as being "natural" at all.

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