

Atıf/Citation: Sevinç Kayahan, M. (2025). Fiction as rebellion: anarchy, power and narrative control in Muriel Spark's *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960), *The Driver's Seat* (1970) and *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988). *Uluslararası Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi (UDEKAD)*, 8 (2), 687-698. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37999/udekad.1664686>

Mine SEVİNÇ KAYAHAN\* 

**FICTION AS REBELLION: ANARCHY, POWER, AND NARRATIVE CONTROL IN MURIEL SPARK'S *THE BALLAD OF PECKHAM RYE* (1960), *THE DRIVER'S SEAT* (1970) AND *A FAR CRY FROM KENSINGTON* (1988)**

**ABSTRACT**

Muriel Spark's fiction explores the interplay between anarchy, power, and narrative control, often challenging traditional moral and social structures. In *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960), *The Driver's Seat* (1970) and *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988), Spark's protagonists act as disruptive forces within rigid institutions, undermining authority through defiance, manipulation, and self-determination. These characters, whether through acts of rebellion, artistic control, or moral ambiguity, expose the fragility of hierarchical systems and the instability of conventional morality. Spark's works reject bourgeois values, ridiculing those in positions of power while embracing the macabre and the absurd. Her protagonists assert dominance over their narratives, yet their autonomy is always precarious, shaped by external forces that seek to impose order. Through irony, ambiguity, and structural subversion, Spark crafts narratives that resist singular interpretations, reinforcing her vision of fiction as an arena where control is simultaneously asserted and undermined. This article examines how Spark's use of anarchic protagonists and destabilizing narrative techniques in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, *The Driver's Seat* and *A Far Cry from Kensington* serve as a critique of authority, morality, and the limits of personal agency.

**Keywords:** Muriel Spark, anarchy, narrative control, authority, resistance

**İSYAN OLARAK KURGU: MURIEL SPARK'IN *THE BALLAD OF PECKHAM RYE* (1960), *THE DRIVER'S SEAT* (1970), VE *A FAR CRY FROM KENSINGTON* (1988) ROMANLARINDA ANARŞİ, İKTİDAR VE ANLATI KONTROLÜ**

**ÖZET**

Muriel Spark'ın kurgusu, anarşi, güç ve anlatı kontrolü arasındaki etkileşimi araştırır ve sıklıkla geleneksel ahlaki ve toplumsal yapıları meydan okur. *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, *The Driver's Seat* ve *A Far Cry from Kensington*'de Spark'ın başkahramanları, meydan okuma, manipülasyon ve kendi kaderini tayin etme yoluyla otoriteyi baltalayan, katı kurumlar içinde yıkıcı güçler olarak hareket eder. Bu karakterler, isyan, sanatsal kontrol veya ahlaki belirsizlik eylemleri yoluyla hiyerarşik sistemlerin kırılganlığını ve geleneksel ahlakın istikrarsızlığını ortaya koyar. Spark'ın eserleri burjuva değerlerini reddeder, korkunç ve absürt olanı benimserken iktidardakilerle alay eder. Başkahramanları, anlatıları üzerinde hakimiyet kurarlar, ancak özerklikleri her zaman istikrarsızdır ve düzeni empoze etmeye çalışan dış güçler tarafından şekillendirilir. Spark, ironi, belirsizlik ve yapısal altüst oluş yoluyla, tekil yorumlara direnen anlatılar üretiyor ve kurguyu, kontrolün aynı anda hem sağlandığı hem de zayıflatıldığı bir alan olarak görme vizyonunu güçlendiriyor. Bu makale, Spark'ın anarşik kahramanlar ve istikrarsızlaştırıcı anlatı tekniklerini kullanmasının, otorite, ahlak ve kişisel faaliyetin sınırlarına yönelik bir eleştiri olarak nasıl hizmet ettiğini inceliyor.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Muriel Spark, anarşi, anlatı kontrolü, otorite, direnç

\* Assist. Prof. Dr., Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of Western Languages and Literatures, Burdur/Türkiye. E-mail: [msevinc@mehmetakif.edu.tr](mailto:msevinc@mehmetakif.edu.tr) / Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy Üniversitesi, Fen Edebiyat Fakültesi, Batı Dilleri ve Edebiyatları Bölümü, Burdur/Türkiye. E-posta: [msevinc@mehmetakif.edu.tr](mailto:msevinc@mehmetakif.edu.tr)

## Introduction

Muriel Spark is known for her novels, short stories, and poetry, and she is a prolific British writer born in Scotland. She embraced “all the fashionable isms of the modern scene: surrealism, existentialism, absurdism, structuralism, and feminism,” weaving them into her fiction (Nordjhem, 1987, p. 140 qtd. in McQuillan, 2002, p. 6). Spark explored the complex relationship between fiction and reality, creating her novels as “fiction, out of which a kind of truth emerges” (Kermode, 1963, p. 80). Her works frequently engage with supernatural elements that disrupt social order, portraying institutions and authority figures as vulnerable to suffering, even as evil often prevails. In her novels, characters are shaped by “powerful historical and political forces, their psychologies and interactions shaped by entrenched educational and religious institutions and ideologies of gender” (Herman, 2008, p. 474).

Spark's writing exhibits a form of conservative anarchism, rejecting bourgeois values such as marriage, home, and family. Spark does not seek to destroy all hierarchical systems. Instead, she offers satirical subversion from within, where individuals expose and mock institutional hypocrisies in her fiction. For instance, politicians and power-seekers are often ridiculed, while the absurd is embraced. Yet, despite this anarchic streak, Spark ultimately appreciates strict social, emotional, or artistic control. She illustrates Lise's pursuit of her own murderer, providing a window into power dynamics, covert anarchy, and artistic expression in *The Driver's Seat*. Similarly, *A Far Cry from Kensington* predominantly follows Mrs. Hawkins's pursuit of autonomy and anarchy alongside the struggles of Isobel and Mabel, reflecting Spark's fascination with characters who reject conventional morality. *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* explores institutional disorder, ethical ambiguity, and the struggle for dominance through the protagonist Dougal Douglas. This article argues that Spark's protagonists in *The Driver's Seat*, *A Far Cry from Kensington*, and *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* are disruptive figures who challenge institutional authority, often asserting dominance over their own narratives while simultaneously revealing the fragility of hierarchical structures.

In this context, anarchy offers a useful lens through which to examine how these novels unsettle authority within their plots and formal structures. Classical anarchist thought fundamentally challenges the state's legitimacy, as articulated by theorists such as William Godwin, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon or Mikhail Bakunin. Discussing the theoretical works of Proudhon and Bakunin, George Chowder defines anarchy as “the absence of a ruler or government [which] should be distinguished from the more common sense of ‘anarchy’ as the absence of order” (1991, p. 1). While anarchists disagree with the laws enforced by governments, they often align with principles of morality or common sense. Chowder (1991) contends that the anarchist society will be governed by practical and, most importantly, moral laws that are self-imposed by each member, rather than by compulsion or force. Thus, the central point of classical anarchism is consolidated around the notion of freedom and that “the State destroys freedom” (Chowder, 1991, p.4). While classical anarchism foregrounds freedom from the state and the replacement of external authority with self-governance, contemporary reworkings of anarchist thought broaden this scope beyond political institutions to include less visible forms of resistance, which becomes especially relevant when examining narrative form and subjectivity in fiction.

Drawing on Todd May's *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (1994), these novels can be read through the concept of anarchism that resists centralised political authority

and hierarchical structures. May presents the notion of anarchism as a philosophical stance that resists some forms of hierarchy and essentialism, expanding it beyond political rebellion. He critiques rigid power structures and specifically emphasises decentralised social organisations suggesting that genuine individual autonomy can arise from dismantling authoritarian systems. Rather than assigning power to a singular institutional source, May's discussion of poststructuralist anarchism understands power as relational and embedded in discourse.

The point of [classical] anarchism's resort to the idea of a benign human essence is to be able to justify its resistance to power. Suppose that anarchists had a different view of power, one that saw power not solely as suppressive but also as productive: power not only suppresses actions, events, and people, but creates them as well. In that case, it would be impossible to justify the resistance to all power; one would have to distinguish clearly acceptable creations or effects (as opposed, in the case of the suppressive assumption, to exercises) of power from unacceptable ones. (1994, p. 63)

May points out that the moral framework for classical anarchism is accepting humans as naturally good and power as oppressive. However, he challenges this essentialist idea by presenting power as productive, not simply "suppressive". Power may not always silence or restrict but also create discourses and identities. If power is productive, then not all power should be resisted equally. The power that produces inequality and repression should be "distinguished clearly" from the power that generates autonomy and creativity. In this light, anarchy can no longer be seen simply as the rejection of governance; instead, it becomes a strategy of critical engagement with specific power formations. Similarly, anarchy emerges not as the absence of governance or social order, but as a narrative strategy to dismantle normative social and ethical structures in these novels. Thus, anarchy functions less as political rebellion and more as a subtle yet persistent resistance to institutional authority and moral absolutism. Muriel Spark's deliberate subversions of plot expectations, character authority and moral resolution destabilise the reader's sense of narrative order in a way that is multiple and relational, irreducible to a single institutional power. Therefore, I would argue that Spark treats anarchy as a productive narrative mode, rather than simply presenting it as disorder, through narrative disruptions and characters who actively resist being fixed within conventional roles or stable identities. This study applies this theoretical framework to *The Driver's Seat*, *A Far Cry from Kensington* and *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* to discuss how Spark's narrative strategies display resistance to institutional authority, thereby complicating the notion of individual agency and revealing the unstable nature of narrative control.

### **Murder as Masterpiece: Agency and Anarchy in *The Driver's Seat***

*The Driver's Seat* primarily centres on Lise's subversive and anarchic act of defying authority – her pursuit of a potential murderer. Lise orchestrates her own death with the precision of a playwright staging a scene, asserting complete command of her life. She interprets a shop assistant's comment about a dress being made of stainless material as an insult and responds passionately to it in the novel's opening scene. Her reaction, defying the perspectives of those around her, signals her assertion of free will. A second interaction with another shop assistant further underscores Lise's autonomy; she follows her own agenda and pointedly "does not appear to listen" (Spark, 1970, p. 11). Throughout the novel, Lise expresses irritation toward various suitors, rejecting them as unsuitable for her predetermined fate. Spark's omniscient narration reveals the inevitability of Lise's demise mid-novel, "[s]he will be found [...] dead from multiple stab wounds, her wrists bound with a silk scarf and her ankles bound with a man's necktie, in the grounds of an empty villa, in a part of the foreign city" (Spark, 1970, p. 25). The novel's use of

present and future tenses in narrating Lise's story defies conventional narrative techniques and refuses to be governed by external authority figures. Paddy Lyons argues, "the unknowing present tense produces Lise [...] another performance artist, caught only in action, not defined by any thoughts or intentions, which are left for a reader to surmise" (2010, p. 93). This matter-of-fact revelation in present and future tenses strips the narrative of suspense in the traditional sense, instead shifting the focus to the how and why of Lise's journey toward her violent end. Spark resists the traditional norms of narrative closure by extending the story beyond the protagonist's death to the police interrogation. In doing so, the narrator becomes an anarchic agent, sabotaging the rules of storytelling and asserting a discursive power that draws attention to its own arbitrariness. Thus, narrating the death before it happens becomes an assertion of narrative power and control, challenging the plot's authority.

Lise resists being categorised in any coherent way by the characters or by the reader. While her determination to find the "right" partner for her murder is evident, the novel never explicitly addresses the reasons behind her self-orchestrated death. The secrecy surrounding her motives preserves a space untouched by authority, rendering the police investigation inconclusive and, in doing so, fulfilling Lise's anarchic vision. As Fotini Apostolou observes:

It is significant that it is mostly women in Spark's work who let themselves be seduced by the signifier [...] so that they manage to seduce others into their spectacles. [...] Lise, the central protagonist in *The Driver's Seat* and the most powerful seductress in Spark's fiction, gives to the voracious eyes of the public the spectacle of her voluntary murder. The police, the image of power par excellence [...] strive fruitlessly to give meaning to an absence. (2001, p. 9)

For Apostolou, murder in *The Driver's Seat* serves a dual function: seduction and rebellion. This observation highlights the performative nature of female agency in Spark's fiction, particularly in *The Driver's Seat*, where Lise constructs herself as both the orchestrator and the object of spectacle. Her obsessive attention to her appearance, her erratic behaviour, and her deliberate pursuit of a murderer all undermine any essentialist notion of self and transform her into a spectacle designed for public consumption. Thus, Lise wields power not simply by resisting dominant structures but by destabilising the expectations placed upon her, seducing both those around her and the reader into witnessing her self-authored demise. The police fully interrogate Lise's murder suspect going "[r]ound and round again [...] always bearing the same questions" (1970, p. 105). The police, representing institutional authority, attempt to impose logic onto her actions, but their efforts only emphasise the futility of interpreting what is ultimately an intentional act of narrative defiance. The novel foregrounds the impotence of the institutional authority: "They will reveal, bit by bit, that they know his record. They will bark, and exchange places at the desk. They will come and go in the little office, already beset by inquietude and fear, even before her identity is traced back to where she came from" (1970, p. 105). Here, the investigators' failure to construct a coherent explanation for her murder reveals the limitations of hierarchical systems in making sense of individual agency. Spark disrupts conventional narrative causality, while simultaneously critiquing institutional authority, suggesting that power structures sustain themselves regardless of who holds office. Therefore, I would argue that Lise's death is not merely a spectacle but a deliberate subversion of the systems that seek to regulate individual agency. In crafting her own poetic death, she asserts narrative and symbolic power over both the police and the institutional forces that they represent.

Lise meticulously plans every detail of her murder, transforming her death into an artistic performance. She selects a colourful dress and coat, deliberately choosing a fabric that will stain dramatically, enhancing the spectacle. She is, quite literally, “dressed for a carnival” (Spark, 1970, p. 69). Furthermore, she fabricates stories about herself and her fictional boyfriend, constructing a narrative as she moves toward her inevitable demise. As Bryan Cheyette notes, Lise’s death becomes a spectacle for mass consumption, sensationalised by the media (2000, p. 77). Cheyette argues that her narrative comprises carefully placed clues that she leaves behind to ensure that her movements can be retraced. For instance, she suggests that her murderer “could be driving a car,” pre-emptively shaping the crime scene’s composition (Spark, 1970, p. 58). Apostolou further contextualizes Lise’s death as an aesthetic and narrative event:

It is her death that initiates the narrative of the novella; it is because of her death that Lise enters the realm of fiction. Lise’s absence becomes a work of art, an impressive spectacle that is worth special attention. It is a unique moment in Spark’s work, where all dichotomies are at the same time celebrated and violated. (2001, p. 42)

While Cheyette and Apostolou frame Lise’s narrative within broader aesthetic and literary traditions, they do not fully account for the extent to which the novel dismantles institutional authority through its narrative form. Here, institutional authority refers to normative systems or structures that impose order, in this case, on narratives. Therefore, institutional authority is not simply limited to governmental bodies in *The Driver’s Seat* but extends to the conventions that govern how stories are told and interpreted. Spark undermines these conventions by revealing Lise’s death midway and withholding the act until the end, thereby destabilising the institutionalised authority of linear storytelling. From a poststructuralist anarchist perspective, Lise’s performance exposes the arbitrariness of moral and narrative hierarchies. Her refusal to conform embodies the very kind of productive and subversive agency that manifests through “resistance against the power relationships of [centralised] site”, as May suggests (1994, p. 11). With the calculated manipulation of her own fate, the protagonist carves out a liminal space for play, performance, and rebellion. Through deception and spectacle, she transforms herself into both artist and subject, drawing from literary traditions to stage her own subversive narrative. Although the novel’s concluding phrase, “Fear and pity, pity and fear,” echoes Aristotle’s definition of tragedy (Spark, 1970, p. 107), Lise’s case inverts it by not conforming to the Aristotelian model of a downfall by a tragic flaw. Rather, she performs her own murder as a radical act of narrative authorship. I suggest that Spark draws upon classical tragedy only to undermine it. Spark rewrites Lise’s act as an anarchic gesture in reconfiguring the tropes of tragic inevitability. Her carefully staged spectacle, then, not only subverts social order but also reinterprets the patriarchal genre of tragedy as a radical act of self-determination, defying both institutional authority and conventional narrative closure.

Lise aims to gain complete control over her own life through death, which also gives her an escape from her problems, mental illness and time spent in a psychiatric hospital, as an anarchic refusal of the systems that seek to define and diagnose her. According to Elisabeth Bronfen, the contemplation of suicide can serve as a powerful stimulus for writing about one’s life since it highlights the tension between self-construction and self-destruction (1992, p. 142). Here, Spark employs anarchy as a narrative strategy that resists dominant hierarchies and normative institution. Lise’s insistence on staging her own murder on her own terms exemplifies this logic of resistance: “I’m going to lie down here. Then you tie my hands with my scarf; I’ll put one wrist over the other,

it's the proper way. Then you'll tie my ankles together with your necktie. Then you strike" (1970, p. 105). Her control extends to compelling her murderer, who claims to have been "cured" in the psychiatric clinic and reluctant to harm anyone, to carry out her plan (1970, p. 103). Rather than submitting to a patriarchal figure of violence, Lise insists on dictating the terms of that violence. In doing so, she enacts an anarchic reversal forcing the person allegedly rehabilitated by the system back into a role he no longer wishes to occupy. Apostolou suggests that "Lise sets out to write the fictional death of her image, whose murder gives her the opportunity [...] to sit in 'the driver's seat,' to author her own destiny, and to escape her anonymity by entering her own narrative" (2001, p. 43). This reading highlights Spark's investment in narrative as both a literary and existential structure. However, this act of self-authorship is ultimately compromised when Lise's murderer rapes and "stabs [her] wherever he likes" while she is bound, a moment that disrupts her carefully constructed narrative control and reminds us that bodily autonomy remains embedded within patriarchal power structures (1970, p. 107). David Herman complicates the notion of Lise's agency, writing:

The bizarre and macabre plot in which the protagonist concertedly brings about her own brutal murder also raises disturbingly far-reaching questions about the threat of sexual violence against women who seek to assert control over their own lives in the manner advocated in the feminist discourse that was contemporary with Spark's novel. (2008, p. 475)

Herman's reading situates *The Driver's Seat* within a broader feminist critique of systemic violence, suggesting that Lise's attempt to dictate her own fate is met with the brutal reality of gendered power structures that deny women full autonomy. My reading builds on this view but extends it by arguing that the novel uses the concept of anarchic self-authorship to explore the contradictions between narrative power and embodied vulnerability. Therefore, I suggest that Spark not only depicts an anarchic protagonist challenging institutional authority, but also reveals the inescapable precarity of women's agency in a patriarchal world. Through Lise's journey, *The Driver's Seat* both enacts and interrogates the limits of female self-determination, revealing the tension between an anarchic desire for self-authorship and the institutional, often gendered narrative systems that render such freedom impossible. While Lise's defiance is ultimately entangled with violence and self-destruction, in *A Far Cry from Kensington*, Nancy Hawkins asserts her autonomy through language and intellectual resistance, challenging authority not through spectacle, but through wit, moral conviction, and strategic defiance.

### **Resisting Authority: Power Struggles in *A Far Cry from Kensington***

In *A Far Cry from Kensington*, Muriel Spark presents Nancy Hawkins as an intellectual rebel, whose defiance of authority manifests through sharp wit, professional integrity, and a refusal to conform to institutional hypocrisy. The novel follows Nancy Hawkins, an editor and proofreader in the publishing industry, as she navigates an environment shaped by power struggles, anarchy, and moral ambiguity. Nancy Hawkins is not just a rebellious protagonist but also the narrator of her own story, reconstructing her past in post-war London, thirty years later as an insomniac in Italy. This almost dreamlike narrative voice introduces an anarchic approach to narration itself, blurring the boundaries between memory and imagination. Mrs. Hawkins is revealed as a respected and influential employee with a keen editorial eye, but her refusal to engage in duplicity makes her a disruptive force in the system in her own narration. She does not hesitate to challenge her superiors, even when it results in her expulsion. Her refusal to participate in institutional duplicity

is most evident in her scathing critique of Hector Bartlett, whom she dismisses as “a *pisseur de copie*”, or someone who “urinate[s] frightful prose” even though he is a friend of Emma Loy, a famous novelist in the novel (Spark, 1988, p. 49). As Bryan Cheyette notes, Nancy’s refusal to stop calling Hector a “pisseur de copie” becomes a near-religious commitment to her, one that feels “like preaching the Gospel” (2000, p. 116). Her repeated use of the phrase functions as an act of linguistic resistance, a refusal to legitimise institutional hypocrisy through polite silence and a challenge to a cultural system that values connections over merit. Nancy derives a sense of satisfaction from her act of rebellion as she delights in challenging authority figures. Her persistent defiance leads to her dismissal from two jobs, yet these experiences strengthen her resolve, preparing her for a more powerful confrontation with Emma Loy, suggesting that resistance, though costly, is also transformative. As Herman points out, Spark’s satire extends to corporations that enforce authority through coercion and hypocrisy, revealing the absurdity of those who wield power (2008, p. 73). In this light, Spark’s portrayal of Nancy underscores the power of anarchy, as the character continuously challenges institutional control. Her former employer, Martin York, who fired Mrs. Hawkins for insulting Hector Bartlett, is later charged with fraud, and Hector himself is reduced to publishing “ridiculous old-age memoirs [found] on a remainder bookstall” (Spark, 1988, p. 50). I suggest Nancy’s anarchic refusal to comply with bourgeois decorum thus becomes a vehicle through which Spark exposes the absurdity of such systems that maintain institutional authority.

Rather than upholding conventional ideals of domesticity or propriety, Nancy often engages in transgressive behaviours that challenge societal norms. She exemplifies this rejection not only through her professional rebellion but also in her personal life. As a young war widow, Nancy Hawkins retains her husband’s surname not out of devotion, but as a strategic tool that affords her social and professional credibility. Yet, she exhibits indifference to his memory, particularly considering her affair with William. In this way, Nancy manipulates societal expectations to her advantage, embodying Spark’s broader critique of moral hypocrisy. This abandonment of normative moral obligations reflects Spark’s anarchic impulse, resisting the moral authority of bourgeois ethics. Herman suggests that Spark’s novels deliberately avoid moral judgment, replacing traditional ethical frameworks with alternative values, suggesting that her characters exist within a framework where conventional ethics have been rendered meaningless (2008, p. 73). In such a world, alternative values, such as self-preservation or anarchy take precedence, challenging the reader to reconsider the foundations of morality itself. However, these values do not merely replace older ones; they expose the hypocrisy of moral systems rooted in patriarchy. In Nancy’s case, the absence of moral conventions is filled with transgressive relationships. By discarding traditional moral codes, Spark creates a liberating narrative space in *A Far Cry from Kensington* in which disorder and resistance become sites of power for women like Nancy to assert agency beyond the limits of social conformity.

Nancy Hawkins seeks autonomy and control throughout the novel, embodying Spark’s anarchic resistance to institutional frameworks. Her steadfast commitment to acting on her decisions, regardless of personal and professional consequences, further proves her refusal to conform to traditional expectations of propriety or allow others to dictate her behaviour. Her employment is terminated after she declines to apologise for insults to Hector Bartlett, yet she does not seek the consent or approval of others. Her focus on independence elevates her status in the eyes of others, with Emma Loy describing her as a “tower of strength” (Spark, 1988, p.

132). Others perceive Mrs. Hawkins as trustworthy, who “invited confidences” (Spark, 1988, p. 6). However, this perception shifts as Mrs. Hawkins undergoes a physical transformation. She acknowledges that people felt comfortable confiding in her when she was overweight, confiding in her as though her physical presence projected stability and security. Yet, after losing weight, she gained emotional control over others at the cost of losing the trust that had once defined her relationships. This shift is evident when Wanda, previously reliant on Nancy's support, suddenly perceives her as a threat, accusing her of conspiring against her highlighting how a woman's assertion of autonomy over her body, one that defies gendered expectations of containment, is met with suspicion. In this context, weight loss becomes more than a physical change; it serves as a marker of fragility and unreliability, revealing how self-governance is often punished in society. Through this transformation, the novel critiques how bodies and behaviour are policed by bourgeois moral expectations, illustrating how individuals who challenge these norms face institutional and interpersonal resistance.

Spark's rejection of bourgeois ethics and conventional social roles further reinforces her anarchic vision, evident in her portrayal of characters such as Isobel and Patrick. A similar detachment from traditional ethical frameworks is evident in Isobel, another ambitious woman in the publishing industry. Determined to advance professionally, Isobel engages in relationships with influential men who promise her employment opportunities, resulting in pregnancy. While her actions might be perceived as opportunistic, the novel does not overtly condemn Isobel's actions. Instead, it critiques the double standards that govern gendered power dynamics by exposing the moral contradictions of the men who deceive her. The men who exploit Isobel's ambition for their own benefit emerge as the true moral hypocrites, reinforcing Spark's larger interrogation of institutionalised patriarchy. Isobel's pregnancy further complicates these themes, and her baby becomes a symbol of her struggles. Her decision to give the baby away reflects her detachment from conventional maternal expectations. Rather than conforming to societal pressures, she asserts her autonomy over her body and future, aligning with Spark's rejection of predetermined gender roles.

Patrick and Mabel's marriage further illustrates Spark's critique of moral and social conventions, particularly in depicting relationships as transactional rather than a genuine emotional connection. Rather than exploring marriage as an institution grounded in affection and ethical commitment, Spark reveals it as a mechanism for control and power. Mabel's paranoia over Nancy's relationship with her husband reflects the novel's preoccupation with transactional relationships as her suspicions are driven less by romantic jealousy and more by a fear of losing control over Patrick. This substitution of affection with transaction signals Spark's anarchic literary strategy of undoing social institutions from within. Within this framework, even a marriage is reduced to a system of negotiations and implicit exchanges. When Mabel offers assistance to Patrick, it is implied that she expects compensation in return. This relationship exemplifies Spark's tendency to assign “an exchange value” to human interactions (Apostolou, 2001, p. 74). The emphasis on transactional relationships destroys the space for ethical considerations, replacing traditional moral frameworks with a system of calculated exchanges. Spark exposes the fluid and often hypocritical nature of social and ethical expectations through these characters, revealing how personal and institutional power struggles determine morality. This anarchic vision is echoed in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, where Dougal Douglas similarly disrupts institutional norms, exposing the hidden malice within structured systems.



### The Subversion of Authority in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*

While *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* similarly explores themes of anarchy, moral ambiguity, and the desire for domination, it further reveals the fragility of the hierarchical systems by focusing on a protagonist who challenges authority and actively manipulates it. The protagonist, Dougal Douglas, is depicted as a disruptive force within his environment. He is described as “an angel-devil”, a character who does not commit outright harm but instead provokes disorder by revealing the weaknesses of those around him (Spark, 1960, p. 30). Spark demonstrates “an emotional commitment to the extravagance and anarchism of her mischievous character” (Cheyette, 2000, p. 47), allowing him to evade consequences despite his self-proclaimed status as “one of the wicked spirits that wander through the world for the ruin of souls” (Spark, 1960, p. 77). His ability to shift between identities reinforces his anarchic tendencies, which are evident in the form of a dance:

[Dougal] pressed into the midst of the dancers, bearing before him the lid of a dust-bin [...]. Then he placed the lid upside down on the floor, sat cross-legged inside it, and was a man in a rocking boat rowing for his life. [...] Next, Dougal sat on his haunches and banged a message out on a tom-tom. [...] He was an ardent cyclist, crouched over the handlebars and pedalling uphill with the lid between his knees. He was an old woman with an umbrella; he stood on the upturned edges of the lid and speared fish from his rocking canoe; he was the man at the wheel of a racing car; he did many things with the lid until he finally propped the dust-bin lid up on his high shoulder, beating the cymbal rhythmically with his hand while with the other hand he limply conducted an invisible band, being, with long blank face, the band-leader. (1960, p. 59-60)

Douglas’s seemingly nonsensical improvisation with the dustbin lid becomes a metaphor for the subversion of social and narrative order, revealing “Dougal’s defiance of a deeply conformist ethos” (Bailey, 2021, p. 113). On the surface, he performs a comic and absurd display. Beneath this performance is an anarchic refusal to submit to any fixed identity or socially defined role. Douglas’s performative transformations destabilise the reader’s grasp of narrative and plot. Spark reveals that anarchy can emerge with the narrative fabric by presenting such characters as Douglas, who challenge norms through absurd performances. His ability to manipulate others, especially in his dealings with labour and corporate authority, highlights how anarchy enables challenges to institutional control through narrative and performance. Douglas plays a crucial role in reconciling absent workers with their employer, only to later manipulate circumstances in ways that unravel workplace order. Midway through the novel, Douglas reverses even the order of his name, becoming *Dougal*, and secures a new position with a rival company. Cairns Craig contends that when a rival company hires Dougal without quitting his first job, it appears that he is not governed by “the temporal constraints by which other workers’ lives are governed” (2019, p. 112). This transformation illustrates his refusal to be confined by institutional expectations. This fluidity ultimately leads to heightened paranoia, culminating in the nervous breakdown of a manager who, in turn, murders his lover. Without directly intending destruction, Dougal’s actions nonetheless bring the downfall of those around him. Yet, Dougal’s true power lies in his ability to evade moral categorization altogether, disrupting the boundaries between order and anarchy.

Spark persistently questions morality throughout the novel, exposing its contradictions and subjective nature. Illicit relationships are referenced frequently, yet the morality of marriage itself is scrutinized more closely. The manager’s affair with his secretary is depicted as an accepted norm, while his emotionally distant marriage is framed as more unethical than infidelity. Spark’s nuanced portrayal of relationships challenges conventional moral judgments, revealing how

socially sanctioned institutions can be as flawed as the transgressions they are meant to oppose. Therefore, Spark's exploration of morality extends beyond personal relationships and into the realm of social and professional ethics. As Gerard Carruthers notes,

It is a typically Sparkian twist that [...] so many characters in the novel have settled into a very mundane, threadbare kind of sinfulness. We see the pair sharing dull suppers together, and Druce very neatly folding his trousers prior to their passionless lovemaking, with the implication that they have lost not only a keen sense of goodness. (2008, p. 495)

Carruthers illustrates the predictability of moral compromises in Spark's characters. Beyond Spark's critique of relationships, her protagonists are also victims of their own moral ambiguity. Because the novel resists endorsing a fixed moral framework, it renders discussions of ethics essentially meaningless. This is evident in the uninspired routines of the manager and his mistress, whose lifeless intimacy highlights the lack of true passion or conviction in their actions. The novel does not frame their affair as particularly scandalous but rather as reflecting Spark's world's broader moral indifference. In contrast, acts that might traditionally be considered immoral such as deception and manipulation, often carry a sense of disruption that renders them more compelling than the passive adherence to social norms.

This moral ambiguity extends into the professional sphere, where workplace ethics are equally unstable. Douglas's deception, which encourages widespread absenteeism among workers, is framed not as a specific wrongdoing but as another symptom of a world in which moral boundaries have blurred. His manipulations destabilise hierarchical structures, revealing the arbitrary nature of professional authority and the ways in which power operates through hypocrisy rather than genuine ethical conviction. Rather than drawing clear distinctions between right and wrong, Spark deliberately collapses the boundary between morality and immorality. Instead, she embraces what she describes as a strategy to "blur the boundary between nonsense and truth," demonstrating how moral codes often reinforce power more than uphold any absolute ethical principles (Kucala, 2011, p. 68).

Spark is often preoccupied with self-control and the control of others in her leading characters, and Dougal Douglas epitomises this dual dynamic. He is portrayed as socially and emotionally manipulative, frequently toying with the perceptions of those around him. His influence extends beyond simple deceit as he alters the way people see themselves. For example, he unsettles Merle's self-perception by asking whether she considers herself "a free woman or a slave," prompting her to reassess her identity and life (Spark, 1960, p. 30). In this way, Douglas operates as both an instigator and a catalyst for change, not through direct action but through suggestion and provocation. Beyond psychological manipulation, Douglas is also presented as an artist, reinforcing Spark's fascination with the overlap between creativity and control. Hired by a firm for his supposed creative abilities, he exhibits an almost performative detachment from reality, turning his own existence into a work of art. His self-fashioning aligns with Spark's broader tendency to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality, as Douglas is transformed into art himself, absorbing the lives of others while simultaneously escaping conventional artistic form and real-world consequences (Apostolou, 2001, p. 4). As Božena Kućala similarly notes, "Spark's fiction features a gallery of plot-makers, characters who usurp power to construct scenarios for their own and other people's lives" (2011, p. 71). Douglas is one such plot-maker, crafting narratives that reshape the world around him to his advantage. Douglas's skilful deception elevates

him to the role of the biographer, reinforcing Spark's tendency to equate mastery of narrative with mastery of reality. Just as he constructs a carefully curated version of himself, he scripts the lives of those around him, leading them to act in ways they might not otherwise. Through him, Spark asserts her dominance over both social structures and artistic forms, using manipulation as a means of control. In Douglas, narrative power becomes indistinguishable from social influence, and storytelling emerges as an act of rebellion and domination.

Across *The Driver's Seat*, *A Far Cry from Kensington* and *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, Spark employs anarchy as a narrative strategy to destabilise moral ethics and institutional authority. Each novel discussed in this article features protagonists who resist social norms and hierarchical structures. While their characteristics differ, these protagonists share a commitment to individual agency in such a way that challenges established systems, whether patriarchal or institutional, in the narrative. Spark also creates an anarchic vision in form with narratives that resist closure and disorient readerly expectations. Spark interrogates how power and authority function in all three texts and exposes the fragility and arbitrariness of moral and institutional conventions that seek to regulate society.

## Conclusion

This article has examined how Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*, *A Far Cry from Kensington*, and *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* represent anarchy as a subversive force embedded in character and narrative form. Each novel primarily focuses on a protagonist destabilising hierarchical structures through performative and linguistic subversions. Lise performs her own murder like a theatrical masterpiece, Nancy Hawkins defies institutional hypocrisy through satire and her late husband's last name, and Douglas manipulates corporate authorities with absurd and performative subversions. These protagonists do not simply rebel; instead, they expose the fragility of institutional hierarchies. Thus, Spark's characters are anarchic in their refusal to conform to the social and moral expectations. As Todd May argues, when power is redefined as a productive force, resistance becomes a question of distinguishing between oppressive and productive uses of power. Spark's protagonists do not seek to dismantle all forms of hierarchies; instead, they distort them from within, unsettling narrative traditions. Thus, I suggest Spark explores the paradox of anarchy coexisting with authority, within her characters and her own storytelling. The protagonists' actions are anarchic not because they destroy order, but because they reveal it to be arbitrary and performative. By refusing moral absolutes, Spark challenges the reader to question the stability of societal structures, the power dynamics embedded in institutions, and the limits of personal autonomy. Ultimately, Spark's fiction does not merely celebrate disruption but interrogates social and literary power mechanisms. Her novels suggest that anarchy is not just a political act but also an aesthetic one, where the act of storytelling itself becomes a battleground for resistance. Spark positions anarchy as both theme and narrative technique in these novels by disrupting narrative temporality and closure.

## References

- Apostolou, F. E. (2001). *Seduction and death in Muriel Spark's fiction*. Greenwood Press.
- Bailey, J. (2021). *Muriel Spark's early fiction: literary subversion and experiments with form*. Edinburgh University Press.

- Bronfen, E. (1992). *Over her dead body, death femininity and the aesthetic*. Manchester University Press.
- Carruthers, G. (2008). 'Fully to savour her position': Muriel Spark and Scottish identity. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 54 (3), 487–504. DOI: 10.1353/mfs.0.1538
- Cheyette, B. (2000). *Muriel Spark*. Northcote House Publishers.
- Chowder, G. (1991). *Classical anarchism: the political thought of Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin*. Clarendon Press.
- Craig, C. (2019). *Muriel Spark, existentialism and the art of death*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Herman, D. (2008). 'A salutary scar': Muriel Spark's desegregated art in the twenty-first century. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 54 (3), 473–486. DOI: 10.1353/mfs.0.1548
- Kermode, F. (1963). The house of fiction: interviews with seven English novelists. *Partisan Review*, 30, 61-82.
- Kucala, B. (2011). The natural and the supernatural in Muriel Spark's fiction. *Studia Litteraria*, 6, 65–73. DOI: 10.4467/20843933ST.11.005.0303
- Lyons, P. (2010). Muriel Spark's break with romanticism. Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley (Eds), *The Edinburgh companion to Muriel Spark* (pp. 85–97). Edinburgh University Press.
- May, Todd. (1994). *The political philosophy of poststructuralist anarchism*. The Anarchist Library.
- McQuillan, M. (2002). *Theorising Muriel Spark: gender, race, deconstruction*. Palgrave.
- Nordjhem, B. (1987). *What fiction means*. Atheneum Distributor.
- Spark, M. (1960). *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*. Penguin.
- Spark, M. (1970). *The driver's seat*. Penguin.
- Spark, M. (1988). *A far cry from Kensington*. Virago.

**Ethical Statement/Etik Beyan:** It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited. / Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur.

**Declaration of Conflict/Çatışma Beyanı:** It is declared that there is no conflict of interest between individuals or institutions in the study. / Çalışmada kişi ya da kurumlar arası çıkar çatışmasının olmadığı beyan olunur.

**Copyright&License/Telif Hakkı&Lisans:** Authors publishing with the journal retain the copyright to their work licensed under the CC BY-NC 4.0 / Yazarlar dergide yayınlanan çalışmalarının telif hakkına sahiptirler ve çalışmalarını CC BY-NC 4.0 lisansı altında yayımlanmaktadır.