

Metafictional Study of Muriel Spark's *Loitering with Intent*

Ms. Babita

Assistant Professor, Department of English, S. U. S. Government College Matak Majri, Indri (Karnal)

ABSTRACT

Muriel Spark's *Loitering with Intent* projects metafiction as its key feature with regard to its complex narrative structure and it has several coatings of fiction-within-fiction and interrupts the reader's expectations of a genre by violating the generic boundaries. The present paper tries to uncover the self-reflexive and self-conscious personality of Spark as a writer which she tries to portray through metafiction. It also explores her art of narration and creation of fiction. Along with it, the paper also reflects its impact on her future novels which she wrote after *Loitering with Intent*.

Key Words: Metafiction, Narratology, Narrative, Narration, Novel, Muriel Spark, Fiction, Postmodern

INTRODUCTION

“When people say that nothing happens in their lives I believe them. But you must understand that everything happens to an artist; time is always redeemed, nothing is lost and wonders never cease.”

~*Loitering with Intent*

‘Metafiction’ is a narratological literary device and genre of fiction, which means fiction about fiction or fiction within fiction. It has become a powerful tool in late modern and postmodern fiction but it is rooted in former authors and works. As history of literature mirrors it has its roots in Homer's *Odyssey*, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1476), Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759) etc., but it is highly practiced by the fiction writers in the 21st century and Muriel Spark is also one of those selected novelists who used this complicated layered narratological technique to form a fiction-within-fiction. Muriel Spark's *Loitering with Intent* projects metafiction as its key feature with regard to its complex narrative structure and it has several coatings of fiction-within-fiction and interrupts the reader's expectations of a genre by violating the generic boundaries. The present paper tries to uncover the self-reflexive and self-conscious personality of Spark as a writer which she tries to portray through metafiction. It also explores her art of narration and creation of fiction. Along with it, the paper also reflects its impact on her future novels which she wrote after *Loitering with Intent* (1981).

Dame Muriel Spark (Feb. 1, 1918 – April 13, 2006) occupies an important place among the post-war British novelists. In 1981, Spark was nominated for the second time in her career, for Booker McConnell Prize for *Loitering with Intent*, though she didn't win the prize but her novel received enough critical attention. This novel is one of Muriel Spark's most accomplished fables or novels. Since its publication, *Loitering with Intent* has been explored from various aspects. However, not many critics have in-depth studies on its metafictional features. A few critics, like Dipple, Page and Wittaker, mention that the novel is a metafiction, but they only draw a general conclusion without providing sufficient arguments in a comprehensive and convincing way. Indeed, *Loitering with Intent* is a typical metafiction and distinguishes itself from others by its extremely wide range of metafictional characteristics. In terms of its structure, the novel has the complicated “fiction within fiction”. As to its content, it not only foregrounds the artificiality of the novel itself but also has literary criticism as its fictional object.

Loitering with Intent is unique for its multi-layered structure. At first sight, it seems to be a simple autobiography-as-novel. However, scrupulous reading can reveal its complex structure as fiction-within-fiction, or story-within-story. Waugh points out: “In metafictional novels, obvious framing devices range from stories within stories and self-consuming worlds or mutually contradictory situations” (Waugh, 30).

Loitering with Intent is comprised of three levels of stories.

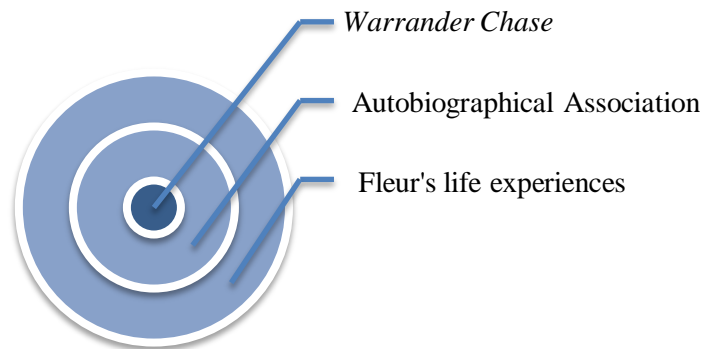


Figure1, Source: Self

The outer frame, or the frame story, is about the protagonist's experiences after she escapes from an organization named Autobiographical Association headed by Sir Quentin. In the frame story, the protagonist is Fleur as the first person "I". It begins with Fleur's own recollections about herself writing a poem in an old graveyard "one day in the middle of the twentieth century" (7). It is later regarded as "the last day of a whole chunk of my life", though "I didn't know that at the time" (7). At that time, "I was close on penniless but my spirits were all the more high because I had recently escaped from the Autobiographical Association (non-profit-making) where I was thought rather mad, if not evil" (9). It then smoothly drops the hint that the protagonist starts telling the inner story: "I will tell you about the Autobiographical Association" (9). Thus the outer story just serves as an introduction to the second and the third level of story. In the last part of *Loitering with Intent*, this outer story reasserts itself: "From the day of the funeral to the day at the end of June when I sat in the graveyard writing my poem, Dottie kept me abundantly informed about the members of the disbanded Association" (209). It rather clearly conveys the message that the other two levels of the story just stop here and the whole work of fiction again returns to the outer story, or the frame story, as it may be called. The frame story, then just brings the fiction to the end through Fleur's narration of her final success with her novel writing and her enthusiasm at being a woman and an artist in the twentieth century. This outer frame of story, or the first level of the story, provides a necessary frame for the novel *Loitering with Intent*. It ensures that both the younger Fleur's and the mature Fleur's opinions are conveyed, thus enabling Spark to give full play to her ideas through Fleur. Without the frame the novel seems merely an autobiography told by Fleur.

The second level of story is chiefly about Fleur's involvement with the members of the Autobiographical Association and her experiences with the writing of the novel *Warrender Chase* as well as her attempts to publish it. In this story, there are more protagonists, such as Fleur herself, Sir Quentin and the like. The story happens "ten months before the day when I sat writing my poem on the worn-out graves of the dead in Kensington and had a conversation with the shy policeman" (9). And it ends with Fleur's knowledge of Sir Quentin's death and things that take place at the funeral. The third level of the story, namely *Warrender Chase*, tells about the happenings to the eponymous hero *Warrender Chase*. It interrupts the second level of the story from time to time. It is not told in a straightforward way. Neither does it have a complete plotline. Its summary can only be vaguely worked out: an evil character named *Warrender Chase* organizes a group with an ulterior purpose. He tries to control the members of his coterie by every possible means, resulting in the death of one of the members and deterioration of the mind of the members. Finally he meets his own doom in a car crash. In fact, there lie many similarities between the second and the third level of story. Generally speaking, these two stories are intertwined with each other, the difference being that *Warrender Chase* is not told in a continual time sequence and the story only exists in scraps told by Fleur. Nevertheless, if we read carefully enough, *Warrender Chase* is found to contain some clear clues as to its plot. For example, Fleur mentions the first clue, she writes, "The novel I was writing, my first, *Warrender Chase*, was really filling my whole life at that time. I was finding it extraordinary how, throughout all the period I had been working on the novel, right from Chapter One... Not that I reproduced them photographically and literally. I didn't for a moment think of portraying Sir Quentin as he was (15-16)."

In the paragraph immediately following this, Fleur expresses her concern that "in September 1949 I had no idea at all if I could bring off *Warrender Chase*. But whether I was capable of finishing the whole book or not, the excitement was the same" (16). In fact, she likes to talk about the writing of *Warrender Chase* when she recollects her involvement with the Autobiographical Association. At one time, she recalls that "I was fascinated by the strangeness of the job. I made no notes at all, but most nights I would work on my novel and the ideas of the day would resemble themselves to form those two female characters which I created in *Warrender Chase*, Charlotte and Prudence" (24). With Fleur's occasional remarks about its creation, *Warrender Chase* is closely connected with the second level of the story and establishes itself as the third level of the story in *Loitering with Intent*.

In the narration of the second-level story, Fleur talks about Warrender Chase so frequently that the reader comes to have an idea of its storyline step by step and at the same time has a perceptive understanding through her occasional discussion of the relations between the novel Warrender Chase and the second level of the story. The three layered complicated structure of *Loitering with Intent* presents this novel as traditional structure of metafiction. In terms of Genette narrative typology, the level of narrative structure can be divided in the four parts of three categories and following table showing the same division:

S. No.	Objects	Levels	Narrative Content
1	Main Plot	<i>Extradiegetic</i>	<i>Autodiegetic</i> Narrator (“I”) <i>Homodiegetic</i> Narration
2	Event Story	<i>Intradiegetic</i>	Story about a novelist Fleur, who is writing her first novel.
3	Second level– Narration Act	<i>Intradiegetic</i>	Fleur writes novel <i>Warrender Chase</i>
4	Embedded Narrations	<i>Metadiegetic</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Story of <i>Warrender Chase</i> ➤ Character’s Autobiographies ➤ Henry Newman’s <i>Apologia pro Vita Sua</i> ➤ Cellini’s <i>The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini</i> ➤ A poem ➤ Some Diaries ➤ Letters

Source: Self

Main plot is narrated at *extradiegetic* level by *autodiegetic* narrator. Fleur is not only a character inside the story but she is also protagonist in the main plot and narrating her own story, so she is *autodiegetic* narrator. The novel is entirely based on the beginning of Fleur’s life journey as a novelist, her experiences as an editor in Autobiographical Association and her novel *Warrender Chase*. That is why Spark chooses *autodiegetic voice* to narrate Fleur’s thoughts, feelings and perceptions. The first level narrative is narrated at the *extradiegetic* level and the event story, narrated in this level fills the second level of narration of writing *Warrender Chase* by Fleur at *intradiegetic* level. The story line of *Warrender Chase*, autobiographies of the members of Autobiographical Association, Henry Newman’s *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, Cellini’s *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*, some diaries, a poem and a letter is the novel’s *embedded* narration. Fleur is narrating other stories, autobiographies, references from different books by various writers, poems etc. and her narrative act is on the same level i.e. *intradiegetic* level. However, all the *embedded* narrations which are narrated through the second level of narration are *metadiegetic*.

Besides the consummate structure of “fiction within fiction”, *Loitering with Intent* also has an extremely special frame relationship which is called *mise en abyme*. This term is borrowed from French and referring to the heraldic image of an escutcheon bearing in its centre a miniature replica of itself, or a small shield depicted within a larger one, originates from Andre Gide’s novel *The Counterfeiters* (1925) where the author includes a fictional novelist writing a novel also entitled *The Counterfeiters*. The third level of the story, or *Warrender Chase* by Fleur, is just the element which is at the same time part of the second level of story and the comments on it. It can be regarded as the mirror-image of the second level of the story. Their relationship is a typical *mise en abyme*.

With the special structural features, and the meditations on critical theories, *Loitering with Intent* exactly falls into the category of metafiction which, according to Wenche Ommundsen, “presents its readers with allegories of the fictional experience, calling our attention to the functioning of the fictional artefact, its creation and reception, its participation in the meaning making systems of our culture” (Ommundsen, 12). Also, with this metafictional novel, Spark self-consciously probes the nature of fiction making and summarizes her reflections as well as ideas about her creation in the past, and makes it guidance for her future novel-writing. Therefore, the significance of *Loitering with Intent* lies not just in Spark’s skilful application of the metafictional strategy, but in its being the connecting link between Spark’s present works and future ones.



WORKS CITED

- [1] Ommundsen, W. *Metafictions?* Melbourne UP, 1993.
- [2] Spark, Muriel. *Curriculum Vitae: A Volume of Autobiography*. Carcanet P, 1992.
- [3] ---. *Loitering with Intent*. Virago P, 1981.
- [4] Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. Methuen, 1984.