

# Reexamination of Orientalism by the Protagonist's Psychological Interiority in Concert with Setting Description in *The Painted Veil*

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**ABSTRACT**-In *The Painted Veil*, the setting descriptions serve as an apparatus to reveal the protagonist Kitty's mental or emotional status for that her psychological interiority is projected onto these external objects, which T.S. Eliot named Objective Correlative. Through this angle, this paper reexamines certain Orientalism related topics and previous critiques. This paper analyzes how Kitty's psychological world and setting descriptions coordinate to indicate Kitty's transformation. The transitional process of Kitty's attitudes towards China and Chinese and the development of Kitty's perception of life are explored. Intriguingly, this paper tempts to prove that some critiques against Maugham and the novel may be prejudice-oriented or evidence insufficient.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Orientalism has been a popular critical theory in the field of postcolonial literary study for many years ever since Edward W. Said published his work *Orientalism* in 1978 analyzing how the Westerns creates "the Orient" to fulfill westerners' imagination and satisfaction with their superiority over the Eastern world [1]. Even nowadays, the misunderstanding between western and eastern cultures remains a severe issue. As Sa'di states, Orientalism still functions in such a globalized world, as it has shifted to be more concerned with culture and economy [2], which indicates the significance of distinguishing its impact on literary works.

Such a lens has been applied to interpretations of *The Painted Veil*; however, certain critiques may overextend themselves without plausible proof or arguments. As one of the most analyzed topics, the setting description of Chinese images in *The Painted Veil* has been considered tangible evidence for both Maugham and the novel being Orientalist or stereotyping China. Nevertheless, the possibility of Maugham utilizing the settings purposefully for the projection of protagonist's mental status has been neglected. Thus, this paper will be reexamining the Chinese imagery description as a method of understanding Kitty's mental status and transformation, in rebuttal to previous judgements.

### 1.1 Literature Review

As a popular British novelist of the twentieth century, who had traveled to and written about many colonized eastern regions and countries, Maugham's works bring controversial voices to the majority. Some tend to consider Maugham as a colonizer, while some may see him

as one who criticized colonization yet was unavoidably influenced by colonialist ideology.

Many critics such as Feng Xiaoqian [3], Yang Qianqian [4], and Ding Meijie [5] take the theory of Orientalism to criticize how Maugham expresses his superiority of western civilization with his environmental description in *The Painted Veil*. They believe that his descriptions deliver a sense of decadent, uncultured, and dark and that Maugham constructs Chinese characters as the other, silenced, uglified, and inferior, with no freedom of action or speech, while in comparison, western characters such as the bacteriologist Walter Fane and the French sisters in the convent are the ones to bring salvation to the Orient. Such an intentional arrangement is believed to reveal Maugham's superiority. Nevertheless, Maugham's conflicting admiring perspective shows in the utopianization of Chinese villages, portrayed as natural, tranquil, and inartificial beauty which the industrialized Occident could not possess anymore. With the additional interpretation of *On a Chinese Screen*, Maugham's travel notes for his trip to China in 1919, Feng further argues that Maugham admires Chinese aesthetics and natural lifestyle, but also holds onto his westerner superiority which interferes with his understanding of China, therefore, *The Painted Veil* contains Maugham's misgivings, misinterpretations, and false imaginations of China [3].

Similarly, in Zhang Yiran's article, she discusses Maugham's complex and ambivalent attitude towards China in *The Painted Veil*, by analyzing Kitty's antipathy to Mei-Tan-Fu and Chinese people [6]. She explores further into the projection of Maugham's desire as a British colonizer onto Chinese images as the other and criticizes Maugham for treating the Orient as a place for self-reconstruction and power exercising in *The Painted Veil*.

Taking the same critical technique, both Cong Siyu [7] and Song Meilin [8] analyze the construction of a

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Manchu woman, who was saved by and in love with a British man Waddington. Cong argues that Maugham creates a stereotypical Oriental woman from a westerner's view and satirizes her appearance and that the relationship between her and Waddington also implicates that the Oriental must be dependent on the Occidental to survive and that it strengthens the constructed relation of the savior and the saved [7].

Contrastively, Xu Fenglin partially disagrees with the previous sharp criticisms of Maugham [9]. Xu considers the Manchu woman a powerful figure that changes Kitty's attitude towards the Orient into admiration, while Waddington is an avatar of Maugham, representing Maugham's contemplations on China and Daoism after his trip to China in 1919. Xu argues that the Manchu woman is evidence of Maugham's worship of ancient Chinese civilization and culture. Song Meilin adds that the Dao in Chinese Daoism mentioned by Waddington represents the utopian society and salvation Maugham sought for his own industrialized country, thus, in *The Painted Veil*, Maugham makes Kitty immersed in Chinese Dao experiencing the changes in the state of mind from antipathy to tranquility [8].

Chen Shuhua employs ecogism to explore Daoism's impact on Maugham manifested in *The Painted Veil* and concludes that Maugham expresses his expectation for Daoism to purify self-centered minds and inspiring westerners to construct a harmonious relationship with nature [10]. Chen argues that influenced by Zhuangzi, Maugham manifests his understanding of the Daoist view of life and death on Waddington and that Maugham creates Waddington and the Manchu woman as a perfect model couple for westerners whose marriages are based not on love but on mutual utilization; meanwhile, she considers the couple to be another layer of Daoism manifestation of harmonious gender relations and marriage.

## 2 DISCUSSION

### 2.1 The Projection of Kitty's Psychological Interiority on Setting Description

As T.S. Eliot explained in his article *Hamlet and His Problems* published in 1922:

"The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked." [11]

Since Kitty Fane is the focal character, Maugham employs an appropriate amount of setting descriptions in *The Painted Veil* and matches them with Kitty's mental state, especially when Kitty encounters certain issues which trigger her inner struggles. With the additional angle of Objective Correlative, the transformations of Kitty's mental state can be traced and spotted.

#### 2.1.1. Initial Figure: Orientalist and Agitated

Originally, Kitty is a cosseted and superficial middle-upper class white western woman, an iconic figure of western colonizer full of prejudice, misperceptions, and disdain towards China. Such a loathing attitude is applied to the tone of setting description when Kitty enters a Chinese curio dealer's shop for her appointment with Charlie Townsend. Taking such an attitude to view her situation in Tching-Yen (Hongkong), the depictions of the environment and Chinese people utilize a considerable amount of emotionally negative words:

"She hated the Chinese city and it made her nervous to go into the filthy little house...the Chinese...stared at her unpleasantly; she hated the ingratiating smile...The room into which he led her was frowsy and the large wooden bed against the wall made her shudder." [12]

From this short passage, Kitty's extreme aversion to China is manifested and emphasized repeatedly by words such as "hated", "filthy", "frowsy", and "shudder" [12]. Highly visible as it is for Kitty that China is uncultured, undeveloped, uncivilized, and full of danger. Another reason for such a negative description is Kitty's fear and concern for her adultery with Townsend. Similar descriptions can be spotted again when Kitty panics realizing Walter her husband has already known her infidelity and hastily meet Townsend: "...walked up the rickety, dark stairs.....It was stuffy and there was an acrid smell of opium." [12] With such depictions, the depraved and opium-addicted Chinese image is sketched, which matches exactly how the colonizers view the Oriental. Meanwhile, it successfully reflects Kitty's nervous and frightened mental status.

Such terrifying emotion deepens as Kitty is forced to company Walter to Mei-Tan-Fu where severe cholera spreads. As Kitty observes the strange world around her, she judges everything with her predominant colonialist perspective and fear of death from cholera infection.

"saw an archway... fantastic and beautiful...it made her uneasy...Was it a menace that she vaguely discerned or was it derision? ...a grove of bamboos and they leaned over the causeway strangely as if they would detain her...It gave her the sensation that someone hidden among them was watching her as she passed." [12]

No matter how stunning the view is, all Kitty can perceive is threatening and impending death and danger, thus, bamboos shivering in freezes are "strange" and may "detain" her, and she feels being watched which shows the insecure and trepid status she is in.

As many may argue that previous descriptions reveal the innate colonialist superiority Maugham has and his Orientalist prejudice against China, it might be a hasty and unfair judgment to make, because not only does Kitty's perception of Chinese views later completely change and transform into admiration and rough understanding, but also does Maugham shows no mercy in depicting and satirizing western images as Kitty returns England mourning her late mother while using "cold and pretentious", "stiff", "flowers looked out of place", and "acrid, musty smell" [12] to describe her mother's bedroom which matches Kitty's complex feelings mixed with resentment and missing for her mother. Such seemingly

harsh and objects-indifferent comments indicate not that Maugham has absolutely no colonialist side but that to prove the opposite with solely fragmented passages of purposefully uglified descriptions of Chinese views may not be convincing enough since such descriptions are not necessarily a revelation of Maugham's psychological interiority but the protagonist's early Orientalist mind state and her inner struggles.

### 2.1.2. *Unveiling Oriental China: Transition and Transformation*

Leaving Tching-Yen (Hongkong), the colonized city, and following Walter to interior China, Mei-Tan-Fu, Kitty encounters her fresh experience of true China, which lifts the long casted veil on the Oriental and prompts Kitty to understand and appreciate China.

Settled in Mei-Tan-Fu and tortured by ceaseless apprehension, Kitty has a metaphorical dream where silent surroundings come to life and Chinese coolies carrying a coffin separate her and Townsend. The series of objects and incidents in this dream provides a tunnel into analyzing Kitty's disordered mental state. The people and objects in the surrounding that she cannot see through are avatars of her shallow understanding of China; Townsend appearing and expressing his remorse for abandoning Kitty is what Kitty desires desperately now – away from cholera raging place; the coffin and coolies symbolize the reality in front of Kitty – ruthless and fatal destiny, which separates her and her wish. The narrative of Kitty's dream stops at her sudden awakening and shifts into depictions of the breathtakingly beautiful scenes Kitty sees – a classical Chinese natural painting-like scenery – mountains and rivers sleeping in tranquility, under the beams of morning break, mists and clouds veiling the forests and cottages. The view immerses and impresses Kitty deeply that:

“Tears ran down Kitty's face and she gazed...She had never felt so light of heart and it seemed to her as though her body were a shell that lay at her feet and she pure spirit. Here was beauty.” [12]

Contrastively, Kitty used to consider these views intimidating, mysterious, and threatening, yet now, she feels mentally purified and calmed. It metaphorically implies the beginning of her transition and growth. Gradually, Kitty's increasingly frequent conversations with Waddington accelerate her reflections and mental development – she begins to see how dualist and irrational the Occidental has been on the matter of understanding the Oriental.

“...in China alone was it so led that a sensible man might discern in it a sort of reality...Kitty had never heard the Chinese spoken of as anything but decadent, dirty and unspeakable. It was as though the corner of a curtain were lifted for a moment, and she caught a glimpse of a world rich with a colour and significance she had not dreamt of.” [12]

Now that Kitty has been aware of the false assumptions of China, she then begins her journey of lifting the veil on the Oriental. Accompanied by Waddington, Kitty enters a cholera raging place and faces the brutal reality

where life and death compete every second, and thus, gender, race, or religion matters no more, but the humanitarians unite fighting against disease. At first, she struggles from overcoming her preceding existed detestation of Chinese when the French sisters in the convent introduce her to all the Chinese kids they saved. In Kitty's eyes, the kids are “mites of two and three, with their black Chinese eyes and their black hair..... sallown-skinned, stunted, with their flat noses, they looked to her hardly human.....repulsive” that makes her “shudder” and “wish to leave” [12]. Then Kitty sees four newborn Chinese infants, though she still thinks “their quaint little Chinese faces were screwed up into strange grimaces. They looked hardly human; queer animals of an unknown species”, but “there was something singularly moving in the sight” for Kitty. It is the humanitarian love that leads Kitty to acceptance and a caring attitude that she joins the French sisters in taking care of all the Chinese kids and gets close and intimate with them.

Since Kitty has established a fresh perception of Chinese, her mental state of viewing Chinese villages and sceneries changes completely compared with her previous reactions. After spending a period caring for Chinese kids in the convent, Kitty has found herself meaningful life for her spirit and has been in a placid and calm mood. With such a mental state, when she is on her way to visit a nearby Buddhist monastery, she embraces and enjoys the pleasantly stunning natural Chinese sceneries and considers the monks she meets are “smiling” and with “beautiful politeness”. Kitty now feels no more fear or horror for Chinese views or Chinese people.

Furthermore, knowing that Waddington has a Manchu lover, Kitty eagers to meet her because the Manchu woman for Kitty is “the symbol of something that vaguely, but insistently, beckoned to her” and “pointed enigmatically to a mystic land of the spirit”, which refers to Chinese spirit and aesthetics. When she finally meets the Manchu woman, Kitty is stunned by her beauty and temperament – “She was slim in her long-embroidered gown.....a jacket of pale green silk with tight sleeves..... elaborately dressed..... her black, slightly slanting, large eyes burned like lakes of liquid jet” and considers the woman's beautiful hands “languid and elegant” which gives Kitty a sense of “breeding of uncounted centuries”. During their conversation (with Waddington's translation), Kitty finds her eyes “wary, self-possessed and unfathomable” and feels that the Manchu woman is seemingly “unreal, like a picture, and yet had an elegance which made Kitty feel all thumbs”. Such beauty prompts Kitty to reflect again –

“...an inkling of something remote and mysterious. Here was the East, immemorial, dark and inscrutable. The beliefs and the ideals of the West seemed crude beside ideals and beliefs of which in this exquisite creature she seemed to catch a fugitive glimpse...That coloured mask seemed to hide the secret of an abundant, profound and significant experience: those long, delicate hands with their tapering fingers held the key of riddles undivined.” [12]

Though Kitty still has not fully understood Chinese aesthetics and philosophy, for now, she breaks the old confinement of Orientalism and experiences in person the

beauty of China, which further encourages her to learn more, which Waddington explains as “Tao (or The Way)” from Chinese Daoism.

At the end of the novel, after experiencing the loss of Walter and resentment for herself for having another adultery with Townsend as she returns to Tching-Yen (Hongkong), Kitty gets tougher and more caring when she heads home to England. She repairs her relationship with her father and decides to raise her kid “to be a person, independent of others because she is possessed of herself”. In the very last description of objects – “a scene of such breath-taking loveliness that for a brief period the anguish of her heart was assuaged. It reduced to insignificance all human tribulation. The sun rose, dispelling the mist, and she saw winding onwards as far as the eye could reach, among the rice-fields”, the beautiful depictions match Kitty’s accepting and hopeful mental status and indicate her determination to devote to her way under the impact of her journey to the Oriental and rough learning of Chinese Daoism.

### 3 CONCLUSION

Through the lens of objective correlative theory, this paper analyzes how setting descriptions assort with the protagonist’s psychological status and further argues that Chinese imagery descriptions in *The Painted Veil* may not be cogent enough to explain or prove Maugham to be orientalist or hostile against China. Text-based discussions have indicated that though admittedly as a British writer, Maugham may have embodied certain colonizer ideologies in his works, setting descriptions cannot be solid evidence for this judgement as they serve a tunnel into the protagonist’s psychological world, instead of the author’s.

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