

Orientalism under Maugham's Veil -The Interpretation of Orientalism in The Painted Veil

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Abstract: *The Painted Veil* shows the misunderstandings and prejudices of Westerners towards the East. This paper attempts to apply Said's postcolonial theory to analyse the Orientalist identity as *the Other* and the Western identity as *the Self*, and tries to explore the colonialist ideology embodied in the novel.

Keywords: Maugham, *The Painted Veil*, orientalism, the Self, the Other

1. Brief introduction to The Painted Veil and the author

1.1 Introduction to the author and his work

William Somerset Maugham was one of the most important British writers of the 20th century, with a worldwide readership. Maugham's reputation stood far higher with the public than with critics. Though some of Maugham's works are charged with criticism of the absurdities and misdeeds of British colonial authority, *the Painted Veil* reflects Maugham's deeply ingrained Orientalist constructs about the self and the other.

1.2 Main plot

Set in Hong Kong, China, under British colonialism in the 1920s, *The Painted Veil* is a story of betrayal, growth and awakening for Kitty, a beautiful but spoiled girl who marries the intellectual but dull Walter Fane without any affection for him. She marries to escape her heartless family, so "Kitty in a panic married Walter Fane"^[1]. She later leaves London, where she feels stifled, and moves with her husband to Hong Kong. When Fane discovers her affairs with Charles Townsend, a career politician, he forces her to accompany him to a small town called Mei-tan-fu, where cholera threatens everyone's life. There, Kitty's awakening conscience forces her to examine her life and learn how to love. But the happy hour is always short, Fane gets cholera and dies, Kitty finally lifts the veil and discovers the depth of his love.

2. Theoretical Perspective

The literary critical theory employed in this paper is Edward Said's postcolonial critical theory-Orientalism, its key role is to identify the colonialist ideology embedded in Western literature, as in the case of *The Painted Veil*.

2.1 An understanding of post-colonialism

Homi K. Bhabha sums up what postcolonial criticism is about: "Postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order...They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that

attempt to give a hegemonic ‘normality’ to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories, of nations, races, communities, people.”^[2]

Professor Wang Dongfeng also notes that “the concept of Orientalism itself contains the inherent postcolonial interpretive anxiety of losing one’s home and identity. It is a critical discourse constructed by a group of ex-colonial, Third World or disaffected Anglo-American hegemonic intellectuals.”^[3]

2.2 A brief introduction to Edward Said’s Orientalism

Orientalism is defined by Edward Said as the Western way of “domination and restructuring and having authority over the Orient”^[4]. It refers to the way in which non-Western cultures are perceived in the West, by scholars, writers, thinkers, politicians and society at large. “It is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other.”

Said developed the notion of Orientalism, arguing that this way of thinking better reflects the values and prejudices of Western society than those of the Far East. What Said claims is that the Orient exists only for the West and is constructed in relation to the West. It is a reflection of what is inferior and foreign to the West. Thus, in the works of Orientalists, The orient people or the Africans are always defined as cruel, sneaky, barbaric, evil, cunning, dishonest, overpopulated and perverted, and so on.

3. An analysis of orientalism in The Painted Veil

According to Said’s Orientalist theory, the novel embodies many postcolonial elements. The author presents the negative orient image and a positive description of the Westerners, who are centralized and embodied with almost all the human virtues, which obviously doesn’t make sense.

3.1 The projected image of the East as “the other world”: the antithesis of the West

The Painted Veil explores the representation of the West as the Self, contrasted with the representation of the East as the Other. The novel presents, “the dogmatic view of the Oriental as a kind of ideal and unchanging abstraction”. The orient people are portrayed as unattractive, uncouth, dishonest, and sparse in their speech and names, in contrast, even minor Western characters are portrayed as saviors of China.

3.1.1 The East regarded as a mysterious and primitive land

Kitty, as the female protagonist, dominates the narrative of the novel. Through her eyes, the novel paints a mysterious picture of China.

Huge they seemed and you could make out no pattern; the order, if order there was, escape you; wayward and extravagant, but of an unimaginable richness. This was no fortress, nor a temple, but the magic palace of some emperor of the gods where no man might enter. It was too airy, fantastic and fabric of a dream.^[3]

Although Kitty fears going to the cholera-infested region, she is nevertheless touched by the beautiful scenery of China. In the West, the East is often seen as a mysterious land.

3.1.2 Life in the East portrayed as barbaric and uncivilized

The primitive, backward, disease-ridden, desolate land of Mei-tan-fu in the novel is shrouded in the shadow of death, and the author repeats many descriptions of death: “...the great city lay in terror; and death, sudden and ruthless, hurried through its tortuous streets.” “At the foot of the wall that surrounded the compound a man lay on his back with his legs stretched out and his arms thrown over his head.”^[5]

From Maugham’s description, Mei-tan-fu is an uncivilized village where people die one by one

without any recourse, in order to highlight the intertwined poverty and weakness of the area in contrast to the power of the West.

3.2 The orient people portrayed as uncivilized, barbaric and ugly: the antithesis of Western whites

The Western characters, such as Kitty, Walter, and Waddington, as well as the French nuns, are portrayed positively and heroically. They reflect the traditional Western image of the self, being “rational, peaceful, literal, logical, capable of holding real values” (Said 2003:49). Maugham reinforces their image as the superior one by centralizing them.

3.2.1 Negative descriptions of the orient people

The foreigners Kitty meets in Mei-tan-fu are some French nuns from a chapel. The French nuns are seen as generous and kind-hearted Westerners who are the saviors of poor Chinese girls, while their parents are portrayed as greedy, irresponsible people who can sell their sons and daughters for petty gain. In contrast to the vivid and positive description of the Westerners’ appearance, the portrayal of the Chinese is negative: “yellow skin”, “black hair” and “flat noses”, there is no difference in appearance from beggars to government officials.

When Kitty meets the dirty Chinese children, she is struck by “their black Chinese eyes and their black hair”. The other little girls she meets later also have “stiff black hair”, “round yellow faces” and “staring, sloe-black eyes”. Similarly, the Chinese official is a “flat-nosed” man and the shopkeeper is a “yellow-skinned” Chinese. These words are used to emphasize the unattractive image of the Chinese. It serves to reflect the superiority of their racial genes by deliberately denigrating the Chinese people.

“ugly, dirty, cruel, cunning, dishonest” are also frequently appear in the novel. When Kitty is being seduced by Charlie Townsend and they are shocked by the noise, Charlie claims it is a Chinese servant spying on them. His remark suggests that the Chinese have a habit of spying on other people’s privacy. That the Chinese cook made salad for Fane and Kitty as the plague spread is also seen as a malicious act.

What’s more, the Chinese language is ignored in the novel; On Kitty’s way to Mei-tan-fu, the Chinese porters and coolies are “just having their heads drooped, continue the walk with any words”. On their silent journey, they meet four peasants who are also “silent, bearing a new coffin” Silence, a symbol of being deprived of the right to speak for oneself, of being deprived of the power of discourse, is a feature of Orientalism.

3.2.2 Misjudgment and prejudice against the orient people due to the misunderstanding of the culture

Ancient, hidden, these words are often associated with oriental culture, especially with the Far East, tea culture is an important part of traditional Chinese culture, with a deep historical heritage and unique cultural elements, as for the abolished foot-binding, an ancient custom is magnified and depicted with the intention of expressing that the East is backward and uncivilized, The portrayal may leave the reader with the impression of a mysterious, ancient, backward and stereotypically exotic Orient. China does have a long history of culture and traditions, but it does not mean that there is a hidden secret, and it does not necessarily have to do with so-called mystical powers, it is exaggerated and untrue.

3.2.3 Orientalism is reflected in the role of the Manchu princess

From the previous analysis, we can see that the author is seldom willing to lavish his ink on Chinese characters. But the Manchu princess is an exception, Maugham doesn’t just describe her with yellow skin

or black eyes, he gives her a detailed portrait. Waddington, an ugly Englishman, is proud to have won her love, as he says with a tone of pride: “*She’s abandoned everything for my sake, home, family, security, and self-respect. It’s a good many years now since she threw everything to the winds to be with me. I’ve sent her away or three times, but she’s always come back; I’ve run away from her myself, but she’s always followed me.*”^[3]

This appears to be a sensational romance, but its real purpose is to show the submissive nature of the orient people. Maugham’s description of the submissive Manchu princess to the Englishman is a microcosm of his deep-rooted Orientalism.

4. Conclusion

From a postcolonial perspective, we can see that *The Painted Veil* is a written document of strong Orientalism, it is full of racial and cultural prejudices. The colonial ideology and Said’s concept of Orientalism are apparent in the novel. We can conclude that Maugham constructs Chinese culture as the other and stresses the dominance of Western culture over Eastern culture. However, the essence of culture should be equal, there is no such thing as one culture being superior to another. Culture should be diverse, we should respect and understand each other’s cultures, take the cream and discard the dross. We should critically evaluate Western culture and not blindly worship foreigners. We should also strive for a true understanding of our own national culture and resist cultural hegemony. It is important to promote cultural exchange on equal terms and to protect cultural diversity.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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