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## Disinterested Westerner in Asia: A Study of Maugham's Travels in Asia

Kush Sengupta

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### Abstract:

The works of William Somerset Maugham has been profoundly influenced by his travels all over the world. A consummate traveler, he undertook extensive travels to the remote corners of the world, encompassing Europe, South-East Asia and the Pacific. His travels have formed the source material for a variety of works in his oeuvre. The purpose of his paper is to turn our focus through Maugham's engagement with the idea of Asia, particularly through the account of his stay in Burma and Indo-China as described in his book *The Gentleman in the Parlour*. This paper seeks to analyze how Maugham's representation of Asia is not only ambiguous but also fraught with a politics that is intensely personal and non-discursive. This study wishes to study his travels in South-East Asia and how he undercuts the process of Imperial Travel Writing and Imperial Meaning making. This paper aims to show the figure of the "Disinterested Westerner" served as a counterpoint to the colonial European active in the Asian colony and how it relates to the prevailing socio-political climate of a resurgent Asia in the mid world-war period.

### Keywords:

Asia, Somerset Maugham, Orientalism, Colonialism, Myanmar, Travel Writing

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William Somerset Maugham's works on Asia occupy a small but significant portion in his literary career. Almost in all the genres of his work, we find an engagement with Asia. There is also a close parallelism between his own travels into Asia and the chronology of his fiction. This, according to Klaus W. Jonas underscores the deep immediate impact of his own travels in Asia over his writings. He also shows us that the strong desire to know the East can be found in any of Maugham's earlier works where he reveals a strong fascination for the East before exploring or knowing it. (99) This paper tries to show how Maugham constructs an ambiguous image of Asia in his travel book; *The Gentleman in the Parlour*. and how there can be contesting ways of looking at Asia which may differ from the official ones prevalent at that time. Consequently, I also show how his two travel books that we discuss in this paper are a parodic reversion of the European travel accounts of the Orient.

It is interesting to note the course of events through which Maugham came to discover East. It was a direct result of the First World War where Maugham's job as the Secret Service took him to exotic locals and Maugham's eyes were opened. In a letter to Leslie A. Marchand in the year 1928, Maugham writes:

I had a vague impression that so far as I was concerned, I could not write any more novel about the English scene. I had put pretty well all my experiences into *Of Human Bondage* and I did not know how I was to follow that up. When I went down to the South Seas, I came across a great many types that were entirely new to me and situations which appealed to my imagination. I was very much struck by the effect of the climate and surroundings on the white people

who for one reason or another had drifted there. So far as I was concerned I seemed to be entering upon an entirely new literary life, and after the war I deliberately travelled in search of this material...perhaps it peculiarly appealed to me on account of my early years in France and other circumstances of my life and after the war I deliberately travelled in search of this material...perhaps it peculiarly appealed to me on account of my early years in France and other circumstances of my life which have prevented me from ever feeling entirely at home in England. (Klaus 100)

There are two issues that one can discern from the above quote. First, we find in Maugham the continuation of one of the earliest and primal impulses of Orientalism through which East becomes a way to rejuvenate the Western literature. This trend is however not new for English literature. One is instantly reminded of William Jones and his project to incorporate Eastern tropes in English literature. Not only Jones, but several other Romantic poets like Coleridge, Southey uses the Eastern mythology and history to bring a spirit of and novelty and freshness in the literature of West, so saturated with the stereotypical notions of the West. The idea of Asia serves as an existential refuge in which the weary soul of the Western artist seeks rejuvenation. To quote one of his own characters from the novel *The Merry Go Round*, which has strong autobiographical traits:

My whole soul aches for the East, Egypt, India and Japan...I may not get an answer to the riddle of life out in the open world, but I shall get nearer to it than here. I can get nothing out of books and civilization. I want to see life and death and the passions, the virtues and vices of men face to face, uncovered. (Klaus 101)

Asia seemed to form one of the places that Glen Hooper categorizes in his essay as "other places" (4) places which played an oppositional role to Europe. It is true that Maugham comes from a long heritage of Western authors who incorporated East in their writings, but while his project to rejuvenate Western literature is same as Jones, he looks for discontinuities, while Jones looks for continuities between the ancient civilizations. Unlike the Orientalists of the eighteenth century, Maugham is more interested in people and this forms the purpose of most of his travels. It is true that his conception of Orient is in opposition to the West, a place of wild spirituality but it was also not simply a mix of wonder and horror that characterized most European travellers. He does not assume a stance of superiority which befits the colonial masters. This was because Maugham comes from an ethos of Empire in decline. Kenneth Champion locates Maugham in the generation of the post-world war writers for whom the promises of the Empire had been rudely shaken by the First World War. Hooper also uses the contentions made by Paul Fussell, in his book to locate Maugham within the literary diaspora of the Modernist writers who constantly travelled as a course of their life and writings. (4) In Maugham especially, we find how his rootlessness and his location as a liberal, modern man generates an ambivalence about the Western Empire. The rise of Japan and intense freedom struggles from all over Asia gave rise to the promises of a new, resurgent Asia. He says that "Suddenly Europeans looked to the East for answers. Not that the East had any to give; and by 1930, when Maugham's book was first published, Japan was already preparing to make World War I look like a regional spat" (Champeon). But while Maugham uses Asia as a critical counterpoint to the Western civilization the East also holds very little promise of any rejuvenation, particularly because he ignores the stark ground realities of the geo-political conditions

of Asia. Maugham was writing during the last phases of colonial endeavors into the Orient, from whose ashes arose the postcolonial Asia. Therefore, it becomes interesting to note how Maugham being a Westerner, uses a form of Orientalism that presupposes a formless orient into a modern world where new nation states in Asia are rising in the prominence. Prasenjit Duara in his essay "Asia Redux" brilliantly formulates the political upheavals in Asia at that time which Maugham glosses over conveniently. He refuses to consider Asia and Asians through the emerging currents of aggressive nationalism and revivalist movements, and a strong anticolonial tendency. On the other hand, however, as the illustrations later in the paper will clarify, Maugham does not subscribe to the colonial knowledge which disciplines and homogenizes the bodies, he celebrates the uniqueness of the people of Asia. This is not the proverbial "Unity in Diversity" which is a colonial creation, instead he looks people in their surroundings at a local contingent level, revealing many ideas of Asia:

Then it seemed to me that in the countries or the East, the most impressive, the most awe-inspiring monument of antiquity is neither temple, nor citadel...but man. The peasant with his immemorial usages belongs to an age far more ancient than Angkor Wat. (103)

According to Glen Hooper, "It is this topicality - the representationalism, the pseudo-anthropological charge that Maugham gives to his writing, and the very relevance that he has for students of empire" (1).

But how to formulate Maugham's complex engagement with Asia? It can be perhaps achieved by locating it in an ethos of universalism and fear of dehumanized nationalism which we find in the essays by Tagore of Nationalism. Maugham, like Tagore, emphasizes the role of the common unnamed individuals' role in turning the wheels of the Asian civilization. However, the entire project of looking to East for spiritual rejuvenation is itself Orientalist, albeit a democratic one which eschews grandness for simplicity, wonder for the commonplace.

. But there is no doubt that Maugham's text tries to venture out of any one idea of Orientalism which can be seen in other European writers like Orwell. Instead, he is interested in the eccentricities and oddities of human behavior in the West and how people can engage with an idea of Asia on a local, contingent level. Paul Smethurst calls Maugham's mode of travel as "disordered mobility" where Maugham by virtue of his non-imperial stance destabilizes the process of meaning making that was achieved through travels by Europeans. Therefore, Maugham's travels cannot be perhaps located in the assumption taken and Mary Louise Pratt, who emphatically qualify European travel in other continents to forward the cause of the Empire. (13-14) But it must be also mentioned that Maugham might be critical of the Empire, but he was most certainly not willing to let it go:

Like a good Briton, Maugham apparently did not mix much with "the little brown men" from whom he nevertheless expected the answers to life, the universe, and everything. When his native cook turns out to be an incompetent drunk, Maugham expels him with not so much as a tremble in his upper lip...But with his constant "chap's, his hearty liver, and his games of patience (a.k.a. solitaire), he fits right in...the underlying message is clear; the message is Kipling's: keep to your own kind. (Champeon)

Therefore, it is only with a sense of ambiguity that we should approach his texts.

Maugham himself calls his travel writings as “straight forward recitals” of the people he met and later used his impressions of them in his fiction, in fact, in case of fiction the author would embellish the facts, but in these books, he tones down the events to make it more realistic or believable. The pieces which find places in both the books were scribbled as first impressions of notable people he met in the places he visited. (viii) Therefore, on a material level also, these pieces represent his most authentic responses to Asia. *The Gentleman in the Parlour* was a “break from fiction.”

*The Gentleman in the Parlour* (1930) by Maugham describes the visits of the author through the modern Myanmar and Thailand. Before going into the thematic aspects of the text and its engagement with the idea of Asia, I want to briefly talk about the technical aspects of the book, which would also have some bearing on the themes of the book and his engagement with the idea of Asia which is the central focus of this paper. In the “Preface” of a volume of his collected writings on travel, he talks about the structure of his account *The Gentleman in the Parlour*; where we get a hint of the transformative effect of travel, particularly Asian travel. The blight of the novelists is that they tend to produce varieties of same character types in their various novels who might differ in age, sex, nationality but are essentially the same people in spirit. (x) To overcome this debilitating blight on one's writing, the author must change oneself; as “he is the variable, and the changing quantity gives an altered value to the symbols with which he is equated” (xi). This change can be brought about through a change of scene for which mere adventurous journeys would not suffice. The author must leave the old essence of his behind on his travels; that is, he must travel freely with an open mind. Specifically, for the Western author, must leave behind their metaphorical “house in London, their circle of friends, their English interests and their reputation” (xi). what Maugham wants to say is that Western authors must not import their conventions, literary and psychic when travelling to far off places. Therefore, literary forms that must be used to describe these remote places must be different from the Western literary stereotypes. The idea of Asia and its narratorial depiction must therefore be different and would by extension undercut the existing genres of Western literature.

But it is not to be assumed that Maugham's oeuvre does not have novels or short stories based on Asia. But the travel narratives serve as an experiment, an attempt to write for one's own self, “an exercise in style” (xi). He says that “if you like language for its own sake; if it amuses you to string words together in the order that most pleases you...the essay or the book of travel gives you the most opportunity” (xii). Therefore, the author posits a stance of insouciance of the narrative that flows from him, an attitude of equivocation where he refuses to adhere to any one ideology. This stance pervades to the level of thematics as well.

The book is divided into sections, which are self-contained sections. The first section surprisingly deals with a critical estimation of the works of Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt. One does not usually encounter critical ruminations on a revered author as the opening of a text. It leaves the reader mystified, when the author talks about the work of Lamb as excelling in the task of writing sentimental prose (169). Maugham is not particularly fond of Hazlitt and this is the reason why he never ventured to read Hazlitt who he believes is an inferior artist of the Lamb school of essays. However, the purpose of his meditations on the writers become clear in the next section where Maugham starts reading a book on Hazlitt. To his utter astonishment, he not only likes the writing, but

adores it. He encounters an essay by Hazlitt called *On Going a Journey* where he encounters the author's view on travel which resonates with Maugham:

Oh! It is great to shake off the trammels of the world and of public opinion- to lose our...personal identity in the elements of nature, and become the creature of the moment, clear of all ties...to be known by no other title than *The Gentleman in the Parlour*.

The above passage served as an inspiration for the title of the book, but on another level, it served two purposes. Firstly, it's reinforced author's idea about the purpose of travel as effacing his former self and the possibility of donning new selves borne out of the experience of travel, anonymity and transitory identity instead of the fixity of the idea of the "Author". It was getting rid of former prejudices and keeping an open mind, that the author encountered Hazlitt; similarly, he should forego prejudice for his Asian travel to be fruitful. The introductory segments therefore foreground the motives of author against the backdrop of travel. And finally, on a level of structure of the account, we get a sense of the loosely structured narratives of decentered observations that will mark Maugham's writing style in this book.

The account was published only four years before Orwell's *Burmese Days*. But the two books could not be more unlike each other. While it is not my purpose to do a comparative study of the two comparisons would inevitably creep in any discussion of the two. While Orwell questions the Imperial setup in a cerebral, symbolic manner, he is still confined within the backdrop of proverbial European clubhouse. Maugham here is not bound by any such ideological constructs, keeping up with the theme of insouciance mentioned in the preceding paragraph. While Orwell is concerned with the gulf between the East and the West, Maugham is more concerned with the provisional and fleeting nature of East-West relations. But at the same time, this confluence of East and West in Maugham is not brought about by a colonial enterprise, instead he is concerned about how the East affects Westerners on a level that is inherently personal. Here, he inverts the trope of colonial literature where the Westerner does not give meaning to the wild landscape by the power of his subjectivity. Instead, we see here how the East through its power; moulds the subjectivity of the foreigners stationed here. Consequently, in these books, he uses the travel narrative in a way that satirizes Englishness and the genre of imperial travel writing itself.

His engagement with Asia and Imperialism is problematic and yet self-aware. He writes that in case the historian of the future *Decline and Fall of the British Empire* would come across Maugham's book in future, he would wonder that the author who "was not devoid of observation" and who had travelled to so many parts of the Empire has failed to notice that "with what a nerveless hand the British held the power that their forefathers had conquered." (176) He goes on to write that the same author would qualify Maugham as a satirist who had expressed "derision in the spectacle of a horde of officials who held their positions only by force of the guns" (176). In the same way that Gibbon had gone to say that the downfall of Roman Empire had to do with the advent of Christianity as the state religion, the downfall of the British Empire had to do with the fact that the modern British were a far cry from the race that had produced Clive, Warren Hastings and Stamford Raffles and instead the British were afraid to rule and they thought they were unfit to rule. "They were sentimentalists. They wanted the profits of the Empire, but would not assume the greatest responsibilities, which is power." (176) Maugham imagines the future author would evaluate him by saying that

he ignored these ground realities in his observations unlike Orwell and producing a book “which can be of no value to the historian, the political economist or philosopher” (176) If one were to unpack the complex argument that he is trying to say, we can perhaps reach the central political core of his book. Firstly, he makes a political decision where he refuses to take up the ideological burden of the Empire in his writing. Instead of describing the officers and their dilemma as Orwell does so brilliantly, Maugham takes a different strand where he discusses in detail men who occupy fringe positions in the scheme of the Empire. In such a course of action, he reveals a different kind of engagement with the idea of Asia from Orwell. Secondly, he seems to be very well the kind of person who would contribute to the ruin of the Empire, people who enjoy the fruits of the Empire without taking a part of it. He is very conscious of his own subject position as he drifts through the Empire but is in no way circumscribed by it. The trappings of the Empire would ill suit his purpose of coming to the Orient, because it prevents him from observing the human subjects. This makes him take a languid and even bored attitude towards the physical symbols of the Empire in his narrative. While an ordinary travel narrative by a European would take great care and admiration to describe the colonial edifices that line the banks of Ganges or Irawaddy calling it a sign of progress and the march of civilization, Maugham calls his recollection of British Rangoon riverfront “nebulous.”: (172)

A cordial welcome, a drive in an American car through the busy streets of business houses...of Honolulu, Shanghai, Singapore or Alexandria and then a spacious, shady house in the garden, an agreeable life, luncheon at this club or that, drives along trim, wide roads, bridge after dark at a club or this...laughter, silk, pleasant conversation, and then back through the night to dress for dinner and out again to dine with this hospitable host or the other, cocktails, a substantial meal, dancing to a gramophone or a game of billiards and then back once more to a large, cool and silent house. It was very attractive, easy, comfortable and gay; but was this Rangoon? (172-3)

What an ordinary travel writer from Europe would describe meticulously running into pages and chapter, he divests off in one paragraph stressing the geniality and yet the uniformity of the colonial towns. He eschews the familiarity of the colonial White towns for seeking a sense of solitude that only Asia can provide. Here he constructs Asia not as a colony but as a wild frontier of the world where the influences of the West have failed to penetrate. The idea of the solitude recurs in the book throughout and the figures he chooses to describe in his novel seem to be shaped by the solitude that Asia makes a person face.

In the book, the author often satirizes the persistent tropes of literature and stereotypes of the European traveler. In fact, he presents his own self as the antithesis of the energetic European traveler who seeks to travel and document as much as possible. Where Europeans stress on the rhetoric of difference to assert their own subject positions as Europeans in the Orient, Maugham says that he takes things for granted and the sights that would appear extraordinary for a European appears perfectly normal to him. He also paints pictures of European club houses that are reminiscent of the one immortalized by Orwell but in a very different vein. While the Europeans in Orwell had to go to the club because that was the only form of recreation, Maugham went there because “he had nothing else to do.” (182) He also satirizes his fellow European traveler in this book. Whereas the author was perfectly content to view one pagoda, his fellow European traveler, “a Czecho-Slovak” from Calcutta visited all the

pagodas in the pouring rain. He not only notes their peculiarity and differences but also is able to historicize them and had ‘theories about them’ (186) and had arguments to support his contentions. This is in line with Mary Louise Pratt’s conception of the European traveler and Maugham refuses to abide by it (qtd. in Doran 2) In the figure he satirizes the Imperial traveler who merely collects information about the Orient without any purpose. But then his narrative suggests that the Western traveler misses more than he sees. Instead, he was ready to “put my Western pride in my pocket” to venture to places that an Occidental might not see fit to visit. His deepest sympathy is reserved for the men who occupy a fringe position in the business of the Empire, people who have no direct stake in the Empire. Maugham is trying to say that these fringe characters engages with Asia in a way that is real, and tangible as opposed to the hordes of colonial officials in colony towns. In a sense, he himself embodies the liminal position the grand backdrop of Asia, neither a native nor an imperialist European. He sees Asia as wild and solitary but does not assume the stance of superiority that Europeans tend to take. Instead, he brings an unconventional honesty into the narrative as the bored European traveler and most of his surroundings bore him. Maugham’s attitude and representation of Asia is different from his other contemporary Europeans. Through a good part of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century, the British were engrossed in portraying the East as a playground for the Empire, littered with the visible signs of the Empire. Maugham seems to hark back to an older way of looking at Orient, which was prevalent till the eighteenth century where Asia is the wild “other” of the Europe and not yet a full-fledged colony. But, importantly, he does not couch his narrative in terms of discovery instead he forwards a narrative of “pilgrimage”, undertaken voluntarily for the spiritual fulfilment that the West never accorded him. This is again different from what Pratt calls the narrative of “anti-conquest” The narratives of “anti-conquest” also carried forward the project of the Empire, but Maugham cannot be located in that category as his narrative is too fragmented for any coherent imperial policy. He locates Asia as a backdrop for his own alienation from the European society, and there is somewhere the attempt in this book to find kindred souls like his own amidst Asia. Maugham in his writings have always admitted the contribution of Asia not just in his writings but also how it has contributed to the development of his being. I would argue that his way of looking at Asia helps him on a deeply personal level, where he is able to contain his own alien status. In fact, both the two novels seem to tell us about the author himself. (Cordell 287)

As a means of summing up, we can assert that Maugham’s conception of the East is different from the average Westerner in its intent as well as outcome. He does not seek Asia to colonize it, instead use it a supplement for his own self, and use the mode of travel as a cathartic device, both for his self and his writings. In such a process, he sees the Orient selectively, forming a mosaic of interesting people and places with almost no attempt to encapsulate the idea of Asia as a whole. He finds a way to look beyond the Empire, and at the same time asserting his subject position as the beneficiary of the Empire. He portrays Asia as a place where men are essentially alone, away from the humdrum of the metropolitan mother country. He colonizes the space of Asia in a different way, by stripping it off its history, its ground realities of the age into a wild frontier of the Western civilization. Almost nothing is said about the complicated and precarious nature of the colonial enterprise, its failings and the attempts by the Asians to rejuvenate themselves. He implicates nobody, appreciates not a single person and forwards a politics of indifference which is aimed at a personal inner rejuvenation.



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**BIO-NOTE**

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