

## Western Superiority and Eastern Otherness in *The Painted Veil*: A Postcolonial Reading

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the themes of colonialism within W. Somerset Maugham's novel, *The Painted Veil*. The research aims to explore the mechanisms of British colonial rule in China during a cholera epidemic, understand the varied responses of Chinese society to this foreign presence, and analyze the Western perspectives of the East that are embedded in the narrative.

Employing a library research methodology, this paper uses a postcolonial framework to analyze the novel. Supporting data is drawn from relevant scholarly sources. The findings indicate that British colonialism in China was driven by three core objectives, often summarized as "Gold" (economic domination), "Gospel" (religious conversion and ideological control), and "Glory" (political and national supremacy). The Chinese response to this colonial presence is shown to be complex, encompassing both cooperation and resistance. Furthermore, the novel reveals a persistent Western viewpoint that stereotypes the East as inferior in terms of culture, religion, manners, and appearance, thereby reinforcing a perceived boundary between the two civilizations.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Postcolonialism, Western, Eastern, Stereotype, *The Painted Veil*

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background of the Research

Historically, Western nations often positioned themselves as colonizers, with many African and Asian countries becoming their subjects. In the 19th century, Great Britain emerged as the most extensive colonial power, controlling vast territories across the globe. A prevailing belief among the British was that their nation was destined to rule others, which shaped their often-dominating treatment of colonized peoples. This involved the exploitation of natural and human resources, the imposition of oppressive policies, and the forceful introduction of European religious beliefs.

Although the direct political and economic domination of these colonies began to wane in the early 20th century as nations gained independence, a more subtle form of colonization persisted through narrative. Authors from colonizer nations often wrote stories that presented their assumptions and doctrines about the colonized as fact, while the voices and perspectives of the colonized people themselves were frequently marginalized or silenced. This phenomenon is evident in W. Somerset Maugham's *The Painted Veil*. The novel, set in China during a cholera outbreak, follows the story of a British couple, Walter and Kitty Fane. Their struggles to adapt to Chinese society are compounded by the complex colonial context. As British citizens, they bring their own preconceived notions about China and its people. Maugham himself, drawing on his experiences in China, uses his narrative authority to present a particular image of the country, making the novel a rich subject for postcolonial analysis. Colonialism, a central concern of postcolonial studies, involves the conquest and control of other peoples' lands and goods through practices ranging from trade and negotiation to genocide and enslavement. This paper investigates how colonialism operates in the novel, how the colonized Chinese respond, and what assumptions the West holds about the East.

#### Research Problems

1. How is British colonialism depicted as operating in China during the cholera epidemic in *The Painted Veil*?
2. What perspectives does the West hold toward the East, as revealed in the novel?
3. How does Chinese society respond to British colonialism in the story?

#### Scope of the Study

This study is focused specifically on analyzing the representation of colonialism and its effects on Chinese society as portrayed in W. Somerset Maugham's *The Painted Veil*.

#### Purposes of the Study

1. To examine the functioning of British colonial rule in China during the cholera epidemic as depicted in the novel.
2. To identify and analyze the Western perspectives of the Eastern world that are implied in the narrative.
3. To explore the spectrum of responses from Chinese society toward the British colonial presence.

#### Method of the Research

##### 1. Research Approach

A postcolonial approach is used for this analysis. Postcolonialism is a literary theory that examines the cultural clash between colonizing and colonized nations, focusing on the power dynamics—ideological, economic, political, and social—that define their relationship. This approach is particularly suited to deconstructing the colonial themes and biases present in Maugham's work.

##### 2. Method of Data Collection

This research is conducted as a library study. The primary data source is the novel *The Painted Veil* itself. Secondary data, which provides supporting evidence and theoretical context, is gathered from academic books, journal articles, and other credible sources available in libraries and online databases.

#### W. Somerset Maugham and His Works

William Somerset Maugham (1874–1965) was a renowned British playwright, novelist, and short-story writer. Born in Paris, he was orphaned at a young age and raised by an uncle in England. Trained as a doctor, he used his experiences from medicine to write his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth* (1897). Its success prompted him to abandon medicine for a full-time writing career.

Maugham achieved great fame for his plays and novels, including *Of Human Bondage* (1915), often considered his masterpiece, and *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919). His works, known for their clarity, irony, and insight into human nature, often drew upon his extensive travels and experiences abroad, including his time as a secret agent in Russia during World War I. Several of his stories, including *The Painted Veil*, have been adapted into films.

### Analysis of *The Painted Veil*

Kitty Fane, a young British socialite, marries Walter, a quiet and devoted bacteriologist, not out of love but to escape her family. They move to Hong Kong, where Walter works as a government doctor. Feeling trapped in a loveless marriage, Kitty embarks on a passionate affair with Charles Townsend, a charming but selfish colonial official.

When Walter discovers the affair, he gives Kitty a cruel ultimatum: she must accompany him to the remote interior of China, to the town of Mei-Tan-Fu, which is being ravaged by a deadly cholera epidemic. If Charles agrees to divorce his wife and marry Kitty, Walter will grant her a divorce. However, when Kitty confronts Charles, he cowardly refuses, revealing his true character.

Forced to go with Walter, Kitty enters a world of hardship and death. In Mei-Tan-Fu, she is initially consumed by bitterness and fear. However, through her interactions with the local deputy commissioner, Mr. Waddington, and a group of French nuns who run a mission and orphanage, Kitty begins to find a new sense of purpose. She starts working at the convent, reflecting on her life and discovering values beyond her previous shallow existence.

Walter works tirelessly to combat the cholera epidemic, earning the respect of the locals. The couple remains emotionally estranged. Kitty becomes pregnant, unsure if the father is Walter or Charles. Tragically, Walter contracts cholera and dies. After his death, Kitty returns to Hong Kong, where she briefly succumbs to Charles's advances again before recoiling in self-disgust. She finally returns to England, determined to raise her child independently and live a life of meaning and integrity.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### Intrinsic Theory

This analysis will utilize key intrinsic elements of fiction: character, setting, and conflict.

- **Character:** Characters are the agents who drive the narrative forward. The main character, who faces the central conflict, is the protagonist. The force opposing the protagonist is the antagonist.
- **Setting:** Setting encompasses the time, location, and social environment in which a story takes place. It is crucial for establishing the context, atmosphere, and underlying social issues of a narrative.
- **Conflict:** Conflict is the struggle between opposing forces that propels the plot. It can be external (man vs. man, man vs. society, man vs. nature) or internal (man vs. self).

#### Extrinsic Theory

The primary extrinsic theory guiding this analysis is postcolonialism.

- **Postcolonialism Theory:** This approach analyzes literature produced in formerly colonized countries and examines the cultural, social, and political impacts of colonialism. It focuses on the clash between cultures, particularly when one culture deems itself superior and seeks to dominate another.
- **Colonialism:** Colonialism refers to the practice of acquiring political and economic control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting its resources. It involves complex and often traumatic relationships between the colonizer and the colonized.
- **British Colonialism in China:** Driven by economic motives ("Gold"), Britain forced opium onto the Chinese market, leading to the Opium Wars. After victory, Britain gained territories like Hong Kong through treaties like the Treaty of Nanking (1842), establishing a powerful colonial presence fueled by economic gain, a sense of racial and cultural superiority ("Glory"), and a missionary impulse ("Gospel").

### ANALYSIS

#### Intrinsic Aspects

##### Characters

- **Kitty Fane (Protagonist):** A beautiful but shallow woman who undergoes significant personal growth from a selfish socialite to a more self-aware and independent individual.
- **Walter Fane (Protagonist):** A brilliant, dedicated, yet emotionally reserved bacteriologist whose actions are driven by a deep sense of duty and a wounded heart.
- **Charles Townsend (Antagonist):** The embodiment of colonial hypocrisy—charming, opportunistic, and utterly self-serving.
- **Mr. Waddington:** A British deputy commissioner who represents a more assimilated and cynical view of colonialism. He is married to a Manchu woman and possesses a nuanced understanding of China.
- **The Nuns:** Represent the "Gospel" aspect of colonialism but are portrayed with complexity, showing genuine charity and dedication alongside their ideological mission.

##### Setting

The settings are crucial to the colonial critique:

- **Hong Kong (Tching-Yen):** Represents the comfortable, insulated bubble of British colonial society, with its clubs and social hierarchies.
- **Mei-Tan-Fu:** The remote, cholera-stricken Chinese town represents the harsh reality outside the colonial bubble. It is a place of death, poverty, and cultural difference, but also of redemption and transformation for Kitty.
- **England:** Serves as the point of origin and return, contrasting with the colonial experience.

## Conflicts

- **Kitty vs. Herself:** Her internal struggle with her own vanity, infidelity, and search for meaning.
- **Kitty vs. Charles:** The conflict arising from his betrayal and cowardice.
- **Kitty/Walter vs. Chinese Society:** The cultural clash and difficulty adapting to a foreign environment.
- **Western vs. Eastern Values:** The overarching conflict between the colonial mindset and Chinese culture, religion, and ways of life.

## Extrinsic Aspect

### 1. British Colonialism in *The Painted Veil*

The novel depicts the three pillars of colonialism:

- **Gold (Economic Domination):** This is shown through the hierarchy of master-servant relationships. British characters are consistently served by Chinese *amahs* (nannies/maids) and coolies, highlighting an economic structure where the colonizer commands and the colonized serve for wages.
- **Gospel (Ideological Domination):** The French nuns running the mission represent the religious civilizing mission. They baptize orphans and care for the sick, which is portrayed as compassionate, yet it simultaneously represents an effort to replace local beliefs with Christianity.
- **Glory (Political Domination):** The very presence of a British colonial government in Hong Kong and officials like Waddington in Mei-Tan-Fu signifies political control. The British have their own administrative structure superimposed on Chinese land.

### 2. The Western Perspective of the East

The novel is steeped in a Western gaze that stereotypes and orientalizes the East:

- **Religion:** Western Christianity (practiced by the nuns) is portrayed as logical, organized, and compassionate. In contrast, Chinese religious practices (like beating gongs to ward off spirits) are depicted as superstitious, illogical, and "inscrutable." Taoism is presented as abstract and fatalistic.
- **Environment and People:** British environments (in Hong Kong and England) are described as orderly and civilized. Mei-Tan-Fu is described as dirty, chaotic, and plagued, reinforcing the stereotype of the East as unsanitary and backward. Chinese people are often described in dehumanizing terms ("hardly human," "mites"), while the British are portrayed as sophisticated.
- **Culture and Manner:** Chinese customs are frequently viewed as inferior. The Chinese language is called "decadent" and "unspeakable." Chinese food is seen as ruining a "civilized" palate. Even a Chinese coffin is deemed an undignified resting place for an Englishman. The British perceive their own manners as superior, generalizing Chinese actions as rude or stealthy.

### 3. The Chinese Response to Colonialism

The response is not monolithic and is shown to be complex:

- **Anti-Colonial Response:** The most common response is a silent, sullen resentment. The Chinese are often described staring "unpleasantly" at Kitty, and the British are broadly referred to as "barbarians." This reflects a deep-seated anger against foreign exploiters.
- **Pro-Colonial Response (Pragmatic Cooperation):** Colonel Yu assists Walter in fighting the cholera epidemic. This is not necessarily an endorsement of colonialism but rather a pragmatic collaboration with a knowledgeable expert to solve a immediate, life-threatening crisis that affects his people.
- **Assimilation and Alternative Perspectives:** Mr. Waddington, though British, represents a rejection of typical colonial attitudes. By marrying a Manchu woman, learning the language, and adopting a Chinese worldview, he consciously blurs the rigid line between colonizer and colonized, offering a critique of colonialism from within.

## Research Findings: Colonialism in W. Somerset Maugham's *The Painted Veil*

This study set out to analyze the mechanisms, perspectives, and responses related to British colonialism as depicted in Maugham's novel. The findings are organized according to the three research problems.

### 1. Findings on the Mechanisms of British Colonialism ("How it works")

The research identifies that British colonialism in China, as portrayed in *The Painted Veil*, operates through three distinct yet interconnected pillars, echoing the historical slogan of "Gold, Gospel, and Glory."

- **Economic Domination (Gold):** Colonial rule is maintained through a strict economic hierarchy. The British colonialists occupy the top tier as masters, while the local Chinese population serves as subordinates. This is most visibly represented by the pervasive use of Chinese servants—*amahs* and coolies—who cater to the every need of the British characters. The relationship is transactional (wages for service) but fundamentally unequal, reinforcing the power dynamic of colonizer and colonized. This system ensures the comfort and functioning of the colonial lifestyle, as seen in the households of Kitty and the Townsends.
- **Ideological Domination (Gospel):** The "civilizing mission" of colonialism is embodied by the French nuns who run the Catholic mission and orphanage in Mei-Tan-Fu. Their work, while genuinely charitable and compassionate, serves as a tool for ideological control. They baptize dying children and orphans "the moment they come," aiming to replace local Chinese beliefs with Christianity. The mission acts as an outpost of Western culture and values, seeking to assimilate the colonized population into the colonial worldview.
- **Political Domination (Glory):** The British presence is enforced through a parallel political structure. The novel features a British colonial government in Hong Kong (Tching-Yen), complete with a Governor, and extends its reach into the interior with officials like the Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Waddington, in Mei-Tan-Fu. This administrative control signifies that the British exercise sovereignty over these territories, reducing the local Chinese authorities to a secondary status within their own country. The ability to build British facilities like clubs and tennis courts further symbolizes this political and cultural takeover.

## 2. Findings on the Western Perspective of the East ("How the West sees the East")

The narrative is deeply embedded with a Western gaze that consistently stereotypes and orientalizes Chinese culture, creating a binary of Western superiority and Eastern inferiority.

- **Stereotypical Portrayals:** Chinese people are frequently described in dehumanizing and animalistic terms (e.g., "hardly human," "mites," a dead beggar like a "dead animal"). Their language is dismissed as "decadent, dirty, and unspeakable," and their customs (like beating gongs for the dead) are portrayed as illogical superstitions.
- **Religion and Culture:** Western Christianity is presented as logical, organized, and compassionate. In contrast, Eastern philosophies like Taoism are depicted as abstract, fatalistic, and incomprehensible to the Western mind. The Western chapel is a center of life and charity, while the Chinese monastery is described as remote, crumbling, and sad.
- **Environment and Civilization:** The British environments (England, Hong Kong's colonial quarter) are associated with order, cleanliness, and sophistication. Mei-Tan-Fu, the Chinese town, is consistently described in terms of filth, disease, chaos, and death, reinforcing the colonial stereotype of the East as backward and uncivilized.
- **Justification for Colonialism:** This pervasive negative stereotyping serves to justify the colonial project. By framing the East as deficient in religion, sanitation, manners, and culture, the narrative implicitly argues that Western intervention and domination are necessary for progress and civilization.

## 3. Findings on the Chinese Response to Colonialism ("How the East responds")

The Chinese response to British colonialism in the novel is not monolithic but is instead complex and varied, ranging from open hostility to pragmatic cooperation.

- **Anti-Colonial Sentiment (The dominant response):** The most common reaction from the Chinese characters is one of silent, sullen resentment and distrust. This is symbolized by the "unpleasant stares" Kitty receives from Chinese people in the streets and shops. The novel explicitly states that the Chinese view Europeans as "barbarians," indicating a clear recognition of the exploitative and foreign nature of the colonial presence. This represents a form of passive resistance and a refusal to accept the legitimacy of colonial rule.
- **Pragmatic Cooperation (Pro-Colonial response):** This is exemplified by Colonel Yu, the Chinese official who assists Dr. Fane. His cooperation is not an endorsement of colonialism but a pragmatic alliance to combat a common enemy: the cholera epidemic. He provides soldiers and resources to Walter, recognizing his medical expertise as vital for saving Chinese lives. This response highlights a strategic choice to use colonial resources for local benefit when necessary.
- **Assimilation and Transcultural Identity (A nuanced response):** Mr. Waddington, though British, represents a direct challenge to typical colonial attitudes. By marrying a Manchu woman, learning the language, studying Chinese history, and adopting a Chinese perspective (viewing European life as a "folly"), he consciously rejects the rigid Us vs. Them binary of colonialism. His character demonstrates that the cultural boundary is permeable and that a identity can exist outside the strict confines of the colonizer-colonized relationship.

## Conclusion

The research finds that *The Painted Veil* serves as a critical expose of British colonialism, revealing its mechanisms of control through economic, ideological, and political power. Furthermore, the novel unmask the prejudiced Western perspective that stereotypes the East to justify its domination. Crucially, it also moves beyond a simple narrative of oppression by presenting a spectrum of Chinese responses, showing that the colonized are not passive victims but active agents who respond with resentment, pragmatic cooperation, or, in the case of those like Waddington's wife, by forging new identities that transcend colonial categories. The novel ultimately underscores the profound and often tragic impact of colonialism on both the colonizer and the colonized.

*The Painted Veil* is more than a story of personal betrayal and redemption; it is a sharp critique of British colonialism in China. Maugham illustrates how colonial rule was exercised through economic control ("Gold"), religious mission ("Gospel"), and political power ("Glory"). The Chinese response is portrayed as a mixture of resentment and pragmatic cooperation, reflecting the complex reality of colonial occupation. Most strikingly, the novel exposes the pervasive Western perspective that stereotypes the East as inferior, uncivilized, and fundamentally "Other." This perspective, which justifies the colonial project, is woven into the narrative's descriptions of religion, environment, culture, and people. However, through characters like Waddington, the novel also suggests the possibility of transcending these colonial biases. Ultimately, *The Painted Veil* highlights the profound cultural boundary drawn by colonialism, a boundary that defines nations as separate and unequal, yet one that can be challenged through understanding and empathy.

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