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**A WOMAN IMPRISONED
ANALYSIS OF FORMAL INFERIORITY OF WOMEN IN SELECTED
NOVELS OF W. S. MAUGHAM**

If Maugham as a creator of characters is remembered chiefly for his heroines, he is also associated with misogyny and unfavourable treatment of his females. Their inferiority to men is often voiced openly by Maugham's male characters who wish their wives in Hell,¹ doubt their judgment, and despise their morals. For Maugham and his male characters "the usual effect of a man's co-habitation with a woman . . . is to make him a little more petty, a little meaner than he would otherwise have been."²

However, an analysis of selected novels of W. S. Maugham: *Of Human Bondage*, *Cakes and Ale*, *The Painted Veil*, *The Moon and Sixpence*, *The Narrow Corner* and *The Razor's Edge* shows that contempt for the "other" sex is not only expressed verbally by Maugham's male characters, often acting as his mouthpieces. The inferiority of Maugham's females is deeply rooted in the structure of the novels as well: women find themselves in a variety of "prisons" on the level of plot, narration and linguistic form down to the layer of the subconscious – symbols, myths and stereotypes.

The inferiority of women is discernible in the formal method of their portrayal in Maugham's novels. Although his female characters play a variety of roles in his fiction – of literary lionesses, novelette writers or waitresses, their most important and immediately recognizable role is their relation to men. Women, although they feature prominently in Maugham's works and can often be described as centres around which the action of the book is woven, are rarely presented on their own, as human beings in their own right. Instead, they are always depicted in relation to male characters and their role in the book is determined by their links to men.

¹ W. Somerset Maugham, *The Moon and Sixpence* (London: Pan Books 1974), p. 143.

² M. C. Kuner, *Maugham and the West in: The World of Somerset Maugham*, ed. Klaus W. Jones (London: Powen, 1959), p. 92.

Therefore the first label attached to any female introduced in the course of the novel's action is usually that of a wife, mistress, friend or casual acquaintance. The majority of female characters appear in the story in a male context. Most often the narrator meets the women whom he later describes because they are wives of some men he knows. Second Mrs. Driffield of *Cakes and Ale* appears as her late husband's wife: "I (the narrator) received a letter from Edward Driffield's widow."³ Rosie, his first wife, at first escapes this label; "through the corner of my eye I saw they were a man and a woman," but she is soon officially introduced by her husband: "This is my wife." Blanche of *The Moon and Sixpence* is the wife of the narrator's acquaintance Dirk Stroeve: "He (Dirk) gave a cry of a delighted surprise. His wife was seated near the stove . . . He introduced me."⁴

This method of presentation remains largely the same in the other three novels even though the narrator is omnipotent. Women introduced for the first time are defined in relation to male characters. In *Of Human Bondage* Mildred appears first as a woman in whom a friend of the main hero is interested: "They often went to have tea at a shop in Parliament Street, because Dunsford admired one of the young women who waited."⁵ Norah is introduced as a "discovery" made by one of Phillip's friends: "Lawson, on the look out for models, had discovered a girl who was understudying at one of the theatres."⁶ The term "girl" is, however, soon made more specific and Norah is given the usual label: "she was separated from her husband." For Kitty, whom we meet in the very first scene of *The Painted Veil*, the male context in which she is presented takes the form of a physical embrace of her lover; she is literally and metaphorically placed in a man's arms and the reader soon discovers her double status of a wife and a mistress.

Maugham's female characters are thus denied the fundamental independence enjoyed by his male protagonists. Women in his novels need male "justification"; they have no role to play in Maugham's world other than that of friends, mothers, enemies or lovers of men. The charges levelled at male writers by feminist literary critics who claim that women in patriarchal literature are "seldom portrayed as independent thinking, feeling, desiring, acting beings; they are generally seen in relation to men or from a point of view of male needs or concepts with regard to women"⁷ could easily be substantiated in the case of Maugham. Female characters in his novels,

³ W. Somerset Maugham, *Cakes and Ale* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 41.

⁴ W. Somerset Maugham, *The Moon and Sixpence*, p. 67.

⁵ W. Somerset Maugham, *Of Human Bondage* (New York: Doubleday & Company), p. 123.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁷ Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions* (Athens, Ohio, London: Ohio University Press, 1976), p. 87.

when analysed on their deeper, more symbolic level, are often forced to play predefined roles of "innocent maidens, wicked temptresses or beautiful bitches who exist only in relation to the protagonist who is male."⁸ They become "the other, the thing, the non-cognating phenomenon for the hero to test himself against as he would against a hurricane or high mountain or disease."⁹

Maugham's women, though generally more active, are often used as foils to men. Their role in the plot is to create circumstances conducive to revealing the true nature of the male protagonist. In *Of Human Bondage* Mildred serves the purpose of exposing Philip's flawed nature with a strong propensity for self-torture, while Sally's role is to evidence Philip's recovery from his obsession, if only partial. Similarly, Mrs. Nichols of *The Narrow Corner* exposes the incongruity of her husband, who is a hero at sea and a coward at home; her role is limited to this single comic effect. Catherine Frith, or rather the memory of her presented by Erik, gives Maugham an opportunity to present the young man's romantic and idealistic personality. Louise, as Fred's second carnal temptation after Mrs. Hudson, serves the purpose of compromising him as a weak male, yielding easily to female charms. Simultaneously, her moral savagery offers contrast to Erik's idealism. In *The Razor's Edge* the pattern of a female background against which male attributes are more clearly seen is even more evident. Isabel's control over matter acts as a foil to Larry's control over spirit; her severity and scheming accentuate his affectionate and noble nature.

The inferior role of women in the plot as foils to men is highlighted by an almost complete lack of scenes in which a woman would be presented by herself and would remain credible and "round". Male presence, though often unobtrusive, is constant. The moments of female solitude are absent; whenever a woman appears in the plot, she enters together with men or at least in a private conversation with the male narrator. The reader does not know the thoughts of Suzanne when she is painting alone; we meet her when she puts her brushes aside to talk to the narrator. Similarly, Blanche is not introduced while sewing, but only when her husband and the narrator enter the room and "objectify" her.

The male context into which every woman is forced is intensified by the narrative method used by Maugham. In three of the analysed novels the reader meets all the characters and sees them through the eyes of a male narrator – a young writer called Ashenden or, even more conveniently, Maugham. All three books: *The Moon and Sixpence*, *The Razor's Edge* and

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁹ Susan Koppelman, in: *Images of Women in Fiction*, ed. Susan Koppelman (Ohio: Cornillon, Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1973), p. xi.

Cakes and Ale are the narrator's attempt at reconstructing the events of his past and remembering the people he once knew. All the characters who appear on the pages of these books are shaped by the male consciousness of the narrator. In the patriarchal universe of Maugham's novels it is the man who "objectifies the world, reduces it to his terms, speaks in place of everything and everyone else, including women."¹⁰ It is particularly true about the novels in which the male narrator consciously chooses to include or exclude certain incidents from his past, especially those relating to women, and in which he can relate women's words only by using his own.

The use of an omniscient narrator does not change this bias; even when the events are related seemingly impartially, it is still a man who plays the role of the central consciousness of the represented world. In *Of Human Bondage* we see the events through Philip's eyes and his hierarchy of values is naturally imposed on the whole novel. Though Philip is very much involved in the events, he nevertheless shares some of the characteristics of the typical Maugham narrator, as a doctor and a painter, as if by virtue of his professions, a shrewd observer, able to notice and dissect even his own idiosyncrasies. Doctor Saunders of *The Narrow Corner* is Maugham the narrator under a different name, an impartial observer not truly involved in the action, but staying aloof, seeing and judging for himself and also, if not primarily, for the readers. The omniscience of the narrator is as if qualified; it is limited solely to the main male hero; thus it is only his thoughts that are revealed to the reader, and consequently, it is only his hierarchy of values against which the whole represented world is judged.

The choice of the narrator – impartial and objective – also points to the limited role of women in Maugham's fiction. They seem excluded from the very narrative fabric of his novels. Maugham's lucid, clear style¹¹ reflects reason, predictability and objectivity. Since Maugham's women represent the opposite attributes: unreason, irrationality and subjectivity they are as if by definition "muted" and excluded from Maugham's masculine discourse. The medical profession of many of Maugham's narrators is not without its significance, either. His style was often compared to cold observations of a doctor.¹² In relation to his female characters Maugham behaves like an obstetrician – a function that the writer performed in real life: "dissecting, finding the truth about women's bodies and the reproductive secrets of the universe."¹³ A woman is thus "arrested at the level of

¹⁰ Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 31.

¹¹ W. Somerset Maugham, *The Summing Up* (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 42.

¹² M. C. Kuner, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

¹³ Bonnie Smith, *Masculinity and the Limits of Interpretation*, in: Sam Keen, *Fire in the Belly*, (London: Judy Piatkus, 1992), p. 10.

biological experience"¹⁴ – she becomes a patient, an object of “dissection”, which obviously implies disorders and thus also inferiority.

Linguistic exclusion reaches also to the level of narrative structure. Since the narrators are always male, all the women are seen – or indeed heard – as if from behind a pane of glass. They are not given the same freedom as male characters to speak for themselves. Some characters – the most violent and harmful to men or the most devoted and therefore hardly credible – are “twice removed” – known only from other characters’ reports. Thus Mrs. Hudson of *The Narrow Corner* never actually appears in the story in her own person, she is literally “told about” by Fred; a similar lot befalls Ata of *The Moon and Sixpence*, whose boundless love to the ruthless painter is recounted only later and is not shown directly. Catherine Frith is also “knowable” through Erik’s tale and thus her affection is never tested in the action of the novel.

Unable to speak, only spoken about, women become “framed”; imprisoned in the novels as objects rather than acting subjects. Although Maugham’s writing is by no means symbolic, meaningful scenes of framing women into male pictures recur in his work. Written about, photographed or painted, a woman becomes an immobilised and symbolically dead *object d’art* like a Snow-white in a glass coffin.¹⁵ She becomes the possession of her creator and can be moulded according to his wishes. Her deadly powers – to seduce, hypnotise, bewitch – are removed. The myth motif used here is the story of Medusa, whose deadly glance is neutralised by Perseus, who fights and kills her looking only at her reflection in the shield and not at the creature itself. The control of her image, her reflection in his shield, which he exercises allows Perseus to appropriate Medusa’s power. She loses her strength while he gains the power of representation.¹⁶

This power is claimed in Maugham’s novels by male artists: writers or painters. An author establishes his “literary paternity”¹⁷ over the text and thus, indirectly, over its subject as well. Similarly, a painter becomes the owner of his model the moment she is imprisoned on the canvas. Being a creator, he is also “a father, a master or ruler, and an owner: the spiritual type of a patriarch.”¹⁸ Women “killed into object d’art,”¹⁹ like

¹⁴ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York, London: Touchstone, Simon & Schuster 1969), p. 26.

¹⁵ Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 616.

¹⁶ Gerardine Meaney, *Between the Mother and the Medusa*, in: *(Un)like Subjects*, ed. Gerardine Meaney, Routledge (London, New York: Routledge 1993), p. 32.

¹⁷ S. Gilbert, S. Gubar, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

women "told about" are those who are not easily reconcilable with patriarchal order. The intention of the artist may be to neutralise female strength and to use woman's potential for his own end, as in the case of Blanche, whom Strickland accepts in his life only as long as he paints a nude. With "good" women the artists may strive to attain the impossible – to preserve the ideal and immortalise it. Ata figures in almost all of Strickland's Tahiti paintings, her perfect subjection being thus made eternal, just as the affection of Catherine Frith is immortalised in the report of her idealistic friend. Catherine, existing only in his tale, cannot shatter this stainless image; it remains forever perfect. The memory of her is like an object of art to be treasured.

Not surprisingly Rosie, the only female character who escapes almost all classifications, and whose tremendous energy threatens to blow up the boundaries of the novel in which she appears,²⁰ is not easily killed into an object of art. Both a photograph and a painting fail to represent her real charm satisfactorily. She cannot be well "contained" in a photograph, the artificiality of which does not agree with the naturalness of Rosie. Even more "human" art of a painting can hardly do justice to her beauty. Hillier, her portraitist, says that "she's the very devil to paint."²¹ And yet, where the painter fails the narrator succeeds: when Rosie elopes with her lover to America she becomes "the skeleton in the cupboard"; an object d'art of the not-yet-written biography of Drifffield. Additionally, the motif of the skeleton in the cupboard – a mystery not to be revealed – is in itself a parody of thrash novelettes with sensational subject matter²² in which all women are immobilised in the roles of damsels in distress, temptresses or wicked stepmothers.

In Maugham's novels these roles are never immediately obvious, yet, on the underlying level, women are often forced into social and cultural stereotypes. "Framing" occurs not only in the more physical sense of capturing women into objects of art in the "real" frame of a picture, a photograph or the covers of a book. Maugham's women are "framed" primarily on a symbolic level; a woman becomes "a spectacle" the moment an image is imposed on her by the male gaze.²³ The male consciousness of the author and the narrator succeeds in immobilising female characters in stock roles predefined by the patriarchal order of the universe. They are often "imprisoned" in clichéd stereotypical images reflecting men's beliefs about women rather than women themselves.

²⁰ J. Whitehead, *Maugham, A Reappraisal* (London: Vision, New York: Barnes & Noble 1987), p. 154.

²¹ W. S. Maugham, *Cakes and Ale*, p. 135.

²² Anthony Curtis, *The Pattern of Maugham* (London: H. Hamilton 1977), p. 147.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

Many women in Maugham's writing are created around a single dominant feature that, in Maugham's universe, is considered typical for the whole of the other sex. Other qualities are added to the "core" attribute to make the character credible and alive. Rosie stands for the power of life and sex, Sophie for sensitivity gone to extremes, Mildred for moral primitivism, Mrs. Hudson for unbridled sexuality and scheming, Mrs. Garstin for pettiness and materialism. Almost all of Maugham's female characters, though complex and interesting, can be defined by one or two basic features. The men to whom they are foils are never so easily labelled. Even if they play a symbolic role in a novel the complexity of their personalities prevents flatness. Driffield may represent literature, just like Larry may be described as a symbol of spirituality but they still possess the ability to surprise the reader.

Women are thus denied the right to develop as characters, which naturally gives them only a limited role in Maugham's plots. If the plot of a novel is "a dramatic embodiment of what a culture believes to be true or what it is afraid may be true,"²⁴ then, in relation to women, it means that female characters become the "uneasy combination of what a man wishes them to be and what he fears them to be;"²⁵ they become imprisoned in a two-fold trap of stereotypes; they must be either demons or angels and cannot step outside the boundaries of their predefined roles.

Thus, even if the story in the novel is not contained within the suffocating limits of "the Pamela plot" still "some stories have been imagined, by male poets as well as male novelists, which tend to perpetuate extreme and debilitating images of angels or monsters."²⁶ The patriarchal image of women splits "into black and white, Virgin Mary and Scarlet Woman, angel of mercy and prostitute."²⁷ This split is necessary²⁸ as the complexity of female characters would not be contained in one mould; it is only with difficulty that it is forced into two. The two images certainly make the male task of "imprisoning" women easier; the man has two potential moulds to choose from. The two broad categories into which a female character may fall is that of Eve – the cause of the Original Sin, and eventually, of the death of the Son of God, and the Virgin Mary, the mother of God who neutralised Eve's action. As polar opposites they offer much room for men to manoeuvre every woman into one of the two groups. The distinction between the domestic angel and the devil outside

²⁴ Joanna Russ, in: *Images of Women in Fiction*, ed. Susan Koppelman (Ohio: Cornillon, Bowling Green Un. Popular Press, 1973), p. 4.

²⁵ Eva Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes* (London: Virago, 1978), p. 17.

²⁶ S. Gilbert, S. Gubar, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

²⁷ E. Figes, *op. cit.*, p. 17, 18.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

the comfortable and moral boundaries of the house was represented in the Victorian times by the dichotomy of "the Angel in the House"²⁹ and a whore. These two images – of a matron at home and a prostitute in the street – were both part of the same picture. Out of this fundamental distinction other stereotypical images of women arose; of wicked stepmothers, dangerous beauties, evil temptresses casting a spell on an unsuspecting male, or, conversely, of paragons of devotion and maternal, filial and marital love.

Naturally, this imagery utilised not only Christian symbols, but relied on the preconceptions, which have been rooted in the deepest subconscious of societies for ages. The images of Eve and Mary overlap to some extent with the figures of women from Greek and Roman mythology, who range from benevolent mother goddesses, like Demeter, to malignant goddesses of evil, misfortune or discord, like Ate and Eris. Of special importance and interest are also female monsters, a ubiquitous species in popular folklore and mythology. The Harpies and the Gorgons, the Sirens and the Sphinx, the Scythian monster – half maiden, half serpent, Lamia who devoured children, la Bella Dame sans Merci, the lady tempting the Green Knight all belong to the repertoire which is and has been used by male authors in presenting women in fiction and which possibly inspired Maugham as well. Though realistic, Maugham's presentation of women is often based on such myths. Stock figures from folklore and legends are particularly suited for Maugham's novels since they are, like Maugham's female characters, judged and described as either "good" or "bad" on the basis of their actions and influence on men.

Maugham's female characters are forced to play roles from mythology, the Bible, misogynistic literature. The readers encounter, often in one novel, an earth goddess, biblical Eve and Mary Magdalene, a stock figure of a wife scolding her husband and making his life into hell, or an archetypical mother. Maugham enriches this repertoire of images with less popular but equally stereotypical female characters: a harlot with a heart of gold and a friend and lover in one person, who become a ubiquitous species in almost all his novels.

Naturally, the framework of a myth or any other stereotype limits female freedom. A woman cannot be herself; in all she does she is compelled to enact her predefined role. Such limitation ensures stability in the represented world. By using the underlying structure of a myth as a basic, symbolic level for his novels, Maugham introduces an order, which seems impossible to overthrow. This order cannot be violated because

²⁹ Patmore's poem, quoted in: *Free and Ennobled*, ed. Carol Bauer, Lawrence Ritt (Oxford, New York, Toronto, Sydney, Paris, Frankfurt: Pergamon Press, 1979), p. 3.

“myth operates within the diagrams of ritual, which presupposes total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were.” Therefore “myths are the agents of stability”³⁰ which help to reinstate patriarchal order in places where it showed cracks due to disruptive actions of some women. Thus, even if a woman poses a potential threat to the system she can be “explained away” as acting out her mythical role of woman the destroyer. This does not, of course, diminish her powers in real terms, but places her within a framework of an understandable and stable system. Her actions are no longer inexplicable instances of sheer female evil, which appears unexpectedly and cannot be controlled. By forcing the disruptive behaviour into a pattern, the system is able not only to neutralise it, but also to incorporate it into the patriarchal order as another stereotype.

The deadly charm of Louise of *The Narrow Corner*, one of the most dangerous of Maugham's females, is seen and explained as mythical beauty of an enchantress – a term used by doctor Saunders in the closing scene of the novel. One pattern seems, however, not enough to integrate Louise into the patriarchal system of signs. Therefore she is presented additionally as Maugham's interpretation of Eve, who lives on a remote island of the Malay Archipelago as in the Garden of Eden. Biblical symbolism of the novel is implied in the very name of Erik Christensen, one of the main male protagonists. Erik, however, is more like Adam than Christ; ignorant of guile or meanness he tastes from the Tree of Knowledge, from which Louise offers him the fruit. Erik's collision with the bare facts of life and baser impulses of humanity is caused directly by Louise and, as in the case of Adam, who was infected with sin, leads eventually to his death. The strong bond between Fred and Erik points additionally to a patriarchal myth of a golden age before the arrival of women;³¹ both men are linked by a spiritual tie, almost like God and Adam, but the carnality of Louise destroys this pure connection of souls. Louise is also an Eve or a serpent tempting Fred; their meeting under a tree, her green sarong – of a colour representing evil in folklore – all point to an underlying level of symbolic patterns and signs.

Female characters of *The Razor's Edge* can also be seen as integrated in different symbolic patterns. Isabel, Sophie and Suzanne all play the roles of temptresses on the spiritual journey of Larry. Isabel represents Flesh and its pleasures, Suzanne tries to distract Larry from his purpose by offering him a happy and loving home, while Sophie offers him the most spiritual temptation of becoming a saved soul and being “Mary Magdalene

³⁰ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 39.

³¹ K. Millett, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

to his Jesus Christ."³² All three women, with the additional and peripheral inclusion of Frau Becker and Ellie may be perceived also in mythical terms as the Sirens, tempting Larry, the Odysseus, on his way to his spiritual homeland.

Apart from mythology and Biblical allusions Maugham uses also stock figures from folklore and fairy tales as a basis for his female characters. Mrs. Garstin, although a natural mother of Kitty, has many characteristics of the wicked stepmother figure. Her dignified appearance, which might imply her youthful beauty, contrasted with the fresh attractiveness of her daughter introduces a motif of concealed jealousy. The death orders issued normally by wicked stepmothers are replaced here by a struggle to mould Kitty according to her mother's wish so that she can, vicariously, relive her youth again by arranging Kitty's future in every detail. The whole of *The Painted Veil* seems a subverted fairy tale. Kitty's younger sister, Doris, plain and held in contempt by her mother, repeats the pattern of Cinderella, rewarded for her humiliation and goodness by a marriage to a prince, here represented by a handsome and rich son of a surgeon with a title. Yet, it is Kitty, the vain sister on whom her mother's affection is bestowed, who is the main heroine. The convention is thus reversed, but the stereotypical roles of women remain largely the same.

The imprisonment of female characters in Maugham's plots is most clearly visible in the type of closures he uses in his novels in relation to women. Maugham recognises two most typical closures in fiction: death or marriage; in the preface to *The Razor's Edge* he voices his doubts whether he should be writing the novel at all, since it ends in neither.³³ Indeed, most of his plots telling the stories of men end with either deaths or marriages. Strickland, Driffield, Erik and Fred, Elliot, Walter all die, Philip Carey is going to marry. The closure of *The Razor's Edge* seems to leave the readers in the middle of events, with no definite conclusion. Yet, it belongs to the same convention of endings, whose major feature is not death or marriage as such, but rather fulfilment. This may be the fulfilment of an individual like an artist, or a certain completeness of a narrative purpose. Strickland dies in the Tahiti after completing his masterpiece, Driffield dies, having become the Great Man of the English Letters, Elliot dies with the invitation card for which he longed in hand; they all find their personal fulfilment.

Maugham's women, like men, often die at the end of the novel or at the closure of an episode. Fanny Price commits suicide; Mrs. Garstin and Mrs. Frith die, Sophie is killed. The major difference, however, between

³² W. S. Maugham, *The Razor's Edge*, p. 220.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

these closures and the endings of the lives of men is the lack of the sense of fulfilment in the case of women. Fanny Price kills herself, a starved and lonely human being and an artist without a trace of talent. Mrs. Garstin dies without having her ambitions fulfilled; only one of her daughters makes a suitable match; the other and her husband remain a source of disappointment for her. By a cruel irony of fate, or maybe by poetic justice, her husband receives his promotion, long overdue, immediately after her death. Catherine Frith dies, leaving her daughter a moral savage, and Erik, her Oedipal friend, an incorrigible idealist.

While death seems an appropriate narrative end for both male and female characters, marriage is a much more common narrative closure for women. Its significance for both sexes is also different; while for men the marital bond is never an aim in itself, for women, according to patriarchal stereotypes, marriage is the ultimate fulfilment of female ambition. "For men marriage is regarded as a state; for women as a vocation. For men, it is a means of ordering his life and perpetuating his race, for women it is considered a proper and fitting aim of existence."³⁴ The social pressure to comply with this stereotype is such that the majority of women do marry, although not necessarily the men they desire; when they do, their marriages become simultaneously their narrative closures.

Marriage, as a closure imposed on women by patriarchy, means often an abrupt end of any other "career" she might be pursuing. Norah stops writing her novelettes and is apparently relieved that she is freed from the need to earn money. Suzanne does not stop painting, yet her future husband assumes control of her artistic activities; he is not only her manager, who arranges exhibitions, but he becomes her chief critic and adviser, although he has no taste for art. Suzanne's paintings, a potentially dangerous means of self-expression and a manifestation of independence, are forced into the framework of "feminine" art, which, put bluntly, means insignificant paintings of flowers. The women have to realise that their main duties from the moment of signing the marriage contract will be domestic in nature while other activities practised before have to be suppressed or strictly controlled.

In putting an abrupt end to female quest, marriage, as a narrative closure of the female "erotic" plot "bears an uncanny resemblance to death."³⁵ It is significant that all the marriages, which bring a woman's life in the novel to a closure, happen off the scenes, after the novel actually ends. Like women killed into objects of art, women are thus "killed" into

³⁴ Susanne LaFollette, in *Feminist Papers*, ed. Alice Rossi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), p. 533.

³⁵ Alison Booth, *Introduction: The Sense of Few Endings in: Famous Last Words; Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure*, ed. Alison Booth (Charlottesville, London: The University Press of Virginia, 1993), p. 2.

wives; after they marry the reader (and so nobody) can see them. Suzanne and Sally are only prospective wives when the narrator takes leave of them; Rosie is not for a moment seen in her role of Lord Kemp's wife, it is only Ata who is described as Strickland's wife in *The Moon and Sixpence*. Even she, however, does not appear on the pages of the novel herself; she is spoken about or seen in paintings and never speaks with her own voice. Sophie Macdonald of *The Razor's Edge* was to be offered a similar quasi-death in her salvation marriage to Larry, her refusal to comply leads to a closure of her episode in actual death.

The erotic plot, finding its culmination in marriage, is the only "ambitious" plot³⁶ that a woman is allowed to pursue without any negative consequences. On the whole Maugham restricts the "Bildungsroman" plot to men; Philip and his counterpart in *Cakes and Ale* – Ashenden, Strickland, Larry, or Fred are presented as developing, cognating human beings on a road to artistic fulfilment or self-discovery. The same paradigm applied to women seems to be summarised in a story: "how she lost him, how she got him, how she kept him, how she died for him/wed him."³⁷ The lives of characters like Suzanne or Norah follow roughly this very pattern. Their "ambition" to marry is fulfilled; a similar plot for Blanche ends with death; hers is the alternative ending to marriage: non-existence. Even Kitty of *The Painted Veil*, who is a heroine of a Bildungsroman, can be seen as imprisoned within this paradigm. Although Maugham attempts to present her religious conversion and a drastic change in life attitudes, the plot of the novel could be summarised as going along the fluctuating lines: she finds a husband – she finds a lover – she loses her lover – she loses her husband – she finds her lover again – she rejects him – she finds her father again. In patriarchal culture the story of a nonconformist battling the world and making great discoveries or creating masterpieces is jealously guarded by men; Maugham is no exception.

Maugham's patriarchal universe usually punishes females who refuse to limit themselves to the role of the domestic angel. Sometimes the women who will not conform to the male-made pattern of a suitable female career die an unsatisfactory death without any sense of fulfilment. In the world of strict patriarchy there can be "no relaxation of standards."³⁸ A woman "is either an absolute woman or nothing at all, totally rejected."³⁹ Thus, a woman can either fully abide by the man-made rules, which imprison her at home, or she may venture outside it, but she risks punishment in so doing. Sophie's refusal to be "Mary Magdalene to Larry's Jesus

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Joanna Russ, *What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Can't Women Write?* in: *Images of Women...*, p. 9.

³⁸ E. Figes, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Christ,"⁴⁰ which is a brazen rejection of the Angel in the House pattern, is punished by death. Mrs. Garstin's ambitions die with her, without finding fulfilment. Fanny Price who is pursuing a highly unsuitable career of a painter is also punished by death.

Women, imprisoned in their stereotypical roles and forced into their predefined place in the plot are deprived not only of their freedom but, thus incapacitated, they are also stripped of any influence on the reality of the novel. In Maugham's universe, as in any patriarchy "the ethics and values, the philosophy and art of the culture and its very civilisation is of male manufacture."⁴¹ Due to their inherent inability to comprehend it, women have been excluded from creating art, or indeed, reality. As a result all the positions of authority and power of determining reality remain in the hands of men; "human achievement, interest, and ambition"⁴² belong to men. The seemingly ridiculous clerks like Mr. Trafford, the silent scientists like Walter and the crippled but proficient doctors like Philip, all wield power as creators of reality. Working quietly in their studies, attended to by women, they forge the images of females that the posterity will inherit. Dominated as they may be in the domestic life by their wives, they do triumph in the end; it is they who generate reality and shape the future. The possibility of change, offered by writing,⁴³ is also given only to men. The real and metaphorical penis – the pen⁴⁴ is the sole possession of men. The power of language is vested in the male and cannot be taken away by women, however voluble they may be. The misogynistic stereotype of a nagging wife or a tattling girl is frequent in Maugham's novels. It may obscure the reality, in which men are still in possession of the logos, although women may be talking twice as much. Women remain muted, but "muting is not to be confused with actual silence. The muted group may speak a great deal," but the issue is whether they can say what they wish.⁴⁵ If they have any control or power of the language, it is only over its less permanent and valuable type – the spoken word. Men have at their disposal the tool of shaping the reality and leaving a mark on the future; women can only engage in gossip, tittle-tattle, whining, nagging or bitching.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ W. S. Maugham, *The Razor's Edge*, p. 142.

⁴¹ K. Millett, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴³ Gerardine Meaney, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁴⁴ S. Gilbert, S. Gubar, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁴⁵ Deborah Cameron, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (London: Macmillan Press, 1985), p. 170.

⁴⁶ Jane Moore, *Introduction in: The Feminist Reader; Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), p. 4.

They can have the word only for a short while in their mouth, while the man is able to "tell stories" – stories in which women are imprisoned in the images that men create.

Female characters, the possession of their creator, remain trapped in a variety of prisons in Maugham's fiction. They can oscillate exclusively between the contrasting and extremely suffocating images of angels and demons, or are forced into stereotypical roles of women from misogynistic literature. Muted and "framed", they are at the mercy of men who relate their story. Strickland's curse, in which he wished his wife in hell eventually comes true. If hell be understood as a situation where a human being cannot influence his/her fate and is imprisoned forever, then all Maugham's women are suffering there: the angels together with the demons.

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