

Analysing the Problem of "Otherness" in *The Painted Veil*—— Based on Beauvoir's Existential Feminism Theory

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Abstract. William Somerset Maugham is a famous British novelist and playwright, known for his expertise in portraying characters and depicting the complexity of human nature. The novel *The Painted Veil*, one of Maugham's representative works, focuses on the experience of the heroine Kitty and her changes of state of mind. It explores the process of female spiritual awakening from ignorance to independence, with distinct feminist features. At the time of the novel's creation, the Western women's liberation movement was in full swing. The wave of liberating women and the pursuit of equality swept the entire Western world, leaving footprints in Maugham's literary works. This paper analyzes *The Painted Veil* through Beauvoir's female theory and a feminist perspective, finding that it breaks the bondage and prejudice of the traditional female image at that time, creating a new image and value pursuit for women. It also reflects Maugham's rejection of the portrayal of females as "the other," criticizes patriarchal society to some extent, and affirms feminist theory.

Keywords: Maugham; Feminism; *The Painted Veil*.

1. Introduction

William Somerset Maugham is a famous British novelist and playwright. He was born in 1874 and grew up in a family of lawyers. His parents died when he was under ten, and he was subsequently bullied by his peers for his short stature and stuttering in middle school, contributing to his withdrawn and sensitive personality. In college, he spent five years studying medicine. Since 1897, he abandoned medicine and started working as a full-time writer, but several works he wrote over the years were lesser-known. In 1902, Maugham tried making plays and met with success, with a lot of support. From 1913, he temporarily stopped writing plays and devoted the next two years to writing the novel of *Human Bondage*, but when the novel was published, it was not favored by critics. During World War I, he joined the British intelligence service and visited Russia as an envoy. In 1916, he traveled to the South Pacific and arrived in the Far East several times thereafter. The rich experience and keen sensibility enabled him to depict the subtle human nature in his works and create a non-flat, fresh female image with progressive significance in the subsequent creation of *The Painted Veil*.

Between 1919 and 1920, Maugham wrote his novel *The Painted Veil* after traveling in China, which was published in 1925. According to himself, *The Painted Veil* was inspired by a plot of Purgatory in the Divine Comedy: "Siena raised me, and Marema destroyed me. The man who had taken out his gem ring and put it on me should know [1]." The heroine, Kitty, is a rich lady living in London vanity fair. As her parents pressure her to marry and her younger sister announced engagement earlier than her, Kitty hurriedly married the bacteriologist Walter Fane and went to Hong Kong with him. After marriage, Kitty is infatuated with the married man Charlie Townsend and falls into an affair. After the adultery was revealed, Kitty was held by her husband in Meitan-fu, where a severe cholera pandemic broke out. In Meitan-fu, Kitty experienced introspection, the work of the monastery, and the death of her husband. A series of changes and experiences made her redeemed and strengthened

her will and determination to pursue herself and set foot on the way home, reopening a life of her own. "Love" and "betrayal," "redemption" and "awakening" are the themes of the book. When life is no longer blocked by the beautiful veil, under the impact of love, betrayal, death, and awakening, Kitty is no longer attached to male, jumping off the oppression under the male predominant consciousness [2]. This study used Beauvoir's existential feminist theory to analyze the characters, language, structure, style, and so forth included in *The Painted Veil* and explored the intrinsic characteristics and value of the work. While this study also paid attention to the details of the author's creation and analyzed the deep characteristics of his thoughts and works from the perspective of the author's creation.

The domestic study of *The Painted Veil* from the perspective of feminism began in 2015, and Wang Xinchun and ZhaoXiaojing (2015) took the lead in analyzing the spiritual awakening of the heroine from the feminist perspective [3]. Some subsequent studies focused on the specific change process of the heroine's spiritual awakening in *The Painted Veil*, laying emphasis on the awakening and gradual construction of Kitty's subject consciousness, and summarized and evaluated it [4]. Later, some research began to analyze the contents related to feminism in *The Painted Veil* with a detailed branch of the feminist theory, which could better understand the feminism in *The Painted Veil* [5,6]. At present, the number of studies on *The Painted Veil* with a perspective of feminism in China is small, and the number of studies on *The Painted Veil* with a specific branch of feminism is more insufficient. On the other hand, most of these studies focus on the perspective of a larger theoretical system, which is easy to make the research content more vague and not representative.

Therefore, this paper is based on the perspective of the concept of "the other" of the existential feminist theory, further focusing on the specific concept of the feminist branch, with a smaller entry point and a more detailed and specific analysis. The purpose of this study is to further analyze the feminism contents in *The Painted Veil*, to explore the unique interpretation and value of feminism in this work, to help fill the vacancy of this relevant research in China, and to help promote the exploration of the humanistic field in China.

2. Theoretical Framework

Beauvoir was a leader in the second wave of feminism. She constructed the theoretical category of existential feminism in her work *The Second Sex*. Her main point is to propose that men are a reference for distinguishing the sexes, pointing out that men define themselves as 'self' in the subject and absolute status, and women as 'other'. She said, 'The reference to define and distinguish a woman is a man, while the reference to define and distinguish a man is not a woman' [7]. As the 'subject,' men have most of the social resources while mastering more power. Under this social background, women gradually become the 'others' who depend on men to survive, and deepen their status as the 'others' together with men, gradually losing their independence and the consciousness of pursuing self-value.

In *The Painted Veil*, most of the male characters portrayed by Maugham are in the position of 'subject,' while the female characters are in the position of 'other.' Maugham's distinctive character shaping fits the theory of 'other' in Beauvoir's existential feminism. At the same time, the main content of *The Painted Veil* is female awakening and separating from male dominance, representing the change of women's status from 'other' to 'subject.' Therefore, using the existential feminist perspective to analyze *The Painted Veil* has great applicability. Analyzing the mutual transformation between 'other' and 'subject' and the two positions in *The Painted Veil* can help us better understand the feminist content in the novel and inspire men and women in today's society.

3. Analyzing Kitty from a Feminist Perspective

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir constructs the theoretical category of existential feminism. She notes that men describe themselves as "The Subject," the absolute "self," and women as "The Other," suggesting that men are the benchmark used to differentiate between the sexes. She contends that "the

reference that defines and distinguishes a woman is a man, whereas the reference that defines and distinguishes a man is not a woman." According to her, "a man is the reference that defines and identifies a woman [7]." Men possess the majority of social resources and are more powerful as "subjects." In this societal context, women progressively lose their independence and the awareness of seeking self-worth as they grow to be the "other" who depends on males for survival. They also further solidify their "other" status alongside men.

3.1. The Initial Desire of Materialism and Love

Kitty's character can be positioned as the "Other" in the first part of the book. Because of the patriarchal system's strong influence and persecution, Kitty's mother, Mrs. Justin, feels that Kitty should utilize her attractiveness as a negotiating tool to obtain better living conditions and social standing. Kitty attends different famous balls, presenting herself as a stunning, sensual single lady. Under the influence of her mother's beliefs and patriarchal culture, she attempts to secure a better marriage than women her own age. All that matters in life, in Kitty's opinion, is having money and leading a nice existence. Because her mother instills and reinforces her sense of male subjectivity, Kitty's values are influenced by this, and as a result, she ultimately finds her entire self-worth in marriage rather than discovering her own purpose in life [2,5]. Given the value of youth and beauty, Kitty panics and marries Walter Fane—a man she doesn't even love—out of fear. In this marriage, Kitty pins her sense of value on her spouse, Walter, a doctor with a high social rank who is also intelligent, well-off, and the ideal example of everything Kitty had been taught to look for in a partner. However, because Walter is so reserved and awkward when he talks, the gregarious and upbeat Kitty cannot bear his quietness, and she ends up feeling alone, even going so far as to cheat on him with a womanizer named Charlie Townsend. Kitty's crippling need for marriage is a reflection of her low self-esteem. She completely identifies with the idea that she would trade her youthful beauty for a position next to a good man; her obsession with Charlie Townsend is a reflection of Kitty's naive reverence for masculine strength. Charlie is powerful and slick, with a strong dislike for women. Kitty, on the other hand, ignores Charlie's flaws and utilizes his position of authority as a springboard to subtly elevate his reputation and develop an obsession with him. Kitty loses her identity and becomes "the other" as a result of her obedience to marriage and male authority, which renders her totally obedient to patriarchal society.

In *The Second Sex*, it is stated that a woman cannot be dependent in a romantic relationship with a man because "blind worshipful love means giving in, and such love is destructive [7]." In Kitty and Charlie's affair, the female partner is dependent on love, and she believes that she and Charlie are truly "in love." During the course of their relationship, "the blissful happiness that Kitty felt had restored him to his former beauty." The affair fulfills her desire to be attached to an attractive and highly placed man. Kitty breaks away from her loveless marriage and enters into an affair that makes her happy, but she still firmly places herself in the position of "the other", deriving pleasure and fulfillment from the relationship between the two sexes. However, the object of her blind adoration and obsession is always male [2].

In *The Second Sex*, it is said, "In love, if a woman cannot get rid of her dependence on a man, she can only be in the position of the second sex [7]." Thus, "For women, true love should be based on the mutual recognition of two free people; two people who are both self and each other, where no one gives up transcendence and no one is harmed, and where together they demonstrate the value and purpose of the world." Although Kitty has always despised her husband, Walter, she is unable to resist sexual behavior toward him. After the affair is discovered, Walter retaliates by offering to take Kitty to plague-ridden China, and despite extreme inner resistance, a threatened Kitty complies with her husband's request and travels to Mae Tan Province. In this relationship, Kitty is always in a vulnerable position, interpreting the unequal behavior in *The Second Sex* [2].

3.2. Awakening of Self-consciousness

Later in the novel, facing the frequent deaths during the cholera period, Kitty voluntarily goes forward to help at the convent. The growing experience of the convent and the death of her husband, Walter, are the key to Kitty's awakening of self-consciousness. Walter's death is not what Kitty wants, but it objectively promotes her self-growth and changes Kitty's perception of her husband's past image. Walter's death deprives her of her social status as "wife" and frees her from the bonds of marriage, while also making her realize that women should not depend on marriage and men for their full value. The experience of working in the convent allowed Kitty to consciously discover her own value of existence and to experience the pleasure of realizing her self-worth. The fraternity nuns taught Kitty the true meaning of self and made her realize that her value should not be limited to the pursuit of vulgar material things, love, and marriage [8]. Since then, she has come out of her former life of only "love" and started to recognize society with her own eyes and contact society with her own identity. This experience of separation from gender relations and transmutation in the face of death allows Kitty to re-examine herself and realize her self-awakening. The death of her husband also gives her freedom, and the nuns' teachings transform her [9,10]. Kitty "felt like a person who had been living by the pond and was suddenly brought to the sea," and the thought of self-worth enlightenment was planted in her heart [11]. Even at the end of the novel, she is briefly dominated by human desires and rekindles them with Charlie. After coming to her senses, Kitty is still determined to pursue her self-consciousness and resolutely chooses to leave Hong Kong and return to her hometown to realize her new value of life. At the end of the novel, Kitty's wish for her daughter contrasts sharply with her own mother's expectation of her. Kitty is no longer bound by old concepts but examines herself from a completely new perspective, passes on her individual consciousness to the next generation of women, and devotes herself to cultivating her own daughter to become an independent self-woman of the new era [2,12]. This reflects her complete transformation from "other" to "self" and her realization that she exists as an autonomous subject. "She feels empowered inside and is able to face what is to come with optimism and ease [11]."

4. Other Female Images

With the exception of the heroine Kitty, other prominent women can be defined as "the Other." For example, Mrs. Garstin, who is Kitty's mother, married Mr. Garstin because her father thought he could go far. However, after many years of marriage, they remained in the common class. Mrs. Garstin was dissatisfied with the existing field and compelled her husband to stand for parliament or participate in high-society parties for the purpose of being one of them. Mrs. Garstin appears to be the head of the household and controls everything about her husband; in fact, she had no choice but to achieve success through Mr. Garstin so that she could gain gratification and realize self-worth. She was dominant in social circles and aimed at establishing a strong bond with her spouse, as well as commodifying her daughters and marrying them off to paramount and powerful men. Therefore, Kitty has been taught to put males first since childhood. She has to marry "the love" she thought and promote self-worth. Additionally, Dorothy, who is Charlie's wife, is also described as a gentlewoman, like a perfect woman. However, since her father retired from the Hong Kong colony, Dorothy lost protection from her family. She even thought she had no right to intervene in Charlie's extramarital relationship and could only ignore this wrongdoing involuntarily. Dorothy chose to maintain superficial happiness and raise their children to achieve the value of being a wife. In the society at that time, women like Mrs. Garstin and Dorothy were bullied by male voices countless times. Under the contradiction of desiring wonderful love and having low social status, they had no right to choose what they wanted. So women were not able to raise themselves and their offspring as individuals, as persons. Alternatively, we can say they complied with patriarchal society in those days. Women always regarded themselves as male property (usually their father or husband). They confined themselves and their daughters to "the other" to accomplish the transmission of women's status from generation to generation [10].

When we talk about the male characters in *The Painted Veil*, almost everyone is different from the female roles. For instance, Kitty's husband Walter was a renowned microbiologist respected in both Hong Kong and Mae Tan. Besides, Kitty's lover Charlie held a senior position as Assistant Chief Secretary in Hong Kong and the head of the Hong Kong colony. It follows that all of the males in *The Painted Veil* are "subjects." Nevertheless, regardless of their social status or personal identity, the majority of women remained subordinate to men in society. Through the disparity of male and female roles, we can observe Maugham's perception of women and the prevalent stereotypes of women during that era.

5. The Transformation of Female View

Mentioning Maugham, it cannot be overlooked that due to the impact of his era and personal experiences, certain biases and animosity towards the female characters in his works are evident. Maugham's most famous novel, *The Moon and Sixpence*, authored in 1919, is inspired by the life of French painter Paul Gauguin and depicts a male idealist who forsakes his existence in pursuit of artistic aspirations. *The Moon and Sixpence* is a compilation of Maugham's early literary creations; thus, it could be asserted that this work partially reflects the author's personal values and feminine perspectives. In *The Moon and Sixpence*, the character of Mrs. Strickland is depicted as an individual who exudes virtue yet harbors duplicity. Before her marriage, she enjoyed reading and possessed her own aspirations. However, after her wedding, she found it incomprehensible that her spouse, a person she hardly understood, departed to pursue his dreams. She even fabricated a falsehood claiming that her husband was unfaithful to gain public sympathy. Moreover, another female character, Blanche, is also portrayed as impulsive and careless. Additionally, when Blanche was young, she impulsively married Stroeve to repay him for saving her life. Their union was emotionally barren and fragile, leading Blanche to betray Stroeve and abandon her family when she encountered the artistic Strickland and was captivated by him. Upon her husband Stroeve's confession of his longing for her, Blanche reacted by striking him. Consequently, Maugham's depictions of males often abandon their families in pursuit of lofty ideals, resulting in these characters being radiant with idealism. Conversely, the female roles tend to "impede" the males' quest for personal aspirations and are even characterized by negative traits such as fickleness, hypocrisy, and capriciousness. However, during the middle and late stages of "The Moon and Sixpence," Strickland encountered the woman who would accompany him for the remainder of his life—Ata. Ata, depicted by Maugham as the epitome of a perfect woman, was gentle, rational, and deferential towards Strickland. She refrained from interfering with the protagonist's actions, instead wholeheartedly supporting him. Upon Strickland's death, Ata honored his wishes by burning the remarkable paintings alongside her husband's remains. However, if we view from a female perspective, Ata effectively relinquished her independent consciousness, relegating herself to a subordinate role and submitting completely to her husband, essentially becoming his servant and vassal. At this point, the relationship between Ata and Strickland was no longer one of equals, indicating that Maugham's notion of the "perfect woman" was merely a male fantasy, characterized by a lack of individual consciousness [13].

The Painted Veil, a novel initially published in 1925, was authored by Maugham following his visit to China in 1920. In this novel, Maugham's attention not only gravitates towards the novelty of romantic sentiments, which differ from his earlier works, but also delves into the profound contemplation of feminism. The protagonist, Kitty, exhibits a distinctiveness that sets her apart from the predominantly negative or submissive female characters in his previous writings. Following a string of betrayals and deaths, Kitty matures and transforms into a protagonist who genuinely embodies the term "heroine." Maugham relinquishes the erstwhile coarse and frivolous characterizations. The female figures he pens, rather than merely experiencing an awakening of consciousness, actively strive to propagate the feminist message to future generations.

Maugham's depictions of female characters vary significantly across different periods. Transitioning from the misogynistic portrayal in *The Moon and Sixpence* to the depiction of "ideal women" from a male perspective and ultimately to the emergence of independent women with an awakened

consciousness in *The Painted Veil*, this progression also reflects Maugham's evolving attitude towards the changing dynamics of female groups.

6. Conclusion

This paper is guided by Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist theory. It analyzes the evolving portrayal of women in *The Painted Veil* and the transition from "the other" to "self" within the novel, which mirrors the shifting roles of women in society throughout history. Women are no longer merely opposites of men as "subjects," and traditional labels such as "wife," "mother," and "daughter" are no longer sufficient to encapsulate the complexity of the female experience. What's more, the protagonist of *The Painted Veil*, Kitty, exhibits a notable distinction from other female characters. She effectively transcends the confines of conventional female stereotypes within the context of her time, vanquishes preconceptions, and generates novel images and values for women, thereby conferring immense significance on her era. Maugham's evolving attitudes towards women objectively reflect his denial of the female collective being perceived as "the others" and critique patriarchal society to a certain extent and confirm the feminist theory. Maugham's so-called "misogyny" is merely a dislike for individual women who remain unenlightened. Instead, he portrays the transformation of traditional women into those with independent consciousness, criticizing the unconscious female collective of the old era and expressing a positive attitude towards the early feminist movement. This article primarily focuses on *The Painted Veil* as a case study, using Simone de Beauvoir's theory to explore the "other" female image in Maugham's works and to briefly analyze the author's unconscious misogynistic tendency. However, the limitation is that the author has not analyzed the reasons for Maugham's alteration in his attitude towards women. Future research can explore the causal factors and their effects on Maugham's evolving attitude towards women, based on the time interval between the writings of *The Moon and Sixpence* and *The Painted Veil*.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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