

Somerset Maugham's rare tribute to the womankind

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Abstract--- *William Somerset Maugham, one of the famous English short story writers of twentieth century, is known to present his women characters as bloody, immature, imbalanced and loud in most of his short stories. The present article on the other hand is about his best homage to the womankind through the short story "The Colonel's Lady". It is one of the finest short-stories ever written by Somerset Maugham, in its length, characterization, matter, theme, situations and settings to give the public what they want. An excellent thing in this outstanding piece of craftsmanship is the character of the Colonel's wife. His professionalism makes one marvel at its details, composition and ability to touch one's soul with feelings of compassion for the Colonel's lady. Every sentence, paragraph, fragment and everything in the story sit as a perfect gem in an exquisite design and the other characters leap off the page to become breathing creatures. Even if one is not a fan of the short story form, after reading this story feels that Maugham's writing is an exception.*

Keywords--- *Somerset Maugham, professionalism, short-stories.*

INTRODUCTION

William Somerset Maugham is a worldly story-teller with incomparable knowledge of the world. His sense of insecurity as an orphan at an early age of ten, proper professional medical training, series of travels around the world, wartime experiences in the secret service as a contact with spies during the Russian Revolution in 1917, interesting and varied life have benefitted tremendously in his writing career. His training as a doctor taught him the minute details of human suffering aptly conveyed through a dispassionate and systematic habit of observation. This is further nourished by his admiration for the 'objective' school of French literature and especially for Maupassant, his role model in youth. To add to this, extensive, fearless and productive travels around the world have benefitted him a lot. The acquaintance which he obtained through travel with a diversity of standards, manners, morals rightly served the clinical attitude of his writing. In addition his spell as a British spy in Petrograd charged with aborting the Bolshevik revolution taught him politics at the very highest level of world significance. On the whole, all these have helped him to develop a keen eye for the minute details of life, which is further combined with his short story writing style in such a way as to capture readers' attention.

Most of the short stories of the author portray women as hypocrites, merciless, undignified, noisy, loud, immature and imbalanced. Some of his stories titled "Rain", "Luncheon", "The Mother" convey his feelings that women are bloody, dominating and imposing. The story "Luncheon" for example is set in Paris during the struggle

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period of the author. The young author at that time is living in Paris on eighty francs a month. A middle aged woman of forty, who calls herself a fan of the author, manages to get herself invited to luncheon at an expensive restaurant, Foyot's, with the author. Foyot's is a place where the French senators eat and beyond the imagination of the young man. Ironically the word luncheon means a light midday meal in Middle English language. There at the restaurant the lady goes on over eating by repeatedly saying that she would not have anything for lunch. She finally over-eats to such an extent that leaves the author penniless for the rest of the month. It is a satire on hypocrisy, external show of the woman belonging to the middle class and gluttony. The imposing and dominating lady is portrayed as a parasite sucking the good will and benefits of the good intentioned people. At the end of the story the author meets her after twenty years. He ironically and humorously manages to avenge the lady by commenting that the Immortal Gods have befittingly made her very fat weighing one hundred and thirty three kilograms for her act of hypocrisy.

On the other hand, though most of Maugham's stories can be best recipes against oblivion, "The Colonel's Lady" is one of his finest stories to pay tribute to the womankind. The story is in-fact incubated for many years on the back of an envelope. It is based on a note he made in 1901, which appears in *A Writer's Note Book*. Actually there can be few better demonstrations of the art of the short story than a comparison of the variety of characters, scenes and situations which make the finished piece of work written forty years later. The setting of the story is done in a country-side, twenty miles away from Sheffield, near London. The story has a common theme of jealousy shown by the husband, George Peregrine towards his wife, Evie as he is unable to bear her success of writing a book of poetry called 'When Pyramids Decay'.

George, at the beginning of the story has always considered himself to be superior to his wife, Evie. He is admired by all the local people in and around his vicinity. According to him, his wife is just a middle-aged woman without much attraction. At the same time he considers her to be a good wife and a wonderful hostess. At a point of time before they got married, he even thought that he loved her, but after marriage realized that they have completely different interests and their interests don't match. Though they have no quarrels in their marital life, the Colonel thinks that their marriage has failed as she is unable to give birth to a child. In spite of having gone through all these, he considers himself to be a healthy man. He even feels quite normal to have an extramarital affair to have fun and enjoyment. He maintains a secret lover named Daphne and never empathizes with Evie on the same issue. Thus in the process, he tends to disrespect, misunderstand and hurt her feelings deeply. The same situation at the home front is beautifully portrayed by Maugham when they sit far away from each other at the dining table for Breakfast. They have developed distance from each other both physically and mentally in the process.

George gets totally surprised after knowing that his wife has published a book of poetry called 'When Pyramids Decay'. As a matter of fact, she publishes the book without his knowledge, that too in her maiden name. Initially, the Colonel tries to underestimate the entire circumstances and ignore her book of poetry. The same situation is once again well depicted by Maugham as their routine life continues normally in spite of being aware of the whole state of affairs. Maugham has further raised the stature of Evie in the eyes of the readers as she continues to play the role of a housewife very well and remains unaffected after knowing about George's extramarital affair. On the other

hand, as George goes to London sometime after the incident, gets totally surprised on knowing that her poetry book is well received and very popular among the readers. The jealous husband is unable to understand her and the reason behind everyone's appreciation. As her poems turn out to be quite successful both in bookstores and in the eyes of the literary critiques, he begins to pay greater attention to her work.

Suddenly the situation around him in the countryside gets changed, as people start talking about the beauty and originality her poetry. People even begin to address and refer to George as Evie's husband. At this point of time, the real talent of Maugham is brought out as he manages to extract mixed feelings from the readers. The reader empathises with Evie, sympathises with George and feels it is natural on his part to feel unbalanced and jealous. George even manages to buy the book, reads it again and again until he understands that the passionate poems are about a love affair between an old woman and a young man. Up to this point of the story, he completely discounts his childless wife, until he imagines that ten years earlier she had a clandestine affair with a younger man. The jealous husband even thinks the affair to be a true one. Although, he is cheating on his wife with Daphne, a girl "*with whom he was in the habit of passing a few agreeable hours whenever he went to town,*" he feels hurt by his wife's confessed betrayal through the book. He is left wondering why he couldn't catch the passionate and attractive side of his wife. At this point, the reader finds the portrayal of George's character to be one-sided and static.

Till now in the story, one sees that the selfish husband has put himself in a superior position by not thinking about his wife at all. He rather neglects and never gives any credit to her for anything. At the beginning, he even thinks the book would be a failure, but the same feeling further resulted in his humiliation as the book becomes widely popular among everyone around. Surprisingly, he doesn't change his mind regarding relations with Evie and at the same time does nothing to improve it. In-fact, her possible and imaginative affair acts as a trigger. In addition, her intelligence and charm make him angry. As he finds out that he is nothing, tries to deny the same by trying to transfer the blame on others. His wife's magnanimity on the other hand is well portrayed when she continues to tolerate his affair and disrespect. The greatness of her character is further elevated when she does not accept the invitation extended by the literary critique on the occasion of success meet of her book, fearing that George would not enjoy the party. On the other hand, the husband doesn't even bother to clarify Evie on the issue of his extramarital relationship. He even stoops down to the extent of meeting his lawyer in-order to find out the truth behind everything by engaging a detective.

The disturbed mental condition of the husband is well brought out by the author where he wants divorce but unable to do so as he feels extremely sad about it. Besides, he also imagines that she could as well do the same to him. Then he tries to look back and compare all the good things done by Evie for his benefit. He is also reminded of his affair with Daphne and worries about his situation after divorcing her. He realizes that there won't be a nice, kind, patient and diligent wife anymore to receive his bad behaviour and continue to serve him. Moreover, there won't be a smart and popular poet beside him anymore. He recollects and admits the fact that there has been an increase in his popularity after his wife's publication of the book. So in the end, he doesn't divorce and lets her affair remain a story for the readers. It turns out to be a comedy with overtones of sadness as Colonel is a comic

character but sympathetic at the same time. Finally the reader might not understand the husband, but empathizes with his wife's need to express creativity in her own way and that part of the life about which the husband is unaware of.

It is definitely a finest tribute to the womankind by Maugham. His gift for creating a gallery of varied and lively characters like Evie, the Colonel, the critique, the lawyer, the young lover and Daphne has a huge readership and seems to appeal to all classes of people. The reader experiences the resonance of real flesh and blood characters brought to life in an un-noticeable manner. One even finds Maugham to be less of a writer and more a story teller. It is through the same technique of story-telling that he pays a tribute to womankind and glorifies the character of the Colonel's lady as a good wife, wonderful hostess, caring, understanding, tolerant, intelligent, forgiving and creative personality in spite of the worst treatment received from her husband. Besides, his style and diction have an informality which makes for unimpeded reading. It finally makes one marvel at its details, composition and ability to touch one's soul with feelings. It is one of the examples that describe volumes about him as a consummate and refined story teller.

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