

## **Maugham on Mainland Southeast Asia**

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### **Abstract**

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*Based on his experiences during a journey through mainland Southeast Asia in 1923, Somerset Maugham published a book of colonial travel entitled *The Gentleman in the Parlour*. Focusing mainly on his representations of Burma (now Myanmar), an analysis will be presented of Maugham's travelogue in the light of postcolonial scholarship, especially those theoretical insights developed under the inspiration of Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism*. Despite its pretensions to be apolitical, Maugham's travel book will be shown to be a repository of colonial ideas and attitudes, integrally involved in the prevailing European discourse of high imperialism. It is thus of great interest and value to scholars of British imperial rule in Asia.*

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In 1923 Somerset Maugham traveled across mainland Southeast Asia all the way from Burma through to Vietnam. He used a variety of means of transport, including riverboat, canoe, pony, rickshaw, car and steamer. He went from Rangoon up the Irrawaddy river to Pagan and then on to Mandalay, then crossed the Shan states into Thailand. He traveled south to Bangkok, by steamer to Phnom Penh in Cambodia, visited the monuments of Angkor, went overland to Saigon, and then by boat to Hue, Hanoi and Haiphong in northern Vietnam. At that time Maugham already had a reputation as a great traveler, but this was the most ambitious and arduous journey he ever made. He recorded his experiences and impressions in a travel book called *The Gentleman in the Parlour: A Record of a Journey from Rangoon to Haiphong*, first published by William Heinemann of London in 1930, and reissued by Marlowe & Company in 1989 (Maugham 1989). (Unless otherwise indicated, throughout this article all page numbers given in brackets in the text refer to this later edition.)

The aim here is to present an interpretation and analysis of Maugham's book of colonial travel, especially in the light of the theoretical insights offered by postcolonial scholarship. Of particular relevance is the work of Edward Said, Rana Kabbani, David Spurr and Mary Louise Pratt (Said 1995; Kabbani 1986; Spurr 1993; Pratt 1992). In his book Maugham explicitly claimed to be uninterested in British imperialism as a political issue. He expressed his intention to write from a subjective point of view, concentrating on those incidents and experiences which moved him as an individual. Though guided by his subjective responses, the style of writing he adopted in the book makes strong implicit claims to objectivity, supposedly presenting realistic descriptions of what he saw and did on his trip. Despite his claims to political disinterestedness, it will be argued that Maugham's account of his travels through mainland Southeast Asia is replete with the images and tropes, stereotypes and cliches which were integral to the discourse of Western imperialism in Asia. This hegemonic discourse of Western imperialism, usually referred to by postcolonial scholars under the rubric of "Orientalism," runs consistently through Maugham's travelogue.

William Somerset Maugham (1874-1965) was a well-known writer of novels, short stories and plays, as well as travel books, essays and literary criticism. He is probably best known for his short stories set during the colonial period of British rule in island Southeast Asia, particularly on the Malay Peninsula. Maugham was English, but grew up in Paris until he was ten. He later lived in the south of France from the age of 55 until his death at age 91. He was 49 when he made the trip through mainland Southeast Asia. By then he was already known as a world traveler, having previously published travel books on Spain and China (Maugham 1905; Maugham 1922), as well as many short stories and novels based on his traveling experiences.

In 1930, when *The Gentleman in the Parlour* was published, Maugham was at the peak of his literary career. This ensured a wide readership for his travel book on mainland Southeast Asia. Without doubt the popular esteem in which Maugham was held as an author gave his views on the subject credibility, authority, and thus considerable influence. Consequently his book would have contributed significantly to shaping contemporary images of Southeast Asia among the British reading public. Indeed Maugham's popularity as a writer has endured to this day and so his attitudes and assessments continue to have an influence on the views of his readers. Maugham was influenced by, and also exerted influence on, the contemporary discourse of imperialism.

The structure of the book does not directly reflect the amount of time or effort devoted to the various sections of the journey. Instead Maugham chose to focus on aspects of the journey that particularly appealed to him, or which set his imagination running. Approximately half of the book is devoted to the first segment of his trip, in Burma, including a long section on the Shan states of eastern Burma. The second half of the book covers his time in Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam; Maugham did not visit Laos. In the following analysis the main focus will likewise be on Maugham's representations of Burma.

The general tone of the book is casual and leisurely. The approach is rambling, giving the impression that there is ample time for digressions, detours, and imaginative excursions off the beaten path, as befits a book of colonial travel. This was the high point of the colonial era, and during his travels Maugham was accepted everywhere as a member of the European ruling caste. He was a gentleman traveler, a man of leisure, with sufficient income and time to venture wherever the urge took him, and at his own leisurely pace.

The incidents which Maugham chose to record were those that appealed to him from a subjective point of view, and which he thought would be of some interest to his readers. Unlike most of the colonial writers discussed in Mary Louise Pratt's book, *Imperial Eyes* (Pratt 1992), Maugham had little urge to be comprehensive or to include all the useful information about the places he visited. In fact he makes fun of a fellow traveler who obsessively collected data about all the temples he visited at Pagan. Maugham was focused more on his own subjective and emotional responses to the places he visited. This attitude can be seen as symptomatic of the general colonial complacency of the British in the 1920s, the prevailing sense of their secure hold over their imperial possessions. Maugham made fun of a figure of his creation called "The Historian of the Decline and Fall of the British Empire." Maugham makes out that this mythical historian would be very critical of Maugham's book because it has little to say about the current status and issues of British rule in Burma, and would therefore be of no value to the historian.

Nevertheless, despite Maugham's intentions to avoid the question of European imperialism, he was writing as an Englishman traveling through the British colony of Burma and the French colonies of Indochina, which included Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. At times throughout the book Maugham's attitudes to imperialism come across clearly. In general these attitudes were consistent with the recurrent images, tropes and assumptions of the discourse of imperialism, as analyzed by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*, as well as by other postcolonial scholars inspired, in different ways, by Said's work. These writers have drawn attention to the way supposedly realistic, objective representations of the colonial world in literature, art and other forms of cultural production were in fact deeply imbued with the biases, assumptions and values of Western imperialism, including those of race, gender and class (Kabbani 1986, 137-139).

Numerous examples of this can be found in Maugham's book. For instance, in a brief discussion of the morality and imaginativeness (or rather lack thereof) of the "Oriental," in this case the people of mainland Southeast Asia, Maugham wrote:

It is one of the mistakes that people make to think that the East is depraved; on the contrary, the Oriental has a modesty that the ordinary European would find fantastic...Vice you must look for in Paris, London, or New York, rather than in Benares or Peking. But whether this is due to the fact that the Oriental, not being oppressed as we are by the sense of sin, feels no need to transgress the rules that during the long course of his history he has found it convenient to make, or whether, as is shown by his art and literature (which after all are only complicated but monotonous variations on a single theme), he is unimaginative, whom [*sic*] am I to say? (87-8)

Such contemptuous dismissals of Asian literature and art were often associated with the Orientalist sense of cultural superiority. The English historian, Thomas Macaulay, for instance, had famously asserted that a single shelf of a good European library was worth all of the literature of India.

Even in a description of the landscape itself, Orientalist notions and assumptions could become evident. Describing a river along his path, Maugham wrote:

But you could never have mistaken it for an English river, it had none of the sunny calm of our English streams, nor their smiling nonchalance; it was dark and tragic, and its flow had the sinister intensity of the unbridled lusts of man. (139)

In this example the landscape itself is anthropomorphized. It takes on human characteristics, in this case lustful and sinister ones, which were closely associated in popular European thought with Asia and the Orient (Said 1995, 4; Kabbani 1986, 19). The tendency to see a diametrical opposition between the Occidental and the Oriental “Other” was also one of the characteristic features of Orientalism (Said 1995, 46). This is a process that Gayatri Spivak has termed “Othering,” arguing that Europe “consolidated itself as a sovereign subject by defining its colonies as ‘Others’” (Spivak 1985, 128-133). Thus Maugham could draw exaggerated contrasts between European vice and Asian morality, between sunny English streams and sinister Asian ones.

There are many other examples that could be cited. When Maugham went to Pagan he visited the famous Ananda temple, where he saw four huge golden Buddhas. His only description of them was that in the “glowing dimness they are inscrutable” (18). The inscrutability of the Oriental “Other” was another well-worn Orientalist cliché. In other parts of his travel account, those covering his experiences in Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, Maugham also had frequent recourse to Orientalist tropes, in particular three of those which have long been associated with the darker side of the Southeast Asian environment: those of illness and tropical disease, particularly malaria; sex; and drugs, notably opium. When Maugham reached Bangkok, he was laid up with an attack of malaria. This he traced to sleeping one night without a mosquito net, which gave the *Anopheles* mosquito its chance. Maugham dwelled at length on this enervating experience of tropical disease (181-183). Even at this time, the 1920s, Bangkok was already associated in the popular imagination with sexual adventures. Maugham told of meeting a Frenchman on the way to Bangkok, who “talked much of the sexual experiences he had had there” (147). At Haiphong in Vietnam Maugham met one of his old school chums, who had become a drug addict after making a fortune smuggling opium in China – a familiar theme in the history of European involvement with China and Indochina (276). These are just a few among many examples of Maugham’s use of Orientalist images and stereotypes. Therefore, despite himself, Maugham did write a book of value to the historian of imperialism, in that it is a rich and useful source for discerning and analyzing the attitudes and mentality of Europeans during the colonial era.

In one respect Maugham’s account stands out from virtually all other British colonial writing of the period: he writes positively of the way the French as colonizers treated their Asian subjects relative to the behavior of the British colonials. It was one of the commonplaces of British colonial literature that the French were oppressively bureaucratic and often even brutal in their methods of imposing imperial control. Yet Maugham wrote approvingly of the egalitarianism of the French as contrasted with what he saw as the “insularity” of the British:

The Frenchman has deep down in him a persuasion that all men are equal and that mankind is a brotherhood...he cannot prevent himself from feeling that the native, black, brown, or yellow, is of the same clay as himself, with the same loves, hates, pleasures and pains, and he cannot bring himself to treat him as though he belonged to a different species...the Frenchman will sit with the Annamite [Vietnamese], eat with him, drink with him, and play with him. In the market place you will see the thrifty Frenchwoman with her basket on her arm jostling the Annamite housekeeper and bargaining just as fiercely...whereas the Burmese only respect the English, the Annamites admire the French. (253-254)

Maugham was very unusual among British writers of the period in this assessment of the relative merits of the French and British as colonizers. There was always a tendency for nationalist loyalties and rivalries to come to the fore when writers of this period undertook comparative evaluations of the colonies (Savage 1984, 321-322). Perhaps Maugham’s upbringing in France and his Francophile tendencies in general influenced him in this assessment.

## **Conclusion**

Several points emerge saliently from the preceding discussion. First, Maugham undertook his journey as a gentleman traveler of the era of high colonialism. This gave him the resources, both material and social, to adopt a leisurely pace and to make frequent detours according to whim; this in turn was reflected in his digressive style of travel writing.

Second, although subjective impulses and responses guided the content, the style of presentation of Maugham's travel account was realistic, giving the impression of veracity and transparency. Homi Bhabha has emphasized how the discourse of imperialism employed a system of representation, a regime of truth, akin to realism (Bhabha 1990, 76). In his seminal work in this field, Said pointed out that "Philosophically, then, the kind of language, thought, and vision that I have been calling Orientalism very generally is a form of radical realism" where words or phrases describing the Orient are "considered either to have acquired, or more simply to be, reality" (Said 1995, 72).

Finally, in his book Maugham explicitly makes claims to political disinterestedness. He asserted that he had no intention of producing an account of the European colonies in Asia. He also makes what might seem on the surface to be contradictory claims to subjectivity and objectivity: subjectivity in that he states that his interest is only in what moved him subjectively, as an individual; objectivity in that his book is written in a realistic prose style, implying that it is a factual, sincere and transparent representation of what occurred on his journey. Together these claims represent an attempt on Maugham's part to distance his travel account from political engagement, especially with regard to the issue of European imperial rule.

It has been argued here, however, that far from being apolitical, Maugham's travelogue was deeply enmeshed in the discourse of high imperialism. As Homi Bhabha put it succinctly, "The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (Bhabha 1990, 75). Maugham frequently played upon the recurring themes, and had recourse to many of the well-used tropes of that hegemonic discourse. Umberto Eco has emphasized how travelers are deeply influenced by what he calls the "background books" they take with them on their travels, so that they "see the unknown in the light of the already known":

These need not accompany us physically; the point is that we travel with preconceived notions of the world, derived from our cultural tradition. In a very curious sense we travel knowing in advance what we are on the verge of discovering, because past reading has told us what we are supposed to discover. In other words, the influence of these background books is such that, irrespective of what travelers discover and see, they will interpret and explain everything in terms of these books (Eco 1999, 79, 71).

Maugham was unable to escape the ambient influence of the dominant imperial discourse; indeed his work served to perpetuate and reinforce it. Thus Maugham – inadvertently – produced a book of great interest and value to that figure of his raillery, *The Historian of the Decline and Fall of the British Empire*.

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