
Regeneration from Plague: Analysis of Trauma Narrative in *The Painted Veil*

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Abstract: *The Painted Veil* is a work with the emotional entanglement of the couple, Kitty Garstin and her husband Walter Fane, as the main clue, which mainly depicts Kitty's regeneration from the plague based on trauma. Born in a middle class family, Kitty's mother forced her to make the most of marriage to enter the upper class, which caused her trauma in the family. Unfortunately Kitty didn't catch the chance, so she had to marry Walter in a hurry, which led to the trauma in her marriage. She was very disappointed in the marriage, which resulted in her affairs with Charles Townsend. In order to revenge, Walter took her to Mei-tan-fu, a plague-stricken place in foreign lands, where she suffered from the trauma from constant death threat. Deeply traumatized in her marriage and the death threat, Kitty was disillusioned and even wanted to die. During her work in the monastery, she began to reflect on herself in the past, realized the true life value, and found the way to regeneration. In view of this, the author carried out narrative analysis of the source of her trauma, the tortures of trauma, and her fight against trauma, aiming at criticizing the utilitarianism and worldliness in western modern concepts.

Keywords: Source, Tortures, Fight Against, Trauma Narrative

1. Introduction

The novel *The Painted Veil* is written by William Somerset Maugham, a famous British writer in the 20th century, which mainly describes the love entanglement between the couple, Walter Fane and his wife Kitty Garstin. Their love story is filled with ups and downs and Kitty finally freed from the shackles of their marriage with utilitarianism and obtained regeneration [1]. But in the process of her pursuit of freedom and regeneration, she was deeply traumatized.

Born in a middle class family, she was a good-looking girl. Her mother, Mrs. Garstin was an ambitious woman, who wanted her husband to get a prominent post and propelled her daughters to marry the young men from rich family with high social status. Kitty followed her, but unfortunately she missed the chance. She had no choice but to accept a bacteriologist, Walter's proposal, which paved the way for her to have affairs with Charles Townsend, the Assistant Colonial Secretary. When Walter got to know her betrayal, he thought this broke his family and his dream completely and he got into the crazy revenge. He took Kitty to the plague-stricken Mei-tan-fu and let her face the threat of death from the plague directly. After

she went to the monastery to help the nuns with their work, she found her errors and came to know the meaning of life. In the end, her husband Walter died of the plague and she returned back to London, setting off her stride to regeneration.

Some Chinese scholars explored the novel from these perspectives, such as character images [2], mysterious Orientalism [3, 4], the image of China [5, 6], creative techniques [7, 8], and feminism [9, 10] and so on, but few of them paid attention to the trauma Kitty got on her road to freedom and regeneration. In *The Painted Veil*, Maugham presents the themes of responsibility and love, betrayal, plague and regeneration in it. It reflects the life concept of people who had to survive in the world full of utilitarianism and worldliness and further conveys people's thoughts and feelings through their struggles when they are faced with traumas.

2. Source of the Trauma

During the Victorian regime, the social trend of utilitarianism spread across all fields of Britain, and it became the foundation of everything [11]. Everyone wanted to get a

higher post with higher social status and more material possessions.

As the main character of *The Painted Veil*, Kitty, her father Mr. Garstin was a Liverpool lawyer with traditional thinking, and her mother Mrs. Garstin was a scheming, ruthless and ambitious woman. She tried her best to make her husband Mr. Garstin act according to her wishes, pandered to the wives of prominent politicians. *“On her side she set herself to cultivate the people who might be useful. She flattered the solicitors who would send her husband briefs and was familiar with their wives. She was obsequious to the judges and their ladies. She made much of promising politicians.”* [12] Even though Mrs. Garstin despised her husband, she could only succeed through her wife, so that she had to set herself to drive him on the way she desired to go. For the wife, her husband was only the ladder for her to connect with the outside and she just tried to make him at her disposal. It was the utilitarianism and worldliness in the society that distorted the relationship between husband and wife.

They also distorted the relationship between father and daughter. Even when Mr. Garstin could not make headway as a leader and his briefs were fewer and fewer, his daughters could not notice his change at home, because *“his daughters had never looked upon him as anything but a source of income; it had always seemed perfectly natural that he should lead a dog’s life in order to provide them with board and lodging, clothes, holidays, and money for odds and ends;.....”* [12] For the daughters, Kitty’s father only played the role of a cash machine and they paid little attention to his feelings and thoughts.

The utilitarianism also regarded marriage as a market transaction, and love was no longer the key to marriage. After comprehensively considering the exchange of their own values, the couple could obtain what they needed in the utilitarian trading market, and also signed a marriage contract, forming a utilitarian marriage combination to jointly make up for various defects in the secular world. This marriage model ignored the emotional instinct, making marriage a shackle for both sides, which is also the background of the theme of *The Painted Veil* and the origin of the ups and downs of the story.

In order to climb up to the upper class, Mrs. Garstin also propelled her daughters to establish a marriage relationship with the children from prominent families, which could help her daughters to live a decent life with much money. Kitty had long understood her mother’s thoughts, which coincided with her ambitions and desires. Kitty kept entering the social circle, but after four years, she still hadn’t found a suitable partner. In addition, when her younger sister Doris was engaged through the social circle she had established, Kitty was even more worried. At this time, when facing the proposal of Walter, a bacteriologist working in Hong Kong, she considered that Walter would leave for China before her sister’s wedding and she didn’t have to be the bridesmaid at her sisters wedding ceremony. At the same time, after her wedding ceremony, she could escape her mother’s endless nagging and change a new living environment. After careful consideration, she agreed to marry Walter. Kitty’s marriage, which was derived from

utilitarianism, left the danger of disaster for the follow-up.

But after three months’ marriage, Kitty found that her status depended entirely on her husband’s social status. When material interests and social utilitarianism cannot meet Kitty’s inner needs, she had regret about her marriage. Being extroverted, energetic and vain made her uneasy about living with Walter, who was not good at emotional expression and introverted. After they got married, *“he treated her not as Kitty had seen most men treat their wives, but as though she were a fellow-guest in a country house”* [12]. Although he was really considerate, it was difficult for Kitty to fall in love with him, which also foreshadowed Kitty’s involvements outside marriage.

During Victorian regime, everything was evaluated by money and social status. In order to get these, Kitty’s mother tried her best to flatter all those who would be useful even at the cost of her passions with her husband; Kitty hunted for an ideal partner for four years and had no choice but to marry Walter hurriedly. So when Kitty met Charles Townsend, the Assistant Colonial Secretary, she was attracted by him deeply. As described in the text *“she noticed Townsend’s cuff-links and waistcoat buttons; she had seen similar ones at Cartier’s..... His face was deeply sunburned, but the sun had not taken the healthy color from his cheeks.”* [12] From the description above, it could reflect the attitude that Kitty pursued from both the utilitarian perspective and the emotional feeling with Walter. Townsend’s outstanding appearance and his status as an assistant to the colonial governor made Kitty fall in love with him deeply. Under the control of desire, Kitty crossed the moral bottom line and became Townsend’s lover. When Kitty asked him to divorce and marry her, Townsend changed his words *“There’s no reason why I shouldn’t be a Governor one of these days, and it’s a damned soft job to be a Colonial Governor. Unless we can hush this up I don’t stand a dog’s chance.”* [12] In his idea, the promising future was more valuable than the love between him and Kitty. In order to become the would-be Governor, he even persuaded Kitty to face the plague. Poor Kitty could only accept the punishment from Walter for her betrayal. She had to come to Mei-tan-fu in China which was a plague bound city and faced the threat of death. Kitty was constantly traumatized for the social requirements, the family prosperity, and the marriage harmony, which even forced her to confront death threat.

3. Tortures of the Trauma

In order to satisfy her mother’s ambition, Kitty *“was launched upon the world and Mrs. Garstin performed prodigies in getting herself invited to dances where her daughter might meet eligible men.”* [12] But the men in love with her couldn’t meet their expectations. After four years, though Kitty thought herself as pretty as ever, prettier perhaps, *“still no one whose position and income were satisfactory asked her to marry him.”* [12] When Kitty was twenty-five years old and still unmarried, *“Mrs. Garstin was exasperated and she did not hesitate often to give Kitty a piece of her very*

unpleasant mind.” [12] She just put down Kitty’s failure to find the ideal partner to stupidity, and it was the reason why she had not taken a chance.

Then Doris came out. In her first season she was engaged to the only son of a prosperous surgeon who had gotten a baronetcy during the war. Doris was not so pretty as Kitty, even a poor figure. Suffered from the social prejudice, the family press, and her own vanity, Kitty married Walter Fane in a hurry.

Kitty’s husband Walter was a bacteriologist from Hong Kong. He was not plausible at all and had a rational thinking mode. He was also the embodiment of ideal and science in the novel; and Kitty was a woman who violated the moral bottom line of modern society and was spurned by civilized society. It was precisely because Kitty had an affair with Townsend, who was married, that Kitty was punished and came to the exotic place Mei-tan-fu, China. Here, with the outbreak of cholera and incurable diseases, human was facing the threat of death at any time.

After Walter brought his wife Kitty to the Mei-tan-fu, he was busy all day, and he became more introverted with fewer and fewer words, which resulted in a cold war with Kitty. Sometimes they even thought it was only death that could solve their trouble [13]. In Mei-tan-fu, there had been an outbreak of cholera. In order to protect human beings from being infected with it, the best way was to eat fully-cooked food and drink boiled water. But two days after they arrived, the cook sent salad in and Kitty took some even when Walter stopped her with “You oughtn’t to eat that. The boy’s crazy to serve it..... It’s always dangerous, it’s madness now. You’ll kill yourself.” [12] Kitty just began to eat it coolly. She had no way to defuse her trauma from the family and her marriage, maybe in her eyes, death was a way out. Later the cook found they didn’t refuse the salad, and he “sent them some in every day and every day, courting death, they ate it.” [12] From the description above, it was found that both Kitty and Walter were just tormented the trauma deeply and they even thought death could be the key.

In addition, the strange environment in a foreign country and the ruthless abandonment by Townsend made Kitty thoughtful all the way and dreamed all night [14, 15]. In her dream, Kitty saw the chastity archway, which was the highest praise for Chinese women for abiding by social morality. Kitty also learned that the chastity memorial arch was a classic building in ancient China to commemorate the women’s virtues. It reflected the absolute recognition of women’s adherence to the moral principles and guarding their own chastity. After seeing that, Kitty felt a deep sense of uneasiness. The reason for the uneasiness was that Kitty had expected that her behavior of deviating from the moral bottom line would cause her to face many hardships. It was also the first time that Kitty felt the coming hardships and threats. At that moment, the sedan bearers hurriedly flashed towards the wall, which made Kitty tremble in the chair. Kitty looked out and found that four farmers carried a coffin in a hurry, making her heart beat strongly. This writing method, which used coffins, cemeteries and chastity archways, depicted Kitty’s guilt and fear for

breaking through the moral constraints, and made her have a clearer understanding of ethics and life. Subsequently, in order to show Kitty’s inner thoughts more vividly, the writer Maugham gave an image description of her journey to Mei-tan-fu. A group of people dressed in old blue rags were as short as dwarfs and emaciated; In order to survive, people discarded infants and young children who could survive by themselves on the roadside. Although Kitty had received regular education and training, as an exiled girl who violated morality, her heart was full of fear, so that she sighed that death was really terrible. This clearly showed that Kitty’s heart was filled with fear when facing death in the exotic Mei-tan-fu.

In Mei-tan-fu, Kitty vaguely knew the terrible things happened. “The people were were dying at the rate of a hundred a day, and hardly any of those were attacked by the disease recovered from it” [12] In the face of the awful condition, “Kitty sometimes was so frightened that her heart sank within her and she would tremble in every limb. It was all very well to say that the risk was small if you took reasonable precautions: she was panic-stricken.” [12] For anyone who experienced this would be panic-stricken. So she wanted to get away, and made her way alone, to some place of safety. She thought maybe she could fling herself on her knees before Walter to admit that she was frightened without thinking about her self-respect.

Poor Kitty was physically and mentally traumatized. She had no right to choose the society and the family, but to cater to social value standard and family desires, which resulted in the tragic marriage. Nobody knew she struggled hard in the life and just criticized that she didn’t grasp the chance because of her stupidity. When she was really unhappy with her husband Walter and had the affairs with Townsend, Townsend discarded her and made her disillusioned for his bright future. The way in front of her was to follow Walter to Mei-tan-fu, the plague-stricken place to be punished. Her life, her love, her feelings were all controlled by utilitarianism and worldliness and nobody cared her inner world.

4. Fight Against the Trauma

In the human history, either individuals or social groups will inevitably face the trauma caused by non-interpersonal natural disasters which include plagues, accidents, interpersonal violence, abuse and other difficulties [16]. Only by constantly keeping a lookout for risks and challenges and enhancing the love for life can traumas and tragedy be avoided to the greatest extent. Therefore, people should be tolerant to others in social life, and pass on kindness through interpersonal communication. Compared with external etiquette and regulations, people’s inner purity is more important, and people’s subjective initiative plays a guiding role in their behavior consciousness. Therefore, in order to achieve salvation, the most essential thing is to achieve spiritual self-salvation, eliminate the influence of anger, jealousy, revenge and other bad factors on ourselves, and master one’s own thoughts more reasonably.

Because of Kitty’s betrayal to love and marriage, Walter’s

heart was filled with anger and jealousy. In order to revenge, Mei-tan-fu with the rampant cholera was his very choice and the plague became the best excuse for him to paralyze himself and punish Kitty. The desire for revenge made Walter live in pain. Later Walter was infected with the plague cholera in the exotic Mei-tan-fu and died in a foreign land. This was also the final road of Walter, who had a strong desire for revenge. Emotionally, Walter was in a passive and inferior complex position, and he had love and gratitude for Kitty. His dream was broken, and he should punish Kitty, which depicted the absurdity of morality and rationality and his fight against trauma ended in failure.

After Kitty arrived at Mei-tan-fu, she was really frightened and desperate at the sight of the people infected with cholera. When she was sent to the monastery, the positive attitude of the nuns in the face of the plague deeply touched Kitty. It was because of this invisible power that Kitty actively explored for self-salvation to get salvation. The monastery became the lucky place for Kitty to save herself. Through the work and tests in the monastery, she could understand her own behavior more rationally to achieve good mental control and regain spiritual freedom. In the face of the constraints of life and morality, Kitty recalled her own experience again, found her personal insignificance, and made her mind to save her soul, turning her original unconstrained behavior against morality into a spiritual change with high respect for life and conformity with morality.

In the monastery, Kitty was mainly responsible for taking care of young girls or little children from different parts of China. At the beginning, she disliked them and retreated with much disgust. The Mother Superior told her "There is only one way to win hearts and that is to make oneself like unto those of whom one would be loved." [12] Because of her own experiences and life feelings, she broke the original way of dealing with people and things by relying on her own feelings, overcame her disgust for girls, and gradually realized the rationality and fraternity in human nature. She could even show the positive impact on these kids with love. It was precisely because of this inner change that Kitty broke the barrier the ice between her and the girls and enhanced their happiness in working in the monastery. This was also an inner experience that Kitty never felt in her original life.

The Mother Superior was a plain and mild-tempered confidant who often communicated with Kitty. She had a positive attitude towards the plague, which made Kitty forget the bad environment around her. The Mother Superior gave Kitty some spiritual advice in her work and life. When Kitty first worked in the monastery, she said to Kitty, "You know, my dear child, that one cannot find peace in work or in pleasure, in the world or in a convent, but only in one's soul." [12] It was Kitty's pursuit of her own soul that made her heart calm. The attitude and spirit of the nuns to face the plague bravely was the source of power that affected Kitty's behavior. It was just because of this power that Kitty thought about the essence of life and the meaning of survival in an all-round way. The Mother Superior and nuns let her know a free world, the spiritual world, that she had never thought of, and provided her with endless

reveries for freedom and regeneration. Therefore, after much work and life perception, Kitty gradually found that she had some essential changes: "The constant occupation distracted her mind and the glimpses she had of other lives and other outlooks awakened her imagination. She began to regain her spirits; she felt better and stronger." [12] Then Kitty was very excited and immediately felt that there was a driving force in her life and that she was also pursuing something she didn't know in her daily life. When Kitty faced the death crisis of the plague, she had a new understanding of herself and found that she had reformed and broken the shackles of her original feelings. She was completely different from herself who had just entered the monastery at the beginning. When she thought of Townsend, she found that she no longer loved him and had gone out of the original narrow thinking mode. She remembered in the past, she devoted all her heart and energy to yearning for Townsend, but he was cruel enough to discard her and she even had the idea of committing suicide. At the same time, she felt the darkness of the world and hatred for him. She had no choice but to go to Mei-tan-fu to receive the punishment from Walter. Now she was suddenly enlightened. Just as the words in the novel "A worthless creature. What a fool she had made of herself!..... She was free, free, at last, free!" [12] From this, it was found that it was because of the salvation from the plague in a foreign country that Kitty broke down her emotional bondage to Townsend and truly got freedom and liberation of her heart.

When Kitty learned that Walter died of the plague, she felt upset and thought it was really a pity, but Kitty didn't love him. This also meant that Kitty's marriage based on utilitarianism came to an end, and her last constraint had disappeared. She set out to return to Britain, and immediately felt that she could really rush for freedom. "Freedom! That was the thought that sung in her heart..... freedom, not only from the death which had threatened, but freedom from the love that had degraded her; freedom from all spiritual ties, the freedom of a disembodied spirit;....." [12]. At this time, Kitty realized her true salvation in the exotic land, completed her self-transformation, and got regeneration, which meant she got victory against the traumas.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, this paper analyzed how Kitty got self-salvation and regeneration in Mei-tan-fu, a plague-stricken place from three aspects, the source of her trauma, the tortures of trauma, and her fight against trauma and described the growth experience of Kitty. The novel *The Painted Veil* depicted that in the world full of utilitarianism and worldliness, Kitty was constantly traumatized by the society standard, family requirements, and marriage harmony. Maugham used the plots full of ups and downs to render the love tragedy of Kitty and Walter, and carried out the analysis of trauma narrative of her salvation in the foreign land. *The Painted Veil* talked about the tenacity and fragility of life, the impermanence of the unexpected world, the uncontrollable love and the final forgiveness of hatred; it deeply revealed that it was rather

difficult for the individuals to control their passions in the complex society, which was also a reflection of the current civilized world, and warned us to achieve accurate control of the balance point of value pursuit in our hearts.

In *The Painted Veil*, the present and history, one self and others, light and darkness, life and death, spirit and flesh mirror each other. Having combined what he saw and heard in China with his own emotional experience, Maugham added his own understanding, imagination, criticism, etc., to feel the contradiction between one self and the society, which verified the ideological conflict between adherence to money and status and the pursuit of freedom, and reflected the active exploration of the social deterioration and decays.

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