

Fallen Women: Land, Nature, and Mem Sahibs in Maugham's Southeast Asian Stories

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Abstract

This paper explores ways in which reconfigurations of agency can be identified in the representation of women, nature, and other subdominant groups in Somerset Maugham's Southeast Asian stories. Through their power to affect the physical and emotional well-being of white settlers, native women and nature emerge as agentic. Thus they realign their assigned place within oppressive systems of domination whereas white women are placed in emotionally and physically precarious spaces. Using postcolonial, ecocritical, and ecofeminist concepts, this paper explores connections between human culture and non-human nature. Maugham's texts are examined from posthumanist and material feminist perspectives to unearth ways in which both human and the non-human subaltern counteract or contend with marginalisation. Our study foregrounds the contested and fraught spaces that white and native women were forced to negotiate in colonial settlements.

Keywords

Southeast Asian ecocriticism, ecofeminist theory, postcolonial studies, colonial fictions, Asian Studies, travel literature

Introduction

Although gender politics has been a central and oft-explored aspect of fictions by "popular" colonial authors, in the case of Somerset Maugham (1874-1965), most critical examinations have revolved around his Pacific travels, or on the stylistic and narratological aspects of his writings, evaluating their aesthetic and literary merit (see Jonas and Epstein). Other scholarly explorations approach Maugham's

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work from the postcolonial angle focussing on the discourse of Western imperialism and orientalism (see Lachazette and Doran “Popular Orientalism”), queer politics, and construction of masculinities (see Holden *Oriental Masculinity*). Many of the more recent works on Maugham such as Jeffery Meyers Celina Hastings’ *The Secret Lives of Somerset Maugham* and Philip Holden’s “Selves in Dialogue” are biographical studies. Other than Christine Doran’s insightful article titled “Maugham on Myanmar: Gender Trouble and Imperial Decay” based on *The Gentleman in the Parlour* (1930), there is little exploration of the feminist politics that emerge as both troubling and provocative, particularly in Maugham’s short fiction on Southeast Asia. Equally under-examined is the relationship of humans, both white and native, to nature. Even as the ethos of the “brave white conqueror” is consistently reified in his short stories, they are undercut by the pathos and indeed bathos surrounding the protagonists’ lives.

In this paper, we consider ways in which the representation of women, nature, and other subdominant groups in Maugham’s Southeast Asian stories realign their assigned place within oppressive systems of domination such as patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism. The larger theoretical framework explores the complicated relationships that are opened up for review between men and women, both white and native, and human culture and non-human nature, using postcolonial, ecocritical, and ecofeminist concepts. Within this paradigm, the relationships between women and nature, whites and natives, and “pureblooded” whites and “half-castes” have been investigated to identify reconfigurations of agency. In these colonial narratives, “femininity” is consistently a marker for native women, native men, European women as well as Eurasian men. Prominent ontological binaries abound and oscillate between centre and periphery with their attendant connotations of progress and stagnation. The relationship of subaltern groups with each other and the interconnections between them also reflect the contested, fraught spaces they were forced to negotiate within the parameters of institutional oppression. Although the advantages accorded by political and economic power favour white men and women in the colonial context, in Maugham’s stories we see this status quo is often overturned. Paradoxically, it is native women and nature, traditionally subsumed under subalternity, who emerge as agentic. They are often portrayed in Maugham’s texts as having the power to affect the physical and emotional well-being of the white settlers. Interestingly, reading Maugham within the context of “the relationship of culture and society to the natural world” (Rigby 152) opens up these texts to posthumanist interpretations, where “agency, subjectivity, and intentionality are not the sole attributes of human beings” (Oppermann 27). Such readings also align these texts to new material feminist and ecofeminist perspectives that explore ways in which “subjugated aspects of patriarchal society—women, the body, and nature—can interact with one another” (France 39) to challenge or reinforce marginalisation.

These epistemologies prompt an analytical model that considers, together with human influences, the impact of matter, which Oppermann describes as “all physical substances” and bodies, both human and nonhuman. These are to be accounted for as “agents with vitality of their own, and as interrelated forces mostly beyond human control, linking human corporeality with nonhuman life processes” (Oppermann 27).

The short stories we examine in this paper are set in British Malaya and British Borneo (present day Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia), and are from collections such as, *Far Eastern Tales* (1921), *The Casuarina Tree* (1923), *Ab King* (1933), *Creatures of Circumstance* (1947), and *Maugham's Malaysian Stories* (1969). Although considered prolific and versatile by many, critical views about Maugham have been divided. He wrote for more than half a century and published twenty novels, three travelogues, twenty-six plays, and seven volumes of non-fiction in addition to commentaries and memoirs. His short stories, however, have undoubtedly remained the most widely-read of his works. They number more than a hundred and are considered graphic accounts of the lives of white settlers in non-white settlements. Many of Maugham's Southeast Asian stories, such as, “The Letter” (1928), “Footprints in the Jungle” (1933), and “The Vessel of Wrath” (1933) are based on real-life incidents and popular scandals that he encountered during his travels in the region in the 1920s, much of which were carried out in “grand colonial style” (Christie 678). His repeated portrayal of decadent life in the colonies gave rise to a lot of criticism. He was widely discredited for exposing undesirable and negative aspects of European communities in the region. An editorial from *Singapore Straits Budget* of 7 June 1938 captures the wave of anger and resentment against Maugham. It reads,

It is interesting to try to analyze the prejudice against Somerset Maugham which is so intense and widespread in this part of the world. The usual explanation is that Mr. Maugham picks up some local scandal at an out-station and dishes it up as a story... [and] the second cause is disgust at the way Mr. Maugham has explained the worst and least representative aspects of the European life in Malaysia – murder, cowardice, drink, seduction, adultery... [with] always the same cynical emphasis on the same unpleasant things. (Morgan 251)

The association of moral decay with tropical topographies fortifies theories of degeneration that relate social pathologies to environmental conditions. Thus, the widely circulated idea that colonial lands were the hotbed of violent crimes and immorality gained traction. Anne McClintock asserts that the colonial expeditions of exploration in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries into native lands, previously unknown to Europeans, were typically represented in travel narratives as moving forward in space but backward in time. The natives, othered as primitive were, as she observes, cast figuratively into an “anachronistic space” (36) and the lands thus ideologically rendered as unoccupied were then opened

up to Europeans for settlement and conquest. McClintock compares these acts of racial subjugation to the subordination of women and the working classes by the bourgeoisie at the imperial centre. Therefore, for her, the “liberal imagination” was created through the merging of empire and domesticity. Equally, the fear and disdain of miscegenation too prompted the conception of colonised lands as “an embodiment of European degeneration and moral decay” (Stoler, “Sexual affronts” 515), hence closely aligning the politics of degeneracy to eugenics.³ Thus, the replication of Victorian domestic ideals conjoined with the ambition of empire lay the ground for the ideological view that becomes very pertinent to this study.

The mems⁴ of Southeast Asia

In the pioneering years, as co-habitation or sexual relations between European men and Asian women became more and more common, the apprehensions about interbreeding began to grow. The practice of colonial concubinage in the region arose from the need for female partners, mainly in rural settings, where native women not only provided companionship, but also helped acclimate European men to their new habitations (Chludzinski 55). Stoler describes how local women were introduced to whites as “useful guides” to the native languages and other customs and “mysteries” of the local societies. Handbooks were supplied to incoming plantation employees posted to Tonkin, Sumatra, and Malaya that encouraged the men to find local ‘companions’ to facilitate quick acclimatisation, and protect them from the “ill-health that sexual abstinence, isolation and boredom were thought to bring” (Stoler, “Making empire” 637). However, Eurocentric colonial ideology that is predicated on white supremacy has always had a fraught and ambivalent relationship with miscegenation. Talking about how European women were essential to the colonial enterprise and in the establishment and maintenance of racial boundaries, Stoler points out that,

their positioning within imperial politics were powerfully reinforced at the turn of the century by a metropolitan bourgeois discourse (and an eminently anthropological one) intensely concerned with notions of “degeneracy”.... Middle-class morality, manliness and motherhood were seen as endangered by the intimately linked fears of “degeneration” and miscegenation in scientifically construed racist beliefs.... Due to environmental and/or inherited factors, degeneracy could be averted

³ For a detailed discussion of the politics of degeneracy and the eugenics of empire, see Ann Stoler’s “Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in Colonial Asia.”

⁴ Shortened form of ‘*memsahibs*,’ a respectful form of address used for white women in colonial South and Southeast Asia. The word ‘*memsahib*’ is derived from the English word ‘ma’am’ and the Urdu word ‘sahib,’ the latter, a polite address for a man, usually denoting social or official status.

positively by eugenic selection, or negatively by eliminating the “unfit.” (“Making empire” 643)

White women began to be seen as a solution to the problem of miscegenation as it was through them that “pure-bred” children could be produced and replicas of domestic, metropolitan ideals could be regenerated in these wild, marginal spaces. In this sense, it became necessary to bring them into these new communities to counter practices that threatened racial purity. In many of Maugham's stories, the identifiable binaries between men extend beyond white versus native to “racially pure whites” and “biracial half-castes.” Although Eurasians were recognised as important allies in ruling over native populations, their “unworthiness” always undergirds colonial expositions. This ideological dimension is played out most poignantly through the character of Izzart in the story “The Yellow Streak” (*The Casuarina Tree*). A colonial official and deeply self-conscious about his swarthy complexion, Izzart hides his Malay roots by pretending to have had a Spanish grandmother. He grapples with the pejorative implications of his hybrid identity and a debilitating inferiority complex which is his tragic flaw in the story. In a moment of crisis, when he lets his instincts of self-preservation prevail and saves his own life instead of the person he was to ward, his lack of resolute machismo and bravery is attributed to the “yellow streak” that is considered a mark of his miscegenated heritage, his cowardice appearing to reinforce the stereotype of the effeminate Asian man. Indeed, Izzart represents a new class that occupied a liminal space in the social structure, one that blurred the clean lines between the races, threatening white racial purity and representing the racial anxiety caused by Eurasians.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, concubinage was not only tolerated by colonial governments and private businesses but actively encouraged as well. Emigration of European women to the colonies was restricted often by refusing employment to married male Europeans (Stoler, “Making empire” 638). Hence, it was not always by choice that European women were not a part of early pioneering ventures. It was argued by government officials and estate administrators “that white prestige would be imperilled if European men became impoverished in attempting to maintain middle-class lifestyles and European wives” (639). The practice of concubinage began to decline in the early twentieth century as the fear of miscegenation peaked and men in the region became financially secure enough to bring European wives. The deliberate move “away from ambiguous racial genres and open domestic arrangements... away from miscegenation toward white endogamy, away from concubinage toward family formation and legal marriage” (644) was also part of a larger effort to consolidate European prestige. The infrastructure in these communities began to improve too as a result of the deployment of native labour, and the land was considered ready to receive European women.

Taking over from native companions, the wives were now responsible for improving the poor mental health of European men in the tropics and for bringing stability to the community. Brownfoot observes that wives were meant to

prevent white men from going ‘troppo’⁵ (mental) or ‘native,’ or becoming alcoholics, behaviour which ‘let the side down’ and compromised white prestige. If a man had begun a degenerative decline, however, popular opinion endorsed the belief that his best means of salvation was to go ‘Home’ and find a suitable wife. (190)

These ideologies are consistently identifiable in Maugham’s stories such as “Before the Party” and “Force of Circumstance,” to be discussed in detail in the ensuing sections.

It is not surprising that there was a powerful discourse built around the degenerative power of the new empires. The ability of these strange new lands to affect the mental and physical wellbeing of its new occupants added to the mystery, melancholy, and intrigue associated with them. The land held a power and sway that its new rulers strove to quell and control. The European women who were brought into these communities were, in a sense, fortifications for the men. They were meant to add ease, convenience, and companionship while upholding moral values and the ethos of the mission to civilise. They had to contend with numerous imperial and patriarchal ideologies, both subtle and overt, that governed their place in the colonial enterprise. While they were the designated flag-bearers of Victorian morality and were expected to carry the weight of civilising influences to be dispensed in the communities they inhabited, they were also “blamed for the progressive loss of white prestige after the turn of the century, sometimes maligned for supposedly widening the gap between the races” (Brownfoot 186). As Brownfoot adds,

In an alien, seemingly decadent tropical world of heat, luxuriant vegetation, diseases and ‘strange, heathen customs’, the community’s bungalows and clubs were sites of European civilisation to which wives and families brought normality, giving their menfolk a sense of stability and purpose. (189-90)

She attributes the perpetuation of certain stereotypical images of memsahibs and sahibs in the inter-war era to a number of publications, including guide-books, travelers accounts and popular literature, that promoted enduring images of “whiskey-swilling planters and bored, empty-headed, flirtatious *mems*” (187). However, patterns of dysfunction began to emerge within the domestic and social spaces where the European women were entrusted with the responsibility of the upkeep and smooth functioning of interpersonal relationships that were expected

⁵ A derogatory term often used to connote strange, unstable behaviour often attributed to tropical heat

to be solidified in strict exclusivity. These dysfunctions were largely symptomatic of the feelings of dislocation and displacement, and the limited social contact they had with other whites. They manifested as infidelity and social discord, and, in some graver instances, resulted in physically violent crimes and even murder.

On the representation of the mems in popular literature of the time, Philip Holden observes that texts written by British men depicting European women as frivolous, vengeful, racist and promiscuous seems to represent an internalisation of the “border conflicts regarding the limits of the European community” (*Oriental Masculinities* 100). The white woman enforces and mediates the need for racial separation and the conflicts of sexual control are displaced from the body of the male colonist to that of the female. Narration thus operates as a vicarious means of enabling “reinscription of a medievalised Malaya in which ruling passions are sublimated and everything remains in its proper place” (100). The European women were seen as enforcers of decorum and their bodies become integral to the maintenance of order and Victorian piety, while the bodies of the native women were sexualised and available for the amorous needs of the European men. However, this pattern is disrupted by forces both natural and indigenous, resulting in the breakdown of social systems within European communities in the tropics. Maugham's mems are portrayed as malignant and murderous, representative and symptomatic of the poor mental health pervasive in these new settlements. It is interesting to observe how the enduring metaphorical paradigm of “paradise and the fall” is integrated into the discourse of empire in distinctly gendered ways, on which the discussion that follows focusses.

The rhetoric of paradise and the Fall

Sharae Deckard identifies the trope of the pastoral as intrinsic to colonial ideologies. The concept of paradise was demystified and rationalised. Deckard observes that it was rooted “in the pastoral vision of bountiful nature ordered and working for Europeans.” This was conceptually opposed to the idea of the “uncultivated, unordered wasteland” (8). This view of the representation of a fallen or depraved Eden is a depiction that can be applied to the representation of Southeast Asian settlements as well. Though the tropics were seen as “treasure-lands” where raw materials were available for the taking, they were nevertheless a “decadent White man's graveyard” in which “all the horrors of disease, natural disaster and mental breakdowns confronted the colonists” (9). Thus, there was a consistent conflict between the reality of the plantation and the fantasy of the paradise (9).

Within colonial discourse, Oriental lands were sexualised, feminised, and characterised as available resources for the gratification of western imperial forces. In these associations, where the portrayal of land as female functioned as a metaphor for non-sexual, political, and economic power relations, this

gendering is problematised within multiple systems of power and domination. Prominent hierarchical dualisms are visibly rehearsed in Maugham's Southeast Asian tales. The trope of the "paradise and fall" is reworked repeatedly, primarily through contrasting the ideal of the colonies as lands of incredible wealth against the brutal reality of it. This entanglement of the myth of the paradise with quotidian realities of colonial domestic and social life becomes the central theme that drives the plot of many of these stories. Interestingly, while white women are often at odds with their new natural and social environments, native women are portrayed as competent, uncomplicated, functional, and fertile companions. Hence, the recurrent colonial ecofeminist trope of (native) women as closely aligned to nature is on display.

As the moral conflicts of the white women in these stories are closely linked to their relationship with nature, ecofeminist perspectives become especially pertinent to the analysis of female characters. As their responses to their new natural environments develop and evolve, we see corresponding changes in the nature of their interpersonal relationships and complex negotiations of what is moral or immoral. Most of these stories are phased into pre- and post-lapsarian sub-narratives. Maugham's narrators, invariably male and European, often begin their anecdotes using pastoral descriptions from the point of view of the female protagonists. For instance, in "Before the Party" (*Far Eastern Tales*), Millicent, the young English bride arriving in Malaya, is pleasantly surprised and relieved by just this inversion between expectation and reality:

From the novels she had read she had expected the rivers of Borneo to be dark and strangely sinister, but the sky was blue, dappled with little white clouds, and the green of the mangroves and the nipahs, washed by the flowing water, glistened in the sun.... She seemed to enter upon a friendly, fertile land, and she had a sense of spacious freedom. (18-19)

With such a pleasant sense of new promise in the sunny colony, the auguries, as she embarks on her new life with her husband, appear auspicious. Some of the rather improbable images that populate the imaginings of the Englishwoman, like egrets that were like "the ripple of snowy notes, sweet and pure and spring-like"; appearing like "a divine arpeggio from an unseen harp" (29) are all incongruously drawn from an alien culture that appears misplaced in the tropical setting. They, at once, demonstrate her cultural and physical alienation as well as her growing familiarity with the new lands, creating a cognitive dissonance. The story begins in England where Millicent, who has returned from Borneo, is preparing to attend her first social event after the death of her husband, Harold. She calmly confesses to her family that she has murdered her husband. Her composure bordering on apathy, complete lack of remorse, and moral disengagement, leaves the rest of her family shocked. Her impenitent behaviour is subtly attributed to long stay in the "strange" Eastern land. While calling out the pretensions of the British middle classes, the story also draws attention to how the dislocation of British officials

serving in the East results in troubled, dysfunctional marital relations. While Millicent's and Harold's life together in Kuala Salor starts off in a placid manner, things change when Harold, on a tour of his district, contracts a bad case of malaria. Even after recovering, Harold is a changed man and Millicent finds his manner peculiar. He is often found just staring with glazed eyes, swaying or making "long harangues about the political situation in England" (22). Harold turns into an incorrigible alcoholic and blames his alcoholism on malaria and the pressures of being an "empire builder" (22). Repeated protestations that he will quit drinking prove futile. His final drunken breakdown reveals his weaknesses in a pathetic manner, evoking repulsion and hatred in Millicent. Overcome by rage and frustration in the realisation that their relationship is irredeemable and there is no possibility of an idyllic, happy life together in Kuala Salor, Millicent kills him. His quick burial prompted by the fast rate of decomposition in tropics ensures that no further post mortem investigation is carried out. His death is written off as suicide due to Delirium Tremens (D.T.).⁶ Here, the "cursed land" and its "infestations" not only cause Harold's emotional breakdown and death but also aid in concealing the murder. Reminiscing the tragic turn of events later in England, what lingers in Millicent's mind are no longer pristine or alluring images of nature. Pathetic fallacy is employed to reinforce the cataclysmic turn of events. Her mind is occupied with the "broad, yellow and turbid river" (29). When her father remonstrates angrily that her confession has placed him in an intolerable position, a judgement on the contrast between the rigid moral convictions of those who live in the imperial centre versus the moral laxity that is believed to prevail in the periphery is surfaced, once again, infernalising the East.

This linking of the dereliction of Europeans to the land and the "fall" is a pervasive idea embedded in colonial ideology that foregrounds the civilising mission intended to elevate the natives from their "fallen state." These postlapsarian narratives occur against contrasting backdrops of both physical dilapidation and also pristine, Edenic, beauty. In "Footprints in the Jungle" (*Ab King*), the backdrop of physical decay situates the tale of moral decrepitude that follows. The story is set in Tanah Merah, which was for long the busiest port and the place with the most "charm" in the region, but is now "...dead. It has the sad and romantic air of all places that have once been of importance and live now on the recollection of a vanished grandeur" (1). Its deterioration and blight appears to also exert a negative influence on its inhabitants, for "...strangers that come to it, lost their native energy, insensibly drop into its easy and lethargic ways" (1-2). The physical decay of the surrounding environment not only presages but appears to exert an influence over the protagonists' immoral deeds, as if moral degeneration were an inevitable result of environmental degradation.

⁶ Onset of confusion, hallucinations, disorientation, etc. due to alcohol withdrawal.

The narrator of the story meets the friendly and charming Cartwrights at the club at Tanah Merah. One night he hears from Gaze, the head of the police, the story of how Mrs Cartwright's first husband, Bronson, was found shot dead in the jungle insinuating that Mr Cartwright, who was having an affair with Bronson's wife, murdered him. The distinctive boot-marks in the jungle are the most significant evidence that determines the ethnicities of the killer and the murdered. It is inferred by the policeman that if the boot-clad (white) murderer stopped to chat with a Malay or a Chinese person, the footprints would not be so well marked. This is not only evidence to the criminal actions of the seemingly agreeable couple, it is also testimony of the nature of interactions and the relationship between the whites and the natives. At the end of the tale, remarkably, both the police chief, Gaze, and the first-person narrator in whom he confides, appear to absorb the whole sordid story of murder and betrayal, stoically, even placidly. A moral torpor pervades the place that prefers to ignore the legal requirements of the trial of a crime, and the judgment and the sentence that should follow. As they sit in their verandah, pondering over the infernal deeds of the murderous couple, we see Gaze calmly proclaim that there's one job he'd hate to have—"God's on Judgment Day" (47). The burden of judgement and punishment is shifted from an earthly realm to a heavenly one, conveying a questionable laxity in morals and a tolerance for crime, implying the unavoidability of a certain moral decadence so far away from "civilisation."

Perhaps the tale that most communicates the strange contradictions in the behaviour of women in the "savage lands" is "The Vessel of Wrath" (*Ab King*). Though Mr Gruyter, the Dutch *Controleur* finds Ginger Ted, a dissolute, drunken man, with no morals to speak of, a figure of amusement, the latter is a constant source of anger to the missionary and doctor, Mr Jones, and his sister, Miss Jones, a forty-year-old unmarried woman. Once, out among the natives, to contain an outbreak of cholera, Miss Jones is forced to endure a night in the company of Ginger Ted and is in mortal terror of her virtue. When she finds that Ginger had, instead, covered her with sacks to keep her warm, Mary Jones undergoes a sudden change of heart and develops an attraction towards him. Through a dint of persuasion and emotional displays, she manages to get him to propose to her. The Controleur is completely bemused by the turn of events. Although Miss Jones believes she is "recuperating the fallen", the sudden and abrupt turn from hating to loving an unpleasant man becomes a caricature of the "Christian spirit of forgiveness," conveying signs of a mind made fickle by alienation and isolation.

Maugham's repeated use of "paradise and fall" metaphors, therefore, deconstructs the "civilising" discourse at the centre of colonialism to reveal the deleterious effect of the alien land on the colonisers that renders them emotionally and physiologically unfit. In the many tropes that play out in these narratives, we often encounter the age-old gender-ideal of the "angel in the

house” versus the fickle, unfaithful wife or the “femme fatale” because, not unusually, akin to other discourses of empire, here too, the land and the women are yoked together in masculine perceptions. Both are depicted as wild, wilful and unpredictable.

Not a white woman's country: White women vs native women

It is not only the land that is infernalised in these stories but the women as well. Sherry Ortner's famous essay “Is female to male as nature is to culture?” began an important field of enquiry in ecofeminism, premised on the view that under patriarchy, the exploitation of nature and that of women are ideologically linked. Material feminist perspectives that have gained traction since the early 90s promote a feminism that strives to examine “the material conditions under which social arrangements, including those of gender hierarchy, develop” (Wicke 751). Thus Wicke argues that all kinds of material conditions play a pivotal role in the social production of gender and the manner in which women contribute to these productions.

White women and natural elements of the tropics have a vacillating relationship in these stories. As discussed earlier in the case of “Before the Party,” for the central female characters, the initial euphoria of newness often gives way to rather tumultuous responses to the natural world. The emotional unravelling is often displayed in altered, dysmorphic or dystopic perceptions of nature. These instances are marked by portrayals of intense psychological stress, often resulting in criminal acts, breakdown of interpersonal relationships, or both. This classic narrative of disharmony between white women and native habitats is repeatedly used in Maugham's stories as an alibi or justification for relationships between white men and native women, thus setting native women and white women as rivals, vying for the white male's attention.

In “The Force of Circumstance”, Guy, a government official posted in Sembulu, tells his new bride, Doris, “The old Sultan didn't think it was a white woman's country, he rather encouraged people to keep house with native girls” (*The Casuarina Tree*, 122). He bandies the idea about as though it is common knowledge. Largely confined to domestic spaces⁷, the European women are further removed from the natural world of the tropics than the men, whose livelihoods are directly dependent on their ability to acclimatise to it, exploit its ecologies, and manage it for profit. As we see with Doris, nature initially reassures her and reinforces her positive state of mind. However, all this changes once Doris suspects her husband of having consorted with a native woman in the past:

⁷ For a detailed historical overview of the lives of European women in colonial Malaya see Tilley (2003).

Darkness closed in upon them. The frogs croaked loudly and now and then they heard a few short notes from some singing bird of the night....

Doris thought she heard a little sigh. It vaguely disturbed her. (128)

The harshness of the auditory signals is apparent and mirrors the discomfort she feels. The sound made by the chik-chak (Malay name for house gecko) is a powerful auditory image used repeatedly in the story. Its characteristic chirp is not simply a diegetic sound that creates the setting, but becomes an actant in the story. Describing his abject loneliness before he got married, Guy says to Doris,

“It was the nights that did it for me. I was all alone. There wasn't a sound in the bungalow except now and then the croak of the chik-chak. It used to come out of the silence, suddenly, so it made me jump.” (134)

Later in the story, when Doris ruminates on the strange turn of events after Guy confesses to having cohabited with a Malay woman and fathered her children, the chik-chaks, once again, make an appearance in the story. This time, it is Doris who reacts to their piercing, hoarse and “strangely human cry” (147). The sound mirrors her inner anguish and seals the disintegration of her marriage. When the marriage finally breaks down and Doris leaves, Guy is shattered and feels that loneliness begin to creep in on him again:

The chik-chak was noisy that night and its hoarse and sudden cry seemed to mock him. You could hardly believe that this reverberating sound came from so small a throat.... The chik-chak laughed harshly. (150)

Just then, he sees his oldest son standing at the door. Finding the isolation unbearable he decides to bring his children and their mother back to the house. The derisive “laugh” of the chik-chak and the subsequent reaction and course of events exemplify the mediation of human action by the sonic experience. The environmental sounds have a synesthetic effect and so vividly evoke the trauma of isolation that it elicits a strongly emotional response, subverting and impairing the ability to ratiocinate. The decision made by Guy in that moment changes the course of his life and those of the other main characters in the story, marking a point of no return for his marriage and the continuation of the “forced” miscegenation, indicated in the title of the story.

Along with nature, native women too are shown to gain agency. Guy's Malay concubine is a looming presence in the story. Each time she makes an appearance, Doris is distressed and discomfited, even when she is unaware of the native woman's relationship with her husband. The Malay woman is not demure or submissive. The first time Doris encounters her in the story, she is arguing in a raised voice with Guy. Not ready to back down or make peace with having been replaced by a white woman, she bravely shows up at Guy and Doris' house on multiple occasions. In the instances in which Doris sees the woman in the village, she always meets Doris' eye in a hard stare. It is Guy who is flummoxed and perturbed in these instances. When he confesses to Doris about his prior relationship, he tells her how intimidated he is by the woman. This is an

unexpected switch in the power dynamic. Not only was Guy dependent on a native woman for his emotional and physical needs, his current state of mind and the fate of his marriage are in her hands too. Doris' subsequent emotional breakdown leads to her ending the marriage and retreating to England, thus proving true the sultan's hypothesis of the unsuitability of the land for white women. Doris is both displaced and replaced by a native woman.

A similar frame narrative plays out in "The Letter" (*The Casuarina Tree*). Mrs Crosbie enters into an adulterous relationship with Hammond, a planter, who has recently moved into her community. As passions run high, all seems to be going well for the lovers till Mrs Crosbie finds out that Hammond has been living with a Chinese woman. Mrs Crosbie attempts to carry on in denial of her lover's indiscretions until she encounters the native woman. Her response is visceral:

I saw her... walking in the village, with her gold bracelets and her necklaces, an old, fat, Chinese woman. She was older than I was. Horrible! They all knew in the kampong that she was his mistress. He said he'd known her for years... and she was the only woman who really meant anything to him.... And then I don't know what happened, I was beside myself, I saw red. I seized the revolver and I fired.... I fired and fired till the revolver went click, click, and I knew there were no more cartridges. (307)

Mrs Crosbie's murderous rage seems rooted in the fact that Hammond's relationship with his Chinese lover has moved beyond the realm of physical intimacy to an emotional bond. It seems unfathomable to her that she is not only rivalled by a native woman but that the native has the upper hand. This inversion of the established power structure leads to her emotional and mental disintegration. Hence, her murder of Hammond is prompted by the "unnatural" liaison between him and a racial other. Strangely enough, she is spared of any legal repercussions as she accuses Hammond of trying to rape her and claims that the murder was an act of self-defence. The manner in which she attempts to cover up her crime is the ultimate act of revenge. She has not only killed the one who betrayed her, she has denigrated him in the worst way possible by accusing him of attempting to "defile" her. Her body is further politicised and becomes an "accessory" in her crime. She also has the unstinting support of her husband in her endeavours to cover up her crime. However, the cards are held by Hammond's lover, who is in possession of the letter written by Mrs Crosbie to Hammond. Normative hierarchies based on race and gender are overthrown as she "with the air of a woman sure of herself" (299) ensures that Mr Crosbie coughs up an enormous sum of money in return for the release of the incriminating letter. Mrs Crosbie's unruffled relationship with her husband despite her blatant and open desire for Hammond reveals the hypocrisy that pervades the social codes in these nascent communities that demands that surface

decorum be maintained at any cost. Moral codes are collateral to order, and matrimonial harmony, or the appearance of it, is foundational to this order. Such extreme and vengeful responses, prompted by rage and loneliness, are shown as being endemic to the tropics and symptomatic of the multiple dysfunctions that beset the land and its white settlers, especially the women.

This theme is reiterated again in “Flotsam and Jetsam” (*Creatures of Circumstance*), the tragic story of the impoverished planter, Norman Grange, and his wife, Vesta. Her affair with a wealthy planter, Jack, who moves into the neighbourhood, ends in his murder at the hands of Norman. Vesta is a witness to the murder and is covered in the blood of her lover who dies in her arms. Since this traumatic episode, she lives her life battling guilt, loneliness, hatred and fear of her husband and is prey to convulsive nervous tics. Thematically, “Flotsam and Jetsam” seems to begin where “The Force of Circumstance” ends. It is as if, the white man admits to the social experiment that has gone wrong. Right at the outset, Norman expresses his regret in marrying Vesta, an Englishwoman. He tells Skeltor, a boat-wrecked, uninvited visitor, “Of course if I'd had any sense I'd have married a Malay girl and had half a dozen half-caste kids. That's the only solution really for us chaps who were born and bred here” (40). Thus he indicates in no uncertain terms that he endorses the popular opinion that white women are misfits in the East. The recurrent pattern of the white woman being enamoured and soothed by the native land, initially, only to discover her alienness is highlighted. Haunted by Jack's murder, Vesta's desperate words to Skeltor belie her initial sense of harmony:

“Oh, Christ, how I hate this country. I hate that river. I hate this house. I hate that damned rubber. I loathe the filthy natives. And that's all I've got to look forward to till I die—till I die without a doctor to take care of me, without a friend to hold me hand.” (43)

She embodies the psychological burden of dysfunctional marriages, financial hardships, deracination, and post-traumatic stress. Regularly “convulsed by a paroxysm of involuntary movement” (46), her physical and emotional dilapidation represents the perilousness of life in the colonies for the white woman and Vesta's life serves as a cautionary tale to the white women who desire to journey to the East.

This trope of misfortune of female settlers is foregrounded in the story “Neil MacAdam” (*Ab King*). Darya, trapped in an unhappy marriage, desires her husband's assistant, Neil MacAdam. She is completely disconnected from nature and has a debilitating fear of the jungle. She was terrified of wild animals, snakes, and insects and had a terror of the jungle “that was almost hysterical” (292). In the story, her resistance towards all pursuits related to nature makes her a foil to the characters of Munro, her husband and Neil, who are naturalists. Throughout the story, Neil tries his best to fend off Darya's aggressive and abusive sexual advances. The tensions between Darya and Neil build up to a crescendo and the

story ends in a tragedy when Neil, in a desperate bid to rid himself of her and prevent being falsely accused of rape, abandons Darya in the jungle, well aware that she will likely never find her way back. Darya's use of the insinuation of rape as a devious tool of control politicises her body much in the same way as with Ms Crosbie from "The Letter" discussed earlier. Darya's distaste for the native landscape and debilitating fear of the jungle are her downfall. Search parties try in vain to locate her as a storm builds up. The inhospitality of the Malayan jungles is a pivotal element in the narrative. In the dramatic climax of the story, the jungle and the storm assume great performative power:

The storm broke suddenly. A great wind blew then the lightning rent the darkness, like the stream of a woman in pain, and the tortured flashes, quick, quick, one on the heels of the other, like demon dancers in a frantic reel, wriggled down the night. The horror of the forest was revealed on an unearthly day. The rain pelted in fierce torrents. Rocks and gigantic trees came tumbling down the mountain. The tumult was awful. (334)

In this instance, the narrative appears to imply a strange collusion between the European male and nature, both "punishing" the "wicked" deeds of an adulterous woman and meting out retributive justice.

Conclusion

The representation of the memsahibs in Maugham's tales set in Southeast Asia becomes a complex site, where desire and anger, attraction and repudiation are invoked, leading to emotional and troubled interactions between nature and white men and women. In these heated and turbulent relationships, the fate of the native women become unexpectedly reversed. Pitted against the white women as rivals, they are far from being mere backdrops or eminently expendable commodities, enabling a rethinking of gender and race relations within colonial communities. They often chart the course of the protagonists' lives and are not afraid to use their influence and place in the white men's lives to further their own agendas. Even as the European women are charged with the responsibility of upholding White power and prestige, morality and well-being of the communities, they are shown to be incapable of "managing" their conjugal and communal relationships. The native males, interestingly, hardly enter the equation and are completely erased from these narratives heavily saturated by gendered politics.

Maugham proclaims that his interest is in people "who by some accident or another, accident of temperament, accident of environment, have been involved in unusual contingencies" (*The Casuarina Tree*, xix). The dysfunctional behaviours prompted by these "unusual contingencies", it is implied, are under "normal" circumstances completely atypical of the whites and perpetrated through maladjustment and a strange misalliance between an inherently decadent

land and the new settlers, the ultimate casualty of which appears to be the white woman.

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