



# Kitty's Awakening of Female Consciousness in *The Painted Veil*

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William Somerset Maugham is a controversial English author whose works are often ironic and profound in exposing humanity. *The Painted Veil* is a novel completed after his trip to China. This paper focuses on the analysis of Kitty's awakening process of female consciousness and the causes of it.

*Keywords:* William Somerset Maugham, *The Painted Veil*, female consciousness

## Introduction

William Somerset Maugham was born in Paris, France on January 25, 1874. The creation of *The Painted Veil* was inspired by the lines of Dante that run as follows: "Siena wife", disfecemi Maremma" (Siena raised me, but Maremma destroyed me) (*The Painted Veil*, 2014, p. 4). It depicts a rather cruel story and this unexpected tragedy touched Maugham's sensitive heart, which led to his creative desire. Several years later, in the process of his trip to China along the Yangtze River in 1919, he saw exotic scenes on the land of the east and conceived the framework of *The Painted Veil* by transplanting this medieval tragic story into the desolate background of his eyes. As depicted, Maugham had thrown out the first layer of metaphor: The gorgeous life that shines in the name of love is a veil of self-deception; the thirst for freedom and love cannot be reached without all difficulties and hazards (Wang, 2018).

## The Synopsis of *The Painted Veil*

This book tells the story of a young British couple coming to the Chinese countryside in the 1920s. The story started with the heroine—Kitty reluctantly accepting the proposal of the reticent bacteriologist Walter Fein only because she did not want to fall behind her sister too much or to become an old unmarried woman. After marriage, Kitty and the charming-married man Charlie Townsend had an extramarital affair. After knowing Kitty's betrayal, Fein decided to take Kitty away towards the remote towns where cholera was raging and gallantly helped control the local plague. As for Kitty, she began volunteering in a monastery, struggling in the whirlpool of her own life, experiences disillusionment, and separation of life and death; she finally uncovered the veil of life from her eyes herself, and embarked on the path of spiritual growth without regrets.

## Definition and Development of Female Consciousness

Female consciousness is actually a concept about women, which is a legacy of history. It refers to looking at things from the perspective of women, observing and thinking about everything in life with women's

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eyes. It explores the role of “women” in “people”, containing the process of finding value that includes gender and transcends gender, that is, female consciousness. It includes two aspects: “gender awareness” as a woman and “social consciousness” as a person. There is a basic premise of female consciousness—female is in an oppressed, discriminated, limited, and biased hierarchy group within the scope of the whole world (Zhao, 2015).

People generally tend to divide female consciousness or feminism into three stages or three waves. The first wave began in the second half of the 19th century and continued into the early 20th century. During this period, the focus of the debate was to demand gender equality. The most important goal was to strive for the equal value of family and social labor and political rights. The second one started in the 1960s and continued into the 1970s. It is believed that the second feminist movement originated in the United States. The keynote was to emphasize the naturalness of the division of labor between the sexes and to eliminate the phenomenon of unequal pay for the same work. The third wave began in the 1990s and continues to the present day. The outcome of the third feminist movement was the rise of academic research on gender studies and feminism. Although there were many schools of thought, the basic point was to strive for the equal rights of both sexes and completely eliminate the inferior situation of women being discriminated, exploited, and oppressed.

### **Kitty's Female Consciousness—From Ignorance to Awakening**

#### **Kitty's Ignorance of Female Consciousness**

In this novel, Kitty lived with her parents and sister. The social circle of London in the 1920s was full of glitz and glamour. Her mother, Mrs. Garstin, was a bossy, ambitious, and short-sighted woman. She attempted to manipulate the people around her, thus the rest member of the family could not lead their own independent and carefree lives (You, 2016). She taught Kitty how to dress up so as to attract others and was always willing to take her daughter to various banquets. In an age that consisted of materialism and money supremacy, most women had no social status in the family, let alone in the society. In an unemotional family, Kitty, like other women in the society at that time, was eager to pursue wealth and married a man with a large fortune. Despite the above reasons, Kitty chose her marriage just because she did not want to be a bridesmaid for her sister Doris, not willing to be laughed at by her mother, and did not want to be left behind by her friends. This was undoubtedly ridiculous. This can be seen from the following writing:

... She was afraid of her mother's bitter tongue. Why, all the girls who had come out with her were married long ago and most of them had children; she was tired of going to see them and gushing over their babies. Walter Fane offered her a new life. She turned to him with a smile which she well knew the effect of. (*The Painted Veil*, 2014, p. 11)

From the above description, it can be seen that Kitty married Fane in haste, which showed her ignorance of female consciousness.

#### **Kitty's Awakening of Female Consciousness**

The awakening of Kitty's female consciousness mainly came from her arduous life in a monastery in China. During her experience in southern China, Kitty witnessed the selfless nuns taking care of the sick at great risk, which made her realize that life should embody a deep pursuit. She began to feel ashamed of her foolish, selfish, shallow, and short-sighted self in the past. The fulfilling life of volunteering made Kitty gain a sense of accomplishment and filled the void in her heart. It also enabled her to get spiritual rebirth and found new meaning in her life. This can be proved from the following depiction:

Kitty had a queer feeling that she was growing. 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. It had seemed to her that she could do nothing now but weep; but to her surprise, and not a little to her confusion, she caught herself laughing at this and that. (*The Painted Veil*, 2014, p. 52)

In addition, Kitty's awakening of female consciousness also resulted from her mother's death.

Nothing, she repeated vehemently. I am very embarrassed when I think that we have been relying on you for the rest of our lives, but I have not rewarded you with anything, we don't even have any affection for you. Your life is not that happy, can you give me a chance to allow me to make up for the past? (*The Painted Veil*, 2014, p. 80)

After Mrs. Garstin's death, Kitty constantly reflected on her past deep-rooted sense of attachment to her mother and to Walter Fane, why she agreed to marry someone she did not like, why she was afraid of being laughed at, why she wanted to be with Charles, why she never had the courage to pursue the life she wanted, and so on. Constant self-reflection made Kitty gradually develop a sense of independence, which was the important beginning of her female consciousness. She realized that only by living without attachment to anyone, any emotion, or any moral custom in spirit, could she achieve real peace and fulfillment in her mind.

Besides, Kitty's transformation of attitude towards kinship also serves as evidence to show her awakening of female consciousness. Although it was Mr. Garstin—Kitty's father had always supported the family, he could never get the slightest recognition from his wife and his daughters. No one appreciated his sacrifice but took it for granted. After the death of Mrs. Garstin, Kitty gradually grew into an independent person. Her first act of maturity was to reconcile with her father. She expressed her deep guilt to her relieved father and offered to take care of him for the rest of his life. The role of "father" has always been at the core of the patriarchal society. Facing her father, Kitty now clearly felt her independent will and realized what she should do for him. It was exactly Kitty's transformation towards kinship that showed the real awakening of her female consciousness.

Finally, Kitty's looking forward to the future also strengthened her self-identity and thus showed her awakening of female consciousness.

I hope to be a girl because I want to raise her so that she will not make the mistakes I have made. When I look back at what kind of girl I am, I hate myself very much, but I can't do anything about it. I want to raise my daughter and make her a forceful and independent person. I bring her to the world, love her, raise her, not to let her sleep with a man in the future, and then attach her own life to him. (*The Painted Veil*, 2014, p. 80)

Kitty chose to raise her daughter on her own. She believed she missed a lot of opportunities in the past to be free and independent and just pursued spiritual pleasure; yet, she could not want her daughter to follow her footsteps. In order to give her daughter real spiritual independence in the future, she decided to stand up bravely and set a good example for her daughter. The past experience and the impact of the unhappy marriage made Kitty sorely aware that she should not blindly attach herself to material things or someone else, but be independent in personality and spirit, and have the courage to pursue her own happiness. In the end of the story, she left the UK for a different place with her father, which could be seen as a separation from the old environment and the beginning of a new life in the near future.

### **Causes of the Awakening of the Female Consciousness**

When Kitty returned to England, she was not the person she had used to be. After experiencing the betrayal of Townsend, the foreign plague, the death of Fane, the voluntary work in the monastery, the death of

her mother, and the reconciliation with her father, Kitty's female consciousness awakened, and the causes of the transformation resulted from social and family factors.

Firstly, the United Kingdom in the 18th and 19th centuries was periods of social transformation. The economic and social changes had greatly converted the lives and personal experiences of women. The capitalist production relationship began to sprout and achieved initial development together with a crack in traditional ideology. Under the circumstances many literary works had given birth to the earlier female awakening consciousness, and there had also been a rise in the degree of female autonomy. However, due to the limitations of their own classes, women were still dependent on men, most of them in that era were politically and economically incapable, and they were also restricted in their choice of marriage. Although there was a hindrance to the promotion of women's status to a large extent, it had also stimulated female consciousness in a sense. Especially in the 20th century, the status of women gradually increased, and the spirit of female consciousness in various literary works was truly advocated. Women were suddenly aware of an independent will, demanding a rich life experience. This sudden change came into conflict with the traditional male-centered society. Kitty is exactly existing in such a society, which also leads to the awakening of her female consciousness.

Secondly, Kitty's attitude toward her unborn child suggested that she was beginning to aware of the female consciousness. Her brief trip to China left her indulgence in the sadness of being abandoned, and her mother's death made her reexamine herself in the past, forcing her to be strong at the same time. There was no doubt that she was foolish in the past, but nothing could be changed. Her maturity was reflected in the expectation that she would raise her daughter to be an independent person. "Freedom" and "independence" are two traits Kitty did not have in her past life, but she later clearly understood the importance of both and wished her daughter to possess them. At that time, all the criticism, torture, and frustration Kitty had suffered before would facilitate her new journey, which also showed Kitty's further awakening of her female consciousness.

### Conclusion

*The Painted Veil* tells the story of a woman's true independence and growth. Maugham uses humorous language to depict the whole process of women's experience and reflection during their marriage in the last century. This article analyzes the performances embodied in protagonist Kitty before and after her awakening of female consciousness, hoping that readers are able to clearly comprehend the whole process of Kitty's efforts to achieve individual independence and spiritual freedom.

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