

Chapter - I

INTRODUCTION

I

SOMERSET MAUGHAM : His Life and Career

"His (Maugham's) successful versatility in four distinct media - the novel, the play, the short story, the personal narrative - is not likely soon to be paralleled ..."¹

Born on 25th January 1874, William Somerset Maugham was the youngest child in the family. His father, Robert Maugham, was a solicitor to the British Embassy in Paris. Maugham spent his formative years of life in France. He went to French school and learnt French even before he learnt English.

Maugham's mother :

"... was very small, with large brown eyes and hair of a rich reddish gold, exquisite features and a lovely skin ..."²

Maugham loved his mother deeply. So her death in 1882 was a fatal blow to him from which he could never fully recover. After his mother's death he was sent to an English clergyman to learn English. He lived there till his father's death in 1884. Then he went to stay with his uncle in Whitstable, Kent. His uncle was the vicar of the All Saints Church in Whitstable. It seems that Maugham was not happy in this atmosphere. His

uncle and aunt were a childless couple. Naturally they did not know how to deal with a boy. The home was full of religious duties and reading the Bible was necessary. In such an atmosphere this small boy became more unhappy and lonely. All this has been reflected later in his works. He did not get genuine love from his uncle.

During his school days at Canterbury his unhappiness increased due to his marked stammer and his suffering from consumption. Even his teachers did not treat him properly. Maugham wanted to get rid of all these tensions and hence, went to Germany. His stay in Germany proved to be greatly beneficial to him, because he experienced freedom there after a long period.

After his return from Germany his uncle wished him to be an Anglican Clergyman, but Maugham did not like the idea. He had his own plans and for some time he worked in a Chartered Accountant's office. Soon he changed his course of life and opted for medical studies in St. Thomas' Hospital, London. The Hospital was situated quite near the Borough of Lambeth. It was largely a slum district in those days. Now Maugham worked in that slum area and came in close contact with the people living there. He wrote his first novel Liza of Lambeth during this period. The novel deals with the slum

life. Fortunately this novel brought him a good success and he decided to give up the study of medicine for literature. In fact this medical profession had given him an opportunity to observe people from close quarters. As a writer he :

"... became alert. He saw life at first hand stripped of reticence, gentility, and pretence. He saw suffering, fear, despair and terror; he saw hope, courage and bravery."³

He now decided to travel extensively in order to satisfy his love of travelling and to get material for his writing. He worked as a medical officer during the World War I and also worked in the Intelligence Department. His experiences of those years have been reflected in his stories.

Maugham's married life was not happy. His wife Gwendolen Syrie Bernardo was :

"... a small woman with a small head, great vitality and plenty of determination ..."⁴

They had a daughter called Liza. His married life lasted for just twelve years. It broke up in 1927 and he did not marry again.

Because of his ill health, he had to go to the South Seas. This journey proved to be more important in shaping his career as a novelist. He came across many personalities and different kinds of people. He reproduced them compositely in his books.

When he was sent to a sanatorium for the treatment of tuberculosis, he observed there many things. All this has helped him later to portrary his characters either in his short stories or in his novels.

In 1953 he was felicitated with the Order of Merit. He lived in his famous Villa Mauresque in France till his death in 1966.

II

"Desmond MacCarthy calls Maugham 'The English Maupassant'"⁵

Maugham's work possesses the qualities and characteristics of Maupassant's writings. It expresses the unflinching realism, beautiful characterisation, lucidity and well organised construction. Maugham always remembered the deep impact made by the French soil on him.

Maugham was contributing to the growth of English novel when the age itself was busy experimenting with new forms and technicalities. Henry James regarded character as the essential element in the novel. Joseph Conrad brought about a change in the form, introducing a kind of stream of consciousness technique. Virginia Woolf utilized stream of consciousness technique which provided a verbal and syntactical approximation of the mind in flux. James Joyce followed the same technique and wrote his Ulysses in 1927. In fact, it was a new beginning in the novel.

Though Maugham was writing in this atmosphere, he followed the French traditional pattern which has a beginning, a middle and an end. He adhered to the traditional principle of narrative. He paid more attention to simplicity, lucidity and euphony.

Maugham's fame as a novelist rests primarily on four novels : Of Human Bondage (1915); The Moon and Sixpence (1919); Cakes and Ale (1930) and The Razor's Edge (1944). Maugham's favourite novel is Cakes and Ale. It is :

"one of the best novels of the twentieth century."⁶

Maugham has written more than twenty novels. They have a variety of range of settings, characters and themes. His wide and indiscriminate reading had become the base of his writings. He consciously improved his writing skill. He believed that the writer must have a store of experiences so that he could select some of them for his expressions.

Maugham had his own method of drawing characters in his novels. He allowed them freedom to emerge from the given situation. Naturally these characters take their own shape :

"... His characters are vivid, believable and although not particularly subtle, for he is concerned with their outer than their inner lives, remarkably individualized ..."⁷

There was a great movement of the emancipation of women during the first decade of the twentieth century in England. Maugham was its silent observer. He noted that the women had

become gradually more and more aware of their rights. They had begun to participate in all walks of life. Some of them had turned their attention towards writing books. Now they had ceased to be chained only to domestic duties and domestic roles. They had begun to behave as friends.

There was a radical change in the role of a woman in the society. It appealed much to Maugham. He began to think of this new behavioural pattern of women and later he has made use of it in drawing the women characters in his novels. As a playwright he was closely associated with the theatre life. Probably this may have constrained Maugham to accept woman in her changed role. Sometimes Maugham has his own mother as an ideal while portraying the women characters in his novels. Maugham's mother was very faithful to her husband. She was very beautiful compared to her husband and :

"... they were known in the Paris of that day
as Beauty and the Beast ..."⁸

Maugham's father never hurt her feelings.

Maugham's women are seen in different roles as wives, friends, mothers and lovers. But at the same time they are lonely.

The present dissertation deals with the following five women characters in four novels by Maugham. These are Liza in Liza of Lambeth (1897); Mildred Rogers and Nora Nesbitt in Of Human Bondage (1915); Rosie Driffield in Cakes and Ale (1930) and Julia in Theatre (1937). In fact these women characters are nothing but the portrayal of ideas about a woman in the mind of Maugham.

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