

Kitty's problematic
characterization:
gender, sexuality, and
history in the paint...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Like every other form of systemic oppression, patriarchy has its roots spread across different cultures, places and time periods. There is no denying that women have been marginalized, both in fact and in fiction, well into the 20th century. In an androcentric world where every other gender is seen as secondary and is used as a mere tool for facilitating the advancement of the man-child, the interwar period saw little to no difference about how women were to be treated and perceived. Recent historians after conducting thorough surveys have reached the general consensus that the so-called emancipation of women that came with the first world war was ephemeral. As an author of the era, W. Somerset Maugham had often and rightly so been labeled as a misogynist for his unfair portrayal of women. His novel *The Painted Veil* chronicled the life of Kitty Fane, an upper-class woman who had been portrayed as vain and promiscuous. Even though she was the protagonist, her character had been shaped in terms of the relationships and interactions she had with men throughout the course of the novel. Her story arc showed her jumping from one man to another; we never get to know her as a complete individual whose life didn't revolve around the lives of men.

Maugham, apparently, thought it acceptable to make Kitty the only one paying the price of having an affair with Charlie, even though it was mutually consensual. This reflects the collective consciousness of a highly gendered society whose lowest rungs were occupied by women. Charlie's male privilege allowed him to go scot free while Kitty was the one who got estranged from the comfort of her home and was made to travel to cholera stricken Mei Tan Fu. Even when she returned to England, after Walter, her husband's, death, she wasn't allowed to navigate the world on her own. She

was entrusted to the care of her father as a woman was not allowed to exist without a man. In the wake of world war one, the glass ceiling that was partially broken while the war was still on, was restored as men claimed their jobs back. The 1919 Restoration of pre-war practices act compelled most women to go back to the realm of domesticity abandoning their wartime roles, to make space for men. Gender norms were reproduced as women were once again expected to adhere to the duties that were traditionally labeled as feminine. Their roles were restricted to those of a mother or a wife. Even though some lower and middle class women continued working for strictly financial reasons, things were harder for upper class women like Kitty. Their basic necessities like food and clothes were easily met, owing to the comfortable economic status of their husbands and fathers. Upper class women like Kitty often had to stay stuck in unhappy marriages as the concept of women working was thought of as degrading. This was the patriarchal society's way of policing the lives and bodies of women. The concept of women's financial or any form of independence for that matter was considered as radical and outrageous.

However, there is no denying the fact that in the wake of world war one the lives of women were changed for the better to some extent. World war one planted the first seeds of equity between men and women. Even though the world was still trying to maintain the status quo that prioritised men, women were slowly making a place for themselves in the outside world. In Kitty's case, the public world came under the guise of social work that didn't violate societal codes of femininity. She was assigned a role of a caregiver, the role thought of as intrinsic to women, for orphaned children. Maugham did not let

her leave the domestic sphere as women having access to a public world that was not bounded by the inhibitions of domesticity would be stumbling blocks for patriarchy to flourish. Nonetheless, what matters here is how he gave her a complex storyline unwittingly. The author wrote, "Kitty had been brought up with the knowledge that she was going to be a beautiful woman and she more than suspected her mother's ambition. It accorded with her own desires. She was launched upon the world and Mrs Garstin performed prodigies in getting herself invited to dances where her daughter might meet eligible men. Kitty was a success. She was amusing as well as beautiful, and very soon she had a dozen men in love with her". Marriage for women was more of a vocation than a bond of mutual respect and love. Walter thought of Kitty as someone who was 'silly and frivolous and empty-headed' and whose 'aims and ideals were vulgar and commonplace'. Kitty who had grown up internalising that beauty was the price she had to pay for her existence, bag a good husband and never thought much highly of herself, for the first time found security within herself and a sense of self-actualization due to social work. Just like the first world war solidified women's trust on their own potential, Kitty's newfound precarious but budding identity made her find a home, she had been searching for in all the wrong people, within herself. This was evident from her longing to stay back with the nuns even after Walter's death.

The narrative that dictated the society of the prewar and interwar period excluded women's sexuality from being part of its equation. The state-sanctioned ideal of a perfect woman invalidated women's sexual desires. Acknowledging the fact that women are sexual beings would mean giving

them bodily autonomy which is the stepping stone in dismantling the entire structure of patriarchy. Kitty's extramarital affair with Charlie stemmed from her unconscious desire of gaining right to her own body which was something women have been refrained from having since the beginning of time. A woman's body is always political and belongs to the state where she has absolutely no say. Kitty used her sexual intimacy with Charlie as a form of self-expression. Considering the resources available to her, this was the most militant she could get. By having a consensual sexual relationship with Charlie, Kitty tried to certify that her body was her own territory and it was inaccessible to her husband. Legitimising women's sexual desires meant giving them access to their bodies and thus humanising them. They were not to be considered as objects whose soul purpose was to cater to the fantasies of men. This would eventually lead to a total collapse of the patriarchal framework upon which the society was rooted. The gap between what was expected of Kitty and the choices she made in reality made Maugham's moral lens paint her in a negative light. No matter what the author said, Kitty's act of adultery was no less than a sexual revolution. Mrs Garstin, Kitty's mother, projected her ambition onto her husband and daughters as was evident from the passage, "It was unlikely now that Bernard Garstin would ever be made a judge of the High Court, but he might still hope for a County Court judgeship or at the worst an appointment in the Colonies. Meanwhile she had the satisfaction of seeing him appointed Recorder of a Welsh town. But it was on her daughters that she set her hopes. By arranging good marriages for them she expected to make up for all the disappointments of her career". She died before her husband got appointed as the Chief Justice of Bahamas. Unlike her mother's generation, who lived

<https://assignbuster.com/kittys-problematic-characterization-gender-sexuality-and-history-in-the-painted-veil/>

vicariously through their husbands, Kitty's generation took things in their own hands to liberate themselves. Kitty never conformed to the idea of women being childish, sexually ignorant and naive and which was why she was shamed. Kitty's sexual intimacy with Charlie was actually her way of exploring her body and her identity.

Every art form is political and a product of its time. The interwar period saw a significant change in the lives of women, because of a number of women's rights movements like the Suffragettes and the Sex Disqualification act of 1919. Things didn't turn around in a day for women but the initial seeds were planted, for their future emancipation and sexual, psychological and legal liberation, during the interwar period. Depicting a woman character from his misogynistic standpoint was how Maugham perpetuated the negative stereotypes about women. Kitty was doomed to a lifetime of servitude for living her life the way she wanted to for once. He presented himself as the omniscient writer and constructed a reality for Kitty so to strip away the power of language from her. This was his way of countering the societal changes concerning women that were inimical to the privilege his gender had been enjoying. No matter how problematic Kitty's representation is in this book, some credit has to be accorded to Maugham for portraying Kitty as a flawed individual and not as a paragon of virtue as was expected of her gender. "The Painted Veil" remains an important interwar novel as it opened room for other writers to follow suit and sketch woman characters in such a way so as to normalise their being imperfect individuals, who should not be demonised for not meeting unrealistic societal standards of morality.