

Oddities of Love and Salvation in W.S. Maugham's '*Christmas Holiday*'

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Abstract

W. Somerset Maugham's *Christmas Holiday* (1939), the last novel of his middle phase, represents a striking departure from the realism that characterizes much of his fiction. Unlike earlier works marked by psychological depth, this novel explores man–woman relationships through illogical and impractical notions of sexual relations and salvation. The heroine Lydia, burdened by guilt for crimes she never committed, embodies abnormal complexity and becomes the central figure in the narrative's exploration of human suffering. Her devotion to her imprisoned husband Robert, despite his destructive influence, underscores her odd psyche and complicates the theme of love and sacrifice. Alongside Lydia, Charley, Simon, and Robert provide contrasting perspectives: Charley, a sensitive painter from a wealthy family, undergoes transformation through exposure to Lydia's tragic life; Simon, cynical yet hardworking, introduces Charley to Lydia and voices pragmatic views on sexuality; Robert, Lydia's husband, embodies brutality and ruin. Critics such as Richard A. Cordell nevertheless praise the novel's stylistic excellence, ranking it among Maugham's finest works. Ultimately, *Christmas Holiday* juxtaposes Lydia's abnormal devotion and Robert's cruelty with Charley's moral awakening, presenting a symbolic abstraction of human relationships that abandons realism in favor of philosophical oddity and stylistic refinement.

Keywords: Realism, Salvation, Abnormality, Prostitution, Transformation, Moral Values, Innocent, Rural, Immaturity

1- Introduction

The last novel of Maugham's middle phase is *Christmas Holiday*; it shows less psychoanalytical study of characters compared to other novels of this phase. The concepts on sexual relations and salvation that govern the theme of man-woman relation in this novel are full of oddities and such impractical views certainly move W.S. Maugham away from his well known taste of realism for which his fiction is marked. In other words W.S. Maugham deviates from the reality in the novel *Christmas Holiday*. The heroine of the novel *Christmas Holiday* is occupied with surprisingly new ways of salvation for those crimes that are never committed by her. The unusual concepts of the heroine for her salvation do categorize her among those women characters that are found abnormal or complicated by nature. The aspects of man-woman relationship that are represented in this novel do not resemble with the real life and they also do not seem to be logical and realistic, that's why there is an obvious eradication of realism in man-woman relationship. The unusual behaviour of the heroine is determined by her baseless as well as exceptional concepts. But in respect of style and technique, Richard A. Cordell in his article '*Five Day Adventure*' declares this novel the best work of Maugham, and again glorifying this novel Cordell remarks:

First of all, it must be said without quibbling reservations that *Christmas Holiday* is a first-rate novel, almost the best of the fifteen novels Somerset Maugham has written during the past forty-two years. It lacks the intense sincerity, the sweep, the autobiographical power of *Of Human Bondage*, but is its superior in form and style. (Curtis, Whitehead 331)

2-Eradication of Realistic Man–Woman Relationships

Charley, Simon, Robert and Lydia are four major characters in *Christmas Holiday* who vary in terms of their points of view on variety of subjects that determine their reactions according to the circumstances. Among these four characters too, this is only Lydia the heroine of the novel whose unfortunate matrimony and odd psyche prepare the main substance of man-woman relationship. Charley becomes the witness of every situation and position in which all the characters of the novel are placed, and finally his character shows transformation.

Charley belongs to a very rich and reputed family whose forefathers have achieved considerable wealth, Mr. Leslie and Mrs. Leslie are Charlie's parents and Pasty is his younger sister. The whole Leslie family is great lover of art and painting. Charlie is a very confused young man who feels difficulty to select his profession; but he is a talented painter. He is admired as a skilled painter by his parents and they expect that he can be a leading painter of his generation. They accept that an artistic environment is must to improve his talent. Mr. Leslie, after examining everything finally decides to send Charley to Paris to learn art. Thus Charley is a man of art, who is interested in creativity and it finally takes him to Paris where the observations of adverse and odd human dilemmas negatively affects young Charley's sensitive mind. Raphael states:

Charley mason, son of amiable middle-class parents, who is given a ticket to go and enjoy himself in Paris, and discover the snake pit of a Europe pullulating with the violence and venom of totalitarianism. The narrative is an uneven amalgam of satire on English Complacency and horrified fascination with the dark passion that threaten it. (85)

Simon is a friend of Charley who lives in Paris and also a dominant character in the novel, he works for a news paper. Simon's father had divorced his wife because of her

adultery. Though the novelist delineates Simon's character with terms like harsh, cynical and unscrupulous yet his dedication and hard working spirit is undoubtedly praiseworthy. Simon and Charley have respectful attitude for each other and they are very good friends.

Attractive physiognomy again stimulates relationship between men and women but it does not play very significant role to schedule relations in between opposite sex as it has seen in the other two novels of middle phase *The Narrow Corner* and *Theatre*. Charley always gets advantages of his charming appearance to draw women's attention. Simon accepts firmly and honestly that Charlie's outlook easily overlaps his (Simon's) hard efforts of brain in order to be the centre of attention among people. Simon also holds the opinion that attractiveness is an essential requirement for the success in life. The total assessment of Charley's personality along with his nature approves him a sensitive and kind human being. Under the influences of all these factors, Charley's personality shows fluctuation and at last he transforms into a purified and thoughtful person.

Simon has very frank views on love and sexual matters; he accepts the necessity of sexual gratification as a normal affair for healthy life. His following remark clarifies his concept of love that is very practical:

"And my sexual desires are urgent? Less urgent than you imagine. When you work from twelve to sixteen hours a day and sleep on an average six, when you content yourself with one meal a day, much as it may surprise you, your desires are much attenuated. Paris is singularly well arranged for the satisfaction of the sexual instinct at moderate expense and with the least possible waste of time."(Maugham, *Christmas Holiday* 45-46)

This is Simon who takes Charley closer to Lydia and then develops the full length of man-woman relationship. Simon introduces Lydia to Charley as a prostitute. She has adopted the name Princess Olga to conceal her identity. In his first visit with Lydia he feels sensuality

for her. Charley's lascivious state in Lydia's companionship is treated with the adulterous tone by the novelist.

This is Charley's uncommon beauty, purity and friendly attitude that take Lydia in his full confidence and then all secrets of her personal life are disclosed before him. Charley, a sensitive young man for the first time encounters the brutal face of human life when Princess Olga, the prostitute introduces herself as the daughter of a professor of Economics. Every tragic reminiscences of Lydia's matrimony are revealed before Charley by Lydia herself, Lydia looks upon Charley as a reliable man before whom she can expose the agonies of her married life. The delineation of painful experiences of life even before a stranger relieves her traumatized soul. Lydia delineates all the unfortunate circumstances and disappointing experiences with her husband Robert; that compelled her to involve herself in mean and inglorious profession of prostitution.

Charley's role in the theme a man-woman relationship is restricted only as a keen listener and he does not influences Lydia and Robert's pathetic matrimonial life that is the core substance of the novel.

At the end of the novel Charley's sexual love leads him to goodness, for he understands the pangs caused by love to Lydia. Though Charley has no role to influence the theme of man-woman relationship yet he is present throughout the novel. W.S. Maugham presents Charley as a person whose experiences of human life increase when he observes unhappy traits of Lydia's married life. Charley's character is evaluated by Evelyn Waugh as following:

What was before an intellectual abstraction is now real and concrete to him. All he had learned is the heterogeneity of mankind. It is a valuable lesson; some people never learnt it. But his own virtues of kindness and tolerance and humour and honesty are still virtues, his bed is still as comfortable and his dinner as satisfying, he has not

received any compelling call, such as does apparently from time to time change people's lives, to any different destiny. (Curtis, Whitehead 330)

Robert Berger, Lydia's husband is imprisoned in the charge of murder, but her devotion and love to her husband who has ruined her life and left her with hopeless future; is absolutely indigestible.

Though Lydia is fully conscious of the fact that Charley is a stranger to her yet she does not hesitate to share her experiences of her nuptial life. Reliable and kind full attitude of Charley takes him closer to Lydia and they make friendly relationship. She takes Charley in her past when she was a kitchen maid and in love of Robert. Robert is a sensual lover of Lydia and can be categorized among other passionate male characters of W.S. Maugham.

Mrs. Berger, Robert's mother approves Lydia as a suitable match for her son, ignoring her pathetic situation. To Mrs. Berger human virtues are more valuable than economical position and she believes that goodness of nature is superior to all earthly achievements. Lydia's domestic harmony is extraordinarily smooth as she narrates before Charley. Robert is an enthusiastic lover of Lydia and even after their marriage this loving attitude of Robert never declines, he loves her without any selfish purpose. Lydia is not aware of her husband's profession though he often offers her expensive gifts. Money plays a vital role and adversely affects their domestic life. Vacillation in Lydia-Robert relation occurs when Robert is expelled out from his job. Robert always misguides Lydia whenever she wanted to know about his job. Through Lydia never wants money, yet it governs her relations with Robert. Robert desires to provide all worldly pleasures to his wife even through illegal and cruel deeds; that finally demolish his married life. Lydia discovers the truth that her husband is a thief and murderer. Though Lydia is quite conscious of that her future with Robert is insecure, yet she never ceases to love her husband. One of her following remark manifests her loving and careful attitude to her husband:

“Whatever he’s done, whatever future has in store, I love him; nothing can make me love him less. I adore him.” (145)

In his domestic avocation Robert is always a calm and careful person but the way he applies himself in order to become rich is absolutely invalid. Lydia’s love for her criminal and imprisoned husband visualizes her admirable virtues and her commitment to be a faithful life partner. Thus in first glance two opposite sides of Robert Berger are quite apparent, as a murderer he is hateful while as a husband he is admirable. He is unnecessarily ambitious and it demolishes his nuptial relations and thus brings him upon his dark fortune. Furthermore “in the character of Robert Berger, the murderer, Maugham suggested that his real motive was a perversion of the creative instinct, an urge for self-fulfillment’ (Morgan 425).

3-Oddities of Love and Salvation

The most highlighted but unrealistic point in the theme of man-woman relationship of this novel is Lydia’s absolutely odd concept of salvation that reduces realism in the novel. Lydia is in abominable profession of prostitution only because she is ruled by the pseudo religious belief that her involvement in prostitution would decrease her criminal husband’s agonies in the prison. She offers her body to men to fulfill their carnal desires who come to her. This irrational and baseless hypothesis of salvation cannot be accepted realistic. Her following remarks clarify her impractical theory of salvation that she has constituted for herself. Though none of these opinions of Lydia fit in a real situation, yet her devotion to her criminal husband can be shown by her exceptional statements. She says to Charley:

“Though I love Robert with all my heart with all my soul, I know that he sinned. I felt that the only way I could serve Robert now was by submitting to a degradation that was the most horrible I could think of.”(Maugham, *Christmas Holiday* 147)

“I welcome to contempt these men have for the instrument of their lust. I welcome their brutality. I’m in hell as Robert is in hell and my suffering joins with his, and it may be that my suffering makes it more easy for him to bear his.”(148)

The doctrine of Lydia’s repentance is whimsical; it has no relation to any religion because god is dead to her. For the calamities of her life she blames god and that’s why refuses to accept Christianity. The sort of procedure that she applies to punish herself is not a religious ritual. Her abnormal deeds are governed by her own impractical ideas of repentance. This is Christmas holiday when Charley is face to face with this unfortunate story of a married, virtuous and devoted woman who has turned a prostitute. Charley’s artistic and sensitive mind becomes dizzy and for few moments he has nothing to utter. As a prostitute Lydia offers Charley to gratify his sexual demands but the pathetic story of her past moves him so much that he refuses her proposal though he is a man of warm sensual desires. Thus it can be said that Charley’s familiarity to the hopeless and suffocating life of a woman restricts his sensuality. These are only the values of goodness that sustains dignity between Lydia, a prostitute and Charley a young artist who does not lack sensual needs.

Charley’s unselfish helping nature to Lydia is praiseworthy, his sympathetic treatment of a calumniated woman like Lydia; fully signifies the goodness of his heart. It is difficult to suggest any name to the relationship of Lydia and Charley because they are neither lovers nor friends. It is only the goodness of nature that sustains unselfish companionship between Charley and Lydia, though it is very short in duration. Thus it is Charley’s goodness and Lydia’s anxiety to share her exhausting matrimonial agonies that initiate a healthy bondage in between them. This is only for a single time when his sensuality crosses the limit, but he overcomes it and retains dignity in his relationship with Lydia. Words like ‘long legs lying against her’ and ‘lissome body’ are used to show fierce sexual desires of Charley.

Lydia's devotion and love to her criminal husband is again apparent and on its peak when she goes to see her husband in the prison. Her grief of separation from her husband is heart rending. Till the end of the novel, brutal situations in which men and women are placed do not show even a slight change in them. Lydia refuses to take money from Charley as help; she also denies to leave prostitution. Concept of salvation and atheism are two contradictory beliefs that collide, but none of them damages, this is only because of Lydia's newly discovered way and meaning of salvation. Charley argues against her irrational hypothesis of repentance and his following points certainly visualize Lydia's queer path that she has chosen for herself:

"But it's crazy. It's so morbid. It's senseless. I might understand, though even then I'd think it outrageously wrong-headed, if you believed in a cruel god who exacted vengeance and who was prepare to take your suffering, well in part-payment for the wrong Robert had done, but you told me you don't believe in God." (274)

Charley's every argument and effort is useless to change Lydia's decision to torture her, her negative views on life, god and religion represent her pessimistic approach to life. Thus Lydia's mode of presentation of love for her husband in the novel *Christmas Holiday* is unique. New definition of salvation and its implication by the heroine of the novel is an exclusive feature that differentiates it from rest of the novels of W.S. Maugham. This novel also points out "Maugham's concept of a good novel: it has an absorbing story, an agreeable style free of irritating eccentricities, a group of living and diversified characters"(Cordell 128). Furthermore, exclusively in this novel; love and hate of the heroine to her husband move side by side, that can be exemplified by Lydia's following remark:

"He is cruel and selfish, unscrupulous and wicked. I don't care. I don't respect him, I don't trust him but I love him, I love him with my body, with my thoughts, with my feelings, with everything that's me."(Maugham, *Christmas Holiday* 276)

The novel *Christmas Holiday* does not show any significant changes in its characters and circumstances, at the end Lydia remains in her prostitution and her concepts of salvation never fuse with reality. Though the formation of such concepts are initiated by her matrimonial agonies yet in practical perspective they are absolutely unrealistic. Simon remains in his profession of journalism and Robert also remains in the prison till the end of the novel. The only character who displays change is Charley; his parents also examine his disturbed mental state after his experiences of life in Paris. Lydia's bitter experiences and devotion to her husband realize Charley the meaning of love and relationship. Characters are helpless, dissatisfied but unable to improve the situations though they aspire for the change. Charley and Simon belong to intellectual world like other protagonists of Maugham's middle phase novels. Charley's parents are minor characters, who reflect harmony along with humour in their conjugal life, they are aware of their domestic responsibilities. The value of money and worldly pleasures is well recognized by them that's why for their daughter's secure future they desire a person who should be ambitious and a man of politics. Charley's parents dislike his friend Simon for he does not match with their social status and he is merely a poor journalist for them. Lydia, as a woman, is disgraced by Simon, he is also proud of that he has prepared the best report of his life on Robert's trail. The story of conjugal misfortune is disclosed by Lydia, but Simon depicts the procedure of the investigation by the police to prove Robert a criminal. The detailing of investigation are presented by Simon in such a style that it acquires the shape of a long detective story as some of Maugham's short stories are written. Simon's presence and manner of work is ridiculous and uncomfortable to Lydia. He goes to bed with Lydia many times only because he wants material for his new article. Lydia hardly views Simon as a human being, he is an insensitive man to Lydia who interviews prostitutes for his report and never hesitates to ask questions that hurt and irritate

them. All praiseworthy comments of Charley about his friend Simon never change Lydia's poor opinion on Simon. She firmly declares Simon as a cruel creature of hopeless world.

The character of Simon and his state of mind in comparison of other characters of W.S. Maugham essentially deserve to be studied comprehensively, for he is the only character who speaks on the problems and issues that are connected to majority of people. He is the only character who is not restricted to his personal problems and he is the only character who puts questions out of domestic discomforts. Simon never narrates his mirthful or hopeless experiences with women; he is a spokesman of cosmopolitan problems. He is a young man well aware of every socio-political shortcoming and other drawbacks of system to which every common man encounters in his daily life. He undoubtedly emerges as an angry young man who is frustrated by injustice of system and imbalanced infrastructure of society.

Simon and Lydia struggle for variety of purpose, Simon struggles for an easy life that contains every comfort, he works sixteen hours a day and is accustomed to live on only a meal a day, Lydia struggles for both identity and existence. She has adopted the name Princess Olga, for this is the common most name in Paris. She has lost her real self and does not hope to regain it again in the clumsy atmosphere of her life, but her soul cries on its loss. Though she is not involved in prostitution to sustain her yet her consciousness to be a daughter of a professor always tortures her. Her dark past and future have placed her into unending misfortune.

4-Conclusion:

Sensuality and adultery in language is very frequent in this novel to show unauthorized relations of the heroine. In comparison of any other novel the reason of matrimonial agonies are quite different in *Christmas Holiday*, for repentance and prostitution move side by side and they are supplementary to one another. The love and devotion of

heroine in the novel never dies or transforms as it has shown by some characters of Maugham's middle phase novels. Another notable feature of this novel is that matrimonial connections are devoid of treachery and betrayal, and prostitution is represented as a method through which the heroine tries to verify her love for her husband. Lydia's sacrifice for her husband is similar to that of Christ, though it is not so noble. Jesus Christ bore bodily pain in order to save humanity but Lydia receives it in order to improve her husband's pathetic condition in the prison. She believes that her distressed situation would restrict criminal desires to visit her husband but it sounds very impractical.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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