

CHAPTER V

THE INFLUENCE OF CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENT ON THESE WESTERNERS

The climate and environment have influence, either directly or indirectly, on the Westerners in the East and the South Seas. Maughan himself in his preface to Ah King showed that the characters in the book acted in such strange ways because of the effects of climate and environment which were quite different from the climate and environment at home in England:

Of course I do not claim that the stories in this book could only have taken place in the part of the world I have described. I think they could have taken place in India or in other colonies of the British Empire; they certainly could not have taken place in England, for they depend on the environment in which the characters chosen find themselves and on the effect upon them of a manner of life which is not quite natural to them. 140

The climatic and environmental factors which affect the Westerners are heat, humidity, loneliness, solitude and beauty.

A. Heat and Humidity

The heat affected the Westerners both physically and mentally. Physically, they became old faster than they would have in the colder climate at home. The Westerners in the hot climate were like plants which had

too much sun and consequently died sooner than they should have. Gaze commented to Naughtan on the effect of the heat, "You haven't lived out East all you life. It ages one before one's time. One's an elderly man at fifty and at fifty-five one's good for nothing but the scrapheap."¹⁴¹

The heat also made these Westerners less active. They did not feel like working, and most of them took a nap in the afternoon because it was too hot for them to work. They became weak and ill if they did not have enough rest or go to a cooler climate for a change of air and temperature. That was the reason why they had regular home leave and also why the Protestant missionaries went to their summer retreats in the hills during the hot season. It was this custom that caused Dr. Saunders to make a joke about Jesus Christ's visiting the Protestant Missions and hospitals only to find them empty, for they were closed for the summer.

Edward Bernard's decreased ambition to work to earn a living was also due to the heat. He became more easy-going like the Aborigines. And because of the heat, he adopted the native costumes called pareo which Arnold Jackson considered very practical because it was "cool, convenient, and inexpensive."¹⁴²

Since most Westerners came to the East and the South Seas when they were young, their education which partly

helped their minds to develop was cut short. They were in a new environment where people thought that physical exercise and card-playing were more important than reading. Moreover, the heat made them lazier and therefore it also affected their mental development. Maugham noticed that many middle-aged Westerners like Bronson still had the mentality of adolescents.

One of the most disconcerting things to the traveller is to see stout, middle-aged gentlemen, with bald heads, speaking and acting like schoolboys. You might almost think that no idea has entered their heads since they first passed through the Suez Canal. Though married and the fathers of children, and perhaps in control of a large business, they continue to look upon life from the standpoint of the sixth form.¹⁴³

Also partly because of under-education in the home environment; lack of "cultural" activities: theatre and concert going; lack of good books; and partly because of the heat, few Westerners were intellectual. Many, like Bronson, never read a book. Many others did not read serious books but read only cheap novels, newspapers and magazines. Red thought himself a great reader because he read the Saturday Evening Post regularly. Gruyter enjoyed reading cheap French novels. The few like the Torols and Neilson who loved literature and art were thought priggish and queer. Since these Westerners were not interested in literature and art, they could not discuss intellectual topics and it made their conversation dull and trivial.

It was, however, the Westerners' disposition that was most adversely affected by the hot tropical climate. It made the people from the temperate zone irritable and, when they were irritated and depressed, they tended to resent everything round them more than usual. Therefore, after a long period of strain, they gradually lost their power of self-control. This led to violence, suicide and murder.

The influence of the heat is in some cases obvious. The hot climate and environment had a disastrous effect on Mackintosh. Because of the heat and the mosquitoes, he could not sleep at night and as a result the sound of the sea got on his nerves:

The thought that nothing could stop that sound, for it would continue to all eternity, was almost impossible to bear, and, as though his strength were a match for the ruthless forces of nature, he had an insane impulse to do some violent thing. He felt he must cling to his self-control or he would go mad. And now, looking out of the window at the lagoon and the strip of foam which marked the reef, he shuddered with hatred of the brilliant scene.¹⁴⁴

Mackintosh's irritability led, in the end, to murder and suicide.

The heat also greatly affected Millicent. Millicent found her husband lying dead drunk on the bed in the afternoon when it was usually very hot. The heat must have affected her nerves and self-control. She became so

and that she did not know what she was doing. When she regained control of herself, she found that she had killed her husband. This probably would not have happened if she had been in a colder climate and in the conventional environment of her English home.

Being unable to control themselves because of the effect of the hot climate and environment, many Westerners committed suicide easily when they were disillusioned for example Erik and Lawson, or when they regretted their actions for example Mr. Davidson, George Conway, and Mackintosh.

Humidity is another aspect of climate and environment which affected the Westerners. In some places like Pago-Pago, it rained for days at a time. This affected the self-control of Westerners like Mr. Davidson. Under the strain of irritability caused by the rain and the gloomy environment, he could not resist his desire when lured by the cunning prostitute. He probably would not have lost his self-control, if he had not been weakened by the climate and environment.

D. Loneliness and Solitude

Loneliness affected the Westerners in many ways. It could lead to lack of sexual control thus resulting in adultery and even incest.

The lonely plantations proved a most suitable

environment for adultery. The planters lived on vast plantations far from their nearest neighbours. They did not see other white men unless they went to the club. The husbands left for work early and came back home late. Their wives had nothing to do all day long. They were bored and therefore fell in love with their husbands' friends who sometimes came to stay with them in the house. Mrs. Bronson and Cartwright became lovers because Cartwright was the only white man whom she could talk to while her husband was working on the plantation. Geoffrey Hammond became Leslie Crosbie's lover when he was sick and stayed for a fortnight at the Crosbies' because he kept Leslie company while Crosbie was busy at work. On the other hand, Violet Saffary and Knobby Clarke fell in love because of proximity. The Saffarions and the Clarks had been neighbours and close friends and had been going to the club and parties together for a long time.

The environment was favorable for these lovers, for a wife could arrange meetings at secret places or even at the house when her husband was out of town on business. Because of the isolation of the plantations, nobody suspected or saw anything. Besides the white men lived as though the natives belonged to another world and did not know or understand the white man's actions. Consequently, the white men acted shamelessly knowing that the natives could

not tell other white men about their masters' affairs.

As for Darya, the loneliness of the jungle tormented her constantly and further weakened any self-control she might have had; therefore, she easily lost her head and let her desire overwhelm her.

In Maugham's works examined in this thesis, there was only one case of incest. Olive Hardy and her brother Tim lived as man and wife. It was the environment of the lonely plantation that made this possible. Their affairs were not known to other white men although others might have guessed the truth. In a similar situation in England where the neighbours would have known what was going on, social pressure would probably have made it impossible for them to carry on such a scandalous affair.

Loneliness also had much influence on the inhibitions of unmarried women like Louise. Knowing that Fred Blake would soon go away and that she might never see him again, Louise felt that she must have him before he went. Her desire was so great that she forgot all about Erik, her fiancé. She arranged for Fred to come to her room because she was certain that no one would know, for the plantation was secluded. If she had known that Erik often walked under her window, she would not have arranged to meet Fred at home.

As for unmarried men like Gallagher, Guy, Hutchinson and Masterson, loneliness drove them to live with native women. It was very convenient for a white man to have a native woman to keep his house and to keep him company especially at night when being alone in a big house in an isolated place might easily drive a person mad. The white man, though he was not in love with the native girl, usually grew fond of her if she was congenial and efficient in house-keeping. However, the white man would send her away when he wanted to marry a white lady or when he retired and wanted to return to England. That was why Masterson's Burmese mistress wanted him to marry her and he nearly did because when the girl had left, he felt the loneliness even more unbearable.

Guy who was weaker than Masterson let his Malay mistress come back to live with him because he could not bear the loneliness when Doris left him.

As for Gallagher, he died of hiccups because the Malay woman he lived with cast a spell on him. She was jealous and angry to see him glad to return to England, leaving her to her fate.

Solitude also led to eccentricity or alcoholism. In his preface to On a Chinese Screen, Haughan, discussing the effect of solitude on the Westerner, writes:

Solitude, an unusual life, have [sic] given him the opportunity to develop on his own lines without the hindrance of our Western civilisation which forces upon people, at least outwardly, ... a common shape. This man may not be very intelligent. He may seem even a little crazy. He may be immoral, dishonest, coarse, vulgar and rude; but by heavens, he's odd! He seems almost to belong to a different species.... There is something heartening in such people. Because, I suppose with nature to help, they have made themselves into something distinct from the common run they seem as if were to possess the world. It is an instrument which they use to create their uniqueness.¹⁴⁵

Mr. Peto, Warburton, Waddington and Neilson were in the first group of Westerners who became queer because of solitude.

Mr. Peto, the consul in On a Chinese Screen, was a bachelor and therefore was sent to isolated outstations which were considered inconvenient for married men. Living alone for long periods of time, he developed the habit of talking to himself. He also liked collecting different strange things: pector, brass, carved wood, stamps, birds' eggs, hotel labels and postmarks. Because he had nothing interesting to do in those lonely outstations, he read a great deal about China and was proud of his knowledge. Being alone too much, he lacked keen observation of people or things around him and as a result had neither sympathy nor tolerance for a person who was miserable because of his own faults and foolishness.

Mr. Warburton became accustomed to his isolation and was quite at a loss when he had to entertain strangers. Therefore, when he had guests, he fled, pretending to have business elsewhere and would not return home until his guests had left. He was afraid that he would lose his dignity if he did not keep up the white man's standard; consequently, he went so far as to dress for dinner even though he was alone. He resented Cooper's vulgar behaviour and never forgave the latter for destroying his happy solitary routine life. For this reason, when Cooper was killed, he felt relieved, and, with satisfaction, returned to his solitary way of life.

Neilson who seldom even saw a white man occupied himself with sentimental imagination although he knew that it was ridiculous to think about young lovers' romantic life. In the same way, Waddington developed a curious personality and sardonic humour. But unlike the narrow-minded Mr. Warburton, Waddington, though cynical, was tolerant.

Many Westerners chose alcohol as an escape from loneliness. Lawson, Harold, and Ginger Tod became alcoholics and suffered from delirium tremens.

Although Lawson lived in a big city, he felt lonely because other white men, knowing his wife was a half-caste,

excluded him from their society. He felt even more miserable living among the natives whom he did not care for and could not talk to. When he had problems, there was no one to whom he could turn for advice. As a result, he drowned his misery in drink.

Ginger Ted also drank to forget that he had to live a lonely life of exile and deprivation. Harold, like Mr. Worburton, lived in a lonely outstation but he could not get used to his isolation. He might have gone mad if he had stayed sober; consequently, he drank. When he married, he could not give up drinking, for he was already an alcoholic.

So far only the bad effects of loneliness have been discussed because they are more obvious than the good effects. Loneliness had only one important good effect on the Westerners: it made them hospitable.

Living far away from home in a foreign land and belonging to a minority group there, most Westerners felt lonely and homesick. Both loneliness and nostalgia made them feel attached to their country and countrymen. Therefore, they were inclined to be unusually friendly, kind and hospitable even to strangers. Erik Christessen's comment was, "That is what I like in the East. Everyone is so nice. Nothing is too much trouble. You cannot imagine the kindness I've received at the hands of perfect strangers."¹⁴⁶

Maughan himself, as could be noticed in his travel book The Gentleman in the Parlour, was warmly welcomed by the white men everywhere he went. The white men, glad to see another white man whom they could talk to about current affairs at home, were ready to entertain and help the author who was a stranger to them. A stranger would never feel lost in the East and the South Seas where the Westerners settled there were willing to be of any possible assistance. This attitude towards strangers could not easily be found in England.

G. Beauty

The beauty of the East and the South Seas could give happiness to the Westerners who loved beauty. Neilson who came to a South Sea island to spend his last days gained peace and happiness because of the beauty of his surroundings. Consequently, he lived longer than he had expected.

Living on Ato's beautiful plantation in Tahiti, Strickland became more content with life, for in the beauty of his surroundings he found what he had been looking for: the meaning of life and of God. Like Strickland, Larr; also found God or the Absolute in the beauty of the mountains at sunrise. Strickland expressed what he had discovered about life and God in his paintings.

Larry applied his knowledge of life and God to real life by living in what he thought was the best and wisest way.



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