

W. Somerset Maugham's *Liza of Lambeth* : A Social Document of the Late Victorian England

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Abstract

W. Somerset Maugham's debut novel *Liza of Lambeth* holds a mirror to the poverty laden slum life of London in the late nineteenth century. This paper attempts to explore how Liza Kemp, an eighteen year old lively young woman living in the Vere Street, was seduced by a middle aged man, and as a result, had to face the horrible consequences. The paper also throws light on the poverty, squalor and violence ridden slum life in the late Victorian society. The paper tries to examine the concept of bigamy and adultery with reference to Maugham's novel *Liza of Lambeth*. The significance of the cockney speech used in the narrative has also been analysed to see how the sub-dialect has been effectively used to add a touch of vitality and realism to the characters.

Key Terms : debut, slum life, bigamy, adultery, seduced, cockney dialect, Victorian society

There's very little love in the world.
A man ought to be grateful if a woman cares for him.
----- Somerset Maugham

Introduction

Written and published in the last decade of the 19th century England, Somerset Maugham's debut novel *Liza of Lambeth* is a dark, captivating tale of the humdrum life of the working class people living in the slums of London. By Maugham's own admission, *Liza of Lambeth* has followed the mind and craft of Maupassant (Rogal, 1997, P.136). Even after more than one hundred years, the novel, which had immediately become a success, is known for its deep and penetrating portrayal of a slum life.

Liza of Lambeth portrays the "Lambeth life in a powerful and perhaps rather lurid way" (The St Thomas' Hospital Gazette, June 1898), and brings out a passionate account of the day to day life of a London slum. The novel is a product of the first-hand experience of Somerset Maugham, a young medical graduate who had spent five years at St Thomas' Hospital, London, and had observed the life-style and psychology of the working class people during his apprenticeship.

Liza Kemp, an eighteen year old 'spirited girl', works in a factory and shares a substantial part of her wages with her sixty five year old alcoholic mother. However, life is not unpleasant for Liza. There is a stark vitality in her character reflected in her singing and dancing. Liza lives her life with her friend Sally Cooper who has been in love with Harry Atkins, and finally gets married with him. Liza is particularly fond of dancing that gives vent to her youthful exuberance and desires.

Liza saw what a sensation she was creating; she arched her back and lifted her head, and walked down the street, swaying her body from side to side, and swaggering along as though the whole place belonged to her. (*Liza of Lambeth* : 8)

However, Life would have been much better, had Liza entertained and accepted the marriage proposal of Tom, a young and honest factory worker who truly loved Liza. But, she discouraged Tom's advances :

'Oh, I can't, Tom!'
'There ain't no one else?'
'Na.'
'Then why not?'
'I'm very sorry, Tom, but I don't love yer so as ter marry yer.'. (*Liza of Lambeth* : 17)

Tom was a true lover who was ready to accept Liza even after all those unpleasant experiences. In the entire Vere Street, Tom appeared to be the only genuine character who maintained his loyalty towards Liza till the end. However, fate had to follow a different course.

Liza didn't have any solid reason to spurn the advances of Tom, but she was swayed by her emotions. She, herself, claims 'I wish I was straight' (*Liza of Lambeth* : 84). Her encounter with Jim Blakeston, a forty year old married man overwhelmed her. Perhaps, the way Jim kissed her passionately in the dark of the night made her feel sexually aroused. 'Moved by the unexpected experience', Liza allowed herself to be seduced by 'her earnest and persistent suitor', and went with the flow. It didn't matter much to her that Jim was already a married man with five children. Jim was, nowhere, a match to the innocent Liza. Jim is like any other predator in the street "a typical lower class brute, who drinks heavily, loves but neglects his children, keeps his wife pregnant, and maintains a sharp eye upon any decent looking woman with whom he can effectuate a liaison." (Rogal : 1997)

After Sally's marriage, and her own irrational decision to refuse Tom, Liza became increasingly isolated. It was only her association with Jim that kept her going. Her rendezvous with Jim made her pregnant. She started having nightmares. Though Liza and Jim tried hard to keep their affair secret, "but not withstanding all their precautions people in Vere Street appeared to know" (*Liza of Lambeth* :78). It was a small community, and everybody knew everybody's business. It became a matter of talk among the people in the street. One of the street urchins openly commented on her face : "Liza 'as all the pleasures of a 'usband an' none of the trouble" (*Liza of Lambeth* : 80). Everybody in the Vere Street, except her alcoholic mother, knew about her affair with Jim.

The Death of Liza

The path treaded by Liza Kemp was not a rare case in the slum of Lambeth. Liza knew that Tom was true, and Jim was fake, a leech and a womanizer; but she was carried away, and became a slave to her passion. She was too innocent, fragile and vulnerable to refuse Jim's advances. She felt tortured and miserable. At the end, her vulnerability consumed her. Liza and Jim were socially and psychologically incompatible, and she was powerless to escape the honey trap. His spell was too strong for her to refuse.

They would lie down on the grass in one another's arms, and thus spend the long summer evenings. After the heat of the day, there would be a gentle breeze in the park, and they would take in long breaths of the air; it seemed far away from London, it was so quiet and cool; and Liza, as she lay by Jim's side, felt her love for him overflowing to the rest of the world and enveloping mankind itself in a kind of grateful happiness. If it could only have lasted ! (*Liza of Lambeth* : 77)

Liza's awakened sexuality leads her to transgress all social codes, and eventually, she yields to the advances of her roguish lover. The clandestine relationship between Jim and Liza didn't last long. Soon it was discovered by the members of the Vere Street community.

'The narrative moves up to a tragic climax when Jim's wife Mrs Blakeston came to know about Liza's affair with her husband. The woman, scorned, felt a strong pang of jealousy and anger, and kept shouting and badmouthing in the street telling people that if she caught hold of Liza, she would make her life hell. Mrs Blakeston was 'a big fat woman' with 'a strong and muscular body' whereas Liza was a weak, fragile young woman on the verge of losing her self-esteem. It was a Saturday afternoon, 'a chill November day', when Mrs Blakeston encountered Liza in the street. She shouted, "Yer dirty bitch! You oughter be ashamed of yourself tikin' a married man from 'is family, an' 'im old enough ter be yer father' (*Liza of Lambeth* :91). She gave her a fatal beating. "Mrs. Blakeston attacked Liza madly. Then, losing all fear, mad with rage, she made a rush on her enemy, and rained down blows all over her nose and eyes and mouth (*Liza of Lambeth* :101).

The exposure to the night air and 'the drunken stupor' caused by the alcohol her mother offered her to provide solace, turned into a miscarriage, and eventually accelerated her death. Maugham portrayed the death of Liza with solemnity (Charlton : 2012):

Suddenly, a sound was heard—a loud rattle. It was from the bed, and ring through the room, piercing the stillness. The doctor opened one of Liza's eyes, and touched it, then he laid on her breast the hand he had been holding, and drew the sheet over her head (*Liza of Lambeth* : 123)

It was late Victorian society in which the social and ethical values like marriage, adultery, sin etc were very strong in the mind of a person. In Victorian England premarital sex among the working class was acceptable between unmarried couples in long term relationships (Frost : 1995), but sexual relations between a married man and an unmarried woman was condemned by law and society, both.

Bigamy and Adultery

Maugham's *Liza of Lambeth* raises the question of bigamy and adultery. Bigamy focuses on the marriage between two people when one of the persons is legally married to someone else, whereas adultery emphasizes sexual liaison between the two people in which one is essentially married to someone else.

Maugham's *Liza of Lambeth* is not 'a run of the mill' sort of story, but rather, a story with deeper meanings. The narrative raises a concern that society, at large, faces everywhere in the world. However, the situation appears to have changed over the years because of the easily available tools of contraceptives and the sophisticated means of abortion techniques. Yet, the problem persists, even today. Liza and Jim can be found anywhere and everywhere. In this case, Jim discusses about taking up residence with Liza, and live like married couple: "You can come along of me, an' I'll tike a room in a lodgin' 'ouse in 'Olloway, an' we can live there as if we was married" (*Liza of Lambeth* : 85). However, Liza is not willing to leave her mother as the old woman is in dire need of her help. Liza was worried about what her mother would think: "Not when I'm not married. I shouldn't like er ter know as I'd --- as I'd gone wrong." (*Liza of Lambeth* : 84). The Victorian society had strict views on sex and marriage. Being pregnant, and living with someone without getting married was not acceptable. The death of Liza was inevitable.

Hence, it is a case of adultery because sexual liaison is involved, as Liza gets pregnant, but the story does not end here; they secretly plan to live together as husband and wife away from the prying eyes of the people of the Vere Street.

'Well, I'll marry yer. Swop me bob, I wants ter badly enough.'
'Yer can't; yer married already.'

'Na, yer can't do that now; it's bigamy, an' the cop tikes yer, an' yer gits twelve months' 'ard for it.'
(*Liza of Lambeth* : 85)

The sudden and untimely death of Liza closed all these possibilities.

Violence and Alcoholism

Violence is a way of life in Maugham's *Liza of Lambeth*. The mother of Liza is an alcoholic, and, is always found drunk. Harry Atkins, when comes home after taking alcohol, frequently beats his newly married wife Sally, sometimes on a very trivial issue like she was found chatting with a female neighbour.

'Na, it wasn't your fault at all. Just you look 'ere, Liza: this is wot 'e done an' call 'isself a man. Just because Sally'd gone aht to 'ave a chat with Mrs. McLeod in the next 'ouse, when she come in 'e start bangin' 'erabaht. An' me, too, wot d'yer think of that!' Mrs. Cooper was quite purple with indignation (*Liza of Lambeth* : 89).

Jim Blakeston is also very aggressive, and treats Liza harshly when he knew that she was pregnant. "He roughly pulled his arm away from her. As she tried to catch hold of it again, he pushed her back, and in the little scuffle caught her a blow over the face" (*Liza of Lambeth* : 91). Jim often beats his wife. Mrs Blakeston terribly fights with Liza and gives her a fatal assault, which becomes the cause of her tragic death. Maugham reveals the hardships in the reality of the daily life of the inhabitants of the Vere Street. "All men beat their wives, women fight each other, and death is an ever present possibility" (Katie's Review : 2012). This was the kind of life in the slums of London in the late 19th century, and that life is depicted poignantly. Thus, the life of Vere Street is full of 'major fights and minor scuffles, while practically every female character has given birth at least to three or four times with equal number of miscarriages.

A Slum Novel

English novelists in the late Victorian era used slum and its typical setting as an important theme in their novels. Slum fiction emerged quickly as an independent sub-genre with a distinct aesthetics. (Victorian Web). The slums were the overcrowded urban areas characterized by substandard housing and squalor. David Trotter remarks that the slum novelists set out to analyse the conditions of England. Trotter claims that slum fiction was pioneered by Walter Besant and George Gissing in the 1880s and later developed by Rudyard Kipling, Arthur Morrison and Somerset Maugham (Trotter : 1983). A slum novel is exclusively an urban novel that deals with the day to day life and struggles of the lower classes. Some of the features of a slum novel is the portrayal of poverty, squalor and the depravity in the life of the slum dwellers in London. Maugham's *Liza of Lambeth* is the finest example of a slum novel in which poor living conditions and street violence in London's East End has been deftly portrayed. Maugham has acknowledged that the book was modelled after the straight forward realistic manner of Maupassant, and was influenced by the socially conscious plays of Henrick Ibsen.

The Cockney Dialect

Maugham has tried hard to capture the language of the people within the Cockney slum of Lambeth. Thus, the reader might have been shocked to or even disgusted by what they witnessed, but they became sure that this brought a touch of realism to

its locale and characters. (Rogal : 1997). The cockney dialect immediately provided the typical setting of slum life. The slums are the places where working class people live and use the substandard dialect. Maugham carefully reproduces the local Cockney speech with its characteristic tone and pronunciation.

"Missus," says 'e, "'ave you been drinkin'?" "Drinkin'?" says I; "no! I've 'ad a little drop, but as for drinkin'! Mind," says I, "I don't say I'm a teetotaler—I'm not, I 'ave my glass of beer, and I like it. I couldn't do withaht it, wot with the work I 'ave, I must 'ave some thin' ter keep me ter gether. But as for drinkin' 'eavily! (*Liza of Lambeth* : 52).

Vivid portrayal of the engaging dialogue indicates the complex relationship among the local people that Maugham found in the slums of Lambeth. Their challenging conditions captivated his imagination.

Conclusion

Somerset Maugham's *Liza of Lambeth* raises deep social and psychological issues found in the human society. The squalor and violence prevalent in the Vere Street is a matter of concern all around. The problems of over population, alcohol, street fight, elderly men chasing and seducing the younger girl, bigamy and adultery are the recurrent social issues. Maugham's *Liza of Lambeth* can be considered an important social document of the contemporary England, which "chronicled the deplorable condition" (Nambisan : 2018) of the life, at a time, when the British Empire was at its zenith, and Queen Victoria was credited to have brought stability and prosperity to the British populace.

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