CHAPTER 10

The Painted Veil: Re-Inventing the Colonial Woman and the Hinterland Narrative

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In *Eastern Figures* (2008), Douglas Kerr asks how one should enter the colonial hinterland. His answer advises caution: “Step by step, circumspectly, if at all”.1 Examining a Kipling short story, “Bubbling Well Road” (1899),2 and Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924),3 Kerr explores with subtlety the lure of the Indian hinterland and its surprises: the hinterland shifts and shimmies from a presentiment of death to the stubborn indeterminacy of the Marabar Caves and it is never quite what one expects. The protagonist of “Bubbling Well Road” enters the hinterland hoping for a hunting trophy and status and leaves empty-handed with his own notions of authority undermined by his experience of the unknown and uncharted. Adela Quested ventures into the Caves as part of her liberal-minded desire to see the “real” India, and she emerges traumatized but uncertain of the cause. The hinterland is disorienting; it unravels and unhinges, threatens death and dissolution. Only the foolhardy would rush in. Yet, there is another way to answer Kerr’s question: if you are a man, enter the hinterland with a woman.

The Anglo-Indian romances written by women were very much alive to this possibility against the disorientations of the hinterland: a woman acting as a bulwark for the white man. This was, after all, the rationale for allowing the presence of European women in the colonies. As Ann Laura Stoler has pointed out in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* (2002),4 European women in the colonies played a vital role in racial vigilance, not merely as keepers of social and racial boundaries, but also as physical reminders to their men of their racial and masculine duties, for “[a] man remains a man as long as he stays under the

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gaze of a woman of his own race".\(^5\) If she is weak, she provides justification for him for the use of force against the natives and stiffens his resolve to be strong for her and Britain; if she is made of sterner stuff, she helps ground him in domestic realities, preventing him from succumbing to the dangers and disorder of the hinterland.\(^6\) I do have a small caveat here though, for the hinterland for women tends to be defined more loosely as anywhere far away from the official and civilized centres of Lahore or Simla. In Bithia Mary Croker's *Babes in the Woods* (1910)\(^7\) for instance, the hinterland is not an unexplored territory but a remote station where the siblings Philip and Milly Trafford, the babes of the title, are to be tried and proven true for the empire. Similarly in Maud Diver's *Captain Desmond, V.C.* (1907), the hinterland is the "rough soil" of the North-West Frontier, a place dominated by military men and less suited to the more feminine type of women.\(^8\) In Patricia Wentworth's *The Devil's Wind* (1912),\(^9\) however, the hinterland is a post-Mutiny wilderness where the heroine, Helen, cares for her injured cousin's husband, Dick, while hiding out in a cave for a few months. In the hands of these Anglo-Indian women novelists, the hinterland can lend itself to the testing and confirmation of one's place in the Empire. This is the hinterland as an imperial Green World, much like the Green World of Shakespeare's comedies, where chaos is remade into new imperial harmony, a site where men and women are tested and ideal imperial couples are matched.

William Somerset Maugham's 1925 novel, *The Painted Veil*,\(^10\) opens with a seemingly similar prospect though the hinterland as Green World motif plays out differently here as the man and the woman do not emerge as fit imperial mates for each other. Instead, the lone woman returns, neither traumatized like Adele Quested nor a stalwart imperial woman, but as an outsider to imperial norms and emotionally aligned with the space of the hinterland. Maugham's overall re-writing of the colonial woman in the hinterland is thus subversive of traditional narratives but the problems he had with the implications of his own subversions are indicative of the middlebrow novelist's struggle to be both boldly modern and yet contain the more disturbing consequences of his own deviations. In this case, Maugham's failure to follow through with the logic of his revisions to the hinterland narrative sees him resorting to an unsatisfactory compromise solution.

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\(^{5}\) Georges Hardy, qtd. in Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 1.


\(^{8}\) Maud Diver, *Captain Desmond, V.C.*, 1907, web, 31 July 2013, Chapter 2.

\(^{9}\) Patricia Wentworth, *The Devil's Wind*, New York: Putnams' Sons, 1912.