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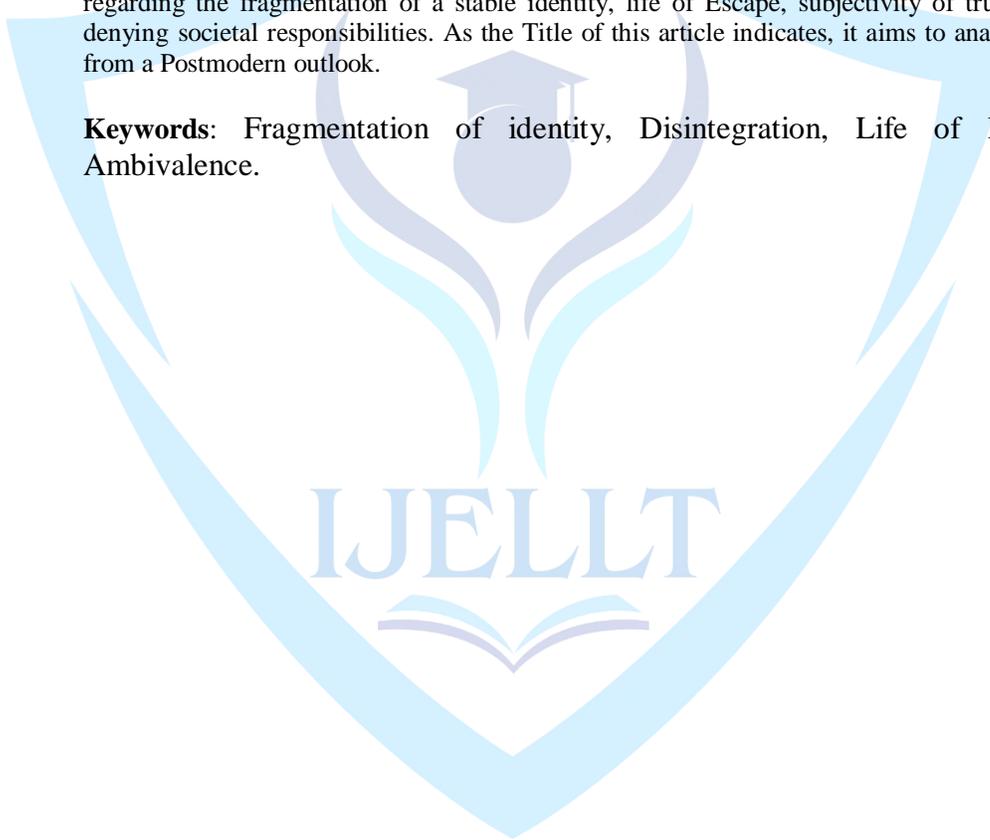
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Decoding The Life of Escape: A Postmodern Reading of Somerset Maugham's "The Lotus Eater".

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Abstract: Somerset Maugham is widely considered as a modernist writer but his short story "The Lotus Eater" is tinged with certain Postmodern traits on the basis of which this short story can be interpreted from a Postmodern perspective. Written in 1935 much before Postmodernism came into being, Maugham consciously or unconsciously has infused Postmodern traits into his central character Thomas Wilson whose character is loosely based on the life story of John Ellingham Brooks. The character of Wilson has been built in such a way that his character demonstrates certain later Postmodern sensibilities, specifically regarding the fragmentation of a stable identity, life of Escape, subjectivity of truth and tendency of denying societal responsibilities. As the Title of this article indicates, it aims to analyse this short story from a Postmodern outlook.

Keywords: Fragmentation of identity, Disintegration, Life of leisure, Escape, Ambivalence.



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Introduction

The plot of “The Lotus Eater” has been woven in such a way that the story itself has become an epitome of postmodernism. It is noteworthy that Maugham wrote this short story in early twentieth century much before Postmodernism emerged. This short story has multiple Postmodern orientations starting from the character of Wilson to the method of story telling. The character of Wilson has been given Postmodern fragmentary structure who, abandoning the conventional life of purpose and object, chooses the life of leisure and amusement on the Italian island of Capri which ultimately proves blunder in his life. While this short story can be traditionally read as a cautionary tale about the dangers of idleness, a Postmodern perspective offers various distinct explanations.

Discussion

The character of Thomas Wilson is at the core of this story whose fragmentary and disintegrated life sets the Postmodern tone. Wilson was a bank manager of the Crawford Street branch of York and City Bank, London. The job to which he was engaged, was a respectable and reputable one which he abandons for having a life of leisure and enjoyment on the picturesque island of Capri. Abandoning a conventional purposeful and aimed life, he chooses a completely different life that is fully devoid of work and duty, goal and objectives. The time he does it, his life gets disintegrated; and in this process, his identity gets fragmented. Wilson’s decision to abandon his stable, “tram-car” life as a bank manager in London directly opposes the societal expectation of work, responsibility, duty and deferred gratification. This decision in his life has ample significance in giving his character and personality a crystal clear postmodern shape. His pursuit of amusement and leisure can be viewed as an effort to construct his own meaning outside of traditional societal structures. Wilson’s life gets an unexpected turn when he decides to dislocate himself on the island of Capri through his pursuit of leisure. Bramaditya points out that, “...his sense of displacement has created an ambivalent situation...” (Bramaditya 24).

This ambivalent situation is very important when it comes to a Postmodern being. Due to this ambivalent situation which Wilson encounters, his identity becomes strange and complex. Wilson climbs to the hostland Capri leaving his homeland England. The idea of homeland always sparks in his mind, and like a diasporic postmodern subject, his identity gradually begins to destabilise by this very idea of homeland and a feeling of displacement. Bramaditya opines that this idea of displacement is responsible for making an ambivalent identity of his life. In this way, Maugham, through postmodernism, tries to question universally accepted grand narratives that structure society. Wilson, as a character, develops by plunging into the world of uncertainty and thereby imbibes postmodern traits of unsteadiness, fragility and fragmentation. He thus rejects the existence of grand narratives that consists of traditional societal norms and structures.

The narrative structure of “The Lotus Eater” fully represents various features which are common to postmodern literature in terms of its use of frame narrative, subjectivity, unstable truth and the fusion of reality and myth. Apart from the character of Wilson, the narrative technique used in “The Lotus Eater” contributes a lot to infuse Postmodern motif. In this short story, Maugham uses First person narrative with a frame story structure. This narrative structure is non linear in that the narrator begins his narration in 1913 after visiting Capri, and then comes back thirteen years later to find out what happened to the protagonist, Wilson. This narrative style somehow generates fragmented timeline because the reader is introduced only with the beginning(Wilson's decision to come to Capri) then the end (Wilson’s downfall). This non linearity challenges the traditional chronological storytelling. The omniscient narrator as a persona of Maugham, simultaneously demonstrates the tragedy of idealised escape from societal reality through Wilson and exerts tone of melancholy through rich imagery of Capri’s beauty and irony through Wilson’s failed venture to live his life revolving his idealised utopian dream, and incorporates nuances of disillusionment as Wilson's keen desire to live carefree life leads to his mental instability instead of freedom and amusement at the end. The way the narrator understands Wilson’s life, is mediated through his personal explanations and the stories told by others, making the truth about Wilson’s disintegrated life subjective and elusive. It fully conforms to the postmodern scepticism towards a singular and objective narrative.

Thus the unnamed narrator tries to present Wilson's failure to create a realm of pleasure, joy and carefree life and in order to do so, the narrator, like the later Postmodern Novelist John Fowles's "The French Lieutenant's Woman" violates norms of narration in breaking sometimes the "fourth wall" to remark on the nature of human character and at the same time, the narrator acknowledges the subjectivity of his observations. The way the narrator ends the narrative is completely predicated on postmodern fashion. The ending is very important in that it is replete with heavy irony in showing the tragic predicament of Wilson who once escaped societal reality for having carefree and pleasurable life, ends up as a devastated and "broken man" whose fate is decided by the economic and biological forces which he attempted to escape. Due to the non-linearity of narrative structure, the plot of the story occupies a reverse trajectory similar to postmodern texts. It begins with the ideal dream of happy retirement but ends in a "nightmare" of madness, failed suicide attempt and severe poverty. In this way, the plot dismantles the idea of quest of happiness which is common in grand narratives.

The ending of "The Lotus Eater" is also fashioned in postmodernist approach. Postmodern literature oftentimes lacks a consistent and meaningful ending. In contrast to it, postmodern endings do have fragmentation of identity and dissolution of character stability. Like many postmodern texts, the ending of this short story turns out to be a failed ending. Wilson wanted to end his mundane life in a specific manner when his annuity runs out but in vain. He wished to have a structured and controlled end of his life but instead, his disintegrated life ends with a whimper – a botched suicide attempt, mental decline, dependency. The ending unfolds Wilson's keen will to commit suicide and thereby ending his futile life at the age of 60 but the exact opposite to it happens in that he falls prey to procrastination, lacking the staunch willpower to commit suicide. As a character and the pivotal protagonist, he begins to degrade as he turns out to be a misfit, residing in a woodshed which belongs to his former landowner and doing trivial works such as tending goats and chickens for having food from the maid, Assunta. His miserable deterioration continues for six more years until his death on a hillside after going through a life of hunted animal in his final years. The way Maugham has presented Wilson in his final years, succumbs him to a "Pagan" (Deogharia 368). Deogharia puts it, "...Thomas Wilson, who preferred country to city, naturalness to artificiality, is a Pagan, not in the Christian sense, but in the original sense of the word. The primitive man lived in a close communication with nature. The people of small communities worked for both ends meet. They had recreation, they had leisure. They were unknown to the capitalist goal of individual property" (Deogharia 368). This paganism in Wilson closely renders him to a capricious postmodern being who is far from religious and social strictures, and who does not conform to social rules by living life on his own.

Apart from these, like many postmodernist texts, this short story makes use of pastiche and intertextuality to generate meaning. “The Lotus Eater” is imbued with mythological intertextuality in that the plot of this short story is based on the framework of Homer’s “Odyssey” and Tennyson’s “The Lotus-Eaters”. Maugham’s story is a modern and ironic adaptation of the “Lotus-Eaters” episode of book IX of Homer’s Odyssey. Like the race of people whom Odysseus encountered who only used to eat the Lotus plant which led them to live in a state of dreamy and peaceful apathy forgetting everything regarding reality, Wilson also in the same manner is too much enamoured by the “unreal” beauty of the Island that he wants to stay here forever forgetting his past and reality. In this context, Wilson’s transformation from a bank manager’s rigid life to the life of leisure and idleness on the island of Capri is very important. This transformation is fully predicated upon ancient Greek mythology. By juxtaposing a modern bank manager’s story onto ancient Greek mythology, Maugham employs intertextuality to remark on the cyclical nature of human desire and stark contrast between dreamy life and stable world. In addition to it, Maugham uses cultural allusions in that there are references to Donizetti’s operas and Roman history of Tiberius to frame the setting as “charming and unreal”, very much like a theatrical stage set or a simulation.

Like many later postmodernist texts, Maugham, in a subtle manner, avoids moralising. He does it through the unnamed narrator of this story. The narrator is not an active participant into the life of Wilson. The narrator closely observes Wilson and his change, and through his observations of Wilson, he seeks to understand it and tells the readers the possible ways of living life putting aside traditional and societal norms. The narrator acts as a curious observer of a “human comedy” rather than a moral authority. The narrator on the one hand admits that Wilson’s situation is “horrible” and on the other, confesses that he also “got what he deserved”. Thus the narrator has been given an ambivalent structure who makes the reader sink into the state of moral ambiguous characteristic of postmodern irony.

Conclusion

Therefore it can be argued that this short story by Maugham has multiple Postmodern tenets on the basis of which it could be analysed from a Postmodern outlook. Yet it was written much before Postmodernist movement of 1950s, it is certainly a Postmodern text, centralised on the character of Wilson. Wilson is such a character who has been given a typical Postmodern mould who discovers a different entity of his life through the alteration of his identity and fragility of his personality after choosing an uncertain life of leisure on the “unreal” Island of Capri. So, it could be said that Maugham in his “The Lotus Eater” has left no stone unturned to criticise grand narratives of life which consist of work, purpose, duty and following norms of society. In this story, he has rendered the best of him to uphold the chaotic, fragmented reality of trying to exist in a separate world which is free from all kinds of societal norms and structures, and at the end, displaying that truth and happiness are subjective, often replete with illusions.

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