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The doughty old lady in the English village has been a standard of fiction at least since Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* in the nineteenth century. Independent, fiercely virginal, incorruptible, she controls her neighbours as firmly as she prunes back her roses; not much liked, she is nevertheless respected, and she is always on the side of Right, scoring victories over the gossips in the village shop in Little Titmouse or Greater Vole.

The type was given teeth, as it were, in Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, who added detective skills to general doughtiness, and was finally deified in Salley Vickers's *Mr Golightly's Holiday*, where the little old lady is in fact a little old man who turns out to be God Himself.

Miss Webster, as it happens, bears more than a passing resemblance to Salley's Vickers's Miss Garnet, in *Miss Garnet's Angel*. Like Miss Garnet, Miss Webster is a retired school-teacher; like Miss Garnet, she leaves the stifling security of England for more exotic places – in her case, apparently, Morocco, as against Miss Garnet's Venice. And like Miss Garnet, she gets mixed up with an angel. Miss Webster, who used to teach French before “being brushed aside by a giant wave of ignorance and mediocrity”, has spent her life dedicated to “the discipline of grammar, the rigorous pursuit of beauty in poetry”. Now crabily retired to her rose-covered cottage in Little Blessington, she has no friends, her only associates being the members of her bridge club, “elderly and well-heeled locals: embittered, ironic, eccentric and morose”.

When Miss Webster has a mysteriously incapacitating attack, her cardiologist-cum-psychiatrist, Dr Broadhurst sends her off: “You are to go far, far away from here,” he tells her, “and then you will be told what to do.”

Dr Broadhurst's unconventional bedside manner seems in some way to be linked to his hands, much in evidence, disfigured by chemotherapy: “The messenger with mutilated hands had sent her to the desert”, Miss Webster is eventually brought to realise, in case the readers have missed the clues to the Doctor's Significance.

Like Salley Vickers, Duncker flirts with intimations of Something Greater, without taxing unduly the agnosticism of her readers, or committing herself to any coherent metaphysic or, God forbid, religion. Miss Webster, we are told, “believed in nothing”; and it does not take a Miss Marple to figure out that Dr Broadhurst is sending her off to find something to believe in.

What she finds is Chérif – or rather, he finds her, turning up on her doorstep after her visit to the desert: “He stood there in her kitchen, meeting her gaze, patient as the Angel Gabriel on the left side of the triptych in a Renaissance painting”.

Unlike the Angel Gabriel, though, Chérif is a Muslim, and thus, in the aftermath of 9/11, the object of suspicion on the part of Little Blessington. He has come to England to study, of all undiplomatic subjects, chemistry, and has nowhere to stay.

Chérif, we are told “had the kind of beauty which silences crowds and persuades elderly pederasts to reach for their flies and their cameras”, and though Miss Webster is no pederast, in fact “on the whole ... did not like men”, she takes him in.

After this, the plot takes off. Chérif turns out to be as considerate and gentle as he is beautiful, but there clearly is a Secret somewhere. He spends hours glued to the telly watching the Bush war; he seems not to know his own name. Somewhere a jazz singer called Carmen Campbell, who killed her lover in self-defence, figures in the mystery.

The relevance of this lurid event to Miss Webster is spelled out for us when she takes Chérif to see a production of, yes, *Carmen* in London: we are told that Don José kills Carmen because she “represents uncontrolled desire and embodies his enemy within, an erotic freedom which puts all his psychic structures in question”.

Now Miss Webster, we know, believes in “discipline, order, control”. So, clearly, through Chérif and Carmen she is being challenged to move beyond her own “psychic structures”, and indeed, she arrives at the point where she can ask herself: “Is it a crime to be passionate? Is it a crime to care?” She goes even further and metaphysically assails the 9/11 terrorists, weirdly linking them with Carmen: “In a world of random murder was it more dreadful to kill 3,000 people and then oneself, like the 9/11 bombers, or just one person, the man you had once loved, as Carmen had done?”

It seems unlikely that any of Patricia Duncker's readers have ever been troubled by this particular dilemma; indeed, the question dissolves into nonsense when looked at too closely. But this is not serious speculation: it's part of Duncker's attempt to dress up her romance in topical garb. Like the feints at religiosity, the erotic-political references in fact have little relevance to the plot.

*Miss Webster and Chérif* is at its best as an acerbic comedy of manners: Miss Webster's plight as a lonely woman is well observed and depicted without sentimentality. It is in trying to impose metaphysical and political meanings upon this situation that it is incapable of supporting, that Duncker over-reaches herself and succumbs to hollow portentousness. Miss Marple was never like this.