Treasure from the Colonial Past: The Reading of Sir Frank Swettenham[1]'s Short Stories 'A Silhouette' and 'A Mezzotint'

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> "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and unselfish belief in the idea — something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to [...]" (Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 20)

Many critics, for example, Joseph Bristow (1991) has revealed that imperialism has no ethical basis and that the idea of imperialism itself has no rationale behind it. This may be true especially as echoed by the lines uttered by Captain Marlow in Conrad's work above. However, that very same idea has changed the lives of two-third of the people in the world in the late 19th and the early decades of the 20th century. And for colonial officers like Sir Frank Swettenham and many others in colonial outposts, this is the metropolis centre's 'set up,' of which they have to 'bow down before'

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1. Frank Athelstane Swettenham was born near Belper, in Derbyshire, on 28 March 1850. He received his early education in Scotland before returning to England to continue his education at St Peter's School, York, where he passed his fifth form in 1868. His career as a Cadet in the Malayan Civil Service began in January 1871 when he arrived in Singapore. He began his career by familiarising himself with the work of the various government departments and to learn Malay. His proficiency in Malay was later proven useful for translating into Malay the English text of the famous Pangkor Engagement 1874. Swettenham was at this time working as a Land Officer in Province Wellesley. Later that year, however, he was promoted to Assistant Resident of Selangor with his friend, J. G. Davidson, as Resident. The following year witnessed the death of Perak's first English resident, James Wheeler Woodford Birch, on the 2nd of November 1875. Swettenham was 'on loan' from Selangor to help Birch put up a proclamation banning slavery in the northern part of Perak when the incident occurred. The tragic death of Birch, to whom Swettenham was deputy, was recorded in his own work of fiction *Malay Sketches* (1875). He served as Secretary for Malay Affairs in the Singapore Secretariat from 1876 for six years with an interrupted home leave in 1877 and got married to Constance Sydney Holmes in February 1878. In September 1882, Swettenham was appointed as Resident of Selangor. Next appointment came in 1889 as Resident of Perak. By 1897, Swettenham was knighted and appointed as Resident General of the Federated Malay States. His last appointment was the Governor of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner for the Malay States in 1901, the position of which he held until his retirement in 1904. Sir Frank Swettenham G.C.M.G. died on the 11th of June 1946, at the age of ninety-six.

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and offer ‘a sacrifice to,’ despite its absence of both ethical and rationale basis as claimed by Bristow earlier. The reading of the following short stories from *The Real Malay* (1899) (henceforth *RM*) would demonstrate how this ‘ethical’ versus ‘individual experience at colonial outpost’ presents a conflict and that this conflict is present in his works of fiction.

The success of imperialism, wrote Lord Curzon (Viceroy of India 1899-1905), lies heavily with service. “In Empire,” he wrote, “we have found not merely the key to glory and wealth, but the call to duty and the means of service to mankind” (Thornton, 1966b: 72). Of the service to mankind, Curzon added, it “depended on one’s conduct and character” (ibid.). These are the two features that Swettenham as a writer tries to depict in the short story entitled “A Silhouette.” The story tells of Swettenham’s meeting with one of the great Malay warriors at his residence. The narrator,[2] as he is also a gifted artist, takes this chance to paint the warrior’s portrait while simultaneously having a conversation with him. The story ends with the warrior’s realizing what the narrator is doing and with the latter generously showing the guest the portrait.

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[2] As opposed to the commonly held distinction between the narrator and the writer, colonial writers like Swettenham has no problem acknowledging his authorship to the public as a form of exercising authority and to make the story more believable (and saleable as well). For that reason, in this paper, I make use of the word author and narrator quite interchangeably. Swettenham’s understanding of what attributes a fiction would be almost the opposite of our understanding of Roland Barthes’ notion “The Death of the Author” or for that matter with Michel Foucault’s “What is an Author?”

Swettenham writes at the beginning of the story: "amongst Malays of the Peninsula, the most picturesque figure is that of the Famous Seyyid. He has come to see me . . ." (*RM*, 224). The phrase 'he has come' connotes a submissive attitude on the side of the Malay warrior despite being "a man of war . . . and one of the famous of the Malay fighting-chiefs . . . " (*ibid.*, 227). The phrase also suggests in Herbert Spencer's term, the relationship of 'the captured-the guardian,' the narrator being the guardian and the Famous Seyyid being the captured. The relationship, added Spencer, "therefore always depend[s] on the successful assertion of power" (Thornton, 1966b: 74) by the guardian. The phrase "He has come" therefore indicates both the subservient attitude of the Seyyid and the successful assertion of power by the narrator. It is even surprising to know that at the end of the story, upon discovering that the narrator has drawn Seyyid's portrait, the latter, having realized that the host is not fully concentrating on their conversation, is not outraged by it; perhaps, epitomizing what Spencer has asserted above.

The adventurous conduct of the narrator having to welcome his old enemy alone into his house, albeit the danger he faces as "the only white man" (*RM*, 66) in the country, demonstrates to the audience back home the narrator's bravery. This is the characteristic of a white man, in this case a British officer acting on behalf of the British imperial agenda, illustrating not only his friendliness but that of what Jawarharlal Nehru, in his autobiography, describes as "the calm assurance of always being in the right" (Thornton, 1966b: 72).

Towards the end of the story, the narrator includes his conversation with the warrior, which runs as follows:

> You have been writing while I have talked," says the Seyyid; "may I ask what you have written about?"
> "I have been trying to make a silhouette of you."
> "What is a silhouette?"
> "Roughly speaking, it is a profile portrait, in black, on a white background."
> "Here," I say, showing him the paper on which I am writing; "and you see, I have only used black and white."
> "Ah!" he says, " I understand; it is the black and the white of me. Do not make it too black. A silhouette can only be true in outline."
> "Very well," I reply; " I will put in the colours."
> (*RM*, 231)

The act of drawing while talking to the object being drawn also offers an episode of symbolic implications between the captured-guardian relationships. It could be argued that in the process of colonization, the colonist tries to form a close relationship with the local inhabitants. The above episode demonstrates the kind of colonialists' endeavor to keep themselves distant from local people by treating the latter as a subject or as an object of his study. To the colonialists, even the Famous Seyyid is being reduced to a mere black and white painting. It is the fate of the Orientals that they "were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people . . ." (Said, 1978: 207).

In concluding this short story, the narrator's choice of words "I will put in the colours" ironically exposes his 'true' colour. He begins by imposing his opinion and rule over what the Seyyid has admittedly said, i.e., he understood what a silhouette is all about. He does not want to listen to Seyyid's suggestion that a silhouette should not be 'too black.' He does not pay much attention to Seyyid's opinion that 'a silhouette can only be true in outline.' He does not permit the Seyyid to exercise any authority over his work of art. The narrator puts in the colours even at the expense of neglecting his own original intention of drawing a silhouette as long as the Seyyid as a captive or, in Edward Said's term an Oriental, does not dominate him.

This last part of the story has clearly depicted the narrator's Orientalist mood. He is "making statements about it [the Orient], authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said, 1978: 3). Using the power of writing, Swettenham, as the author, "is both exhibit and an exhibitor, winning two confidences at once, displaying two appetites for experience: the Oriental one for engaging companionship (or so it seems) and the Western one for authoritative, useful knowledge" (ibid., 160). Swettenham is able to gain both: a friendship and an authority over his subject of fiction.

Looking from another angle, however, the conversation between the colonial narrator and the famous Seyyid reveals different meanings. The narrator seems to give his so-called colonial 'subject,' the Famous Seyyid, an individual autonomy to express opinion — "Do not make it too black. A silhouette can only be true in outline," as revolutionary especially in light of the colonizer-colonised relationship. As a colonial author, he allows Seyyid's suggestion/intervention over his own 'master plan'—the silhouette, as opposed to the usual practice of colonial encroachment on the natives. He wants the Malays to be inquisitive. This allowance for individual autonomy is a very modern concept, and I think, it is the way that Swettenham imposes his understanding of progressive thinking onto the Malays. The term modern, in the context of this paper, is characterized by Enlightenment thought which assumed as a possible course for both modern consciousness and modern social institutions, including that of social structure as discussed by social theorists, even though it may still invite some debates over the use of such term.[3] When the narrator responses by saying "Very well," " I will put in the colours," he goes even further in not just accepting Seyyid's opinion but also in introducing the Seyyid (and the Malays) to an innovation—colours.

The fictional writing may also serve as an avenue for colonial officers like Swettenham to voice out their opinion on the imperial policy, providing some kind of reaction or input from the peripheral into the metropolis centre. In another short story entitled 'A Mezzotint,' Swettenham deals with the issue of education and his views of the impact of education onto the locals. The story is about Unku Sherifa, a beautiful and intelligent daughter of a Malay chief who is brought up by an English family in one of the British possessions in the East. Having returned to her own land, she finds comfort mixing with an old British officer, one Edward Cathcart, a gentleman of Indian blood, but raised and educated in England. Young Cathcart falls in love with Unku Sherifa. Unku Sherifa, as her Western upbringing has taught her to be outspoken, a characteristic uncommon among her native Malays, rejects the proposal. Feeling dejected, Cathcart freely accepts the offer of a transfer to another British Settlement and gets married soon after. With the death of Unku Sherifa's father, the whole family falls into misery. To ease their trouble, Unku Sherifa is forced to marry a son of another Malay chief. Two days before the wedding takes place, Cathcart, who happens to visit the state, meets with Unku Sherifa. Unku Sherifa begs Cathcart to help her elope to Singapore but the latter hesitantly denies her request. The wedding takes place as planned but the union lasts only for few months. Poor Unku Sherifa roams with her mother into a foreign land and dies far away from her native people. Cathcart, unable to fulfill the request of his first lover, becomes reckless and falls into a life of misery and eventually dies, in another foreign land, thousands of miles away from Unku Sherifa.

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[3] The term 'modern' derives from the late fifth-century Latin term *modernus* which was used to distinguish an officially Christian present from a Roman, pagan past. 'Modern' was used in the medieval period to distinguish the contemporary from the 'ancient' past. But 'modernity' has come to mean more than 'the here and now': it refers to modes of social organization that emerged in Europe from the sixteenth century and extended their influence throughout the world in the wake of European exploration and colonization (Ascroft, at.el., 1998). The term modern may also be equated with the notion modernity spearheaded by the classical sociological theorists such as Max Weber which include rationality to Habermas' conception of modernity, which argues for the end of the veneration of tradition and paved the way for the Enlightenment philosophical project of developing "a rational organization of everyday social life" (Habermas, 1981: 9).

Swettenham mentions in his introduction to his first book *Malay Sketches*, that, "Education and contact with Western people must produce the inevitable result" (1895: x), the present story exemplifies such a situation. In a modern world, where contacts with the outside world and outside influence are almost unavoidable, Swettenham seems to suggest in his story that such 'contacts' have an irreversible impact as well. After having been educated and brought up in an English environment, Unku Sherifa's education has molded her "into a realm of knowledge beyond their [the Malays'] old-fashioned ideas and more limited capacity" (*RM*, 278). Even her shyness, which is "common to native girls rapidly wore off" (ibid., 277).

Her education has transformed both her behaviour and outlook. At one point in the story, she even retorts, "I don't want to marry any Malay" (ibid., 285), a rejection that is doubly impermissible to the traditional Malay lady. For one, Malay girls do not customarily reject a marriage proposal made by their parents or relatives, and two, Malay society usually prefers an arrangement of marriage among them (in-breeding). Those of other races have to be Muslim first before being permitted to marry a Malay girl.

Swettenham argues that Unku Sherifa's modern character is a product of Western education and this is what has led her to suffer in the midst of an Eastern culture. Unku Sherifa may have the privilege of expressing opinions and free choice, but society around her is not prepared to accept this modern element into their culture. Looking at it from a colonial discourse perspective, the tragedy of Unku Sherifa's life lies in the limitations set forth by the British Empire that "intermarriage between natives and English men and women was undesirable" (Said, 1978: 213). Her union with Edward Cathcart is, in Cathcart's own word "indeed, ... impossible . . ." (*RM*, 285).

Unku Sherifa's marriage to a Malay chief, which is against her choice and free will, is as Swettenham predicts, "a failure—a failure of the worst—and in a few weeks, or at least months, the girl was divorced from her husband" (ibid., 188). One may very well predict this failure, especially after becoming aware of Unku Sherifa's background. Swettenham, of course, blames the Malay society and their resistance to change for Unku Sherifa's tragic life. After the failure of her marriage, Unku Sherifa "fell on evil days...and, after two or three years' wandering with her poor old mother, the girl died, and was buried in a foreign land, far from her own people" (ibid., 288). One simple reason for her wandering is to avoid shame, but Swettenham wants us to believe that Unku Sherifa is in search of a society, 'a foreign land, far from her own people,' that can easily accept her in the light of her modern character. For this reason, Swettenham argues that the best way to achieve progress is through a process of 'regeneration,' which involves the process of change in society as a whole, rather than a simple individual. To achieve this goal, the Malays require a process of education in order to construct a whole new generation that understands the spirit of progress.

What contributed to Unku Sherifa's failure merely boils down to one factor — her surroundings. She is brought up in a modern English environment to think and act accordingly. Later, she is forced to live in her old surroundings, which by now is entirely alien to her. Swettenham seems to suggest that the ideal way of educating the Malays is to educate them in their own country.[4] The narrator believes that Unku Sherifa is "wiser to remain in the cool, moonlit jungle, where, at least, she was at home with those of her own kind . . ." (ibid., 289). Any attempt to introduce any sudden change "more likely than not, will be disaster" (ibid.). The narrator adds that, "it might be thought that a little education, a little emancipation, is what the Malay woman chiefly needs. I doubt it" (ibid., 272). Education (for both male and female) as a gradual process of social construction will generate a new generation that would pave a better transition for a modern and progressive way of life.

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[4] If one looks closely into the history of British colonisation of Malaya, education in the Malay States was slowly introduced during the last part of the second decade of the British Occupation. The "initiation of a system of education had to wait till the more urgent administrative and social services [...] had been provided for" (Chai, 1967: 228) in order to modernise the infrastructure. Even after the turn of the century, the total expenditure for education between 1906 until 1918 with comparison to the total revenue of the States remained around one percent each year, even after the post of Director of Education was created in 1907 and the Resident was released from the responsibility of education (ibid., 233). Of course, one could argue that the British's policy did not consider education of prime importance especially when one looks at the figures spent on educating the populous. Nonetheless, Swettenham had his own reason. He professed the concept of 'safe education,' as stated above which "preserve[s] the stability of Malay village life and economy" (Loh, 1969: 174). Hence, "forcing Malay girls to go to school might be construed as a violation of Malay custom and religion" (Chai, 1967: 232). Swettenham doubts the need for much enforcement. The Selangor State Government (of which Swettenham used to serve as a Resident) enforced compulsory attendance in June 1891 for Malay boys only. It was not until 1901 that all the Malay Federated States followed the step of the Selangor State Government and this time, girls were included (ibid.).

Towards the end of the short story, the narrator makes an interesting comparison by comparing the life of Unku Sherifa and a beautiful green cicada. He writes:

> As I was writing these last words, a beautiful green cicada, with great eyes and long transparent wings, flew into the room and dashed straight at a lamp. In spite of several severe burns, and all my efforts to save her, she has accomplished her own destruction, and now lies dead and stark; the victim of a new light which excited her curiosity and admiration, but the consuming power of which she did not understand (*RM*, 289).

What Swettenham does here is to use the green cicada as a metaphor for symbolic quality or an illustration just like an artist "was trying to do [producing graphic images] in relation to the probable general reader" (Hodnett, 1982: 4). As a self-taught artist, Swettenham's tendency to use a symbolic graphic representation of character in his work of fiction is apparent here, perhaps to provide a more vivid, fascinating and appealing message to his reader.

In his works of fiction, Swettenham seems to subscribe to this idea of "graphic expressiveness" (ibid., 16). The use of the green cicada as a graphic representation of the life of Unku Sherifa at the end of the text is in some degree supplementary, and contributes to “the reader’s understanding of the text and reinforces the emotional effects sought by the narrator” (ibid., 8), it leads us to question the narrator’s intention. As if, in reality, the narrator as the Resident did not have the power to save Unku Sherifa, that if only the latter were a cicada, then he could try to save her. Even then, the method of saving her was not necessarily appropriate, as it is the nature of the cicada to be easily attracted to the light, the best way is for the narrator to put out the lamp and stay in darkness for a while until the cicada goes away. However, he would not do so as it would be an act of giving in to an inferior being.

Though remarkably full of sorrowful events, the short story presents a wider spectrum of Swettenham’s progressive views especially on matters relating to the education of Malay women, and to Malays as a whole. “A Mezzotint,” a method of engraving a copper plate, suggests the permanent effect on a person like Unku Sherifa after receiving Western education. As it appears, the type of education that she receives does more harm than good to her and her native people. What is more, since the engraving is permanent, Unku Sherifa is unable to re-assimilate into her original native culture and custom. Her intelligence proves futile in the old surrounding of her “unregenerate” people, to borrow Swettenham’s term. From the perspective of colonial discourse, Unku Sherifa’s upbringing is simply an experiment to be studied and analyzed respectively by the educated West. Her whole life as an Oriental becomes an aspect of Orientalism as “a school of interpretation whose materials happens to be the Orient, its civilization, peoples and localities” (Said, 1978: 203). For Swettenham, Unku Sherifa’s life is just another sad story of a woman who fails to realize her happiness, which is promised by the idea of progress, in the face of her own traditional society.

What the analysis of the two stories above has demonstrated, as far as the colonial discourse situation is concerned, is that colonial officer such as Swettenham faces the notion of ambivalence. For example in "A Mezzotint" in which he has to juggle between his duty as a colonial officer in support of the imperial policy to educate the young and bright students overseas; whereas he argues, at least in his works of fiction, that overseas' environment would only do harm than good to the students. Even though it is debatable to say that colonial officers like Swettenham has served as external agents who provided the impetus for change in any colonized society, the study of colonial discourse itself is very intricate and multifaceted and that the relationship between the coloniser and colonised is evidently fuzzy, at least as far as the works discussed above are concerned. Such confrontation, be it within the colonial system itself or between the colonial administrators and the locals is a necessary condition of social change, and to a certain degree a requirement for any radical reformulation to take place in a given society. The study of both historical contexts and the analytical reading of literary works written by colonial officers such as Swettenham would pave a better way to the understanding of the complexities of imperialism itself.

In the case of Malaysian literature in English, for example, these written works of the colonial officers have not been considered as part of the texts to be studied partly because the nature of postcolonialism itself that is being rather antagonistic especially during the early era of post independence and partly because the call for nationalism would only make the literary foci limited only to the ones written by the locals. However, I think, as we move forward into the twentieth century, it is becoming harder to understand or even recognize the kind of resistance purported by colonialist during the colonial era. Therefore, I would like to propose that colonial texts are to be considered as part and parcel of literary texts of a colonized country's literature, rather than to be abandoned altogether, at least, it would give young generation some understanding of what the notion of ambivalence, peripheral and metropolis centre would be all about. After all, people are becoming more mature to gauge for themselves what good to take, and what bad to throw.

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