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200
years of
SINGAPORE
and the
**UNITED
KINGDOM**

Edited by
TOMMY KOH & SCOTT WIGHTMAN

Straits Times Press

Mutiny takes us well beyond Singapore to India, Russia, the United States, Canada, Hong Kong, Malaya, Japan, Germany and Turkey, fuzzifying the local-global binary, which was as problematic then as it is today. Tim Harper rightly argues that attention to the Singapore Mutiny enables us to “recast Singapore’s history inside out” with the reminder that “it captures a moment when Singapore was one of the most global cities on earth and also one of the most modern”. This strongly nudges towards a recalibration of Singapore’s historiography and a shift to the realisation of the island’s standing as a modern, global cosmopolis. In the final analysis, it would appear that Singapore was more than just a site for the enactment of the Singapore Mutiny — a realisation that ought to provoke Singaporean curiosities about a somewhat unjustly interred event in the island’s self-narrative.

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THE COLONIAL ART OF TELLING TALES

Nazry Bahrawi

Once upon a time, the ultra-pragmatic city of Singapore was a literary mecca of sorts. In the days of colonial yore, it had attracted some of Europe’s most renowned authors, most of whom had taken up residence at Raffles Hotel, the crown jewel of this British Crown Colony, during their sojourn. Among its admirers were William Somerset Maugham, who was rumoured to be the world’s highest-paid writer in the 1930s, Rudyard Kipling of *The Jungle Book* fame and the Nobel Prize winner Hermann Hesse.

Having played host to such notable figures, it only seems natural to ask if there is a legacy here that Singapore can boast of. This would be a fair question except that intellectual developments since then have deemed “legacy” too kind a word when referring to those contentious years; “consequences” seems a better term.

To understand the *consequences* of colonial literature in Singapore is to first accept an unsavoury fact — it is mired with misinformation about race in British Malaya.

To say otherwise following the critique of Orientalism levelled by the literary scholar Edward Said would be incredulous. In 1978, Said unleashed unto the world his seminal book that presented the artistic manners in which European colonisers manufactured racial

stereotypes about their colonised subjects in the Middle East. In paintings and in prose, the latter were rendered the opposite of all things European — savage, irrational, exotic. These stereotypes have the effect of institutionalising a racial hierarchy, which privileges Europeans over natives.

The same has been said of the indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia. British and Dutch colonialists unfairly surmised them as “lazy natives”, argued the Malaysian sociologist Syed Hussein Alatas. None lesser than Stamford Raffles, the much-lauded “founding father” of modern Singapore, made this claim when he described the natives of the South Seas as “habitually mischievous, given to thieving, lazy and intractable”. Disdainful features, he must believe, that were non-British.

Raffles made that observation in an 1821 letter to the Duchess of Somerset. While this has the appearance of “truth” because it was expressed in a non-fictional form, it is still a fantastical assertion with little empirical evidence. Today, we might call that letter a work of “fake news”. A poison-pen letter.

Writing about the natives had become something of a favourite pastime for colonial administrators who had spent time in Singapore. There was Frank Swettenham, an illustrious civil servant who later became the Governor of the Straits Settlements. After arriving in Singapore in 1871, the ambitious 20-year-old worked hard to master the Malay language. Swettenham did well for himself in the Far East. After Singapore, he was posted to other outposts in British Malaya, including Penang, Perak and Selangor, each time climbing the ranks.

To his peers, Swettenham must appear as an expert on the Malay culture. One might expect him to be empathetic to the Malays, but an obituary published in *The Straits Times* on 6 March 1954 suggests condescension more than compassion. It describes Swettenham’s vow to civilise Malaya by introducing “cricket, football and other British games”. At first glance, the idea that sports can improve the

lot of a people may sound ridiculous. Yet, this becomes less strange when we dig deeper into Swettenham’s own life. As an adolescent back in England, he was known to be “less able at his school work than at sports and games of all kinds”. Swettenham may be prescribing a tried-and-tested solution for the unruly brown natives of British Malaya only because it did wonders for a struggling sod like him.

Later in his own writings, Swettenham reproduced this same conviction in colonialism as a civilising mission, which he thought most profitable for the Malays, the subject of his many character sketches. In the essay “Local Colour”, he waxed lyrical of the manners in which British “intervention” had replaced slavery, debt bondage and forced labour with government, roads and hospitals for the Malays. This claim was fuelled by what he perceived to be the inherent rusticity of the Malays, whom he believed were “very much what they were” despite all the technological progress happening around them.

To Swettenham, there were specific traits that maketh a Malay. His firmness in these saw him pen some seven pages detailing them in an essay titled “The Real Malay”. Among his most damning description is this: “He [the real Malay] is, however, lazy to a degree, is without method or order of any kind, knows no regularity even in the hours of his meals, and considers time as of no importance.” There is a hint of Raffles in there. The Malays are the malaise.

What of fiction? To answer this is to consider Hugh Clifford, another decorated colonial administrator who had also climbed the ladder to become Governor of the Straits Settlements for a brief spell of less than three years from 1927, retiring only because of ill health. Like Swettenham, Clifford found his way into the colonial service of British Malaya as a young man, 17 to be precise, and worked his way up on the back of mastering the Malay language.

As contemporaries who were probably the most adept at the native tongue and customs among their peers, Clifford and Swettenham

were unsurprisingly acquainted with each other. In 1894, they had even co-published a Malay dictionary for English readers, featuring Romanised and Jawi alphabets, because they felt that the Dutch-produced Malay dictionaries were “sealed books to the average English student”, revealing not just their animosity towards their rival European colonialists in the region but also their camaraderie for fellow British administrators. They were themselves susceptible to tribalism; they were men of their time. Yet, there are also clear differences between them.

Unlike Swettenham, Clifford preferred to manufacture his Malays in creative prose. He was prolific at this task, producing four novels and 80 short stories set in Malaya. Literary scholar Philip Holden formerly of the National University of Singapore, in his exhaustive study of Clifford’s literary output called “Modern Subjects/Colonial Texts”, speculates that Clifford was “probably the most widely read colonial writer of the Malayan Peninsula after Conrad and Maugham”. Clifford was known to be pro-Malay, though he was just as reductive when it came to writing them. Holden points to a host of recurring ethnic stereotypes in Clifford’s oeuvre of works, including the Malay dandy, who is “effeminate in his dress” but also “intensely attractive to women”. It is fascinating here that while the figure of the Malay dandy can be seen as buttressing an ethnic stereotype, he also subverts gender and sexuality norms. Clifford was exercising literary finesse.

However, he was far less sympathetic in his assessment of the Chinese. This is evident in his short story “The Wages of Sin”, which was based on a true court case he reviewed in 1898. In this story, an unnamed narrator, presumably Clifford himself, recounts the trial of a Chinese man Lim Chong on charges of murdering a Malay woman, Lunet, who was the concubine of another Chinese shopkeeper Ah Si. The twist in the story is that a Malay villager had killed Lunet — an act that was condoned by the *penghulu* (headman) and the Malay

community. Holden points us to a more nuanced twist — the narrator was far more affected that Ah Si had abandoned his friend Lim Chong by not testifying that the latter was falsely accused. It was as if the narrator (Clifford) agrees with the judgment of the Malays in the story, who saw the Chinese as rapacious immigrants with “no scruples, no heart, no mercy, no morality, commercial or private”.

Clifford’s stance stands in stark contrast to that of the German author Hermann Hesse. In his essay “Going for a Ride”, which captures his musings about touring the streets of colonial Singapore, Hesse spoke admirably of the Chinese who “understand how to dress and how to carry themselves” and whose houses lined the Singapore streets “in as refined and discreet a manner as the houses in Paris”. The Chinese were *almost* Europeans. The darker-skinned Asians did not impress Hesse as much. While he found the Tamils and other Indians to be carrying themselves with a “heroic bearing”, he also described each of them as having the countenance of “a dethroned raja”. He reserved his most caustic comments for the Malays, who possessed “the kind of gullibility characteristic of black Africans” because they so easily “fall for every imported article on offer and dress like housemaids on a Sunday”.

Yet another crucial difference between Swettenham and Clifford has been outlined by J. de V. Allen in his 1964 essay “Two Imperialists: A Study of Sir Frank Swettenham and Sir Hugh Clifford”. This has to do with their reflections on colonisation. According to him, Swettenham was unwavering in his faith in the merits of British colonisation while Clifford’s later books published in the 20th century suggest that “he all but admits that his life’s work has been in the wrong cause”. This is an important distinction because it serves as a reminder to us not to fall into the same habit of over-generalisation that European colonialists had towards the natives. Not all colonialists were the same. Some were devotees; others harboured regrets.

Indeed, it has become convenient to decry colonialism as the sole cause of Singapore's racialised policies today. The tales spun by Swettenham and Clifford did manufacture stereotypes, some of which are still being voiced on both sides of the Causeway. However, there are also indications that natives themselves were just as complicit in producing neat racial categories.

Take Munshi Abdullah, whose claim to fame was *Hikayat Abdullah* (1849), a textual chronicle of his life that had modernised the traditional Malay literary genre of the *hikayat* (tale) by way of writing style, subject matter and themes.

Abdullah's legacy as a Malay role model is complicated. On the one hand, he had written several important works in the late 19th century that represented the native voice in British Malaya. For this, he was hailed as "the father of modern Malay literature". He was also an early Muslim reformist who was keen on incorporating the use of reason in the public practice of Islam.

On the other hand, Abdullah was an uncritical admirer of Raffles, whom he had tutored in the Malay language. In his observations about racial groups in Singapore and Malacca, Abdullah had described Malay women who were married to important people as "conceited and lazy", and Chinese and Malays who believed in spirits and ghosts as "ignorant and superstitious". In contrast, Abdullah saw himself as an enlightened Malay when it came to these regressive customs because he had the chance to associate himself "with intelligent people like the white men". Here is a native reifying the racial hierarchy of British colonialism.

Abdullah was not the only one to have inherited these colonial prejudices. An equally damning view of the Malays can be seen from a more recent source — the 20th-century book *The Malay Dilemma* (1970) by none other than Mahathir Mohamad, the past and present Prime Minister of Malaysia.

The aim of this article is not to provide a laundry list of bigoted passages in colonial literature. Rather, it seeks to address the crucial role played by creative writing, fiction and non-fiction, in the enterprise of colonising British Malaya. The colonial art of telling tales is also the art of telling tall tales beautifully, the manufacture of neat ethnic categories in lyrical, persuasive prose, to justify British colonisation as a civilising mission. It had worked to a certain extent. Swettenham's stories were described as "charming" by Raman Krishnan, the Malaysian publisher at Silverfish Books in its 2016 annotated edition of his *Malay Sketches*. To be fair, Krishnan also acknowledged the scourge of colonial prejudices.

Yet, as consequence more than legacy, colonial literature in Singapore must also include contemporary writings as diametrically opposing as Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians* (2013), which arguably substitutes an old racial order with a new one, and Alfian Sa'at's *Malay Sketches* (2012), which ironically deconstructs the malaise of the Malays.

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