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Transgression and Violence in Maugham's FMS Stories: The Impact of Oriental Settings on Colonial Alienation



Roohi Huda
Assistant Professor,
Deptt. of English,
BRAC University
Dhaka, Bangladesh

Abstract

W. Somerset Maugham is widely accepted as one of the most notable chroniclers of life in the exotic Orient during the heyday of the British colonial rule in parts of Asia. His portrayals of British colonial administrators, living in Singapore and the adjacent regions of the then Federated Malay States (FMS) are also considered to be authentic. Maugham's fame as a master of the short story rests, to a great extent, on his stories of the Far East and his virtuoso portrayal of human frailty, ambiguity, and unpredictability. While many aspects of histories have been explored and analyzed in academic writing, the transgressions and violence depicted therein have not been discussed much. This paper closely examines these transgressions and violence in three of Maugham's FMS stories: "The Outstation," "Before the Party," and "The Force of Circumstance." The analyses reveal that the oriental backdrop and alienation had either a debilitating or a subversive influence on the damning frailty of the European characters that people these Far Eastern tales.

Keywords: Transgression, Violence, Alienation, Colonial Backdrop, Disenchanted Violence, Orient.

Introduction

W. Somerset Maugham initially became very successful as a playwright, but he gained greater renown in the later part of his long career as a short storywriter, due, primarily, to the depiction, in his Oriental stories, of colonial life in the Federated Malay States (FMS), Singapore, China, and the South Seas. Maugham's skill as a short story writer has placed him on par with the French master of short stories, Guy de Maupassant, and like him, Maugham's stories had exotic settings or centered on newsworthy events (Gordon 401-402). Maugham's writings have been invoked as examples of work that promoted colonialism, and critics have discussed his and Rudyard Kipling's complicity in advancing the British imperial project in the FMS and India respectively (Moulud 212). Academic discourse has also been concerned with Maugham's sexuality as reflected in his FMS stories, particularly those set in FMS and China (Holden 575; Clement 183). However, discussions on the portrayal of violence and transgressions in Maugham's stories, especially his Oriental stories, have not received much attention in academic writing. The stories set in the FMS of the 1920s have popularly been referred to for their depiction of the authentic life of the British colonialists in the then Far East. Maugham captured in vivid detail the vocation and social lives that the colonial white administrators, his compatriots, led in these countries. The interactions of the British administrators and their family members with the local people, and the consequences of those contacts – the tragedies and romances that unfolded – are narrated with wry humor and a sense of irony. Most of these narratives, however, also contained descriptions of violence and transgressions with tragic endings. The current reading of the three tales – "The Outstation," "Before the Party," and "The Force of Circumstance" – would suggest that "violence" and "transgression" are striking elements in the stories, and each of these narratives builds a tension that is ultimately resolved violently or through an act of transgression, or both.

Objective of the Study

Not much research has been conducted on the acts of violence and transgression portrayed in Maugham's short stories, but the FMS

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stories, written using the experience and material he collected during his 1921 travels to Malaya and Borneo, afford an opportunity to examine the author's realistic depiction of these acts within an authentic setting. The analysis will also clarify the role of the setting in perpetrating the violence and transgression described, the time period during which Maugham traveled to these places, and the outlook of his white protagonists as well as the alien society in which they lived and worked. Contemporary accounts of violence and transgressive behavior as portrayed in literature can also be compared against the findings of this paper; especially when it comes to discussing British colonial projects, their legacies, and the isolated lives of their expatriate civil servants, traders, and adventurers living in foreign outposts in Asia. Textual analysis of the stories may also shed light on the changing perceptions of East in the minds of the white protagonists as they make these outward voyages to take administrative positions in the colonies and gradually get into settled opinions about the East through their experience of living in these far away alien lands. Finally, the paper will assess the outlook of Maugham as to the usefulness of the difficult and violent lives that were often led by these colonizers. Maugham's depiction of violence and transgression may signal a changing mindset of the colonizers that was gradually taking place: instead of taking pride in the conquered lands, and vanquished races, the European (in this case mainly British) colonial administrators were increasingly being wearied of their colonial endeavors. How the enterprising colonial spirit sapped with the passage of time, and the brutality of wrangling with alien people and alien conditions can be understood better from the discussions that unfold.

Review of Literature

The stories in question, "The Outstation," "Before the Party," and "The Force of Circumstance," were first published in 1926 in a collection titled *The Casuarina Tree* (Curtis and Whitehead 168). Violence, in the form of murder, concludes the first two stories, and the third is a sketch of marital transgression in all its complexity in an Oriental setting. "Before the Party" also shows elements of transgression through alcoholism and the breach of a sacred trust as a disillusioned wife reckons with the deteriorating alcoholism of her husband. In all three stories, what is noticeable about the climax of each, is the way Maugham prepares the setting— climate, geographical factors, power, and race relations with the natives —to influence the devastating outcome. There is a stark contrast with the West in the setting of the stories and the life that is led there also appears to influence the fate of the protagonists who, almost unwittingly, follow a path that ultimately wreaks havoc in their lives. Using Sarah Cole's ideas presented in her book *At the Violet Hour: Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland*, this paper also examines the nature of the violence depicted in the conclusions of these FMS stories.

Cole, in her book, categorizes violence in literature as "enchanted" and "disenchanted." According to her, "Enchanted violence is defined as

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an approach to violence that stresses its transformative value; disenchanted violence insists on its unredeemability" (1). Cole explains that when death is unnatural and undeserved, it needs to justify itself or explain its radical lack of justification. If violent death, as in the case of Jesus Christ in Christianity or the fallen soldiers of the First World War, result in something transformative as the "salvation of mankind" or "freedom from tyranny," then they become "fuel for generativity" (40). Cole maintains that historically, war literature has utilized violence as an aesthetic means to take positions for or against war, or proffer militarism as well as nationalist idealism as an outcome of violence (41). Thus, something transformative or desirable emerged as a result of violence: enchanted violence. That is why "they virtually codify the war enchantment: that in the peculiar conditions of war, violent death is transformed into something positive, communal, perhaps even sacred" (Cole 45). Disenchanted violence, on the other hand, is meaningless, bleak, and wasteful. And Cole exemplifies the nullity of disenchanted violence with the extermination camps "where death is indiscriminate and the possibility of apotheosis foreclosed" (40). In short, the enchanted-disenchanted dichotomy can be expressed thus: "To enchant, in this sense, is to imbue the violent experience with symbolic and cultural potency; to disenchant is to refuse that structure, to insist on the bare, forked existence of the violated being, bereft of symbol, and expressing only a regretful beauty" (Cole 44). Catherine Ladds in her article *Charles Mason, the 'King of China': British Imperial Adventuring in the Late Nineteenth Century* discusses the life of Charles Mason and how his ideas of adventures in China came to be undermined when faced with realities on the ground and resulted in violence and tragedy (249). The three stories amply supply us these conflicts between ideal and the reality. To a certain extent violence and transgression do emerge from this conflict as well. The depiction of violence particularly can also be examined parallel to contemporary perspectives on violence as depicted in short stories form conflict ridden geographical corners like the West Bank and Gaza. Isabelle Hesse in her article *Sensory siege: dromocolonisation, slow violence, and poetic realism in the twenty-first century short story from Gaza* claims that a group of contemporary Palestinian short story writers are using poetic realism to depict the plight and violence- especially slow violence- to which they as people are subjected to as opposed to visceral realism (192). In visceral realism the suffering human body is used as a marker of shared humanity, on the other hand poetic realism depicts the everyday, mundane, and routine world, and describes within these contexts the violence that slowly unfolds- slow violence (Hesse 193). In tandem with these Palestinian authors Maugham's stories also describe the environs, the everyday and the mundane, and within the reality of those depictions express the violence.

In the first two stories under discussion here, Maugham develops the plots by highlighting the isolation and exotic nature of the Orient which lead his

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main characters to dissolution through violence. He finally characterizes the violence unleashed at the end of each of the stories as disenchanting violence. At the conclusion of each story, the reader is struck by the absurdity and pointlessness that the violent death encompasses. Maugham also uses irony to express this pointlessness, this wastage, as he wryly brings each story to its conclusion.

"The Outstation" is the story of a stereotypical British colonial official working in the FMS of the 1920s whose orderly life is upset by the arrival of an assistant at his remote station. The official, Mr. Warburton, happens to be a snob who finds it difficult to forget his youthful, spendthrift days that were passed in the company of the fashionable rich and aristocracy of 1890s London. After squandering his fortune in the pleasure pursuits of the London nobility with whom Mr. Warburton proudly consorted, he is obliged to find employment in a remote district of FMS as a Resident. Although deprived of his club in Pall Mall and the distinguished company of his London circle, Mr. Warburton decides to re-enact the routine and mannerisms of his English past in the district of his post, to whatever extent possible. What we also find is that in "The Outstation" Maugham paints a picture of snobbery around Mr. Warburton's manners and attitudes that can be labeled as 'Appreciative Snobbery'. Stephanie Partridge in her most recent article *Snobbery in Appreciative Contexts* describes that two types of snobbery often manifest themselves in appreciative contexts: attitudinal snobbery and contextual snobbery. The attitudinal snob as the term implies has displays snobbery through his attitude, and the contextual snob finds the context to depict his snobbery. Appreciative judgements for both types can be passed by the observer or reader when faced with these types (243). In the case of Mr. Warburton we will notice that he is a snob who is both an attitudinal snob, and also a contextual snob. His high birth and public school background make him an attitudinal snob, and in the context of the colonial outstation his role as the resident gives him the context to act out as a snob. As the story unfolds it will be found out that his snobbish attitude and manners are the starting point where the discord with Cooper begins, and ultimately culminates in the end of Cooper.

From the very beginning, Maugham builds tension by introducing Cooper as everything that Warburton is not. Cooper, the newly arrived assistant, is the antithesis of Mr. Warburton, and Maugham captures his personality and the Resident's consternation at his manners as the story starts. When the Resident cordially invites the travel-worn Cooper to dine with him and asks whether eight o'clock would suit him, Cooper casually responds, "Any old time will do for me" (Maugham 1357). This matter-of-fact and careless behavior from Cooper continues as the dinner starts in Mr. Warburton's residence later that evening:

Presently he appeared. Cooper was wearing the khaki shorts, the khaki shirt, and the ragged jacket in which he had landed. Mr. Warburton's smile of greeting froze on his face.

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"Hulloa, you're all dressed up," said Cooper. "I didn't know you were going to do that. I very nearly put on a sarong."

"It doesn't matter at all. I dare say your boys were busy."

"You needn't have bothered to dress on my account, you know."

"I didn't. I always dress for dinner."

"Even when you're alone?"

"Especially when I'm alone," replied Mr. Warburton, with a frigid stare.

He saw a twinkle of amusement in Cooper's eyes and, and he flushed an angry red. (Maugham 1357-1358)

As can be discerned from the above, Maugham sets the stage elaborately, and memorably captures the moment when a relationship of mutual dislike and acrimony commences between the two characters.

Warburton and Cooper's isolation and loneliness surface repeatedly as the story unfolds. Banished from the hallowed London life of his past, Mr. Warburton has gradually come to accept, and even like, his lonely existence as a Resident in the FMS. He does not feel deprived of the company of white men and, during the First World War, had not met a white man for three years. Mr. Warburton did not regret that his London life was over and came to appreciate the Malays amongst whom he had to pass the rest of his days. To Warburton, some of the high class Malays even seemed to be as refined as the well-born gentlemen in England. He was willing to overlook their shortcomings and more inclined to admire what was good in them. Mr. Warburton thus came to enjoy the isolation that Malaya offered him and, in a way, almost exalted in his alienation from the modern world that was England. His tolerance for the Other had not come from his effective separation from a desired social life which pulsed in faraway England, but from his official position that thrust him deep into the everyday life of the Malay people whom he ruled:

The position he found himself in flattered his vanity; he was no longer the sycophant craving the smiles of the great, he was the master whose word was law. He was gratified by the guard of Dyak soldiers who presented arms as he passed. He liked to sit in judgement of his fellow men. It pleased him to compose quarrels between rival chiefs. When head hunters were troublesome in the old days he set out to chastise them with a thrill of pride in his own behaviour. (Maugham 1363)

Thus, Mr. Warburton was a snob who was happily ensconced in faraway Malaya, in a life of position, power, and adventure. And to him, Cooper was a nuisance not only because he was disdainful of the aristocrats and the refined ways of the English gentry, but also disrespectful of the Malays and their customs. He held the Dyaks and Malays of the FMS in scorn, and his behavior towards them amounted to

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unvarnished racism. Once when Mr. Warburton pointed out that the Malays were a shy and sensitive people, and therefore ought to be treated politely and kindly, Cooper retorted disdainfully: "I was born in Barbados and I was in Africa in the war. I don't think there's much about niggers that I don't know" (Maugham 1364). Cooper's aversion to the Englishmen from mainland Great Britain, and his feelings of contempt and utter condescension for the local Malays doubly isolate him from those with whom he found himself in the FMS. The central plot of the story begins when Mr. Warburton is obliged to find a suitable servant for Cooper who could not retain his domestic help because of his bad manners towards them. But things falter and Cooper eventually finds himself at variance with Warburton's administration style. Indeed, Cooper soon gets embroiled in a final and bitter quarrel with Warburton when the Resident countermands Cooper's orders to the prisoners that they should work until six in the evening. The ensuing insult that Cooper suffers in front of the Malays makes him so bitter and angry that he tries to get even with Warburton by physically abusing Abas, the houseboy who was hired for Cooper through Warburton's connections. Cooper's abuse of Abas reaches its peak when he withholds three months of the houseboy's wages and assaults him. Mr. Warburton knew that insult and injury of this magnitude to the Malays were often avenged; and this may mean death for Cooper, for the Malays were capable of murdering a white man who had ridiculed and demeaned them. Fearing the worst, Mr. Warburton thinks it his duty to warn Cooper about the possibility of a backlash from his Malay servants and advised him to pay the wages. To this Cooper responds angrily that he is not afraid of a "damned nigger" (Maugham 1378). But deep in his heart, Cooper knows that his conduct has been reckless and may indeed lead to tragedy. Maugham poignantly paints Cooper's plight as an isolated man in a hostile environment, bereft even of the benevolent thoughts of the only white man – the Resident, Mr. Warburton, who has made the best of his isolation, and is content to occupy himself with his routine of reading the *Times*, idle contemplation of life by the river, and dressing up for dinner all by himself. The isolation of Warburton resembles Cooper's in its restlessness, but contrasts in Warburton's resignation in accepting the place that is Malaya. But for Cooper it was not so: the place, its living conditions and people – in short, Malaya – wore him out:

At the beginning of the year Cooper went down with fever, and when Mr. Warburton caught sight of him again he was surprised to see how thin he had grown. He looked ill and worn. The solitude, so much more unnatural because it was due to no necessity, was getting on his nerves. It was getting on Mr. Warburton's too, and often he could not sleep at night. He lay awake brooding. Cooper was drinking heavily and surely the breaking point was near. (Maugham 1378)

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Cooper, in the bitter depths of his anguish after hitting the boy, considers his foolishness in courting his vengeance, but then, ironically, decides that his life was not worth living for:

For a moment he had an uneasy fear of what Abas might do. Warburton had warned him alright. He sighed. What a fool he had been! But he shrugged his shoulders impatiently. He did not care; a fat lot he had to live for. It was all Warburton's fault; if he had not put his back up nothing like this would have happened. Warburton had made life a hell for him from the start. The snob. But they were all like that: it was because he was a Colonial. (Maugham 1379)

Cooper's deep pessimism has grown before the story reaches its climax. Maugham paints a sad picture of Cooper's slow disintegration owing to the absurd feud that drags on between him and Warburton, and the anguish that he suffers in his sheer loneliness. Ultimately, the worst happens when one morning Mr. Warburton is startled out of his sleep by his head-boy and given the news of Cooper's murder. The scene of the violence described by Maugham is rather deadpan, unsympathetic, and thus amplifies the horror of violence, its drama, and its uselessness:

Cooper was lying in his bed, with his mouth open, and a kris sticking in his heart. He had been killed in his sleep. Mr. Warburton started, but not because he had not expected to see just such a sight, he started because he felt in himself a sudden glow of exultation. A great burden had lifted from his shoulders. (Maugham 1381)

"The Outstation" is a finely narrated story where Maugham builds the tension between the two protagonists before bringing it to its violent climax. Along the way, Maugham builds not only the two characters but also the character of the country, Borneo, Malaya, as the setting. Aside from the idiosyncrasies of Warburton, or the boorishness of Cooper that are fed and nurtured by the environment of the Malayan outstation where they are posted, the story also presents a poignant picture of the multiple levels of isolation that ultimately lead to the tragedy. The isolation of Warburton from his cherished London life, circle of noble aristocrats, a decade which he loved (the 1870s), the news and happenings in England, is no less powerful than the isolation he is forced to endure in a jungle of Borneo. Cooper similarly feels isolated as a colonial white man who could never be the equal of the public school-educated English as he was born in Barbados without the benefits of an aristocratic education. Cooper resentfully attributes his failure to obtain a commission in the army to the snobbishness of the English authorities. His hatred for the Malaysians is more pronounced and virulent because he straddles a world which is neither white nor black. Therefore, his anger is vented out as racial slurs and he cannot practice

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the benign tolerance for the other kind that is so easily achieved by his superior, the Resident, Mr. Warburton. Maugham very subtly shows how the weather and the routine of dreary duties wear Cooper down, ultimately instigating him to assault Abas and bring about his own violent death by a Malayan weapon, a kris.

Ultimately, the violent death suffered by Cooper is also shown to be quite meaningless. This death is a waste as it does not "provide beauty and imaginative release where there is brutality and suffering" (Cole 2). According to Cole, "enchanted violence" captures terrible realities but provides an impetus for healing and transformation (Cole 2). In "The Outstation," that is never the case. Cooper's life is a vacuum, and a banal one at the outstation of an FMS jungle. His violent death only serves to provide relief to Mr. Warburton who was irked to the limit by Cooper's presence in his life. No sadness or remorse assails Warburton as he surveys the ghastliness of Cooper's dead body. Compassion, regret, and human sympathy are depressingly unavailable to Cooper as he lies dead in a pool of blood. Warburton's nonchalance is darkly portrayed as he takes the kris out of Cooper's body with an effort and remembers when this very kris was offered to him by a dealer: a strand of memory that serves to show how little he cared for the dead man. Later on, Mr. Warburton comfortably discusses the fate of the murderer while drinking tea and helping himself to more marmalade while breakfasting alone. The death meant nothing to Warburton, and his focal point was the restoration of his isolated and eccentric way of life at the outstation where he was the Resident. Thus Maugham powerfully characterizes Cooper's death in terms of what Cole would define as "disenchanted," when death is a "sign and precipitator of total degeneration and waste" (Cole 2).

Maugham's other short story, "Before the Party," begins with Mrs. Skinner, ready to go to a party with her husband and daughters, ruminating on the circumstances under which her son-in-law, Harold, had died. She is dressed in black mourning clothes and wondering why her daughter, Millicent, is not showing any sign of bereavement which befitted a young woman who had just lost her husband. At the beginning of the story, the reader is told that Harold and Millicent had been living as a married couple in the FMS – in Kuala Solor, to be precise – and there Harold had passed away, ostensibly from a fever. Before the drama of the story begins, readers are treated again to the circumstances of the East in which people may lose their vitality and health. The importance of the story's setting is therefore moved to the foreground. In comparing her two daughters, Kathleen and Millicent, Mrs. Skinner wonders why Millicent, despite being the younger of the two, was no longer very pretty:

Millicent said the climate was trying. It was true she was a bad color. No one would think now that Millicent had been the prettier of the two. Kathleen had fared down as she grew older, of course some people said she was too

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thin, but now that she had cut her hair, with her cheeks red from playing golf in all weathers, Mrs. Skinner thought her quite pretty. No one could say that of poor Millicent; she had lost her figure completely; she had never been tall, and now that she had filled out she looked stocky. She was a good deal too fat; Mrs. Skinner supposed it was due to the tropical heat that prevented her from taking exercise. (Maugham 383)

While the above is a narrative about the health and physical appearance of Millicent, and how that altered in the tropics, it is also a commentary on the Orient's subversive effects on the westerner – at least in its physical manifestations. Thus, as the narrative progresses, so do the descriptions of the East as a place which is inhospitable, alien, and exotic to the point of incomprehension at one point. The plot thickens as it is revealed that Kathleen, while playing golf, had met a Bishop who had been to Singapore, and from him she had learnt that Harold committed suicide. It becomes obvious that Millicent had lied to her family about the cause of Harold's death. It had not been a fever which carried away Harold, but suicide, and the discovery of this shocks the family.

Everyone in the family begins to suspect that Millicent is hiding something unpleasant and this is what accounts for her indifference and lack of sadness at her husband's death. Eventually, it transpires that Millicent had been upset with Harold because he was a confirmed drunkard, and it was to reform himself that he decided to marry Millicent and take her over to the colonies. When Millicent's mother protests against this notion and claims that Harold had been in love with Millicent, memories of her life in Borneo with Harold flash before Millicent's eyes. The author again provides a vivid description of the FMS – its environs and its people – through the eyes of a colonist's wife:

Millicent looked at her mother again and a deep color dyed her sallow skin. Her hands, lying on her lap, began to tremble a little. She thought of those first months of her married life. The Government launch took them to the mouth of the river, and they spent the night at the bungalow which Harold said jokingly was their seaside residence. Next day they went upstream in a prahu. From the novels she had read she expected the rivers of Borneo to be dark and strangely sinister, but the sky was blue, dappled with little white clouds and the green of the mangroves and the nipahs, washed by the flowing water, glistened in the sun. On each side stretched the pathless jungle, and in the distance, silhouetted, were the rugged outline of a mountain. The air in the early morning was fresh and buoyant. She seemed to enter upon a friendly, fertile

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land, and she had a sense of spacious freedom. (Maugham 391)

Maugham is obviously portraying here the perception of the English about the environment of the East and how exotic it appeared to them when they landed there. Perceptions and ideas gained from popular books and stories must have been negative with a hint of the romantic and that is why Millicent thinks that the rivers ought to have been dark and strangely sinister. Of course, perception and reality differ, and that is when the Occidental is moved by an epiphany. Here Millicent is strongly in the grip of a sense of freedom and a buoyant spirit as she observes the natural beauty of Borneo from the launch. Thus, Maugham gradually builds the effects of the location – the exotic East – on his protagonists. A preoccupation with the East, and its supposedly untamed or brutal nature and uncivilized ways, was something that Maugham had espoused as an idea quite early in his career. He had been strangely appreciative of the unvarnished world that was the East. Maugham admired or romanticized the counterpoint of progress and civilization. As Mark Clement in his article “Queer Colonial Journeys: Alfred Russel Wallace and Somerset Maugham in the Malay Archipelago,” describes, Maugham was a stranger in the society where he lived. He cites Maugham’s diary entry that questions western civilization:

‘What is the advantage of progress? How does it benefit the Japanese that they have assumed Western Civilisation? Are not the Malays, on the borders of their forests, the Kanakas, on their fertile islands, as happy as the London slummer? What does it all end in? What is the use of it? I don’t know the answer.’ Here was the germ of his desire to travel to Asia to experience life stripped of the veneer of civilization. (179)

Maugham’s sojourns and the stories that came from that experience frequently pit the westerner against the untrammelled nature and people of the FMS that he found. That Millicent is experiencing the strangeness of Borneo in her very veins is quite evident from the descriptions Maugham provides. But as the story comes closer to its denouement those same exotic lands and the colonial projects being implemented by the westerners are seen to also unmake them. Harold, Millicent’s husband, takes up drinking, and becomes an alcoholic. Whenever confronted by Millicent, he puts the blame on the stress of being an empire builder or malaria: conditions that are the result of their being in Malaya. To excuse himself from his bad behavior Harold readily says “Pulls you down dreadfully, this confounded malaria. Ah, little woman, you little know the strain it puts upon a man to be an empire builder” (Maugham 394). Millicent’s anger against Harold increases gradually as she finds one indiscretion after another as he pursues the bottle. She feels mortified when one of Harold’s underlings informs her that Harold keeps a bottle in his office to

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drink from during working hours. Eventually it turns out to be too much, and Millicent becomes exasperated when Harold refuses to reform himself. The shocking finale of the story reveals to Millicent’s stunned family the reason behind her reticence and lack of feeling at Harold’s death: it was Millicent who had murdered her husband in a fit of uncontrolled rage after one of Harold’s drunken episodes. Harold neither committed suicide nor died of a fever. Through Millicent’s narration, the author paints a graphic picture of the vicious deed, committed using, again, a local weapon, a parang, which is a Malayan sword:

“The parang was on the wall, I told you.

I don’t know what happened. There was all the blood, and Harold opened his eyes. He died almost at once. He never spoke, but he gave a sort of gasp.”

At last Mr. Skinner found his voice.

“But, you wretched woman, it was murder.”

Millicent, her face mottled with red, gave him such a look of scornful hatred that he shrank back. Mrs. Skinner cried out.

“Millicent, you didn’t do it, did you?”

Then Millicent did something that made them all feel as though their blood were turned to ice in their veins. She chuckled.

“I don’t know who else did,” she said. (Maugham 401)

“Before the Party” is, thus, another story set in the FMS where Maugham exposes the decimation of a colonial administrator. Like “The Outstation,” this story, too, employs local colors, conditions, and the environment that appear to work in complicity to destroy the white man unfortunate enough to reside here. The use of local weapons, such as a kris or parang, to kill the man is also emblematic of the active or passive hostility of the vanquished lands in question. In “The Outstation,” a local kills the assistant to the Resident, and in “Before the Party,” Harold is murdered by his own wife. His death, to use Cole’s term, is “disenchanted.” It was a waste that Harold died so brutally; his existence seems to have been purposeless, and it came to an end randomly as the parang violently slit his throat. The matter of fact way in which Millicent narrates the evil deed increases the sordidness of the story.

After the terrible revelation, and the initial shock, the Skinner family recovers quickly, and together, goes out of the house to attend the party:

He led her out of the room. Kathleen followed close on their heels, and a step or two behind came Millicent.

“You’ll get used to it, you know,” she said quietly. “At first I thought of it all the time, but now I forget it for two or three days together. It’s not as if there was any danger.”

They did not answer. They walked through the hall and out of the front door. The three ladies got into the back of car and Mr. Skinner seated himself beside the driver. (Maugham 402)

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This chilling description highlights how useless Harold's death was: the world went about its business with complete indifference to him, and his violent death did not change anything.

Much like "Before the Party," "The Force of Circumstance" sets out to show the influence of the natural environment in FMS on new arrivals. The very first paragraph of the story describes a married woman's perception of the natural scenes around her house as she awaits her husband, a colonial resident in the Sembulu province of FMS, to arrive home:

She was sitting on the verandah waiting for her husband to come in for luncheon. The Malay boy had drawn the blinds when the morning lost its freshness, but she had partly raised one of them so that she could look at the river. Under the breathless sun of the midday it had the white pallor of death. A native was paddling in a dug-out so small that it hardly showed above the surface of the water. The colors of the day were ashy and wan. They were but the various tones of heat. (It was like an Eastern melody, in the minor key, which exacerbates the nerves by its ambiguous monotony; and the ear awaits impatiently a resolution, but waits in vain.) (Maugham 481)

This provides a brief sketch of a day in the lives of the newly married couple, Doris and Guy. Doris, in love with Guy, was brought over to Sembulu as his wife while Guy was serving the Sultan of Sembulu as a resident in an outstation. It is interesting to note how the monotony of nature almost portends to Doris that something unhappy is to come, and its various sounds almost wear down her nerves. In another paragraph of the story, the author describes the general impression Doris received when she arrived in the Malayan Archipelago. The impression has a marked resemblance to that of Millicent in "Before the Party":

Of course she had read novels about the Malayan Archipelago and she had formed an impression of a sombre land with great ominous rivers and a silent, impenetrable jungle. When the little coasting steamer set them down at the mouth of the river, where a large boat, manned by a dozen Dyaks, was waiting to take them to the station, her breath was taken away by the beauty, friendly rather than awe-inspiring, of the scene. It had gaiety, like the joyful singing of birds in the trees, which she had never expected. (Maugham 486)

The fact that the white men and women who travelled to the East were informed by literature or travel stories about the colonies is implicit. Travelers and authors imparted to the Europeans a somewhat negative and foreboding impression about the East (162). In Maugham's writing, this is implicit, for the contrast that Doris experiences when she arrives in Sembulu surprises her. But then, as she settles down

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in the colonies and begins to experience the strange circumstances that condition the lives of the empire builders who are doomed to work in these places, her impressions change. The change is brought about by Doris's growing awareness of the practice of the cohabitation of white men with local women which results in illegitimate children, abroad of half-castes. Children and sexual ties are nothing but inconsequential – an accepted arrangement for white men, practiced in these parts of the world, which could be slipped out of easily – and not deemed to be an impediment to a proper marriage with a white woman from England. But the author gradually reveals how Doris becomes aware of the woman who previously held sway in Guy's life, and she finally finds it impossible to accept the injustice of the arrangement, the unsavory smack of the cohabitation in her married life, and the subsequent annulment of her marriage which she could no longer continue.

Every night when she went to bed she leaned over Guy and lightly kissed his cheek. Her lips only touched it. It was as though a moth had just brushed his face in its flight. A second month passed, then a third, and suddenly the six months which had seemed so interminable were over. Guy asked himself whether she remembered. He gave a strained attention now to everything she said, to every look on her face and to every gesture of her hands. (Maugham 500)

Despite giving herself six months to adjust to her life with Guy in Sembulu, Doris fails. Her whole being eventually revolts against Guy despite the extenuating circumstances that were explained in detail to her by him. She decides to leave him as she could no longer tolerate the transgressions that were being perpetrated in colonies like the FMS. She gives him a sad and harrowing explanation for her decision as she leaves. The ending makes this story very subtle yet sublime, where a transgression against native women as well as white women is portrayed in all its lurid details and harmful consequences:

"Listen, Guy, I want to tell you again that I don't blame you for a single thing you did. After all, you were only a boy, and you did no more than the others; I know what the loneliness is here. Oh, my dear, I'm so dreadfully sorry for you. I knew all that from the beginning. That's why I asked you for six months. My common sense tells me that I am making a mountain out of a molehill. I'm unreasonable; I am being unfair to you. But, you see, commonsense has nothing to do with it; my whole soul is in revolt. When I see the woman and her children in the village I just feel my legs shaking. Everything in this house; when I think of that bed I slept in it gives me gooseflesh. ... You don't know what I have endured."

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"I think I've persuaded her to go away. And I've applied for a transfer."

"That wouldn't help. She'll be there always. You belong to them; you don't belong to me."
(Maugham 501)

The confrontation with the marital transgression is not the only experience that shatters Doris's marriage and her first impressions of the East. The subtle influences of nature, the people, and the power structure in the colony within which she finds herself also contribute to her disillusionment. Maugham shows that there are many levels of depravity at various strata of the colonial condition.

Assuming that eccentricity, bitterness, blood-letting, and violence should inevitably erupt in the jungles, the environs and the native people are subject to the taming operations of the white colonialists. That the murders committed in Maugham's stories discussed here can be labeled as "disenchanted violence" is evident: both the deaths are useless, wasteful, and empty in their sordidness. They are forced violence, evil in the worst sense of the word. The transgression is also squalid, at least unacceptable in terms of the vaunted western sensibilities of the time. The violence and transgression are shown to be the negative outcomes of loneliness, isolation, and sexual angst of the stranded white men in the tropics.

Maugham's short stories often utilize complex structures and an abundance of irony. The complex structure is an end in itself because it is sophisticated, and sophistication also produces suspense, irony, and "facilitates abrupt changes of attitude from section to section, and adds another dimension of meaning to the story" (Sopher 111).

Conclusion

The three stories discussed in this paper, in the richness of their setting, plot, dimensions of meaning, the abrupt changes of attitude from section to section (for example, Millicent confessing to the murder of her husband to her concerned parents, and then filing out with them cheerfully to a party), and overall, in terms of irony, are quite sophisticated, and complex productions. Debra Kay Stoner Barker, in *Ironic Designs in the Exotic Short Fiction of W. Somerset Maugham*, explains that Maugham in his South Sea stories (including the FMS stories) explores the dialectic of expectation and outcome, hope-disappointment, illusion-reality (1): "The narrative voice in Maugham's stories, whether that of the omniscient or the dramatized first-person narrator, draws attention to the discrepancy between the ideal and the actual, using irony to highlight characterization as people are shown to be something other than they might be or what they are" (Barker 2). This analysis is quite congruent to the stories analyzed here in terms of their portrayal of violence and transgression. For instance, could Warburton guess that Cooper would turn out to be such a disruption and trial to his aloof and orderly life? Could Cooper anticipate that his employment as an assistant would entail bitter reckoning with his dubious social position, his dislikes, and ultimately his nemesis? The answers to these questions are provided in the most

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ironic way possible. Maugham even reveals his tropical settings as ironies: tropical paradises which are deemed to be dreams turn out to be nightmares (Barker 2). This becomes clear if the first impressions of Millicent and Doris on their arrival in Malaya are taken into account, and are compared to the bitterness with which they finally leave that "paradise." The fantasy and reality of colonial contexts are also eerily prescient in the stories. This study of violence and transgression in some of Maugham's short stories gives an idea of how positive as well as negative perceptions about the Orient and the East were propagated by western literature: first from their sense of adventure, then from their encounters with the otherness of the environment and culture of the East, to the implosion of the colonial projects manifested in the chaos, violence, and transgressions, aggravated perhaps by the isolation imposed by this geographical separation from the West, that countered the moral codes and principles advertised by the westerners of the period. Research on how stories written by the likes of Maugham shaped the popular consciousness of the westerners in the final days of the colonies would help clarify how perceptions about the East have evolved in literature. The foreignness as well as the inevitability of the violence or transgression are also issues that maybe explored further. The stories are dark and almost sanction a tragic end, a deplorable finale to the colonists' endeavor to build a meaningful life in the Orient. Maugham's characterization of violence as "disenchanted" and his use of irony almost suggest a wry commentary on the future disintegration of the colonies, and therefore is prescient. More research on the real life stories of the Warburtons, Millicents and Guys would serve to understand the western psyche that confronted the East and recorded it. Literature from that period, especially from writers like Maugham and Kipling, needs to be discussed in light of the portrayals of violence, loneliness, and resolutions of sexual desire, so that deeper insight into the shaping of western ideas about the East with respect to conflict, isolation and sexual norms can be gained. Finally, the contemporary literature and narratives on violence and transgression that are found encapsulated in the short-story format can also be examined against the FMS short-stories of Maugham in order to figure out how the context, narrative style, geographic location and nature of the violence had changed (as reported by the short-story format). As alluded earlier in the paper, the violence and war that deliver stories from places like Gaza, or Syria, Ukraine or war-torn Afghanistan can show us stunning parallels with the bygone era of colonies when Maugham wrote his stories. New material for the evolution of such literature can be found for further studies and gaining new insights as academics and researchers delve into the topic

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