

THE BRITISH EMPIRE AS A FAMILY IN W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM'S "THE FORCE OF CIRCUMSTANCE"



Forum for Contemporary Issues
in Language and Literature
No. 1/2020

ISSN: 2391-9426
doi.org/10.34739/fci.2020.01.04

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Abstract

Set in the context of early 20th century Malaya, W. Somerset Maugham's (1874–1965) short story "The Force of Circumstance" (1926) concisely represents the conflicting attitudes to sex and family life among the British colonial employees. The narrative, which develops around the main hero Guy's relationships with his English wife Doris and an unnamed Malay concubine, reflects a contrast between the attitudes to sex dominant in the official imperial ideology of that time and the practice in the colonies. The frameworks of narratology and Cognitive Poetics make it possible to read the complicated situation of the main hero as an extended metaphor of the British Empire, in which formal and informal family relations map onto the relations between Great Britain and the dependent states. Though the British imperial ideology used the concept of family to strengthen the relations between the metropole and the colonies, Maugham's story represents the Empire as a not-so-happy family – a result of circumstances rather than of mutual bond and consent.

Key words

British Empire, concubinage, family, ideology, marriage, metaphor, narrative, prototype, sexuality

Introduction

W. Somerset Maugham (1874–1965) never worked in the medical profession for which he was trained. Instead, he served as an agent for the British Intelligence during the First World War. After the War, he travelled extensively to the South Seas and Asia, visiting British colonies in the region and getting first-hand experience of their life (Drabble and Stringer 1987, 361). Maugham became a successful and popular author of plays, novels, and short stories. As a writer, he combined "an economical and exact means of fixing the sense of place, often exotic places; and an equally economical skill in realizing the crisis of the story" (Ross 1917, 356) with "permanent sense of the nature and ends of human existence" (Muir 1926, 30).

Focusing on "The Force of Circumstance", one of the stories that deal with the complex issues of sexuality, race, and family in the British Empire, the present paper has two principal aims. First, it reads the story as a matter-of-fact image of sexuality

and family life in British Malaya and shows the contrast between the official imperial directives and the practice of the colonial employees. Secondly, basing on the frameworks of narratology and Cognitive Poetics, it attempts to uncover the meanings that go beyond the sequence of events constituting the simple and economic narrative. Cognitive metaphor, which is not “merely a matter of words”, but also “a matter of [...] all kinds of thought” and a tool “indispensable not only to our imagination but also to our reason” (Lakoff and Turner 1989, xi), facilitates an interpretation of the story as a questioning of the idea of the imperial family of nations, which was present in the official discourse of the time.

1. The Background: Sexuality and Family in the British Empire

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the attitudes to sex had a profound impact on the lives of the British colonial elites and the subjects of the Empire. Sexual relations in the colonies took various forms. There were white families living together, which had regular conjugal sex. Less stable patterns were related to migration. Enslavement of the colonial subjects, as well as temporary sexual relations with local women, were also common (Stoler and Cooper 1997a, 5). The attitudes thus ranged between the exercise of sexual restraint linked to the Puritan morality at home and easy access to various sexual opportunities (Hyam 2010, 1). The situation began to change with the case of sexual abuse committed by Hubert Silberrad (1879–1952), a colonial employee in Kenya. After a long and detailed investigation, a sexual directive to the members of the Colonial Service was issued in 1909 by Lord Crewe (1858–1945), the Secretary of State for the Colonies, which condemned concubinage (Hyam 1986; 1990, 418–419; 2010, 157). Known as Crewe’s Circular, it was an offshoot of the morality of sexual restraint and the Purity Campaign launched in Victorian England in 1869, exported overseas, and continued into the Edwardian times (Hyam 2010, 149).

Apart from morality and psychological dispositions, sexual contacts with local women were believed to contribute to racial, cultural, and moral contamination. It was thought that concubinage and prostitution could strengthen or undermine the authority of the imperial elites (Cooper and Stoler 1997b, 25–26). Though the British were susceptible to frequent boundary crossings, in many cases there was fear of “going native” and of miscegenation, which was likely to produce “fabricated Europeans” (Stoler and Cooper 1997a, 5; 1997b, 26). Going native, though assumed by some colonial employees, became unacceptable within the official imperial ideology:

To the extent that European officials, settlers, and traders interacted sexually with colonized women, they threatened “racial purity” and opened up questions about the clarity of the cultural conventions that secured male white supremacy through distinctions of class, race and gender (Stoler and Cooper 1997a, 1).

In India, for example, sexual relations led to marriages with indigenous women, which gave rise to a new racial group called the Anglo-Indians. Their “ambiguous identity caused considerable worry to officials concerned with the social markers of British power” (Stoler and Cooper 1997a, 5). By contrast, in Sudan sexual restraint was a consistent practice. This was because, with few exceptions, the colonial elites took their civilising mission in Africa¹ more seriously than in other parts of the Empire (Hyam 2010, 159).

2. “The Force of Circumstance”: A matter-of-fact interpretation

In Malaya the situation was different. Both James Brooke (1803–1868) and Charles Brooke (1829–1917) – the rulers of Sarawak – encouraged concubinage and frowned on white wives. James’s private secretary openly wanted to amalgamate races and had a son by a Sarawak woman when he became a raja in 1873. Even though permanent marriages were discouraged for fear of conferring status on native women, intermarriage continued well into the 1950s (Hyam 2010, 158; Reece 1985 cit. in Hyam 2010, 179). Sir Hugh Clifford (1866–1941), a colonial administrator in Malaya, also supported concubinage and even wrote novels about it (Hyam 2010, 158).

In the Preface to the third volume of his short stories, Maugham writes:

In the old days Sarawak, say, or Selangor were where they [colonial employees] were expected to spend their lives till it was time for them to retire on a pension; England was very far away and when at long intervals they went back was increasingly strange to them; their real home, their intimate friends, were in the land in which the better part of their lives was spent (1976, vii).

The emergence of aviation, which made frequent visits to England possible, turned the reality upside down (Maugham 1976, viii). As a result, the colonies became less homely and more peripheral.

“The Force of Circumstance” neatly illustrates the situation in Malaya prior to the change. Guy – the main hero – is a colonial employee who

was born in Sembulu, where his father had served for thirty years under the second Sultan, and on leaving school he had entered the same service. He was devoted to the country (Maugham 1966, 198).

¹ By contrast, the French colonial attitudes in Africa were more tolerant, possibly because they were motivated by religion to a much lesser extent. Intermarriage was believed to strengthen the French influence in the region (Paxman 2007, 98–99).

He has a native-like command of the language, profits from the good reputation of his father, and the locals do not look upon him “quite as a stranger” (Maugham 1966, 210). He rarely visits England and lives on an outstation. When he travels to the home country on leave and first meets Doris, he tells her: “After all, England’s a foreign land to me [...] My home’s Sembulu” (Maugham 1966, 198). They fall in love and get married in England.

Guy and Doris then decide to return to Sembulu. Though it is a new place for her, she assumes the role of a prototypical wife responsible for home-making:

It was a dreary, comfortless life that Guy had led there [...] She had deft hands and she soon made the room habitable [...] friendly and comfortable. [...] She felt an inordinate pride because it was her house [...] and she had made it charming for him (Maugham 1966, 203).

The life they soon begin to live becomes similar to the life in England of that time: the man works, the wife takes care of the home, they enjoy afternoon games of tennis and evening meals and drinks. Doris is also studying Malay industriously to fit into the local conditions.

Soon an unnamed Malay woman begins to intrude on them. She comes close to the house, at first stares only at Doris, then at both of them. The intrusion makes Guy and Doris’s life uncomfortable, so Guy decides to admit that she is his concubine and the mother of three half-caste children. The children are well provided for and likely to go to school and work as clerks in some colonial office. Guy tries to justify his behaviour by sketching his lonely and boring life on an outstation:

It’s awfully lonely on an outstation. Why, often one doesn’t see another white man for six months on end. A fellow comes out here when he’s only a boy [...] I’d never been alone before. [...] I seemed always to live in a crowd. I like people. I’m a noisy blighter. I like to have a good time. [...] But it was different here (Maugham 1966, 201, 209–210).

Taking a local concubine was thus an expedient solution:

I wasn’t in love with her, not even at the beginning. I only took her so as to have somebody about the bungalow. [...] I sent her back to the village before I left here. I told her it was all over. I gave her what I’d promised. She always knew it was only a temporary arrangement. I was fed up with it. I told her I was going to marry a white woman (Maugham 1996, 210).

He further justifies the situation by explaining the broader context of life in Malaya:

I couldn't expect you to understand. The circumstances out here are peculiar. It's the regular thing. Five men out of six do it. [...] But she was never in love with me any more than I was in love with her. Native women never do really care for white men, you know (Maugham 1966, 211–213).

Guy even argues that the old Sultan encouraged mixed contacts to keep the country quiet.

Guy's attitude to the half-caste children is not that of a prototypical father, who – irrespective of the social model of family (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 313–316) – is emotionally attached to his offspring. He tells Doris:

I want to be quite frank with you. I should be sorry if anything happened to them. When the first one was expected I thought I'd be much fonder of it than of its mother. I suppose I should have been if it had been white. [...] but I had no particular feeling that it was mine. I think that's what it is; you see, I have no sense of their belonging to me. I've reproached myself sometimes, because it seemed rather unnatural, but the honest truth is that they're no more to me than if they were somebody else's children (Maugham 1966, 213).

Guy thinks that the children – much like his relationship with their mother – are just an offshoot of the circumstances. To Doris, however, they are his family: “She'll be there always. You belong to them, you don't belong to me” (Maugham 1966, 219). She cannot come to terms with the new situation and, after six months, decides to return home. Soon after Guy lets the Malay woman in and she is ready to satisfy his needs. He also puts on a local jacket and a sarong, and walks barefoot, which additionally makes him a part of the local community and its particular circumstances.

The story thus represents all aspects of permissive attitudes to sexuality common in the British Malaya: the social isolation and boredom of the employees, as well as the sexual contacts with the local women that help them to live relatively regular lives and adjust to the local situation. Those relations, however, do not create prototypical families – they give the white men some emotional and sexual benefits; the local women – because they are the weaker side – benefit from them mainly financially.

3. The metaphor of family in political discourse

The concept of “family” frequently underlies conventional conceptualizations of various forms of political organizations, such as governments, nations, countries,

and empires (Lakoff 1996, 5–8; Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 319–320; Nünning 2004). The metaphor A POLITICAL ORGANIZATION IS A FAMILY functions on the linguistic and discursive levels, as well as in visual representations of various countries and states. For example, Poland is usually represented as a mother. So is Russia, which – apart from conventional discourse and literature – is evident in the statue of Mother Russia in Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad). Germany and some of its parts are also represented as female figures: the examples include the Germania statue in Rudesheim am Rhein and the Bavaria statue in Munich. Marianne, the half-naked woman holding the French flag, represents France on Eugène Delacroix's (1798–1863) painting "Liberty Leading the People" (1830–1831) – one of the best-known pictorial representations of the family metaphor. Though the American government is commonly represented as Uncle Sam, the metaphor of mother is common in political discourse related to the local government (Lakoff 1996, 5–8). The Statue of Liberty, donated to the United States by the French government, represents the country as a woman and as a mother. The poem engraved at the entrance to the monument refers to America as "Mother of Exiles" (Kövecses 2002, 59–60).

In the mid-19th century the idea of the British imperial "family" described a group of states constitutionally connected to the United Kingdom (Johnstone 2016, 17). Like a typical family, the British national community was to be "bound by shared norms, values, and purpose" (Bell 2007, 113 cit. in Johnstone 2016, 17). The metaphor was employed not only "to blur the lines between home and abroad while Britain attempted to shore up the idea of a wider British national racial identity geographically across the Empire", but also to counter strong racist overtones rooted in Darwin's legacy (Johnstone 2016, 17). Because it was also used to emphasize the political superiority of the British (Johnstone 2016, 10), it is evident in the Victoria Memorial in London, erected to commemorate the Queen during whose reign the British Empire reached its peak. The statue facing Buckingham Palace represents the Maternity and the Queen's love for her people both at home and in the colonies.

Such discourse persisted well into the 20th century. Following the abdication of King Edward VIII (1894–1972) in 1936, the British Royal Family used the metaphor to draw a new picture of itself and its values around the new king (Johnstone 2016, 16). The metaphor was still used after World War II, when in 1948–1949 the Empire gradually transformed into the British Commonwealth of Nations. The 1949 speech by the Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee (1883–1967) is a well-known example of its discursive force:

At the head of the Commonwealth is a family. The family does in a very real sense symbolize the family nature of the Commonwealth [...] It is not altogether fanciful to compare this conception with that of the Holy Family in the Christian world (The Commonwealth Secretariat 2016 cit. in Johnstone 2016, 8).

The metaphor is also present in Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's (b. 1926) first Christmas Broadcast delivered in 1952:

At Christmas our thoughts are always full of our homes and our families. [...] But we belong, you and I, to a far larger family. We belong, all of us, to the British Commonwealth and Empire, that immense union of nations, with their homes set in all the four corners of the earth. Like our own families, it can be a great power for good – a force which I believe can be of immeasurable benefit to all humanity (The Royal Family 2018).

It was consistently repeated on many other occasions, especially in the Queen's Christmas Broadcast delivered in 1970:

I am thinking of a rather special family – a family of nations – as I recall fascinating journeys to opposite ends of the world [...] Yet in all this diversity they [the people] had one thing in common: they were all members of the Commonwealth family (The Royal Family 2015 cit. in Johnstone 2016, 8).

The Queen's view of the family of nations as 'special' possibly reflected a new form of power relations between the members: Britain's influence decreased as the states gradually became independent.

Irrespective of its version, the metaphor of the British Empire as a family had numerous entailments. Britain was viewed as the "mother country"; the parts of the Empire were the "children". Such discourse created a homely image based on order, succession, lineage, limited independence, and fellowship (Nünning 2004, 74–75)². It also implied the presence of mutual support, loyalty, and commitment between the members of such a family.

4. "The Force of Circumstance": A metaphorical interpretation

A narrative is not only a major element of many literary works, but also "the fundamental instrument" on which our capacity for rational thinking depends (Turner 1996, 4–5). It can be read as a fictional account of a segment of life, but it often follows recurrent patterns which represent culture-specific or cross-cultural understandings of heroes, emotions, ideas, institutions, etc. (Booth 1961; Campbell 1949; Hogan 2003, 2011; Propp 1958; Todorov 1968, 1977). Such concepts are frequently perceived in terms of prototype-based categories built around their salient or best

² Nünning (2004, 68–73) mentions other metaphors that highlight the strong connections between the main element and the related parts: empire as a tree, a fleet, or a body politic. The first one is closest to the family metaphor because it emphasizes natural links between the members.

examples (Lakoff 1987, 58–90; Rosch 1977; Rosch and Mervis 1975; Kövecses 2006, 21–30; Wittgenstein 1953). Narratives, even if they reflect unfamiliar actions or emotions, often do so by means of reference to prototype-based categories simply because much of conventional and literary thinking takes place in terms of some salient or best examples of various phenomena.

The recurrent structures of narratives function as prototype-based and idealized cognitive scenarios or “frames” (Fillmore 1985; Turner 1991) that can be projected onto more abstract concepts. Such projections or mappings constitute the essence of metaphors, which extend, elaborate, and even question various ideas current in conventional discourse. Metaphor-based narratives thus serve as an efficient cognitive device for constructing complex literary meanings (Crisp 2003, 99–113; Deane 1995, 628–630; Steen 2003, 67–82; Lakoff 1993, 229–235, 237–238; Lakoff and Turner 1989, 67–72; Steen and Gavins 2002, 1; Stockwell 2002, 105–119).

Maugham’s short story can be read as a complex metaphor of the British Empire based on the cognitive frame of family. Unlike some of the representations of the metaphor mentioned above, its narrative shows the motivation for the creation of family, the stages of the process, as well as its outcome.

Apart from the play on some social stereotypes³ of its heroes, the simple narrative of the story involves the prototypical scenario of romantic love. Hogan (2011, 90–91 cit. in Kövecses 2006, 91) describes such scenario in terms of the following conventional stages:

sexual attraction → romantic love → romantic union (marriage) → enduring happiness

The scenario culminates in marriage, which involves bond and attachment between the lovers (Hogan 2011, 77, 108), as well as “delight in the presence of the attachment object” (Kövecses 1986, 63). All of its stages but for the last one are present in Guy’s relationship with his English wife Doris. Though only the first stage is to some extent present in Guy’s affair with the Malay woman, it is this relationship that will ultimately last.

The simplicity and conventionality of the scenario of emotion belie the depth of the meaning of the story. At its heart is the complex metaphor THE BRITISH EMPIRE IS A FAMILY, which also involves some minor metaphors contributing to its overall effect. Via the metaphor A STATE OR A COUNTRY IS A PERSON (Kövecses 2002, 60), Guy, Doris, and their way of life represent the typical Britain of their time. The Malay woman, who comes from a poor local family, personifies the colonies. Because Sembulu is a dull place where one mainly works, Guy brings Doris there to make the

³ A stereotype is a kind of prototype (Lakoff 1996, 10). Though Guy is not a prototypical father, Doris does her best to be a prototypical wife.

place feel like an English home⁴. He fails because his nameless Malay concubine and their three half-caste children begin to intrude on them. The Malay woman pesters them at home and on one occasion has to be brutally turned out by one of the boys. Her physical presence is thus a way to make her social importance felt. On other occasions she stares impassively at Doris or at Guy and Doris. Such actions represent the pressure of the local conditions on the English couple by means of the metaphors SOCIAL BEHAVIOURS ARE PHYSICAL FORCES⁵ and SEEING IS TOUCHING⁶ (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 54). Guy's attempt to get rid of his Malay family any time he wants represents Britain's wish to use her colonies in an instrumental way and only for her own good. His failure to do so corresponds to a permanent effect of the process of colonization on Britain. At the same time, the concubine's subservience to Guy represents the political and economic subservience of the countries forming the Empire to its metropole.

The complex metaphor underlying the plot of the story can be represented by means of the following diagram, in which the arrows indicate the direction of the mappings:

A FAMILY	→	THE BRITISH EMPIRE
Guy and Doris	→	Britain
Guy's nameless concubine	→	Britain's colonies lacking their own identity
Guy's bringing Doris to Sembulu	→	Britain's making the colonies home
Guy's three half-caste children	→	mixing of cultures and races in the Empire
Guy's attitude to his informal family	→	Britain's power and superiority
the Malay woman's subservience to Guy	→	the subservience of the colonies to Britain

Elements and stages of the frame of Guy's relationship with a Malay woman metaphorically represent the relations between Britain and her Empire as a non-prototypical family. It is not held by any strong emotional bond or by a legal bond that guarantees the same rights to both sides. Instead, it is a utilitarian response to local circumstances, which represents the relations between the metropole and the dependent states as far less ideal than claimed by the official imperial ideology prevalent at that time.

⁴ The culture-specific English attitude to home is reflected here – no other nation pays more attention to the idea than the English (Paxman 2007, 168).

⁵ Social behaviours are often understood as forces or barriers (Talmy 1988, 53–54) – people can thus *resist* certain actions or be *pushed* towards them by the accompanying conditions. See Albritton (1992 cit. in Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 83–85) for experimental confirmation of the conceptual impact of force as metaphor.

⁶ Looking implies close physical contact and so causes discomfort. The metaphor is motivated by “the correlation between the visual and tactile exploration of objects” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 54).

Conclusions

Though married, Guy and Doris do not have children. Their relationship is close to a prototypical family, but it fails. Though children are born out of it, the relationship of Guy and the Malay woman is not a case of intermarriage. It resembles a marriage of convenience⁷, but it is expected to provide social advantages which mainly benefit Guy. The relationship thus creates a family which – though non-prototypical – turns out to be lasting.

Maugham's simple narrative owes much of its effect to the blending of non-prototypical realizations of the cultural frames of romantic love and marriage with the conventional metaphor A POLITICAL ORGANIZATION IS A FAMILY. In the clash of races and cultures, the relationship of Guy and his Malay concubine reflects the view of the British Empire as "rather a special family of nations", in which mainly the stronger member is expected to profit. In this way the story becomes an implicit comment on the use of the concept of *family* in the British imperial ideology.

Maugham's other works, for example "The Yellow Streak" (1926) and "Outstation" (1926), contain many images of the life of the British colonial employees. Because he refrains from taking a firm standpoint on the issues of the Empire and expresses implicit rather than straightforward comments, Maugham can be regarded as an emotionally detached complement to Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) and Joseph Conrad (1857–1924) – two great writers that grappled with the theme of colonialism. He is far from the aggressive imperialism or even jingoism of such Kipling's poems as "A British-Roman Song" (1906), "Recessional" (1897), "The White Man's Burden" (1899), and his "art for Empire's sake" (Rodway 1983, 388); he is equally far from the crushing criticism of colonial ideology of Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" (1902).

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⁷ See Goldenson and Anderson (1994) on various cultural conceptions of marriage.

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