CHAPTER – III

THE SINGAPORE GRIP : TREATMENT OF IMPERIALISM

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3.1) INTRODUCTION :

The Singapore Grip (1978) is the third novel in Farrell's "Empire Trilogy". Farrell's trilogy is implicitly about the decline of modern Britain and significantly he selected moments in history which involved blows to imperial self-esteem and a loss of cultural self-confidence. The books are connected in that all deal with various moments in the decline of the British Empire, but they expand notably in scope. In *The Singapore Grip*, Farrell convincingly recreates Singapore of 1942, on the verge of its fall to the Japanese. This is a book of epic proportions, playing off, often humorously, the pomposity of British colonials and the grim onset of occupation by the Japanese. The blindness of the colonials, their arrogance and their disregard of native people is significant, in that the reader know that humility in the form of a ruthless invading Japanese war machine is just over the horizon. Farrell's ability to place the reader in pre-war Singapore is well-executed.

Farrell's novels of the 'Empire Trilogy' were set during three different assaults on British rule: *Troubles* (1970) during the brutal guerrilla war in Ireland in 1919-1921; *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) during the Indian Mutiny of 1857; and *The Singapore Grip* (1978) in the years leading upto and during the Japanese invasion of Malaya and Singapore. In all the three stories of violence and calamity Farrell juxtaposed an Austenean comedy of manners with slapstick and gallows

humour, and punctuated the whole with absurdist scenes. Although, *The Siege of Krishnapur* is his most finely balanced book, *The Singapore Grip* is his broadest canvas and most elaborate work. Ramifying from an account of the relationship between the two British partners of a Singapore commercial firm, the novel takes readers on leisurely tours of, for instance, the nightlife of Singapore (then perhaps the world's most cosmopolitan city); the rubber plantations (with their exploited workforce of Chinese, Indians and Malays); and the Briton's intricate social world (characterized by the cloying ennui and bitter jealousies engendered by a willfully self-contained community). But all the while the novel tells a story of great narrative intensity; the shocking and relentless Japanese advance that sent British and Australian troops and their vacillating commanders scurrying down the Malaya Peninsula. Singapore's fate was sealed almost at the start of the invasion, and Farrell matchlessly conveys the dull terror of incipient disaster that seized that rich, modern, but isolated and artificial metropolis.

The novel focuses on the life of a wealthy colonial family and provides massive and intelligent insight into one of the pillars of the Asian part of the Empire: the rubber industry. The Japanese invasion changed Singapore forever, and it is difficult for many to recall what the settlement founded by Sir Stamford Raffles in the nineteenth century on the site of a small fishing village was once like. The Singapore Swing recaptures colonial Singapore in its decadent heydays and transports the reader into the world of the haves and have nots. The Singapore Swing is a tragic commentary on the follies and evils of empire- both British and Japanese.

Though *The Singapore Grip* is the most experimental and anti-realistic of Farrell's novels, it has an unquestionably firm substratum of historical facts. In the Author's Note to *The Singapore Grip*, Farrell pointed out that "although many of its bricks are real, its architecture is entirely fantastic" (P.7). Farrell's note clearly points to the two vital facets of the novel- the realist and the anti-realist- and therefore, any reading that fails to take into account the factual foundations- 'the bricks'- of this great masterpiece, would be to miss the submerged part of the proverbial iceberg. An attempt is made in the following pages to articulate the realist and anti-realist dimensions of *The Singapore Grip*.

3.2) [IRONIC] TREATMENT OF IMPERIALISM :

While *Troubles* (1970) and *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) treat of the internal disturbances caused by the native population, *The Singapore* Grip deals with the first major threat to the Empire posed by an external Asiatic power. Historically, *The Singapore Grip* fictionalizes the British surrender of Singapore to the Japanese force during World War-II. 'The fall of Singapore', as it came to be called is widely held to be one of the greatest diplomatic disasters of imperial Britain. Colin Cross described it as 'the worst single military defeat the empire ever suffered' (1968:240). There was something quite anti-heroic and bathetic about Britain's loss of its 'grip' on Singapore which lends itself to 'Farrellesque fictionalization'. As the leading business centre of South Asia which facilitated maritime access to other formidable colonies like India, Australia and New Zealand, Singapore was of great consequence to the Empire. As a result, British administration always expended much energy and money in making it an impregnable vantage point of the Empire and gradually, 'fortress Singapore' began to be looked upon as an inspiring

symbol of imperial sovereignty. Therefore, the British surrender of Singapore to the Japanese came as a totally unexpected and humiliating shock to the British national consciousness and to the official disseminators of the imperial mystique. The bitter irony of history becomes very evident when one considers the air of arrogant confidence which characterized the official attitude towards the defensibility of Singapore. Referring to Caroline Moorhead, Farrell pointed out that Britain's loss of Singapore was "an episode of British history largely left alone by historians perhaps ....because it was a defeat, not a victory" (1978:46).

Farrell's main focus in *The Singapore Grip*, however, does not fall on the tactical oversight of British resistance which resulted in the loss of Britain's 'grip' on one of its formidable colonies but on the way in which Britain held weaker nations in its crushing 'grip' strangling the native economy. In other words, primarily Farrell is concerned with the politics of economic imperialism. He presents the readers with enough facts about the economic reasons for the Japanese invasion of Singapore. From the British point of view, a war with Japan had begun long before the actual Japanese attack and in silence by means of quotas, price-cutting and a stealthy invasion of traditional markets. Since the end of World War-I, there had been a steady 'deposit' of British commerce in the Far East. By 1934, the Japanese had begun to make inroads into British textile markets which resulted in the introduction of import quotas on cotton and rayon goods destined for Malaya. And the British merchants in Singapore, disconcerted at the possibility of loosing their 'grip' on the market, had protested to the Colonial Office that if the British could not compete with

Japan, the commercial interests of the imperial firms would be irreparably damaged.

From the Japanese point of view, the war was the ultimate solution for economic survival which depended heavily on silk and cotton. Forty percent of Japan's total export trade then was silk. The disastrous effects of the slump at home froze their assets and forced them to look for foreign markets. At a time when the average Japanese price for textiles was ten cents a yard, it was twenty cents for the same product in the markets in the Far East which were under the 'grip' of imperial Britain. After having conquered the markets of China and Manchuria, the Japanese began to extend their influence far and wide, an attempt at survival which gradually grew into the dream of an economic empire which was "an excellent imitation of the sort of economic imperialism ....which Britain herself had been making in Asia since the 1880s" (P.139).

Farrell, in *The Singapore Grip* undertakes to explore the ruthless politics of British economic imperialism through an excellent use of the rhetoric of the 'grip' and through a presentation of the vicissitudes in the life and fortunes of a British rubber tycoon and his family. Walter Blackett, the chairman of the multi-national rubber exporting company, named Blackett and Webb is a living symbol of the imperial 'impetus of avarice' while Matthew Webb almost functions as Farrell's ironic mouthpiece on the rhetoric of imperial power which almost invariably masked the harsh reality of economic exploitation.

The Blacketts lived in an old colonial house and, for Walter, even the conduct of family life is "based on commercial logic" (P.5). In his

view "Sons are an asset, daughters a liability. This had always been.... axiomatic"(P.50). He considers his daughter Joan a good business proposition and he goes to preposterous lengths in finding her a husband who would further his commercial interests. While Walter's wife is deeply disturbed by the fact that her daughter had brought only 'romantic nonsense' from her school, Walter is evidently pleased with Joan's promiscuity. His rise from rags to riches is an inglorious history of inhuman manipulation and exploitation of the poor labourers. Joan is obviously warped by a Western education. After giving his readers an idea of the dominance of the impulse to be rich even in matters of family life, or by showing how economic ruthless 'begins at home', Farrell powerfully conveys a sense of the foretaste of things to come – the 'grip' that profit took on the imperial imagination.

For Walter, imperialism is a 'law of nature' and he tells Matthew that strong nations will take advantage of the weak: "....Weak nations go to the wall. That has always been the way of the world, and always will be"(P.140). But Matthew feels unhappy and unconvinced. When Walter adds that in real life people are guided by self-interest, Matthew almost bursts out: "But surely a government has a duty to act in the moral as well as the material interests of its people" (P.132). But quite significantly, this "assertion ....was received only with sympathetic smiles, the matter had already been settled to the general satisfaction" (Ibidem:132). Walter strongly believes that it is the 'misplaced idealism' and 'pacifism' of people like Matthew that has "resulted in the decline of British prestige" and "sapped the nation's strength" (P.134) and therefore, he would never comprise his love for the empire and its policy of economic aggrandizement. He is one of those blood-thirsty businessmen who would

not hesitate to justify the imperial excesses. He believes that "there comes a point when the justice of the matter becomes irrelevant" because "justice is always bound to come a poor second to necessity" (P.140).

Like the Collector in *The Siege of Krishnapur* Walter, too, is a staunch proponent of the concept of superior civilization. Though Walter also has a collection of 'artistic bric-a-brac' which e proudly shows every visitor to his place, his theory of the superior culture has more to do with financial acumen. For Walter, civilization is almost synonymous with the dissemination of capitalism in the Far East. According to him, it is "unjust that history should only relate the exploits of bungling soldiers, monarchs and politicians, ignoring the merchants whose activities were the very bedrock of civilization and progress" (P.157) Fully convinced of the rightness of what he was saying and of the great commercial exploits of the British Empire, he invariably finds himself in strong disagreement and deep dissatisfaction with Matthew Webb, the son of his dying partner who thinks that the rhetoric of progress and civilization is a myth perpetuated in the economic interests of the empire. But Walter feels certain that such theoretical knowledge (which stores the facts and statistics and ideas) could be of no practical use whatsoever to the commercial interests of Blackett and Webb and fears that such awareness would lead only to the undoing of Britain's unquestioned economic superiority.

Walter always speaks of the innumerable advantages offered by the coming of Western capital to the Far East. Walter's high rhetoric of power provides him with an appropriate camouflage for economic self-interests while Matthew considers such idle rhetoric sheer rubbish.

Matthew contends that the so called commercial exploits of the empire could never be seen as progress from the natives' point of view and that with the coming of Western capital to the Far East, "profit took a grip on the country like some dreadful new virus against which nobody had any resistance" (P.172).

Though the use of disease as a central metaphor is relatively limited in scope in the fictional structure of *The Singapore Grip*, Matthew continues to use the disease metaphor whenever he refers to the impact of the flow of Western Capital in to the Far East. Matthew says: "The native masses are worse off than before. For them the coming of Capitalism has really been like the spreading of a disease" (P.174). In all his discussions of what he calls 'the colonial experience', Matthew is indignant at the way in which the Empire amassed fabulous wealth in the name of progress and civilization.

As the war covers the horizon, Walter decides to go ahead with his plans to celebrate the jubilee of his firm, Blackett and Webb which in Walter's words is "the living diagram of the colony's economic growth" (P.249). Walter hits upon a slogan for the jubilee celebration – "Continuity in Prosperity". Against the backdrop of the grand plan for the jubilee celebrations, Farrell unfolds the grim tale of imperial exploitation. Walter tells everyone that the real purpose of the jubilee is to improve the sagging morale of the natives of Singapore while behind this ostensibly lofty purpose lies the actual aim of giving his business concern a face-lift, of tightening his company's 'grip' on the international rubber market because in recent years it has begun to face stiff competition from the firestones, another name to be reckoned with the rubber-exporting

business. Walter's ridiculous attempt to run the jubilee show even in the thick of the Japanese offensive against Singapore parallels the decision of the cricket club not to put off the match under any circumstances: "No doubt cricket would continue despite the bombing; important matches could not be expected to wait until the Japanese had been dealt with" (P.224)

Walter's son Monty is ideologically a chip off the old block. He does not agree with Matthew on Britain's failure to fulfill the imperial mission. When Matthew says that, 'one of the most outstanding things about our empire ...is the way we have transported vast populations across the globe as cheap labour' and that 'it (imperialism) is not much better than slave trade' (P.179), Monty retorts impatiently "it matters whether they (natives) work as coolies or anything else as long as they have jobs" (P.179). This serious discussion on the colonial question comes to an abrupt end in a very ironic fashion as Monty invites Matthew to spend a month with a 'clean, young, broadminded' Chinese prostitute for less than eighteen pounds. Totally disturbed by the invitation, Matthew observes: "We (The British) have a rotten way of doing things when it comes to anything but making money" (P.187). But finally, Matthew decides to go with Monty to the red-light area of Singapore so that he could see another of the imperial mission and this scene assumes great significance as one of the techniques whereby Farrell relates morality and economic development.

Matthew is astonished to see a beautiful girl of fifteen and wonders about the circumstances which must have launched her on such a disgusting career: " .....at what precise moment during the past ten years

it had become inevitable that she should be uprooted from her village ....and flung down on the streets of Singapore, obliged to sell herself" (P.188). Matthew quickly locates the cause of this state of affairs in British imperialism and remarks: "What chilled the blood was thought that this girl's plight and a million other tiny tragedies has been brought by suave, neatly barbered, Seville Row-suited genial, polite, cultured and probably even humane men in normal circumstances who would shrink with horror from themselves if they could be made to see the responsibility for what was happening!"(Ibidem:188). Against the sordid backdrop of this red-light district, a serious discussion on the purity of the colonial enterprise takes place. The meaninglessness of the abstract discussion which throws into bold relief the stark reality of the life of the downtrodden is parodically paralleled by a scene in which a Chinese prostitute tries to learn arithmetic: "The young Chinese girl ....had turned to arithmetic. Now she was sitting, stark naked, sucking her pencil over a problem which involved the rate at which a tap filled a bath. What, she wondered, was a tap? And what, come to that was a bath?" (P. 195).

Despite the obvious thematic significance of Matthew in the novel, Farrell portraits of this protagonist is not complete un-ironic – a fact which almost prevents the readers from taking Matthew as Farrell's mouthpiece on the question of imperial economics. Though Matthew is consistent in his attack on the imperial policy of economic exploitation of the native population, there are certain myths like the relative professional inferiority of the natives which Matthew also has imbibed from his imperialist ambience. Farrell introduces a powerful scene – a visit with a Chinese girl to the dying-house – wherein Matthew's idealism melts away in an ignominious fashion. Though the experience has the

edifying effect of changing his views on the matter, just for once in the novel, he is reduced to the point of being a typical Briton with a bloated sense of unquestionable superiority. During his visit with Vera Chiang to the dying-house where a group of moribunds live waiting for death, the latent imperial strain in Matthew's personality surfaces.

The dying-house scene is crucial to the novel in terms of theme and technique because it is the only scene in which the protagonist comes into contact with "the real roots of life in Malaya, not just its top dressing of Europeans" (P.342). When one of the dying old men accuses Matthew's firm of having brutally swindled the native population, Matthew is deeply disturbed. He has always been an ardent advocate of the view put forward by the old man and has never been sparing in his attack on the ruthless politics of imperialism. But it is for the first time in his life that he becomes the target of the very same attack and consequently, he is caught off-guard. As the dying man who might suffer some 'terminal seizure' any moment begins to speak about the way the British estate owners grab money from the native smallholders, Matthew's initial reaction is one of annoyance which quickly develops into intense displeasure. In the beginning, he doesn't even listen to the old man's complaint for until now he had never been complained against, that too by a 'skeletal' native. Farrell ironically remarks: "Matthew had discovered that he did not mind being critical of the British himself, but, when a foreigner was critical, that was different" (P.344) – a remark which sharply contradicts his own idealistic thoughts of a little while ago about 'a shared humanity' which 'with different nations and communities', living 'in harmony with each other, concerning themselves with each other's welfare' (P.341).

However, Matthew gradually overcomes this imperial mental block caused by the inherited rhetoric of power and begins to comprehend the situation in all its earnestness. As the dying man continues to reel off his list of complaints against the British Empire, surrounded by 'shadowy cadavers.....lying supine and displaying no signs of life', Matthew realizes that 'there was an aspect of the matter which, in spite of himself ....(he) did find interesting' (P.344). Until now he had not given much thought to native smallholders and the old man forces him into a realization of the fact that though in most cases, natives, employed by Western enterprise lacked the knowledge, skill and capital to compete directly with it. In the case of rubber, it was not so: "There was nothing in the growing and tapping of trees.....or in the mangling and smoking of the resulting rubber sheets (that) could not be done as easily by an illiterate Malay or Chinese as by a graduate of British agriculture college" (P.345). At the end, the dying man gives a piece of paper to Matthew who, flanked by 'skeletons and moribunds' manages to read it in the faint light of a match. It turned out to be a press cut-out in which the writer expresses the honest unbiased opinion of leading men in the country that "the less the smallholder has to do with rubber, the better it will be in the long run for himself and all others engaged in rubber production" (P.347).

After having lived in a country under the 'grip' of Empire where 'dispensation of justice' was quite unheard of – of, the 'moribunds' return to their racks with the deep sense of fulfillment which accompanies an act of vengeance for the heinous outrages against the native population. Thus, in the dying-house scene, by giving his readers an irrefutable evidence of how the rhetoric imperial power was ruthlessly employed to deprive the native population of their traditional sources of income, of

how the imperialists tightened their 'grip' on native economy, Farrell unearths a new dimension of capitalist exploitation. Though described in an essentially Gothic terminology, the dying-house scene has a chillingly realistic dimension as a graphic picture of life situated on the 'cliff-edge' of death. Unlike the 'cities of the silent' (cemeteries) described in the opening pages of *The Siege of Krishnapur*, the dying-house presents a macabre world of ghostly voices expressing their profound antipathy to the dehumanizing rhetoric of imperial economics.

3.3) PARODIED IMPERIALISM :

Parody is perhaps the most powerful and dominant mode of creative expression in contemporary fiction. In Farrell's fiction, parody is the central controlling technique and he uses it with consummate skill in *The Singapore Grip*, arguably the most ambitious novel in the empire fiction. Farrell uses parody in his work not as a genre but as a technique. As Hutcheon puts it: ".... it is obvious that parts of a work may be parodic without the entire text being so labeled" (1985:18). Perhaps, the foremost theorist of parody in fiction is Mikhail Bakhtin who has clearly elaborated in his writing that there has always been a tradition of writing which departs from the canonical forms. Bakhtin defines parody as "an intentional dialogize hybrid, within it, languages and styles actively illuminate one another" (1981:76). Bakhtin lays particular emphasis on the power of laughter to destroy hierarchical distance. In other words, parody for Bakhtin is essentially subversive – it "is a writing which is always anti-authoritarian, satirizing and travestying the canonized genres and by implication the hierarchies of power in society those genres tended to reinforce" (In Haffenden 1985:166) and therefore, parody as the

"laughing reflections of the direct word" (Bakhtin, 1981:45) is immense in its scope and profound in its significance.

Farrell's Empire fiction attempts to invoke, in a subversively parodic fiction. His Empire fiction not only inscribes the continuity of the literary heritage of imperialism but also supersedes the earlier fictional literature on the imperial theme. Farrell uses parody in his empire fiction in order to 'quote' the ghosts of imperial literature, so that they may be successfully 'overcome' through laughter. In other words, Farrell's parody seeks to exorcise his readers of the ideological ghosts of Empire and of the vast body of pro-imperialist literature, affecting in the process a cultural exorcism through laughter.

The dying-house scene in *The Singapore Grip* reads like a powerful parody of the literary features of a special genre of adventure fiction which flourished at the climax of Empire- the imperial Gothic. The dying-house which is filled with old men with a foot in their coffin (who are brought there to spare the family the bad luck that was supposed to accompany a death) is described in terms that very overtly mock-Gothic. The house which is scattered with 'skeletons and moribunds' and 'shadowy cadavers' is reminiscent of the fantasy landscapes of imperial Gothic of novelists like Rider Haggard and R.L.Stevenson. Vera's and Matthew's descent from the bustling world of the fair into the subterranean dungeon of a dying-house with 'shelves of expiring people' recalls images from Haggard's novels in which heroes and heroines are temporarily entombed in tunnels, crypts and caves. The dying-house scene, on the whole, reads like a parody of the place of Death in Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1951).

Farrell also attempts an ironic inversion of certain stylistic conventions of pulp fiction in *The Singapore Grip*. Vera Chiang's lustful reflection on the admirable attributes of Matthew's physical beauty is a parodic attack on such light literature of romance: "'how attractive he is!' Vera was thinking. 'How stooping and short-sighted!. What deliciously round shoulders and unhealthy complexion?' She gazed at him in wonder, reflecting that there was no way in which he would be improved. Indeed, she could hardly keep her eyes off him" (P.340). Again, the shocking funny scene in which the uneducated Chinese girl, Vera Chiang gives 'a basic but hasty education' to Matthew Webb, a public school product, on how to make love, on the 'Five male overstraining' and the 'Five Revealing Signs' which should be manifested by the partner represents a parody of all such scenes in the literature of romantic adventure.

Thus, through a parody of the conventions of the novel of romantic adventure, Farrell satirizes the mindset of those millions of readers who were nurtured on such low forms of literature. In other words, Farrell's parody seeks not only to explode the myth of the adventurous Briton but also to undermine the myth with contradictory knowledge. Thus, this parodic dimension shows how certain ideological preferences engender certain generic conventions and stylistic mannerisms and in so doing, unearths a cunningly contrived attack on the wonted culture of imperialists. If, as, Martin Green pointed out, the romantic adventure form was "more influential than the serious novel" (1979:49), Farrell's parody of the form implies that it had laid siege to the popular imagination during the imperial regime and that consequently, the

popular view of history was a distorted one. In laying bare the devices of the cf the adventure novel, Farrell seeks to lay bare the pretensions and idealized values of imperial culture.

Farrell's parody of historicism is equally imbued with ideological implications. This traditional mode of historical discourse implied an attempt to project a nation's history as an expression of its evolving 'spirit' and to impose a false notion of immobile harmony and uniformity upon our conception of a historical period. By parodying this idealized mode of historical thought, Farrell persuades us that historicism cannot provide us with an absolute or objective interpretation of history and that the concept of a uniform and harmonious culture is a myth imposed by the colonial appropriators on the expropriated natives of the colonies. In *The Singapore Grip*, the scene in which the imperialist Walter finds himself brooding on what makes up a moment of history is worth quoting in its entirety for the important reason that it throws sufficient light on Farrell's use of rhetorical figures to powerful comic effect as well as on Farrell's essentially absurdist vision of history: ".....if you took a knife and chopped cleanly through a moment of history, what would it look like in cross section? Would it be like chopping through a leg of lamb where you see the ends of muscles, nerves, sinews and bone of one piece matching a similar arrangement in the other? Walter thought it would, on the whole. A moment of history composed of countless millions of events of varying degrees of importance, some of them independent, others associated with each other. And since all these events would have both causes and consequences they would certainly match each other where they were divided, just like the leg of lamb" (P.434). Apart from stressing the essential precondition of distance for the attainment of objectivity of

historical analysis, Farrell awakens his readers to the mysterious process whereby the rhetoric of imperial power originates and gets disseminated. Farrell seems to imply that the Empire-builders who never succeeded in going 'too near' the subject races [in the sense of socially interacting with them] always had to base their administration on their own biased interpretation of the colonial situation.

Through a parody of the naïve concept of a 'spirit of the times' and by showing how the process of historical interpretation itself can have a variety of interpretations, Farrell implies that traditional historicist interpretations cannot be a substitute for historical truth, that provided the limitations of historicism as a methodological tool are recognized, it can extend and refine our understanding of certain moments of history and, finally that the idea of a uniform and harmonious culture which existed on the heydays of Empire is nothing short of a myth imposed on history by the imperialists to further their own political interests.

3.4) IMAGES AND SYMBOLS SIGNIFYING IMPERIALISM :

As James Vinson puts it: "Farrell has an eccentric and highly sensuous imagination finding expression in a powerful and suggestive use of imagery, much of which takes on the force of symbol"(1976:427). In his Empire fiction, Farrell took recourse to a 'disease symbolism' to avoid an 'undue formality' in his subtle critique of imperialism. But, though the use of disease imagery is relatively limited in *The Singapore Grip*, Farrell does make use of it in a very effective manner. Walter Blackett, the rubber tycoon, begins to feel that, with the beginning of Japanese offensive against Singapore, the existing stock of rubber is a

cancerous growth on his business career: "It [rubber] seemed to him like a tumour, disfiguring his career in Singapore. And like a tumour it continued to grow because although diminished in quantity by Japanese advance and by the increasingly chaotic state of the roads in Johore, new consignments of rubber continued to arrive from across the causeway"(P.399). And to the natives, Walter's rubber industry is, in every sense, a cancerous abscess which takes its toll on the native economy and pushes the natives to the extremities of adversity. Considering the fact that the primary thematic focus in *The Singapore Grip* is economic imperialism, the comparison of the advent of British capital in the Far East with a dreadful disease serves to highlight the imperial hypocrisy.

Farrell's description of the British General, Percival's shaving presents, in metaphorical terms, a hilarious picture of the failed tactics of British resistance and a comic portrait of the hare-brained General himself: "He [Percival] stood poised, razor in hand, gazing at his lathered face in the mirror ..... with due care he began to attack the fringes of the lather, driving it inwards from its perimeters at ears and throat with tiny strokes of the blade in the direction of the chin and moustache. Here, he would presently have it surrounded, if his experience was anything to go by, and would finish it off with a few decisive strokes..... Percival paused again, this time about to launch a flanking attack from the direction of his right ear. ....Percival had been scraping steadily at his commanding, white-bearded face. Gradually as the razor advanced and the white beard fell away, the features in the mirror had grown more uncertain: a rather delicate jaw had appeared followed by a not very

strong chin and a mouth not sufficiently assertive for the moustache on its upper lip" (P.450-52).

The whole passage reads like a biting satire on Britain's strategic pitfalls. The fall of Singapore exposed the Empire's vulnerability as well as the emptiness of the imperial rhetoric of power parallels the fall of the beard which reveals 'a rather delicate jaw' with 'a not very strong chin'. The General's thoughts on war tactics are presented against the backdrop of the shaving which very jocularly parallels the British mode of attack, with the moving razor standing for the indefensible advance of the Japanese force.

A similar satire is implicit in the description of Dupingy's futile attempt to kill a cockroach by hurling a book at it – "a fat, ginger cockroach which was making its way, glistening with health and horribly alert, across the wall.... The book had missed, however, and the cockroach darted away at an unnatural speed" (P.330). But any earnest attempt at a metaphorical interpretation of such descriptions in Farrell would be to miss the whole point unless the attempt itself is not preceded by an awareness of the fact that Farrell's use of such rhetorical devices is motivated by both an ironic vision of imperial history and a metafictional desire to refer the reader to the production of such rhetorical practices. In other words, in making we laugh at the strategic inferiority of imperial Britain which led to the catastrophic loss of Singapore Farrell foregrounds the processes by which language makes such subversive laughter possible. Thus, through a brilliant exploitation of the rhetorical potentials of various symbols and images, Farrell successfully attempts to resist and transcend the limitations of the rhetoric of power itself.

3.5) TITLE: IT'S IMPERIAL SIGNIFICANCE :

In *The Singapore Grip*, wherein the 'hermeneutic code' is employed, the meaning of the title is neither fixed nor fixable; it remains in a state of becoming, of creative instability. An exploration into the hermeneutic code helps towards a resolution of the enigma of the title because the reader is led to ask, as Barthes puts it in his reading of Balzac's novella Sarrasine "What is Sarrasine? A noun?, A name?, A thing?, A man?, A woman?" (1970:19). When the reader hits upon this code in Farrell's novels and legitimizes its signs, it also throws sufficient light on the metafictionality of Farrell's Empire fiction.

It is in *The Singapore Grip* that Farrell's metafictional awareness of the instability of linguistic reference finds it's most joyous expression. The 'grip' of the title is so bandied about in the novel that the readers lose their 'grip' on the referential axis of the world. Farrell's evocation of the illness-ridden life of the poor colonized in Singapore concludes with the grim observation that "it will take high explosive.....to loosen the grip of tuberculosis and malaria on them" (P.217). Singapore is described as an octopus holding other trading centers in 'a friendly grip' (P.250).Walter wants to get Matthew in his daughter's 'grip' (P.527). In its halcyon days, Blackett and Webb had a firm 'grip on the destinies of individual companies' (P.314) while, due to the Japanese war, the company begins 'to loose its grip on the country and its own destiny' (P.528). Dupingy speaks about 'the national vanity which at intervals gripped nations like France and Britain' (P.320).

Another sustained use of the term 'grip' occurs in authorial comments on the unreality of the fictional world of the novel. The

characters of *The Singapore Grip* loose their 'grip' on reality very frequently. The world of the novel alternates between reality and dream so much so that the readers find themselves delicately poised on the uncertain territory between logic and magic. Matthew loses 'his hold on the passage of time' (P.533) and is at a loss to decide whether he is dreaming or not. Walter feels that 'his grip on reality had loosened' (P.365). The fictional world of *The Singapore Grip* is full of 'ghostly voices, speaking gibberish which, however, sometimes held a queer sort of significance' (P.503). At the end of the novel, General Percival feels that the people, whether historical or living, "had no real substance, that they were merely phantasms.....incredibly life-like but no more reality than the flickering images one saw on a cinema screen" (P.553). Almost every significant event in the novel tends to loosen the characters' 'grip on reality'. This technique of 'dis-realizing' the fictional world of his historical novel is part of a conscious attempt by Farrell to discourage notions of dogmatic clarity of perspective in judging the colonial experience. The novel's dreamy texture, by implication, seeks to highlight the unreality which pervaded the imperial enterprise, obscuring issues and confounding perception.

But it is with reference to the concept of the 'Singapore Grip' that the meaning of the title is irretrievably disseminated and destabilized. When the first two times Matthew broaches the subject of the 'Singapore Grip', it "proved a failure as a conversational opening. Nobody replied or showed any sign of having heard him"(P.108). A little later, Matthew receives an explanation from Dupingy who thinks that 'grip' derives from *la grippe* [the French word for influenza] and says that 'Singapore Grip' is a 'grave tropical fever' (P.146); but, when Matthew speaks to Ehrendorf

about 'The Singapore Grip' as a fever, he is taken aback and says that "it was a suitcase made of rattan, like Shanghai basket" (P.200). Joan immediately adds a "further element of confusion to a scene which Matthew had already found sufficiently puzzling" (P.200) by saying that 'Singapore Grip' was actually "a patent double-bladed hairpin which some women use to curl their hair after they had washed it" (Ibid). Matthew is not satisfied with any of these interpretations and comes to think that 'Singapore Grip' refers to a peculiar handshake of the Chinese-which again is promptly disproved. He comes to think that it is the name of a 'secret society' (P.389). But when he asks Vera Chiang if the 'Singapore Grip' is a secret society, she finds the question so entertaining that her impatience with Matthew melted away. Towards the end, when the expression the 'Singapore Grip' is discussed for the last time in the novel, Ehrendorf gives an interestingly new version which comes at an anti-climatic digression in the scene in which Matthew is seriously engaged in an angry attack against the self-interested West corrupting human affairs across the world. Matthew, perhaps, having comprehended the acute instability of the expression gives a final interpretation of the 'Singapore Grip': "it is the grip of our Western culture and economy on the Far East ....its the stranglehold of capital on the traditional cultures of Malaya, China, Burma, Java, Indo-China and even India herself. It is the doing of things our way ..... I mean, it is the pursuit of self-interest rather than of the common interest" (P.498). But this final explanation, far from being generally acceptable, forces Ehrendorf to think that "The Singapore Grip was about to be pried loose," though, significantly, within the text of the novel, the expression is never fully pried open.

Whatever may be the meaning of this well-known expression for the specialists of history, the readers who confront the term for the first

time from Farrell's novel *The Singapore Grip* will only be confused about its actual import. Though the explanation provided by Matthew might sound politically more acceptable than others, the fact that other characters refuse to accept it as the final word on the meaning of the expression points to Farrell's self-consciousness about the fluidity of linguistic reference.

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