

## 'Amok' in Frank Swettenham's *Malay Sketches* and Isabella Bird's *The Golden Chersonese*

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### Abstract

Motifs of colonial ideology like 'amok' are fostered by the British colonial rule; they are embedded in its colonial discourse. During the time of British Colonisation in the Malay Peninsula, amok meant a solitary man in a frenzy, running with a drawn dagger. Therefore, it is related to colonial fear and anxiety. From his position as an authoritative male colonial administrator, Frank Swettenham constructs the motif of amok to justify British colonial control. On the other hand, Isabella Bird as a woman writer writing about the East describes 'amok' from the accounts of male British administrators to make her narrative realistic and engaging. Both of their writings strengthened the trope of amok within the colonial academic scholarship and administration. This perpetuated the British colonial regime in the Malay Peninsula. This paper will show how Frank Swettenham, in his *Malay Sketches* and Isabella Bird in her *The Golden Chersonese*, depict amok as a frenzy among demented Malays that requires to be controlled through colonial interventions. By doing so, it will do a closer investigation of 'amok' as a motif in colonial discourse that perpetuates colonial authority over the colonized.

*Keywords:* Amok, British Colonial Administration, The Malay Peninsula, Colonial anxiety

During the British Colonisation in the Malay Peninsula, the dominant British usage of the term 'amok' was related to psychopathology, but the vernacular Malay press described amok as the violence of modern life (Williamson 343). Amok is often associated with the "image of a solitary man, running with a

drawn dagger" (Williamson 350). Therefore, it is related to colonial fear and anxiety as well. Incidents of "running amok" have been a dramatic part of life on the Malay Peninsula for hundreds of years. It is both a quasi-biological situation and a social phenomenon with a meaning that has changed over time (Williamson 342). However, during the colonial era, it was employed to create colonial divisions between the colonizer and the colonized (Williamson 349). In Frank Swettenham's *Malay Sketches* and Isabella Bird's *The Golden Chersonese*, amok is depicted as a frenzy among demented Malays that requires to be controlled through colonial interventions; nevertheless, a closer investigation of the term exposes amok as a motif in colonial discourse that perpetuates colonial authority over the colonized.

Throughout the nineteenth century, European colonizing nations intruded on the Malay Peninsula, and the possibilities of colonizing the territory depended on their colonial capacity to persuade and subdue its inhabitants (Tay 18). After the Indian "Mutiny" in 1857, British Malaya was seen as an opportunity for the British Empire to redeem its glory. This is why colonial rule in British Malaya was established not by military aggression but with persuasion. The Malay Peninsula has always been a profitable territory for the British colonizers; it is one of the world's largest producers of tin and rubber- essential resources for British industrialization. Initially, Britain adopted indirect rule, not through force but 'advice' provided by the advisors to Malay Sultans (Tay 18). Frank Swettenham (1850-1946) was one of the most efficient advisors among them.

Stories and Sketches by Sir Frank Swettenham, his statements, views, and narratives are compiled in his book *Malay Sketches* (1895). 'British Malaya' the term was first coined by him in this book. He was a cadet in the British residential system, also an astute colonial administrator who could speak Malay fluently. He knew the rulers most intimately and presumably

could cast his influence over them (Bastin xvi). His experiences form the basis of his authoritative account of the colonial narrative. His point of view in his writing is simultaneously of an outsider and an authority. He constructs the Malay Peninsula as an unknown place awaiting colonial intervention. According to colonial ideologies, he seems to have favored this country and promoted its culture by making it known through his writing.

In chapter VI of his book *Malay Sketches* (1895), titled *Amok*, he provides an account of the amok runner Imam Mamat: a quiet, older man over forty years of age; suddenly, without any apparent reason, he became an amok runner and brutally murdered several people including his nearest relatives and friends. Based on this incident, Swettenham defines amok as a sudden, murderous attack by an individual who:

suddenly and without apparent cause, seizes a weapon and strikes out blindly, killing and wounding all who come in his way, regardless of age or sex, whether they be friends, strangers or his own nearest relatives (39).

Swettenham conjectures that perhaps Imam was suffering from intense psychological pressure. This created within him an insane desire to kill. An autopsy was performed on his dead body. The surgeon reported that he died from hemorrhage from a wound, though his internal organs were healthy, except for membranes at the right side of his brain (Swettenham 43). This implied that he was mad. This is how western medicine studies the amok runner as a lunatic.

Significantly, the idea of amok evolved not only through the fields of medicine but also with administration and travel literature. The western scholarship invented that amok results from an idiosyncrasy or peculiar temperament common amongst Malays. Therefore, amok conditions demand a medical analysis so that the Europeans can learn about the term through scholarly

communication (Williamson 345). Colonial medicine defined amok as murders committed in a fit of passion by lone Malay men. Based on this knowledge, European control over the indigenous capacity for violence was implemented (Williamson 345). Moreover, along with newspaper stories and medical research, amok violence became significant for the law enforcing agents (Williamson 347). The rise in the number of amok psychopaths justified the intense policing of the peninsula; it also made Malaya safe for colonization (Williamson 349). Furthermore, as a violent and destructive form of behavior, amok signifies a native's failure in his own self-government.

This notion implemented that Malays are unable to govern themselves; therefore, the colonizers have to govern them (Tay 24). Finally, amok cases transformed to be a part of colonial artistic life. European travel narratives, short stories, and novels typically contained amok scenes. Newspapers, medical journals, administrative reports, and novels worked together to delegitimize the Malay population through the portrayal of amok cases (Williamson 349). Finally, violence described as amok attacks encouraged the colonial power to strengthen its control, and a means to do so was drawing a line of difference between the Europeans and the Asians (Williamson 348): it situated them in the binary opposition of the 'self' and the 'other'.

In his colonialist portrayals of British Malaya, Swettenham skilfully depicts amok via colonial rationality. He labels amok as a phenomenon that needs to be eradicated from Malaya (Tay 23) through British intervention. He presents Malays as backward and unencumbered by the legacy of the European enlightenment: a race lacking cultural accomplishment (Tay 22). He portrays Malaya without its own history, a land devoid of the inhabitant's collective memories: a place that can easily be appropriated by anyone (Tay 15). The depiction of the

native who runs amok and attacks the members of his own family becomes a testimony to the native's irrationality; it becomes his psychological portrait of the 'Other' of the European Enlightenment. The colonizers like Swettenham are here "to save the natives from themselves" (Tay 22). Thus, amok becomes a justification for colonial governance. Through the trope of amok, Swettenham establishes the superiority of the British colonizers and the inferiority of the colonized Malays.

However, it is also through this trope that he connotes the colonizer's fear (Tay 28). While characterized as a psychopathological condition on the part of the colonized subject, amok can also be an expression of anti-colonial sentiment that ferments among the native community due to years and years of oppression (Tay 25). From the point of view of the isolated European, alone in the empire, the ratio of the rulers to the ruled renders the European vulnerable, and the amok of the colonized engenders the paranoia of the colonizer (Tay 26). The terror in the heart of every colonial administrator in Malaya must be the *pengamok* who, with his jagged knife or *kris*, strikes upon the walls of colonialism. Amok is the return of the repressed originated from the colonizer's paranoia (Tay 26). Thus, amok is a source of anxiety for European colonizers.

This connection between amok and colonial anxiety became crucial in understanding when the first British resident, J. W. W. Birch, was killed in the Pasir Salak rebellion in 1875. The familiarity of amok grew as British officials began to interpret and organize the meaning of this event (Williamson 345). Birch's traumatic death was immortalized as a particular kind of violence, a group attack against the new colonial regime. Afterward, 'amok' became a counterpoint of British colonial fascination. Amok stories became a part of the colonial press, and they were circulated throughout the English-speaking parts

of Asia (Williamson 346). Isabella Bird (1831-1904) structures her discussion on Amok based on these stories.

She provides her account of British Resident Mr. Birch's death in her book *The Golden Chersonese* (1883). According to her, Mr. Birch died because he protested against the disparities among different classes of Malay people and their horrendous slave system. Slavery and debt bondage existed in all the native states of the Malay Peninsula, where slaves could be easily acquired by slave-owners. A man or woman owing a trifling debt incurred through extravagance, misfortune, or gambling can be seized by his creditor, then his wife and all his offspring become his slaves (Bird 26). Mr. Birch was murdered because he strongly campaigned against these cruelties (Bird 358).

Bird's account informs that the Rich and privileged Malays led idle lives, and they used to "live like leeches on the toil of their fellow-men" (Bird 362) by oppressing the poor (Bird 26). According to her book, the British officials and administrators were actually devoting their interest to the betterment of the land and its people (Tay 15). They were the truest friends of the Malays since they tried to establish order, discipline, and equity among them. Bird provides this account from Captain Shaw, the Governor of Malacca, who is devoted to Malacca and its interest (Bird 126). Being a guest at the Briggs' house, she meets him and comes to know from him that the Chinese call him "Father," and among the Malays, he is a just ruler (Bird 127). It was Captain Shaw's efforts that made slavery prohibited in Malacca, and slaves from the neighboring states arrived here for freedom under the shelter of the British flag.

Unlike Swettenham's, Bird's text exhibits colonial administrators according to a British domestic ideology which values sympathy and tenderness over a more aggressive

representation of manliness; they endorse personal qualities such as care, sympathy, and kindness (Tay 35). We have to remember that Isabella Bird was a female travel writer during the nineteenth century. With the continuous growth of European colonization of the East, travel literature flourished, and the colonies of the East served as a source of inspiration for Western poets and writers. In addition, British colonial expansion especially resulted in an increasing number of female travelers who provided their own accounts of Eastern regions, customs, and races, parallel to the earlier male voices (Osman 85). Isabella Bird is one of these female British travelers who explored various parts of the world and interacted with numerous non-European peoples. In her book *The Golden Chersonese*, she describes the Malay Peninsula, its inhabitants, their societies, and resources under the British colonial power from a feminine perspective.

Nonetheless, Bird's narrative, like Swettenham's, is certainly intended to depict the superiority and benevolence of British imperialism. She also proposes that the civilizing mission of imperialism is done not by force but by compassion (Tay 35). Bird tries to establish the fact that the Malays highly appreciate the manner in which law is administered under English rule. They relish security in their persons and property, and Malays under the British regime no longer get plundered by their own kind. They prefer being equitably taxed by the British in return for the security that their regime provides (Bird 140). Bird's journey begins not in Malaya but in Hong Kong, Canton, and Saigon. She writes a book on British Malaya with chapters on Canton so that the narrative order reiterates the British trade route. Traveling along this trade route, Bird was to compare the different governments of all these countries to bring to the forefront her argument about the benevolent nature of British

colonialism. This theme is elaborated in her chapters on Malaya (Tay 36). She compares and contrasts the colonial ventures of various other nations on this land and upholds British governance to be the best.

For example, she validates British imperialism over the Portuguese one. Bird narrates that after being rediscovered by the Portuguese in 1513, General Albuquerque, under the reign of Emanuel, King of Portugal, captured the city of Malacca and slaughtered the Moors who defended it; this was considered as "a great triumph of the Cross over the Crescent" (Tay 33-34). By the year 1600, the strait came under the full command of the Portuguese settlers (Bird 2). While they were busy with their crusades and making enemies, in 1641, their empire was seized by the Dutch, who were more diplomatic and focused in terms of commerce (Bird 3). However, the East India Company was kind and friendly to the Malay people; it won their hearts through order, discipline and generosity. Consequently, the Company acquired the land in 1775, and these colonies were consolidated under the Crown in 1867. This was possible because of the benevolence of British colonial rule.

Later, Bird discovers that the British regime has also controlled the rate of "Amok": "a furious and reckless onset" (Bird 356) of demented Malays. In letter XXII, she opines that a Malayman is, on some point, excessively sensitive regarding his honor, and anyone who casts a stain upon his honor can be assassinated by him. He teaches a lesson to the offender by rushing forth in a frenzy and "slays all he can lay hands upon" (Bird 355). Under British rule, the police were expected to take such an "amok" runner alive and arrange his trial like an ordinary criminal for murder. Bird encounters in Malacca, an amok runner. She describes:

Under English rule, the great object of the policy is to take the "amok" runner alive... and if he can be brought to bay, as he sometimes is, they succeed in pinning him to the wall by means of such a stout two-pronged fork as I saw kept for the purpose in Malacca. Usually, however, the fate of the "amok" runner is a violent death, and men feel no more scruple about killing him in his frenzy than they would about killing a man-eating tiger. (357)

The British administrators preferred to arrest the amok runner alive. He then faced punishment in public. He was exhibited in front of the crowd as a criminal accused of unforgivable charges. His trial was displayed to others as a matter of warning. At times, the crowd themselves were even engaged in murdering the amok runner.

Bird narrates that in this way, as the British came to power, amok cases gradually decreased due to their effective and efficient rule. This made her obviously proud of British law and administration (Gungwu viii). Never the less, as a woman writing about her travels to colonized regions, she was unable to adopt the imperialist voice with the ease which the male writers possessed (Osman 88). In describing amok, she had to incline to the account of Major M' Nair (Bird 357), a male officer. She also had to be careful about women's image associated with the idea of purity and domesticity as well.

Thus, to negotiate colonialism from a feminine perspective, Bird's narrative restores Malaya as a homely, feminine space in the empire (Osman 88). The wounds of the 1857 mutiny in India were still fresh in British memory. In Malaya, the very notion of the glory of the British Empire was tarnished by recent events of the Indian "Mutiny" of 1857. She had her share of colonial anxiety too. However, Bird was writing

these letters to her sister Henrietta at her British home. She was writing for a domestic reading public. Thus, one of the key issues for Bird in her representation of Malaya was to write of it in such a way as to assure readers that it would not turn out to be another India, another instance of colonial resistance (Tay 36). Therefore, her accounts of amok are not vivid and terrifying.

Bird was reproducing the colonized world of Malaya for readers back at home and, while doing so, she presented it as a warm place, safe for the colonial venture. The word 'Chersonese' is a poetic or rhetorical word for a peninsula (Gungwu v); Bird wrote the book with the hope to enlighten her readers about a beautiful and little-traveled chersonese of the Malays (Bird vii). According to Bird, the Malay Peninsula attracts scholars and sight-seers basically for its imposing, magnificent, and prolific Nature (Bird 12). It is a gorgeous tropic land with bounteous rainfall and sunshine (Bird 7). While her stay in the Strait of Malacca, she calls it a "fragrant tropic dream" (Bird 131). She gives a beautiful description of Malacca in her Letter IX.

The feature of Malacca is that it is featureless! It is a land where it is "always afternoon- hot, still, dreamy; a commercial city that has no politics, little crime, and does nothing towards making contemporary history" (Bird 130). Here, the nights are very still, and the days are a tepid dream (Bird 131). Like Swettenham, she calls the golden chersonese a somewhat *terra incognita*, a pre-colonized land or a tabula rasa that awaits colonial intervention (Tay 33). However, she believed that the claim to its history has to be legitimized via recognition from the colonial authority existing within a Eurocentric framework (Tay 33). The peninsula was under British rule, and Bird calculated its possibilities of how it could provide "increasing employment to British capital and enterprise" (Bird viii). Ironstone limestone is found everywhere. Gold is also

found here. The vastest tin fields in the world are found in the western Malay states (Bird 5). The climate is healthy and densely covered by evergreen forest (Bird 5), an easy target for the colonial venture. In her descriptions, Bird depicts Malaya as a resource, emphasizing its pragmatic and economic value to the empire... prized as among the most valuable of our possession in the Far East (Tay 33-34). She also describes the natives from a colonial perspective.

Bird assumes that the inhabitants of the land, the Malays are its colonists rather than its conquerors. They came from Sumatra in the 12th century and spread across Malacca and other coastal regions (Bird 12). The aborigines or the wild tribes or "men of the country" retreated to jungles and mountains as the Malays spread themselves over the region. Malays kidnapped their children and used them in cleaning the jungle or for carrying burdens (Bird 14); in this way, the slaves and the masters were created. When the Malays started their commercial intercourse with the Arabs, they converted into Muslims during the 13th century (Bird 13). Since then, the Malays have been bigoted, and for the most part, ignorant and fanatical Mohammedans (Bird 140); to Bird's utter dismay, they successfully resisted all missionary enterprise to convert them to Christianity (Bird 20). Bird provides her readers with Captain Shaw's account of the Malays here and describes them as a race that is jealous, suspicious, treacherous, and most bigoted Mussalmen (Bird 20). She tries to prove them to be inferior to their British colonial ruler in terms of discipline and manners.

Nonetheless, according to Bird, Malays are not savages in the ordinary sense, for they have a complete civilization of their own, and their legal system is derived from the Koran (Bird 138). Gender disparity is a noticeable issue among this race as they seclude their women inside the house (Bird 139). The

slightest courtesy shown by a European man to a Malay woman would be a deadly insult, and at the sight of a man in the distance, the women hastily cover their faces (Bird 140). The Malays, like other Muslims, practice polygamy, but they are affectionate and display a great deal of domesticity (Bird 24). They are ignorant and grossly superstitious (Bird 361). In this way, by describing the condition of the Malay women, she convinces her British female readers about their privilege to be a part of a nation that values women's integrity. British women were not bound to be confined within their houses. They had every right to go out, view, and learn from the outside world, like men.

However, Bird's narrative "superimposes the domestic space of the metropole onto British Malaya" (Tay 32). British women were only allowed to figure as symbols of hope and purity. Women travel writers lacked the imperialist voice of the male writers. They were less able to assert 'truths' of British rule without qualification (Osman 88). Imperialism is constituted by investment in "constructing masculine British identity"; therefore, women were conventionally seen not to be a part of the colonial expansion (Tay 32). Thus to negotiate colonialism from a feminine perspective, travel writing by women was expected to constitute a "discourse of difference" associated with gender roles and identities.

Women writers like Bird who chose to write about the East were thus highly aware of their marginalized position as authors of "colonial" subjects, one that not only exposed them to a greater level of criticism compared to their male counterparts but also placed their personal reputations as women, and thus "symbols of home and purity" at peril (Osman 88-89). Despite assuming the authorial role of narrator of Eastern scenes, Bird was keen to emphasize how their "feminine" status as "ladies"

remains uncompromised in their writings, either through self-effacement and modesty or reinforcing domestic or social relationships (Osman 89).

Bird enhances her own profile as an author by implicitly connecting herself with reputable men and in doing so, inserts herself into the colonial history of British Malaya, making her narrative even more realistic and engaging, grounded as it is in actual events and real people (Osman 96). Although constantly surrounded by men, both "native" and British, who serve as guides, translators, protectors, and handlers, Bird depicts herself as the sole determinant of her adventurous journey and the shape it is to take; her writing demonstrates that it is entirely possible to possess a feminine imperialist voice (Tay 37). Bird was asserting her own merit as a woman through her writing.

Moreover, at various moments in her writing, the emphasis on effect and sympathetic portrayals of male colonial administrators are evidence that the feminine voice is an adjunct to masculine constructs of imperialism (Tay 37). She made her readers realize that it was not enough to hear the male voices only. It was important to raise and value the female voices from the colonies as well.

However, colonial texts written by both male and female British colonial authors described Amok through colonial anxiety. Controlling and punishing the amok runners were strategies for British rulers to assert their dominance and power. It snatched the native Malays ability and awareness to rule themselves. The British administration created the motif of amok through colonial administrators like Swettenham and female travel writers like Bird. Nonetheless, newspapers during the colonial regime played a vital role in deconstructing Amok's typecast pattern; they subtly altered the British definition of

amok (Williamson 354). They viewed it as "the confusion produced by language differences, urban life, and the flood of information" (Williamson 349). Instead of a racialized or individualized concept (Williamson 350), with raising awareness, Amok started to be associated with highlighting the severity of modern life as it mediated the peninsular experience of changes brought by colonization.

Williamson in his essay "Communicating Amok in Malaysia," contends that in Malaysia, references to amok provide an index of social pain that people feel: it is a pain of economic transformation, family dislocation, ethnic competition, and isolations of modern life that produce violence (362). These newspapers invoked the common humanity through their alternative approach to amok cases and inspired compassions among readers to understand this violence within their nation. They also searched for ways to ameliorate the conditions that created it (Williamson 362). In this way, from a distinctive colonial motif, amok gradually became more open to alternative interpretations. As a result, depending on the socio-cultural conditions of the Malay Peninsula, the meaning of amok changed over the centuries.

The motifs of colonial ideology like amok are fostered by the British colonial rule; they are embedded in its colonial discourse. Both Swettenham and Bird used amok as a colonial motif in their writing. Frank Swettenham describes in his sketches that the Malays cannot eradicate their amok violence themselves due to their lack of strong political institutions (Bastin x vii). From his position as an authoritative male colonial administrator, he constructed the motif of amok to justify British colonial control. On the other hand, Bird as a woman writer writing about the East, supported the accounts of the British administrators like Swettenham to make her narrative realistic

and engaging (Osman 96). With their writings, the trope of amok was strengthened within the colonial academic scholarship and administration. This perpetuated the British colonial regime in the Malay Peninsula.

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