

Chapter 2

FARRELL AND EMPIRE: THE RHETORIC AND BEYOND

... it is hardly possible to take up one's residence in the kingdom of the ill unprejudiced by the lurid metaphors with which it has been landscaped.

Susan Sontag, **Illness As Metaphor**

Explicitness, my dear fellow, is fatal to the glamour of all artistic work, robbing it of all suggestiveness, destroying all illusion. You seem to believe in literalness and explicitness, in facts and also in expression. Yet nothing is more clear than the utter insignificance of explicit statement and also its power to call attention away from things that matter in the region of art.

Joseph Conrad, **Conrad to a Friend**

(!) The Rhetoric of Disease

In the Empire fiction, Farrell's critique of the imperialist ideology is brilliantly accomplished through a masterful use of the rhetoric of disease and 'grip.' **'Rhetoric'** is not merely the art of eloquence; **it ...** "is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic, and is continually born **anew**" (Burke 1969:43). Mulhern echoes the same view when he says that rhetoric is the study **of "language** and thus of forms and meanings; of language in action and thus also of its occasions, purposes and effects" (1992:18). According to Barthes, the term **'rhetoric'** denotes not only 'the set of connotators' which exists as a latent potential within the text but also the ideological load which underlies use of the rhetoric. 'Rhetoric,' for Barthes 'appears as a signifying aspect of ideology' (1977:49). As he observes: "the common domain of the **signifieds** of connotation is that of ideology, which cannot but be single for a given society and history, no matter what signifiers of connotation it may use" (Ibid). **Thus,** in Barthes's view, 'rhetoric' is essentially the 'rhetoric of power.' The present chapter attempts to study the 'forms and meanings,' and the **'occasions, purposes and effects'** as well as the ideological ramifications of **Farrell's** use of the rhetoric in Empire fiction. While in *Troubles* and *The Siege of Krishnapur*, Farrell draws extensively on the rhetoric of disease to communicate the decline of British power over the rest of the world, in **The Singapore Grip**, the rhetoric of 'grip' powerfully conveys how with the British colonisation of Singapore, "profit took a grip on the country like some dreadful new virus against which nobody had any **resistance**" (**SG, p. 172**). The effect of disease in Farrell's novels is not only the **realistic** subject of his novels but becomes a metaphor for the larger sickness of the body-politic. Farrell makes use of fatal illnesses for imagery. While cancer is the dominant image in **Troubles**, cholera recurs throughout **The Siege of Krishnapur** As Sontag has pointed out,

"To use only fatal diseases for imagery in politics gives the metaphor a pointed character" (1982:82).

One of the important possible reasons behind Fan-ell's sustained interest in disease could be the sudden attack of poliomyelitis which reduced him to an invalid throughout his life. "Illness seems to stimulate creative genius for the constant anxiety, terror and sense of doom intensifies isolation and introspection" (Meyers 1985:13). Though Farrell attained partial recovery from the disease, he was quite self-conscious and always attempted to conceal his disability. As Dean tells us, Farrell took pains to prove to his friends that he was self-sufficient. And it is quite clear that a poignant sense of personal inadequacy has dis/coloured his perception of life. Physical infirmity was a disgusting companion to Farrell throughout his life. Living a life of weakness perhaps forced Farrell to people his fictional world with weaklings and eccentrics—characters who are maimed either physically or psychologically.

Another important reason could be the wide range of metaphorical possibilities provided by disease as a dominant trope. The philosophical, ideological, political and moral ramifications of the rhetoric of disease coupled with his own invalidism seem to have led Farrell to draw extensively on 'the kingdom of the ill.' As Sontag has aptly put it, "the subjects of deepest dread (corruption, decay, pollution, anomie, weakness) are identified with the disease. The disease itself becomes a metaphor. Then, in the name of the disease (that is, using it as a metaphor) that horror is imposed on other things ... Something is said to be disease-like, meaning that it is disgusting or ugly" (1988:58). Farrell found the metaphor of fatal diseases highly appropriate for the portrayal of the imperial curse. Though Farrell is not the only writer who has exploited the metaphorical fecundity of illnesses,¹ Farrell is undoubtedly the first novelist who used disease as a controlling metaphor to explore and expose the colonial pathology. The scourge of imperialism which is a brutal expression of the

primitive instinct of the strong to subjugate and exploit the weak is shown to carry within itself the cancerous viruses of its own destruction. Such a subtle diatribe against imperialism can only be the result of acute dissatisfaction with the imperial idea and the regime of political corruption and exploitation which it turns out to be once the idea is put into practice. "Modern disease metaphors specify an ideal of society's well-being analogised to physical health, that is as frequently anti-political as it is a call for a new political order" (Sontag 1988:76).

(a) Disease And Empire

Tyranny is a habit capable of being developed and at last becomes a disease.... The man and the citizen disappear for ever in the tyrant; and then a return to human dignity, repentance, moral resurrection becomes almost impossible.

Dostoyevsky, *The House of the Dead*

Disease forms a dominant factor in the structural organisation of Farrell's Empire fiction and constitutes a major rhetorical technique whereby Farrell foregrounds the political and personal pressures in the cultural moments of the colonial experience. Farrell's obsessive pre-occupation with the theme of disease and decay in his Empire fiction can be seen to be closely bound up with his serious and sustained engagement with the decline and decay of British imperialism. His fictional characters who suffer from various illnesses and infirmities are doomed to live out their lives as part of a political system which is itself ill and infirm at its foundations. As a writer constantly plagued by illnesses and disabilities in his real life, Farrell's novels are steeped in extrapolations from his own personal life which become in the larger context of his fictional world rhetorical catalysts for a powerful commentary on the 'dis-ease,' decay and the

eventual demise of the Empire. The ailing material bodies of his characters become a metaphor for the larger illness of colonial domination as a deplorable human condition which results in the total loss of mental 'ease' and individual dignity for both parties involved—the coloniser and the colonised. In the Empire novels, illness isolates, exposes, intensifies and transforms characters and structures the work as we follow the characters to recovery or death. A careful, profound and 'symptomatic' reading of Farrell's Empire fiction would not only reveal the real nature of the imperial 'dis-ease' but also throw sufficient light on how Farrell's meticulously planned and beautifully woven texts attempt to diagnose and heal the 'dis-ease.' In Farrell's Empire fiction, desire for physical health can be seen, by a metaphorical displacement, as a desire for the health of the body-politic the foundations of which are badly shaken in all colonies of the Empire.

Farrell's critique of imperialism in the Empire fiction is achieved primarily through images and symbols. 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). Margaret Drabble locates the reason for this acceptance of the symbolic mode in an awareness on the part of Farrell about a "curious dislocation between thought and language, as though the words of the thought can't quite catch the painful complexity without an undue formality" (1981:188). In the light of these reflections, it is argued in the following pages that Farrell took recourse to a 'disease symbolism' to avoid an 'undue formality' in his subtle critique of imperialism. In other words, through an adroit manipulation of the 'cultural code,' drawing on the important branch of medical science, Farrell communicates the disgusting effects of imperialism. Before moving to Farrell's critique of imperialism in *Troubles*, it would be appropriate to place the novel in its historical context.

The 'troubles' of the title refer to the first Irish civil war of 1919-1921, though recently the term has come to be used in connection with the internal disturbances in Northern Ireland which started in 1968 and continued till the recent promulgation of cease-fire by the militant outfits. The novel covers the two-year period from July 1919 to July 1921. In 1919, Ireland was part of the United Kingdom and governed by the British from Dublin Castle. With the formation of the Irish Republican Army (or IRA) in January, the imperial authority had to face sporadic acts of IRA violence. IRA continued its guerrilla war against the British administration. As the war raged on, the British Government brought in the Black and Tans and the Auxiliary Division who had a "taste for fighting and brutality, who became an autonomous terror squad" (Taylor 1975:206). The novel ends with July 1921, the month which witnessed the signing of a truce which put an end to the fierce fighting and led eventually to the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922.

Numerous books have been written on "the Irish Question" as it came to be called. L. J. McCaffery (1968) offers a traditional interpretation, sympathetic to Irish nationalism while Nicholas Mansergh (1965) gives some interesting insights into the European implications of Irish nationalism. Like any troubled period in the history of a nation, the period of Irish turbulence has also been looked at from various points of view, and consequently, has fired the imagination of the literati too. In *A History of Modern Ireland*, published a year after Farrell's *Troubles*, Edward Norman speaks of this elusive aspect of the Irish troubles: "Englishmen have often supposed it to be a lamentable chronicle of good intentions frustrated by an ungovernable and ungrateful people; in Ireland, on the contrary, a review of the past has only too readily suggested an unceasing catalogue of usurpation and oppression" (1971:9). The only novel written against the background of the 'troubles,' *The Last September* (1927) by Elizabeth Bowen attempted to diagnose the imperial 'dis-ease' in a purely conventional and realistic mode. And as Edward Norman has aptly put it, "certainly not everyone

could have been correct in the diagnosis of Ireland's troubles" (1971:15). It is in this context that an analysis of Farrell's diagnosis in *Troubles* assumes special significance.

Troubles begins with an elaborate description of the decrepit and rotting Majestic—a rambling hotel which functions as a powerful metaphor for the decaying state of the Empire. Though some reviewers of the novel were really thrilled by the metaphorical implications of the 'diseased' Majestic, no attempt has yet been made to read the Majestic's steady disintegration in terms of a telling commentary on the gradual disintegration of the Empire itself. As Patrick Skene has noted, "One of the many imaginative and technical marvels of the novel is that the metaphor of the Majestic is sustained and continually developed and embellished throughout" (1983:29). Martin Levin, reviewing the novel a year after it was published, pointed out that "The Majestic, decaying from within even faster than it is being battered from without, goes the way of the Empire" (1971:38). Fifteen years later, Binns averred that "In *Troubles*, the transience of life and the collapse of health are implicitly connected to the condition of Ireland and of the Empire," (1986:58) but discussed it in terms of the novel's "concurrent theme of the tragic vulnerability and brevity of human life" (Ibid:60). As pointed out earlier, Binns's analysis focuses on the extra-historical aspects of *Troubles*.

As the novel opens, the Majestic is in an advanced stage of disintegration. In other words, the Majestic is seriously ill. Though the disease is never explicitly mentioned, Binns is of the view that in metaphorical terms, the Majestic has cancer (1986:58). If the Majestic suffers from cancer, the Majestic does not merely stand for the Empire; the Majestic *is* the Empire. Susan Sontag defines cancer as follows: "In cancer, the patient is 'invaded' by alien cells, which multiply, causing an atrophy or blockage of bodily functions" (1977:18-19). And significantly, Farrell describes the Majestic in terms of a living organism:

the rooms they had been staying in for twenty years were dotted here and there over that immense building and, though whole wings and corners of it might be dead and decaying, there would still be a throbbing cell of life on this floor ... slowly, though, as the years went by and the blood pressure dropped, one by one they died away" (*T*, p.11).

The picture of the 'throbbing cells' of the Majestic, 'dying away as years went by' runs parallel to the Empire's gradual loss of the colonies. Farrell reminds us that the Majestic had a glorious past. "Here and there among the foundations one might still find evidence of the Majestic's former splendour" (p.7). Quite significantly, Sontag uses the colonial metaphor to describe the effect of cancer: "cancer cells 'colonize' from the original tumour to far sites in the body, first setting up tiny outposts ('micrometastases') whose presence is assumed, though they cannot be detected" (1977:64). Through a skilful employment of disease symbolism, Farrell throws light on the corrosive and corrupting impact of imperialism. Of the aptness of the use of cancer as a political metaphor, Sontag remarks: "It amounts to saying, first of all that the event or situation is unqualifiedly and unredeemably wicked. It enormously ups the ante" (Ibid:82). With meticulous care, Farrell continues to describe the Majestic in terms of a living organism which, as it 'invades' and is invaded by the multiplying 'alien cells,' gets atrophied.

An important image that recurs in the novel is that of an 'abscess'—a cankerous tumour which threatens to bring down the whole building. The Major Brendan Archer is quite disturbed to find the wooden blocks of parquet flooring 'bulging ominously like a giant abscess' (*T*, p.25). Horrified at the dire consequences of such a cancerous growth, ("one shudders to think what it may be doing to the foundations" (p.251)), the Major and Sarah inspect the Majestic and go looking for 'suspicious bulges'—an exercise which finally turns into a 'marvellous game' of sinister significance. Farrell adds: "Although a number of

these bulges proved imaginary, once one started looking for them at the Majestic, there was no shortage of genuine ones" (p.251). Even the Majestic's "rusting drain-pipes bulged on the southern walls *like varicose veins*" (p.201; Italics mine).

The Majestic's illness steadily aggravates as troubles become rampant in Ireland. Occupants begin to move from one room to another as plumbing or furniture fails. Even the 'Do More' generator which was installed to restore the Majestic's 'reputation' goes out of order. The amenities of the hotel go from bad to worse. Mirrors everywhere become more 'fogged and grimy than ever'; the gas mantles that have been burning on the stairs and in the corridors stop working. The quality of the food goes down. Edward Spencer, the owner of the Majestic decides to announce an 'economy drive.' At this point, Farrell inserts a newspaper cut-out which serves as an ironic dig at the imperial rhetoric of power:

We have won the fight, but we have gone into debt in buying the "gloves." It was a glorious fight for humanity, but the creditors call regularly for interest on the loan nevertheless ... (T, p.69).

The Empire's plea for financial aid from the country's citizens for colonising weaker nations of the world is symbolised in the economy drive enforced in the Majestic while the Majestic continues to disintegrate.

'One unseasonably warm day,' the giant letter 'M*' of the Majestic detaches itself from the facade of the building and demolishes a small table. Like The Siege of Krishnapur wherein the disease hits from inside just as the mutiny rages from outside, the occupants here are threatened from within by the Majestic's own worsening condition as the Irish rebels weaken the Empire from without

The significance of the 'abscess' becomes quite overt towards the end of the novel when, Edward, the jingo-imperialist, with his reason almost unhinged by the mounting violence of Irish nationalism, turns paranoid and kills an innocent Irish boy, (a Sinn Feiner, according to Edward)—an act which even the soft-spoken Major condemns as 'inhuman' and 'intolerable.' But significantly, Edward feels better after this murder and Farrell adds a telling comment: "Edward's frame of mind had improved to some extent since he had killed a Sinn Feiner. *An abscess had been lanced and a quantity of poison had been allowed to escape. Nevertheless, the Major was aware that it would fill up again.*" (*T*, pp.388-9; Italics mine). The Major who is effectively given the weight of the author's voice knows for sure that the Majestic is beyond diagnosis and recovery. The poisonous 'abscesses' have come to stay and the demise of the Empire is only a matter of time. Tired of 'comprehending a situation which defied comprehension,' the Major reconciles himself to the tragic fate of being forced to live in constant fear of disease and death under 'the spreading umbrella of decay.' When Boy O'Neill says that the Auxiliary terror squad would cure the Sinn Feiners' disease, the Major profoundly replies that "the cure may be as bad as the disease" (p. 158).

Edward Spencer is the King of the 'Majestic' Empire and significantly, the disintegration of Edward's sanity coincides with the disintegration of the Majestic. The fact that Farrell wanted to portray Edward as symbolising the King of a decaying Empire is implicit in Farrell's description of the Major's reflections on Edward's contempt for his son, Ripon who missed a splendid chance to serve the imperial army: "'A chance to do what?,' wondered the Major. To have his name carved into the dark wood of Edward's war memorial, a dead servant of His Majesty?" (p.46). Even as Edward goes ahead with his futile efforts to cure the Majestic (by calling in a mason to inspect the structure etc.,) Farrell reminds us that "nothing is invulnerable to growth, change and decay, not even one's most fiercely guarded memories" (p.259). Edward wants to fight for the English

dominance of Ireland and his insanity which leads to the murder of an innocent Irish boy symbolises the failure of the military ideal and the barbarism within the Empire.

'Bulges' and 'Sinn Feiners' are not the only 'abscesses' on the structure of the Majestic as far as Edward is concerned. To him, everything that affects the general health of the Majestic are abscesses which must be lanced to allow the poison to escape. On an earlier occasion, the Major lists out the potential threats to the safety and security of the Majestic: they are the proliferation of cats in the upper storeys, the lamentable state of the roof, the 'ivy advancing like a green epidemic' and the poor state of the foundations. As Farrell develops these 'abscesses,' it is impossible not to notice their significance. The proliferating cats weaken the state of the Majestic's roof while the malignantly spreading vegetation threatens to pull it down by the foundations. The political overtones of the spreading vegetation and of the proliferating cats are incontestably powerful. Throughout the novel, cats symbolise a sinister force which is potentially capable of undermining the Majestic. When Sarah comes to the Majestic, she is disturbed by the 'frightful smell of cats' and Miss Stavely finds, to her dismay, a 'litter of kittens' in her knitting basket. As the disturbance caused by cats continues, Edward keeps the doors and windows shut. But still the infiltration of cats continues unabated. Finally, when an 'evil, orange, horridly whiskered' cat comes out of a rent in the side of the sofa and leaps into Mrs. Rappaport's lap, everybody is taken aback. And Edward begins to smell a rat in the proliferation of cats. A little later, the Major senses a 'threatening movement' in the darkly swaying shadows of the Majestic, and on closer inspection finds that "it was only one of the multitude of cats out for the purposes of hunting or mating in the Majestic's endless forest of furniture" (p.297). The Majestic thus becomes a scene where disturbing elements are hatched just as the Empire disperses the seeds of militant discontent in its 'endless forest' of colonies. But Edward is all-out to defend his Empire by hook or crook. As the proliferating cats worsen the

already deteriorating health of the Majestic, Edward undertakes a 'grim harvest of cats.* He goes upstairs and shoots down all cats:

So one day Edward had steeled himself to climb the stairs with the revolver. The eucalyptus reek of cats was overpowering, so long had they dominion over the upper storeys. *Ah, the shrieks had been terrible, unnerving, as if it were a massacre of infants ...but it had to be done in the interests of the Majestic"* (p.300; Italics mine).

Edward justifies his inhuman cruelty in terms of his sincere concern for the health of the Majestic while the whole scene re-enacts, in purely symbolical terms, one of the many instances of imperial brutality. A final irony emerges as the Major finds a couple of weeks later that the shoot-out of cats has led to the proliferation of rats which is even more dangerous. Farrell adds: "a cat, however savage and wild, can be passed off as a pet. Not so with rats" (p.307). The massacre of cats necessitates the massacre of rats and thus one brutality leads to another and then to another and so on *ad infinitum* in any system of imperial domination.

As the novel nears its end, everything that happens in and to the Majestic acquires political overtones. For instance, Farrell skilfully juxtaposes his description of the powerful impact of spring storms on the structure of the Majestic with that of the escalating violence of Irish rebels on the Empire—a rhetorical feat whereby Farrell reinforces the Majestic's symbolic terrain. Shortly after the graphic description of IRA violence in which 'eminent British soldiers and statesmen were blown off their feet,' Farrell describes the great storms that "blew in from the north-east and once more all the windows in the Majestic were rattling *in torment*, while the chimneys *groaned and whined like un milked cows*, half threatening and half-pleading, and draughts *sighed gently* under doors *like love-lorn girls*" (p.356; Italics mine).

Farrell makes use of other images which are powerfully satiric. As troubles go on to assume alarming proportions in Ireland and various colonies of the Empire, the rotting Majestic's equally rotting occupants begin to cling absurdly to some illusion of power and permanence. As the only way to improve their sagging morale, the Majestic's population turns to the game of whist and gradually the whist tables which dispense a 'faint odour of cats' become the centre of social life in the hotel, with each player finding a 'retinue of advisers and confidantes' at her or his elbow. Within a day or two, this '*epidemic of whist*' (p.221) takes such a grip that the game continues almost without interruption throughout the day and on into the night and Fan-ell's intentions become quite evident as he describes the players moving to their bedrooms:

And everyone would climb the stairs, chuckling, to their rooms and dream of aces and knaves and a supply of trumps that would last for ever and ever, one trump after another, an invincible superiority subject to neither change nor decay nor old age, for a trump will always be a trump, come what may (T, p.222; Italics mine).

Farrell's use of cricket matches is also symbolic in a similar fashion. As the Majestic continues to disintegrate, the cats to proliferate and the vegetation to advance and engulf the hotel, England continues to lose cricket matches in Australia. Farrell juxtaposes the erosion of imperial power and the continued loss of cricket matches in such a way that it becomes an obvious satire on the Englishman's sense of invincibility:

What dreadful days those were! The future of the British Isles could never have seemed so dismal since the Romans had invaded; there was trouble everywhere. The ultimate stunning blow arrived just two days before Christmas with the news that England had been defeated in the first test match

in Australia by the appalling total of three hundred and seventy-seven runs (p.278).

Farrell persuades us that most Englishmen considered the loss of a test match as regrettably and deplorably un-English as the loss of a colony.

Another image of decaying imperialism that has been consistently and marvellously developed throughout the novel is that of a 'sinking ship.' It is Ripon who first compares the Majestic to a 'sinking ship'—a comparison which reinforces the Majestic's symbolic status as Empire. On one night in the Majestic, Major dreams that he was in a ship and that the captain and crew had fallen overboard. The dream comes true at the end as everybody except the Major leaves the Majestic. As the novel nears its end, Farrell uses the image more overtly: "that night he (the Major) lay awake listening to the wind and the waves, thinking that he might have been alone in a great ocean liner, drifting in the eye of a storm" (p.358). Finally, the Major realises "that he must continue to row furiously for the nearest land, for the boat continued to settle lower and lower in the water" (p.392).

On their last day in the Majestic, the Major and Edward engage themselves in straightening the statue of Queen Victoria—an activity whose metaphorical implications are darkly humorous and biting satire. In the

last afternoon at the Majestic, he (Edward) and the Major took sledge-hammers and rained blows on Queen Victoria and her horse in an attempt to restore her to a more vertical position. For half an hour, they hammered away at her shoulders, her head, even her bosom, the sound of their blows ringing cheerfully over the country-side. As they worked, her delicate green metal became pocked with brown marks.. but little else was achieved. She was still leaning drunkenly sideways. At most, they had managed to correct her position a few inches by

the time they retired, **perspiring**, to **drink** some tea...
After tea they returned to hammer down her ruffled
skirts. That was all they could do for her" (p.394).

This is perhaps one of the best examples of the typically **Farrellesque** attack on imperialism and on those who work hard for the cause of the Empire.

To sum up, **Troubles** throws light on **Farrell's** unique use of various symbols and metaphors as tools for his critique of imperialism. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, most novelists of Empire, even those who were clearly critical of the Empire, resorted to a more direct method while Farrell, aware of the fact that the so-called realism conjures away the represented reality rather than replicates it accurately, makes effective use of the symbolism of physical illness and other disorders to convey the gravity of imperial evil. Now, a careful inquiry into the rhetoric of disease in *The Siege of Krishnapur* would throw this aspect of Farrell's fiction into sharper relief.

(b) Disease And Civilisation

There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.

Walter **Benjamin**, **Illuminations**

... [A]s one surveys the aims of civilisation and the means it employs, one is bound to conclude that the whole thing is not worth the effort and that in the end it can only produce a state of things which no individual will be able to bear.

Sigmund Freud, **Civilisation and its Discontents**

In **The Siege of Krishnapur**, Farrell uses two major tools in his critique of civilisation and imperialism. In the first place, he resorts to the use of disease symbolism on a scale as massive as that of *Troubles*. The images of disease are integrated into the text in such a way that the connection between the sickness of characters and certain external events becomes incontestably self-evident. Though all the three Empire novels make extensive use of the images of disease and decay, it is in *The Siege of Krishnapur* that they become one of the most dominant structural devices for a powerful critique of civilisation. In the second place, Farrell presents two equally important characters in the novel who represent conflicting responses to the concept of a superior civilisation. Fleury who seems to represent the author's voice in the novel is in perfect disagreement with the Collector, Hopkins who speaks and acts out the rhetoric of power.

The illusory faith in a superior master race with an infinitely rich civilisation was always a hallmark of the imperial temperament and there has always been "a sustained political campaign to equate imperialism with modern civilisation and a 'civilising' mission" (Williams 1976:159). This concept is most belligerently articulated by the French exponent of imperialism:

It is necessary, then, to accept as a principle and point of departure the fact that there is a *hierarchy of races and civilisations*, and that we belong to *the superior race and civilisation*, still recognising that, while *superiority* confers rights, it imposes strict obligations in return. The basic legitimisation of conquest over native peoples is the conviction of *our superiority*, not merely our *mechanical, economic and military superiority*, but our *moral superiority*. Our dignity rests on that quality, and it underlies our right to direct the rest of humanity (In Curtin 1971:294-95; Italics mine).

Quite paradoxically, this mad faith in the natural inheritance of a superior civilisation led to the development of a governing ethos in Britain which was characterised by primitive notions of justice and a peremptory demand for loving awe from the subject race. In his recent book **Culture and Imperialism**, Edward Said explores this puzzling paradox which was at the heart of the imperial rhetoric of power: "Most professional humanists ... are unable to make the connection between the prolonged and sordid cruelty of such practices as slavery, colonialist and racial oppression, and imperial **subjection**, on the one hand, and the poetry, fiction, and philosophy of the society that engages in these practices on the other" (1993:xiv).² The primitive impulse to conquer the weaker nations of the world was never seen to be in conflict with the hallowed concepts of progress and civilisation. This apparent paradox was allowed to remain irreconcilable as a matter of convenience and Great Britain continued to become 'greater' by subjugating the 'benighted' regions of the world one after another till it grew to be the "Empire of the Sun."³ In other words, Britain kept succumbing to the instinctual compulsions of territorial expansion so that the vanquished races could attain to a higher state of civilised existence. The rhetoric of power was so powerful that it could make a military campaign look like a great civilising mission which fitted in perfectly with the lofty notion of a superior civilisation. As Said aptly puts it, "the rhetoric of power all too easily produces an illusion of benevolence when deployed in an imperial **setting**" (1993:xix). Thus, with a notion of civilisation which was 'antiseptically' quarantined from its worldly affiliations' (Ibid: xv), Britain went on to destroy native cultures so as to bring light to the dark continents of the world: "Africa grew dark as Victorian explorers, missionaries, and scientists flooded it with light, because the light was refracted through an imperialist ideology that urged the abolition of "savage customs" in the name of civilisation" (Brantlinger 1988:173).⁴

According to Raymond Williams, the first use of the word 'civilisation' in its modern sense was made by John Stuart Mill for whom it meant:

the multiplication of physical comforts; the advancement and diffusion of knowledge; the decay of superstition; the facilities of mutual intercourse; the softening of manners; *the decline of war and personal conflict; the progressive limitation of the tyranny of the strong over the weak*; the great works accomplished throughout the globe by the co-operation of multitudes” (In Williams 1976:58; Italics mine).

My emphasis in the quoted passage would substantiate my point. Farrell’s derisive view of the concept of a superior civilisation, by equating it with disease, is to be understood in the context of Mill’s definition of the term ‘civilisation.’⁵ Like Farrell, Coleridge, perhaps the first writer to refer to civilisation as a disease, thinks that civilisation has a ‘corrupting influence’: “civilisation is itself but a mixed good, if not far more a corrupting influence, *the hectic of disease*, not the bloom of health ...this civilisation is not grounded ...in the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterise our humanity” (Ibid:59; Italics mine).⁶ But in its use by the rulers of the Empire, the word ‘civilisation’ was always contrasted with ‘savagery’ or ‘barbarism’ and the uncivilised methods of the Empire’s civilising mission made the word lose itself into a synonym of its opposite. In other words, the very exponents of a superior civilisation began to valorise savagery in an attempt to retain the sinews of imperial power. Mannoni makes a splendid analysis of this aspect of the imperial psychology:

the savage is identified with the unconscious, with a certain image of the instincts... And civilised man is painfully divided between the desire to ‘correct’ the ‘errors’ of the savages and the desire to identify himself with them in his search for some lost paradise [*a desire which at once casts doubt upon the merit of the very civilisation he is trying to transmit to them*] (1956:21; Italics mine).

In his influential book *The Psychology of Jingoism*, Hobson, too, describes imperialism as a "reversion to a savage type of nature"* and as a "depraved choice of national life" (1901:19). And it is against this background that Walter Benjamin's statement ["there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (1968:37)] assumes profound significance. Farrell refuses to agree with the hackneyed view that the problems of the colonised lay in their lack of civilisation. According to Farrell, civilisation of the Empire is not the cure for the colonial 'dis-ease'; on the contrary, it is, extending the metaphor a little further, the disease and therefore the main reasons for the continued failure of the Empire to understand and to 'improve' the natives are the diagnostic errors perpetually repeated by novelists as well as historians of Empire. The following section examines Farrell's metaphorical treatment of this aspect of the imperial enterprise in *The Siege of Krishnapur*

Binns has complained that Farrell's critique of Empire in *The Siege of Krishnapur* is devoid of an 'underlying seriousness' and that the 'predominantly comic tone' of Farrell's novel 'conjures away the problem of evil' (1986:59) involved in the imperial enterprise. On the contrary, the 'predominantly comic tone' of Farrell's narrative underscores the seriousness with which he tackles the question of imperial evil—this is the subject of the fourth chapter. As Margaret Drabble has aptly put it, Farrell's "comedy is serious, and although there are moments of mock-epic and mock-heroic, we remain convinced that Farrell is deeply engaged with his subject-matter" (1981:178). Though it is easy to argue like Binns that Farrell's treatment of Empire is quite different from that of either Forster's or Orwell's (1986:80) which is actually the central thesis of this whole chapter, his view that Farrell's critique of imperialism is flippant fails to stand textual scrutiny. In *The Siege of Krishnapur*, Farrell undertakes an attack on imperialism with consummate skill, unmatched in the fictional literature of imperialism. Another criticism which Binns hurls against *The Siege of Krishnapur* is that atrocities perpetrated on both sides during the Indian Mutiny

are slurred over and that the actual siege was an infinitely more painful affair ~~than~~ it is in the novel. To accuse Farrell of such a flaw is to mistake a novelist for an historian. **The Siege of Krishnapur** is not a historical record of the Indian Mutiny; it is the fictional recreation of a historical reality. Moreover, good historical fiction *does* take liberties with verifiable facts. Drabble has complained that Farrell's "sepoys are never shown as people at all, but mere as cannon fodder and comic fodder at that, and ...their cause is given the most frivolous explanation, seen as it were through the British eyes" (1981:190). This charge is similar to that of Binns's in that both are based on what Stanley Fish calls "the disparity between reader-expectation and reading experience" (1965:153) which he considers a distinctive aspect of great literature. In this context, it is instructive to note that Farrell was writing a novel on the Mutiny at a time when more than fifty novels had already been written on the subject. The following excerpt from R. J. Crane's **Inventing India** substantiates my point:

The events which began on 10 May 1857 are known variously as the Indian Mutiny, the Sepoy Mutiny, the Sepoy Rebellion, the Sepoy revolt and the First War of Independence. That those events should have come to be known by so many names illustrates the vastly different ways in which they have been interpreted and suggests the general air of **confusion**, fuelled by emotion which has always surrounded them. It was not an Indian Mutiny because the revolt was largely restricted to the northern region of India. It was not simply a mutiny or rebellion by the Bengal sepoys, as many Victorians saw it, because although it was by no means embraced by the whole **population**, it was not confined solely to the sepoys either. Nor was it truly envisaged as a war of independence, though it may well have been the seed which gave rise to the independence struggle in later years. It was perhaps a mixture of all these **things—the truth lying somewhere between the extremes of contemporary imperialist interpretation and more recent nationalist interpretation**" (1992:11; Italics mine).

Farrell knew that as long as the truth was **'lying somewhere,'** a fictional replication of the Mutiny which takes no liberties whatsoever with facts would read like just one of those numerous biased history texts. So, if atrocities committed on both sides in the Mutiny are not sufficiently dealt with, as Binns complained, it was because Farrell wanted to effect a shift of focus in his treatment of the Mutiny. In a fiction which concerns itself with a subtle yet effective critique of imperialism and its **civilisation,** accurate representation of historical facts is immaterial.

Perhaps, the best possible rejoinder to **Drabble's** criticism of *The Siege of Krishnapur* is inscribed within her own text. If, as she complained, the sepoys are 'never shown as people at all,' it is so because Farrell is presenting them **'through British eyes'**; if their cause is shown as **'most frivolous,'** it is so from the British point of view. If the picture of the Mutiny is comically painted, it is so because **Farrell's** angle of the **fictional** vision of history is distinctively different. Farrell suggests that the colonisers, swollen with a sense of false confidence in the glory of their civilisation looked down upon the colonised in general (and the sepoys, in particular) merely as 'cannon fodder.' Farrell implies that the Empire had to beat an ignominious retreat from most of its colonies because rulers of the Empire were firmly grounded in the misconception that the British civilisation is a panacea for all the cultural, political and administrative hindrances to nation-building. James Morris ironically puts it: "Never mind the true motives and the methods of imperialism; in the days of their imperial supremacy, the British genuinely believed themselves to be performing a divine purpose, innocently, nobly in the name of God and the Queen" (1973:37-38). And Farrell explores and exposes the 'true methods and motives of imperialism*' in **The Siege of Krishnapur.**

Like the city sieged by plague in Albert Camus's **The Plague (1947),** a novel whose echoes abound **in** *The Siege of Krishnapur,* the Residency in

which the white community is trapped is pictured as "a mysterious sign isolating a contagion from the dark countryside" (p. 142). In **Camus'** novel, the plague is a metaphor for **fascism**—a mighty and macabre alien that invades and infects a city's population. In *The Siege of Krishnapur*, cholera is used as a similar structural device but with a distinctive difference. Here, the imperial civilisation is a 'contagion' which attempts to infect the pure Indian population. At the very outset of the novel, after the ominous distribution of chappatis which "swept the countryside like an epidemic" (p.11), the Collector is filled with a depressing sense of foreboding and like a 'prophet of doom' buttonholes every Englishman about an impending disaster. As part of his serious efforts to avert the supposedly imminent scourge, the Collector orders the digging of a deep trench combined with a thick wall of earth around the perimeters of the Residency. But ironically enough, the disease hits from **inside**—a fact which forces the readers to reflect deeply on the significant metaphorical overtones of the disease which threatens to exterminate the imperial community marooned in the Residency. The disease remains undiagnosed and this diagnostic incapacity is implicitly related to the hitherto undiagnosed disease of imperial civilisation which ultimately resulted in the collapse of the health of the Empire.

As the novel opens, the most striking thing about the town of Krishnapur is its capacity for distortion, **misperception** and **illusion**. Farrell seems to be **suggesting** that the entire colonial adventure and the eventual catastrophe have opined resulted from a certain set of fundamental misconceptions about the colonies and purposeful distortions of the imperial mission. **Farrell's** subtle critique of an erroneously conceived notion of a superior civilisation is implicit in the very description of the lie of the land of Krishnapur which is the metaphorical centre from where the disease of civilisation spreads like an epidemic:

Anyone who has never before visited Krishnapur
and who approaches from the east is likely to think

that he has reached the end of his journey a few miles sooner than he **expected**" (**SK**, p.9).

This chasm between illusion and reality, compounded as it is by **the** ubiquitous presence of heat and dust and the vastness of the Indian plains seem **to** be at the heart of the imperial failure. Here, in ***the heat-distorted distance'** of **the** vast expanse, the foreign visitor sees nothing as it *is* but only as it 'appears to be.' The new-comer to Krishnapur is deluded into thinking at first that the town 'is not quite **deserted'** because he thinks he finds a traveller here and there "but as **he** approaches, he will see that the supposed town is utterly deserted. Nearer **again**, he will find that it is not a town at all but one of those ancient cemeteries" (**p. 10**). As the new visitor continues to look for some vestiges of civilisation, he realises that "there is no comfort here, nothing that a European might recognise as civilisation' (Ibid). When he suddenly finds walls made of **brick**, Farrell intrudes with an ironic aside: "Bricks are undoubtedly an essential ingredient of civilisation; one gets nowhere at all without them" (Ibid). Thus, in his description of the landscape of Krishnapur, Farrell has made clear in a typically Farrellesque fashion that **The Siege of Krishnapur** is a serious and cunningly accomplished attack on the civilisation of the Empire. And it is from this point of view **that Farrell's** description of the land of Krishnapur as an agent of **distortion**, misperception and illusion sets the tone of the whole novel. Farrell proceeds **to** debunk the myth of the imperial civilisation by maintaining an ironic narrative stance and by introducing characters who represent conflicting responses **to** the colonial experience.

Fleury calls the Empire's civilisation a **"beneficial disease"** (p.42). **Fleury** is an important character in **The Siege of Krishnapur** who falls a little short of being **Farrell's** mouthpiece on **civilisation**. **Fleury** comes **to India** as a romantic young man who has been commissioned **to write a book on "the advances that**

civilisation had made in India under the company rule" (p.24) and returns to Britain with profound misgivings about the theory of a superior culture. Unlike Conrad's Kurtz who, delving deep into the heart of darkness in the hope of dispelling it for ever merges with its symbolic landscape, Fleury comes to the Indian subcontinent to compose a volume on its darkness, is distressed to find his own people blinded by the dazzling light of an alien and elusive culture and goes back home enlightened. Fleury's description of civilisation as a 'disease' suggests that in his Empire fiction Farrell is attempting a final diagnosis of this colonial 'dis-ease.'

Fleury says that although the abolition of Suttee and the digging of canals are all sure evidences of improvement, they are only 'symptoms.' And as he puts it: "The trouble is, as you see, that although the symptoms are there, the disease itself is missing" (p.42). And this is a 'trouble' which hinders the accurate diagnosis of the disease. Farrell uses the Great Exhibition (which was considered to be a landmark of western civilisation) held in Hyde Park in 1851 as an instrument by which he can ridicule the coloniser's 'diseased' concept of civilisation. The Collector, Hopkins, another possible protagonist like Fleury, is one of the staunch exponents of the theory of the superior culture of the Empire on which he bases his administration and personal conduct in Krishnapur. He is the champion of the Great Exhibition where 14000 exhibitors displayed their goods. Hopkins had attended the exhibition in an official capacity and regards it as a 'a collective prayer of all civilised nations' (SK, p.48). He has spent a substantial part of his fortune to bring over to India, a number of exhibits like statues, paintings, sculptures, machines etc., from the Exhibition which he considers as "a concrete embodiment of a progressive and rational civilisation" (Binns 1986:66). Most of these 'hallowed' objects which are emblems of a superior culture for the Collector are condemned by the Magistrate as 'artistic and scientific bric-a-brac.' Farrell's attitude to the idea of a superior culture becomes quite evident when he makes the Collector assert that some articles brought from

the Exhibition which are bizarre, tasteless and even comically preposterous to modern eyes are synonymous with civilisation. Fleury tells Hari bluntly that "the Great Exhibition was not, as everyone said it was, *a landmark of civilisation*; it was for the most part *a collection of irrelevant rubbish* such as your ancestors might well have collected" (p.92; Italics mine). The Collector's obsession with the Exhibition as symbolising civilisation and progress becomes a powerful critique of civilisation itself. For the Collector, "Faith, Respectability, Geology, Mechanical Invention, Ventilation and Rotation of Crops" are the essential ingredients of civilisation. And it is quite ironic that Miriam whom the Collector wants to impress by his monologue on civilisation "found that her eyelids kept creeping down in spite of herself. Even when the Collector began to shout ... about the progress of mankind... about the conquest of ignorance and prejudice by the glistering sabre of man's intelligence, she could not manage to keep her eyes properly open" (p.90). Farrell uses the clichéd rhetoric of power ['the progress of mankind,' 'the conquest of ignorance,' 'the glistering sabre of man's intelligence'] as a tool to critique the reprehensible ideological formations they imply.

The Collector quotes examples of human inventiveness and ingenuity from the Exhibition and considers those "humble artefacts of God-given ability to observe and calculate as minute steps in the progress of mankind towards union with that Supreme Being in whom all Knowledge *is* and ever shall be" (p.59). But Fleury who controverts his view strongly believes that the real spiritual and mystical aspect, 'the side of the heart' is missing in such a concept of civilisation. says: "What is required is a completely different aspect of it [civilisation]..., the side of the heart" (p.42). Later on, Fleury tells Hari that civilisation as it is now has changed man into an engine and that "an engine has no heart" (p.95). "...[O]nly the person capable of listening to the tenderest echoes of his own heart is capable of making that aerial ascent which will unite him with the Eternal" (p.57). He continues:

As for your brilliant engineers, if they don't listen to the voice of their hearts, not a thousand, not a million balloons will be capable of lifting their leaden feet one inch from the earth (Ibid).

This description by Fleury of the cramping effect of civilisation links up incontestably with Dr Dunstaple's description of the effect of **cholera**. Dr Dunstaple describes the effect of cholera in similar terms. He says that as cholera strikes "the blood continues to be black... and in due course the heart becomes asphyxiated" (p.230). This 'asphyxiated heart' is similar to what E. M. Forster called the 'undeveloped heart' of the British which, according to Ashish Nandy "separated them not merely from the Indians but also from each other" (1983:34), Ashish Nandy continues to speak about this 'undevelopment' (Ibid) in terms of an illness which has indirectly caused large-scale destruction and cruelty, creating "a new pathological fit between ideas and feelings" (Ibid).

Even as the siege is raging outside, the white community is complacently engaged in lengthy and fruitless discussions of the causes of cholera. In **The Siege of Krishnapur** cholera and the siege are thus thematically bound up with each other. Just as the beleaguered community in the Residency attempts to fight the actual threat of **cholera**, the sepoys outside it are fighting to contain the spread of a 'cholera' from the symptoms of which they have been suffering for decades. Dr Dunstaple's speech underscores the irony with tremendous impact:

Ladies and Gentlemen. I need not tell you how we are ravaged by this disease in Krishnapur! Many have already departed by the way of this terrible illness, no doubt **others** will follow before our travail is over (p.277).

Even Dr McNab is not quite certain about 'the supposed invisible cholera cloud.' And Farrell's use of language reinforces the metaphorical implications of the 'cholera cloud':

but McNab continued as he always had, grave and rather lugubrious, knowing that given time, the 'cholera cloud' would move on ... but *this would happen imperceptively, and not, perhaps like a cloud passing, but more in the way that sediment settles in a glass of muddy water* (p.302; Italics mine).

The whole passage with its image of the 'cholera cloud' is a telling commentary on the eternal threat of imperial domination—a threat which will never actually disappear from the world but can only be temporarily suppressed. Farrell implies that the imperial idea will always remain dormant in the British national consciousness like a 'sediment' that 'settles in a glass of muddy water' and that can be stirred up and brought to the surface anytime in one form or other.

If, as Fleury says, those instances of material progress symbolised by the Great Exhibition are symptoms of a 'disease' called civilisation, it goes without saying that the self-same imperial custodians of the human race carry the viruses of a dangerous disease which can shatter the 'ease' and 'peace' of innocent native communities. Such ironic reversals are central to Farrell's technique and invite us to look at the imperial enterprise from a stunningly original angle of vision. Farrell implies that the concept of a superior civilisation is a disease for which no accurate technical name has yet been found. Thus, Farrell is occupied with frontiers of imperial consciousness beyond which words fail and only symbols and metaphors are of any help. As Conrad puts it: "nothing is more clear than the utter insignificance of explicit statement and also its power to call attention away from things that matter in the region of art" (*hi* Kimbrough 1988:232).

When Fleury finds the ailing Collector with a red and swollen face, he fails to guess the nature of his illness. But as the Collector falls sideways, **rapping** his head on the floor, "all became clear to Fleury and he drew back with horror, thinking 'Cholera!'—a diagnostic error which is quickly corrected by Dr McNab as erysipelas. And most significantly, the Collector's recovery from his disease coincides with the abandonment of his belief in the 'superior civilisation' of the Empire: "India itself was now a different place; the fiction of happy natives being led forward along the road to civilisation could no longer be sustained" (p.249). In other words, the illness of the Collector's body heals the illness of his **mind**—the dis-ease of civilisation. And this profound realisation dawned on the Collector in his delirious state of ill-health when he was "possessed with the vehemence of a strange inner life where no one could reach him" (p.247). Shortly after this recovery, when Miriam taunts him on his faith in the Great Exhibition, he replies that it was just one of his 'tricks.'

The problem of the accurate diagnosis of physical illness receives a major focus in *The Siege of Krishnapur*. With two doctors holding diametrically opposite views on the causes and treatment of almost all diseases, it becomes quite difficult for the ailing occupants of the Residency to decide on the most reliable doctor. Binns has pointed out that "Farrell shows a great interest in medical debate as an expression of the battle between tradition and orthodoxy on the hand and rationality and innovation on the other" (1986:46). But what the medical debate results in, as far as the ailing community in the Residency is concerned is an acute state of indecision as to which of the two doctors—Dr Dunstable and Dr McNab—would best diagnose their disease. The rift between the two doctors aggravates as the siege **progresses**—a fact which assumes a metaphorical significance: "It had become clear to the garrison that not only did the doctors sometimes apply different remedies to the same **illness**, in certain cases, these remedies were diametrically opposed to each other. So what was a sick man to do?" (**SK**, p.275). With the cholera epidemic functioning as a

metaphor for the rotting state of imperial civilisation, Farrell symbolically presents the larger problem of the need for a coherent perception of the imperial question. Dr McNab says that it "is wrong to suggest that there is an accepted treatment of cholera. The medical journals still present a variety of possible remedies, many of which sound most desperate and bizarre... all of which is a sure sign that our profession remains baffled by this disease" (p.282), If the disease—the 'profession' of imperialism- is universally accepted to be beyond diagnosis and cure, the only thing that can be done is to carry on with it as best as one could. Farrell's irony is implicit in the silence that falls immediately after Dunstaple utters the word 'cholera,' "a silence only made more absolute by the sound of a distant cannon" (p.277).

If, as R J Crane has pointed out, Dr McNab represents the post-Raj view of imperialism (1992:29), the fact that the traditional Dr Dunstaple has the greatest number of adherents has to be viewed from a different angle. This fact—that most people are on the side of the short-tempered, ill-mannered and illogical Dr Dunstaple in this 'cholera controversy' throws into sharp relief the majority dismissal of Fleury's view that the idea of a 'superior culture' is an imperial construct. Thus, the clash between the two doctors about the best possible diagnostic method and treatment of cholera is a paradigm of the battle between the pro-imperialist and anti-imperialists for 'the best available treatment' (p.271) for the colonial 'dis-ease.' Farrell persuades us that the true pathology of this dangerous disease seems elusive.

Hari, the prince of Krishnapur and the only Indian character who is developed to some degree in the novel is a victim of the disease of imperial civilisation. Farrell's description of Hari's first appearance in the novel reveals the symptoms of this disease:

Near a fireplace of **marble** inlaid with garnets, lapis lazuli and **agate**, the **Maharaja's** son sat on a chair constructed entirely of antlers, eating a boiled egg **and reading *Blackwood's Magazine***. **Beside the** chair, a large cushion on the floor still bore the impression of where he had been sitting a moment earlier; he preferred squatting on the floor to the discomfort of chairs but feared that his English visitors might regard this awkward" (p.79).

Beneath the thin veneer of his sophistication, Hari remains a biased Indian whose British education has taught him nothing except that his own culture is far inferior to that of the British. Matthew's description of such an Indian in **The Singapore Grip** suits Hari perfectly: "... an Indian bloke ...in his striped tie and cricket blazer, modelled on some fatuous English tradition that has no real meaning for him at all. He has borrowed a culture that doesn't fit him any better than his jacket" (**SG**, p. 173). Hari appears out of place in his Indian surroundings and yet quite ill at 'ease' in British surroundings. He is shown eating a boiled egg and reading *Blackwood's Magazine* but at the same time preferring to squat on a cushion rather than sit on a chair. While the natives who stubbornly resist the disease of civilisation are indirectly admired by the British, Hari appears quite unappealing even to a Briton like Fleury. When Fleury says that "**the** only *real* progress would be to make man's heart sensitive to love, to nature, to his fellow men, to the world of spiritual joy" (p.94) Hari's response is one of dogmatic intolerance. He says: "I am very sad that **you**, Fleury should reveal yourself **so** frightfully backward" (p.95).

Hari's misused idioms, misquoted Shakespeare, and his great interest in daguerreotype are all symptoms of the disease of imperial civilisation. The fruits of his British education plucked him out of his cultural roots and made him live in a room "laden with mercury vapours, and a variety of other fumes no less toxic, emanating from crystals and solutions of chlorine, **bromine**, iodine and potassium cyanide" (**p.91**). With his emphasis on '**potassium cyanide**,' Farrell

reveals the 'toxicity of the intellectual hegemonising of British education. Hari's British education turned out to be unhealthy for him rather than a step on the road to progress and culture. As Vrinda Nabar has aptly put it: "the introduction of English as a medium of instruction insidiously transformed virtually every educated Indian into a kind of cultural schizoid. While Indians have coped with this psycho-cultural duality in various ways, they have never been able to come to terms with it completely" (1994:6). Hari's eventual shift of allegiance in the name of 'progress' and 'civilisation' comes in for a good deal of sharp though veiled criticism from Farrell. Hari, 'firmly on the side of Progress,' falls out with his father who, according to him, was prepared to "connive at the destruction of the fount of knowledge" (p. 142) and switches his loyalty to the British. And Farrell, the ironist is seen to be at his best when Hari, the exponent and lover of freedom of thought ends up in British captivity where he realises that even in the civilised 'Mr Hopkin's (Hari reduces Hopkins to the singular for grammatical purity!) scale of values, political expediency takes precedence over justice. The sarcasm implicit in the description of Hari's captivity in a stable is calculated to shock:

It was here, in the days when life in Krishnapur had been on a grander scale, that a former President, anxious to emulate the local rajahs, had kept a pair of tigers. Now where once the tigers had lived, Hari strode endlessly back and forth behind the bars (p.194).

Hari, 'anxious to emulate the local rajahs' of the Empire ended up in an imperial stable. British education keeps him a prisoner of the imperial theories of progress and civilisation while his attempt to practise those theories lands him in British captivity. Thus, Hari is a victim of the imperial 'cholera.' And significantly, just before Hari's exit from the novel, the Collector takes him to the roof from where he watches the cantonment burning: "From the roof it seemed as if a perfect semi-circle of fire had stretched around the Residency enclave like some mysterious sign isolating a contagion from the dark countryside" (p. 142).

Through the profound portrayal of Hari's divided psychology, Farrell successfully diagnoses his 'disease' and seeks to heal it in his readers.

As flesh-and-blood people, Fleury and the Collector share certain common characteristics but as structural devices to critique civilisation and imperialism, each represents opposing views on the theory of superior civilisation. For the Collector, civilisation seems at first to be a judicious mixture of science and religion, faith and mechanical invention. The Collector's faith in the Exhibition as the consummate embodiment of progress and civilisation is held up to ridicule when he agrees with Mr Rayne, the opium agent who cites the rise of the opium trade as one of the glorious instances of material progress and civilisation. As Ashish Nandy has aptly put it, "... much before the modern doctrines of progress came home to roost in the First and the Second Worlds, the colonised societies had to bear their full brunt" (1983:40). Significantly, Farrell almost gives Fleury's view the full weight of the author's voice by a conscious accentuation of the discrepancies in the Collector's views. Fleury remains consistent in his view that the imperial civilisation as it existed in the heyday of the Empire is very dehumanising. When Hari, the Maharaja's son shows him one object after another as symbols of progress and civilisation, Fleury says: "...we must change the direction of our society before it is too late and we all become like engines which will soon be galloping across India on railway lines. An engine has no heart" (p.95). On another occasion, Fleury tells Dr Dunstaple that "civilisation as it is now denatures man" (p.42). But the Collector is inconsistent in his view. He agrees and disagrees with Fleury. In his reflections on the character of the Magistrate, the Collector is shown to be in agreement with Fleury's stance.: "Even after all these years in India, muses the Collector, Willoughby doesn't understand the natives. He is too rational for them. He can't see things from their point of view because *he has no heart*" (p.98; Italics mine). And it is interesting to note that this reflection is immediately followed by a detailed description of the Collector's favourite room which is 'ornamented' with

loudly about the inferiority of the 'arid' eighteenth century, with its 'poor conception of man' and 'fruitless ratiocination*' in sharp contrast with his own century as the terminal point of progress and civilisation of the entire humanity, a cannon shot from the sepoy lands in the mudwall, missing him narrowly and showering him with pebbles. And Farrell, comparing the lingering influence of imperial fictions to *amputated limbs' that continue to 'itch,' adds his telling remark:

Somehow the shock of the narrow escape had a sobering effect on him [the Collector] and his confidence drained away, and with it the satisfaction with his own epoch. He thought again of those hundred and fifty million people living in cruel poverty in India alone...Would Science and political Economy ever be powerful enough to give them a life of ease and respectability? He no longer believed that they would. *This notion of the superiority of the nineteenth century which he had just been enjoying had depended on beliefs he no longer held, but which had just now been itching like amputated limbs which he could feel although they no longer existed* (p.223; Italics mine).

Consequent to this profound awareness, the Collector is "shocked" to see that there was a growth of a beard on his chin which "was sprouting with an *atheistical tint* of ginger" (p.251). Through the accentuation of such oddities in the life of top British officials whose ostensible love for scientific and artistic elements of cultural production and the contemptuous attitudes to the native population always remained irreconcilable, Farrell seeks to expose not only the imperial doublespeak inherent in the imperial psychology but also the gaping chasm between the rhetoric of power and the reality of life under the imperial system.

By Presenting such ideological inconsistencies in one of the leading characters, Farrell hopes to highlight the pathetic inadequacy of the theory of superior civilisation. Once in a 'wool-gathering' mood, the suffocation that Fleury feels in the evening dress coats worn in India by Englishmen leads him to ponder on the possibility of the natives' feeling of suffocation under a foreign rule:

He was thinking of civilisation, of how it must be something more than the fashions and customs of one country imported into another, of how it must be *a superior view of mankind*, and of how he was suffocated in his own evening dress coat (p.45).

Farrell's contempt for the so-called civilised imperialists is voiced directly and indirectly in many parts of *The Siege of Krishnapur*, Mrs Dunstable is introduced to the young British officers who have come to Calcutta 'for a bit of civilisation' and immediately afterwards Farrell makes an ironic thrust as the young officers call her son Harry Dunstable a 'rotter' and 'rascal' right in the face of Mrs Dunstable.

Again, in his 'objective' discourse on the "perplexing question of why after a hundred years of beneficial rule in Bengal," the natives would want to return to the anarchy of their ancestors, the Collector says that one or two serious military mistakes committed by the Empire were surely no reason "for rejecting a superior culture as a whole" (p.76). But when Fleury says that he must take issue with the expression, "superior culture", both the Collector and the Magistrate ignore him completely. Fleury's attempts to broach the subject of 'superior culture' as 'a doubtful proposition' meet with stiff opposition. But when the Collector finally says that "a superior civilisation such as ours is irresistible" (p. 177), Fleury boldly declares : "It's wrong to talk of a "superior civilisation" because there isn't such a thing. *All* civilisation is bad. It mars the noble and

natural instincts of the heart. Civilisation is decadence!" (Ibid). The Collector's vaunted 'objectivity' takes leave of him at this stage of the discussion and he dismisses Fleury's idea as 'gibberish' and quickly changes the subject to Fleury's dress. Fleury stands dumbfounded, "taken aback at the speed with which his theories had been dismissed" (Ibid). Farrell's conscious attempt to lay bare the imperial hypocrisy is foregrounded when the Collector tells Fleury a little later that "the principles behind a civilisation are more important than the question of whether they were actually realised in a concrete manner" (p. 178). As the Collector continues to harangue Fleury in this way, an enemy rocket from the Sepoy lines careers down at them in wild loops out of the sky. When they find that the rocket is luckily defused, Fleury remarks to the Collector that the rocket which could have snuffed out their lives in no time was also "one of the advantages of civilisation" (p. 179). And the fact that the Collector fails to grasp even this simple irony serves to make the whole incident look all the more ironical from the standpoint of Farrell's fictional structure.

The actual events of the Mutiny are described with a touch of ironic humour.⁹ The way in which the very emblems of civilisation become weapons of destruction is hilariously humorous and, at the same time, bitingly ironic: "A sepoy with a green turban had his spine shattered by the *Spirit of Science*; others had been struck down by tea-spoons, by fish knives, by marbles, an unfortunate *Subadar* had been plucked from this world by the silver-sugar tongs embedded in his brain" (pp.318-319). As Frances. B. Singh has aptly put it, "... in the last defence of the compound, the very implements of civilisation, progress and science become missiles of pain, horror and death" (1979:29).

Farrell continues to take to task the English imperialists who considered themselves superior to the natives in terms of culture and race. Stranded in an exotic land of myths, legends and superstitions, Farrell's imperial representatives play comic 'Prosperos' in a land of heroic 'Calibans.' During Fleury's visit to

Rayne's house, for a tea-party, Rayne introduces his servants whom he calls by the name of animals and insects: "We call this lad "Ram". That is not his real name. His real name is Akbar or Mohammed or something like that We call him Ram because he looks like one. And this is Monkey" (p.62) and an 'elderly and dignified' servant is called 'Ant'. It doesn't stand to reason that Farrell would introduce such scenes as instances of coarse humour because as V. Glendinning has pointed out "nothing in Farrell's world (is) simple" (1981:442). Farrell's intention is to satirise the coloniser's overweening sense of superiority which has always remained a serious obstacle to a rapprochement between the British and the Indians. A whole new dimension emerges as one considers the famous words of Aimè Césaire: "... the coloniser, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as *an animal*, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal and tends objectively to transform *himself* into an animal" (1972:57-58). Farrell implies that such instances of insulting attitude towards Indians were axiomatic in the British way of life in India and this is clear from the fact that Fleury doesn't seem to find anything particularly strange about Rayne's behaviour. The tea-party turns into a drunken gathering and Farrell adds a comic incident as Fleury decides to leave Rayne's house: "What, Can you be off already?" exclaimed Rayne. "I haven't yet had a chance to talk to you... A talk about civilisation " (p.66).

R J Crane has pointed out that "in India as elsewhere in the Empire, the British simply established their own society and culture imposing their buildings on the landscape and shipping the furniture and possessions to fill them as if it was their right and the natural course for a superior race" (1992:15). Farrell makes wonderful use of such possessions shipped to India from England as tools to ridicule the pretensions of the 'civilised' British. The huge busts of Plato and Socrates, the powerful representations of Western civilisation stand out awkwardly in the Indian surroundings. The pictures of the four Greek

philosophers gazing out at the inscrutable plains of India throw the imperial pretensions into sharp relief (*SK*, p. 109-110).

Farrell also employs animal imagery with consummate skill to reflect on the physical and mental deterioration of the British colonisers. While Farrell uses cats and rats in *Troubles*, in *The Siege of Krishnapur* he makes use of dogs. As Spurling has pointed out, Farrell's "treatment of dogs is especially interesting" (1981b: 159). Dogs in his novels are "not dear, faithful pets, but squalid, even faintly sinister creatures who attach themselves to people purely for the dog's own convenience and protection" (*Ibid*). Interestingly, Spurling's definition of Farrell's dogs is strangely similar to the post-imperial definition of the coloniser—a fact which is corroborated by a scene from *A Man From Elsewhere* wherein Farrell satirically praises dogs on the ground that they are better equipped than humans for keeping a firm grip (with their four legs) on the surface of a revolving globe (p. 1).

In *The Siege of Krishnapur*, Farrell's description of dogs slumbering beside a well and the Collector's following reflections on the various kinds of dogs read like a poetic commentary on the effect of the siege on the British and the Indians: " they [dogs] included mongrels and terriers of many shapes and sizes *but also dogs of purer breed...* setters and spaniels, among them, Chloe and even one or two lap-dogs. What a spectacle they made. The faithful creatures were daily sinking into a more desperate state. *While jackals and pariah dogs grew fat, they grew thin; their soft and luxurious upbringing had not fitted them for their harsh reality*" (p. 193; Italics mine). This passage is illustrative of the Farrellesque mode of satirising not only the class-consciousness of the British but also the caste-ridden Indian society.

Again, Farrell seems to be in perfect agreement with Jane Austen's view that "a sick chamber may often furnish the worth of volumes" (1958:156). Disease is a grisly but fascinating subject which offers profound insights as to how to deal with the immutable law of inevitable mortality. Disease reminds us that we are all mortal; it forces us into a realisation of the fact that our lives can be terminated in a brief flick of time, that we can lose our world and become nothing. "Sickness is a shocking experience that exposes the victim's physical and psychological nakedness; plunges him into the anguished aesthetics of despair; jolts him to a recognition of his loneliness and vulnerability" (Meyers 1985:13). In most of Farrell's novels and the Empire fiction, in particular, Farrell introduces invalids and doctors who explore the metaphysical overtones of disease. Disease awakens the victim to the pangs of isolation and neglect. Most doctors in Farrell are acutely aware of human mortality and in some of them, this awareness verges on existentialism. But Farrell is not interested in an exploration into the philosophy of existentialism; nor does his protagonist nose-dive into "the anguished aesthetics of despair". For Farrell, it is just another fictional tool to project his views on the disintegration of Empire. The Farrell hero is no more the flamboyant, rosy optimist who takes the world in his stride; he is a desperate individual who is constantly trying to come to grips with realities in a world of myths. Farrell's protagonists are no more the fittest to survive. On the contrary, plagued by various 'unmentionable illnesses' throughout their lives, they wobble about in life. By picturing characters afflicted with a poignant awareness of the inscrutability of human life ("People are like bubbles, Brendan; they drift about for a little while and then they burst" (SG, p.463), Farrell suggestively underlines the transience of earthly power. Farrell's absurdist vision of human life, by implication, underscores the absurdity of all the constructs of imperialism. In other words, in Farrell's works, absurdity and the colonial enterprise go hand in hand.

Farrell's Empire fiction presents a macabre world of deadly diseases where Nietzsche's theory of man as "the sick animal" finds one of its most profound and finest expressions. Farrell shatters the myth of the healthy white and shows that the English are as vulnerable to the onslaughts of physical illness as the natives are. The Empire novels are pervaded by images of physical illness, death and decay. Most characters in these novels suffer from various diseases, some of which are not even diagnosed. The disease of the characters is suggestive of the tangible presence of physical decay in the living representatives of the old order.

In *Troubles*, the Major is just out of hospital when he comes to Kilnalough 'with a bitter, weary expression in his eyes' and is clearly yet to recover from the trauma of wartime experiences. His fiancée, Angela is dying of leukaemia and Sarah, the Major's second love is a semi-cripple and is frequently attacked by a mysterious disease which defies medical diagnosis. And Angela's detailed account of the dental work her family required is ominously significant. The Major's aunt in London experiences a series of haemorrhages and dies. We learn that Angela's mother died of an embolism. The Unionist Boy O'Neill suffers from cancer and Ripon's father-in-law is ill with chest trouble and high blood-pressure. Dr. Ryan is an apostle of death itself. Obsessed with a devastating sense of inevitable mortality, Dr. Ryan reminds everyone that they are going to die, that life is 'a fugitive affair at best'(p.140). Thus, the various characters are the tangible manifestations of decay and disease which is at the heart of their political system.

In *The Siege of Krishnapur*, the Joint Magistrate is reported to 'have gone away to die in the hills' (p.49). The Collector sends his wife to England due to ill-health and the Collector himself gets laid up with erysipelas and his youngest child dies of poor health six months earlier. Dr McNab's wife has died from cholera. Mr Donolly and Dr Dunstaple die of heart attacks. During the

course of the siege, Mrs Scott gives birth but the baby is stillborn and she herself dies afterwards. During the siege, two more babies are born and one dies almost immediately. Little Mary Porter dies of a sunstroke- Dr Dunstaple gets used to death: "...these days death was the genial doctor's drinking companion** (p.230). And once the cholera strikes, everybody lives under threat of disease and death. The white community's fear of being killed *en masse* by the sepoys is ironically related to their fear of an outbreak of cholera which Farrell describes in terms of an enemy: "... an epidemic of cholera, with black banners fluttering was advancing in solemn deadly procession through the streets of the enclave" (p.275). This inventory of sickness and death underscores the frailty of the white community and by implication, of the Empire itself. Thus, in the larger context of Farrell's fictional diagnosis of the colonial 'dis-ease,' the Sepoy Mutiny becomes a life-and-death struggle to contain the cholera of imperial civilisation.

To sum up, in *The Siege of Krishnapur* Farrell accomplishes a critique of imperialism and its wonted civilisation in two ways.. First, by accentuating the presence of death and disease and equating disease with civilisation, Farrell suggests that the imperial community is not only vulnerable to physical disease and disorder like the natives but also that they suffer from a disease of the mind—the disease of civilisation. Secondly, by presenting characters who are the very picture of ambivalence itself, Farrell suggests that, far from being the benevolent owners of a superior civilisation, the Empire-builder is a sort of 'wounded surgeon' (Eliot's *Burnt Norton*) who ineffectually attempts to cure the colonised of a disease, the causes and symptoms of which can be traced to the *surgeon' himself. Or, to use Mannoni's words, "the civilised man is painfully divided between the desire to 'correct' the 'errors' of the savages and the desire to identify themselves with them in his search for some lost paradise [a desire which at once casts doubt upon the merit of the very civilisation he is trying to transmit to them]" (1956:21).¹⁰

Thus, in *Troubles* and *The Siege of Krishnapur*, Farrell employs the rhetoric of disease with a single-minded consistency of purpose. Both these novels are set against a backdrop which powerfully evokes realistic and symbolic dimensions. As the novels move towards the end, the *Majestic* and the *Residency* begin to look increasingly like a hospital whose inner atmosphere corresponds to that of life in a repressive system of colonial rule—the lack of privacy, the necessity of obedience, the economic and physical vulnerability and the personal degradation. Both these places of one-time luxury become, as the novels proceed, a prison or concentration camp in which the condemned man endures the cruelty of power and the threat of imminent death. Moreover, the unequal relationship between the helpless patients and the god-like doctor licensed to treat them represents a paradigm of dictatorial power. In both the novels, the happy Englishwomen represent the British unawareness of the growth of militant nationalism that threatens them. As England fails to fulfil her historic destiny, the political violence of Sepoys and Sinn Feiners inspires barbarism within the imperial force and brings disease to the organism of Empire.

00 The Rhetoric of the 'Grip'

...the Empire is a vast business concern

J.G. Farrell, *The Singapore Grip*

*The political and moral ideas of the age are to be examined
in the very closest relation to the economic development ...*

Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*

Though *The Singapore Grip* is the most experimental and anti-realistic of Farrell's novels, it has an unquestionably firm substratum of historical fact. As Barthes observes: "not all elements of the lexia can be transformed into connotators; there always remain[s] in the [fictional] discourse a certain denotation without which, precisely, discourse would not

*

be possible" (1977:50). 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, ['Farrell's private attempt at *War and Peace*' (Mahon 1979:313)] would be to miss the submerged part of the proverbial iceberg. And, as will be discussed in the next chapter, since Farrell draws extensively on the insights of both these modes of fiction-making with a view to transcending the limitations of both these modes, a concentration on these dimensions of the novel would serve to highlight the techniques by which Farrell, though 'self-conscious ... about the limits of mimesis' manages to 'reconnect [his] readers with the world outside the page' (McCaffery 1982:264). An attempt is made in the following pages to articulate the realist dimensions of *The Singapore Grip* while a detailed discussion of the anti-realist strand is made in the fourth chapter.

While *Troubles* and *The Siege of Krishnapur* 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** fictionalises 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' (1970:240). There was something quite anti-heroic and bathetic about Britain's loss of its 'grip' on Singapore which lends itself to a Farrellesque **fictionalisation**. As the leading business centre of South Asia which facilitated maritime access to other formidable colonies like **India**, New Zealand and Australia, 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: "in British imperial mystique it [Singapore] ranked second only to the Sues Canal itself (Ibid; **p. 141**). 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 cocky confidence which characterised the official attitude towards the defensibility of Singapore. In 1942, Winston Churchill wrote:

The possibilities of the Japanese undertaking an attack on Singapore, which would involve so large a proportion of their Fleet far outside the Yellow Sea are remote; in **fact**, nothing can be more foolish from their point of view (In Owen **1962:40**).

In such an atmosphere of high morale, the shameful surrender of Singapore on 15 February 1942 with a garrison of **85,000** British troops to a numerically inferior Japanese force turned out to be an **anti-climactic** setback to imperial supremacy and Churchill's **description** of the event as '**the** worst

disaster and largest capitulation in British history' passed into familiar quotation. And the very fact that historians have always been very reluctant to focus the fall of Singapore implies certain ideological constellations. 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" (Moorehead, 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, Farrell is primarily concerned with the politics of economic imperialism. Farrell 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 it was being fought invisibly 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 losing 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 battle for economic survival which depended heavily on silk and cotton. Forty percent of Japan's total export trade 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' (SG, p.139).

In *The Singapore Grip*, Farrell 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 ruthlessness **'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-interests, 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' (Ibid).

Walter's merciless pragmatism is highlighted in the achieves his goals. He 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 compromise his love for the Empire and its policy of economic aggrandisement. 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 civilisation. Though Walter also has a collection of 'artistic bric-a-brac' which he proudly shows every visitor to his place, his theory of the superior culture has more to do with financial acumen than with what Coleridge called 'the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterise our **humanity.**' For Walter, civilisation 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 merchant whose activities were the very bedrock of civilisation and progress*" (p. 157; Italics mine). Fully convinced of **'the** rightness of what he was saying' (Ibid) 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 civilisation is a **myth** perpetuated in the economic interests of the Empire. Matthew is fully conversant with the economic conditions in the Far **East** and in other backward countries of the **'colonial** Empire.' But Walter feels certain that such **'theoretical** knowledge' [which stores 'the facts and statistics and ideas' in the mind in the form of **'Russian** salad' (p. 157)] 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 [according to which his company and a few other merchants transformed the British colonies from a country **'where** unless a coconut fell off a tree, nobody had **any** supper' into a group of 'modern **nations**' (p. 172)] provides him with an appropriate camouflage for economic self-interests while Matthew considers such idle rhetoric sheer rubbish [and he contemptuously tells his friend, Ehrendorf: "I gather he delivers it to everyone he comes across" (p. 172)]. 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**, "[P]rofit took a grip on the country like some dreadful new **virus** against which nobody had any resistance" (**SG**, 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 into 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 civilisation.

As the war looms large over 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 in 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 fulfil the imperial mission. When Matthew says that 'one of the most astounding 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's 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 dumbfounded to see a beautiful girl of fifteen and wonders about the circumstance 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 the thought that this girl's plight and a million other tiny tragedies had been brought about by suave, neatly barbered, Saville 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!" (Ibid). Against the sordid backdrop of this red-light district, a serious discussion on the purity of the colonial enterprise takes place. If, as Fleury said in *The Siege of Krishnapur* 'civilisation denatures man,' the brothel scene in *The Singapore Grip* seeks to show how imperial economics dehumanises him. 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?" ft). 195).

Walter himself compares imperial Singapore to a 'beneficial octopus' with its tentacles *encircling the necks of Shanghai, Hong Kong, Bombay, Colombo, Rangoon, Saigon and Batavia' (p.250). Walter is a bit displeased with the octopus image: "the snag is that the octopus does not have a very good reputation' (Ibid).

Despite the obvious thematic significance of Matthew in the novel, Farrell's portrait of this protagonist is not completely unironic—a fact which almost prevents the readers from taking Matthew as Fan-ell'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 [the technical aspect of this scene is discussed in the fourth chapter] 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 accuse 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 'stole 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 'litany of complaints' against the British Empire, surrounded by 'shadowy cadavers ...lying supine and 'displaying no signs of life,' Matthew realises 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 realisation 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 agricultural college'" (p345). 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). The scene ends as the flame dies out:

All around in the **semi-darkness**, as if summoned by the last trump for a final dispensation of justice over the doings of this imperfect **world**, supine **figures** were sitting up and casting off their shrouds and bandages, while others were clambering down from the tiers **of** shelves on which they had been stretched (p.347).

After having lived in a country under the 'grip' of Empire where 'dispensation of justice' was quite **unheard-of**, the 'moribunds' return to their racks with the deep sense of fulfilment 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 of 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 dehumanising rhetoric of imperial economics.

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 (*SG*, p.399; Italics mine).

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.¹¹

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

no

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 (pp.450-52).

The whole passage reads like a biting satire on Britain's strategic pitfalls. The fall of Singapore which 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 us 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. *

Notes

1. Jeffrey Meyers¹ *Disease and the Novel* presents a fascinating study of the subject. But **all** the writers discussed in the **book—Tolstoy, Solzhenitsyn, Hemingway, Gide, Mann, Ellis and Chekov—have** used disease imagery with different orientations.
2. Edward Said further remarks that the imperialists were controlled by notions that "certain territories and people *require* and beseech domination as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination" (1991:8).
3. I am aware that J. G. Ballard's historical novel *Empire of the Sun* (1984) implies an interesting play on the **title—apart** from the fall of the British Empire upon which it used to be said that the sun would never **set**, the title refers to **Japan**, the Empire of the Rising Sun and also to the arrival of the atom bomb, the so-called 'second sun.' Alan Massie complains that Ballard's novels are characterised by a relative lack of "the force of **imagination**" (1991:41).
4. Brantlinger gives an illuminating discussion **of** "the Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent" in a chapter of that title (1988:173).
5. It may be noted here that Mill was no detractor of imperialism in a full sense of the term. Said writes: "He [Mills] always recommended that India *not* be given independence" (1991:97).
6. It is instructive to note the rhetoric of imperial power was not alien even to that Coleridge, that Coleridge, too, favoured the British policy of colonialist expansion: "Colonisation is not only a manifest expedient for, but an imperative duty **on**, Great **Britain**. God seems to hold out his finger to us over the sea" (In Brantlinger 1988:25).
7. It may be noted here that Manohar Malgonkar in his Author's Note to **The DeviPs Wind**, a novel on the Indian Mutiny, has commented: "It is fiction; but it takes no

liberties with verifiable facts or even with probabilities" (p.x). According to Fan-ell's concept of history, most historical facts are unverifiable and hence the need for a new outlook on historical fiction. Incidentally, a novel on the Indian Mutiny with the same title *The Devil's Wind* was written by Patricia Wentworth in 1912.

8. Binns believes that Dr. McNab is the fittest character to be considered the hero of *The Siege*—a belief which he bases on the fact that his is the most modern voice in the novel. On the basis of the frequency of appearance in the novel, the Collector and Fleury deserve to be given the 'heroic' status. Though the present study assumes the utter irrelevance of such categories, the thematic focus of this chapter has made a concentration on the Collector and Fleury inevitable. And the uncertainty regarding the hero of the novel is a consequence of Farrell's attachment to certain postmodernist notions of fictional characterisation—a point fully discussed in the opening section of this chapter.
9. In this context, Susan Howe's remark about the Empire novels on India serves to underline the uniqueness of *The Siege of Krishnapur* : "There are few crisp, incisive, humorous books about India" (1949:33)
10. As Benita Parry has aptly put it: They [the British] saw in India vestiges of a primordial, dark and instinctual past which their own society had left behind in its evolution to civilisation" (1972:3).
11. In *The Singapore Grip*, Farrell, at times, uses disease imagery to describe the general state of affairs. As the war continues, the whole nation bears an air of depression: "Weariness was becoming a disease of epidemic proportions" (p.451) and "[A] momentary shift in the wind had peeled the smoke back from the river like a plaster from a wound" (p.541).