


# Reimagining Singapore in verse: A critical discourse analysis of contemporary poetry and its role in emerging national identity

## Penggambaran Singapura di dalam sajak: Analisa wacana kritis pada puisi kontemporer dan peranannya dalam perkembangan identitas nasional

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Submitted: July 10, 2022; Accepted: February 22, 2023; Published: February 27, 2023

### KEYWORDS

contemporary poetry; critical discourse analysis; discursive strategies; national identity; Wodak's (2001) Discourse-Historical Approach

### ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines how contemporary Singaporean writers use language in verse, that is poetry, to make vivid representations of Singapore as a nation and discursively construct the social notion of the country's national identity. Utilizing Wodak's (2001) Discourse-Historical framework, this paper reveals how the two authors use some common discursive strategies, mainly representational and predicational, in making explicit representations of Singapore and creating a strong sense of national identity. In their poetry, authors frequently utilize referential linguistic devices such as first personal pronouns to attach specific human traits that help personify Singapore and express an in-group identity that functions as a unifying mechanism that connects Singapore, including its people, together. Lexical repetitions and rhetorical figures are also used to convey more emphasis and reveal the authors' intended meanings or messages. The authors employ various descriptive words to create better and more accurate imageries of Singapore as a varied community and as a nation. Furthermore, the authors' discursive techniques perform both the 'constructing' and 'preserving' macro-functions by discursively constructing Singapore's national identity as well as making an urgent call to all Singaporeans to safeguard their collective identity.

### KATA KUNCI

Puisi kontemporer, analisis wacana kritis, strategi diskursif, identitas nasional, kerangka wacana-sejarah dari Wodak (2001)

### ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji secara kritis bagaimana penulis Singapura kontemporer menggunakan bahasa dalam sajak, yaitu puisi, utamanya pada puisi, untuk membuat representasi yang jelas tentang Singapura sebagai sebuah negara. Selain itu penelitian ini secara diskursif membangun gagasan sosial tentang identitas nasional negara tersebut. Dengan menggunakan kerangka wacana-sejarah dari Wodak (2001), hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa dua penulis menggunakan dua strategi diskursif yang telah banyak digunakan, yaitu secara representasional dan predikatif, dalam membuat representasi eksplisit dan identitas nasional Singapura yang kuat. Pada puisi mereka, para penulis sering menggunakan perangkat linguistik referensial, seperti kata ganti orang pertama, dalam mencantumkan karakteristik khusus yang dapat menggambarkan warga Singapura dan identitas kelompok yang dapat mempersatukan Singapura, termasuk warga negaranya. Selain itu, pengulangan leksikal dan figur retorik juga digunakan untuk memberikan penekanan dan menunjukkan makna atau pesan yang ingin disampaikan oleh penulis. Para penulis juga banyak menggunakan kata-kata deskriptif untuk menggambarkan citra Singapura sebagai komunitas yang beragam dan sebagai sebuah negara, secara lebih baik dan akurat. Lebih lanjut, penulis dengan teknik diskursif juga melakukan fungsi makro 'membangun' dan 'melestarikan' untuk membentuk identitas nasional Singapura, serta menyerukan bagi seluruh warga Singapura agar mereka senantiasa menjaga identitas kolektif mereka.

### How to cite this article:

Mangila, B. B. (2023). Reimagining Singapore in verse: A critical discourse analysis of contemporary poetry and its role in emerging national identity. *Bahasa dan Seni: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Seni, dan Pengajarannya*, 51(1), 27–43. <https://dx.doi.org/10.17977/um015v51i12023p27>

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## Introduction

Singapore's English and language history could be traced back to the early nineteenth century, when the East India Trade Company's economic activities in the Malay peninsula converted the island into a trading outpost, then a settlement, and eventually a colony. Singapore's English poetry history, on the other hand, is relatively recent. Between the 1930s and the 1940s, there was no evidence of English usage outside of pragmatic necessities in everyday discourse, business, and trade. The university, together with the mentoring power of older poets and the canon they had developed, fostered the first attempts at poetry in English in the late 1940s, and the university continued to play a major role in the development of talent in a country whose history had been synonymous with its growth as a small, rapidly modernizing metropolis, with a relatively small community of readers and poets (Patke, 2000).

Wang Gungwu's *Pulse* (1950), Lim Thean Soo's (1951, 1953), and Edwin Thumboo's (1951, 1953) were the first English-language collections of poems published in the region (1956). *Litmus One* (1958) and *30 Poems* (1958) were the first anthologies of poetry in English. Since then, more than fifty poets have contributed to the corpus of Singapore poetry, which now stands at over a hundred volumes (Tan, 1994). The state's retention of English, a practical option for an island with four languages, three million inhabitants, and countries that have reverted to their regional languages, is responsible for its continued vitality as a creative language. Despite individual talent, Singaporean interest in writing remained sporadic and isolated during the 1950s and 1960s. It finally came into its own during the 1970s, when a few poets emerged and matured and interest in writing found a wider base, helped by the ease with which regional publishers were willing to invest in poetry. Since the turn of the century, there has been an exponential increase in interest in poetry, especially among young poets. This activity has been supported by supportive media and a rising readership, while Singaporean work has not yet achieved the kind of international acclaim it merits.

Early poetry was fascinated with incorporating indigenous cultural and linguistic elements into a learned language, convincing its pre-established standards of form and style to make room for localized self-expression. At its most literal, this meant pushing English into the poetic setting in order to accommodate Malay and Chinese idioms. The resulting result, *Engmalchin*, was mostly unsatisfactory, as Wang Gungwu (Brewster, 1989) demonstrates:

Camford's thoughts are fading,  
Contentment creeps in;  
Allah had been kindhearted;  
Orang puteh is generous.  
Only recently his brother stated,  
'Can have lagi satu wife lah!

For writers in Singapore and elsewhere, the question of how a local idiom may develop in connection to the former colonizer's language has remained a struggle. Because of the government's insistence on preserving an imagined norm based on British English, all local variants have been labeled Singlish, making every idiom choice by a writer between the standard and the local politics.

Singaporean poetry in English is often analyzed as having entered its third generation. Thumboo's work, as well as those of Seng's and Yeo's, is representative of the first generation. Lee Tzu Pheng and Arthur Yap collaborated on the second piece. Until recently, the third generation was regarded as an amorphous phase, denoting younger poets who had a few poems published in anthologies and periodicals, as well as those who were deemed "promising" by their teachers and seniors. This generation seems to have a different social and political significance from their predecessors. Critics like Koh Tai Ann and Edwin Thumboo suggest that this generation does not engage in public issues and concerns and instead retreats to a private sphere. According to Thumboo (as cited in Tiang, 1997), they "differ from their predecessors primarily in that they are less actively involved with broad public concerns and more concerned with a world organized around the immediacy of human experience." There may be a new role for this new generation of Singaporean poets. The continuing task of poets to the nation is to imagine it. This is especially so if we allow, as Anderson (1991) argues, that nations – particularly new and homogenous nations such as Singapore – should be understood not as natural, pre-existing geographical or social phenomenon, but rather as "imagined communities." In specific imagined communities, activities like the media, geographical, and cultural depictions (including writing and poetry) provide self-description and delimitation. They tell us – consciously or unconsciously – who stands within that community and, conversely, who is outside it. As such, it is not only "nation-building" that poetry may serve but the act of imagining and creating a nation.

Anderson (1983) gives the most influential definition of 'nation,' describing it as an 'imagined community.' A nation is a concept that exists only in people's minds who identify with it. It is a work of fiction because it is not based on direct relationships. Members of a nation cannot conceivably know each other, yet they have a sense of belonging to the same national group; hence, a sense of shared identity (Jenkins & Sofos, 1996). However, even though it is imagined, it does not imply infinity. Nations have borders, and these borders mark the beginning of other nations. As a result, the distinction is as follows. The term "nation-building" suggests that a nation already exists and is then built up. It is analogous to a land plot; one wants to build a house. The act of imagination and creation differs from no plot of land or nation. The role of communication and arts, including poetry, is in the first place to make the land, to create a community, and to make a nation.

This study's theoretical foundation is Fairclough's (1989) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Fairclough (1989) defines CDA as the study of social inequality as it is stated, suggested, generated, legitimized, and so on via the use of language. According to Wodak (2001), CDA attempts to disentangle how language is used to build social identity, and social interaction [therefore social inequality] is directly referable from linguistic forms. Furthermore, identity politics at all levels demands the integration of past experiences, present events, and future hopes across a wide spectrum of human pursuits. This entails delving into the link between complicated historical processes, hegemonic narratives, and CDA techniques and studying, comprehending, and explaining it. CDA also aims to make the discursive dimensions of socioeconomic injustices and disadvantages visible (Meyer, 2001).

Several studies were conducted which critically analyzed contemporary poems written by various authors. Nnyigide and Egenti (2013) found that the selected poetry in Africa satirize, criticize, correct, and reprimand Africans on modern topics such as unity, identity, and development. As revealed in Khan and Ali's (2015) critical study of female poets' work, female poets, regardless of origin or age, build a gender identity based on reliance, self-pity, passivity, full surrender, objectification of the self, and, in some cases, self-annihilation. This type of gender identification is consistent with the responsibilities that society allocates to women, who are to some part responsible for their own gender's marginalization. Wiguna and Kombong (2016) discovered that socialism and humanism were the primary philosophies in modern Indonesian poetry from the 1960s to the 1970s. As stated by Ebim (2016), Osundare's poem highlights key national challenges in Nigeria that are critical to the democratic process' progress. He also discovered that Osundare's goal is to bring about societal revolution.

Shiferraw's (2016) representation of both good and terrible previous life events, as well as nostalgic memories, re/define the poet's indivisible forged identity from the recreated past as African in America, based on Elias's (2018) interpretation. In their search for cultural identity, Man and Lee (2019) discovered that Chinese poems respond to the pursuit of a "national local color" colloquially within the popular poetry paradigm, whereas Taiwanese and Malaysian poems maintain a "strong connection to classical diction" and are consistent with "form and text alteration" and "content defines form" orientations. According to Sari (2019), the themes of Song's poems are depicted in strong poetic devices, and these poems rely on rich visual imagery to elicit the poet's personal memories. Hughes' concept of ecology is essentially founded on a biocentric vision encapsulating the intrinsic integrity and independence of all living organisms in this universe, according to Baby's (2020) interpretation of Hughes' poetry. Rafat's poetry reveals aspects of British romanticism, as found in Rafique and Tabassum's (2021) study, although his poetic and romantic descriptions are tinged with a Pakistani tinge. Furthermore, Hussein's (2021) studies demonstrated that the natural imagery in Cuming's poetry has pointed to his worldview of women's role in society and contribution to the nation's development. Although there have been studies previously conducted on contemporary poetry considering several aspects of human lives and societies, there has been a dearth of critical studies on the roles of contemporary poetry in the construction or deconstruction of certain national identities.

Given the preceding scenario, this qualitative research critically examined the poems written by two contemporary Singaporean poets in order to reveal how Singapore is represented and described in the poems and how these poems construct the social notion of national identity. Specifically, this study sought answers to the following questions: (1) How do the authors represent and describe Singapore in their poems? And (2) How do the poems discursively construct the social notion of national identity?

## **Method**

### *Research design*

This study made use of the qualitative research method, specifically Wodak's (2001) Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to Critical Discourse Analysis. The Vienna School of Discourse Analysis established the Discourse-Historical Approach in the

1980s. Their early concerns included complicated social issues such as antisemitism, racial discrimination, and national identity in modern cultures (Wodak, 2001).

### *Corpora of the study*

The three poems written by two Singaporean poets, Sharifah Maznah and Teo Sum Lim, were evaluated in this study. The first two poems, "Crippled" and "Poverty," were written by Sharifah Maznah, the first Singaporean poet, and were initially titled "Pincang" and "Kemiskinan," respectively, in Bahasa Malaysia. Meanwhile, another Singaporean poet, Teo Sum Lim, wrote the third poem, "The Crested Ibis." Unlike the first two poems, this poem was initially written in English; thus, there was no need to select the translated version of the poem for analysis. All poems were published in the book titled "ASEANO: An Anthology of Poems from Southeast Asia" published in 1995.

### *Data collection*

The researcher borrowed from the college library the book titled "ASEANO: An Anthology of Poems from Southeast Asia" which contained the three poems that were subjected for analysis. Although there had been original versions of the poems in Malay, the English translated version of the poems was chosen due to the researcher's limited capacity to understand the poems in their original language, and to gain a better understanding of what the poems are all about if they are only translated to a familiar language like English. Furthermore, the researcher carefully copied the poems by stanzas, which were then used as units of analysis.

### *Data analysis*

The researcher utilized Wodak's (2001) Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in the careful and in-depth analysis of the selected poems in this study. The Discourse-Historical Approach, as Wodak (2001) argues, seeks to incorporate as much information as is currently available about historical sources, the background of the social and political fields in which discursive "events," as well as the incorporation of suitable social theories to explain the context. This analytical technique is thus essentially comparable to that of other critical discourse analyzers, but with a focus on historical context to integrate it into discourse interpretation and ethnography and fieldwork to investigate the object under inquiry from the inside. To put it another way, it is historically oriented and context-sensitive (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001).

## **Results and Discussion**

Careful and in-depth analyses of the poems in stanzas were conducted by the researcher in order to reveal how these poems clearly represent and describe Singapore as a nation as well as how these poems discursively construct the social notion of national identity. These analyses are presented as follows.

### *Discursive Strategies and the Construction of National Identity in Maznah's First Poem Titled "Crippled"*

#### *Crippled*

by Sharifah Maznah

- 1 Here a native is
- 2 incapable of blending thoughts with deeds
- 3 is incapable of inventing and creating.

4 He is crippled by history.  
 5 The wounds from the keris of Hang Tuah  
 6 still leave their marks.  
 7 And look how history uplifted Jebat from an  
 8 anarchic to a freedom fighter  
 9 and so becomes a respected figure.

In the first stanza, it is apparent that the author employs two referential linguistic strategies to allude to Singapore as a nation. The first linguistic device is the noun "native," which is found in the first line, and the other device is the third personal pronoun "he" found in the fourth line. In this scenario, the employment of both a noun and a personal pronoun serves the discursive purpose of adding a human or personal dimension to the object to which the noun or pronoun refers. It also allows the insertion of human traits via what appear to be Singapore personifications. The metonymic form of the first personal pronoun "we" is "he," as stated by Wodak et al. (1999), because the person or native introduced in the verse speaks for the country or a national unit. With this, Singapore is represented here in a more personal way.

Aside from referential strategy being used, predicational strategy is likewise employed as the author describes or gives qualities to the native who represents Singapore. These descriptive words, also known as adjectives, include "incapable," which is found in the second and third lines, and "crippled," which is located in the fourth line. As observed, there is a lexical repetition as the word "incapable" occurs in the stanza twice, which emphasizes the characteristics that the native has, such as his incapability to blend thoughts with actions as well as to invent. These qualities provided by the author to that native signify the country's failure in the past to institute positive change, implement reforms, and even innovate due to its lack of natural resources, physical land features, cultural and linguistic diversity, and several years of political and economic turbulence.

Personification is the most common rhetorical figure used in this stanza. This rhetorical figure is employed here as the succeeding lines depict the history and the wounds as persons who possess human qualities or attributes. For instance, history is seen as the reason which makes the native crippled in the fourth line while it is the one who lifted Hang Jebat, Hang Tuah's closest friend, from being anarchic to a freedom fighter in the last three lines. Furthermore, the fifth and sixth lines of this stanza show the wounds from the keris of Hang Tuah, a legendary hero from Malacca, having been personified as they are shown to have left their marks among Singaporeans which signify that although Hang Tuah is chiefly recognized as the hero of the Malaysians, Singaporeans also want him to become their hero; thereby revealing their desire to construct a unique national identity through proclaiming individuals as heroes and establishing monuments as identity markers.

Fuller (2004) indicates the government's lack of confidence in the development of a distinct Singaporean identity, as evidenced by the country's long-standing stance toward national monuments. Old buildings, for example, were demolished because they were impeding development. As a result, there are few surviving relics of Singapore's colonial past, and the city's massive skyscraper dwarfs those that exist. For the typical Singaporean, the new national emblems had little meaning. Perhaps the most famous of these is Merlion. The image seeks to relate Singapore to its legendary background,

notably the pre-colonial era when Sumatran Prince Sang Nila Utama saw a lion and called the location "lion city." In 1964, the government chose to build the first of its type as a tourist attraction. The act was meant to establish a shared history and future. It served economic growth principles well by attracting foreigners (and their money) to Singapore. However, as Yeo (2003) points out, the emphasis on change makes the formation of a strong Singaporean identity unlikely.

*Second Stanza*

- 1 Here a native
- 2 is without an honoured tradition
- 3 to be proud of. He has never been
- 4 introduced to the beauty of a
- 5 struggle, has never been born to die
- 6 for a belief.

In the second stanza, the author uses similar referential linguistic methods to describe Singapore as a country. These linguistic devices are lexical repetitions as they also occur in the poem's first stanza. These devices include the noun "native" found in the first line and the third personal pronoun "he," which can be seen in the third line. Like those in the preceding stanza, these devices have the same discursive function of adding a personal dimension to Singapore, which is reflected by both the noun and pronoun in this verse. The usage of these elements in this stanza allows the attachment of human traits that could be interpreted as personifications of Singapore as a country. As Wodak et al. (1999) refer to, "he" since the pronoun is the metonymic version of "we" as the native or the individual represents the country. Singapore is also depicted in a more detailed manner here.

Aside from depicting Singapore, the author also gives descriptions of the natives, which reveal some of the same traits that Singapore has as a country. The author uses negation as one of his predication strategies. For example, the author uses the term "without" in the second and third lines to denote the lack of a certain thing, in this case, the cherished tradition that Singapore wishes to preserve. These lines tell us about the country's diversity, being multicultural and multilingual, and how this diversity fails to give the country something of its own that it can be proud of someday. Aside from negation, the author also utilizes irony, particularly in using verbs to illustrate an idea opposite to what is presented literally. For example, the phrase "beauty of a struggle" in the fourth and fifth lines and "born to die" in the fifth line denote several contrasting ideas as these tell us what is opposite, like there is no beauty but the pain in a struggle and that you are born to live and not to die. The fourth and fifth lines of this verse imply that, as a former colony, the country's excessive reliance on its colonizers in the past and, most likely, other nations today have primarily led to its failure to recognize that it is failing on its own. Furthermore, because the country is divided by its diverse people and affected by other nations, its failure to be born to die for a belief shows that the country lacks another vital element in common, such as shared ideals and aspirations.

According to Hobsbawm (1983), Singapore is built on what is known as the "invention of tradition." Hobsbawm (1983) defines 'invented tradition' as a set of ceremonial or symbolic acts intended at imposing certain values and standards of conduct via repetition, which always implies continuity with the past. This indicates that elites are actively attempting to foster a common culture that supports the political system. As

Gellner (1983) points out, [a] basic category of humans (for example, residents of a particular region or speakers of a specific language) becomes a nation when its members firmly understand certain mutual rights and obligations to one another as a result of their common membership.

Wong (2008) differentiates between "Singaporeans" and "Singapore citizens," meaning that there are two categories of Singaporeans. To begin, Wong would like to distinguish between persons who have just migrated to Singapore and those who have lived in the city-state for a long time. "Real Singaporeans" differ from "newcomers" in the following ways, according to him: 1) they had friends who served in the military; 2) they had friends who struggled in school; and 3) they ate, celebrated, studied, and suffered together, as well as serving and being served by other Singaporeans. Although Wong (2008) mentions celebration, the focus is clearly on adverse events such as hardship and struggle. True Singaporeans are those individuals who grew up in Singapore and have had a comparable profoundly unpleasant life experience. While rejecting new nation members goes against the concept of civic identity, immigrants in Singapore must first adjust to the Singapore "style of life," which can take a lifetime.

*Last Stanza*

- 1 Here a native
- 2 *treads* history without turning
- 3 *his* back to the past, unaware that
- 4 *the* obsoletes are the joints and pulses
- 5 *of* his life.

Similar to the previous stanzas, the author in the last stanza employs the same referential strategy in making representations of Singapore as a nation, such as the repeated use of the noun "native" in the first line; however, it can be observed that the author utilizes the possessive personal pronoun "his," a variant of the third personal pronoun "he," in the third and fifth lines to indicate ownership or possession as well as to add another referential linguistic device to refer to Singapore. As presented in the previous stanzas, the use of the noun "native" and the pronoun "his" adds a more personal dimension to the country of Singapore, which the noun and pronoun both refer to. In addition, the use of these linguistic devices particularly attaches human qualities or attributes, which would be like personifications of Singapore. Added to that is the use of a variant "his," another metonymic form of the personal pronoun "we," which could not only suggest a sense of ownership or possession but could also discursively construct an in-group identity that has a close association with what a specific group has explicitly or owns.

In this stanza, the author has also employed a predicational strategy in presenting Singapore as a nation. In utilizing this, the author uses two descriptive words. The first descriptive word is "unaware," which is found in the third line and used to describe the same native representing Singapore. The second descriptive word used in this stanza is "obsoletes," which is found in the fourth line and is used here to describe history. In addition, the author uses metaphor, a standard rhetorical device, in revealing the interrelationship or interconnection that history has with the country's development, especially its collective or national identity. For example, the author indirectly compares history as the joints and pulses of the life of the same native as shown in the fourth and fifth lines. I firmly believe these lines contain the author's personal view about his



country's failure to look back at the past and express gratitude for what history has done while it sets a new direction in the future. Furthermore, these lines also remind the country, especially its people, not to forget its historical past, that it must never forget that it is its history that gives breath to what life it has as a nation today.

According to Fuller (2004), after independence, Singapore's founders were determined that the country could not be defined by its past, but rather by its vision for the future, as stated in the National Pledge, "to achieve happiness, prosperity, and advancement for our nation." The past was relegated to the role of a future lesson. As ethnic tensions and corruption wracked Singapore, its founders elevated the concepts of "multiracialism" and "meritocracy" as the two primary foundation myths of the Singapore state, both of which embody the futuristic aspects of the Singapore tale. Singapore's officials believed these notions are crucial for the country's economic success. As a largely Chinese city in the center of Malaya, situated between Indonesia to the south and Malaysia to the north, any overt Chinese preference would have generated serious issues with these critical trade partners, as well as water supplies in the case of Malaysia. The island country could not subsist on its own. Furthermore, meritocracy assured that only the finest and brightest, rather than those with deep familial ties, would prosper. Singapore's authorities effectively eliminated exogenous corruption, which was important in global corporations choosing the city-state as a base for their operations. Because of the success of this approach, several multinational corporations decided to locate Southeast Asian headquarters - or at least large operations - in Singapore.

*Discursive Strategies and the Construction of National Identity in Sharifah Maznah's Second Poem Titled "Poverty"*

*Poverty*

by Sharifah Maznah

- 1 We had left the obsolete past
- 2 the bond of loyalty to the forefathers
- 3 the truths which once
- 4 we accepted unquestioningly
- 5 the oppressed individualism
- 6 along with impoverished hope.

In the first stanza, it can be gleaned that the author uses only one linguistic device in representing Singapore as a nation. This linguistic device is the first personal pronoun "we," which appears twice in the initial part of each line, one is in the first line, and the other is in the fourth line of this stanza. Here, using the first personal pronoun "we" provides some human qualities or traits that would also look like personifications of Singapore. In addition, its use in this stanza helps to discursively construct an in-group identity which can be considered a unifying device that unites its people. Furthermore, the first personal pronoun "we" does not only have a specific discursive function of adding a human dimension to what it refers to in the poem, but it also discursively constructs the notion of unity as it gathers together all elements of Singapore, including its people.

Aside from using this specific linguistic device to represent Singapore, the author has also used another linguistic device to refer to something else, this time in Singapore's history. The linguistic device used by the author is "past," which can be read to mean "history." In the first poem, the author uses the same predicational strategy in

describing Singapore's history, as shown by the adjective "obsolete." In addition, the author's metaphorical tactics for describing history are added to this description. Examples of these descriptions used by the author are "bond of loyalty," which is found in the second line, and the "unquestioned truths" found in the third line. These descriptions of history tell us both about the notions of unity and national identity as the first description implies the ties or connections between the country's past and present generations. At the same time, the other entails the role of the country's history in shaping its people's consciousness and identity. The author uses collocation and metaphorical tactics to highlight the specific meanings of some of the terms used in the poem. For instance, the author uses the adjectives "oppressed" to describe individualism and "impoverished" to describe hope. Here, the phrase "oppressed individualism" may imply disunity among Singaporeans due to the country's diversity. At the same time, the words "impoverished hope" entail the possible consequence that Singaporeans might face when they forget their past. From these lines, we can see history's vital role in establishing connections among generations. Therefore, as people, we should be grateful as it has been seen as an essential tool in shaping our collective identity and our country's future.

Ortmann (2009) stresses understanding the notion of a nation and how it applies to a multi-ethnic city-state like Singapore. Because the city-state has a short history and a heterogeneous ethnic population, the Singaporean nation (if it exists) must be seen as a particularly modern and definitely constructed phenomena. If ethnicity became the primary emphasis of a concept of "country," the multi-ethnic immigrant state with its colonial history could never become one. As Clammer (1985) points out, Singaporeans are characterized by citizenship rather than national identification, owing to the fact that 75 percent of the population is Chinese, 13.7 percent Malays, 8.7% Indians, and 2.6 percent other nationalities, primarily from Central Asia and Europe.

*Second Stanza*

- 1 We are not poorer with the death of
- 2 everything of the past.

In the second stanza, the author uses the same referential language construct, the first personal pronoun "we," to allude to Singapore, specifically its people. Similar to the previous stanza, this personal pronoun also attaches human qualities to personify Singapore. It discursively constructs the notion of unity that binds Singapore, including its people. Aside from the personal pronoun "we," the use of an indefinite pronoun, particularly "everything," in this stanza could also provide a broader inclusive spectrum. Here, the indefinite pronoun used may include all that Singapore had in the past, whether material or non-material culture. Aside from using this indefinite pronoun, the author also uses the word "death," which could not mean here "physical death" but could mean forgetting.

The author also uses predicational strategy in describing the kind of a nation Singapore is. In this stanza, the author uses the adjective "poorer" to describe the Singaporeans, including the author herself. However, the use of negation in this stanza, as shown in the presence of the word "not" before the adjective "poorer," denotes the author's revelation that it is not only forgetting the country's obsolete history which is the

reason that makes the Singaporeans poorer but also because of several reasons that the author believes.

*Third Stanza*

- 1 For too long we judge personality
- 2 by forms and appearances, position and fame
- 3 For too long being the resurrector
- 4 of skeletons without souls
- 5 Everything lofty being mere words
- 6 which had never permeated life
- 7 to enable the emergence
- 8 of men of great and free spirit.

The author in the third stanza also uses the same linguistic device, the first personal pronoun "we," in referring to Singapore as a nation. Found in the first line of this stanza, the personal pronoun "we" does not only add or attach some human qualities that will help personify the country but it also discursively constructs an in-group identity which acts as a unifying device that unites or gathers all the Singaporean people, including the author herself. Apart from using the same referential linguistic device, the author also presents some of the reasons that make Singaporeans poorer aside from attributing it mainly from forgetting the country's ancient history. Meanwhile, using predication as a tactic, the author describes what Singaporeans are like and how their acts differ in two ways in this stanza. The first description focuses on the author's revelation of the Singaporeans' style of assessing others, while the second describes them as "resurrectors." The author's first description in this verse indeed discloses a specific fact: our unique attitude, shown through the judgments we make and provide, becomes one of the factors that lead to poverty. The author's other argument, on the other hand, could mainly pertain to our unforgiving attitude, as the third and fourth lines of this verse state that we are the "resurrector of skeletons without souls." This word, I believe, refers to our inability to forget the unresolved events of the past, which creates a gulf or chasm between us.

In an IPS poll conducted in 2002, it was found that 83 percent of Singaporeans consider "materialism" to be a national trait. It also illustrated how a shared identity brought Singaporeans closer together (Ooi et al., 2002). The notion of "kiasu" or its offspring "kiasuism," described as a "national preoccupation in Singapore" by Australia's Macquarie Dictionary, has found expression in the concept of "kiasu" or its offspring "kiasuism" (Hwang et al., 2002). It references to Singapore's overwhelming prevalence of consumerism and rabid individualism. As stressed by one scholar, "the desire to queue is part of the Singaporean kiasu character" (Leong, 2001). He uses this to explain why some individuals stay in line for the annual National Day Parade while being unaware of its purpose. The expression is also used to describe Singapore's authorities' fear of political opposition, as they "have proven themselves to be kiasu (literally, afraid to lose)" (Backman, 2008).

*Last Stanza*

- 1 We are poorer in this way.

The poem's final stanza, despite being just one line long, offers the author's validation of her assertion on the several causes that, in her opinion, can lead to people becoming impoverished. Like the preceding stanzas, the author uses the first-person pronoun "we" in this stanza, which serves as a unifying instrument that links or unifies all

Singaporeans, regardless of their differences. In addition, the term "poorer," which the author uses to describe Singapore and its inhabitants, is also present in this stanza. Apart from the affirmation, the author is also emphasizing, both explicitly and implicitly, that to achieve that perfect existence in the future, we must first look back and begin to change our old behaviors.

*Discursive Strategies and the Construction of National Identity in Teo Sum Lim's Poem Titled "The Crested Ibis"*

*The Crested Ibis*  
by Teo Sum Lim

- 1 I took a gamble with Fate. And
- 2 lost.
- 3 Reduced to a meager earth, my pride, I, the one of soaring
- 4 flight. Living, as I dream, alone.

In the first stanza, it can be observed that the author uses the first personal pronoun "I" as a referential linguistic device to refer to Singapore. Here, the first personal pronoun is used repeatedly, at least three times, to emphasize the individualistic nature of the author or the persona who is talking in the poem. Just like how the personal pronouns "we" and "he" function in the previous poems, the pronoun "I" here performs the same discursive function of adding unique qualities to the noun or object that the pronoun refers to. Its use also attaches some human attributes that would look like personifications of Singapore. Although this pronoun entails singularity, it shows a broader inclusive spectrum as it is the metonymic form of the first personal pronoun "we" following the works of Wodak et al. (1999), and it also stands for the country or a national entity. Singapore is also discursively represented in the stanza in a more personal and closer way.

Meanwhile, in employing a predicational strategy, the author uses certain human qualities such as gambling, living, and dreaming in describing the persona in the poem. Although these qualities are only for humans, Singapore, as represented by the pronoun "I," is shown in this stanza similar to a human who took a gamble with Fate and lost, as indicated in the first and second lines while he was living and dreaming alone as shown in the third and fourth lines. Aside from giving human qualities, the author also uses metaphor as a rhetorical device in depicting Singapore not only as a human but also as a crested ibis, an endangered bird species in the world, as shown as "the one of soaring flight" in the last two lines. These lines suggest that Singapore once had its own cultural identity. Still, cultural identity is already changing because of globalization and other factors. It is approaching extinction, similarly as the crested ibis, due to continuous habitat degradation, tiny population size, limited range, winter famine, and persecution.

Several studies have found that Singaporeans lack a strong sense of national identity. "Singaporean identity is in its infancy and taking form," Hussin (2004) adds. For one reason, the Malay minority's political alienation is mirrored in the divergence in opinion between Malays and non-Malays on the Iraq war and the threat of terrorism. Singaporeans, despite government attempts, have produced their own songs and dances. Finally, high emigration rates demonstrate that young, educated Singaporeans have only a limited commitment to their country. Furthermore, economic success, which is commonly regarded as a vital source of pride, is too superficial to be a

significant source of national identity, particularly among young people, as pointed out by Yeo (2003).

*Second Stanza*

- 1 Stepping over the centuries,
- 2 who remembers me? Who forgets that fateful gamble?

The poem's second stanza has a version of the first personal pronoun, "I," which is "me," which the author utilizes as a referential linguistic device concerning Singapore, even though it is just two lines long. This personal pronoun, which appears in the poem's second line, has the same discursive function of associating human attributes with Singapore, the subject of the pronoun's reference. In this stanza, Singapore acts like a human. It then emotionally raises two puzzling questions to persuade the people, mainly Singaporeans, who are the ones the questions are being addressed to. The author, in this case, makes use of questioning as a strategy to promote collective awareness and make a call for all Singaporeans to do a particular course of action. In these questions, the author employs antonyms as a linguistic device to show two contrasting ideas to emphasize a specific viewpoint. Here, the author uses the antonyms "remembers" and "forgets," both found in the second line but used in the two questions separately. These lines of the poem suggest that although Singapore has become popular because of its solid politics and economy, there will be a time that Singapore will not be remembered because it fails to foster a strong sense of national identity due to its multicultural and multilingual society.

The author's predicational method, which is utilized to provide descriptions of Singapore, adds to his referential linguistic device. The author personifies the country by using a distinctly human quality. The phrase "stepping across the centuries" refers to the passage of time and Singapore's quality, which is similar to that of humans. The verb "stepping" refers to a human or animal motion assigned to a country to represent a movement. In addition, the author uses another descriptive term in this verse; however, it simply describes another noun. The adjective "fateful" characterizes the noun "gamble," which might refer to Singapore's various hurdles in becoming a nation and establishing its identity.

According to Quah (1990), Singapore's economy grew dramatically in the late 1980s, as indicated by several skyscrapers and massive shopping malls, as well as the emergence of consumer culture. However, the leaders considered that modernization had been followed by the vices of Westernization, as seen by an increase in individualistic behavior such as consumerism and familial atomization. Furthermore, as Singapore grew increasingly rich, Singaporeans desired more than simply economic prosperity. In light of this, the government devised a national ideology. This philosophy, named "Shared Values," was based on Asian values discourse and attempted to strengthen the society's hierarchical strong foundations. Among them are "nation before community and society above self," "family as the primary unit of society," "community support and individual respect," "consensus, not conflict," and "racial and religious peace" (Singapore Government, 1991).

*Third Stanza*

- 1 I am Nature's orphan.
- 2 Exquisite, noble, gracious – I am cursed
- 3 to live lonely, to die alone.

4 Waltzing in the winds, all the earth and the heavens are  
5 my lonely playground.  
6 I dance on and on, in isolation, step in fear.  
7 Before my own grave, I cannot be silent.  
8 But who will hear the void?

In the third stanza, the author employs three linguistic devices in referring to Singapore as a nation. The first referential linguistic device is the first personal pronoun "I," which occurs four times in this stanza in the first, second, fourth, and seventh lines. Like the previous stanzas, this pronoun also has the same discursive function of adding or attaching human and personal attributes to make personifications of Singapore. Although this pronoun implies singularity, it still denotes broader inclusivity because its use in the poem entails the inclusion of every Singaporean as it is considered a metonymic form of the personal pronoun "we" and that the pronoun itself stands for the person who represents the country. The second referential linguistic device used by the author is the possessive pronoun "my," which appears both in the fifth and seventh lines. In this stanza, the use of the pronoun "my" denotes a sense of ownership or possession, and it also discursively constructs an in-group identity that has a close association with what a specific group mainly owns. Aside from the personal pronouns used, the other linguistic device utilized by the author is the noun "orphan" that is found in the first line, which could also make representations of Singapore. Here, the author's use of this noun somehow tells us about some of the similarities the country has experienced during its journey to becoming a nation. Singapore was previously a jungled island, became a British-dependent colony, joined the Malaysian Federation in 1963, and declared its independence in 1965.

According to Kong and Yeoh (1997), once Singapore was expelled from the Malaysian Union and declared independent in 1965, the government-supported pragmatic aspirations centered on economic success. These were largely concerned with modernity, expansion, and financial success. As a result, there was no need to pay special attention to cultural difficulties, which were still viewed as a hindrance to development goals. Furthermore, as Hill and Lian (1995) point out, the government had no intention of creating strong nationalist emotions during this period. Instead, the ruling party's major purpose was to preserve the economic and social system reorganized. Meanwhile, the author uses predication to describe Singapore, which is the subject of the referential linguistic strategies used. The author uses adjectives like "exquisite," "noble," "gracious," and "cursed" to describe Singapore in this poem. However, it can also be noticed that the author uses antonyms in providing descriptions to illustrate two opposite or contrasting ideas. For instance, the adjectives "exquisite," "noble," and "gracious" imply positive human qualities, while the adjective "cursed" denotes the negative or the opposite one. Like in the first stanza, the author here also portrays the country like the crested ibis, the endangered bird species, shown in the fourth line "waltzing in the winds" while "dancing in isolation and fear" in the sixth line. These sentences could indicate that, while Singapore is a progressive and prosperous country in terms of politics and economics, it nonetheless regards itself as a failure due to its weakened national identity produced by its diverse racial makeup. In addition, the author also depicts in the seventh line the death of what the country has or owns, mainly the loss of its national identity, which the government does not allow to happen because it refuses

to remain silent. Furthermore, the author's use of questioning as an approach in the last line of this stanza convinces each Singaporean, the one to whom the question is addressed, that there is a need for them to pay for an answer – that is to unite and be known as one people despite their diversities.

*Last Stanza*

1 Indulge me in my drunken isolation and desert tears.

Lastly, in this stanza, the author utilizes the objective pronoun "me" as a referential linguistic device about Singapore as a nation. The use of a personal pronoun here not only attaches certain human qualities that personify Singapore, but it also discursively represents the country in a more personal and closer way. Added to the use of this strategy, the author also has provided descriptions in his use of the predicational method. However, instead of using these adjectives to describe Singapore as what the pronoun refers to, the author uses the adjectives "drunken" and "desert" to describe something else. Here, the adjective "drunken" is used to describe "isolation," while "desert" is utilized to describe "tears." This line of the poem entails that Singapore must have the will and determination to foster its sense of national identity; otherwise, it will no longer have the power to bring back the true essence that it once had in the past.

Hill and Lian (1995) stress that one of the most major hurdles to a unified national identity has always been the idea of meritocracy. It created a strong feeling of elitism within Singapore's ruling class, providing the elite with a strong sense of belonging. While politicians ruled the previous generation, technocrats dominated the second. A successful academic career, particularly time spent at a foreign university, has become a prerequisite for the recruitment of new leaders. Given its apparent achievements in the economy and other fields, the ruling class believes it has a monopoly on competence.

## Conclusions

In many social behaviors and social transformation, language plays a critical role. Any important social issue involves language, i.e., texts, which are not an exaggeration. "Nobody who cares about modern society... can afford to neglect language," says Fairclough (1989). Language plays a crucial part in the critical historical period that the Singapore community is experiencing, and its examination has shown to be highly informative. A close examination of the selected poems utilizing Wodak's (2001) Discourse-Historical Approach to Critical Discourse Analysis reveals the authors' intensive use of both the referential and predicational strategies in making vivid representations of Singapore as a nation and in discursively constructing its national identity. In the use of referential strategies, both authors frequently employ the first-person personal pronouns such as "I" and "we" and their variants to add or attach certain human qualities that would look like personifications of Singapore as well as to convey a broader sense of inclusivity and cultural consciousness among Singaporeans. Lexical repetitions and rhetorical devices such as metaphor, metonymy, and others are also used to distinctly present and represent Singapore not only as a multi-ethnic city estate but as a nation as well as to reveal some significant social realities. In making use of predicational strategies, both authors utilize distinctive words to provide better and appropriate descriptions of Singapore as a diverse community and a nation. Furthermore, the authors' referential and predicational methods in their poems have been labeled as both

"constructive" and "preserving," as they try to discursively construct and protect an in-group identity at a time when that identity is perceived to be under threat. Although the study can be considered novel as it affords readers with new perspectives on contemporary poetry's role in constructing an emergent national identity, the study still poses a limitation as certain generalizations cannot be deduced from very limited corpora such as the three poems considered in this study. The researcher recommends that another study should be conducted to include adequate number of contemporary poems to be analyzed, and if possible, personal interviews with the authors of these poems in order to ascertain how they make use of their poems as agents for the construction of a certain social reality, in this case, national identity.

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