Metaphors as Ideological Constructs for Identity in Malaysian Short Stories

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ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates how writers use metaphors as constructs of ideology. The paper is based on a study of two short stories that posit LAND as a metaphor for IDENTITY. Working on a sociological view of ideology, the study employed Lakoff's Conceptual Metaphor Theory to conduct a cognitive analysis of the concepts and ideas inherent in the metaphors in both short stories. By identifying and explaining the structural mappings that exist between the source and target domains that underlie the metaphors, the paper reveals some of the key concerns and social and cultural beliefs of the writer(s). The relevance of these concerns and beliefs to the general theme of the story and to the theme of nationhood is highlighted in the closing argument.

Keywords: metaphor; conceptual metaphor; ideology; nationhood; cognitive poetics

INTRODUCTION

The concern for a local literary and national identity emerged after the Second World War among the literature fraternity in the University of Malaya. The experience of war had imbued in the people of Malaya the need to take control of their country and destiny rather than let the British run their lives. This kind of national consciousness, if one could call it that, highlighted the need for a national literature that could play a role in uniting the diverse loyalties of the various ethnic communities. One of the first literary publications that catered to writings of this nature was the New Cauldron, published by the then University of Malaya Raffles Society, which was formed in 1949. The New Cauldron slowly evolved from being a collection of essays on campus life to a serious intellectual journal that reflected a newfound interest in culture and literature.

The effort to use literature as a means of uniting diverse races was first evident in the writings of Wang Gungwu (writing under the pseudonym "Awang") who interspersed his writings in English with Malay and Chinese dialects. It is said to be the first attempt at "Malayanising" poetry in English. Other writers like Ee Tiang Hong, Wong Phui Nam, Kassim Ahmad, Lloyd Fernando, Lee Kok Liang, K.S.Maniam and Edwin Thamboo (the editor of "Youth" magazine) also emerged as the pioneers of a new breed of socially conscious writers. Their literary works were what we could truly call Malaysian, written by Malaysians, with a distinct Malaysian flavor in both language and content. Their works gained prominence in the sixties and seventies (a comprehensive list is provided by Quayum, 2003).

Since then, Malaysian literary works in English have displayed all the complexity, themes, and flavours that could possibly be expected of a multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual society. Local scholars such as Fadillah Merican, Ruzy Suliza Hashim, Subramaniam and

Raihanah, (2004), Zawiah Yahya, (2003), Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Subramaniam, (2003), Quayum and Wicks, (2001), Fernando,(2001) have already detailed the many forces that have influenced and helped shape the local literary movements. One of the key concerns addressed by these scholars and by others who have studied and commented on the local literary scene, is the question of the relevance of Malaysian literature in English to building a national identity and to nationhood.

Since nationhood is also very much a political agenda in this country, it is not uncommon to see both leaders and the media bombard the society with a variety of slogans and symbols that incorporate ideology related to nation building. It is fair to say then that symbols are one means of conveying the sense of nationhood across to the masses. In literature, symbols are manifested best in the forms of metaphors. This study into metaphors in local works of literature was spurred partly by the often quoted challenge facing local creative writers who write in English, that "writers in this tradition cannot refer to a common pool of consciousness, as there is 'no common source of collective imagery, symbols and myths' given the heterogeneous nature of this country" (Quayum & Wicks, 2001, p. xi). Metaphors are not literal by nature, i.e. they do not attempt to communicate directly, but instead communicate ideas and notions by borrowing concepts and ideas from domains other than the ones expressed. Therefore, metaphors provide the perfect platform for a study exploring the ideology underlying works of fiction by local writers. The British had already taught us that literature is a useful tool in propagating ideology. Zawiah Yahya (2008) states that if we think that literature is strictly for the soul, we should remind ourselves that English Language and Literature have been a great political tool for Britain in the past.

This paper focuses on the use of metaphors in two Malaysian short stories as ideological constructs of identity, using a cognitive linguistics approach (this approach is also known as "cognitive poetics", i.e. when applied to literary texts). Specifically, the paper illustrates how metaphors are actually representations of the writers' thoughts and ideas on identity and how they relate to the notion of nationhood. In this way, the paper demonstrates that Malaysian literature in English is both relevant and contributes to nation building.

IDEOLOGY AND NATIONHOOD

There was a commitment among early writers to produce a body of literature with a uniquely Malayan consciousness, one that would give a 'common identity' to the diverse population of Malaya. Raihanah (2008) states that the framework for multicultural identity consists of three constructs – personhood, ethnicity and nationhood. Personhood has to do with personal requirements of the individual that help him or her to be centered in the self. Ethnicity creates a link between the individual and the cultural community to which he or she belongs, while nationhood makes the final connection between the self, the community and the nation. This means that we could view literary works that address the above-mentioned constructs of identity as being more intimately connected to the nation-building agenda.

In another scholarly work, Berendt (2005) conducted a cognitive semantics study of metaphors of nationhood. His study looked at a corpus of news reports (in major news papers) in the United States of America, Japan and South Africa. He found that the key words of 'land', 'home', 'people' and 'realm' were predominant in the metaphorical expressions underlying the concept of 'nationhood'. Imran (2006) also looked at conceptual metaphors that underlie the linguistic expressions used to refer to 'nationhood.' He argues that the meaning(s) of the concept

of 'nationhood' is actually ingrained in the linguistic structures that one uses to articulate ideas about nationhood. Using the cognitive framework (essentially the same approach used in the current study) proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Lakoff and Turner (1989), Imran contends that the conceptual metaphors underlying the expressions we use affect and shape how we view and comprehend the concept of 'nationhood.' Imran states that the Nation-as-Family metaphor can explain certain actions and positions held by the government playing the role of parents. He contends that different and unique conceptual metaphors can be created to reframe the discourse of nationhood.

As for ideology, Kress and Hodge (1979,p.15) define it as "a systematic body of ideas, organized from a particular point of view." Eagleton (1991) states that ideology can be looked at as being the general material process of production of ideas, beliefs and values. Language, apart from being a means for communication, can also be used as an instrument of control. Various linguistic forms allow significance to be conveyed and to be distorted. Kress and Hodge contend that in this way, readers can be manipulated while being informed, or manipulated while they suppose they are being informed. Literature can be viewed as one of the agents as well as effect of such an endeavor (both an agent and a product of ideology). Lee (1992) states that, it would appear that those who control the production of text control the operation of ideology.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK - CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY

Generally, the post-colonial approach is considered as the logical choice for a critical reading of works written by postcolonial writers in Malaysia. However, metaphor analysis involves a study of language structures used in the literary texts at both the linguistic and conceptual levels. Since a cognitive linguistics approach involves a stylistics inquiry that incorporates both structural and conceptual elements, it was deemed as most suitable for the purpose of this paper.

The theoretical framework is derived from the Conceptual Metaphor Theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), and later refined by Lakoff and Turner (1989), Stockwell (2002) and Steen (2002). According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 5) "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another." The cognitive and contextual dimensions are necessary in this approach to literary analysis as "our minds are embodied, not just literally, but figuratively" (Stockwell, 2002, p. 4). Lakoff and Johnson's theory is that the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined, and that human thought processes are largely metaphorical (1980). This means that the linguistic production of metaphors is preceded and influenced by thought structures that we identify as conceptual metaphors.

The understanding that metaphor is analogous in nature means that there exists a set of correspondences between two concepts in two different knowledge domains, known as the Source Domain and the Target Domain. For example, in the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY (conceptual metaphors are always written in capitals), LIFE is the target domain, while JOURNEY is the source domain. In interpreting the meaning of LIFE, the ontological structure of the source domain is transferred to the target domain. However, the ability to comprehend metaphors effectively also depends on conventional knowledge. This refers to knowledge about the source domain that is both current and culturally accurate. This means that in order to understand a target domain in terms of a source domain, one must have

appropriate knowledge of the source domain. Apart from possessing conventional knowledge of the source domain, another factor that has to be considered when identifying properties that could be mapped from source domain to target domain is the context of the metaphor occurrence. Only those properties of the source domain that are relevant to the target within the context of occurrence are selected for the purpose of interpretation.

The current paper utilizes this approach to provide a bit-by-bit mapping of properties between concepts in different domains, which then provides sufficient clues in interpreting the ideology underlying metaphors.

METHOD

Two literary texts, K.S. Maniam's *Haunting the Tiger* and Kassim Ahmad's *A Common Story*, which were well known for their richness in metaphors, were selected as the corpus for the study. Another reason for the selection of these texts is that both addressed the issue of "identity" in their plots. The study began with the metaphor identification phase, involving a five-step metaphor identification procedure proposed by Steen (2002). Once the metaphors had been correctly identified and selected with the help of two literature scholars, the metaphors were subjected to a conceptual analysis utilizing the framework proposed in Lakoff and Turner's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (1989).

FINDINGS

STORY 1 – K.S.MANIAM'S *HAUNTING THE TIGER*

The story is about a cultural cross-over, or rather the refusal to do so – and the psychology behind it. Muthu, a second generation Malaysian Indian, tries to assimilate into the local culture, and Zulkifli, a local villager, tries to help Muthu to adapt (this is portrayed through Muthu's reminiscence of a metaphorical journey – the hunt for the tiger). The story ends with Muthu being unable to possess the tiger when he finds it with the help of Zul.

In the story, Muthu is cast as the 'Other,' as opposed to Zul, who is the native. This is similar to the dichotomy of the colonized 'Other' vs the 'Colonizer' in colonial works of literature. The tiger is used in a metaphoric sense – the hunt for the tiger can be interpreted as a search for identity (self), and also as a search for belonging (inclusive of all the accompanying postcolonial notions like alienation, ambivalence, hybridity, etc.). Zulkiffli (one of the main characters in the story) says that the tiger can neither be shot nor possessed. We know from our worldly experience that a tiger can, in fact, be shot or possessed. So the tiger here has to be more than just the physical being that we have come to know. The term is being used in a metaphorical sense. Note an excerpt from the story (there are many examples):

> "What will you do?"
> "Shoot it," Muthu says.
> "The tiger I'm going to show you <u>can't be shot</u>," Zulkifli says with deep conviction.
> "I'll see it and possess it!"
> "<u>Nobody can possess it</u>," Zulkifli says.

As we probe further into the text for the metaphorical idea, we are told that the tiger is "all around us" and its stripes are "everywhere". At this point, we realize that Zulkifli is beginning to equate the tiger to the jungle itself. If the tiger represents the jungle, then by extension, the tiger represents the land itself. As soon as we realize that the tiger is actually a metaphor for land, the plot for the whole story falls into place and the meaning of the story becomes apparent. We are then able to postulate the conceptual metaphor TIGER IS THE LAND, with LAND being the source domain and TIGER being the target domain, while Zulkifli represents the local (native of the land). Like the tiger, he is one with the land. The difference between Muthu and Zul can be seen in the following excerpt from the story:

> "You know so much," Muthu says.
> "Centuries of living here," Zulkifli says. "We'll go together one day."
> Zulkifli has known it all: how to take Muthu into the knowledge that resides within him.

In associating oneself with the land, especially when we view land as "motherland" or "place of origin" we can postulate several properties of land as being particularly relevant to the story. Though in general, there are many associated properties of LAND that we could list and map onto the target domain TIGER, based on context and relevance, only several may be accurate for the meaning making process. Context and relevance are two elements of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory that influence the selection of properties from the source domain. The following is a list of properties coming into play (in the conceptual metaphor TIGER IS THE LAND, where properties of LAND are transferred to the TIGER):

1. Birthright – born of the land
2. Belonging – ones affiliation to the land
3. Ownership – to be the master of your own land
4. Control – to be able to make decisions related to the land
5. Knowledge – to know the land well

Once we scrutinize the properties above and understand that these are the attributes that the TIGER symbolizes, Muthu's hunt for the tiger immediately falls into perspective and the reader becomes aware of and begins to comprehend Muthu's obsession with the tiger. In understanding the ideology underlying TIGER (as the key metaphor of the story), we realize that the writer's choice of metaphor is no coincident. Rather, it is a deliberate and calculated choice by the writer. The tiger is very much a part of Malaysia's identity and culture, which is why it is featured in the national emblem. It does more than represent our land, in fact, it represents the whole country. This is also why the tiger features on the logo of the national car Proton. It can be said to represent the country's spirit and soul. By hunting the metaphorical TIGER, the protagonist in the story is seen to be searching for the qualities that would make him one with the land, a native of the country. The fact that he has to *hunt* the tiger, and repeatedly at that, implies that the matter of him naturally assimilating into a native of the land is quite beyond his ability, perhaps beyond his right to do so.

Another prominent metaphor in the story is SKIN. There are four instances in the story when the writer employs SKIN as a metaphor. The excerpts are presented below:

Excerpt 1
His mind emptied itself of all that he himself had gathered through the years and left him naked, skinned. He chuckled, lying on his wooden bed, and said to himself, "this is the falling out of from the skin I knew of long ago." He had experienced this just after his mother died, when he was about eight. It was not a sense of loss his mother's death brought but a loss of the self. The person he had known himself to be suddenly died.

Excerpt 2
He had to, he had told himself, actually jump out of his skin and be refashioned to fit into the life with her (his wife).

Excerpt 3
Freed from the gun, Muthu feels as if the skin would peel from his body…

Excerpt 4
"Where's my body? Can't feel it. May be jumped out of its skin…There you are. Just a shape. Too dark now to see. Always standing, waiting. Not being yourself."

When the reader considers the term 'skin' within the general context of the story, he or she would realize that 'skin' is actually a term embedded with a deeper meaning. 'Skin' here refers to more than a sheath covering Muthu's body. The 'skin' is the element that sets Muthu apart from Zul. It defines the self of the "Other" as opposed to the self of the 'Native". Based on the information and examples related to 'skin' in the story, we can postulate the conceptual metaphor SKIN IS IDENTITY, which enables us to draw the following properties (based on relevance and context) from the source domain IDENTITY to comprehend the true meaning of SKIN:

1. Nationality – the country one is a citizen of
2. Ethnicity – race origin
3. Color – shade of one's skin
4. Name – usually indicative of origin
5. Language – also an indicator of origin
6. Culture – informs us of the person's way of life

The writer uses the term 'skin' in a metaphoric sense throughout the story for the purpose of illustrating that one cannot simply change or give up one's identity overnight. The ideology of the metaphor is that in embracing the TIGER, Muthu faces a loss of his original identity. The phrases *to peel, to fall out of,* and at the end of the story, *burning of the skin* all imply painful processes that one has to endure as one tries to assimilate a new identity, or as one attempts to transform from the self of the "Other" into the self of the "Native". The metaphors provide an insight into the writer's thoughts on what it feels like to give up one's own cultural heritage when one is assimilated into the society of the adopted country. Muthu's consciousness (the settler) registers a loss, while Zul's dominant consciousness (the native) displays its sense of supremacy, knowledge, ownership, and belonging (and with these senses comes a sense of assurance). The pain involved in the metamorphosis from 'Other' to 'Native' explains why the protagonist fails to successfully 'hunt' the tiger.

STORY 2 – KASSIM AHMAD'S *A COMMON STORY*

The plot revolves around a young Malay man from the kampong who has just returned from Singapore, presumably after finishing his tertiary education. Yusuf (the protagonist), upon completion of his education, does not take up a job as an officer in the civil service much to the chagrin of his parents and village folk (an officer in the civil service is deemed prestigious at that time, i.e. in the 1950s). His experience with a culture quite different from his own convinces him that he must not forsake his ancestral land, the "sawah' (the rice fields) where he grew up, and which had moulded him into the person that he is.

The protagonist's reluctance in moving to the city and taking up a civil service appointment is depicted through his attachment to his ancestral "land". Thus once again, land is central in highlighting the citizenry and role of an individual in the nation's development. In the story, Yusuf (the protagonist) speaks of a 'disease' that he is recovering from upon his return to his native kampong (village) from Singapore, where he had gone to study for a college degree. Later we learn that this disease refers to the type of life he had grown accustomed to while living in Singapore (refer excerpt below).

> Back again among his rustic folk, he began to recover from it – that <u>disease</u>, or <u>malaise</u>, that was too sickening to be trivial, yet too subtle and elusive for words. He had been for some years in Singapore.

In this case the term disease is used to explain Yusuf's life in Singapore. Looking at it at a conceptual level, the term 'disease' serves as a slot for the source domain. It is categorized as source and not target domain since it is life itself that is depicted as being "diseased". Therefore life serves as the slot for the target domain. Now we can formulate the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A DISEASE as the underlying thought structure.

Properties that can be mapped from DISEASE to LIFE:

1. Unwell – This refers to Yusuf's general state of well-being.
2. Unhappy – A natural side-effect of being unwell.
3. Abnormal – Something is perceived to be very wrong with the state of Yusuf's life.
4. Weak – there is a feeling of being lifeless, not having the zest for life.
5. Physically or mentally disabled – We could equate this with being weak and unwell, but Yusuf also appears to be depressed, denoting a stressed mental state.
6. In need of cure – There is an unspoken yearning to find a cure for his condition.

The initial interpretation of the metaphor of life as being "diseased" leads us to the understanding that Yusuf led a somewhat disturbed life in Singapore. As the story unfolds, Yusuf feels a kind of liberation from his malaise upon his return to his kampong. He has found his cure for the disease he suffered from in Singapore when he is back in the kampong surroundings living his old lifestyle. The rice fields invigorate his zest for life and he is able to draw comfort in the knowledge that he is back to the land where he belongs, in spite of the villagers' suspicion of his loyalty and of being a "communist". Of particular importance to Yusuf's remedy is the term "land". As in Maniam's story, "land" appears to be at the centre of the story's focus (refer excerpt below).

> It was the poetry of the muddy earth that yielded rice to the village folk, the poetry that dumbly moulded him.

At the core, the definition of life in the kampong rests on one thing – the paddy fields, the rubber plantations, of all things that come from the muddy earth – i.e. the LAND. Yusuf's identity rests with land; he is a part of it. To be detached from the land signals the death of him and his people. It was the land that moulded him and his people into what they are. The land signifies their identity. At this juncture, we could postulate a new conceptual metaphor that underlies much of the story: LAND IS IDENTITY.

To understand the ideology underlying the writer's metaphor, one needs to realize that Yusof, the protagonist, actually wants his people to progress but not by leaving the kampong. Yusuf knows what it is like to be detached from the kampong, to lose the land that feeds them. It leads to the "disease" that he suffered from which could eventually lead to "death", i.e. the loss of identity. His story is a reminder to his people not to forget their roots. To lose their lands means to lose their identity. The writer warns that while life may seem peaceful and blissful on the surface, there are dangers or issues that the people are unaware of. Yusuf has realized this on his journey. Issues like illiteracy, selling one's land, the lure of the easy life could have fatal consequences. It is a warning not to turn away from one's roots, not to become slaves in one's own land. When one understand this ideology of the metaphor (LAND), you realize that instead of being the 'communist' that the village folk had feared that he had become, Yusof was actually very much a patriot, a true son of the land.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analyses of both stories, we can say that the themes in Maniam's *Haunting the Tiger* and Kassim's *A Common Story* both revolve around the protagonist's search for identity and belonging. In the former, the protagonist is a migrant settler in a post-colonial world that is struggling to forge its own identity. It is a nation in its early stages of postcolonial development. The protagonist's journey is manifested through the tiger hunt that he embarks on in his quest for a new identity. The metaphors of TIGER and SKIN and the associated concepts reveal the state of ambivalence that Muthu, the protagonist, is in. The metaphors provide insight into the writer's thoughts on what it feels like to give up one's own cultural heritage and be assimilated into the society of the adopted country. In the latter (Kassim's *A Common Story*), the protagonist is a native, whose journey in life almost uproots him from his home culture and thrusts him into a world permeated by the culture of his former colonial masters. His journey reflects his fear of and resistance to becoming an anglophile. Both of these stories can be considered particularly relevant to the forging of nationhood or to the process of nation building.

Metaphor analysis provides us with a window into a writer's thoughts and ideas. From the analysis of metaphors from both stories, it is apparent that the writers had specific reasons for casting the term LAND as the key metaphor (as posited by Berendt, 2005). LAND is an ideological construct for not only identity, but also for belonging and citizenry, all of which highlight a strong bond to nationhood. In fact, Kassim Ahmad's narrative and use of the LAND metaphor reinforces K.S.Maniam's narrative and metaphor choices, all of which underscore the ideology that it is only through an affiliation to the land, can one forge one's identity.

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