Critical Discourse Analysis of Symbolism in the Selected Poems by Shirley Geok-lin Lim

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ABSTRACT

Symbolism is vital to literature because it leaves resonant expressions that capture the attention of the reader. Understanding the underlying meaning of the figurative language of symbolism allows the reader to comprehend the poetry's implicit messages. As symbolism is a common figurative language in poetry, this study examines its usage in Shirley Lim's selected poems, *Feeling Sorry*, *A Woman Speaks of Grandchildren*, *The Gate*, *The Rebel*, *My Father's Sadness*, and *Pantoun for Chinese Women*. The implicit meaning of the symbolism expressions is analysed using a qualitative descriptive research design using the three-dimensional model proposed by Fairclough (1995) to analyse the data in order to gain a deeper understanding of the ideologies underlying the poems. Moreover, this study employs Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) to investigate the connections between periphrastic texts, practises, and events and broader social and cultural structures. The results indicate that symbolism is frequently employed, with 12 instances in the selected poems, elaborating on the use of symbolism to enhance the meaning and expression of the ideas of the social and cultural backgrounds. It is determined that the symbolism contributes significantly to the poem's underlying meaning and ideology, which is gender discrimination. It is hoped that this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how symbolism is employed in a few of Shirley Lim's poems in relation to social and cultural structures.

Keywords: Figurative language; symbolism; poetry; critical discourse analysis; Shirley Lim

INTRODUCTION

Literature consists of written works that combine intellectual content with artistic quality in order to employ language creatively, including the use of figurative language. It is a crucial element in poetry because it not only helps authors express their feelings and thoughts but also helps create a medium that allows readers to feel the intended meaning of the poems and freely imagine the setting based on the scenario of the poem. Consequently, the extensive use of figurative language allows for a more vivid expression of emotion as well as a greater degree of originality in one's interpretation of life events. This is because literary compositions are frequently influenced by the authors' experiences and surroundings throughout various periods of their lives, contributing to countless theories, histories, cultures, and traditions from ancient times to the present.

This study utilised the Critical Discourse Approach (CDA) to investigate the use of symbolism in the poetry of Shirley Lim, a Malaysian poet, in order to establish a connection between language and social context. According to Rogers (2011), critical discourse analysis describes the context and explains the functions of discourse. According to Maharsi (2016), knowledge of literature aids in gaining a deeper understanding of literary theory and history, as well as provides insight into various cultures and traditions around the world. Research on poems typically focuses solely on the profound meaning of the poem. The symbolism in some of Shirley Lim's poems can therefore be examined using a critical discourse analysis to better understand how it is used and how it affects the meaning of her poems in their social context.

Furthermore, studies on Malaysian literature collections are scarce. For instance, Muhammad Syaukat (2013) explored *The Poetry of A. Samad Said and Cecil Rajendra: A Comparative Study in Ecocriticism*. While Muhammad Amirudin (2015) investigated *The Effectiveness of Illustration in Conveying the Meaning of Usman Awang's Poems*, Gui (2021) looked into *Hyphenational poetics in Omar Musa's Parang and Millefiori*. Since Shirley Lim is an award-winning writer of fiction, poetry, and criticism, as well as a renowned scholar in the field of literature not only in Malaysia but also internationally, this research examined some of her poems, including *Feeling Sorry, A Woman Speaks of Grandchildren, The Gate, The Rebel, My Father's Sadness,* and *Pantoun for Chinese Women.* In addition, despite the fact that she was born in Malacca in 1944 and has lived abroad since 1969, her writing continues to be influenced by her home country. As a Malaysian Chinese and Asian-American, her writing demonstrates an intricate and ambivalent imagination, and many of her well-known poems, like *When*, *The Debt*, and *Reading*, are influenced by her childhood and life experiences (Quayum, 2014, 2019).

Most previous studies of Shirley Lim's poetry have focused on describing the themes and literary devices used in her poems. However, critical discourse analysis of the figurative language used in her poems is still scarce. For instance, Chin (2019) examined Shirley Lim's poetry's depiction of the father figure and the idea of filial piety in the poem My Father's Daughter. Furthermore, Ng (2007) emphasised the maternal imagination or figure in Shirley Lim's poetry. Thus, conducting a critical discourse analysis on symbolism is worthwhile in order to delve deeper into the symbolism used in her poems to depict the social context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nordquist (2019b) stated that figurative language is a discourse that uses figures of speech freely in contrast with literal language. Thus, figures of speech are normally used outside of formal contexts, such as in poetry, novels, prose, drama, and even daily life. In contrast to the literal dimension of language use, which employs words in their usual and obvious sense without any additional connotations, the figurative dimension is concerned with the suggestive or connotative use of language and, consequently, implies extended or associative meanings (Yeibo, 2012). Figuratively expressing meaning, the imaginative style of language therefore appeals to the emotions of the reader or listener. According to Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature (1995), figurative language in the European language is classified into five categories: figures of resemblance or relationship; figures of emphasis or understatement; figures of sound; verbal games and gymnastics; and errors. Literary devices like metonymy, metaphor, kenning, conceit, simile, personification, synecdoche, parallelism, euphemism, and symbolism are used to show similarities or connections.

Due to the fact that symbolism is one of the figurative languages that is frequently used in poetry as opposed to other literary genres, it was chosen for analysis in this study (Raisa, Sudarsono, & Rufinus, 2017). According to Nordquist (2019a), symbolism is the practise of embedding things with significance so that they can represent something other than themselves. Additionally, symbolism is the use of words or images to represent particular ideas, characters, things, or events in order to make them come to life in the reader's mind. Symbolisms are prevalent in all cultures, societies, and norms. As an example of how it is used to convey information about a character, scene, or plot point, a black cat might stand in for a character's misfortune. A rose, for instance, is frequently used as a romantic or love symbol. As such, symbolism provides a clue as to the possible nature of the thing or person alluded to in the text. This eventually sparks readers' imaginations and helps them better understand the context by using symbolism to bridge the gap between the poem and the readers.

Language is a means of communication that is connected to the social construct. The way individuals perceive things is shaped by their life experiences, which are heavily influenced by the social context. According to Butler (2003), as cited in Adekunle (2021), language is the primary means by which people communicate in social, cultural, and psychological settings that represent society as a whole. Fairclough (1995) affirms that language is essential to society. He asserts that the manner in which people use language in society is more of a social practise than an individual act. He then introduces a framework that discusses language, discourse, and society in order to better understand the relationship between language and social context. Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) seeks to systematically investigate vague relationships between periphrastic practises, texts, and vast social and cultural events, structures, and processes (Al-Thamery, 2017). According to Fairclough (1995), CDA covers three main dimensions: text and the study of *texture; discoursal practises* and the concept of *orders of discourse*; and sociocultural practises and the concept of *culture*. Fairclough (1995) developed three levels of critical discourse analysis to correspond with the three dimensions: text analysis (description), processing analysis (interpretation), and social analysis (explanation). Figure 1 depicts Fairclough's three-dimensional framework for critical discourse analysis.
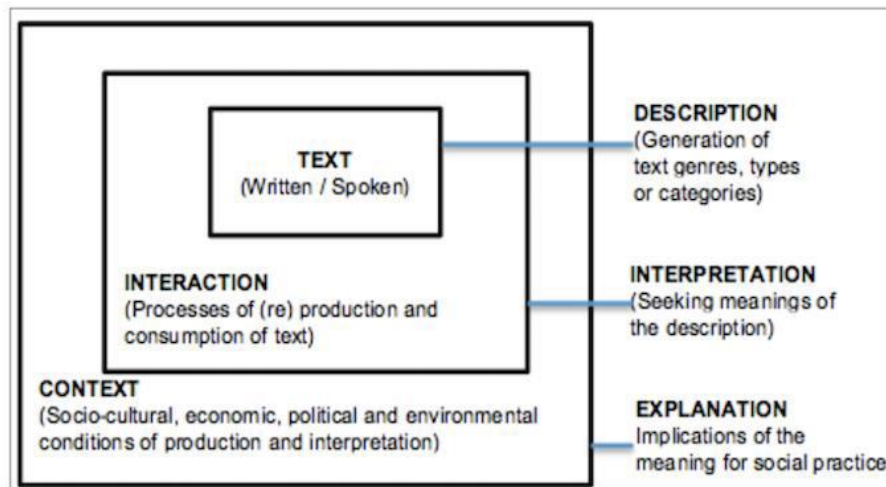
Figure 1: Fairclough's (1995) Three-Dimensional Framework for Critical Discourse Analysis

Fairclough (2001) contended that critical discourse analysis is a method "which is in a dialogical relationship with other social theories and methods, which should engage with them in a transdisciplinary rather than just interdisciplinary way" (p. 121). According to Fairclough, the study of language usage in social and cultural contexts is dependent on a variety of critical discourse analysis approaches. Hence, determining the use of figurative language elements in Shirley Lim's poems requires the application of Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, which is deemed the most appropriate technique for this study. This study includes the frequency of figurative language expressions and index line analyses in its text analysis. The analysis of the discourse practise includes the meanings and interpretations of figurative language expressions, whereas the analysis of Shirley Lim's social ideologies is included in the sociocultural practise.

METHODOLOGY

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is one of several types of qualitative research analysis methods. It involves a theory of language as a form of social relations, and this type of analysis allows researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying meaning of a discourse, thereby interpreting the relationship between language and society (Hussein, 2021). Hence, the present research employs a descriptive qualitative research design to investigate the critical discourse analysis of symbolism in selected poems by Shirley Lim. In order to analyse the data, this research adopted the three-dimensional model proposed by Fairclough (1995). The first section, which is the textual analysis, focuses on identifying instances of symbolism in Shirley Lim's selected poems. The second section of this study, the processing analysis, investigates the implied meanings of the figurative language used in the chosen poems. Finally, the third section of this study's textual analysis seeks to investigate Shirley Lim's underlying ideology through the use of symbolism in her chosen poems.

The present study applies purposive sampling in which the poems such as *Feeling Sorry, A Woman Speaks of Grandchildren, The Gate, The Rebel, My Father's Sadness,* and *Pantoun for Chinese Women* by Shirley Lim are selected to be analysed further due to their similarity in theme, which is the restriction of freedom. Due to the prevalence of symbolism in poetry relative to other literary genres (Raisa et al., 2017), symbolism serves as the research instrument for this descriptive study. In addition, the data sheet, which was adapted from Inpok, Webb, and Nimmannit (2019) in their study on *An Analytical Study of Figurative Language Used in Emily Dickinson's Selected Poems*, is used as a secondary tool for data analysis. Minor adjustments were made to the data sheet template, though, to enable the use of a clearer data analysis visualisation in this study. The formatted data sheet is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Example of Data Sheet

Types of Figurative Language	Poems						TOTAL
	Feeling Sorry	A Woman Speaks of Grandchildren	The Gate	The Rebel	My Father's Sadness	Pantoun for Chinese Women	
Symbolism							

In the present study, data is collected primarily from websites and freely accessible online documents. Using Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional model for data analysis, the contents of six selected poems by Shirley Lim are thoroughly analysed to determine how the use of symbolism enhances the meaning of the poems and more effectively expresses the ideas. These procedures were used to analyse the data for this study:

1. Text analysis
   This step involves recording the frequency of symbolism occurrences in a table. The phrases employing symbolism are then listed accordingly.

2. Processing analysis
   In this step, the underlying significance of the symbolism instances is clarified and elaborated.

3. Social analysis
   In this step, the ideologies of Shirley Lim regarding sociocultural practise based on instances of symbolism in the selected poems are explained.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the analysis of Shirley Lim's chosen poems; *Feeling Sorry*, *A Woman Speaks of Grandchildren*, *The Gate*, *The Rebel*, *My Father's Sadness*, and *Pantoun for Chinese Women*, symbolism is evident throughout. Moreover, instances of symbolism are present in each poem, thereby fulfilling the objective of this study. Table 2 provides an overview of the frequency of symbolism in selected Shirley Lim poems. The data indicates that symbolism appears 12 times in the selected poems of Shirley Lim. It can be seen that symbolism is used more than once in each poem, with the exception of *The Rebel*, which has only one instance. *Feeling Sorry* (2), *A Woman Speaks of Grandchildren* (3), *The Gate* (2), *My Father's Sadness* (2), and *Pantoun for Chinese Women* (2) all contain multiple instances of symbolism.

Table 2
Frequency of Symbolism in Shirley Lim's Selected Poems

Types of Figurative Language	Poems						TOTAL
	Feeling Sorry	A Woman Speaks of Grandchildren	The Gate	The Rebel	My Father's Sadness	Pantoun for Chinese Women	
Symbolism	2	3	1	2	2	2	12

Textual Analysis of Symbolism

Symbolism is the use of words or images to represent specific concepts, figures, objects, or events that suggest a meaning other than their literal meaning in order to better connect the reader's imagination to perspective. Table 3 presents the total of 12 instances of symbolism found in the selected poems.

Table 3
Instances of Symbolism in Shirley Lim's Selected Poems

Poems	Instances
Feeling Sorry	*"So, must you mutter for the fallen forest…"*
	"Must the young man with the revolver to be hanged tomorrow noon have a claim on us?"
A Woman Speaks for Grandchildren	*"...to birds tumbling into the deadly arrogant ocean."*
	"It's terrible to be seduced by filthy books with high thoughts…"
	"But a little bird I'll never be."

The Gate	*"...scorpions in a city night."*
The Rebel	*"I will be reckless and roast opium balls over spirit lamps."*
	"I will close my eyes in fox women harems…"
My Father's Sadness	*"...so many men and women like dragons' teeth rising in the instance of his lifetime."*
	"He is an oriental."
Pantoun for Chinese Women	*"They say a child with two mouths is no good."*
	"She will not pluck the rooster nor serve its blood,"

Processing Analysis of Symbolism

On the basis of Fairclough's CDA framework (1995), the processing analysis is applied to the textual analysis of selected poems, namely *Feeling Sorry*, *A Woman Speaks of Grandchildren*, *The Gate*, *The Rebel*, *My Father's Sadness*, and *Pantoun for Chinese Women*, in order to interpret the instances of symbolism. The following are examples of processing analysis results from Shirley Lim's poems:

> I.   *Tonight I will think of my uncles.*
> *For once I will walk in their spirit.*
> *Pile mahjong tiles in great walls*
> *and crash them down with two big fists.*
> *I will be reckless and roast opium*
> *balls over spirit lamps. I will close*
> *my eyes in fox women harems*
> *and wake to male children,*

The preceding instance is taken from Shirley Lim's *The Rebel*. This poem describes the persona's desire to rebel and defy gender norms. There are two highlighted symbols above. First, *'I will be reckless and roast opium balls over spirit lamps'* represent the persona's act of defiance. The act of women roasting, or smoking opium is frequently frowned upon by society, as it contradicts the stereotypical portrayal of women as feminine. Second, *'I will close my eyes in fox women harems…'* symbolises how men frequently indulge in women's embraces. According to Chinese culture, the fox represents cunning, mischief-making, and seduction. Therefore, the poem depicts the social norm of men engaging in indecent behaviour, whereas it is strictly forbidden for women to act similarly.

> II.   *They say a child with two mouths is no good.*

The aforementioned instance is taken from Shirley Lim's Pantoun for Chinese Women, which depicts the ancient tradition of infanticide of female newborns in Chinese culture. Here, *'…a child with two mouths…'* represents a daughter as a burden to the family, as two mouths suggest the child has an additional mouth to feed; consequently, having a daughter is viewed as worthless in ancient Chinese culture.

> III.   *Through her two weak mouths his mother prays.*
> *She will not pluck the rooster nor serve its blood,*
> *For broken clay is never set in glaze:*
> *Women are made of river sand and wood*

This instance is also taken from Shirley Lim's *Pantoun for Chinese Women*, which exemplifies the ancient custom of infanticide of female newborns in Chinese culture. As one of the Chinese zodiac signs, the rooster represents a significant symbol. The rooster represents good luck, and its blood is frequently used to ward off evil spirits. Therefore, '*She will not pluck the rooster nor serve its blood*' suggests that the persona's mother-in-law will not slaughter a chicken because no son has been born and, consequently, there is nothing to celebrate in the household. This demonstrates that discrimination against women has become deeply ingrained in the Chinese culture.

> IV.   *I am tired of poetry —*
> *this boring half-talking*
> *to yourself half-asleep —*
> *broken flight of women*
> *turned unsuccessfully*
> *to birds tumbling*
> *into the deadly*
> *arrogant ocean.*

This instance is from *A Woman Speaks of Grandchildren* by Shirley Lim. This poem explores the importance of education and how different people may view it, particularly from the perspective of women. The question of whether education is important allows one to yield to the desire to seek knowledge or to simply enjoy life regardless of the circumstances. In this context, '*…the deadly arrogant ocean'* symbolises desires and fears drowning in the limitless possibilities of acquiring knowledge. Due to its physical characteristics, the ocean always symbolises vastness. However, the phrase "broken flight of women" may also represent anarchy, as the depth of human emotions is analogous to the depth of the ocean.

> V.   *It's terrible to be*
> *seduced by filthy books*
> *with high thoughts which make you want*
> *to delete the world.*

This instance is also taken from Shirley Lim's *A Woman Speaks of Grandchildren*. As Shirley Lim is concerned with academic life, which she sometimes embraces and sometimes views with cynicism, the depiction of books as a source of knowledge is interpreted in this instance. Indulging in reading and beginning to question many things as individuals consume new information would be crucial for the development of knowledge and societal structure. Nonetheless, this incident cynically demonstrated that curiosity and a thirst for information can be harmful. The stanza concludes with the conventional role of a mother, or a woman, in society, which is to care for and nurture young children.

Social Analysis of Symbolism

As symbolism involves the act of representing ideas or concepts with greater meaning through the use of a person, situation, word, or object to represent another thing, it is essential to relate it to context. On the basis of Fairclough's CDA framework (1995), the social analysis of selected poems reveals that Shirley Lim's views on society are influenced by gender discrimination. According to Villiness (2021), gender discrimination is the practise of treating individuals differently based on their genders as opposed to their individual talents or qualities. In all environments, women have faced discrimination for centuries, including the present day. *The Rebel* depicts the discrimination of women in society, who are expected to behave modestly to demonstrate their femininity, in contrast to the reckless and defiant conduct of men. In addition, both *The Rebel* and *Pantoun for Chinese Women* depict males as superior, resulting in unfair and discriminatory treatment of female characters.

Moreover, *Pantoun for Chinese Women* represents the injustice of unborn female babies being killed because they are portrayed as a burden in ancient Chinese culture. This poem also depicts the ancient practise of killing newborn female infants, prevalent primarily in Chinese culture. Not only in Chinese culture, Cartwright (2016) shows that there has been discrimination against women in Europe since the beginning of capitalism. There was a constant and violent attack on the sexual and productive autonomy of European women during this time, as hundreds of thousands of women were tortured and killed during witch hunts. This included women who lived in villages, worked as craftspeople, and had a strong sense of independence, as well as women healers and midwives. Other than that, *A Woman Speaks of Grandchildren* also contains gender stereotypes in the form of implicit bias toward women, as the poem stresses the value of education while stereotyping women as natural caregivers for young children. Gender stereotypes exert pressure on individuals of both sexes to conform to unreasonably high standards, which harms society as a whole.

CONCLUSION

There are numerous reasons why symbolism is essential in poetry. One of them is to facilitate the effective communication of the text's ideas to the audience. In addition, it contributes to the poem's ideas being enhanced and made more vivid. Despite the fact that countless analyses of poems have been conducted, the relationship between the use of symbolism in expressing the ideologies underlying the poems requires further study. This resulted in the execution of a discourse analysis of the use of symbolism in Shirley Lim's selected poems. Unquestionably, conducting a critical discourse analysis necessitates not only a deeper understanding of symbolism usage, but also a profound comprehension of the author's values and ideologies. Consequently, the use of symbolism in selected poems by Shirley Geok-lin Lim has been analysed throughout this study using Fairclough's model of CDA. Based on the data analysis, the results indicate that symbolism occurs frequently in the six examined poems, a total of 12 times. In addition, the figurative meaning of the expressions used in the poems is elaborated in accordance with Fairclough's CDA, highlighting how Shirley Lim's perspective on gender discrimination is portrayed through the use of symbolism.

It is intriguing to observe how context influences the connotation and interpretation of symbols. As poetry is primarily socially oriented, the use of a person, situation, word, or object to represent another thing with broader understanding encourages readers to use their imaginations and be creative while connecting with the underlying meanings of the poems. As research on critical discourse analysis of symbolism in Shirley Lim's poems is still limited, this study provides insights and knowledge to linguists, students, and those interested in gaining a deeper understanding of Shirley Lim's poems. In addition, this study recommends that future research be conducted on other Malaysian poets or writers in order to make their poetry accessible to a wider audience and to increase knowledge and understanding of their ideologies, perspectives, and writing style.

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