

A Postmodern Analysis of a Primary 5 Social Studies Chapter

Brenda Ng

Rivervale Primary School, Singapore

Postmodern theory helps us examine how and why particular pasts are constructed, legitimated and disseminated (Segall, 2006). Postmodern theory includes deconstructionism, whereby meaning and values are constructed using binary oppositions that represent certain ideologies and the role of power in the society to privilege certain terms over others (Khezerloo, 2010). In this article, I use postmodern theory to analyze the Primary 5 Social Studies chapter, "Singapore's Journey to Self-Government." I focus on the binary opposites presented in the text, the relevant political and social contexts, and the language used to persuade readers.

The chapter discusses David Marshall's government, its lack of full control over Singapore's internal affairs, and the problems it faced due to the lack of support from the British powers and the Communist challenge. In particular, the chapter features the Hock Lee Bus Riots in order to highlight the seriousness of the problems caused by the Communists. The chapter goes on to talk about David Marshall's quest to gain full internal self-government from Britain through the Merdeka talks. The next section of the chapter highlights Lim Yew Hock succeeding Marshall as Singapore's Second Chief Minister and the strict measures he took against Communist-led organizations. His tough stand against the Communists pleased the British who granted full internal self-government to Singapore in the 1959 election. Subsequently, the PAP under Lee Kuan Yew emerged victorious with the most votes and formed the new government. The chapter then concludes by explaining the areas of responsibility of the Elected Government and the British Government.

Binary Opposites in the Chapter

A few binary opposites can be identified in the chapter, such as colonialism and communism, the British government and the Singapore government, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) and other political parties, and lastly, an active government and its passive people. In this section, I focus on two binary opposites: (1) the idea of an active government and a passive people; and (2) the PAP and other political parties.

Active government versus passive people

Hong and Huang (2008) state that Singapore's history is narrowly focused on leadership struggles that emphasize the triumph of the morally upright PAP over the communists. Focusing on Singapore's struggle for government, the text presents the government's perspective and highlights the actions taken at the bureaucratic level to achieve full internal self-government. It neglects the people's voices and portrays voting as their only passive means of participation in the journey of self-government. The chapter, however, leaves out the issue of how self-government can affect and benefit its people. Notably, despite the absence of the people's voices, a question appears on page 29 asking pupils to discuss how they think the people of Singapore felt during the election rallies in 1959. Given the omission of sources representing different perspectives, it is unlikely that primary school pupils would be able to relate to the 1959 experience simply via the official perspective and conduct a meaningful discussion of this issue.

PAP and other political parties

Another pair of binary opposites identified in this chapter is the PAP and the other political parties in the 1959 Election. It is interesting to note the outright endorsement of the PAP since it is the only political party mentioned. Other parties such as Singapore People's Alliance (SPA), United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Liberal Socialist Party (LSP), Workers' Party (WP) and Labour Front (LF) are simply termed "the other political parties." The textbook further puts the PAP in a positive light by saying that many voters were impressed by the PAP with their clear plan on what it would do for the people if elected to govern Singapore.

Important political leaders such as David Marshall, Lim Yew Hock and Lee Kuan Yew are presented as central figures of the struggle for self-government. At the opposite end are Communist forces. Interestingly, there is little mention of the background of the Communists and who they were in Singapore. They are simply presented as a disembodied group of people who were instigators of the strikes carried out by workers and students. The Hock Lee Bus rioters are painted as belonging to a union "controlled by the Communists" who "encouraged" workers to go on "strike to ask for higher pay and shorter working hours" (p. 22). Language is used to evoke aggressive images when describing the rioters' retaliation at the police force (e.g., "Let us throw stones at them" p. 23). The text serves to deflect attention from the poor working conditions and the low pay and long working hours of the bus drivers. The bus company owner's mistreatment of his workers and refusal to recognize their legitimate union, as well as the long history of bitterness and bad faith between the bus company and its workers have also been omitted (Thum, 2010). Instead, the text focuses exclusively on the riot and explicitly blames the Communists. There is, however, no information about the students and their agenda in supporting the riot. Once again, the larger context is omitted.

The Need for Context

Postmodern theory advocates an examination of why different versions of the past exist, who maintains them, and what agendas each advocates and silences through its particular interpretation (Segall, 2006). It also seeks to address how power and hierarchy "imposes an interpretive template on the subject being examined" (Khezerloo, 2010), as well as the creation and the use of knowledge. To help readers gain a better understanding of the students' participation in the riot, the context of the Chinese Middle School students in labour disputes must be understood. To the Chinese-speaking population, labour disputes were part of a broader pattern of colonial discrimination and oppression. Their inability to speak English caused them to be excluded from the financial world and the civil service. Despite their qualifications, a Chinese-educated person was often forced into blue-collar work upon graduation from school, leading to a build-up of resentment towards the colonial government which had connections to business interests (Thum, 2010). By challenging the official narrative and acknowledging other stories, one can become more discerning when interpreting sources with strong political agenda. Hence, in the case of the Hock Lee Bus Riots, knowing the contexts and reading from multiple perspectives can give readers a broader and deeper understanding of the actions from the various groups presented.

To conclude, one of the objectives of the Primary 5 Social Studies Syllabus is for pupils to demonstrate critical and creative thinking by taking different perspectives, generating new ways of viewing a situation, and developing arguments. This article has shown how the text is in direct conflict with these skills objectives as it is written from a singular perspective, and fails to bring forth the multiple perspectives that are needed to generate and develop arguments.

References

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