

# Revisioning History: A Deconstructionist Reading of a Learner's Multimodal Text, *Revenge*

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## Abstract

Recent interest in multimodality recognizes the integration of text and image in meaning-making as representing reality. It has also been argued that with the use of digital communication, the meanings of visual and verbal data can be easily manipulated rendering them unreliable. As such, a close and critical reading of the text is required to discover what is hidden, absent, or inconsistent with it. In a deconstruction of a multimodal digital composition of a poem that involves revisioning of history, this paper privileges the absences of cultural and historical texts to signify socio-political issues. An eclectic use of theoretical concepts on meaning-making, especially those proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen, Foucault and Baudrillard, constructs the discussion of the analysis. The digital poem entitled 'Revenge' is deconstructed to further discover such absence in the text. The findings reveal that language and images are used by the learner as a source of power to negotiate the boundaries of identity. It has also been discovered that the message in rhetoric and visuals complement each other to support the process of meaning-making.

**Keywords:** absence, deconstruction, multimodal digital poem, reality, revisioning history, socio-political

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Prelude to the Study

A growing interest in representing reality has been observed in recent multimodal creative productions, which incorporate the use of selective visual and images as the medium to communicate meanings. Kress and van Leeuwen, (2001) define multimodality as "the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined". Here, mode is defined as a "socially and culturally given resource for making meaning" (Kress, 2009). In this paper, language and images are the sets of resources used to represent reality via poetry. The resources are also extended to the use of punctuations as rhetorical markers (Fahnestock, 2011). In addition, visual choices, such as costume and colour have also been included in order to enhance the cultural elements chosen (Page, 2009). Nevertheless, such a creation today is different from those produced in the past because of 'increasing individualism', 'neo-liberalism' and digitalization' that have revolutionized the means through which people interact (Kress, 2010; Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). The reality that is presented is also dissimilar from those produced in the past because the resources used are by nature, personally and technologically driven. This paper thus argues that reality created by a multimodal production can be influenced by the liberation and empowerment of production.

### 1.2 Importance of the Study

In the representation of reality, revisioning, as an act of creative production is required as a way to look into the past from the lens of contemporary subjects. Here, re-visioning means the critical retrospection of the past as a way of designing creative work that sparks ideas to re-fashion the historical representations, with the intention to meet contemporary aspiration (Croce, 1970; Greenblatt, 1980; Rich, 1980). When socio-politically inclined writers revision the past, they look back at historical events and critically analyse them to represent their socio-political stand. One mode of such a critique can be via the poem, which is critical and socio-political (Rich,

1980, 2005). Indeed, this interpretation is later re-constructed into a new form of historical representation to express an ideological footing (Greenblatt, 1980). In a way, it is a critical historical judgement as a way that resonates contemporary concern (Croce, 1970; Cheah, 2005). Hence, alluding from what has been discussed earlier, this paper aims to investigate how a learner perceives the history of Malaysia, as reflected through language and images expressed in creative production. In this respect, this act is a modern reappraisal of the past, as she, a Malaysian, produces work that accentuates certain values and ideas of the post independent citizen, or in Raihanah M.M, Ruzy Suliza Hashim, Noraini Md. Yusof and Zalina Mohd. Lazim's (2011) words, "...will enable the young generation to channel their personal and alternative perspectives of appraising the past and to attend to pressing socio-cultural, political and ideological concerns". This process thus creates the rhetoric of nation-building as the poem created is her personal expression of the public issues that matter to her. As such, this learner will, via her creative text, set herself free from the walls of the public institution of higher education, as she speaks of her concerns on socio-political issues in Malaysia.

### 1.3 Relevant Literature for the Study

It is noted that current culture in creative production has problematized some of the works produced. Indeed, the use of new technology has modernized the way meanings are presented as they are now more liberated. The change in media technology has given way to visual culture where different visual experiences allow "simultaneous experience of visual, audio, verbal data as fluid and easily manipulated"; however, due to the increasing dependence on visual experiences, this culture has been taken as the way of knowing where seeing is almost believing it, as true (Spencer, 2011). In addition, postmodernism rejoices in the fragmentation in arts thereby liberating it from any system of guidance (Barry, 2002). However, this means that the new experience may not be reliable because they can be reconfigured or recreated. On one hand, postmodernism initiates and liberates the culture of creative production; but, on the other, it may lead to inconsistencies of meaning making rather than the creation of knowledge progression. This affirms the view that the discourse of the contemporary production is the rhetoric of creative innovation. Therefore, this paper argues that there is more to representing reality than the mere integration of multimodal resources. Hence, rather than being attentive to the multimodal composition only, focus will also be specifically given to the hidden or absence in the meanings of the representation of reality in revealing socio-political issues in relation to nation-building. In other words, metaphorical meanings created out of the modes of communication lend credence to the argument at the superficial level; nevertheless, the absence highlights the hidden perception of a learner on nation-building via her creation in the classroom.

### 1.4 Milieu of Literary Production: Understanding the Construction

In a Creative Writing class of e-methods in Literary Production at a public institution of higher learning, a group of learners produced a multimodal digital poetry as a product for the course assessment (Course Proforma, SKBS3133). Prior to production, these learners were exposed to issues of Post-colonialism, especially in Malaysia, that permeate the social, cultural and nationalistic concerns via the literary theories and works produced by local and international authors. To this end, the learners are assumed to be familiar with the basic knowledge on nation-building and the related concepts such as identity, discourse and power. Therefore, when they were asked to create poetry that revisioned an event in the history of Malaysia, symbolic representations of reality were employed to exhibit their creativity. This paper highlights the interpretation of realism by a learner through her reimagining of a monarch from the Malaccan Sultanate, as one of the key players during the downfall of the Malay civilization.

### 1.5 Milieu of Historical Accounts: A Glimpse into Sejarah Melayu (The Malay Annals)

To contextualise the composition of *Revenge*, a discussion on selected events in the *Malay Annals* is relevant. In this classical text, the narrative of the monarchy is on the dynamics of the institution of power because it creatively highlights the manifestation of power relations via the historical account of the Malay Sultanate of Malacca. In the narrative, it specifically tells about the power of the sultan as the *raja* or ruler and the people as the subjects in the Malay kingdom within the time frame of the fifteenth to seventeenth century. This is also a narrative of a Malay *kerajaan* as the Malay working system that highlights the *raja* as the only institution on which the Malay subjects are dependent upon. (Note 1)

The significant ruler and the subject relationship highlights the feudal era via the prince named Sang Sapurba, who represents the *raja* as the ruler endowed with spiritual and supernatural powers (Note 2) and Demang Lebar Daun, the ordinary people or *rakyat*. This binary relations illustrates the archaic agreement on the practice of power. The king is also regarded as the protector of the people as exemplified in Sultan Muzaffar Shah's words: "the *rakyat* is like the roots, the ruler like the tree; without the roots the tree won't be able to stand upright, that's

how the ruler is with the *rakyat*” (SM: Chapter 9). In return, the king is assumed to be just, fair and protective of the safety and wellbeing of the *rakyat*. These two contrary metaphorical expressions on the practice of power through the *kerajaan* and *rakyat* paradigms manifest the different perspectives on power relations.

## 2. Methodology

Deconstruction is a methodology that analyses the learner’s creative work in an unorthodox way. By adopting the Derridean deconstruction to analyse the digital multimodal work, a radical rethinking on the text of everyday linguistic and visual signs of media encounters is proposed. Campbell (2012, p. 106) acknowledges that Derrida’s work has been primarily on written text, and proposes that Derridean deconstruction is also visual. This paper however, extends the analysis to multimodality consisting of text and images that make meaning upon their integration. Further, as a product of media technology, this multimodal text becomes a new text known as multimodal digital text.

Because any text is a mere representation, deconstructionists urge us to search for those hidden meanings that are not seen. This approach implores us to deconstruct, that is not to destroy, but to disclose the absence or hidden operation of signs in the text. Absence can be understood as the void of control. Derrida (1976) argues for the absence of centrality thus making the text ‘decentred’ thus free from any guideline, for instance, the underlying rules or the author’s intention in the writing. This is known as a violation to logocentricism as a notion attributing to central meaning making using the prescribed parameter. As a consequence, meanings produced are considered difficult to grasp and indefinite, thus making them slippery. In other words, signifiers of meanings and the expected signified do not correspond as they keep breaking apart. Derrida (1976) argued against traditional and structured sign systems such as de Saussure’s (1974) linguistics that depends on structural relationship between signifier and signified which is arbitrary in nature, thus suggesting that linguistic signs represent ideas based on convention and norm as the logo centrality. To Derrida, this is problematic because first, there is no standard rule to refer a signifier to a specific signified; second, meaning making requires the signifiers as a mark to show at what it means. In other words, there is no one proposition that can directly be the reality, as the signifiers are more significant and functional, rather than the signified that is denoted. Hence, a complete and stable meaning making is also not possible as signifiers become free floating signifiers.

To understand meaning making in the text, a deconstruction of the text begins with a method of very close reading, to identify the absence in the composition. This can be discovered through two main readings of the text.

Firstly, deconstruction employs a conventional reading to decipher what the text mean as a representative of reality thus named ‘reading with the grain’. This process makes necessary references to the other inbuilt elements such as cultural context or the outlined ideas in the text. Because of that, it may refer to the duality of meanings, e.g. low/high culture, good/evil, etc. The tools of ‘salience’ that highlight the deviance, and ‘framing’ that situate the socio-political boundary of the creation are also relevant to enhance the semiotic processes that construct the reality as intended by the designer. This is later put into ‘hierarchical opposition’ or in Derrida’s words, ‘violent hierarchy’ that contradicts ‘the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis... [where] one of the terms governs the other’ (Derrida, 1981, p. 41, emphasis mine).

Secondly, deconstruction requires a critical reading or otherwise known as ‘reading against the grain’ that keenly investigates into wordplay or the use of the signs in the text. This process is antithesis to the one mentioned earlier. In both stages, the term ‘grain’ is defined as the presence of the philosophy or the logic of the text that act as the logocentric of the text (Davoud & Davoud, 2012, p. 112). Therefore, the interpretation of the text requires the reader to understand what the text infers or proposes that abides to the structure of the text as reality at the initial stage. At a later stage of meaning making, the reader looks into the contradictions and inconsistencies of the meanings as a way to problematize the creation to function as a critique of the text. In other words, any discrepancies in the system of signification becomes the trace of the absence. Indeed, it is in this void of centrality that situates the absence of the text.

In this particular paper, a revisioning strategy that equips the transformation of meaning making is required. ‘Reconstructing images and representation’ that indicates the selective redesign of creative work as the evidence of social and political leanings is relevant in order to alleviate the process of signification through which the ideology has been obscured (Yusof, 2005). In this paper, the deconstruction of the poem aims to uncover the absence in the reconstructing of images and representation. This takes place firstly, in the transformation-transduction process, where history is reinterpreted into a text of poetic lines that functions as the rhetoric of nation-building, before it is translated into visuals where the semiotic mode of text moves across to visual (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Bezemer & Kress, 2008). The process of transformation and transduction is

then integrated to construct the full signification in the stage of 'reading with the grain'. To highlight its distinctive design, salience and framing are the tools used to mark the deviance and boundaries of signification. This is then followed by 'reading against the grain' where the inconsistencies of meaning are then highlighted in which absence, as the violation of centrality of ideas, is located.

By deconstructing the text, not only are the inconsistencies of the text brought to fore, but the way the text itself challenges the principles of the production, is revealed. This is also where the analyst has the opportunity to challenge the philosophy, privilege and hierarchy that it claims as well as the 'rhetorical operations' it pursues in the discourse (Culler, 1982). In the former process of transformation and transduction of meaning making, the work of rhetoric is scrutinized in terms of the linguistic devices employed in tandem with the analysis of visuals projected to indicate unity of realism. In the latter process, deconstruction becomes a reversal of philosophy used and hierarchy presenting the text as it is a critique of the hierarchy and ideology which suggest the discordance of the text. This has been argued by Derrida (1976) in his "of Grammatology":

Reading...cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it...or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place, outside of language...[hence] the absence of the referent or the transcendental signified. There is nothing outside the text.

In the excerpt above, though Derrida has focused on the use of language in the text to be deconstructed, his analysis has also ventured into the visual arts through the theme of blindness (Derrida, 1993). This theme similarly works on the idea of absence. In fact, the analysis should examine the play of the meanings in the visual and delay the final judgement of the visual shown until it has further interrogated from within, as mentioned above. Campbell (2012, p. 117) argues that visual deconstructionism is different from visual methodologies as it defers giving an answer, instead it indulges with the complexity of the images. This differentiates multimodal deconstructionist analysis from the others as it locates the absences within the linguistic and the visual; and how these multimodal resources depend on the absence to make sense (Campbell, 2012, p. 120).

### 3. Results

In this study, the right to question is the theme developed out of the learner's metaphorical re-inscription of the characteristics of a selected Malay Sultanate of Malacca. *Revenge* is the learner's representation of reality as a re-imagining of a Malaysian historical artefact. Ideally, any semiotic representation is the trace of the signmaker's distinctive qualities as a show of truth. The connection between the signifier and the signified becomes a symbolic relationship of the designer and his interest (Jewitt, 2009, p. 31). It basically appeals to the designer's interest besides other controlling elements namely the rules and the norms, such as logocentric tendencies that determine one's meaning making. This indicates any meanings that do not comply by the rule and function beyond this western metaphysics is considered different and any attempt to escape this is seen impossible. Nevertheless, being a product of revisioning the past, the work is seen political due to the verbal and visual redesign of a selective narrative in the *Malay Annals* that leads to inconsistency and contradiction of meanings. In other words, the deconstruction of the poem investigates deep into the interpretation and transformation in linguistic and visual signs that function as the rhetoric and semiotics of the multimodal text. At a superficial level of signification, the revisioned poem is the trace of the learner's intended projection of her ideological stand on current issues, nevertheless it is at the critical level that her true perception is revealed.

#### 3.1 Reading with the Grain

The learner's subjection to the wordplay of the rhetoric is evident in the reconstruction of Sultan Mahmud Shah's images and representation as a Malay Sultanate of Malacca who rebels, as a style of production. Her re-enactment of the king's representation is a form of contestation of the past narrative in the history. In "Revenge", the learner reconstructs the representation of a sultan named "Sultan Mahmud Syah" in a rhetoric of the accused. The persona is the metaphor of the sultan's spirit lamenting for being accused as a traitor despite his selfless and daring exploits to save Malacca from being colonized by the Portuguese. In a form of argumentation, his Majesty was aghast at the accusation of being a 'coward' (P1, S1, L9, 11)' and 'a traitor'(S1,L14). He came to his own defense as he proclaimed, "They were wrong/I didn't run away!"(S1, L16-17) before defending himself through her verbatim report on how he took on to battle the Portuguese as he was cruelly murdered, "Though in the back/I was stabbed/I was killed" (S2, L5-7). Then again he realized that his death is meaningless as he said, "Till my last breath/But my battle was for nothing"(S3, 125-6).The depiction of a sultan does not match the characteristics as aligned in the classic social contract that it signifies a permutation of semantic as it drifts away from the narrative in the *Malay Annals*. The persona says, "I made up my mind/To rebel over those people/And will continue to.....R-E-V-E-N-G-E!!! (S2, L45-7). Sultans as the typical representatives of feudalism is no more

the nucleus of the society as he has been humiliated, marginalized and ironically transformed into the figure of feudal rebellion.

Indeed, her rootless verbal narrative is problematic when the meaning is transferred into another mode of signification. As a consequence, it remains ambiguous because the source of information to explain 'her' deadly injury and the other people's resentment have not been provided by the learner as the designer of the poem.

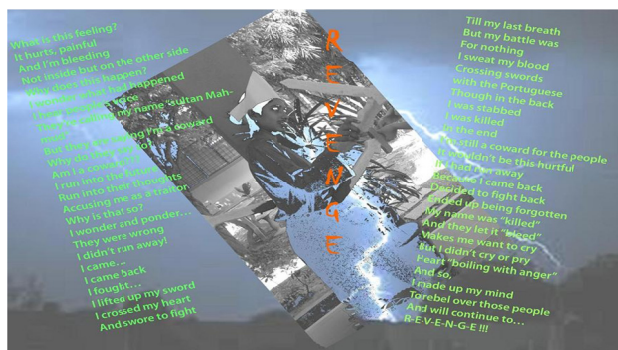


Figure 1. The Multimodal text, *Revenge*

The visual of the poem further tells about the bloody event in which Sultan Mahmud Shah was in a battle with the Portuguese, the colonizer of Malacca. The image of a person produced in that creative experimental project supports the meanings intended. Here, the idea was framed by the scenario of a dark and gloomy day, marked by heavy rainfall and accompanied by countless flashes of lightning and thunder across the sky. The negative of the real image shown below is diagonally tilted across the page of the image to influence the reader's imagination on the mysticism of the work. The use of visual digitalization has successfully reconstructed the images in accordance to the intent of the creator.



Figure 2. A reenactment of the scene

In the real image of a photograph, 'Sultan Mahmud' is a character played by an Indian lady adorned with a tall, yellow headgear and dusty green baju *Melayu Teluk Belanga* (Note 3), who is shown to have a sharp weapon drawn thrust at others. She is 'injured' as evident from the bloodied 'swords' shoved at her. In a stark contrast, her chosen image in the poetic representation becomes the negative of the positive, as it is technically coloured dull, but was made digitally shiny from the flash of lightning across the lower part of her body. It indicates the blurry perspective on royalty as it almost erases the costume's cultural identification. Meanwhile, the silhouette of the tall headgear seems to indicate a failing and disappearing sign of the monarchy while the weapon does not replicate a *keris*, which is part of the sultan's customary complete style of dressing (Note 4). However, such depiction might be merely the cosmetics of the cultural manipulation, which can be a pompous mimic of the reality.

In *Revenge*, the powerful rhetorical language and semiotics employed is so dominant that it suggests the

metaphorical conceptualization of the ruler's predicament. It does not represent Sultan Mahmud Shah as a celebrated hero, but a victim of circumstances. In this poem, the learner seems intent on articulating her concern on the tragedy of a fallen ruler in a dramatic manner.

### *3.2 Reading against the Grain*

At this stage of reading, the learner's experimental court narratives that highlight the wordplay of the rhetoric signifies the concept of absence in meaning making. Absence, as earlier noted, is the effect of challenging the idea of western metaphysics – presence. This can be discovered through the inconsistencies of meaning making created by both semiotic modalities, language and the visual.

The crisis of emotional turbulence is observed in the poetic lines set to express the amok perspective. As suggested in 'reading with the grain' above, the fluctuating of emotions from denial to submission and finally, to reaction is the mind of an amok. As claimed by a Malay scholar, "Amok represents the external physical expression of the conflict within the Malay...a final and complete escape from reason and training" (Mohammad, 1994, p. 118). This is evident in the learner's rearrangement of the rhetoric where her verbal and visual expressions indicate thoughts that are unstable, uncertain and irrational. First, her use of interrogatives or questions in the rhetoric of nation-building is a show of disavowal that invites the readers to empathize with his misery, "Why do they say so? /Am I a coward??/... Why is that so?"(S1, L10-11, L15). The stress reflected in the use of emphatics, as shown in the exclamation marks, "I didn't run away!" is further enhanced by the use of ellipses to symbolize pensive thought, "I wander and ponder.../I came.../ I fought..."(S1, L17-19) leading to the conflicts of the story. The use of anagram emphasized with exclamation marks "R-E-V-E-N-G-E!!!" indicates the climax on the release of suppressed emotion. Such representations could be to express and emphasize the rather unsettled state of mind, possibly due to the rush of adrenalin, accompanied by an exhibition of anger. What may be observed too are the changing signs from markers of denial to signs of contemplation and finally, the signs of action. The learner's creative reconstruction from different perspectives suggests her hidden perspectives. In this poem, the learner as the producer, has simultaneously become the persona of the anguished sultan. In her denouement of the narrative, she or Sultan Mahmud Shah is intended to be similarly represented as the amok who rebels to express personal grudges against the unknown enemy.

Further analysis of the visuals used showed a result of transduction process, which is another failing process of meaning making. The visual showed an image of an amok, who is armed with a weapon and attacking innocent people (Winzeler, 1990, p. 97). However, the confusion over the social status of the persona arises due to his colourless headgear and the dress worn. These aspects are the determinants of power that exist in the Malay community (Note 5). Because they remain clueless and groundless, these images do not contribute to a stable and centralized meaning making as the control entity that guides the creative production. The disfigured and culturally flattened signifier of the tengkolok as the headgear, for instance, has blinded the signified in the construction meaning. Because of that, the signifier remains as isolated entity that remains floating thus meaning becomes ambiguous.

## **4. Discussion**

Re-visioning history is one credible approach to the discovering of one's perception of past events that is un-shown or unsaid. It is, in other words, a show of a hidden paradigm. Further, this can be done through poetry, and according to Rich (1980, 2005), poetry can become the critical appreciation of the past, exhibiting the sociopolitical nuances of reality. In other words, a learner-poet may impose her embedded ideology in the representation of her subjective choices in the poem rather than having the poem as a medium of a mere emotional expression. In addition, the learner's refashioning of the work, as highlighted by Greenblatt (1980), has diverted the reading of the creative production from the narrative on sultanate power in the Malacca in 15<sup>th</sup> century as in its traditional narrative of the event. In fact, this refashioning, has become the avenue for the learner's perception of the rhetoric and semiotics of socio-politics of Malaysia, and her participation in the contemporary aspiration of the young generation (Croce, 1970). It is also interesting to note that in the poem, Sultan Mahmud Shah, who is known for being an emotional and reckless Sultan of the Malay sultanate of Malacca, has been transformed into a pitiful, yet dangerous character. It is worth-noticing as the Sultan was wielding much power and not 'pitiful' but yet the re-visioning has made him so. What is obvious here is that in re-visioning the past, the creative production is not censored or controlled by any external entity. As such, the learner-poet utilizes her integration of the rhetoric and the visual meanings as a trace of her perception on the socio-political issue in nation-building to indicate the absence of cultural and historical texts. What is covertly missing might indicate what is meant. Indeed, in the analysis, the tyrannical Sultan Mahmud Shah is encapsulated as a victim by discourses of logocentrism as the accepted way of thinking and practices to power

usage (Murfin & Ray, 1998, p. 365). This suggests the negotiation on the boundaries of identity as a way of empowering the sign-maker through the language and visual used take place, which is also empowered by other discourses such as media and literature.

In analyzing the poem, the sign systems have been alluded to distinctive manners of meaning making. The poem, designed in multimodality symbolizes the symbolic discourse of reality as it is connected to the designer's interest (Kress, 2010, p. 62). This integration of multimodal meanings happens in two ways. First, it is verbally fashioned upon the creator's style as evidenced in her choices of the signs to be used and in so doing, she assumes the role of the transformation agent at work, imbued with the freedom of expression. This means that the new design takes into consideration the social context and the complication of meaning making upon individual choices as it lays as the foundation to social semiotic system of signification (Kress & Hodge, 1988). Hence, this transformation is not a typical change as it innovates traditional representation in interaction that theoretically operate on similar entities but divergent structure or arrangement (Bezemer & Kress, 2008, p. 175). Second, meanings produced in the transduction further complicate the process of meaning making. It does not lead to a 'recontextualization' (Beinstein, 1996, p. 64) where original discourses are reshaped to fit in the intended meanings in disguise; instead, the poem chosen problematizes meanings through its metaphorical representation. As claimed by Pink (2004, p. 10), visual interpretation becomes the 'poetic processes' that 'encourage the use of metaphor and the emphatic communication of knowledge and experience', the experience that cannot be achieved via the sole use of language. This cuts across the semiotics of Saussurean linguistics on the arbitrary signifier-signified relationship where meanings are unmotivated by creator's interests. In other words, language used may represent the subjective ideas posed by the designer to signal her sense of individualism and liberalism; nevertheless, the visual chosen complement the meanings created in such a way that it anchors the signifier of idea to that of knowledge.

Nonetheless, this study shows that the visual and verbal produced are the contested representative of the reality in the contemporary world. The signs produced signify a broken semiotic relationship which do not succeed to define the process of meaning making. Baudrillard (1983) argues that as the signifier-signified connection is lost, the reconstructed images do not represent reality due to the lacking of reference and objectivity. Instead, hyper-reality is achieved that is through the distortion, disguise and finally replacement of the real image (Baudrillard, 1983). The semiotic systems of the poetic meaning making closely resemble hyper-reality because the traditional ruler's image is chosen, altered and eventually substituted with the image of the reenacted character in a scene. The adapted use of experimental digital photography technique further complicates the revisioned representation as it further alters the visual. In other words, the signifier does not meet the signified, thus it is kept floating. A similar failure in meaning making is observed in the language construction of the poem. There is no effort to combine the short disjointed phrases on fluctuation of emotions, which lead to a disunified narrative. In such a case, reaching a universal truth or constructing a 'fact' as the basis of reality using language is questionable. What is present can merely make up the absence of the real. As such, the signs produced is of postmodernism, free from any influences or guidelines and becoming the way of knowing (Spencer, 2011; Barry, 2002). This creates a blurring identity of the designer whose work signifies her indefinite sense of self as she poses her right to question issues of concern.

The analysis has also revealed the real absence of cultural and historical elements, which should be relevant to the understanding of the historical events during Sultan Mahmud Shah's kerajaan. The learner's reconstruction of the discourse highlights the absence of cultural and historical representation thus signifies socio-political issues, or in Madan Sarup's (1986, p. 32) words, hidden of meaning are "made out of what it is not". In *Sejarah Melayu*, it was narrated that the king, as an orphan, was installed as the sultan when he was still small, hence the administration of the state was controlled by the court officials. However, he was wrongly guided by these officials. For instance, he was taught by Seri Maharaja to be cruel and insensitive to the rakyat when he to impose the death sentence on a minor offence committed by a rakyat (SM, 139). As such, his poor upbringing led him to become as a person with low character, harsh, impulsive and even a womanizer. In effect, these traits exemplify the failure of the court officials in moulding him to be an exemplary and much respected sultan. However, this case in history is an isolated case which does not represent the whole sultanate of Malacca as the kerajaan of the time. This is an absence of the historical element in the learner-poet's narrative that is revealed through the analysis.

The absence of a cultural element is also discovered from the deconstructionist reading of the learner's text. Conflicting points of view on the ruler's sovereignty and the relationship with the people as the concern of the rakyat are evident in the learner's contemporary creation. The power of kerajaan (Note 6) can be observed as a top down class paradigm where the perpetuation of power comes from the traditional Malay sultan onto his

subjects, notwithstanding their origin. This ruler-ruled absolute obedience and loyalty are regulated by the Malays culture and anyone who does not adhere to this will be regarded as a traitor (*derhaka*). Added to this, the sultan also assumes the democratic role as a protector, symbolized by a tree and having a symbiotic relationship with the roots which represent the ruled or the masses. This myriad of definition on power becomes bilateral official relationship of the ruler and the ruled or *rakyat*, which in return, taken as the *wa'adat* or social contract in the traditional Malay polity; a politics of the past that is still relevant until now.

A similar and interesting observation on this bilateral connection has been articulated by Abdul Rahman (2014, pp. 67-77), who proposes the *rakyat* (Note 7) paradigm as the analytical construct to meet the current interest of contemporary communication, that is more of individualism, yet can tap into multiethnic society of Malaysia. This is strongly related to transformation on the redefinition on the idea of sovereignty due to the social and political awakening of the *rakyat* as the citizenry of Malaysia being the voting power that determine the democratic polity in Malaysia (Embong, 2014, p. 76). Henceforth, this paper suggests the supremacy of the *rakyat* as the learner's paradigm on the issue of nation-building. The choice of Sultan Mahmud Shah as a creative reconstruction of the past is symbolically taken as the *rakyat's* examination into the exertion of power and behavior of a ruler. Because today's Sultanate of Constitutional Monarchy is the surviving tradition of Malacca (Bari, 2012, p. 63), the learner's poem on a selective Malaccan sultanate and other symbolism is the emblematic of her appraisal of Malay Sultanate's symbolic power. Therefore, the learner's revisioning of the past via the multimodal work becomes her social platform to express her personal perspective of interest on the issue of nation-building in Malaysia. This is another void in the poem because cultural element has been camouflaged by the emotional expression by the persona.

In short, this paper proposes to contest the knowledge construction of a micro practice of a learner in a classroom that leads to the critical evaluation of a learner's ideology, namely the idea of a Malaysian citizenry. Revisioning history is seen as a practice to facilitate the projection of the power of literary discourse produced upon the design at postmodernism. This can accentuate certain avenues of resistance thus becoming the channel for the powerless and marginalized citizen to challenge the convention which may not possible elsewhere (Foucault, 1980). Indeed, linguistic and visual semiotics has been accepted as the representation of reality, nevertheless, by adopting Derridean deconstruction of the text to analyse the text in depth, the hidden historical and cultural elements reveal the absence of cultural and historical elements that mark the learner's socio-political issue on nation-building. The learner's creative re-appraisal within the *rakyat* paradigm as the contemporary idea on democracy indicates matters on the socio-polity of Malaysia, which is the concern of all people, regardless of ethnicity. This learner has also revealed her 21<sup>st</sup> century thinking, which upholds the importance of human rights to ethical self-expression and justice among all human beings. Interestingly, the analysis also reveals the lacks in the learner, that she is not well informed of certain historical facts that are relevant to the understanding of an important historical figure in the days of the Malacca Sultanate. To sum up, these are the insights on socio-political issues discovered through the deconstruction of the rhetoric and semiotics of a multimodal digital poem, *Revenge*.

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## Notes

Note 1. Milner (1982:113-14) emphasizes the total reliance of the Malays onto the ruler as the sole institution through which their "...position in this life and the next depended on the Raja; he was the bond holding men together, and the idiom through which the community experienced the world...[this] political life could be subsumed under one term: men constituted themselves to be living not in states or under government, but in *kerajaan*, in the condition of having a Raja".

Note 2. The feudal images are represented by the king as a godly figure (raja) in accordance to Hindu-Buddha tradition as well as the chosen one in Islamic doctrine connotes their sovereignty of spirituality and supernatural

power (Syed Ali Husin, 2013, p. 4).

Note 3. Baju Melayu Teluk Belanga, a type of Baju Kurong, has been inspired by Sultan Abu Bakar in 1866 as a commemoration of Teluk Belanga, as a center of Johor administration before (Zuraidah Shawal, 1944, p. 30). This male dress has no collar, was pulled over the head and reached only to the waist (Mubin Sheppard, 2011:126). For the royalty, the short sarong (kain samping) is worn on top of the dress (berdagang luar), whereas the commoners wear it underneath (Siti Zainon Ismail, 2006, p. 139).

Note 4. Costume is defined as a complete set of dressing, including all the clothes accessories, etc.(Geddie 1961:339 in Siti Zainon Ismail, 2006). It is also known as customary dress because it relates to the social value and adat (Ismail, 2006, p. 29). Keris is one of the customary costume (Malay Annals:95).

Note 5. This is highlighted in the classical text, Sejarah Melayu (SM:82). It was narrated that Sultan had “laid down the custom and protocol of the kingdom”. The custom includes the dressing code, among all that highlight yellow should be colour of the royalty’s clothing and golden sheath is only for the royalty’s keris.

Note 6. *Kerajaan* is a concept that works on the personal relationship between ruler and subject (rakyat), and not with a specific race (Milner, Abdul Rahman & Tham Siew Yean, 2014, p. 8)

Note 7. *Rakyat* is a concept that has been used since the precolonial feudal period that indicates the hierarchal subject-ruler relationship, though regardless of their ethnic origin. It has evolved ever since after independence in 1957, with the transformation of kerajaan system into constitutional monarchy, rakyat is now known as citizenry with the constitutional rights irrespective of ethnic, religious and socio-economic background (Abdul Rahman Embong, 2014, p. 61).

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