

Education and society: The similitude of rigid systems in Catherine Lim's The Teacher and Adeline Ng Ai Choo

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Abstract

This study investigates the representation of shared social realities within educational systems as depicted in Catherine Lim's stories *The Teacher* and *Adeline Ng Ai Choo*. Existing literature discusses academic pressure and institutional expectations, yet limited attention is given to how literary texts critically reflect these systemic concerns and their psychological consequences. Addressing this gap, the study aims to analyze how characters, themes, and symbols illustrate the tensions within rigid academic environments and their effects on learners. Using discourse analysis grounded in New Criticism and Critical Theory, the study examines textual evidence to explore how educational expectations shape individual experiences. Findings indicate that both narratives underscore prevailing themes of academic pressure influenced by institutional and parental demands. Character analysis highlights strained relationships between teachers and students, where strict adherence to standards contributes to emotional distress. Symbolic elements, particularly the students' books, represent internal struggles, feelings of isolation, and a silent plea for support. The study concludes that these stories illuminate the consequences of inflexible educational structures that neglect student well-being. The implications call for educational reforms that prioritize mental health, encourage empathy in teaching practices, and cultivate supportive school environments.

Keywords: Academic pressure; character analysis; discourse analysis; educational systems; mental health.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The school is commonly referred to as the students' second home. However, not all homes can consistently offer positive memories, particularly in the academic sector, where balancing academic standards, personal challenges, and societal pressures is the weight people carry in pursuit of a diploma and the desire for a better life (Aldridge et al., 2024). The hallowed halls of academia bear witness to both the resilience and silent struggles of the generations of students who walk through them, and the reflection of these realities in literature is significant because it can offer insight into the impact of these academic pressures on mental health and personal well-being (Uzunboylu & Özmen, 2021).

Education, when used with noble intentions, forms the foundation of societal progress (Ma et al., 2024). However, with education and societal standards combined, it can sometimes be challenging for students to meet such expectations (Uzunboylu & Gönül, 2020). Catherine Lim comments on such rigid systems in her narratives. Widely regarded as the doyenne of Singaporean writers, Catherine Lim, or in full Catherine Lim Poh Imm, is a multi-awarded writer known for her sharp political commentary, wit, and often irreverent sense of humor. Local and foreign schools and universities have recognized her literary works, and several countries have translated them into various languages (Ahmad, 2018).

One of Lim's notable works is her first book of fiction, a 1978 collection of short stories, "Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore." *Little Ironies*, characterized by its wit and deliberate irony, is a collection of vignettes that explore Singaporean life, primarily through the lens of the Singaporean Chinese community (Ahmad, 2018). This collection includes her stories, entitled *The Teacher* and *Adeline Ng Ai Choo*.

These two stories provide a glimpse of social issues pertaining to education. In similitude, both of these works explicitly and implicitly show the cause and effect of stress and depression in the area of education, which sometimes lead to depression or, worse, suicide. As a result, issues like this undoubtedly highlight the importance of both mental and emotional health. These issues are not limited to the people of Singapore; they are realities that the entire world, particularly Asian countries known for their strict "pressure cooker" educational systems, should be more aware of. As one writer puts it, "the joyous world of Asian academic expectations—it's like a never-ending season of *Game of Thrones*, but instead of dragons and undead armies, we've got calculus and chemistry" (Chen, 2023).

A systematic review investigating the connection between academic pressure and mental health found that it brought together data from 52 studies conducted in different countries, and 48 of them showed a link between academic pressure or the timing of school activities and various mental health outcomes (Steara et al., 2023). In correlation, Qomariyah et al., (2023) studied the factors and impacts of academic pressure on both students and lecturers. They emphasize that to have improved educational outcomes and mental well-being, there is a need to recognize, understand, and mitigate pressures that stem from school curriculum demands, peer influence, and parental expectations, as they can possibly result in detrimental psychological effects and academic burnout.

Moreover, a study from Kenya University exploring academic pressure as a predictor of suicide and gathering data both from counselors and students across selected public universities in Kenya confirms the relationship between such pressure and the increasing suicide rates. They concluded that a significant number of youths often feel worthless, doubt themselves, have experienced hopelessness, and eventually contemplate suicide as a result of academic pressure (Muhammad).

Similarly, Liu (2023) concludes that family conflict, academic pressure, and teacher-student conflict are psychosocial factors contributing to underage suicide rates, and the relationship of the three can be understood when considering the historical background of China, highlighting the need to explore the context of a literary work that explores similar themes. Additionally, the study finds that suicidal tendencies should be addressed in their early stages, emphasizing the need to liberate students, parents, and teachers from conventional thinking to overcome negative psychology (Liu, 2023).

Furthermore, according to Sonkar and Gupta (2023), suicide is a pressing concern in India and holds that "expectation is the main culprit" (1) because academic excellence is a "matter of pride" and students who

underperform face criticism and animosity from teachers, parents, and relatives (4). Essentially, the study reveals that mental health challenges are experienced by students, such as anxiety, depression, and in extreme cases, even suicide. This is primarily due to the high expectations they get from parents and society, along with the rigid educational system, which influences a negative perception about life (Sonkar and Gupta, 2023). The reviewed studies correlate and support the assumption of this literature research as they provide relevant information and knowledge, which helps find evidence that makes the research impactful and coherent.

1.1. Purpose of study

This study is undertaken to examine the similarity of social realities in educational systems reflected in Catherine Lim's select stories, *The Teacher* and *Adeline Ng Ai Choo*. Specifically, it delves into the characters, symbols, and themes.

2. METHOD AND MATERIALS

This study employs a qualitative approach through discourse analysis through New Criticism and Critical Theory to investigate the similarities between Catherine Lim's *The Teacher* and *Adeline Ng Ai Choo*. Specifically, it looks into the characters, symbols, and themes and how they reflect the social realities of educational systems. The qualitative method is a presentation and interpretation of textual and verbal data. Discourse analysis is a research method used to investigate and analyze the content and meaning of a literary work through an analysis of language in its broadest sense. This study focuses mainly on the literary work's analysis and contents to answer the sub-problems and the main problem. The limitations of this study are within the parameters of the subproblems raised.

New Criticism refers to the approach focusing on the analysis of the features of the literary text itself, to the exclusion of biographical, historical, or intellectual contexts. The assumption states that the key to understanding a text lies within "the text itself" (a common saying among New Critics). It is a critical approach to study, interpret, or evaluate the inherent elements of a text because the text is the primary emphasis of this theory. It enables readers to assess a piece of literature through close textual reading and analysis of its formal elements, language, and other devices to uncover meaning. It is a method of interpreting and emphasizing literary form and the literary devices used in a text (Mambrol, 2020). This is significant in this study to analyze the subproblems raised.

Critical Theory, on the other hand, originally developed by the Frankfurt School, aims to uncover power imbalances and social injustices as it examines societal structures and ideologies. In literature, this approach centers on the analysis of texts to uncover their reflection, reinforcement, or challenge to prevailing ideologies through their exploration of class, race, gender, and power as themes in literature. Through the exploration of these dynamics, this approach seeks to analyze and question societal norms, to foster transformative change through literature (Harris, 2002).

The study further utilizes critical theory to answer the problem. Through this criticism, the study analyzes the power dynamics primarily between the teacher-student relationship. Additionally, it looks into parental expectations and societal standards in the selected elements to understand how educational systems either reinforce or challenge social structures. The study seeks to uncover how the chosen Singaporean literatures depict the burdens of academia and societal expectations. In this sense, there is a need to investigate how actual events shape the narrative and reflect the realities of the time.

3. RESULTS

This section answers the sub-problems raised in the study generated through the literary method used.

3.1. Characters

This discussion focuses on the main characters in Catherine Lim's *The Teacher* and *Adeline Ng Ai Choo*, emphasizing the roles and dynamics of teachers and students from both narratives.

Teachers. Both of Lim's narratives, *The Teacher* and *Adeline Ng Ai Choo*, center around the characters of a teacher and a student. While the teacher in the first story was never named, it can be deduced from the use

of the pronoun “him” that he is a male teacher who teaches English classes. This is evident in the line, “*Day in, day out, we teach grammar and usage. For my part, I’ve taught them the use of the tenses till I’m blue in the face.*” He is shown to be dedicated and proactive to his profession, as he is deeply concerned but also frustrated with his student’s constant grammar mistakes and overall lack of improvement, even with the extra coaching sessions. However, while he focuses on meeting the academic standards and his students’ failing marks, he fails to notice the story Tan Geok Peng shared in his essays. The teacher was only checking the grammar errors and was considerably blind to the content of Tan Geok Peng’s written composition, like when they were asked to write about their happiest day, the student wrote about a time when he was allowed to continue school:

‘I was very sad because I don’t like to sell cakes, I like to learn in school. But I am scared that my father will beat me if I disobey him, so I cannot say anything to him. He ask me to tell my principal of my school that I am not going to learn anymore. I was scare my principal will ask me questions. Lucky my mother came home from the hospital where she born the baby, and my mother say to my fater that I should learn in school and become nurse later. So I can earn more money. Sell cakes not earn so much money. She begged my father and at last my father agree. I think he agree because he was in good mood. If in bad mood like drunk he will beat my mother up and make trouble in the house. So my mother told me I was no need to stop learning in school. And that was the happiest day in my life which I shall never forget.’

However, the teacher only recognized the multiple grammatical errors in the composition and failed to acknowledge the story Tan Geok Peng shared, which could have added insights into the reason why the student has poor academic performance

On the other hand, the teacher in *Adeline Ng Ai Choo* can be inferred as female through a conversation she has with another teacher, as she is addressed as Mrs. Tan. Similar to the first story, she also teaches English, as evident in the line, “*I am the teacher who marked the English language script of Adeline Ng Ai Choo in the recent end-of-the-year examination in the school.*”

Mrs. Tan is characterized as a rule-bound teacher who strictly adheres to the standards, highlighting rigidity when the student, Adeline Ng Ai Choo, asked for one additional mark to pass, and she refused, as she claimed it would make the examination a farce. However, even with the news of Adeline’s suicide, she still stands her ground, showing her unyielding character, as she states this is “a decision made in the course of duty, even if that decision resulted in tragic action, cannot be regretted.”

In relation, a 2010 study administered the Academic Expectations Stress Inventory (AESI) to 176 Singaporean secondary and college students before major examinations (Tan & Yates, 2011). The study claims that Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) countries like China and Singapore put significant value on education. However, the study finds data about academic stress with two separate subscales on “expectations of parents and teachers” and “expectations of self.” Both contribute to the academic stress students experience (Tan & Yates, 2011).

Students. As both narratives center around a teacher and a student, it is crucial to recognize that the students’ voices in both stories, Tan Geok Peng’s and Adeline Ng Ai Choo’s, can only be heard through excerpts from their written compositions in class and diaries. The teacher’s thoughts were the sole focus of both stories, told in the third person. This is primarily because, in the story, both students committed suicide by jumping from a building. In *The Teacher*, this was revealed at the end of the story, while in *Adeline Ng Ai Choo*, the news of her death opened the narrative.

Tan Geok Peng is described as a timid and “*mousy-looking girl who looks ready to faint with fright the moment you call her to answer a question.*” While her teacher emphasized her poor academic performance in the story, insights into Peng’s situation at home can be read through her written compositions. It is revealed that she comes from a poor family and is the eldest with younger siblings, prompting her father’s attempt to make her quit school to sell rice cakes. She shares, in her essay on the topic “My Ambition” that she wants to be a nurse to support her mother and siblings because according to Peng, “*if have no ambition to help my mother and brothers and sisters they is sure to suffer for my father he don’t care at all every time come back from selling cakes only he must drink and spend all money on drinks and sometimes he beats my mother.*”

This highlights the reality of domestic abuse and economic hardship. As the eldest child, Peng bears the weight of this reality. The difficult situations she encounters at home with her father's drinking and abuse turn her home into a place she has to survive in, rather than a place of comfort. This is why education has become secondary, thereby affecting her academic performance. This reflects a social reality where families face significant economic pressures that lead them to prioritize earning immediate money over schooling, especially for girls.

There is a relationship between parental economic hardship and children's achievement, as families who live in poverty have to realign their priorities, whether to support their children's education or to focus on their basic needs, because even if they don't have to pay tuition fees, there are still several added costs. Additionally, poor families are more likely to send boys to school than girls (Rodriguez, 2020). Moreover, domestic violence significantly impacts children's mental health and education. A study on the intersection of domestic violence and education finds that such experience causes "disruption to their schooling and harms the quality of their educational experiences and outcomes" (Lloyd, 2018).

On the other hand, Adeline Ng Ai Choo is similar to Tan Geok Peng in terms of their academic struggles with learning the English language. Adeline is a fourteen-year-old girl who comes from a better social status than Peng, as her father is described as "well-educated" and actively monitors her education. However, a test she failed to pass triggered her suicide due to the overwhelming expectations and intense academic and parental pressure she faced. A letter she left addressed to her parents writes, "*Dearest Dad and Mum, sorry to be a disappointment to you.*"

A conversation from Adeline's teachers after her death reveals the stance of the education system to uphold integrity, as one teacher says, "*perhaps we shouldn't blame the school or examination system.*" They diverted the situation to Adeline's instability, saying she used to be a good student but "*this year she didn't seem interested in her work, she didn't seem able to concentrate, and always appeared nervous and distracted.*" Her teacher claims she was always scribbling in her diary while in class. Her father adds, "*Why in hell was she wasting so much time scribbling in her diary when she should be studying and revising her lessons? I recall the number of times when I came into her room to check on her work and she was idling away with that book.*" He further claims that he has done more for her daughter than most fathers have, such as getting her a tutor, supervising her work, and keeping her away from the negative influences of peers. However, failing to meet the high expectations, Adeline became pressured and depressed. In her diary, she writes:

Dear Diary,

What shall I do? What can I do? I tell you frank manner I can't go on like this, can't go on! Father, every day he will tell me to study hard and get good marks, but even though I study very hard, cannot remember or concentrate. My mind has gone blank, blank, blank! I don't know what is the trouble—I think I'm sick or going to mad or what I don't know. I cannot sit in the room for three hours to study, I can't concentrate. I wish I can watch TV or listen to the radio or go out, but Dad says must study hard for the examinations and pass well. Must pass, past, past!!! I will sure to get a good caning. If I fail, mum will be so very disappointed—they love me so much, my parents, so how can I disappoint them! Dad has bought me a new watch—he says he himself will go without a watch, because he wants me to be happy to study hard—Mum loves me so much—she says she will die if I don't pass the exams because it will be a great shame and Father, he will be the laughing-stick of friends whose children are very clever and study hard. I want to be clever, very clever for sake of my dear parents who love me and sacrifices for my sake.

I must study! study! study! I must do well in the exams and make my parents happy. Must study! study! study! even if I die, Adeline Ng Ai Choo, must really work hard to get at least a pass grade.

Like most things in this world that come with pros and cons, parents can also either negatively or positively influence their child's growth. Academic pressure from parents can have adverse effects on a child's mental health. Setting unrealistic expectations can contribute to stress, anxiety, and a sense of inadequacy (Wahi, 2023). Furthermore, according to Sonkar and Gupta, "expectation is the main culprit" in suicide (1) because academic excellence is a "matter of pride," and students who underperform face criticism and animosity from teachers, parents, and relatives (4). Essentially, students face mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and, in extreme cases, even suicide. This is primarily due to the high expectations they get from their parents and society, along with the rigid educational system, which influences a negative perception of life (Sonkar and Gupta, 2023).

Catherine Lim's narratives reveal the rigidity of education as embodied by the teachers and emphasize the challenges the student characters face in the face of personal hardships and academic expectations, thereby leading to mental health deterioration.

3.2. Symbolism

Tan Geok Peng and Adeline Ng Ai Choo's written works are a common symbol, and perhaps the only symbol shared by both of Lim's narratives. Only their written works allow us to hear their voices. For Tan Geok Peng, it is her exercise book whose content was disregarded and was only recognized for its grammatical errors. For Adeline Ng Ai Choo, it is the diary she always scribbles in class.

Literally, one can find a notebook anywhere. However, it serves as an important symbol that not only represents their struggles amid all the pressures but also their little voices that struggled to be heard. This highlights the conflict of man versus society, where these students could no longer carry the burden of expectations, thereby impacting their mental health. While these books have multiple errors in grammar and spelling in the English language, they highlight the need for understanding and communication beyond mere letters. In reality, it shows the lack of platforms for these students to speak up and reach out, in fear of judgments and criticisms, of being labeled as weak. They serve as mediums of expression, yet ironically, they remain unheard, or more accurately, unlistened to.

Moreover, this symbol symbolizes their isolation and societal rejection. As a result, their stories can only be heard through their written words, which is ironic given their failures in this area. This symbol plays a powerful role in the story because it aims to make people realize the severity of depression and how it pushes its victims to the corner, alone and fearing the eyes of societal expectations.

Writing puts feelings into perspective and becomes a coping mechanism against feelings of isolation, entrapment, and helplessness. Some people write about their frustrations instead of dealing with them, which is also why nobody can predict suicide. It both becomes a way of release and a form of suppression (Watson, 2020). Furthermore, there is a relationship between academic pressure as a predictor of suicide and the increasing suicide rates. A significant number of youths often feel worthless, doubt themselves, have experienced hopelessness, and eventually contemplate suicide as a result of academic pressure (Muhammad, 2024).

3.3. Themes

Rigid Educational Systems. Both of Catherine Lim's short stories explore the issue of the rigid and inflexible nature of educational systems that significantly impacts not only Tan Geok Peng and Adeline Ng Ai Choo, but also their teachers, who are bound to adhere to these structures. The stories highlight the extent to which adherence to regulations and protocols inside these institutions neglects to accommodate the particular needs of individual students, thereby resulting in worse scenarios like suicide.

The Teacher portrays the story of Tan Geok Peng, a student who faces difficulties in mastering the academic English language. Despite her ambition to pursue her education, she is unable to meet the academic standards. Hence, the teacher, constrained by these standards, expresses his frustration with Peng's lack of improvement in the subject area. However, in spite of his concerns, the teacher is incapable of diverging from the curriculum's demands. In the teaching of the language, grammatical mastery is emphasized. This inflexibility hinders the teacher's ability to provide the type of assistance that can aid Tan Geok Peng, as shown in his disregard for the content in Peng's writing, which revealed the conditions she faces at home. At the end of the story, the teacher could only ironically say, "Poor girl. What? She actually jumped down from the eleventh floor? Such a shy, timid girl. If only she had told me of her problems. But she was always too shy and timid to speak up."

On the other hand, *Adeline Ng Ai Choo* portrays a similar theme through Adeline, a student who struggles with the pressure to pass her exams. Her request for an extra point to pass her English Language exam is rejected because of strict policy adherence. The teacher rationalizes this decision by asserting that granting additional marks would, as stated by her teacher, "make the examination a farce." While this aims to uphold

academic integrity, for students like Adeline, it contributed to her growing mental health deterioration. Her tragic decision to end her life reveals the severe aftermath of the rigidity of educational standards that prioritize rules over compassion, because even after her death, the education system refuses to admit the role it played.

Moreover, it is important to recognize that in 1966, Singapore implemented the English-knowing bilingual school policy mandating students to study English as a first language and a mother tongue language as their second (Leong, 2016). It is also crucial to consider that Singapore's education system underwent an efficiency-driven phase afterward. In 1978, a study found that the main problems with the education system were a high dropout rate, low levels of reading, and bilingualism that was ineffective. This study concluded that the rigid school system was the main cause of these issues (Singapore Education System over the Years, 2016).

Beyond literary works, some authors have also expressed criticism of how rigid school systems are. In the book "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," Paulo Freire claims that this traditional framework of education is known as the "banking concept of education." This view students as passive recipients of knowledge rather than active participants in their own learning. Thus, Freire highlights the need to empower students by recognizing their unique experiences and needs through a more flexible and dialogical method of education (Freire, 1993). Rigid educational institutions sometimes resemble the banking model, characterized by a predetermined curriculum, the teacher as the ultimate authority, and limited student autonomy.

Pressure, Expectations, and Mental Health. Tan Geok Peng and Adeline Ng Ai Choo struggle to navigate the expectations imposed on them by society and their own parents. This ultimately contributes to the academic pressure and stress they are experiencing in the face of the rigid system. With no one to turn to, the weight of these expectations and pressure significantly impacts their emotional and personal well-being, which unfortunately led to the tragic end of both characters.

Tan Geok Peng's father, who demands she quit school to sell rice cakes, indirectly pressures her to excel academically as a means of escape from his authority and provide a better life for her mother and siblings. Meanwhile, Adeline's parents, particularly her father, strictly monitor her performance, intensifying her fear of failure. The actions of these parental figures contribute to the children's academic pressure and stress.

Academic stress stems from places of education and is a student's subjective experience that sometimes results in undesirable behaviors due to feelings of pressure and anxiety to perform the academic demands in a way that is deemed socially acceptable. Expectations from family, changes in the educational environment, competition with other students, failure, transition to independence, all contribute to students' stress (Yaribeygi et al., 2017). A study found that around 20% of students worldwide claim that they are not under pressure (Yuhuan et al., 2022). This is relatively low compared to the number of students who claim that they are. Both student characters from the story apparently represent the remaining 80%.

While Tan Geok Peng has to endure domestic abuse and economic hardship as the eldest child, Adeline Ng Ai Choo is pressured by the high expectations and strict guidance from her father. Both characters' mental health spiraled into depression as they got poor marks and failed their exams. Liu (2023) concludes that family conflict, academic pressure, and teacher-student conflict are psychosocial factors contributing to underage suicide rates. Therefore, the sense of helplessness and fear of disappointment affected these students, and they self-destructed in suicide

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, it is evident that the social realities surrounding education are intricately reflected in the characters, symbolism, and overarching themes of Catherine Lim's stories, *The Teacher* and Adeline Ng Ai Choo. Both narratives vividly portray how rigid educational systems, coupled with high parental expectations, can have detrimental effects on students' mental health, fostering anxiety, stress, and a sense of inadequacy. These depictions resonate with real-life patterns observed in Singapore and other Asian countries influenced by Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC), where academic achievement is often closely tied to familial and societal approval. Through nuanced characterization and symbolic storytelling, Lim not only

illustrates the emotional and psychological pressures students face but also invites readers to critically reflect on the broader socio-cultural forces that shape these experiences.

Importantly, these literary works emphasize the urgent need for reforms and the creation of supportive platforms that enable students to navigate academic pressures more healthily. By advocating for environments, both in schools and at home, that prioritize mental well-being alongside academic success, the narratives suggest that students' holistic development should not be sacrificed for scholastic performance. This interplay between fiction and social reality highlights the potential of literature to inform educational discourse, policy, and mental health initiatives. Essentially, the findings of this literary research underscore the value of further studies that extend beyond fictional narratives, encouraging a deeper examination of how societal expectations, cultural norms, and educational systems impact students' psychological and emotional lives across various Asian contexts.

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