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Studying and Negotiating Kiasuism: Transnational Education Experiences in Margareta Astaman's *After Orchard*¹⁷

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ABSTRACT

The pursuit for the better education has enabled young people to leave their mother and nest and seek for self-improvement in other countries. This flock of students therefore witnesses and possesses their own translational experiences that would bear to colourful stories on surviving both academic and social alien life. Singapore has been one of the major destinations for international students which is also widely known for its distinctive spatial and cultural features. For Margareta Astaman, the country has shaped her identity that she decides to share her personal struggles living as a foreign student in her journal, *After Orchard* (2010). Using her urban Jakartan style, she reveals not only her opinion on the famous educational centre in Asia, but also the country in general. This paper will discuss translational education portrayed through the most intimate account of the traveling scholar to analyse the broader issue on studying abroad at and with prestigious access. I will also deliberate about how the different educational system and everyday life between the native country and the second home reveal the concept of bilateral cultural relation between Indonesia and Singapore.

KEYWORDS: Indonesian-Singaporean relation, *kiasu*, personal journal, transnational education

¹⁷ A paper on the same journal was presented under the title ““Scuss Me, Where Am I? Indonesian-Singaporean Urban Cultural Connections in Margareta Astaman's Journals” at the *Singapore Studies from the Outside*, a conference held at Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore on 8 October 2015. The focus of the paper is the urban connections between Jakarta and Singapore, mostly about surviving the city and questioning identity, almost does not discuss the studying experiences. Paper is never published.

“A land of opportunity, but also a land of desperation.” (Astaman, 2010: 4) For many Indonesians, Singapore is a name mostly associated with wealth. Before airline tickets are cheaper as they are today, going abroad for holiday meant going to Singapore, or as Indonesians would call it, *Singapur*. Today, visiting the island is as easy and affordable as paying a visit to grandparents (probably easier and more affordable). Still, the almost effortless access does not necessarily mean that Singapore is less rich than before. It is an enigma that the country can be first going abroad experience for its close distance, but its high living cost and entertainment are the opposite epitome of their native country. Chua (1998) describes Singapore as “never a Third World country”. It is never poor. It was born from the mother of modernity before it is even an independent country. For such character the small-sized nation is considered to be the nirvana of consumerism, where you spend your hard-earned money.¹⁸ It is a new fancy mansion erected near your humble house, the neighbour whose house you always want to visit and enjoy the modernity.

Singapore lives in perception as a destination for world-class entertainment, top notch shopping boulevard, reliable medical care, alternative for short escape from the hectic urban life, and also safe box to keep blood money from being traced. For parents who want the best for their children, it is also where they send them for first- (and -world) class educational facilities. Indonesian parents have trusted Singaporean educational system for their children to learn at an excellent business class, and for those who cannot afford the tuition, scholarships are available. With the approximately

¹⁸ See Chua (1998; 2003) on the Singaporean character of globalism even since its declaration of independence in 1965 where the early Singaporeans must struggle recovering from the aftermath of colonial days that the government decided to improve the quality of life and followed by the next generations bearing to the today's hard-working citizens that makes the country an excellent model of prosperity.

one-to-two-hour flight¹⁹ from the family, Singapore is one of the best choices for Indonesian students who do not trust Indonesian teachers (as they also have a little faith in the doctors). Stories about surviving Singapore as an international student include cultural shocks on how different Singaporean school and living systems. Such contrast bears to colourful stories, though for most Indonesian writers, Singapore is not romantic enough for a setting, that Margareta Astaman decides to “warn” optimistic young people who consider Singapore for their studying destination. Astaman uses personal log-style containing contemplations and wits on the school system (and Singaporean urban life) in *After Orchard* (2010). In this paper, I will discuss the transnational education experiences from the point of view of an urban young student and how the system has contributed to her identity as she picks up some of the Singaporean distinctive features.

FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL: SOME BACKGROUNDS

I shall begin my analysis with Astaman’s background. In her journal, she, known by her nickname Margie, addresses herself with a typical urban Jakartan speech, using “gw” for herself and colloquial way of speaking. As you read the pages, you are also listening to your best friend complaining about her restless life, a type of today’s Indonesian popular books loosely called as “*perlit*” or personal literature.²⁰ Such “speech acts” or as Bakhtin calls primary speech genres to differ it from the secondary ones found in literature or scientific text may be closer to the real events that give birth to autobiography (Pyrhönen in Herman, 2007: 113). To call this a literary work may cause a perpetual discussion on how a book should be put in a

¹⁹ It is important to note that as I address Indonesia, I mean big cities, such as Jakarta, Bandung, or Surabaya in consideration to the corpus of this paper. To include all parts of Indonesia is an overwhelming and *kiasu* project, almost impossible.

²⁰ A term, referring to the previous ones, such as chick lit, teen lit, made famous since Raditya Dika published his personal journal *Kambing Jantan*. The book is so famous that the similar way of narrating is followed by the next generation of young writers.

section at a library. This book, however, is a book of confusion and such complexity is what Astaman offers in her logs. In the beginning of her book, she informs us that many people do not believe her how stressful and draining the experiences are and she assumes that she is probably not a good narrator (Astaman, 2010: 16). *After Orchard* condensed the four years of being an Indonesian in Singapore, not only as a student, but also as a growing personality. Margie, a Sino-Indonesian young woman, left Jakarta to study at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) on ASEAN scholarship awarded to her being able to work on doctoral level mathematics test. Her background is the exemplary case of Indonesian urban middle-class woman: educated and privileged with Javanese *priyayi* and royal Betawinese blood even though she is mostly Chinese, the race that has possessed problems of its own in her own country. Her encounter with Singapore, searching for the better education in order to have the better life, is the typical motivation for Indonesian to come to Singapore. During her stay in Singapore, through the space and time, Astaman has developed the Singapore she knows based on her experiences and the act of recalling memories. Fludernik (in Herman, 2007) suggests that identity should be treated as plural entity that it "...is an accumulation of performative stances and memories of past experiences which creates a continuity of self-understanding between roles and between contexts" (261). Singapore had watched Astaman growing and developing that being a foreign student in a foreign place that is actually closer and accessible than other places in her own country is an experience worth sharing. Astaman gathers the pieces from her memories of Singapore about what makes her who she is. Referring to de Carteau's concept of discussing narrative operation in terms of recalling memory (1984), Astaman story is constructed from the events she links together in certain circumstances as her response to the development of the hypothesis on identity.

Her story also indicates the unique relation between the two neighbours where Singapore is known to urban Indonesians as an “escape” for the better modern life. This connection also symbolises the birth of the new middle-class which occurs precisely after the regional crisis in 1998 following the country’s post-authoritarian politics. Gerke (2000) notices this distinctive phenomenon, suggesting classical views from Bourdieu, Featherstone, and others, in Indonesian urban lifestyle as another form of case that rarely happens in the Western world. Before the crisis, Indonesian middle-class struggled to make the ends meet in terms of consuming mass-produced and leisure goods, including traveling for pleasure. For such country with tense political shift and economic underdevelopment, the growing number of this middle-class has become a new attraction in researches. The close distance, the easy access, as well as the increasing purchasing power of Indonesian middle-class have created this distinctive relation between the two countries (Febriani, 2015).

In her luggage, she carried all hopes and dreams and pride with her. For her, and for most urban Indonesians, Singapore is so close yet so far. Hamilton-Hart (2009) suggests that “size, geographic location and conscious economic strategic decisions have meant that Singapore looks outward -and very often to Indonesia- for everything from resources, trading commodities, financial sector clients and labour.” (264)²¹. The bilateral tensions are obvious, but still they enjoy Singapore for everything that Indonesia does not have despite its bigger size, richer natural resources, or diverse demography. Singapore that they enjoy can be summarised in three-day-two-night tour package that most definitely would include the famous Orchard Road, the symbol of consumerism.

²¹ See Hamilton-Hart’s (2009) account on the Indonesian-Singaporean bilateral relations as she examines the “sharp fluctuations” relationship between the two neighbouring countries in terms of historical, political, and economic notions.

Singapore will “[W]elcome” them in various languages at the fragrant-smelled carpeted Changi Airport to experience strolling around the famous road and other tourist attractions. Margie pictured herself waking up in a modern dorm room with non-polluted air, coming to a large green campus with all the facilities to support world-class education. The graduates would work at a multinational company and earn the dollar that is six-time higher than the those from local universities. In short, everyday is holiday in Singapore (Astaman, 2010: 6-7). She calls this revelation using the term developed by Foucault (1984), heterotopia referring to the touristy Singapore as a utopia that gradually shows contrasting realities when you experience it longer than three days and two nights.

SCHOOL OF KIASUISM: ADAPTING CULTURE THROUGH EDUCATION

Located at the heart of Asia’s burgeoning student markets. A safe, clean city of 4.3. million people with high living standards. A former British colony with English- language-conducted instruction, Western-style education, and a diverse cultural and religious community of Chinese, Indian, Malay, and Western residents. Brand-name universities such as MIT, Stanford, and NYU offering on-site dual-degree and joint research opportunities. Hefty scholarships for international students. A new “student protection” program and stepped up regulation of private institutions. A low birthrate that has opened doors of 7,000 multinational company offices to skilled foreign talent. Generous immigration policies for students remaining in Singapore after graduation to contribute to the city-state’s plans to become a research and development (R&D) and innovation-driven economy. (Rubin, 2008: 56)

As the most developed country in Southeast Asia region, Singapore has become a model for everything modern not only for the other Southeast Asian

countries, but also for those in other regions. Further discussion on how Singapore is a perfect example of modernity, I realise, would contribute nothing new in this paper. They know it already.²² The brochure-like reference above also what brought Astaman and other students to the centre of excellence with pride to be “la creme de la creme”, “foreign talent”, and “the chosen ones”. They came invited by the Singapore’s government on ASEAN scholarship provided for bright young Southeast Asian people to study and work in Singapore on affordable tuition. Rubin (2008) also notes that Singapore indeed employs the Singapore Tourist Board (STB) to recruit these scientific Olympic winners to not waste their potentials studying in their native countries for lesser quality of education. This type of enrolment system is most likely Singaporean character of competitiveness where everything (and everyone) is measured by numbers. Astaman’s log on how she had to sacrifice passion and talent in order to secure a room in the university’s dormitory shows how “*mengembangkan bakat dan minat*” or self-improvement by joining six extracurricular activities would make you homeless. Here she expresses her own moral value on the system.

“The campus also didn't show concern to the foreign students who didn't have any relative to stay with [in Singapore]. *They were not responsible for those who didn't get a room in campus. Everyone had been given an equal chance to join activities that would grant them enough points.... All six kinds of activities, six weekly meetings, six days of work for the extracurricular [activities were for nothing because] five less points meant wasting opportunity?* I became upset. But the campus security didn't care.” (Astaman, 2010: 19-20)

Astaman learns that being “the chosen ones” is not in fact a privilege that would guarantee that they would study in a way they shop and have a holiday in Singapore.

²² I would like to acknowledge Prof. Chua Beng-Huat for this.

Students are measured in what they can gather now, not in the past. Individual self-expression is a luxury that ironically does not secure you a decent place to live. Singaporean meritocracy system is what Astaman constantly criticise as people are worth how much and how many numbers they can achieve. She also complains how the system is responsible for the people to glorify grades and points and to continually feel dissatisfied when it is not the perfect one. To understand such culture is to trace back on the historical formation of the country which have been explored in more comprehensive researches in vast range of fields. The independent nation has also formulated their own value and it is penetrated and pervasively implemented through its education system since primary schools. Its vulnerable geo-political and economic background has been realised by the leaders that it is important for the small country to not meow but to roar that it now becomes one of the four Asian tigers (Chia, 2015: 3).

The *kiasu* character, or the tendency to refuse to lose, of Singaporeans is mostly appreciated by as the culture that makes the country as it is today. Astaman sees this character as a selfish inhumane act. Despite the success, *kiasuism* in her perspective denies individual worth. Referring to the controversial case of David Widjaja²³ and the significant number of suicide cases in Singapore, she believes this “pressure cooker” education system has dehumanised people. When mentioning the case in the chapter called “An Hour from Home, Thousand Years from Heart”, Astaman recalls the incident triggered by the strict system where “[it] is not a place for failure” that makes

²³ This refers to the case of David Hartanto Widjaja, a final year Engineering student from Indonesia where he was allegedly stab his professor and the committed suicide. The incident is believed to be triggered by the stress due to degrading GPA that led to the termination of his scholarship and pressure from Final Year Project. The case remained controversial as the Singaporean media tends to not talk about suicide case. Discussions, however, continued online where forums debate whether he actually committed it. One of which can be found here <http://sgforums.com/forums/8/topics/349937?page=6> (accessed in September 2016).

human interaction rare as seen in the empty benches. In her case, she considers herself lucky enough compared to her contemporaries who are terrorised by their professor on the assignments. It is not surprising that in the country so wealthy and sophisticated the pressure is equally high. As a foreign student, her life has also become like Singapore: idyllic in the outside, fragile in the inside. She also comes to comprehend that it is understandable that suicide is an option even at the young age. As she discusses it later in the chapter named “Dilarang Bunuh Diri²⁴”, she narrates the story in a casual way and she realised this. She accepts it as a normalcy that “what is the point to stay alive if someone is only seen as a machine or an inanimate object?” (Astaman, 2010: 14).

As usual in journals on living in a foreign country, *After Orchard* is a book of cultural shocks. The inevitable effect that would show perspectives of a place seen from aliens. Astaman is able to tell such story because she is not a tourist whose experience consists of Orchard Road, Universal Studios, and Bugis Street; thus, stories about a place from alien perspectives require a semi-permanent visit. Foreign students, foreign workers (or expatriates), or refugees may give broader stance compared to travellers. Most students would choose to study abroad in the level of higher education. Ong (2006), on her account as a foreign student in USA and Chinese immigrants, states that “education is a technology of power involved in the construction of modern ethics and knowledges, the beliefs, attitudes, and skills that shape new kinds of knowledgeable subjects.” (139). Education shapes the next generation of productive workers with professional skills that is not only to meant for self-improvement and looking for knowledge, but also, in the case of studying abroad, is both prestigious and an opportunity to get a better job. It is also “a common cultural currency” that would

²⁴ “Don’t Commit Suicide

divide the trained graduates into divisions that represent their qualities. (Hannerz, 1996: 71). As the industrial world grows more advanced and competitive, the human resource manufacturing system would have to improve by mobilising. This is where studying abroad is resorted to keep up with ultra-modernity.

Western-style education in countries such as USA, Australia, and some European countries is an exemplary model of sophistication. Singaporean schools adopt this system and even hold joint-program with notable Western universities, promoted with marketing-style and tourism-like recruitment by their network officials in several countries, including in Jakarta. Scholarships are offered generously even though with selective requirements that include agreement to work in Singapore after graduation in enhance the country's productivity. As students from lesser wealthy countries are selected, they would feel obliged to adapt with the culture, both inside and outside the classroom that in the long run would shape a new identity for these students. Astaman has to struggle in the beginning from her native slow-pacing character to *gancheongism*²⁵ and to join the competition by being *kiasu*. These are the natures that she problematises and protests as inhumane and machine-like culture where everything is so strict that regulations are made not to be broken, including in the case of emergency, such as bed bugs extermination (in "Membasmi Kutu Sesuai Prosedur"²⁶) and healthcare (in "Sistem Pengobatan Tradisional [Ala] Singapura"²⁷).

Astaman, in the end, gradually compromises with this culture and accepts this to be part of herself.²⁸ In "In NTU Everyday is a Celebration", she proposes tips on

²⁵ *Gancheong* means always in a hurry.

²⁶ "Exterminating Bugs in Procedure"

²⁷ "Singapore's Traditional Healthcare System"

²⁸ In her next book, *Excuse-moi* (2011), Astaman continues her account on her developing identity after she finished her school and worked in Singapore. She admits (based on other people's comments and her own observation) that she has adopted some Singaporean characters, including *kiasu* and *gancheong* characters.

how to keep sane “during stress and jobless period”, specifically addressing her juniors who are considering NTU as their next destination by using facilities provided by the campus. Among stories about depression, you can always enjoy drinking at the rooftop, swimming while at the same time provoking other students whose test is held in a room near the swimming pool, using extensive source of reading in the library, or having healthy subsidised meals in the canteen. She continues in “Belajarliah Sampai ke Negeri Singa²⁹” where she refers to the widely known translation of *hadith* of learning to the China in which she reflects that studying in Singapore is the best decision she has ever made. She defends the country for having given her the opportunity to achieve “the symbol of material establishment at the age of 24”. Singapore’s education system has enabled her to experience world class learning process where everything is managed professionally. By mentioning a series of achievements believed to be only possible if she had not chosen to stay in Jakarta, she convinces us that above all the stressful culture, being a successful person at the young age is worth fighting for. For this, she owes Singapore.

BETWEEN ORCHARD ROAD AND CLASSROOM: CONCLUSION

Studying in Singapore means successful stories and this kind of stories that the students would share to their family and friends at home. Therefore, Astaman realises that she is “not a good narrator” when she tries to tell another side of having transnational education experiences. She rationalises the narrative as her way of criticising her “second home” in order to make that home better and humanise it. Most miserable stories, however, are not her own. Rather, she considers herself more fortunate than her other friends. Her way of listing her personal achievements during her study in Singapore is both proving that studying abroad is a valuable experience

²⁹ “Go Studying up to the Land of Lion”

and raising further questions as her family and friends feel³⁰. Singapore displayed in the tourism brochure is what Foucault (1984) calls as a “perfected form” while Astaman calls her story “*heterofia*” [sic] revealed from the mirror. Singapore in her story is “the real place”. Astaman tries to balance the narrative which fundamentally indicates that it is not only worth telling but also worth experiencing keeping the country in utopia even though the heterotopia has been revealed.

In relation to the relation between Indonesia and Singapore, this may give another narrative other than shopping and getting a better medical health. The perspective, of course, is from educated urban middle class that may indicate the fundamental connection between the country that Singapore is also another Jakarta (although more expensive). Most urban Indonesian would have the similar opinion on Singapore; a more extended one would discuss on the government and meritocracy system. Published creative works (literary works or journals such as this) on Singapore are also mostly from this perspective. Other writings deal with making the country as an example of city planning or economic growth or business model. *After Orchard*, therefore, is not an entirely sad story, but it gives another view beyond the shopping arcades. Alternative perspectives may be proposed by considering more diverse backgrounds and longer period of staying.

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³⁰ After my presentation, a professor and some students from NTU approached me and convinced me that NTU was not that strict.

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