

2-28 | Hypertext Fiction: Through the Eyes of Migrant Workers

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Table of contents

| | |
|-------------------------------|----------|
| Definitions | 3 |
| Medium | 3 |
| Rationale | 4 |
| Literature Review | 4 |
| The Plight of Migrant Workers | 4 |
| Hypertext Fiction | 5 |
| Methodology | 6 |
| Limitations | 7 |
| Further exploration | 7 |
| Product | 7 |

Definitions

Migrant workers refer to foreign workers who come to Singapore for work. Most of them hail from less developed neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, India and Myanmar. Though our group recognises that foreign workers do take on jobs such as executive roles at multinational companies, our project will focus on low-paid and low-skilled migrant workers, including but not limited to construction workers and domestic helpers.

Hypertext fiction is a genre of literature allows the reader to click on hyperlinks in the story to access different segments of it. Hypertext fiction takes inspiration from the genre of “choose your own adventure” books, making use of the digital medium to create a more immersive and content-rich narrative.

1. Medium

For this project, we have chosen hypertext fiction as the medium of our final product. Hypertext fiction, as defined above, is a form of electronic literature inspired by “choose your own adventure” stories. In this genre, the reader has a significant role to play in the narrative and the outcome of the story; rather than following a set storyline passively, as is the case with conventional books, the reader can actively choose how the book progresses and explore the effect of each hyperlink on the final narrative that they read. Hence, hypertext fiction may be construed as an intermediary between linear literature (e.g. a novel) and a game, creating a more engaging and immersive narrative overall for the reader. Migrant workers live day to day in uncertainty, unsure how much more time they have in Singapore to work, or when they will be paid again. Any small decision can drastically affect their lifestyles in Singapore. Given these two factors, hypertext fiction is a viable option, because small decisions in hypertext fiction can put the reader on an entirely different storyline.

2. Rationale

Migrant workers in Singapore are over-documented but understudied. Our group finds

that past studies fall short of accurately telling the story of migrant workers and helping people see through their eyes and portray their day to day experiences. These studies may ironically hinder migrant workers' integration into Singaporean society, despite the researchers undoubtedly having good interests at heart, due to their portrayal of migrant workers as "requiring help" and "different". We aim to create a work of hypertext fiction about the plight of migrant workers in Singapore, where the reader can see and experience Singapore through the eyes of a migrant worker. By using hypertext fiction as a medium, we hope to engage the youths of Singapore and allow them to better understand the plight of migrant workers, therefore promoting greater interaction between the youths and the migrant workers in hopes of removing the social stigma around migrant workers.

3. Literature Review

a. The Plight of Migrant Workers

Many migrant workers in Singapore are unsung heroes; accepting "dirty", "dangerous" or "low-skilled" jobs that locals will not take. They are also underpaid and prone to exploitation. Migrant workers only earn a fraction of the salaries of white-collar employees, which is unjustified considering their immense contribution to Singapore's development, especially in terms of infrastructure.

Migrant workers immigrate to Singapore in hopes of better living and working conditions; however, most of them are unable to even obtain the pay that they were promised. When they do get paid, it is often late, or that the money received is lesser than what had been agreed upon. Migrant workers usually have to pay recruitment fees amounting to between S\$3,000 to S\$15,000. They often face extreme pressure due to this since they borrowed the money from banks, friends and relatives; any delay or discrepancy in their pay would render them unable to repay their loans. Additionally, their employers can terminate their permit at any time, leaving migrant workers vulnerable and at their mercy.

Foreign workers have played a "major and fulfilling role" in the beautification of

Singapore. Cognizant of the many threats that face migrant workers including exploitation by unscrupulous agents and unethical employers, the Government spares no effort to protect their rights and improve their living conditions as they form an integral part of Singaporean society and its workforce. The total foreign workforce in Singapore is estimated to be at 1.386 million (Ministry of Manpower, 2018). Considering the population of Singapore, which stands at around 5.6 million (Singstat, 2018), migrant workers make up a very significant proportion of Singaporean society.

Many stories exist regarding migrant workers' exploitation by unscrupulous figures. In 2018, CNN brought to light the story of Sardar Md Insan Ali from Bangladesh, who hoped his earnings from Singapore's construction sector would translate to a better life for his family. He was promised S\$1,600 a month but only got \$18 a day and his employer did not pay him for his full 8 months. In these desperate conditions, he would send most of his meagre salary back to Bangladesh and keep very little for himself. Additionally, the average starting salary for migrant workers from Bangladesh and India in Singapore was around \$400 to \$465 (CNN, 2018), which is extremely low as compared to other blue-collar jobs. This is further exacerbated by the fact that Singapore does not have a stipulated legal minimum wage, which allows employers to pay migrant workers as little as they deem fit. This is supported by the fact that 317 salary-related claims have been raised by foreign employees to the Employment Claims Tribunal in 2018 (Today, 2018).

Some migrant workers also work in unsafe conditions, where a heightened risk of injury or even death exists. In 2017, there were 12 workplace fatalities in Singapore's construction sector (CNA, 2018).

b. Hypertext Fiction

In the 1967 essay "The Death of the Author" by Roland Barthes, it is rightfully pointed out that when conventional texts are narrated from a third-person point of

view, the reader would never truly know the intention of that narration or how the character in the narration feels; the only person who knew would be the author.

Additionally, Barthes opines that since the sole function of lexia, including fiction, is to be read, the author and the process of writing is irrelevant. Hence, he suggests that readers avoid contemplating the author's intentions behind their choice of words or means of description; rather, he encourages them to draw their own conclusions and interpret the text in their own way.

With hyperlinks strategically placed throughout the text and a non-linear storyline overall, hypertext fiction opens itself up to the possibility of collective authorship, going against the idea that writing should be from one single source, where the audience is required to follow one single storyline which the author lays out. Hypertext fiction allows the reader to navigate the text in their own unique, non-linear ways based on what piques their interest within the story, giving rise to a myriad of possible interpretations, all of which are equally valid. Hypertext fiction is able to highlight the importance of the reader in the "writing" of a text - each reading, even though none of the words are changed - "rewrites" the text simply by rearranging it. By placing emphasis on different sections, the meaning of the text as a whole is subtly inflected.

Thus, it can be concluded that the real allure of hypertext fiction lies in its ability to dissociate itself from the writer, allowing it to be read as an open narrative, with different possible outcomes and interpretations. Hypertext fiction provides the reader with the ability to actively construct meaning from the text, instead of being "spoon-fed" with the writer's intended interpretations of the text.

The fall of hypertext fiction was brought about by the proliferation of crowd-sourced online encyclopedias such as Wikipedia and social media such as blogs and Facebook. Through these platforms, users unknowingly created their own hypertexts through sharing interactive content, such as attaching pictures and links to their posts, as opined by Wired in 2013, Hypertext fiction, in particular,

was also very difficult to write as authors found it difficult to create long narratives while retaining the cohesiveness of a normal story. “Real nonlinear storytelling” was rare amongst hypertext fictions produced, with most authors tending to borrow many elements of conventional linear stories due to an unfamiliarity with hypertext fiction as a medium.

How To Be A Blackbird, 2018 This work of hypertext fiction contains a collection of poems regarding the life of a blackbird. By incorporating a decision tree, the work puts the reader into the shoes of a blackbird and creates an immersive experience for them as they explore the world.

Luminous Airplanes, 2011 Paul LaFarge’s romance novel written in hypertext weaves an intricate web of details and backstories, creating a comprehensive experience for the reader. For example, short narrations are provided at certain parts of the story to allow the reader to understand the motive behind a character’s actions.

4. Methodology

Resources such as news articles, figures and oral histories regarding the migrant workforce in Singapore will be used to study and collate their general experiences working and living in Singapore. We will also interact with migrant workers through different events organised by Project Integrate and an organisation, Migrant x Me, to better understand them. In the hypertext fiction, we will explore the problems migrant workers face in Singapore, including but not limited to homesickness, fatigue, the social stigma of the locals, exploitation by employers, being forced to work in dangerous conditions and workplace injuries. In addition, we will discuss the possible reasons for such problems.

The hypertext fiction will mainly be coded using HTML to create an intertwined array of web pages that the reader can navigate between and explore, in a manner that is not

dissimilar to contemporary hypertext fiction.

5. Limitations

A potential lack of first-hand sources or accounts may cause our hypertext fiction to fall short of being a fully authentic and realistic portrayal of migrant workers' lives in Singapore. As our final product is a hypertext fiction, it may be overly dramatised as compared to the actual lives of migrant workers.

6. Further exploration

The scope of this project could be widened to investigate if the race or ethnicity of migrant workers affected their treatment by the public and their employers. A possible further extension of this project could study Singapore through the eyes of an ethnic or religious minority.

7. Product

Introduction

According to 2019 statistics from the Ministry of Manpower, the total foreign workforce in Singapore amounts to almost 1.386 million. This is a significant proportion of Singapore's population, which currently stands at around 5.8 million. Migrant workers in Singapore face the threat of mistreatment and abuse-

Xi Feng, a 41-year-old noodle factory worker had been injured at work, causing her hand to be burnt. However, despite her injuries, she continued to suffer at work and the agency she worked for refused to reimburse her.

Zhang Yong Cheng, a 47-year-old butcher's finger had been accidentally cut by a blade at his job. His employer did not report his injury and at the same time refused to pay him.

According to Today Online, many foreign workers lodged complaints about their

employers because the amount of work they had to clock in per day was 12 hours or more. They also received physical and verbal abuse because they mentioned that their employers would shout at them, call them names, or harass them.

Another prevalent form of complaints amongst domestic workers was the quality of food, including inadequate or poor-quality food. An example of such employers is Tay Wee Kiat and Chia Yun Ling who abused their helpers and their case has been going on for 5 years. Another employer had withheld the pay of \$40,000 of a worker for nearly 10 years. This worker was not allowed to use a mobile phone, nor was she allowed to speak to her family for almost 7 years.

Sardar Md Insan Ali from Bangladesh hoped his earnings from working in Singapore's construction sector would translate to a better life for his family. He was promised S\$1,600 a month but only got \$18 a day and his employer did not pay him for his full 8 months. In these desperate conditions, he would send most of his meagre salary back to Bangladesh and keep very little for himself.

-as well as ostracisation by locals. Such reports are particularly common among low-skilled professions, including but not limited to construction workers and domestic helpers.

This hypertext fiction explores the story of a Bangladeshi construction worker working in Singapore. At certain points, readers will be prompted to make choices for him, which may lead to different outcomes in the story. Enjoy!

Dhaka, May 2013

Night had fallen by the time I came home. Tania was sitting in the kitchen, feeding porridge to our baby son Abu Hajar. He raised his tiny hand at the sight of me, and I smiled back. Abu Hajar was Allah's gift of joy and peace to us -- I had decided before he was born that I would do everything in my power to make sure he had a good life; that he could break free from the chains of poverty that tied down Tania and me.

That was why I simply could not bear to tell Tania -- I was now unemployed. It was not my fault or my doing at all. The corrupt boss had suddenly run off with our unpaid salaries and abandoned the factory, with only a locked gate and a small note scribbled in Bengali to greet us when we reported to the garment factory for work this morning. I had spent the day helping out old Amir with his rickshaw taxi business, only bringing home a measly 3000 takas for my troubles.

Driving a rickshaw was a volatile business; people would not take rickshaws during the rain for fear of getting wet, and people often haggled until they paid less than half the price initially agreed upon. Dhaka's gridlocked roads made every trip take forever, no matter how close by the customers' destinations were. I knew clearly that driving rickshaws could not be my permanent job -- but decent jobs like the one I had just lost were near impossible to secure in the present economy. Perhaps Boss ran away because he was fed up of paying us so much, deciding it would be better to keep all his profits and close up shop.

There was still one way out, and it lay outside the borders of Bangladesh, where I had never gone before. I could join Rajesh's company-

A friend of mine in high school. Running an agency for migrant workers was obviously not his first choice; he graduated with a diploma in banking and financial services. He switched industries when he realised that the top banking jobs which paid well were all occupied by either expatriates or well-connected people, which meant he would never rise high in the company from the lowly starting position of bank clerk. No amount of money gained through shady dealings under the table, he said, would give him more satisfaction than if he earned every last penny with his own two hands.

I was amused by the irony; his business now consisted solely of milking as much

money from aspiring migrant workers as possible. I knew there was still a flicker of that initial righteousness left in Rajesh, though; his agent fees were reasonable compared to the rest of the agents in Dhaka. I found it a miracle that we had managed to maintain our friendship since then until the day I needed him again.

-and work in Singapore as a construction worker. The wages were not astronomical, but it was a better choice than searching in vain for a job here and accepting the low pay that came with it; I would let down Tania and most importantly Abu Hajar. I wanted them to have a better life; I was determined to go.

I stepped onto the street and into the sunshine, my sleepless eyes squinting to adjust to the sunlight. It had taken almost a whole night of cajoling, arguing and heated exchanges; with much reluctance, Tania had finally agreed to let me go. -

"You know I have to go; we have no choice," I pleaded.

"So you mean you're completely fine with leaving us to fend for ourselves? What if you don't send money? What will we do then?"

"Listen. There are no more good jobs in Bangladesh. If I stay, I'll only earn enough to cover our expenses. I could make much more money in Singapore and give us a good life if you let me go."

Tania appeared ready to retort but stayed silent.

"So?"

"If I don't let you go, you'll grumble about it until God knows when. Being a construction worker is so dangerous -- what if you fall off the top of a building? Who will earn money for the family then?"

"I won't. I know very well that I cannot afford to get into any accidents," I said, exasperated.

-All that remained was obtaining funds and contacting the agent. I passed my usual

breakfast place, one of the oldest dhal and naan shops in Dhaka, resisting the temptation to give in to that heavenly spiced scent. Breakfast was not my priority for now. "Raja Moneylending", read one sign. "Durgesh & Sons Financial Services", read another. I spotted the Citibank building from a distance away, its glass facade shimmering in the morning sunlight. Rickshaw drivers sat on the curb, either smoking or loitering on the streets in search of customers. I picked up my pace and walked into the Citibank branch.

"Of all people, it is my friend Dinesh coming to pay me a visit today!" Half a face peeped out of the cubicle, the mouth curving to form a smile.

"Indeed. I'd like to work in Singapore," I told him, cautiously omitting the explanation.

"No problem. Just fill in these two forms. I'll send your visa once it's done."

"I thought you'd ask for the money first," I quipped.

"Sure, sure, pay me however much you like," Rajesh laughed, "You can repay the rest when you come back!"

All I could mutter was "I will" as I counted the cash and handed it over to him. I placed the forms safely in the briefcase. It felt much lighter now, and a burden on my heart was lifted as well. This was my ticket out of here -- my ticket to a better life for Tania and Abu Hajar. Parting with them would be hard, but for what I could bring to them in return, it would undeniably be worth every drop of sweat and every ounce of effort.

"Last call for flight DH 349 to Singapore."

"Bye Tania! Bye Abu Hajaar!" I waved, as I turned my back on the family that I had been with for so many years. Abu Hajaar was uncharacteristically silent today, a look of mild

confusion in his big brown eyes as he watched his father leave him behind.

It broke my heart; I tried to conceal my tears as I boarded the plane.

As the aircraft lifted off the ground, the tears flowed freely.

Sadness was replaced by fear and uncertainty as I landed on Singaporean soil. One look and I knew it was different. The airport was larger, more spacious, and they even had a large shopping mall with an indoor waterfall. The contrast between Changi Airport and many of the older, less modern airports back at home was jarring

Soon, I was on a taxi towards the office of Chee Heng Construction Pte. Ltd, which had accepted the online job application Rajesh sent over on my behalf before I had set off for Singapore.

Before entering the building, I had some naan at the prata shop downstairs. It didn't taste as good as the ones back home.

Singapore, July 2013

Four weeks of waiting had finally passed. Our boss promised to pay us for the work we had done for the past month, as well as the previous few months in which he had purportedly "run out of cash". My friends and I awaited his arrival with high hopes. With all this money, we could finally remit some to our families and let them have peace of mind that we were doing well here. For the last few months, we were left with no choice but to keep almost all that we had earned for ourselves just to buy food, only being able to send what meagre sums that remained. It was not an act of selfishness; rather, it was borne out of necessity. All of us felt certain guilt for leaving our families without sending the money they would have expected in return for our absence.

The office phone rang. One of the men standing close to the door ran in like a bullet to pick it up. Naturally, the others crowded around him; one could feel the anticipation and excitement in the air.

"Sorry, an important meeting came up today, so I will not be able to make it to the construction site today. Tell everyone to get back to work. I will drop by tomorrow to pass all of you your pay."

He hung up and we sighed. Convenient excuse after convenient excuse; that man would say anything under the sun to get out of paying us. There would be no chance of him coming tomorrow, or anytime this week, probably for fear of confronting an angry throng of his workers. We would wait one more month -- what could we do? We had no power over him. He could do all he wanted with us. Like robots in this unforgiving factory, forced to work in appalling conditions, paid (or not) at the whims and desires of the boss; we shuffled back to work in an orderly manner.

I was almost at the end of my tether. I did not come to Singapore to experience poorer working conditions than that garment factory back in Dhaka. The newspapers and media sang endless praises about Singapore as a safe haven for migrants, a first-world city where everyone was treated as a first-class citizen. Throughout the day, the thought of whether confronting my boss-

The grumbling increased in volume. Nobody wanted to wait any longer.

"Fine, we will wait one more day for Boss to pay us. I came to Singapore to work and earn money, not to get exploited by the locals and treated like a slave! My family is waiting for me to send money back. If he doesn't give me our money tomorrow, I'll hunt him down when he comes back!"

"We'll go too!" the other workers shouted.

That day, we worked with a vengeance. The hammering was louder, the

commands were hollered at the top of our voices and the cranes swung around at top speed. We would channel all our energy into completing this building as quickly as possible. What other excuses would Boss have if the building was finished and he still had yet to pay us?

As twilight turned to darkness, we grew weary as well. As if on cue, everyone stopped work and streamed towards the rest area.

-was a good idea shifted in and out of my mind. Or perhaps I should let it go-

When night came, we climbed up to the roof of the skyscraper to take a breather. The topping-out ceremony was happening soon and we were on track to meet that deadline. We were not just faithful workers -- we were faithful servants at this point. A hundred metres up, the night sky was illuminated by the rooftops of other office buildings nearby. I had once shown Abu Hajar the stars in Dhaka, but Singapore's night was filled with another breed of stars. The man-made kind, fitted one by one, with the hands of all the foreign men in safety jackets that came before me. Brilliant, saturated and plentiful, just like Singaporean society; but both had failed to notice that he who fits that light on the first time is blinded the most by it.

-who knows if he has a perfectly valid reason that he has yet to disclose?

(sit alone)

Staring at the night sky, I recalled my family. It had been 4 months since I last sent money back or managed to speak to them. Tears welled up in my eyes as I remembered the times I spent with them back in Bangladesh.

(sit with colleagues)

We talked and laughed about the good times we used to have with our families when we were younger. It felt good to be with them. They made me feel something that was lacking in me since I landed in Singapore: family. They could never replace Abu Hajar and Tania, but they came very close.

The bus finally arrived and a queue formed as soon as it stopped. We were all eager to get a good night's rest after a long day of work. It was near midnight when we arrived at the dormitory. I chose to stand near the staircase and enjoy the cool night breeze.

Singapore, August 2013

The city looked more colourful that month. Red and white flags hung on the facade of the flats and the same few upbeat songs played in almost every local-run shop I passed by. It seemed like a sudden wave of intense patriotism had washed over the city; the realisation that these songs they played were about Singapore only came when I asked my supervisor why. National Day was around the corner, he said. Singaporeans are plastic - they only show their love for this country and pretend they stand for its ethos when there is a government-sanctioned occasion for it.

The songs were all in English - I could not understand any of the lyrics. Though written in a foreign tongue, I was quite convinced that they were about Singapore's inclusiveness and the wealth of opportunity it could provide to one and all.. After all, this was what Singapore prided itself on, was it not?

The sentiment on the streets was different. The shunning, conscious or otherwise-

If we were sitting on the floor to eat, we were bound to attract glances and stares from passers-by; but I forgave the tendency of the children to look. Just like my Abu Hajar, they were infinitely curious about the world; they should be let loose to explore it.

"Ah girl, don't look at those apu neh neh, at night they will come and catch you one," one middle-aged lady muttered as she pulled her daughter in the other direction. I was carrying out surveying works outside the construction site; I presume the girl was interested as to why I kept peering into the land surveyor, as if there was a whole new world that awaited beyond the lens.

Over the weeks, I memorised a phrase some parents would mention to their child when passing by - "later you will become like that". My heart sank after my superiors explained what it meant; it was derogatory, using us as a cautionary tale to their children about the importance of getting an education and doing well since young.

Oh, how badly I wanted to learn English at that time - to tell them that some of us are just victims of circumstance and that not all academically uninclined children end up in our situation, to remind them that they should let their child's youth be their happiest days, free from the pressures of materialism and competition.

-persisted even as National Day drew closer. Parents would not stop pulling their children away whenever they saw us sitting around; people would not stop pointing their fingers and speaking in hushed voices, as if we did not notice. We did not even expect gratitude of any sort; all we wanted was to be treated as equals, as fellow workers striving to make Singapore a better place for everyone. And yet, such a simple request was never fulfilled, for the thousands of foreign workers who built Singapore with their bare hands, and the thousands who continue their work today.

Singaporean society saw us as different - no question about that.

On National Day, we turned up to work as per usual; our boss would not even let us take leave on public holidays, let alone give us a free rest day. However, the entire place seemed different all of a sudden - the supervisors under his control were not roaming the pavements outside the site and the close-to-completed building looked especially empty.

Nobody had turned up to brief us about the day's work. I noticed identical printed pieces of paper stuck on every surface near the entry to the construction site - the walls, pillars and even on the gate. This situation bore a slight similarity to that garment factory shutdown back in Dhaka that brought me here in the first place - I had a bad feeling about it.

"Someone must have lodged a complaint against the boss. The government could be shutting this site down," I heard someone speculate.

As I approached the site office, a Singaporean woman led me to the rest area. The crowd was immense; I was quite sure they had every worker on the site gathered there.

It turned out that she was a social worker; she and a team of similarly dressed locals informed us that we no longer had to work on site; our pay would also be temporarily put on hold while they brought the errant boss to justice. As for us, we were free to take a break from work for the time being, until we could find another employer. At that point, my emotions were a mix - I felt relieved and vindicated as we did not have to work from dawn to dusk for him anymore, but this also meant that the wait for our pay would have to drag on for another month or more. We had two choices then: Wait aimlessly-

I chose to take my chances and stay in Singapore in search of other job opportunities. I received invitations to work as domestic helpers, cleaners, and so on. These would earn me a pay decent enough to provide myself with 3 meals a day and send a meagre amount of cash back to my family. But that was not enough. What if I lose my job again? I was worried that I would not be able to provide for Tania and Abu Hajar if I could not earn a wage decent enough to support them for weeks.

I decided to keep on searching and waiting for more offers, when finally the day came, just 4 days later, a new employer was hiring construction workers to work

on a large scale project and was short of workers. My brothers and I saw this as a newfound opportunity, and the pay was more than any ordinary construction worker could receive. I called Tania to tell her the good news. She was glad to hear that I had gotten a stable job and told me that she had recently become a babysitter back in Bangladesh so she had to take care of many children at a time while others went out to earn money for their families. After all this toil, I was relieved that our lives were taking a turn for the better.

-until we found a new job or got our money back, or allow the social workers to begin processing our documents -

I phoned Tania the next day.

"I am buying a plane ticket home this week. See you soon."

I hoped that when I got back home, I would be able to get a job as well-paying as my first job. I desperately wished that my life would finally take a turn for the better when I got home. I wished our financial situation of our country would have improved, I hope I get to see my beautiful wife and child, I wished that I can live a happy life with my family. Tania called and informed me that she had gotten a job as a babysitter. It seemed that many citizens have been trying to find babysitters so that they could work and win bread for the family. I was relieved to hear this. Because the next few days of waiting kept me less worried now that Tania was also supporting the family. Within three days, I was ready to board a budget aircraft to fly back to Bangladesh.

-for our return to Bangladesh.

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