Plot Archetypes:
'Overcoming the Monster' Still Useful for Singapore

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Synopsis

As Singapore celebrates its 50th anniversary, there may be a need to refocus its economic success narrative for it to be more relevant not only to the past, but also to current and future challenges that Singapore may face.

Commentary

THE STORY of Singapore's humble beginnings and eventual rise to first world status has been used time and again for nation-building, and has effectively illustrated Singapore's achievement of becoming a developed country. This narrative of Singapore's 'Third World to First World' journey has provided Singaporeans a common past, a shared memory, and a collective identity.

As Singapore celebrates its 50th anniversary, there may be a need to refocus the narrative for it to be more relevant not only to the past, but also to current and future challenges that Singapore may face. How can this possibly be framed?

'From Third World to First World'

The 'Third World to First World' narrative depicts how Singapore had to depend on itself to ensure its survival as a sovereign nation and realise its long-term objective of becoming an economically developed country. Social and economic problems such as poverty, the lack of infrastructure and education plagued the society which led to initial struggles in its founding years. However, these challenges were largely eliminated because of Singaporeans' diligence, perseverance, and hard work, and the country's pragmatic economic policies.

In this regard, Singapore's economic success story has been widely disseminated through various projects run by state institutions to encourage Singaporeans to identify to a shared history and the obstacles it had to face. The government has reinforced this narrative through efforts such as exhibitions. For instance, a national history exhibition was organised in 1984, where a comparison of old huts of the 1960s and innovative government high-rise flats was presented. This depicted the government's implementation of an urban renewal and housing programme.

In 1998, an interactive exhibit called 'The Singapore Story — Overcoming the Odds' depicted the struggles Singapore had to bear and its eventual economic success. This was followed by the release of an educational CD-ROM of the same title in 1999.

Through the Social Studies subject in school, young Singaporeans are taught about the country's phase-by-phase economic strategies such as the open-door policy to foreign investments and labour-intensive policies in the 1960s-1970s and capital-intensive programmes to build up a technologically advanced manufacturing industry in the 1980s. In the late 1990s, Singapore shifted into a knowledge-based economy from a manufacturing base. Singapore's economic approach was re-evaluated in order to embrace the global IT age, where the government rolled out numerous initiatives to build a wide-ranging knowledge infrastructure that supports information and knowledge sharing and education.

By evolving with global economic developments and implementing pragmatic economic policies, Singapore has experienced economic success. Singapore's 'Third World to First World' narrative thereby allows Singaporeans to relate to the country's journey to developed world status.

Plot Archetypes

Do the stories Singapore tells of itself matter? Arguably they do, and plot archetypes may help us understand why. Plot archetypes are storytelling patterns which affect and influence beliefs and behaviours, and therefore are effective tools in allowing the audience to relate to a story. In Christopher Booker's 'The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories', he explained that stories can be identified into seven plot archetypes namely 'Overcoming the Monster', 'Rags to Riches', 'The Quest', 'Voyage and Return', 'Comedy', 'Tragedy', and 'Rebirth'. It can be argued that Singapore's 'Third World to First World' narrative concurrently uses 'The Quest' and 'Overcoming the Monster' as central plot archetypes.

'The Quest' describes Singapore successfully setting and achieving its long-term goal of becoming a developed country. The 'Overcoming the Monster' plot illustrates Singapore's survival as an independent nation after being expelled from the Malaysian Federation in 1965, and the country's triumph over hindrances to development such as poverty and lack of infrastructure and education. However, 'The Quest' has already been completed, and it is undeniable that Singapore has joined the ranks of highly developed, industrialised states.

The plot of 'The Quest' is definitive, and therefore is not easily bent. The purpose is clear, that is, to achieve the goal. In contrast, the monster in 'Overcoming the Monster' is more vague and amorphous, and thus can be more easily adjusted to relate to current and ever-changing reality.

Therefore, 'The Quest' may not be as significant as 'Overcoming the Monster' as Singapore would continue to experience newer challenges after achieving its goal of becoming a developed country. 'The Quest' may therefore be more appropriate only when relating to Singaporeans' shared history of economic success, whereas 'Overcoming the Monster' offers more utility today because it relates not only to the challenges of the past, but also of the future.

Current and future odds

If the past 50 years has taught Singaporeans anything, it is to be supple in confronting obstacles. In his TODAY article 'SG50: Look to the Future, Too, Not Only the Past', author-consultant and former public servant Devadas Krishnadas argued that the '… past is no guarantee of future performance. Singapore has to remain nimble and be able to take knocks'.

As Singapore continues to develop, certain concerns have been recently raised such as the rising cost of living and the increase in the number of migrants in the country. Socio-economic problems such as a widening income gap, a shrinking job market, and higher costs of living may affect Singaporeans' outlook on their own futures in the country.

Hence, 'Overcoming the Monster' — as encapsulated through 'Overcoming the Odds' in Singapore — may be more useful than 'The Quest' today in bringing Singaporeans together to face and survive the hits and blows that come to Singapore's way. While 'The Quest' has served Singapore well in inspiring its people to accomplish the goal of becoming a first world country and remembering its past as a nation, 'Overcoming the Monster' could prove to be more appropriate in enduring current and

future hardships. With this, Singaporeans could be further encouraged and inspired to work towards success for the next 50 years and beyond.

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