ABSTRACT

Catherine Lim’s *The English Language Teacher’s Secret* (1987) features Sylvie Ponniah as a spinster during The Graduate Woman phenomenon in Singapore during the mid 1980s. While unaffected by the government’s matchmaking efforts and the excitement of the people around her, the story revealed Sylvie’s secret love story and how she had faithfully held onto the memory for twenty years without having her feelings actually reciprocated at the present time. Lim brilliantly projects the issue of feminism, freedom and individual choice within her spinster narrative, opening up possibilities for Sylvie to be read under an existentialist point of view. By using the conceptual framework that highlights the construction of Sartre’s bad faith, this paper aims to dissect Sylvie’s use of misdirection strategies to evade her freedom. The construction of Sylvie’s bad faith is unravelled by exploring her secret devotion towards Dr. Chellam, her past lover that she could not marry due to her father’s disapproval. The paper hopes to generate a balanced view upon the spinster, so that her individuality and existential freedom receives equivalent attention; as received by many efforts to record the traits of spinsterhood in fiction.

Keyword: Spinster, bad faith, misdirection strategies

INTRODUCTION

For many generations, the spinster’s trait of being ‘alone’ has been responded to by society with mixed feelings, often anxiety and sympathy. Kathryn Kent asserted that “women who did not participate in the ‘natural’ feminine functions of wife and mother were socially ostracized and culturally ridiculed” (Kent 24). The earliest and most memorable spinsters in fiction under this stigma contained the essence of grotesque, with the combination of romance and absurdity/insanity; as famously portrayed by Miss Havisham (*Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, 1861) and Emily Grierson (*A Rose for Emily* by William Faulkner, 1930). Emily’s absurdity/insanity was based on the rearrangement of reality to her own purposes - in which she “denied the death of both her father and the tax pardoner Colonel Sartoris; refused to accept the smell, her tax bills, a postal address, or the role of spinster for forty years, preferring a dead lover to none” (Munson Deats and Tallent Lenker 111). Sylvie Ponniah in Catherine Lim’s *The English Language Teacher’s Secret* (1987) appeared decades later with motifs similar to Emily, although less grotesque in physical form.

Catherine Lim’s *The English Language Teacher’s Secret* tells the story of Miss Sylvie Ponniah, set in the time when unmarried women became the highlight of the Singaporean nation. The Graduate Woman phenomenon emerged to be a serious social problem during the mid-1980s, where the trend of graduate women delaying or forgoing marriage and children for career life became prominent (Lyons-Lee 1). Bachelors and single women were scrutinized
and attempted to be matchmade by the government to improve the declining marriage rates in
the country, causing singletons to become a hot topic of conversation. Sylvie, unmarried at
the age of forty-six in the story, managed to evade the unwanted attention of her colleagues
and students in school. It was revealed however, that she was in a romantic relationship with
a man named Dr. Chellam twenty years ago. Despite Dr. Chellam’s astoundingly good
qualities, Sylvie could not marry him due to her father’s disapproval of their relationship. She
chose to break off the relationship for the sake of her father, but secretly continued to nurse
her one-sided romantic sentiments towards Dr. Chellam for twenty years, even after the death
of her father. She read his love letters religiously every day since the separation, reminiscing
and relishing only on the glorious aspects of the relationship; solely believing that Dr.
Chellam remained unmarried due to his love for her. This was the justification for her faith,
which kept her content for two decades. The story discloses and untangles Sylvie’s faith
towards the end, as Dr. Chellam was truly revealed to be engaged to her colleague Miss De
Silva. Realizing that she should have stood her ground against the tyranny of her father and
pursued her wishes, Sylvie became very miserable and exploded into a nervous breakdown
during a grammar lesson in school.

Despite the different eras they were in, Lim’s Sylvie Ponniah (1987) and Faulkner’s
Emily Grierson (1930) share certain similarities in their plot and characterisation. Both
women were not allowed to marry by their fathers. Sylvie, like Emily, had refused to accept
the change that comes with the passing of time. Their refusal to move on from their past
romance was developed to resemble an obsession, which lead to tragic endings with hints of
insanity. To preserve her love, Emily was hinted to have poisoned her former lover and kept
him in a bridal bed, wirg the trace of her own silver hair by his remains suggesting very close
proximities to the deceased. Sylvie defied the expiry of her love by worshipping the love
letters from her past, suffering a nervous breakdown as she faced the truth of the present.
While Emily’s tale was definitely darker than Sylvie’s, both were hysteric, depicting a state
of psychological instability within the nurturing of their romantic obsessions. The similarities
within the narratives reflect how absurdity and insanity continue to be the essence of the
spinster character, regardless of the fact that Sylvie’s story had emerged well after two waves
of feminism.

While Emily’s tale is a distanced and mysterious recollection by another narrator, Sylvie’s story allows the readers to divulge into more intimate details of her experience. This enables one to evaluate Sylvie’s spinsterhood from an individualistic point of view as the Self, as opposed to the abundant reading of fictional spinsters as the Other. Scrutinizing Sylvie under the construction of Sartre’s bad faith would reveal the nature of her existence as a single woman, beyond the usual reading of spinsters as stereotypical or grotesque. To apply a Sartrean framework upon the spinster would reveal not only the process of how she descends into stereotype, but also the extent of control she has upon herself, as opposed to the societal pressures commonly involved upon the discussion of spinsters. This method of reading the spinster would be different from the usual attempts to document how society views her, by paying specific attention to how she utilizes her free will to project herself as an unmarried woman in the society.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Throughout the years, the fictional spinster has received a good amount of attention in
describing her stereotypical character. Among the first attempts to this was done by Deborah
J. Mustard, who observed and discussed the evolutionary portrayal of spinsters characters in Hollywood films, based on how the society perceives them. She listed four characteristics to this profile which are “abnormal”, “pitiful”, “unfulfilled” and “suspect” (2000). This trail was followed by Ann Chang (2015), whose focus on unmarried women in Irish fiction involved the society’s hand in shaping the spinster stereotype. Chang’s discussions revealed spinsters to be treated as social outcasts and monsters, as well as their involuntary role as social mothers as a form of containment. Runghip Anmai also pursued a similar path in describing the attitudes against spinsters and spinsterhood in modern Thai fiction (2011). Anmai’s analysis shows largely of the spinster’s recurrent role as the villain and social outcast as she does not participate in marriage, to enforce the ideals of Thai heterosexual norms. The work of Katherine Sullivan Barak (2014) tracks the evolution of the spinster into the cat lady, whose containment was deemed necessary by society as they “intrinsically transgress social norms, query gender roles and challenge the limitations of mediated womanhood” (Barak iii). Barak’s discussions reveals not only how the spinster stereotype has been developed and perceived by society, but also the extent of freedom she has in the age of post-feminism. Barak claims that “in post-feminist mythology all women are presumed to start their lives independent and free to create whatever life they choose” (115). While the freedom to choose had been popularized upon the daughters of post-feminism, she points out that choice itself works as a modality of constraint, where women are pressured to choose “correctly”. The powerful mark of sovereignty called choice then, was an illusion (Barak 116).

Meanwhile, Catherine Lim’s *The English Language Teacher’s Secret* contains the concerns parallel to the discussions above. Sylvie Ponniah, an English language teacher, sat in the periphery of society during the time when unmarried Singaporean women received massive scrutiny and attention by the nation. Sylvie was set in a close society who contemplated why their single colleagues were not married (a sensitive question to other spinster teachers as they tend to address personal insecurities). Perhaps here she relates to Mustard’s characteristic of being abnormal and suspect, for being single past the ideal age of marriage and yet successfully secluding herself from the intrusive curiosity of the people in her school. While Sylvie’s graceful, gentle and aloof personality spared her from receiving a villainous light, the unravelling of her secret unfolds Sylvie to be a romantic (and neurotic) spinster; which is not new nor unusual in the portrayal of fictional spinsters. Here emerges the issue of freedom and choice, where Sylvie had been successful in escaping the gaze of the society, but had in the end brought herself to join the coven of spinsters who became hysteric wrecks due to their unsuccessful romances. A few examples from this group (aside Faulkner’s Emily Grierson) would be Miss Havisham (*Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens), Paradi Sawangwat (*The Mansion of Sai Tong* by Kor Surangkhanang) and Nong-Ram (*Charmless* by Vor Vinnichayakul).

Although scores of papers have been written to describe the fictional spinster, they were made with the view of the spinster as the Other, from which they were described as outcasts for not participating in the social norms of marriage. The employment of this perspective aids us to record and understand the spinster stereotype from the spectacle of society. The reversed perspective of the spinster as the Self however, would allow us to explore the spinster’s individual freedom to define herself against the gaze of others and reveal her own uniqueness as a single woman. Such is the perspective this paper aims to take, through the employment of an existentialist point of view.
RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This paper seeks to read Catherine Lim’s main character Sylvie Ponniah (The English Language Teacher’s Secret, 1987) from an existentialist perspective. Its main objective is to explore Sylvie’s bad faith, specifically on the use of misdirection strategies to establish her individuality as a spinster. This would be made possible by utilizing an inward existentialist framework derived from the Sartrean reading of bad faith, which pays more attention to the construction of bad faith itself than the usual scrutiny of how a being exists in or escapes bad faith.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Bad faith is a phenomenon where a being of consciousness deceives itself regarding its anguish and freedom (Detmer 75), hence not allowing itself to transcend and achieve authenticity. In Being and Nothingness, Sartre cites the goal of bad faith to be “what I am, in the mode of ‘not being what one is’, or not to be what I am in the mode of ‘being what one is’” (110). He willingly grants that “bad faith is a lie to oneself” (87). Joseph Catalano (A Commentary On Jean-Paul Sartre’s Being and Nothingness 79) pointed out that to further explicate the definition of bad faith, Sartre compares it to the common process of lying, which is made of three basic steps. The first is to believe something to be true. The second step would be to express the opposite of this belief to others. The third step which secures the success of the lie, is for the others to believe in the statement expressed. While holding similarities with the process of lying, bad faith differs slightly in its fundamentals, as the lying is done to one’s own self. David Detmer draws out that to be in a position of bad faith, the being “knows the truth (so that its denial constitutes a lie, rather than a mere error) and not know it (so that it is genuinely deceived)” (Sartre Explained: From Bad Faith to Authenticity 75). In simpler words, a being who is in bad faith involves the situation in which “the liar is more or less the victim of his lie, that he half persuades himself of it” (Sartre 88).

Sartre also claims that a person can live in bad faith. This is not necessarily without “having abrupt awakenings to cynism or to good faith”, but with the implication of “a constant and particular style of life”; where “people gladly have recourse to the unconscious” (Being and Nothingness 88). This suggests that the trick of securing the success of the lie is through the skilled manipulation of perspective, as explained by Sartre:

The very essence of the reflexive idea of hiding something from oneself implies the unity of one and the same psychic mechanism and consequently a double activity in the heart of unity, tending on the one hand to maintain and locate the thing to be concealed and on the other hand to repress and disguise it. (Being and Nothingness 94)

Such suggests that the being would learn to avert its gaze from unpleasant matters in a scrupulous and consistent manner. At the same time, it keeps other matters topmost in its mind (and perhaps exaggerates them), and thereby convince itself of misleading partial truths (Detmer 77). It could train itself to avoid the consciousness’ clarifying gaze upon vaguenesses and comforting falsehoods, so that they remain hidden from the scrutiny which would reveal their true conditions. These maneuvers are made possible by the nihilating powers, self-division, and ambiguous being that Sartre claims characterize one’s consciousness (Detmer 78). From these observations, we could identify two misdirection strategies used in bad faith – “omission and emphasis”, as well as “ambiguity and vagueness” (Detmer 78).
In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre states that consciousness affects itself with bad faith. There must be an original intention and a project of bad faith; this project implies a comprehension of bad faith as such and a pre-reflective apprehension (of) consciousness as affecting itself with bad faith (Sartre 89). Bad faith is strengthened by the fact that we are always in a situation, which Sartre describes as an ambiguous synthesis of two components. The first is facticity, which refers to the factual givens of our lives. The second is transcendence, which could simply be put as our way of living to surpass facticity. Some of the steps involved in the process towards transcendence includes focusing solely on certain selected features, performing specific interpretation upon them, and initiating projects with reference to them (Detmer 78). Both components provide a background for the practice of self-deception. The first is through the “denial of transcendence”, where one restrains itself by setting a boundary to limit the freedom of its consciousness. This is accomplished through defending its state of facticity. It eliminates the option of setting its consciousness upon facticity, thus rejecting any attempts to go beyond it; especially the process of negation which would cause it to evolve. One who denies transcendence would be most likely to portray itself as someone who is forced to succumb to the situation it is in (“I can’t help it”), or to the object of its being (“That’s just the way I am”) (Detmer 78). The second type of self-deception would be the “denial of facticity”, where one refuses to believe in the facts and reality that is part of its existence. Perhaps this would be the more straight-forward of the two types of denial, as it is done by simply denying the action and occurrence one had participated in; normally to escape the effects of its consequences. One who denies facticity defends itself from the reality that is unpleasant to it, by resisting to accept its entire truth. Supporting this resistance is the shift of its conscious gaze to a better account of itself. This account however, could be real and also fabricated.

**THE CONSTRUCTION OF BAD FAITH IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

**TEACHER’S SECRET**

To escape from her anguish of being free, Sylvie manipulates the perspective of her disrupted consciousness to reduce the distress of opposing it. This is done through the calculated simulation of Dr. Chellam’s presence, as he is the representation of her desire and freedom. In his absence, Sylvie has established a secret devotion towards him, though the anomalous conservation of his image and memories.

Sylvie’s devotion towards Dr. Chellam qualifies as bad faith, as it is based on the diversion of her true consciousness. Sylvie’s anguish was her state of existence that had depended on the relationship with other persons to achieve meaning. The attempt to defend her relationship with Dr. Chellam was an act parallel to her authentic consciousness, which is exclusively dedicated towards her transcendence. The first step towards this is the separation from her father’s undisputed authority to decide upon her. Having failed to do so, Sylvie is stuck in the agony between what she was and what she wanted to be.

Sylvie’s attempt to soothe her anguish then, within the unreadiness to embrace her true freedom, is to linger between the two dimensions of her existence. For her part as a filial daughter, she released Dr. Chellam to commit to her father. The consciousness found earlier continued to be nursed in her secret profile as a distant lover. Although done in a clandestine manner, the preservation of Dr. Chellam reflects the attendance to her own consciousness and freedom, as he was the first salient choice she has ever made for herself; both as a woman and free individual. The indication of bad faith however, surfaces within how Sylvie
directs her consciousness. What was to be the council of her own progress had been manipulated towards relieving the emotional agony of her anguish:

_In the crucible of Miss Ponniah’s suffering, the love had become purified of all dross so that it was now most precious gold, enshrined in Miss Ponniah’s heart. For Miss Ponniah had heard that Dr. Chellam never married; he had returned from his studies and gone to settle in Malaysia, where he was attached to a large private hospital, but he never married. Miss Ponniah had heard of attempts by relatives to matchmake for him, but he remained resolutely unmarried. Only she understood why. He had gone away a brokenhearted man, and he returned still brokenhearted, unable to forget the woman he could not marry. Miss Ponniah’s father had died at the ripe old age of eighty, by which time Miss Ponniah was forty and her sad little love affair entombed almost twenty years in her faithful heart. Knowing that her memory was also being kept alive in the loyal heart of the man who declared his love for her so long ago had invested this secret love with an almost religious quality, so that Miss Ponniah, unmarried at forty-six and pitied by some for her lonely existence, was in reality a deeply contented woman._ (Lim 95)

The excerpt introduces how Sylvie has navigated her consciousness to heal the wounds upon losing her lover (and symbol of freedom), by adopting the belief that Dr. Chellam had refused to be married in honor of their love. Despite her innocent intentions pertaining Dr. Chellam, the deceit lies within Sylvie’s treatment upon the issue of her past lover. The devotion towards him had grown unhealthy for Sylvie, whose consciousness had been turned to focus onto the memories of Dr. Chellam under suspicious beliefs. From this, Sylvie’s consciousness had been driven to the denial of transcendence.

**Denial of Transcendence**

While admitting to the chronology of her unsuccessful romance, Sylvie’s treatment upon the image of Dr. Chellam has blocked her path towards transcendence. Her secret devotion towards him has only served the purpose of providing emotional comfort after the devastating departure of her first love:

_Every day she thought of Dr. Chellam and she reread his letters in the privacy of her room, with the reverent ardour of a devotee, and, again and again, she thought of how no other woman had risen to take her place in his affections. She had left a void in his life, as he had said in his last letter, and since then, the void had remained unfilled, indeed, could not be filled because it had already been sanctified by her memory._ (Lim 95)

Having believed that Dr. Chellam has been faithful to her for years, Sylvie turns the focus of her consciousness towards honoring him, by being equally faithful to his memory. The fortification of this faith then turned into a personal project for Sylvie, which carried on for twenty years. Her consciousness has been made occupied with this project of conserving the memories of their relationship in the past. The effort to conserve the ideals of their relationship had included protecting them from any potential notions that would taint their “sublimity” (Lim 96). This however, would be further discussed in the use of misdirection strategies. To keep their memories alive, Sylvie had refused progress upon herself; as progress is the greatest threat capable of reducing invisible sentiments from the past. The preservation of Dr. Chellam would mean stagnancy for Sylvie’s authentic consciousness, as this project does not allow her to move past her sentimental commitment to a love affair that has transpired over two decades ago. In simpler words, her loyalty to Dr. Chellam allows neither need nor space for Sylvie to transcend. This denial was nurtured by the use of two strategies of misdirection, which are ambiguity and vagueness, as well as omission and emphasis.
Ambiguity and Vagueness
The first strategy, ambiguity and vagueness, is the idealist foundation of Sylvie’s practice of bad faith. It is through the use of this strategy that Sylvie had successfully manipulated the image of Dr. Chellam to blind her consciousness from its original purpose. It begins with the implication of ambiguity upon Dr. Chellam’s image. He was the representation of Sylvie’s freedom from her father, but has also been made the constrictor of her consciousness. Despite the fact that she was unable to live the life of her choice (which was to be married to Dr. Chellam), Sylvie’s secret devotion is a method for her to retain him – her symbol of freedom – within her. This concept has been imposed upon her consciousness; allowing it to be effectuated in the form of a passionate on-going reminiscence of the past.

The project of focusing her consciousness towards the faithful sustenance of Dr. Chellam had become more important than the consciousness towards transcendence itself. Her dedication towards Dr. Chellam had resulted glory to his memorial image, providing her emotional comfort in exchange. The outcome of this devotion is static, if not unbalanced; as there was no significantly authentic development upon Sylvie’s consciousness from its relentless concentration upon Dr. Chellam. Sylvie relies more on the outcome on this devotion, compared to her conceptual idol. Her need for solace has granted power upon his image, in which the strength of her devotion towards Dr. Chellam has been equal to her commitment to Mr. Ponniah; if not stronger. The devotion towards her past lover has bound Sylvie to him, eliminating any need for progress and transcendence.

Strengthening this ambiguity is the effect of vagueness, which had supplied Sylvie the justification for her faith. The provider of this effect is the concept of love, as partially seen in the relationship with her father. Sylvie’s bond with her father was built on familial love, made up of the combination of empathy and obligation. In a similar modus operandi, her faithful devotion towards Dr. Chellam was in reply to what she assumed to be his tribute to their romance. The effect of vagueness lies between the one-sided conceptions of love, in which Sylvie was under the impression that Dr. Chellam had chosen to remain unmarried due to his love for her. Her inference was built from an emotional point of view, with the intentional dismissal of any present potential that proves against her preferences:

Even her secluded innocent world was not free from malicious gossip: snippets reached her of the carefree, bachelor existence of Dr. Chellam and some of his colleagues, which was at odds with his enshrined image. But this gossip was not even disquieting to Miss Ponniah, for having long ago consecrated her love for Dr. Chellam, and his for her, on the altar of sublime love, anything that did not add to the sublimity was dismissed from her consciousness. (Lim 95-96)

The interpretation of the cause of Dr. Chellam’s bachelorhood became the backbone of Sylvie’s devotion towards him. The naivety within her secret however, reveals to be a diversion to protect the suspicious nature of her faith. Sylvie has opted to focus her faith towards a moment of “sublimity” (Lim 96), which is her relationship with Dr. Chellam without any threats of separation or disloyalty. She dismissed any notions that would taint the beauty of their memory, hence paying no heed to any news of Dr. Chellam that would jeopardize his image as her perfect lover. Such is reflected within her silent battle against the effect of time, which would have threatened the truth condition of her past ideals in the present. This proves Sylvie’s current feelings for Dr. Chellam to be strongly one-sided.

Here surfaces Sylvie’s delusive attitude concerning temporal validity, where she had attempted to evade the circumstances of time. In general, Sylvie’s predilection for the past had brought her to elude the possibility of change; which generally comes with the
progression of time. While acknowledging herself to be twenty years away from the occurrence of her romance, Sylvie dedicated her life into worshiping its best moments by trimming the parts that opposes its glory, e.g. the separation in the past and potential disloyalty in the present. Her love story, “purified by all dross” to become “most precious gold” (Lim 95); has been reduced into sublimity, as literally termed by the author herself. Her life of devotion towards this concept then, revolves around the construction and preservation of its ethereal image.

Parallel to the effort of dedicating her consciousness towards the memory of Dr. Chellam, Sylvie had ignored any potential reality that would terminate the validity of the sentiments preserved from the past. Its survival through time and doubt has allowed Sylvie’s lover and love affair to remain a seraphic concept. However, the means to secure such survival have been dubious. To preserve the memories of Dr. Chellam, Sylvie had removed herself from the position that allows her ideals to be challenged by the effects of realistic time. This included the ignorance to rebuild her relationship with Dr. Chellam after her father’s death, in preference to the concept of sublimity that she had clung onto for years:

*It had never occurred to Miss Ponniah to consider an attempt at renewing contact with Dr. Chellam; her father being dead, there was now no earthly reason why they should not be married. Perhaps she had waited for Dr. Chellam to make the first move, and when he did not, and the years went by, she set up the little altar of their love and there placed herself and her lover, exactly as they were twenty years ago, young and ardent and pure. Removed thus from time and place, they become immortal: it did not matter that Miss Ponniah’s hair had turned gray and the youthful roundness of her face and body were gone; it did not matter that Dr. Chellam too had probably grayed and that gossip hinted at debauchery relieving the loneliness of a bachelor existence. She in her world, he in his, but how close together in their lives of chosen commitment to the past!* (Lim 96)

With the aid of stealth, Sylvie had “escaped the tyrannies of the present and the future, and was therefore happy” (Lim 96). Happiness was the result from the protection of Sylvie’s consciousness from the potential challenges against her ideals. While its origin (the assumed faith of Dr. Chellam) has been suspicious, the pure love she devotes herself to is vague; as it had been purposely made shielded from truths that are potentially threatening. Sylvie had dotted on the concept nonetheless, in attempt to retain the presence of Dr. Chellam in her life. Such has been done not only to divert the focus of her consciousness from its authentic purpose, but also to convince itself that it is on the correct path. This was assured by the illusive sensation of happiness.

**Omission and Emphasis**

The second strategy, omission and emphasis, is the more visible and practical part of Sylvie’s bad faith. Both tactics work in synchronization to implement the beliefs constructed with the first strategy, as previously discussed. Within the story, Sylvie attempted to omit her single status in the present by emphasizing the romantic relationship she had in the past. Such includes intense efforts to reminisce critical sentiments within the relationship, as done by Sylvie through the routine reading of Dr. Chellam’s letters. Being the only relic from their days of courtship, Sylvie had used the letters to instill the belief that she is irreplaceable to Dr. Chellam, hence being the only woman he preserves himself for. The daily reminder of his sentiments, combined with the assumption of why he remains unmarried up to the present day, becomes the justification for Sylvie to develop and continue her own faith towards him.

Having eliminated the challenges of the present upon her ideals, Sylvie chose to emphasize only upon the preferable elements of her romance. Both had worked in tandem to induce the sensation of love, in which Sylvie had believed herself to be loved by Dr. Chellam.
even after twenty years of their separation. To feel that she is still loved by Dr. Chellam produces the effect of tranquillity within Sylvie:

‘I am loved,’ thought Miss Ponniah with a glow that radiated outward; people often remarked on the radiant serenity of Miss Ponniah’s smile. ‘... I am loved and I love in return,’ thought Miss Ponniah, the inner glow suffusing her features, and her love had the capacity of expanding to embrace the whole world. (Lim 96)

The constant claim that she ‘is loved’ marks a level of success upon Sylvie’s efforts to diverge her consciousness from its true purpose. The success includes a sense of confidence, from which Sylvie has fully embraced the ideals of her own positive assembling; having avoided any dispute of its existence.

The absent Dr. Chellam has been made present through the preservation of his image in their sublime relationship, which she devotes herself to every day for twenty years. As the years went by, her faith towards Dr. Chellam has taken a new form practice. Taking a different route than her usually inward praise, Sylvie had begun to project her feelings outwards:

A happy secret, after a time, has need to reveal itself to the world: Miss Ponniah, teaching English language to a class of secondary school pupils, found herself abandoning the ‘Johns’ and ‘Marys’ and ‘Mr. Tans’ that invariably provide the human link to the dry little bones of grammar, and instead wrote on the chalkboard ‘Dr. C’ and spoke it aloud in the oral practices. (Lim 97)

Although appearing in a subtle fashion, Sylvie has brought the memory of Dr. Chellam into a more vivid light. A portion of his existence that had always been alive within the motionless privacy of her bedroom, was innocently let out into a vocal classroom. While it might not have been intended, the appearance of ‘Dr. C’ in grammar lessons becomes another step for Sylvie to emphasize his exclusive presence in her life. This move however, risked the stealthy nature of her faith, which later contributes to the confrontation and the undoing of the belief that she had held on to for twenty years.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has introduced Catherine Lim’s The English Language Teacher’s Secret as a spinster narrative by comparing it to William Faulkner’s A Rose for Emily. It has also mentioned a few previous works that viewed and discussed spinsters as the Other, where attention was paid to the society’s perception and attitude towards the spinster. From there onwards, it attempted to study Sylvie Ponniah past her common traits as a spinster, by utilizing an existentialist framework that highlights the construction of Sartre’s bad faith to explore her individuality and how she deals with her freedom. It is discovered that Sylvie was in denial of transcendence, in which she utilized two misdirection strategies to establish her bad faith. Such efforts were done was to validate and maintain the existence of Dr. Chellam in her life, despite the fact that Sylvie herself had discontinued their relationship. In her bad faith, Sylvie manipulated her freedom to bind herself to the memories of Dr. Chellam and nursed an obsession towards their relationship for two decades.
REFERENCES