

Language of Indifference: The Voice of the Powerless in the Select Works of Filipino Artists

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The study focused on the elements of nationalist consciousness as the language of indifference in Philippine literature through the works of select contemporary Filipino writers. Identified masterpieces of the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature¹ awardees that have Marxist tendencies were evaluated using the Marxist Literary Approach to identify the elements of nationalist consciousness and to deduce the implications on the relationship of literature and society. The elements of nationalist consciousness were identified by taking in consideration the main struggles of the characters which were revealed in the characters' lines. These were classified using a researcher-made checklist. Common and recurring themes like class struggle, injustice, wanton disregard for human worth, indifference, moral degradation, political unrest, insurgency, inequality, exploitation, harassment, police brutality, poverty, and violence were considered negative elements as they mirror the struggles of the oppressed and abused characters. The significant contribution of the study lies in its richness in values, realities, and insights into human experiences as it ascertained the socio-economic problems embedded in the works. Evidently as concluded, reforms, justice, and true peace were found absent in the works and these were the essential values that the characters and personas tried to find as they relate with other characters. Fundamentally, literature and society are inseparable and that literary prisms can be vehicles of change in the society.

Keywords: Marxist Literary Approach, nationalist consciousness, language of indifference, Philippine literature

Introduction

It is recorded in the history that literature has been used for socio-political purposes to drive people to effect change in their community. However, there were still arguments whether literature serves rightly its purpose. Others claim that literary works are just for entertainment. On the other hand, others believe that literature mirrors their lives hence, they espouse the idea that in order to retain literature's validity in our society, it must tackle the significant issues of our time. This claim is reflective in societies where social inequalities and political unrest are very common.

Tolentino (n.d.) said that the sustained popularity of José Rizal's novels *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo* and the persistence of the idea that these must be taught in Philippine schools and even in other countries in the world are some of the reasons, that indeed, these novels changed Philippine society. However,

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¹ It was established in 1950 and it aims to develop Philippine literature.

after hundreds of years of Philippine independence, Filipinos still experience bondage from socio-economic crises, inequalities or unjust conditions in society, various forms of harassment, corruption, and political unrest even during this time of pandemic. The powerless remained weak and the voiceless became mute while those in power enjoy their position and freedom. These are the deeply-rooted contemporary problems that haunt Filipinos ever since the country gained its “independence”.

It is indeed essential to a third world country like the Philippines to develop among its constituents the consciousness about social transformation that will later help them avoid inequalities, harassment, corruption, and political unrest (Curada & Soriano, 2011). It is believed that through the works of contemporary Filipino writers, the Filipinos and the others who will read these works, will develop consciousness and understanding of themselves, their needs, and their problems so that later they would find determination to affect and effect changes in order to transform their society.

Bonnycastle (1991) said that Marxist critics often judge literature by how it represents the main struggles for power going on at the time it was written and by how it might have influenced those struggles, through changing reader's minds about key issues. By subjecting the select works of Bonifacio P. Ilagan, Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio, F. Sionil Jose, Edgardo B. Maranan, and Manuel E. Arguilla using Marxist Literary Approach, the elements of nationalist consciousness are highlighted as they reflect the language of indifference.

Objectives

This study aimed to do a critical analysis of the select works of contemporary Filipino writers using the Marxist Literary Approach, and on the basis of this analysis, some theoretical implications on the relationship between literature and society were deduced.

Specifically, the study identified the elements of nationalist consciousness in the select works of Bonifacio P. Ilagan, Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio, F. Sionil Jose, Edgardo B. Maranan, and Manuel E. Arguilla, all Palanca awardees, using the Marxist Literary Approach and deduced the implications on the relationship of literature and society based on the findings of the study.

Methods

Cursory reading of the works of the self-proclaimed Marxists was done in order to identify the subjects. Both fiction and poetry were included in the study.

These were the novel of F. Sionil Jose (*My Brother, My Executioner*), the plays of Edgardo B. Maranan (*Ang Panahon ni Cristy* or *Cristy's Time*), Bonifacio P. Ilagan (*Katipunan: Mga Anak ng Bayan*), and Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio (*Walking Canes and Fans*), the short story of Manuel E. Arguilla (*Rice*), and the poem of Edgardo B. Maranan (*Ambush Hill*).

Instrument

The elements of nationalist consciousness were identified by using a researcher-made checklist. Any idea present in the works that has something to do with class struggle, injustice, wanton disregard of human worth, indifference, moral degradation, political unrest, insurgency, inequality, exploitation, harassment, poverty, police brutality, and violence was classified as element of nationalist consciousness since it mirrors the struggles of the oppressed and abused characters included in the works under study.

Data Collection

The select works were analyzed, interpreted, and evaluated. In using the Marxist Literary Approach, it was believed that the elements of nationalist consciousness in the select works of Bonifacio P. Ilagan, Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio, F. Sionil Jose, Edgardo B. Maranan, and Manuel E. Arguilla were revealed.

An interview with some of the artists was done to guide the researcher in her analysis.

Analysis

Literature has a social function. This is the case whether its objective is to give pleasure, to instruct, or to move people into action. The mere fact that literature is a form of communication indicates that its function has something to do with what it seeks to do to its readers. Literature, in one way or the other, influences society. Another reason why literature cannot be divorced from society is that social reality is, to a large extent, the subject of literature. It deals with the life of men and women in society. These arguments were used as springboards on how to deduce the implication on the relationship of literature and society through the select works of the Filipino contemporary writers. These works were subjected in critical analysis using the Marxist Literary Approach.

The elements of nationalist consciousness were identified by taking in consideration the main struggles of the characters. These were believed to be imbedded in the language used by the artists as they qualify the oppressed and the powerless.

Results and Discussion

The voices of the powerless were considered the elements of nationalist consciousness. These were the lines that imply or suggest class struggle, insurgency, injustice, wanton disregard of human worth, indifference, exploitation, harassment, moral degradation, political unrest, inequality, poverty, and violence. These negative elements are believed to mirror the struggles of the oppressed and abused characters in the works of F. Sionil Jose, Edgardo B. Maranan, Manuel E. Arguilla, Bonifacio P. Ilagan, and Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio.

In *My Brother, My Executioner* (F. Sionil Jose), the main character and the landlord, Don Asperri, believed that the tenants were not deserving of the land in the Hacienda Asperri since in his eyes they were indolent, ingrates, treacherous, and lazy. He considered them as people who refused to change. This thinking was clear in the landlord's words.

On the other hand, the peasants believed that the land they till is rightfully theirs and that their rich landlord had long treated them as slaves. This same thought fueled them to rebel. The new Commander Victor, the executioner, already showed how determined and rebellious they were through the messages that he sent to his brother, the new landlord.

All these and more were depicted in the dialogues of the characters, especially those who were oppressed like Ipe, Victor, Tio Joven, and the other peasants. The language used mirrors how they were abused by those who were powerful. Thus, these lines are intensified reflections of elements of nationalist consciousness.

A generalization that prisoners are evils is a wrong notion. *Ang Panahon ni Cristy (Cristy's Time)* is one play that tells the readers that not all who are inside the jail are really guilty of the crime that was charged of them. Through the lines of the prisoner-victims, it could be deduced that indifference is rampant in the four walls of their prison cells. Since they could not exercise fully their freedom, they were not given any choice, but to follow the orders of those who were powerful than them, be it their fellow prisoners or the jail wardens

or else, they will suffer. This was depicted by the characters through their dialogues. Hopelessness was also evident like Ispin whose wife died because he did not have any money to sustain his wife's medication while his children were forced to find food away from their home. Poverty and lack of proper education were the main reasons why the characters like Ispin, Berting, and the other prisoners lost hope. All of these have something to do with the nationalist consciousness of the writer. His way of showing the pains and sufferings of the victims underscores the realities of society, in which up to now prevails.

Poverty, especially if the people experienced great apathy from their fellowmen, may drive people to think negatively. This was proven in the dialogues of the characters in *Rice*, a short story written by Manuel E. Arguilla. The characters were forced to resort to rebellion since they were strongly motivated to harm and fight. These were obviously seen in the dialogues of Andres and Pablo. On the other hand, an overbearing landlady called Señora seemed to be unperturbed by the poor plight of the poor hungry tenants. Her paramount consideration was to make more money and to make her private enterprise grow bigger even to the expense of sacrificing the lives of others. All these are considered elements of nationalist consciousness since they exemplify the struggles and exploitation of the poor by the rich and the mighty.

Majority of the lines in *Katipunan: Mga Anak ng Bayan* by Bonifacio P. Ilagan was classified as lines that suggest insurgency. These were manifestations of the people wanting to end the colonial rule of the Spaniards. Since the characters were in the fighting mood, their dialogues are clearly suggestive of rebellion against their oppressors and that the rebels were ready to stage war against the Spaniards. The antagonists grabbed the land owned by the poor Filipinos who were asked to pay the tax. This incident was a clear manifestation that the characters, the poor Filipinos, were exploited by the Spaniards. The dialogues of the characters were reflective of the cruelty of the antagonists and the feelings of the oppressed. On the other hand, the antagonists' words expressed their readiness to exchange blows against the *katipuneros* using their weapons. Their wanting to stop the armed revolution planned by the Filipinos agitated and all the more motivated the soldiers to kill whomever they thought making allegiance with the *katipunan*. These are the elements of nationalist consciousness found in the dialogues of the characters. These elements are suggestive of what truly happened in the lives of the contemporary Filipinos during the Martial Law Regime in the Philippines. These were further reaffirmed by Bonifacio P. Ilagan during the interview.

In *Walking Canes and Fans* by Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio, most of the major characters sympathized with the *katipuneros*. Most of them were prepared to have a bloody encounter with their enemies, the Spaniards. This was shown through the actions, reactions, and words of the characters like Juaning and Cleotilde. Others were shouting for revolution so the story clearly shows that the people want revolution. Since the Spaniards feeling superior were the powerful then, they underestimated the capabilities of the Filipinos and that was evident in the lines of Padre Carmelo, one of the antagonists. These lines that were negative in nature were classified as elements of nationalist consciousness since they were suggestive of the intentions of the playwright to show the ruthlessness of the Spanish government to the Filipinos during those times.

Indifference, harassment, violence, and moral degradation were clearly implied in the poem *Ambush Hill* by Edgardo B. Maranan. The lines speak of the inhumane experiences of the personas in the hands of their rapists. Some lines showed how power was abused by the soldiers and how the victims scampered and pleaded for help. While in the last line, it evidently showed how the abusers or rapists enjoyed their drinking spree after their lusty achievement.

Table 1

Summary of the Predominant Elements of Nationalist Consciousness Found in the Six Works of the Select Contemporary Filipino Writers

Elements of nationalist consciousness	Number of elements of nationalist consciousness found in the select works of contemporary Filipino writers						Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	
Class struggle	4	1	2	3	1	0	11
Injustice	1	1	0	2	0	0	4
Wanton disregard of human worth/indifference	3	3	1	3	4	3	17
Moral degradation	1	1	1	0	0	2	5
Political unrest	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Insurgency	1	0	1	18	5	0	25
Inequality	6	1	0	1	0	0	8
Exploitation/harassment	2	3	2	1	1	3	12
Poverty	1	4	4	1	2	1	13
Violence/police brutality	7	2	1	4	4	1	19

Notes. A. *My Brother, My Executioner*

B. *Ang Panahon ni Cristy*

C. *Rice*

D. *Katipunan: Mga Anak ng Bayan*

E. *Walking Canes and Fans*

F. *Ambush Hill*

The summary given above (see Table 1) showed the number of elements of nationalist consciousness found in each of the works in the study. The top three elements found in all the works were insurgency, violence or police brutality, and wanton disregard of human worth/indifference. Hence, these three social issues were found to be the most predominant elements of nationalist consciousness in all works included in the study. Based on this result, it was found out that indeed Bonifacio P. Ilagan and F. Sionil Jose have shown Marxist tendencies in their works and that they are biased towards those who were oppressed, those living in poverty, and those who were struggling for freedom and better life. The period when these works were written was also a contributing factor why insurgency, violence or police brutality, and wanton disregard of human worth/indifference predominate in the works of Bonifacio P. Ilagan and F. Sionil Jose since *Katipunan: Mga Anak ng Bayan* and *My Brother, My Executioner* were written during the dark period in the Philippines—the Marcos Regime.

Conclusions

Arts for arts' sake no longer holds relevance today (Constantino, 1977). This was proven through the artists' works included in the study. All the works exhibited excellence in craft since the authors' literary devices and tools were effectively used to put across the intended nationalist meaning of their works. It was also verified through this study that the nationalist consciousness of some Filipino contemporary writers could be seen through their characters since most of them were abused and maltreated by those more powerful than them. They became victims of indifference, and most especially they were deprived of true freedom.

Select works of some Filipino contemporary writers could illumine the minds of the readers and later arouse them to make change within themselves and transform their world based on how they wanted it to be. The artists of these select works were effective in using their crafts to awaken the nationalist consciousness of their readers. They helped their readers see how people were abused, oppressed, and maltreated. Through the

characters, the readers experienced a world full of indifference and social realities vicariously. In this sense, the readers realized the pains and the struggles of people who experienced the same fate. It is also the reason why literature and society are inseparable since literary works can bring change in the society and to the people who are members of it and vice versa.

Indeed, this study is relevant to Filipinos and foreign people alike not only because it will help them do in-depth analyses of all the literary genres in Philippine literature, but it will also enrich their knowledge on both human and artistic values as well as augment their knowledge about the harsh realities of life, hence, broaden horizons for a safer, happier, and meaningful life ahead.

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