

Po-on: From Darkness to Darkness

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The history of the Filipino people and hence the growth of their consciousness and the attainment of national awareness is primarily the history of their struggles against colonial oppression.

—Renato Constantino,
*Neocolonial Identity and
Counter Consciousness*

Though last of the *Rosales* quintet to be written, F. Sionil José's *Po-on* (Manila: Solidariad, 1984) constitutes the chronological beginning of the saga. This sequential ordering, seemingly haphazard, is in fact very appropriate, for it reflects the widespread tendency among Filipino writers to search for roots, to explore themes, events, and personages from the past in their attempt to illuminate the present.

It is in this looking back that national continuities and patterns become more apparent; and when viewed against the sacrifices of the past, the failures of the present—the corruption of ideals and the easy triumph of greed that pervade *The Pretenders* (1962), *My Brother, My Executioner* (1973), *Tree* (1978) and *Mass* (1979)—acquire a heightened poignancy and irony.

It is interesting to note that *Po-on*, like *Noli Me Tangere* by Jose Rizal and *The Three-Cornered Sun* by Linda Ty-Casper, fosters a strong sense of community, albeit through different means. In Rizal's novel, the oppressed are in a sense drawn into a communality by their tragedy: one individual's

misfortune echoes that of another. To that extent, the lives of Ibarra, Elias, Sisa, Don Pablo, and the other victims of San Diego are but variations of the same theme. This shared fate underlies their oneness, their spiritual bond.

In Ty-Casper's work, the revolution provides the unifying focus of the characters' anxiety, commitment, equivocation. Although often divided by conflicting loyalties and convictions, the revolutionaries are one in their recognition of the force of historical process. The use of multiple points of view affords the reader a glimpse into the characters' inner struggles, but their dominance is eventually eroded and they become, all of them, helplessly thrown into the vortex of violent events and movements. And it is history, as the author has indicated in her dedication, which stands out as the novel's main protagonist, the subsuming force to which the rest of the characters can only react with apprehension or heroism, self-preservation or self-sacrifice.

In F. Sionil José's *Po-on*, the sense of communal identity, which is central to the novel's theme, is portrayed in the process of defining itself, of growing and transcending the individual, the familial, the tribal, to become the national consciousness. Indeed, the entire narrative can be plotted in terms of the gradual development of the concept of nationhood, the spiritual birth of a people, as represented by the main character, Eustaquio Salvador (or Istak, for short).

The narrative primarily utilizes Istak's point of view, except in a few situations where the physical absence of Istak from the scene precludes his narrative involvement, as in Ba-ac's fateful visit to the convent in Cabugaw during which he unintentionally kills the young arrogant priest, Padre Zarraga; and Bit-tik's journey to Apo Diego's hidden village in the Caraballo range. Using Istak as the central consciousness in the novel is fortunate.

By allowing him a predilection for introspection and a questioning intelligence, the author makes him an ideal witness to the series of events that sweeps and alters their lives. Istak, who has served as Padre Jose's sacristan and has studied Spanish and Latin, not only demonstrates the perceptiveness to see the moral discrepancies around him, but also the compelling need to understand and resolve them.

As the novel's moral conscience, he articulates what the rest of the characters can only express in resignation, confusion, or inchoate rage. It is also in Istak that the reader sees most clearly the gradual evolution and

acceptance of a larger identity and consciousness for himself, and for his people.

The novel shows a perfectly symmetrical structure. Part 1, which begins with a letter by a Spanish priest to his superior, has nine chapters. Part 2, which ends with another letter by an American soldier to his teacher-brother, also consists of nine chapters. In their letters, both Padre Jose Leon, S.A., and Tom reveal a rare capacity for kindness and understanding for the people that they have come to “conquer” or “civilize.” This generosity of spirit, however, contrasts sharply with what the reader encounters in the novel and serves to demonstrate that the colonial policies of Spain and the United States do, in fact, allow for a wide latitude, not only of altruism, but also of abuse and oppression.

The book straddles two colonial eras (underscoring perhaps the artificiality of the neat division of colonial reigns which often overlap): the last decades of the Spanish regime in the 1880s, and the first years of the American rule up to 1900. The very division of the novel into symmetrical halves indicates a form of judgment on the essentially identical nature of the colonial rules of the Spaniards and the Americans. It suggests that, despite the occasional goodness of individual colonizers, the very idea of usurping other people’s lands, of forcibly controlling their lives, whether for their own good or otherwise, smacks of injustice—and, therefore, must be resisted at any cost.

Thus, the initial half of the novel deals with the oppression perpetrated by the Spaniards: the loss of Ba-ac’s arm after he is hung by the hand for a week for his failure to work on the new church; the dismissal of Istak from the *kumbento* for witnessing the new priest’s seduction of Carmencita; the expulsion of Ba-ac’s family as tenants in the friar’s land allegedly because of poor harvests; the burning down of the entire village of *Po-on* and the pursuit of the villagers by the civil guards for Ba-ac’s crime; the wounding of Istak and the rape of Orang by the chief of the civil guards, Capitan Gualberto.

The second half of *Po-on* deals with the revolutionary unrest that eventually ends the Spanish rule in the country. The fall of one reign, however, only heralds the rise of another. In quick succession, hardly giving the Filipinos a chance to breathe, new masters replace the old.

In another year, a new ruler—and a new enemy—had come. The Americans had defeated the Spaniards and were now battling the Republic's poorly equipped army. General Aguinaldo had none of the giant horses and the big guns that enabled the Americans to move with speed and overwhelm the puny units that faced them. They were also a ruthless enemy who defiled women and bayoneted children (138).

That last assertion, still provisional at this point because only based on hearsay, is finally confirmed in Chapter 7 when Istak, while on a mission to deliver a message to General Aguinaldo, who is being pursued by the Americans, observes with horror the massacre of all the villagers of Baugen and the burning down of their houses by the American soldiers.

Now, blue-shirted American soldiers dashed into the village, shouting, firing. The screams of pain and fear were not just of men and women but of children. He crawled away to the edge of the forest bordered by butterfly trees and though he could not see the village now, he could still hear the screams, the guttural shouts, and the neighing of frightened horses. When the firing stopped, he slithered close to the village again; now, the big men walked about the village. They had gathered in small sheaves portions of a roof and were igniting them and tossing them onto the roofs of the houses. Po-on all over again.... (180-81).

A strong sense of *deja vu* permeates the second half of the novel. The reader feels that all of these events have happened before—the rape of a young girl, the clubbing of Istak to unconsciousness, the hanging of the *insurrectos* in the plaza, the pursuit of fugitives by soldiers. Nothing much has changed, except the face of the oppressor. But it is the same senseless acts of oppression all over again.

When Istak reaches the conclusion that “the Americans were no different from the Spaniards—they were here to humiliate, deny life” (183), the reader is willing to concede its truth because the novel has developed that very idea so thoroughly, through recurring images of almost identical

violence in the first and second parts of the novel, that the identification of the Americans with the Spaniard is practically inescapable. Even the epistolary prologue and epilogue reinforce this similarity, for both Padre Jose and Tom, as pointed out earlier, do share essentially the same virtues and limitations.

Despite the Spanish abuses in general, Sionil Jose nonetheless allows the possible kindness of specific individuals. On this point, he demonstrates the same qualifying tendency found in Rizal and Ty-Casper, so that even in the face of the worst persecution, the author's condemnation is still less than total. Padre Jose, for instance, softens the harshness of the Spanish image because he stands in sharp contrast to the Zarragas and the Gualbertos of the novel. His close association with Istak has opened the latter's mind to the wonders of languages, medicine, botany, history; to the comforts of the Christian teachings. Although he does not appear in the novel except in the thoughts and remembrances of the central character, Padre Jose's presence is nonetheless palpable. He colors the views and judgments of Istak: he provides the moral standard to which Istak aspires; he is the secret protector, the constant guide to whose wise words and kind deeds Istak returns with compulsive regularity.

But in the course of the novel, with his ever-deepening disillusionment, Istak gradually distances himself from the memory of his old mentor, and his attachment becomes ambivalent to the point that it turns into something else—resentment, anger, even hatred. After all, hasn't Padre Jose, like the arrogant Padre Zarraga, also required tokens of respect and indebtedness? On his birthday, haven't the villagers stood in line to kiss his hand, to pile the convent hall with mountains of food? Istak's unconscious hatred finally surfaces in a feverish dream, on the third day after he is shot and left for dead by the *guardia civil*. In that dream he is transformed into an Igorote and he tells Padre Jose:

Your God is not mine. He is not in the seminary in Vigan, he is not in you, and if he is in all men, then He wears the uniform of the Guardia, he has a gun pointed at us. I was baptized in the river and the river is cold and it is my brother An-no who carried me there, and it is Dalin and my mother who cared for me. It is they and my people whom I will serve, not you and your god. And as for you—and the likes of you, I will kill you! Death to all Kastilas! (60-61).

These conflicting emotions—a sort of love-hate syndrome—are often seen in the relationship of the colonized to his colonizer.

Just as he eventually learns to come to terms with these conflicts, Istak is also able to synthesize foreign influences and native elements into something new. For instance, the teachings of the Catholic church and the native pagan beliefs are combined into a Philippine church which, while not pagan, is not totally Christian either.

It is a religion whose followers easily accept the coexistence of saints and *komaws*, angels and guardian-snakes. The future is augured in dreams; ill winds harbor misfortunes. God protects the innocent from evil just as surely as washing the feet with warm water at the foot of the stairs protects the house from wandering ghosts. It is symbolically apt that Eustaquio Salvador—the former acolyte, and Padre Jose’s protégé for the priesthood—discovers his true vocation as a faith healer, an *herbolario*, a unique Filipino medicine man whose practice blends scientific knowledge, religion, common sense, drama, and a bit of mumbo-jumbo.

Not too surprisingly, Sionil Jose’s novel itself reveals the same characteristic tendency of the Filipino to “Filipinize” an imported form: to realism and historicism are added colorful elements of native folklore, local anthropology, and fantasy (the latter Diego Silang and his secret valley; the propitiation of spirits, the burial customs; message-carrying dreams, treasure-guarding snakes).

This process of adaptation or synthesis transforms something borrowed into something more native and, therefore, more meaningful because it bears the imprint or personality of the receiving culture. Although the author does not extend the tradition of the Western novel, his proficient use of Philippine themes and history demonstrates the form’s peculiar adaptability to native contents.

Istak’s original destiny as a man of peace, a giver of life, is soon to change with the advent of the Philippine revolution and the coming of the Americans. As an acolyte, he has been indoctrinated in the more pacifist virtues of forgiveness, humility, and love. His chief reaction to oppression, therefore, has been one of meek acceptance. After all, hasn’t Padre Jose expounded on the necessity of suffering, which is the foundation of Christian faith? “[M]an would suffer as Christ did. In pain was his redemption” (23).

At the most, he can only run away from relentless persecution; he cannot strike back.

Thus, the first half of the novel follows the flight of the entire Salvador clan from Spanish retribution for Padre Zarraga's murder. Among the family members only Ba-ac, who bears the symbol of Spanish oppression in his amputated arm and who burns with helpless rage, can dare to be violent. But even his murder of the arrogant priest is largely unpremeditated, an act brought about only by the latter's intolerable abuses.

In the course of their long flight from *Po-on*, during which they encounter all sorts of barriers—checkpoint guards and rampaging Igorotes, hunger and sickness, wild animals and floods—Istak's resentment toward the Spaniards, who are after all the cause of their sufferings, gradually intensifies. It is ironic that the family escapes the pursuing Spaniards only to meet the indifferent cruelty of natural forces: Ba-ac is strangled by a huge python and Mayang is carried away in the strong currents of the Agno, never to be found. Istak's resentment is eventually carried over to the church, for isn't the church Castilian too? Can one worship God without obeying and respecting His ministers? And isn't God white, just like the priest? And if so, is there any real salvation for those whose skin color differs from His?

I pray that You be not white, that You be without color and that You be in all men because goodness cannot be encased only in white.

I should worship then not a white god but someone brown like me. Pride tells me only one thing—that we are more than equal with those who rule us. Pride tells me that this land is mine, that they should leave me to my destiny, and if they will not leave, pride tells me that I should push them away and should they refuse this, I should vanquish them, kill them (92).

However, for a long time, this resolve remains only in Istak's mind, resurfacing now and then in times of extreme anguish and doubt. In their new village called Cabugawan, a sanctuary carved out of the wilderness around Rosales, and with a new family name (Salvador is changed to Samson to prevent the Spanish authorities from tracing them), a new life, a

new beginning seems possible, and Istak and his family become preoccupied with life-sustaining activities. He tills the land, ministers to the sick, puts his uprooted house in order.

When the first rumors of war reach their isolated village, he counsels not flight but staying put. The time of fleeing is over. “If there are men who believe so much in themselves that they can drive away the Spaniards, let them think that way; let them shout themselves hoarse. Our duty is to our families” (135).

Up to this point, Istak’s loyalty is principally, if not exclusively, towards his family: his father and mother, his brothers, his wife and children, his uncles and aunts, his cousins, his nephews and nieces—the relatives of his extended family. Thus most of the characters in the novel reflect those familial ties. Throughout their flight, the family members help and support one another. Respect for elders, cooperation, and loyalty are not just social virtues but necessary strategies for survival. One member’s fortune or tragedy inextricably affects them all, just as Ba-ac’s guilt becomes the burden of all. Their closed system admits outsiders only with caution, because too often strangers bring bad luck, betrayal, treachery. If they come from the same region, then there is at least an implicit kinship in terms of a shared language, common customs, tradition. Identification and sympathy are easier to give or achieve.

But if they are from other regions, then there is suspicion, distrust. Dalin and her family, who come from Lingayen, have suffered at the hands of men from the north. Istak himself has always looked upon the Igorotes, the Bagus, with uneasiness. Indeed, while camping out at the foot of the Cordilleras, his family is attacked by the Bagus who resent, and possibly fear, the trespassers in their land. And during the fighting at Tirad Pass, Istak, who is just a simple Ilokano peasant, is treated with suspicion and distance by his co-fighters, the Tagalogs.

Regionalism, then, unifies the group even as it divides the people. Their geographical isolation, their strong regional identity and tradition, and their distinct languages have not prepared the Ilokanos and the Tagalogs, the Igorotes and the Bulakenos, the various ethnic groups in the country to accept a larger identity that subsumes them all. As Mabini sadly observes: “If only we could learn to trust one another—Tagalogs trusting Ilokanos, Pampangos trusting Tagalogs. . . More of this and, Eustaquio, we have a nation” (160).

Thus, before Istak can see himself as a Filipino, he must transcend not only the limited perception of himself as simply a family man, a Salvador married to Dalin, whose sons are Antonio and Pedro. But he must also learn to see that as an Ilokano he is joined in a fraternal bond to his brothers and sisters from the rest of the country. Yes, even to the Igorotes who decorate their houses with the skulls of their enemies.

If Padre Jose is Istak's religious teacher, then Apolinario Mabini, the Cripple, the Sublime Paralytic, is his political mentor. It is through Mabini's influence that Istak begins to look beyond Po-on, beyond Cabugawan and Rosales. Mabini's visit to Rosales, Pangasinan, as the author indicates in a footnote, has a historical basis. From this small detail, Sionil Jose has recreated an atmosphere rich in debate, political intrigues, and nationalist aspirations. As one of the architects of the short-lived Malolos Republic, Mabini is naturally vehement in his defense of the Filipinos' right to freedom from both the Spaniards and the Americans. From Mabini, Istak learns to see the tantalizing vision, the exhilarating possibility, of a free people, a free Filipinas.

In the past, the status quo has seemed indestructible, permanent. He has accepted his humble station in life as a preordained condition. As an *indio*, the highest he can aspire to in his life is to be an acolyte. But even that small dream is withheld from him, at the whim of his new superior. But now, for the first time, hearing about the revolution that is being fought courageously, if not always successfully, by the Filipino people, the flight of General Aguinaldo and the unfortunate loss of General Luna, Istak begins to perceive colonial oppression as a pervasive phenomenon, touching not only his own family but countless others; an oppression, more importantly, that is being met with widespread resistance. "We must not be subservient to anyone, not you to me, as I have never been to anyone. In me, in you—in all of us is dignity. We should stand bravely because we are citizens of a sovereign nation no matter how weak that nation. We are Filipinos now, do you understand, Eustaquio?" (152). And would he consider making that supreme sacrifice of becoming a part of a revolution, "to face the enemy, fling stones at him, and bare his chest to him?" (155). As somebody who has been witness to the gratuitous persecution of his people, Istak finally realizes the need to resist, to fight back.

But as a man of peace, Istak, like Simeon, finds the idea of Violence unattractive. Besides, his primary duty is to his family, to his wife and

Children. “I am not going to be involved with his violence” (155). It is only fitting that he should resist the idea of involvement in a revolution, for such a commitment demands a drastic change in the priorities that he has known all his life. Throughout their ordeal, his family has been the only source of support, of loyalty, of comfort; and now, suddenly, he is asked to offer his life to an amorphous concept, an entity too large for his parochial mind to encompass, a thing called “nation.” “How can I love a thousand islands, a million people speaking not my language but their very own which I cannot understand?” (179).

So when he finally offers himself and accepts the mission to deliver a message to General Aguinaldo who is fleeing from the Americans, the reader knows that the decision has not been made lightly, that the act is more than an expression of courage and sacrifice, that it symbolizes Istak’s entry into the nationhood of the Filipinos.

None of Rizal’s characters in *Noli* has really faced this kind of identity crisis, although there are other instances of identity problems: mistaken identity, withheld identity, falsified identity, revelation of identity (e.g., Santiago as the assumed father and Father Damaso as the real father of Maria Clara; the young man buried beneath the tree who could easily be Elias or Ibarra). In *Ty-Casper*, the conflict of identity often takes the form of divided loyalty, particularly among the mestizos or the Spanish-Filipino characters who have to choose during the revolution on which side to fight. Cristobal fights on the side of the revolutionaries while his cousin, Leon, ends up fighting on the side of the Spaniards. Thus, relatives, who have no personal enmity against each other, unwittingly become enemies during the war. But since some *peninsulares* and Philippine-born Spaniards, like Ramon Arroyo, stand alongside Cristobal, this means that the question of identity or identification is ultimately a matter of sentiment and conviction, rather than that of blood.

Istak’s situation, however, is different: his exposure to an expanding range of experiences has not only brought about an awareness of his membership in increasingly wider circles of identity—family, region, country, in that order—but it has also demanded, in those difficult times, a reversal of the familiar order of his attachment, so that country comes before family.

As observed earlier, the first half of the novel deals with the family’s flight from Po-on and the founding of their new village, Cabugawan; most of the second half deals with Istak’s pursuit of General Aguinaldo in the

Ilokos. Flight and pursuit are essentially complementary movements, or mirror images. And this again reinforces the formal balance that underlies the structure of the novel. If the name of the enemy has changed, the risks have not.

Once, in Po-on, a Spanish captain has shot him and left him for dead; in Baugen, an American strikes him unconscious as he covers a young girl who has been raped and shot dead by the soldiers. Yet, for all his sacrifices, we know that nothing will really make any difference. History has already completed the rest of the story. General Aguinaldo, forewarned or not, will eventually fall into the hands of the enemies. But, for a while, our knowledge of the historical outcome and Istak's dogged determination to guide the general to safety creates dramatic irony; And when the young General del Pilar, a Tagalog, looks down upon this poor Ilokano emissary and rejects his warnings about a secret trail at Tirad Pass, we finally see the inexorable confirmation of destiny.

Although General del Pilar is "fated" to make his last futile stand at Mount Tirad, Istak is not. Having fulfilled his mission, he is free to leave and return to Cabugawan and his family. In fact, the Tagalogs do not want him around, they do not trust him because he is an Ilokano. They encourage him to leave and surrender, to save his own skin.

Yet, despite their distrust and rejection, despite their ridicule—the devoted family man, the staunch man of peace, the gentle giver of life—decides to give up family, peace, and life so that other Filipinos may continue having them. In his willingness to sacrifice the self to a higher purpose and for others, Eustaquio resembles Elias in Rizal and Amado in Ty-Casper.

While still an acolyte in Cabugaw, Istak wrote:

We go from one darkness to another and in between, the hidden light of the world, of knowledge. We open our eyes and in this circle of light, we see not just ourselves but others who are our likenesses. This light tells us all men are brothers, but even brothers kill one another, and it is in this light where all this happens. But living in this dazzling light does not blind us to what lies beyond the darkness from where we emerged and where we are going. It is faith which makes our journey possible though it be marred by

the unkindness of men, their eternal faulting, before we pass on to another darkness (47-48).

With its almost Biblical cadence, the passage is obviously meant by the young Istak to describe man's brief and imperfect sojourn through life, from birth to death. Yet, not too surprisingly, it also suggests the historical context of the novel. The two colonial periods through which the characters move are, inarguably, dark periods in the history of the Filipino people; and, the bipartite division of the novel demarcates the two darknesses. The transition from one to the other is filled with new knowledge and liberating visions, as well as violence. One form of that violence is the mutual destruction of brothers by brothers—Spaniards, Americans, and Filipinos killing one another.

Colonial oppressions are also acts of unkindness. From self-identity, the characters define themselves in relation to others, whom they see as their coequals, their likenesses. And the promise of freedom, like faith, is the sustaining force in the characters' struggles to overcome the persecutions of their own brothers.

This possible allegorical interpretation of the passage, while admittedly simplistic, somehow anticipates and reflects with uncanny accuracy the narrative movement and the structural design of the novel. It is in such felicitous touches, in the repetition and restatement of patterns, big and small, that the theme is beautifully and memorably amplified.