

F. Sionil Jose and His Women Characters

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Critics of women studies opine that the roles women portray in Philippine literature are distinguishable. They can be wife, mother, daughter, sister, mistress, seductress, witch, and outcast. Margarita Orendain (“The Invincible Populace: Women in Narratives for Children on the Cordillera,” 1996) observes that the possibilities of roles by which women are portrayed and represented in much of Philippine literature are defined in the absolute terms of the good and of the scourged. This view is substantiated by studies that apparently point to some distinct characteristics that women characters in fiction possess. In effect, several studies about women have rendered various characterizations and opinions of women in general, and the Filipino woman in particular. But Mina Roces (2000, citing Badinas, 1994) posits that, in the past, women characters were rarely seen to be political agents of change unless they held political office; and that, since they were not empowered, images of women have usually been associated with a particular phenomenon called victimization, exploitation, and commodification.

But in more recent texts women characters are no longer portrayed as submissive and long-suffering wives or dutiful and self-sacrificing mothers or daughters. Neither are they portrayed as the unthinking masochistic sex objects of male lust, nor the cruel, vengeful woman that appears in many male-authored texts. Instead, they have been portrayed as strong individuals who show control of themselves and who can stand firmly on their decisions with aggression. The stories of Estrella Alfon and Aida Rivera Ford, for instance, show women whose strength and audacity could be considered far beyond what is expected of them. In Alfon’s story “Magnificence,” the mother

fought for her daughter who would have been victimized by a pedophilic family friend disguising himself as an affectionate minder of her children (Reynan M. Santos, 2017)

Helen Lopez (“The Outsider Within: The Cultural Representation of Women in Selected Tagalog Novels of the 1920s,” 1992) finds that the portrayals of women in Philippine literature reinforce traditional stereotypes within the patriarchal order. Lilia Santiago (as cited by Kintanar, 1992) agrees with Lopez. In her own survey of women characters in the novels of Jose Rizal, Amado V. Hernandez and Nick Joaquin, she has found them generally portrayed as weak, indecisive, if not, outright victims and wretches. More interestingly, her study draws a link between the condition of women and the nation’s conditions at the time these novels were written. They were realistic portrayals and metaphors for the various crises the country went through at those times.

Within this context, a study on the women characters of an award-winning writer can be seen as an important contribution not only to the scholarship on women literature, but also to Philippine literature in general. A noted Filipino writer whose works spanned a long period of time since the 1930s, Sionil Jose cannot be allowed to simply leave the corridors of Philippine literature without the recognition due him. The analyses cover only the women characters from his two short story anthologies, namely, *The God Stealer and Other Stories* and *Waywaya and Other Stories*. This writer believes that Sionil Jose’s depiction of women characters is intriguing, as other critics have observed.

Woman as Doormat

A suffering woman is seen as a martyr. In her dissertation, *Female Suffering in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, Allison Adair Alberts (2014) posits that the late medieval Latin Church’s devotional practice adapted the Roman martyr’s standard—in which physical suffering leads to salvation and glory—as imagined, emotional suffering. Most late medieval English Christians never encountered religious persecution, but they understood that this largely self-induced, emotional pain reaped the same reward as the early martyrs’ physical pain. Alberts further said that uniting secular and religious literature across the medieval and early modern divide has shown how the martyr’s example deeply influences—though

simultaneously problematizes—popular constructions of the feminine ideal. *Female Suffering* analyzes how and why texts consistently return to suffering as a means to reinforce, interrogate, or refute cultural expectations of women. Albert's piece is of help in understanding the suffering women in the selected stories of Sionil Jose.

Sionil Jose's stories—"The Heirs," "Two Letters," "Riddle," "The Exile," and "Tong"—present women who sacrifice their personal pleasures and dreams for the interest of their loved ones and families. These are women who give more premium to the welfare of their loved ones despite their miserable conditions. This brings to mind another writer, Marjorie M. Evasco (1992), who opines that one of the most dominant images projected by women in early Philippine literature is that of the silently suffering martyr. As mother, wife, lover, sister, or daughter, she is molded after the image of the ideal woman—the Virgin Mother (Mother Mary for Catholics) who suffers in silence and denies her wounds for the sake of love. These include women who have settled with the idea of what is perceived to be their primary role in life—bearing children. And with this role, her personal whims must not come to the fore.

Thus, Josefina in "The Heirs" does not disappoint Don Jacinto when she is told, "Don Jacinto was going to have a woman to keep house for him... expected her to be a fecund bearer of children." She contents herself with being a domesticated wife who opts to always stay at home and submits to whatever her husband demands from her. Although perceived initially to have a strong character, since she descends from a wealthy Spanish businessman, she succumbs to the pressure of producing the children of her more powerful and richer husband. The same image is seen in Don Jacinto's daughter-in-law, from whom his son, Don Felix, also demands heirs. After she gives him a sickly-looking daughter, a fiery Don Felix asks for a son: "... what is the use of this house if there are no male children to enliven it!" His constant demand for male heirs causes her unhappiness and desperation, which eventually leads to her insanity. In the desolate asylum, she regresses further emotionally and physically until she dies.

In "Two Letters," Nana Antonia is the typical mother who chooses to embrace hardships and sacrifices so her children can pursue their studies. Despite her advanced age and having a fragile condition, she works like a slave as she dreams for a bright future for her children. Her son, whom she sent to a law school in the city does not actually know of her predicament in

the province. The story does not mention if her sufferings have ended and if she has realized her dreams.

Ella Jacinto in “Riddle” is likewise a martyr. In her youth, she dreamt big “...talking big, owning the sky, dreaming of the good life.” But after her elopement with a former schoolmate who projected an image of opulence and comfort, everything changes. He turns out to be “a slob, a braggart and a loudmouth,” who cannot provide her the comfortable life he has bragged about. Having borne him three children, Ella sacrifices her happiness and continues to live in misery, aggravated by the physical and emotional maltreatment from her husband. She seeks to keep the family intact despite being ridiculed for her situation—the opposite of what she has aspired for, though she is hopeful that everything will still end with a happy note. With regret, she would tell her childhood friends, “My husband is all right. It didn’t turn out to be as I expected. Time teaches a lot of things.”

Nena in “The Exile” foregoes her own happiness for the sake of her parents and siblings. At a very young age, she had already embraced suffering. “She was twelve when she came to the old house. She helped in the kitchen most of the time; she was a tenant’s daughter and had come to work...” But her natural charm and pleasant ways easily catch the attention of her politician landlord who sends her to school so “she could be more useful.” She metamorphoses into the brilliant and confident woman her landlord envisioned her to be, and becomes one of his mistresses. Nena knows the predicament, her prime concern is to give her family the comfortable life she has dreamed of. She sacrifices her honor and dignity and a decent life so she can improve the impoverished condition of her family. Another character in the same story is the wife of Nena’s landlord, who cannot contain her philandering husband. His infidelity becomes more overt when he even brings home his mistresses, and shows his wife and children how he adores and flatters them. But the wife treats everything as normal, to the children’s disappointment.

Meanwhile, in the story “Tong,” the female character suffers emotionally, because she is forced to marry a wealthy Chinese widower, so her uncle will be saved from bankruptcy. As a result, she foregoes her own happiness and leads a miserable life. She becomes the “tong”—the bribery fee—of her uncle.

The above discussion confirms that women, although they may have the option to choose happiness and contentment, end up in miserable

situations, because of circumstances which seem to be out of their control. They are likewise projected as women who are molded to suffer for the rest of their lives and with no resolve to improve their lot.

Woman as Victim

Victims refer to people who are caught up in an asymmetric relationship or situation. They are those who suffer injury and harm by forces beyond their control. In the Philippines, many writers portray women as victims of circumstances, and even of their own personal convictions and decisions. As a result, they live in a limbo and become pathetically unconscious of other alternatives to living.

But the women characters of Sionil Jose apparently do not suffer physical pain only. In “The Forest,” a beautiful, innocent, and naïve woman is victimized by a young military officer. Physically attracted to him, she easily gives in to his whims and lustful desires, resulting in her pregnancy. Because he has no plans of marrying her, he proposes an abortion which she rejects. Angered, he eventually abandons her. Confused, devastated, and emotionally battered, she cannot think of any other solution to end her problem but to jump from a cliff. Another nameless woman is victimized by another man in uniform in this same story. Apparently, her innocence, naiveté, and simplicity are abused, and unfortunately her miserable plight is only known after she is discovered unconscious in the hills with “lacerated breasts and the pubis that was mashed.” People would recognize her as “the one who entertained the squad of army who got the pro kits in the Red Cross station.” No one could tell what she had done to merit such brutality. But what is clear is she was stripped of dignity which could have been her last defense after volunteering to be of service to her fellowmen.

In the second story of “Two Letters,” province-bred Elen, wanting to have a taste of the cosmopolitan lifestyle in the city, leaves behind her boyfriend, forgetting everything about him. Unfortunately, her new life in the city offers more misery than happiness. She is sexually abused by the son of her landlord and gets pregnant. Helpless and frustrated, she goes back to the province and faces the cruel reality of the consequences of her initial decision—her old boyfriend has forgotten her, and her province-mates loath her presence in their midst.

In “Flotsam,” Lita wants to lift her family out of poverty, and agrees to become a helper of a Chinese copra merchant, who also offers to send her to school. But the favor has an attachment to it, as she is constantly sexually harassed by the merchant. Devastated, she leaves her place and moves to Manila, hopeful to find work and to continue her studies. But misfortunes continue to haunt her and she ends up being a housemaid instead. Fortunately, she is able to meet a relative who promises to help her. But her kinswoman proves to be another “instrument” of misfortune, as she convinces her to become a prostitute. Eventually, she comes to love her new job, forgetting her dreams and aspirations. As she ages, she loses her charm and beauty, but is able to go on living by peddling sweepstakes tickets in the dirty streets of Quiapo. Based on how she is depicted by Sionil Jose, it is clear that Lita has been victimized not only physically, but also emotionally.

Meanwhile, Marina Salcedo in the story “Progress” is a victim of the bureaucratic process in the government agency she works in. Hopping from one section to another to get her papers done for a job promotion, she gets to meet the last person to sign them. But the latter refuses to, if she does not treat him to a dinner date. Thinking this could be the last step in her promotion, she agrees. The date turns out to be a disaster, as she ends up sexually abused.

Shinae in “The Refugee” is in a similar situation. As a tour guide of a history professor who visits Korea for lectures, she unconsciously takes the bait he offers, blinded by her admiration. After he tells her that she looks like his former lover in Hong Kong, Shinae easily falls for him. Their constant togetherness leads to intimacy, but she is told that he cannot reciprocate her feelings. Trapped by her fondness and admiration for the old professor, she becomes greatly confused and devastated, and is left to fend for herself as the professor leaves for another country.

Strong-willed and Aggressive Women

This third classification of Sionil Jose’s women characters is in sharp contrast to the first two earlier mentioned. Being aggressive and strong-willed, she is projected as audacious and resilient as well, an empowered woman.

In “Dama de Noche,” Ramona is determined to realize her grandiose dreams. She goes to Manila and pursues her studies, but fate is

uncooperative. She searches for ways to survive what she is going through, and uses her charms to befriend people who could help her. She meets Pepe Sevilla who volunteers to help, but his assistance is not enough. So she does not realize her plans, but though she fails in her dreams, she does not wallow in despair. She insists on living an independent life, refusing other people's help. Her response to the deplorable conditions shows her valor and bravery.

Dely, in the "Light Bringer," is one of her company's trusted executives. With a colleague as her lover, she does not mind being his mistress; and the relationship does not get in the way in their corporate life. But when the lover learns of how she has manipulated so that he has been demoted to make way for her promotion, she dumps him and ends their relationship. The decision might be painful, but Dely is determined to let go of him. For her, it is wiser to be alone, than to be tied to a relationship with a patronizing and narrow-minded man, who only thinks of his own feelings and self-interest.

In the story "Respectability," a nameless mistress attempts to reconcile a father and a son. This is not an easy task, begging her lover's son to visit him, since his days are numbered. Despite the cold treatment she gets from him, the mistress insists to no avail. The strength to see face to face the family of the man she has been caring for is not an easy task, and it takes courage and determination to do so, but she does it despite all the challenges. Her sincerity and loyalty to her lover might be considered the barometer for her inner strength.

Another woman who shows her own brand of valor is the widow in "Something is Wrong with my Hearing," who becomes the toast of gossipmongers, because no less than her own mother has spread the news that she has poisoned her own husband to death. In addition, living with blood relatives in animosity is quite a miserable situation. But for this widow, life continues even if she has been tagged as "an atheist as she never went to church... used dirty words... and was not at home most of the time." Unluckily, her own son does not side with her. But for all that she has been through, she continues to live with her family, and the gossipmongers in her neighborhood. Moreover, she is not seen to retaliate against her detractors.

In the story "Hero," the aggressive and strong-willed Linda would initially be involved in rallies and demonstrations as a young, university student. However, she realizes that fighting the oligarchs, Malacañang occupants, and the Americans is pointless. She also realizes that her heroism and idealism cannot bring her comfort. Thus, she works hard to get all the

things that she unconsciously desires at the expense of dignity and honor “...she gets even with the moneyed and powerful men by selling herself and peddling drugs.” She even questions her own father who has instilled in her the values of heroism, and for fighting for one’s country. “I don’t care about your war anymore,” she tells him, “I just want to get on and I don’t want to be tied up imprisoned by the past and its sentimentalism.” She bluntly adds that “one’s patriotism no longer has a place in the Filipino’s heart... everyone in the Philippines is a traitor... we are a nation of traitors, Papa.” Obviously, for Linda, the only way to conquer poverty and misery is to “join the bandwagon.” This, after she has seen how “her former friends had been living it up in the government, in business...”

Meanwhile, in “Arbol de Fuego,” Lorna shows her strength early on in life. She would claim “I was very poor... with not enough, never enough to eat... how did I get to school? By the sheerest guts, by the sheerest hard work. Any kind of work.” But, swayed by the promises of a young lover, Pepe, she becomes pregnant. Not the type to wallow in misery, she searches for Arturo, the father of Pepe, and makes him fall for her. She transforms into a very ambitious and confident woman, to the extent that she would demand for Pepe’s return from the U.S. so he could marry her. The story hints that she is able to get what she wanted.

In “The Wall Between Us,” Ligaya refuses to be caged in an environment that she abhors. She “commits an unforgivable offense,” causing her to be evicted from a dormitory run by nuns. She goes to her lover’s house only to find out that, because of sibling rivalry, he has left his house, leaving his older brother as occupant. Ligaya insists on living in the house, so that the older brother becomes her new lover. Her manipulateness shows she is a woman in full control of her life. She is a strong-willed woman.

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that Sionil Jose strikes a balance in the depiction of women characters in his fiction. If he has portrayed women as sufferers, victims of people and events, he also has depicted women whose strength and resilience counter life’s difficulties. In an article for *Philippine Star*, “The Women in My Fiction,” he writes:

I’ve attempted to make my fictional women as real, so that my readers will be convinced of their authenticity, although they are obviously symbols. As such, they should not appear as artificial constructs. Organic symbolism

gives a work of art, a novel, a deeper meaning, illustrating the precious ambiguity of art. Its discovery is one of the ineffable pleasures of reading. More than this, the reader is unconsciously, yet profoundly, bonded with his past, and the national experience as recorded in the fictional imagination.”

I have never really tried to categorize the women in my novels and short stories... Almost all the women in my fiction are creatures of the imagination. If ever one is based on a real person, I made sure dissimilarities exist. My fictional women came from various places and from all walks of life: Tondo and Forbes Park, the mountains and the small towns and bucolic villages. I researched on their backgrounds. A teacher is not just a teacher—I give her character, her history, education, her relationships. She appears in the story as a complete person.”

From the article, we see glimpses of how Sionil Jose has depicted women in his fiction. From a personal perspective, this writer loves how the famous writer is able to present different images of the Filipina, a wide variety of female fictional characters.

In a chance encounter with F. Sionil Jose in my university—he was the keynote speaker of the Iligan National Writers Workshop—I personally told him that I made a study of his short stories. He asked if I liked his short story anthologies, and I answered in the affirmative. But I got his enthusiastic nod when I told him that I was intrigued by his depiction of women characters.

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