

Unmasking the Polite and the Perfumed: F. Sionil Jose's *The Feet of Juan Bacnang* as Allegory of an Ailing Nation

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Spanish colonialism was not the product of unilateral action by Iberian *conquistadores* and *frailes* but alliances with local chiefs who provided the resources, manpower, local knowledge and leadership that made possible the extension of Spanish power. Chiefs were coopted with titles, positions, and privileges, but, more important, were actively engaged in calculations of risk and benefit in the face of a new power.

- Resil B. Mojares, 2006

How did they become so powerful, even acceptable to us? Simple. They co-opted the slogans of nation. They proclaimed themselves as nationalists who protect us from all foreign incursions in our economy, in our culture. Decolonize your minds, they cry out. Yes! They are powerful because we believe them.

- F. Sionil Jose, 2011

We also ventured that the reason why there seems no end to elite rule is that those in power create or reproduce the conditions for their own reproduction or perpetuation considering that they control the coercive and ideological instruments or agencies of the state. Otherwise, as Marx said, they won't last a year.

- Elmer Ordonez, 2012

The Italian poet Dante Alighieri wrote that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. If he were still alive, he would probably have given himself a tap on the back for a clear prognostic of what was to become the Philippine socio-political landscape. One hundred and twenty years after the first declaration of the country's independence from Spain's tyrannical three-century rule, the Philippines is yet to see a nation free of corrupt government and a real democracy—one that is not of the rich. F. Sionil Jose's latest magnum opus of a novel titled *The Feet of Juan Bacnang* allegorizes this image of the Philippines as a country suppurated with exploitation, and social injustice by its own elites.

The novel shows the glaring material difference between the poor and the rich and powerful. But more importantly, the novel exposes the ugliness of those considered the polite and the perfumed of Philippine society. It also renders a scathing commentary on the way these same people—from whom the so-called brains of the nation emanate—are complicit in preventing the Philippines from rising as a nation. The story begins with the final moments of Juan Bacnang's life while he ruminates on ending the bizarre life he has led, from being a poor, scrawny boy in the unheard barrio of Nalipatan to becoming the right (read: murderous) hand of the country's most powerful man. The protagonist Bacnang is an illegitimate boy from Ilocandia. He was born out of rape. As indirectly implied by his mother, his father is a rich mestizo in Manila and holds an important political position. He later finds out that his father is Senator Juan dela Cruz III, a World War II guerilla, and an obscenely rich and powerful man in the political circles in Manila.

The novel chronicles the boy's journey from dire poverty to becoming instantly wealthy courtesy of the part of his body which he hates the most—his feet. Bacnang has a pair of ugly feet with big toes webbed to the rest as the tissues are undifferentiated. Medically known as syndactyly, his feet are

hideously small, broad, and smelly, a condition which is considered ominous. Later in the novel, it is revealed that Bacnang inherited this deformity from his father and he would pass it on to his own son. The same set of unsightly feet which signify deformity of the body and the spirit are also his passport to a rollercoaster life of extravagance.

His feet become his ticket to his wealthy and powerful father, and they come in handy when he needs to flee Nalipatan after “accidentally” murdering his childhood best friend out of jealous rage, raping the girl he lusts after. Upon carefully inspecting Juan’s feet, Senator dela Cruz III finally acknowledged Bacnang as his own son, joyfully pronouncing him to be Juan Bacnang dela Cruz IV. He has long been unsuccessful in producing a male heir despite his collection of women. This meeting with the Senator is Bacnang’s moment to be catapulted into the heady life of fortune and crime. Henceforth, he breathtakingly transforms from a rural boy to a lawyer, who graduates from a leading university; and then to a business magnate who would be known as “Sunny Johnny”—the name that ironically marks his descent into the insidious and corrupt elite.

The novel describes Bacnang as a young, charming, and intelligent boy. He is also frugal, diligent, and determined amidst the hardship that typecast the Ilokano. But deep within him, he is consumed with an insatiable desire for the flesh. One of his first crimes was raping a childhood friend, and after having been accepted as heir to the dela Cruz empire, he surrounds himself with more women. His newfound wealth and power must have made him even more ravenous for sex as he keeps an incestuous relationship with his half-sister, rescues the girl he raped in the barrio from prostitution, marries an heiress from the South, and keeps his wife’s sister as a mistress. Along with this virile power is his proclivity for crime and corruption. Doing wrong has become very easy for him.

In examining Juan Bacnang’s life, one can see the rapaciousness of the Philippine elite. The novel reveals the foulest secrets, and depicts the ugliest truths about the lives of our *crème de la crème*. However, these desolate realities must also be taken reflectively. The need to review how these have been accepted hypocritically by Philippine society is imperative. Using the novel as my springboard for discussion in this paper, I would like to uncover how the Philippines has fostered a culture of impunity through the evils of its elite.

Sex and the Sins of the Fathers

The novel says that Sunny Johnny has an unquenchable appetite for sex. He has sexual intercourse five or six times in a night, and he has come to terms with this as normal. This sexual insatiability seems to trigger other urges. Johnny becomes overwhelmed with ambition. We follow his breathtaking rise to power as the son of the Senator, and as nephew of the mysterious, powerful character called The Leader, and his own irreversible demise as a human being. His perversion is masked by his physical prowess, keen instincts, organizational skills, and uncanny good looks, which make him attractive to many women. This seems to mirror our own political leaders, whose clean and well-mannered image actually hides their corruption, greed, and other horrid qualities. And, pathetically, even if the Filipinos know the ugly truth about their leaders' corruption, they keep on electing them to office. The indifference of the Filipinos has made them accept that their leaders are inutile and murderous, and they will keep on voting for them just because of their entertainment value, or their names recall.

Historically speaking, the Philippines has had a turbulent colonial narrative that puts the elite at the forefront. Resil B. Mojares in his book *Brains of the Nation* (2016) traces the manner by which the elite have come to be during the colonial times. He writes that imperial knowledge-building's primary intention was not so much to understand the colonized *indios* per se, but rather it was driven by motives of reconnaissance, conversion, proselytization, and conquest. Its main ideological reasons were to establish ecclesiastical and military control, and "enforcing a European conception of order on a primitive 'anarchy' of facts, converting natives to a 'superior' way of life (and death), marking the differences of biology and culture that authorize racial and political hierarchies" (Mojares 2016: 387). He adds that although the natives felt the results of the European knowledge-building, they never had access to these texts because these were produced for Europe which in effect objectified the natives (388).

But the precolonial society already had their own wealth of indigenous knowledge. According to Mojares, these traditions of knowledge were most vital in oral, ritual, and localized forms which did not concur with the Western mode of discourse production, hence the deprivileging of these native forms of knowledge. Attached to this deprivileging is the persecution and cooptation of native bards, seers, and ritual specialists who held the indigenous knowledge, as they were viewed as bearers of "superstitions" and

agents of resistance by the Spaniards (Mojares 2016: 390). These bards, seers, and ritual specialists could well have been our first cognoscenti, but with the new power, their only choice was to engage it in the way that would ensure their own survival. And with their cooptation, they became representatives of a new regime of knowledge and power. Mojares explains:

...Spaniards set the ground in which a native “intelligentsia” began to emerge. It was the practice of missionaries to recruit talented young men, usually from the local elite (later called *principalia*), as informants, translators, copyists, catechists, *cantores* (singers), *fiscales* (parish secretaries), and *sacristanes* (acolytes)...we do not only have a case of young, compliant natives conscripted as mission assistants but natives actively engaging Spaniards to protect old prerogatives or appropriate new sources of power. Members of the indigenous elite parlayed their status and wealth to gain preferments in colonial church and government. They became the *donados* and *beatas* (auxillaries of the religious orders), soldiers and lower-rank officers, and the first university students... *Principales* parlayed “local knowledge” and control of manpower and resources to bolster their position vis-à-vis the Spanish priest. They proved quite skillful in exploiting to their advantage the instruments of the colonial regime. (396)

This gives us a picture of how these native elites (who might have been the seers, bards, and the *babaylanes* in another time) access new sources of power. These people had access to two worlds, as signified by their ability to speak two languages—their own language and the colonizer’s. This ability to shuttle between two systems of signs, says Mojares, could be viewed both positively and negatively (2016: 400): positively, as this ability translates to opportunities to hold resources and is thus seen as worthy of emulation, and negatively, because speaking two languages may also mean the propensity to become a turncoat with reference to a snake’s forked tongue.

In other words, the *principalia* or the native elite, driven by their economic empowerment as the conqueror’s own colonial agents, have already had the penchant for cultural and social advancement. In Caroline

Hau's article, "Sins of the Father: The Elite in Philippine Literature," in *The Manila Review* (2014), she presents a number of iterations of the word "elite." This include among others "upper classes," "haves," "the rich," "*mayaman*," "*makapangyarihan*," "cacique," "*ilustrados*," and even "the middle classes." The word "elite," according to Hau, has come to correlate with wealth, power, influence, status, education, ethnicity, leadership, talent, and lifestyle. She expounds that their presence has always been felt and their actions have real consequences, and that their relations with each other and with the rest of the Filipino people have an important bearing on the fortunes (and perhaps misfortunes, if I may add) of the Philippine nation-state (Hau 2014: 3). She adds:

In a sense, "elite," along with its cognate "elitist" (*elitista* in Tagalog), is the name that scholars, students, media practitioners and other professionals, and activists give to the human agency behind the problems and failures besetting the Philippines. Deemed traitorous, colonial-minded, opportunistic, predatory, *mayabang* (arrogant), and indifferent to the plight of less privileged others, "elite" is one element of a politically potent binary system of values, with the "the poor," "the masses," and "the people" constituting the opposing element. (3)

In his novel, F. Sionil Jose confirms these images of the elite in his portrayal of Juan Bacnang. Like the native elites during the colonial period who were admired and mistrusted at once, Sunny Johnny acquires a reputation for "humility... natural good humor and charm, his cultivated carefulness not to hurt or demean anyone by rash and improper language." Yet, towards the novel's conclusion, he has become irreparably corrupted by his work for the dictator. He burns villages, masterminds kidnapping for ransom, and murders his own brother-in-law. Committing a crime has become so easy for him. As the novel progresses, we are told that "(a)lthough he admitted the sin, that admission became just one more plate, one more scale on his body armor. Soon came a time when sin or crime became not a moral condition but just one of those social impediments to be avoided." And as all the sins pile up, they reveal themselves in the epidermal corruption that Juan and his Boss the President suffer (Hau 2014: 5). How apt is the image of Sunny Johnny's skin turning white to obliquely refer to the polite and the

perfumed, and that his skin's whiteness to be skin actually being torn away as it molts like that of a reptile to mean the hidden irredeemable perversion of the elite.

Sunny Johnny's voracious hunger for sex also mirrors how the elite are rapacious in accumulating social and cultural advantage through exploitation of available power sources in order to ensure their illicit affairs. The novel traces the roots of this malady and declares that the moral decay affecting our leaders is exacerbated by our colonial history when all the rules were thrown out and everyone fended for one's self. Colonialism conditioned our elite to become the inutile and corrupted leaders they are now, as they unfortunately imbibed the vices, not the virtues, of the colonial powers that they had intercourse with, figuratively and perhaps literally (Mercado 2013). For Sunny Johnny, this corruption would manifest as the growing abscess on his skin and would culminate in his final transmutation into a terrifying hooved and horned beast of the Armageddon.

The Inchoate Nation

F. Sionil Jose does not mince words in criticizing the socio-political climate of the Philippines. In the novel, he explains the failure of the Philippines to become a real nation through the character of an honest journalist named Narciso A. Tured. In his conversation with Sunny Johnny, Tured gives a bleak picture of the Philippines. He says, "What went wrong in the past is what will go wrong with our present leaders, Mr. dela Cruz, including the man you believe in. They never transcended themselves, their great egos—and, of course, their familial and ethnic loyalties. This is the reason we are not a nation. There is always something for them, something tucked in fine print, in their subconscious."

Jose depicts this condition of the Philippines, and he points to the elite as the main culprit of the country's state of inchoateness. In his own blog entry titled "Past, Present, And" (<http://www.fsioniljose.com/blog/past-present-and> 2016), Jose vehemently demands the unmasking of these elites who are comfortably occupying bureaucratic sinecures. He writes:

In our apathy, we have come to accept that many Filipino voters will vote for candidates who are popular although inutile, whose names are easy to remember and who are crowd pleasers. They will not look into the candidates' past,

their achievements or lack of it. And so we deserve the nincompoops that we put in Malacañang and in Congress...

The widespread destitution in our country cries for a revolution that will wipe out the oligarchy which has colonized this nation...

...we must now face the ugliest of truths about some of our leaders—they are murderers. This is the theme of my last novel, *The Feet of Juan Bacnang*. The novel illustrates the hypocritical acceptance of these killers by Philippine society and the impunity of their evil. To eliminate them, we need a leader who is not afraid of them and can restore justice in Philippine society. (2016)

Jose is saying that these elites or the oligarchy were the same acolytes of the old colonial masters who have coopted the ideas and the slogans of revolution, thereby faking their nationalism in order to colonize their own people. In her seminal book, *Necessary Fictions: Philippine Literature and the Nation, 1946-1980* (2000), Hau emphasizes a similar postcolonial sentiment. She stresses that the Philippine post-independence history gave the lie to the promise of freedom, sovereignty, and progress, such that the hand of the colonial past remained oppressively visible in the present. For Hau, the new oppression did not simply take the form of the exploitative foreigner or outsider, but the other within, an other that is also Filipino (Hau 2000: 101).

The novel manifests this unfortunate truth about the kind of leaders that we have. In their ineptness, the leaders think so little of the masses, and this is exemplified in the advice of Sunny Johnny's senator-father to him: "Look around you, around us. It is those who know the people, their strengths and weaknesses, how they will react as individuals—not citizens of a town, a region or nation. Look around you—because we are individuals and not citizens, we commit crimes, we abuse others, all in the name of our family, our clan... We have no memory at all—the kind of memory that will build a nation." The senator's counsel to his son shows the Machiavellian philosophy of crime and cruelty that our leaders use in governing. In the process of exercising their political power, they revert back to the idea of individualism and forget the concept of the collective community with which they are supposed to adhere. In a manner of speaking, Hau and Mojares

concur with Jose that the elite failed as vanguards of the nation with their historic cooptation that betrays their greed and self-interest.

In the novel, Tured ties all the loose ends that reveal how the elites have caused an unfinished nationalist project. Referring to Sunny Johnny and his complicity with the crookedness of his Boss the President, Tured hits the nail in the head when he says that Johnny represents what has been wrong in this country for so long, because he is not alone. There are others of lesser means, but like him in the way they work; they ingratiate themselves into the minds of the ordinary Filipinos, who consider them as patrons, philanthropists and sadly, even patriots and nation-builders.

Coda: The Role of Literature

With his grim depiction of the Philippines in the novel, F. Sionil Jose also offers a glimmer of hope in the character of Tured who, despite offers of bribery and threats to his own dear life, resists the lure of corruption and remains resolutely critical of the oppressiveness of those who wield the coercive and ideological instruments of the state (Ordoñez 2012). In his final memoir, Tured challenges his readers:

How do we destroy the termites? First, we must locate them, then look at ourselves, our strengths and our weaknesses which they have exploited.

For those of us who have the awareness, our duty is to draw them into the open so that all of us can see them, how they destroy not just our bodies but our minds. We do not have the arms and the money which they possess but we have the numbers and it is us who feed them. So we must deny them their food—our votes in elections. If we cannot overwhelm them, let us shame them, ridicule them, expose them for the evil that they are. (Jose 2011: 262)

Using Tured's character as his mouthpiece, Jose calls for the unmasking of the truth behind the polite and the perfumed. He reminds the readers of their own power when they are able to strip naked the elite to reveal the sinister truth of their evil.

By using Tured's memoir as the concluding chapter of the novel, Jose symbolically discloses the role of the writer; he exalts the role of literature in exposing the fraudulence and evil that hides behind the façade of the elite and their brand of nationalism. In this novel, Jose shows that the evil characters of old are really the familiar politicians in our present day. Thus, Jose also demonstrates the fraught relationship between literature and nationalism.

Caroline Hau, likewise, discusses salient points about the fraught relationship between literature and nationalism in *Necessary Fictions*. In "The Problem of Consciousness," the first chapter, she interrogates issues of Philippine nationalism and their nuances. She reveals the entanglements that construct the very discourse of the Filipino as a historico-political collective. She anchors her interrogations of literature as an "ethical technology" concerned with the formation of the "ideal" citizen, one whose consciousness is supposed to have been shaped by the lessons of history, and is geared towards the imminent moral and economic progress of the nation.

Hau suggests the idea of locating national consciousness within the pedagogical practices of reading literature (2000: 16). In this connection, she surmises that reading a novel

refers to the institutional formulation and deployment of literature in the cause of nation formation. What cements the link between literature and nation formation is the fact that Philippine nationalism draws on a powerful pedagogical imperative towards ethical self-development. Literature is utilized strategically in the formation of an educated, "model" citizen-subject who aids in the transformation of his or her society. (16)

What Hau emphasizes is the role of teaching literature as the counterhegemonic movement's "ethical technology" intended to produce in the Filipino subject of moral and political knowledge and action. In other words, literature and pedagogy have the responsibility of forming the nation and producing citizens. It goes without saying that reading literature for its "moral" and "truth-telling" content is "contaminated" with different political investments, thus allowing for the exploration of the problems of fostering nationalist consciousness (17).

In the third chapter, "Literature and History" Hau discusses how literature is important not only in the formation of a national consciousness, but also in the collective memory of the nation. For Hau, literature as a repository of memory reorients the language of recollection toward that of reflection. She calls this the demon of comparisons, which she adds should induce critical thought.

What the country is facing today is the threat of collective amnesia brought about by the same hooligans, the polite and the perfumed, who have abused the nation. One hundred and twenty years after the declaration of the country's independence and after several EDSA "revolutions," the elites still lord over while the masses are perpetually left on the fringes. Our history is bound to be erased, and we might not learn from the lessons of the past, or be able to expose evil for what it truly is. Unless we strengthen our arts and culture, most especially our literary education.

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