

# Leaving Rosales, Leaving Sipnget: Trauma and History in F. Sionil José's *My Brother, My Executioner*

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## Introduction: A Narrative of Pain

**M**y *Brother, My Executioner*, the third book in F. Sionil José's *Rosales Saga*, is most heart-rending. Its disturbing potency is on par with that of José Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* or Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart*. In my literature classes, I am no longer surprised by my students' reactions after they have read the novel. Girls confess that they have wept buckets of tears over the story, and boys linger at the end of the class, a troubled expression in their eyes, and ask, "What happened to Luis Asperri?" as if inquiring after the well-being of a close friend. The novel has this kind of remarkable effect—gripping the readers to form an emotional affinity with it. Critic Lito Zulueta has pointed out that José's novels have the capacity "to summon sentiments and passions that are deeply human and heartfelt. The power strikes at the core of the person, the impenetrable soul that is the repository of memories and desires" (143).

Scholars such as Gelacio Guillermo, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, and Thelma Kintanar have viewed José's protagonists as "failed intellectuals," incapable of effecting a positive change in society.<sup>1</sup> This, according to Kintanar, is symptomatic of the imposition of Western intellectualism, which seems futile in addressing Third World problems, such as class disparities, poverty, and corruption. However, shall we consider the problematic conditions of José's characters merely on the level of intellectualism? This kind of approach

might serve to abstract and isolate the individual dilemma without regard for any affecting personal determinants and socio-historical contingencies that might have shaped the character into what s/he is.

In this essay, I view José's writing as a "historical act," and *My Brother, My Executioner* as a narrative of pain. I examine how the novel re-constructs representations of individual pain and trauma, and how these representations are inextricably linked to a larger history, the history of trauma and violence in the Philippines. A novel of such intricate design and magnitude has set the individual narrative against a backdrop of historical events, such as the peasant-based colorum uprisings of the 1930s, the cacique system in the rural areas, the Japanese Occupation, and the Hukbalahap conflicts. The main character's short turbulent life parallels that of an emerging nation in socio-political turmoil. S/he becomes an "unwitting" witness to the history and memory of violence, devastation, and death. My investigation is informed by the trauma theories of Sigmund Freud and Cathy Caruth, among others.

### **The Latency of Individual Trauma**

*My Brother, My Executioner* opens with Luis Asperri returning to Rosales to visit his ailing father. Of illegitimate birth, he is the offspring of the union between Don Vicente, the powerful landlord of Rosales, Pangasinan, and Nena, a poor peasant who once worked in the Asperri mansion. Luis has left college and assumed the editorship of *Our Time*, a pretentious left-leaning magazine owned by the business mogul Eduardo Dantes. Abiding by his father's wish, Luis marries his cousin, Trining, to keep the family wealth, to the anguish of his lover, Ester Dantes, who then commits suicide. When his father passes, Luis becomes the new landlord. The novel ends with the Huks' destruction of Rosales, headed by Luis' half-brother, Commander Victor.

In the novel, we perceive that Luis Asperri, an intelligent young man, is wracked by doubts, bitterness, and melancholy. He seems incapable of taking decisive actions, most of the time, subjecting himself to a state of inertia. Is he just immature or self-absorbed because of his birth origin? Of his singular state, Luis terms it "malaise," "ennui," "pain without surcease, even after the wound has healed and the scab has lifted" (76), "the sore that festers in me" (19), "these doubts that rankle in my mind and poison my heart" (77), "the cancerous hatreds that had embittered him" (94), and even calls it

“suffering” (76).

Using the lens of psychoanalysis, we treat Luis as one suffering from trauma. His recurring feelings of guilt, melancholy, and anger, and his attitude of detachment and deadened response are what medical sciences have deemed the indicators of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Luis’ trauma is “a wound of the mind.” In Freud’s exegesis on trauma, later significantly extended by Caruth, one crucial feature of trauma is its inherent forgetting and the latency of its manifestation.<sup>2</sup> Due to its sudden incursion into their life, the violent occurrence is not fully comprehended by the victim, or its overwhelming impact is not immediately processed by the victim’s consciousness. Thus, the object of trauma is repressed or neglected in the recesses of the victim’s mind cave. Symptoms appear belatedly in the forms of fears, nightmares, flashbacks, hallucinations, negative reflections, or aggressive conduct. Caruth declares, “[T]rauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (*Unclaimed Experience* 3).

Luis’ most traumatic moment takes place when he is thirteen years old. He is suddenly uprooted from his impoverished birthplace and displaced in the manor of a stranger called Father.<sup>3</sup> It seems that his mother has “abandoned” him to another fate. On the contrary, Luis is the one who chooses to depart, or rather, he initiates his immediate departure. When his mother tells him he must live with his father, Luis protests at first, refusing to believe that his mother would let him go. He then presumes that she does not want him, has never wanted him, because he is “different.” This experience has been predicated upon by Luis’ suspicion of his birth, for even when he was still a boy, he has been teased by playmates and gossiped about by neighbors. Thus, he resolves, “I’ll go tomorrow then, Mother” (29). And that night, as his mother gently covers a blanket on him, Luis turns away and whispers, “Leave me, Mother” (30).

War has estranged Luis from Rosales and Sipnget. He could have gone home every weekend or during the holidays. He could have visited his mother frequently. After four years of staying in Manila, Luis returns to Rosales only because his father is ill. On seeing Sipnget, his heart momentarily soars, “I am home. I am home. This is the place honored in the mind and sanctified in the heart...” (21). The very next day, ironically, he leaves “home.” The fact is, he continually leaves Rosales-Sipnget. Even after

he has become landlord, he desires to leave. Have years of being away made him an outsider to his own homeland? Is it his loathing of his own father? Or is “home” tied to the past “which must be escaped because it spelled perdition and all the bog and swamp of his muddied beginning” (21)?

From the perspective of trauma theory, Luis repeatedly embarks on this act of departure because he is unconsciously compelled to do so, whether he really wishes it or not.<sup>4</sup> Freud observes that, “the compulsion to repeat is attributable to the unconscious repressed within him” (58). Luis’ initial departure from Sipnget at the age of thirteen has been an excruciating experience, perhaps too painful for the boy to utterly comprehend it. The space of trauma is his own act of leaving, not his mother’s “abandonment,” nor his father’s “intrusion” into his life. In addition, the inherent forgetting and incomprehensibility of his trauma propel him to re-enact the experience. Leaving is a literal act of repeating the past. It is a belated re-possession of what originally has not been fully known.<sup>5</sup> Taking a step further, Luis resorts to dissociation.<sup>6</sup> He claims his mother is dead, as though he is ashamed of his peasant family. We perceive though that Luis has to “kill” his mother; he must deny the existence of Sipnget so he does not have to return to his hometown. For in returning, he must leave again, and leaving is such a traumatic experience.

This trope of departure is invariably associated with two other recurring images in the novel’s flashbacks. “To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Caruth, “Introduction,” *Trauma: Explorations* 4-5). The first image is that of Luis’ mother striking him, and second, the image of his mother spitting at the name of the man he called Father. Eight-year-old Luis once asked about his father and his mother slapped him. He recalls, “Her hand fell across his face, its sting sharp on his lips. He stared at her in utter surprise, feeling the pain spread across his face, but he did not cry. He did not move and he could feel something warm trickling down his mouth, and when she saw this she ran to the kitchen and with a damp towel wiped the blood off his lips” (José 27). Luis’ reaction is that of bewilderment, he does not grasp his mother’s anguish, nor does he understand why she has struck him: “...though always, the memory of her hand across his face and the taste of his own blood would be imperishable in his mind” (27-28). Caruth puts forward, “What returns to haunt the victim... is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known” (*Unclaimed Experience* 6). It is not

so much the physical pain from the slap that bothers Luis, but the image of the “blood trickling down his mouth.” For this is the same blood that the man he called Father possesses. This is the same blood of the “man whose face his mother said she could spit at without blinking” (9). The trickling blood connotes the extent of the violence and the depth of his mother’s hatred. It is also an image reflecting his mother’s wound, in its ambiguity, in its incomprehensibility. Luis’ trauma is thus inextricably connected with the trauma of another. These recurring images bear witness to the wound buried in Luis’ psyche, and the impact of its incomprehensibility.

Of more import is how Luis survives or attempts to live through the unconscious trauma. Caruth asserts that the trauma effect lies not merely in one’s encounter with the traumatic event—perhaps loss or death, but in “*having survived, precisely, without knowing it.*” (*Unclaimed Experience* 63). The survivor’s frequent remembrance of an image or event signifies more so his incomprehensibility of his survival. Thus, Luis’ motion of repetition is not an endeavor to understand a child’s loss of its mother, but rather, his claim to survival, an act of undulation “between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 7).

At the novel’s finale, when the Huk rebels attack Rosales and Luis finds himself and Trining alone in the red house, he refuses to leave. He justifies that “he knew in his bones that he could not live elsewhere—not in the city, which would remind him of Ester and of the lies he had told. Living here required courage, too, which he must now possess. Most of all, being in Rosales would confirm, for him at least, that illusory contract he must have with his own people” (179). This time, why does Luis not leave Rosales? Is it the trauma survivor attempting to master his incomprehensibility? Or is it another trauma—Luis’ shock and pain over Ester’s death and his latent response? Or is this the trauma borne out of the Sipnget massacre? Is the refusal to leave a drive to destruction and death?

### **Addressing the Historical Traumas**

In the novel, Luis’s individual trauma is related to the trauma of another—the national trauma, and of a larger history of violence. Curiously, the narrative does not dwell much on Luis’ life during the Japanese war. It simply mentions that Luis, secluded in Manila, has not “suffered” during the war, and bearing the Asperri name, has been spared. The only other semi-

lengthy account of Luis' activities during this period is his brief encounter with the original Commander Victor, retold in Luis' letter to his Father (which he never sends). Yet, somewhere between the silence of the paragraphs, a phrase indicates "He was frightened..." (52) Such economy nonetheless implies that something "frightful" has been entrenched in Luis' unconscious, for it is in the inherent "dismissal" that the trauma is initially experienced. The lines, "What did he really know about the war? He was too young to have been in the Army and too old to be with the women..." (52), suggest that the traumatic potency of war has not been fully perceived by the boy. This does not mean that Luis has not been "traumatized" by war's atrocities, where the number of killings and deaths far exceeds any human imagination. Luis writes, "I saw them kill... In their company I was part of a wave" (145). He recalls mere details such as "mutilated bodies, clean bullet holes" (188). "Through its very missing, his story... bears the impact of a trauma" (*Unclaimed Experience* 40). Luis' selective memory is a sign of the inherent forgetfulness—a self-imposed amnesia. His silences and omissions are precisely symptomatic of the trauma of history.

What is significant, however, is the novel's silence. For instance, of Manila during the Japanese invasion, we witness a brief account in Luis' letter to his father, "...that Manila would be safe... the conquerors did not bother us and we were adequately supplied not just with the amenities that you were used to but with the same dogged loyalty that your encargados and your tenants had always shown you" (144). Is this believable? How could Manila be "safe" when it was overrun by Japanese troops, and later, by American battalions and tanks? Civilians were tortured, raped, imprisoned, or killed. Blasts and bombings occurred everywhere. Wreckage and fatality scattered at every corner. In *The Battle for Manila*, Richard Connaughton, John Pimlott, and Duncan Anderson document, "During the month-long battle [between the Japanese and the American forces] which followed between February 3 and March 3, 1945, the city was completely destroyed: all that remained by the end were heaps of smouldering rubble. The charred bodies half-buried in the ruins bore terrible witness to a massacre beyond the nightmare of any Manileño. An estimated 100,000 Manileños were killed..." (15) And this larger history of violence succeeded in various towns and villages across the archipelago, even as it traversed the seas to replicate such horror in Southeast Asia, and in the Asia Pacific.

Memories of traumas, because of their inherent forgetting, can never be comprehensive or accurate, and may at times be subject to silences, omissions, exaggerations, and errors. However, the veracity of the survivor's account should never be an issue in the reconstruction of memory as history. Janet Walker declares, "It is precisely the quality of exaggeration that gives this memory its historical resonance" (136). The recollection itself, which serves as a testament of the traumatic incident, shows the claim to survival, and of resistance against extinction. "Manila is safe" because Luis has emerged physically unscathed, or so it seems. The hyperbolic statement "Manila is safe" sums up the insufficiency and obscurity of Luis' memory, but at the same time, testifies to the historicity of war's horrifying effect.

The novel reenacts post-war Hukbalahap activities in the north and creates an atmosphere of relentless tensions and imminent doom. Vivid, concrete images are deployed to define the uneasiness and anxiety that enshroud the Asperri household, for instances, the ubiquitous presence of the civilian guards, the "stone as large as duck's egg" thrown at Don Vicente's room, and the unpredicted appearance of Commander Victor in Luis's room. Luis realizes, "It suddenly became clear that Rosales was like the rest of the country—in turmoil—and it was here, right in this very house, that the turmoil was perhaps keenest and deepest" (8). The anxiety is exacerbated by discussions in newsrooms and rumors in social gatherings: "By Christmas talk was rife that the Huks were already in the outskirts of the city, that they could now attack Manila at will. Many provincial capitals in Central Luzon had been raided and occupied by them for at least one night before the Constabulary could retake them..." (63).

The novel chooses to reveal only the disquieting aftermath of the Sipngat massacre—a barren land, a bustling land transformed into "a flat and ugly wound" (96). Through Luis' eyes, we see "How lonely and empty Sipngat had become—a few buri palms, the bamboo brakes that lined the river bank, the green puffs of acacia, rows of broken buri palm trunks left to rot near the river bank, the water shining in the sun, the broad stony island, and the stubborn reeds, jutting above the water with their catch of moss and water lilies" (95). And the voices of the past—"the halting screech of his mother's scolding and the soothing remonstrances of an old man"—seem to have faded with Sipngat's annihilation. Here, the trauma is not in the violence of the act, but in the image of desolation, and in the few fragments of words and silences from Tio Joven. Luis is outraged by the tragedy, particularly by

his father's callous order in sending tractors to flatten out the village, thus obliterating the memory of its existence. Perhaps, he is even more devastated that he has *not known* of this until three months later. Sipnget's erasure makes him realize the "bleak truth," that "there was no sense in returning" (100). Again, the survivor is compelled to leave. The way the traumatic shock is not entirely perceived will return to haunt him later.

Universally, the historical power of trauma is an endless cycle of the past, of the violence and horrors of yesteryears. The conflict among brethren recurs throughout histories, beginning with Cain and Abel, and the descendants of Isaac against Ishmael's. *My Brother, My Executioner* is specifically the narrative of Filipinos in discord—Luis versus Victor, son versus father, the landlords versus the peasants, and the military versus the Huks. This narrative is a manifestation of the inherent latency of historical traumas that have afflicted our nation, including class exploitation and the loss of lands ("It is a land exploited by its own leaders, where the citizens are slaves of their own elite," 73); and the external colonialisms and internal colonialism ("The thieves who raided the GI quartermaster depots, who robbed the government treasury, the same ones who continue to do it now. These were the people who traded with the Japanese and got rich working for themselves. How can I believe in the Americans when they are responsible for making heroes of these scum?" 71). The war results in a pervasive tragedy—the collective trauma of the post-war generation. Call it ennui or malaise, but Luis' predicament is symptomatic of his generation's trauma. He contemplates,

It is a generation that really is aimless. We say that we have been sobered or matured by war, the generation that could be the trailblazer, for it is the generation that has known the first years of independence. But for a few exceptions, we are headed nowhere. The generation that preceded us was interested in independence. What are we really interested in? (129-130)

Is this the grim indication of their incomprehensibility of their own trauma, and even more so, of their survival?

In writing a narrative of pain, F. Sionil José performs a historical act, and *My Brother, My Executioner* serves as a witness to the wounds of our

history. In its re-imagining and representation of traumatic experiences, the novel seeks to recover stories of the wounds and the sores that are otherwise unavailable, that in their latency, need to be addressed.<sup>7</sup> “History is made when the pain of the past is both remembered and forgotten.” (Xiong, 213). In telling the story of Luis Asperri and how historical violence has intruded into his personal life, José investigates how the personal history of trauma is never an isolated case, but is bound to the traumas of others, and to the larger history of trauma. Caruth declares, “...that history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (*Unclaimed Experience* 23). Paradoxically, histories are never new, for they are uncanny repetitions of what have previously happened. They are nevertheless not just repetitions of one’s trauma, but more so, a recounting of one’s attempt to survive.<sup>8</sup> Thus, narratives of past traumas must be retold or written. It is in retelling, in writing, that their cry can be heard, that every possible survivor’s departure can be sensed. Philippine literature, as a history of departure, leaves the sites of adverse accidents and repeated traumas, to depart for another new history, or to seek the formation of an altered history.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, we—the girls and the boys of literature classes—play the inevitable role of the “therapeutic listeners,” attending particularly for the departures and the claims to survival. In this age of more personal vicissitudes, national tragedies and global traumas, we shall continue to read novels like *My Brother, My Executioner*, to remind ourselves, as Caruth has counseled, to “listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves” (“Introduction,” *Trauma: Explorations* 10-11).

## Endnotes

- 1 In her essay “Coming Full Circle: The Rosales Novels of F. Sionil Jose,” Thelma Kintanar declares that “Luis is the third in Jose’s portrait gallery of failed intellectuals... intensely aware of the social evil because he has once been and is indirectly still a victim, yet unable to act, easing his conscience by agonizing in beautiful prose. They [including Tony Samson and the narrator of *Tree*] serve as a commentary on the sometimes crippling effects of Western intellectualism on intelligent and sensitive individuals who have to live under Third World conditions of grinding poverty, social and economic inequality and unabated corruption” (24). Gelacio Guillermo, likewise, deems Luis Asperri a “bourgeois intellectual” and “angry young intellectual,” declaring that “Luis’s failing is his mind: it is not made to resolve problems in reality but to fabricate illusions” (34). Geok-lin Lim also suggests that Luis’ failing is of the intellect. He is one of those who have betrayed “personal ideals for material comforts” (85). Lim observes that “Luis relates this internal wound to his illegitimacy which has created a profound questioning of his identity and individual value. He symbolizes the dilemma of the intellectual who, because he is capable of reflection and analysis, is trapped in his subjective anomie and cannot act positively for social change” (86).
- 2 See Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*.
- 3 Interestingly, this echoes that of the Spanish wife of Don Vicente who has become “mad.” It is said that “she was a sensitive woman who was [not just] uprooted from hearth and home...” (José 43).
- 4 Freud in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” relays the *fort-da* game of a boy whose mother has to leave him during the day.
- 5 Caruth has observed that “The pathology consists, rather, solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event.” (“Introduction,” *Trauma: Explorations* 4-5)
- 6 Dissociation is a psychological defense mechanism which the survivor resorts to by distancing himself from events. According to Elizabeth Waites, it “allows the mind, in effect, to flee what the boy is experiencing, thus maintaining a selective conscious awareness that has survival value.

The shock of trauma produces states that are so different from ordinary waking life that they are not easily integrated with more normal experience." Quoted in Walker, 127.

- 7 As Cathy Caruth has said, "What the parable of the wound and the voice thus tells us, and what is at the heart of Freud's writing on trauma, both in what it says and in the stories it unwittingly tells, is that trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our every actions and our language." (*Unclaimed Experience* 4)
- 8 Caruth says, "Repetition, in other words, is not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died but, more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt to *claim one's survival*. If history is to be understood as the history of trauma, it is a history that is experienced as the endless attempt to assume one's survival as one's own." (*Unclaimed Experience* 63)
- 9 So it seems "the very possibility of history [is] in the nature of a traumatic departure" (*Unclaimed Experience* 14).

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