

# Pinoy Ako, Pinoy Tayo: Fashioning the Fragmentary Filipino Identity in Teaching F. Sionil Jose’s “The God Stealer”

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“**T**he God Stealer” is a short story written by National Artist F. Sionil José. It is his most anthologized work of fiction. It is not just a tale about an Ifugao stealing a religious idol, but also about the friendship that developed between a Filipino and an American, a representation of the relationship that developed between the “colonized” and the “colonizer.” This story won first prize in the 1959 Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature, and it is included in the book by José with a similar title, *The God Stealer and Other Stories*.

As a teacher of Philippine Literatures for many years, I have always included this story in my course reader, as I find it a good material and fertile springboard for discussing identity, culture, and tradition. As a facilitator, I would always begin the discussion by giving the summary of the story, or by asking several students to recount the events or scenes in the story.

The main characters in “The God Stealer” are Philip Latak and Sam Christie. Philip, better known as Ip-pig to his friends and relatives in the province, is an Ifugao who consequently lives and works in Manila and becomes a Christian. By being a city dweller, Philip becomes less sentimental about his cultural identity, beliefs, and customs. On the other hand, Sam Christie is an American who wants to see the rice terraces of the Mountain

Province. He is also interested in purchasing an original statue of an Ifugao god. Philip and Sam both work in a travel agency and Sam is Philip's boss.

During a feast honoring Philip for his return, the two characters are disappointed because of the unwillingness of the Ifugao people to sell any statue. Sam Christie wants to buy an authentic Ifugao idol—one that he could take home and treasure alongside his other precious collections—a Grecian urn, a Japanese samurai sword, a Siamese mask. Philip then decides to steal his grandfather's god to give to Sam as a token to repay him for the support and the salary raise given to him by Sam. After finding out that his god is missing and stolen by his own grandson, Philip's grandfather becomes depressed and dies. Because of his grandfather's passing, Philip decides not to return to Manila anymore with Sam as a way to repent and ward off his guilt. Philip transforms himself back into an Ifugao clothed in traditional garb, carving a new god to replace the old idol he has stolen.

Then, I would proceed to ask a general comprehension question about the narrative. Do you see symbolisms in the names of the two main characters of the story: Sam Christie and Philip (Ip-pig) Latak? Obviously, Philip stands for the Philippines and the typical Filipino. His surname "Latak" means the remains, the residue, or what seems to be left of the original. Sam refers to Uncle Sam or colonial America, and his surname Christie is an abridged or colloquial term for Christianity which means colonial Spain. Here, the representation of the colonizers of the Philippines is evidently portrayed.

Taking the selection further, I would attempt to raise the following comprehension questions:

1. What is a prose allegory? Is this story an example of a prose allegory? What do the following characters represent—Sam, Philip, Sadek, the grandfather?
2. Did Sam Christie deliberately steal the god? Why is the god stolen? What is the significance of the stolen god?
3. What is the essence of Philip's statement, "You can buy everything, even gods?"
4. Explain the last paragraph. Is there a resolution in Philip Latak at the end of the story? Prove your answer.
5. Ultimately, what is the story all about? What does it speak about Philippine traditions?

But like any teacher, I also intend to integrate other points which could make this discussion more interesting and introspective. Since the themes of the story center on colonial mentality, identity formation, going back to the roots, and the concept of nationhood, I try my best to work on these areas.

Whenever I raise the quintessential questions “Who is the Filipino?” or “What constitutes a Filipino?” I would always see students looking for or groping for tangible answers, either by describing qualities that make a Filipino, or explaining some cliché examples or reflections about Filipinoness, but never really hitting the mark.

It is a clincher.

I would take the time to offer some concepts pertaining to Philippine history and identity formation.

We learned about some tokenized assumptions of the complexity of the Filipino experience. We allegedly have inherited our lackadaisical, almost lethargic attitude from the Spaniards, revealed in the practice of the “siesta” (an early afternoon break from work) and the “mañana” habit (“mañana” is a Spanish term for “tomorrow,” the habit of “putting off for tomorrow what you can do today” or “due tomorrow, do tomorrow”). America’s influences on us proved to be massive, ranging from their independence of spirit which resulted in our virtual mimicry, their grandiose lifestyle which morphed in the formation of colonial mentality among us, and the Hollywoodization of our culture, the McDonaldization of our cuisine and the Rock and Rollization of our music, fashion, and the arts. We simply have become what we are today because they have made us this way.

But the Spaniards fled our country more than a century ago. The Americans, who never set us “totally free,” have been around, ingraining and integrating their presence and influence in our culture and ways of life. But the Americanization of society has been a long standing problem not only of the Philippines, but also of all the countries in the world. The US has positioned itself to be the international police dog. It has ingratiated itself to become the Orwellian Big Brother—watching the world from its own superior vantage point. Add to these, the influences of the Chinese, the Japanese, the Indians, the Malay, and the other Europeans which have also seeped into our culture and traditions.

The Filipino identity has long been subjected to various essentialist and reductive remarks—that the Filipino people are suffering from severe colonial mentality and are brown Americans living in a nation without a visible nationality. These conclusive assumptions collude to make acceptable the primacy of the idea that the Filipino is a broken, fragmented, and residual being who thrives on mimicking the so-called “superior cultures.” As a result, the damaging effects of colonization, the negative identification of nationality due to the generalized narrative of identity, and the fissures compounded by our presumably strong adherence to tradition, religion, and strong kinship, all contribute to the aggravating reductive image of the Filipino suspended in limbo and indeterminacy, hardly grounded by gravity, and paralyzed by cultural cringe.

However, geographically and culturally, the Philippines remains a paradox. It is a republic consisting of more than seven thousand islands, with each island constituted as fragmentally diverse from the others. It is a land where ironies and contradictions thrive. The gap between the rich and the poor is wide, and widens, even as the rich and the poor struggle to coexist.

On the one hand, we have the properly educated. On the other hand, the barely literate. We have the cosmopolitan elite of the urban centers and the underprivileged of the rural areas, the Catholics up north and the Muslims down south. We speak distinct languages, live in varied territories, adhere to divergent yet conflicting value systems, and adapt to extremely different cultures and beliefs. How does one explain the notion of Filipino identity when almost three-fourths of the country’s population straddles or falls below the poverty line even as the once biggest shopping mall in Asia is found right in the heart of Manila? How does he/she account for the singularity of Filipinoness when the question of national identity is highly mediated and contested by affiliations resulting from diverse life-modes, global migrations, and cultural differences? Like Philip Latak in the story who was initially smitten by the allure of foreign ways and mores, Filipinos will find themselves at the threshold of change because of the constant bombardment of multiculturalism and globalization.

The Filipino is always bound by traditions. Whatever remains from the bequests of our ancestors have been permeated with Hinduized, Sinicized, Hispanized, and Americanized structural influences. At this juncture, the Filipino responds, and will continue to respond, to all these

influences either by imbibing some or rejecting others, manifesting his or her mutable sense of tradition.

At present, history and culture are being rethought and recast as human constructs because the past becomes only accessible to us through textual appropriation. Using the historiographic metafiction framework, we can gather, assess, and imagine how the past is lived through texts, traces, and traditions and not duly from the grand narratives culled from history books and archival documents.

Even if we are purported to be diverse literally and metaphorically, our concept of identity (“katauhan”) remains a grand narrative. We have learned before that an identity should be whole, untarnished, and devoid of any outside influence. For example, when we perceive Chinese identity, we affirm that it is an identity defined by its distinct characteristics—authentic Chinese art and literature, multi-layered Chinese history and music, recognizable Chinese architecture and tradition. We can even pinpoint certain colors (red and gold), fashion and designs (*cheongsam* and calligraphy) exclusively identified as Chinese. Whenever you go to China or even India, you know you are in Asia. And then you say that when you go to the Philippines, you realize that there is nothing really distinct in this country. That it may just well be any other country in the world. Everything is highly Westernized. Wherever Chinese or Indians are, you see them wearing their traditional *cheongsam* or *sari* outfits, whether they attend important business functions or just peddling mosquito nets and blankets on their scooters. Corollary to this, you don’t see Filipinos marching along Quiapo wearing traditional *ternos*, *baro’t saya* or *Barong Tagalog*. You begin to wonder why are we not like them? Why don’t we have a distinct culture or identity?

Let’s go to food. The taste that we have developed throughout our history and tradition is always a hodge-podge of everything. Isn’t it interesting to learn that our favorite drink/cooler/ dessert (you see, even the label is problematic and cannot be specified) is *halo-halo*, which is literally a concoction made up of the combination of fruits, vegetables, crushed ice, milk, sweetened crops, and *leche flan*? It is all there in the halo-halo. It has become the emblematic signification of all the ingredients that make up the concoction, which is actually parallel to the Philippines, colored and embellished with micro and macro influences from north, west, east and south.

But about our eating habits and table manners, I could say in this regard that the Filipino identity is distinct. Unlike in Western countries, where the order of food is strictly followed and observed—entrees and appetizers first, soup and salad second, main course third, desserts next, and finally, the drinks and wine to ward off indigestion—in the Philippines when eating, there is hardly any sequence observed at all. We can drink first before we eat. Or maybe try the dessert first because it looks so tempting. We can take the rice and the viand later. Or perhaps, why don't we pour the soup on the rice? It could be more delicious that way.

When there's a fiesta, food is always served buffet-style. We put everything in one plate—rice, noodles, *rellenong bangus*, *lumpiang shanghai* laced with sweet and sour sauce, barbecue chicken glazed with barbecue sauce, *lechon* dipped in its own *lechon* sauce, *buko-pandan* and *leche flan* for dessert. We eat all of them at the same time. Never mind if the viands or the sauces get all mixed up. They will all taste the same anyway once inside the stomach.

Our concept of entertainment is also worth critiquing. For us, entertainment should have all the necessary ingredients—a little bit of singing, dancing, and dramatics. This perhaps explains why karaoke was invented by a Filipino, and why it has mushroomed all over the country and has become our national pastime. Some Filipinos even face untimely deaths just to have the chance to sing via karaoke Frank Sinatra's "My Way," right? When we watch films, we cannot sit through a serious one for two straight hours. It is too depressing. We need variety. There must be a happy balance of suspense, drama, comedy and music. In short, a good film must be a perfect blend of everything: *iyakan*, *tawanan*, *sayawan*, *kantahan*, and *lambingan*. *Dapat meron ding sampalan, meron ding lihim na mabubunyang sa huli, dapat merong sasabihing importante ang isang mamamatay na bago siya bawian ng buhay, dapat huling dumating ang pulis. Dapat kikiidnapin ang leading lady at dadalhin sa isang inabandonang bodega.* I never realize that we had so many vacant warehouses in the Philippines. *Dapat ding nakajacket ng itim ang bida kahit na ang init-init dito sa Pilipinas.*

A TV host could never be considered a good one if he is all brains and no comic ability. He should know when to pitch informative ideas and when to crack jokes to break the monotony. Filipino newscasters of local news program actually differ little from emcees of variety programs, in terms of their speech and ways of hosting. Ted Failon or Mike Enriquez are certainly

no different from Willie Revillame or Vic Sotto when delivering news or hosting, respectively. All of them are animated speakers and the Filipino audiences quite like them this way.

Even when we greet someone on the street or in the hall, we tend to be over-expressive. I remember an American friend of mine who once said to me that we are the only race in the world who can do all the facial movements at the same time when greeting someone on the street—bulging eyes, flaring nostrils, twitching eyebrows, grinning mouth, contorting cheeks, twisting facial muscles, and raising forehead saying *Uy, kumusta ka!* I didn't realize that we are like this. It took a foreigner to make this witty observation.

The story “The God Stealer” symbolizes a tradition of clash between race and culture. By weaving and interweaving the story through fertile discussions, readers can determine the various possibilities of contextualizing traditions, which can be a source of personal and national pride, a deterrent to identity formation, or a result of multi-negotiated convergent space.

F. Sionil Jose's “The God Stealer” ends metaphorically with Philip Latak's focused and ardent work in carving a new god to replace the old one, garbed in his traditional Ifugao clothes. This, as in many representations, continues to depict the Filipino as an individual trapped between opposing worlds, as a person searching for his or her authentic soul, or as a figure hybridizing disparate aspects of his identity formation. Nick Joaquin once remarked that the “true identity of a Filipino is a Filipino searching for his identity.”

The allegations hurled against the Filipino which were discussed earlier in this essay might have some truth-claims. But students must not forget that this fragmentation of our identity is not solely our own doing. We have been divided because the divisions have time and again, shaped our lives and our consciousness—our land is a group of fragmented islands, our history has been periodically classified according to the sequence through which our colonizers have conquered such lands, and our people have been consistently divided according to many regions, diverse languages, and a mix of multiple nationalities. Corollary to this, we have been “salvaged” (meaning “saved” in the original English definition, or “murdered” in the appropriated Filipino English context) by the pressing dichotomy of the materiality of the self and the providence of religion.

What is wrong with a fragmentary identity? Is it because it is not

whole, or complete, or does not measure up to the ideal construction of the self that we ascribe to an individual?

The problem lies in the obsession of people that identity must be whole, pure, and untarnished. This is a grand narrative. There is no such thing as pure culture or perfect identity.

Perhaps, a presupposition one may derive from this is the thought that fragmentation is brought about by the way a Filipino sees his or her sense of completeness, given the uneven landscape of his or her history, the disconnected modes of his or her existence, and the splintered subjectivities that constantly confront him or her. An identity can still be whole even if it is made up of broken pieces from different parts. We are a mixed culture because of the colonizers and their influences. This is what history has given us. But we can turn this around by changing our mindset about the concept of fragmented identity and embracing the idea that we are still whole, only made up of fragmented parts.

It is about time that we become proud that we are cultural mongrels. We are a mix of everything. And this is good.

It is in being half, or in parts, that we become whole. One foot is in the water, the other on the ground. No matter where we go, we are a hybrid identity, with a hybridized sense of self.

As I end the discussion, I would feel that I was able to pique the interest of the students as they engage in a very lively discussion about Filipinoness. I would ask them finally if they subscribe to the idea of the Filipino's hybrid identity, and how this acceptance and embracing of the notion of fragmented identity can be an advantage in helping the Filipinos attain progress.

I feel complete. Now, does anybody care for mixed nuts?