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Review Articles

Ermita: After the Wake, Before the Awakening

LEONARD CASPER

ERMITA. By F. Sionil Jose. Manila: Solidaridad, 1988. 258 pages.

Between writing the third and fourth volumes in his Rosales saga, F. Sionil Jose digressed briefly to sketch the unhappy relationship between call girl Ermi Rojo and media consultant Rolando Cruz, a procurer serving multinational clients of Manila's power-brokers. The resultant long story, "Obsession," became half of *Two Filipino Women* (1981). Yet Jose recognized that its basic theme, "man's search for a moral order and social justice," was identical with his continuing intent in the Rosales series. Anxious to pursue his insight into parallels between Ermi and Ermita, as well therefore as between prostitutes and those monied thugs willing to sell the body politic, the nation itself, after his fifth volume *Poon* (1984) he returned to the postwar years with *Ermita*.

By publishing *Poon*, a nineteenth century chronicle, after the twentieth century novels, Jose was reinforcing one of his major insights: the decline of values in a culture which once was more sure of itself. Too often Filipinos have accepted the role of either the helpless victims or designated beneficiaries of centuries of colonialism. Feeling unable to resist the processes of history, or thoroughly content with the power it proffered them, they acquiesce to inertial drift, downward, away from the ideal of commonalty. The definition of the "Filipino Soul" becomes confused with the body of material imports/impositions. The imbalance between what, in proper proportion, should be compatibles (moral order, directing soul and body) has been at the center of Jose's apprehension over the lack of mutual concern (social justice) of all citizens joined as equals. On such matters he has spent his working life as journalist, as founder of *Solidarity* (deliberately an attempt to revive *La Solidaridad*) and its far-ranging seminars, and as novelist. *Ermita* too seeks a means and momentum of transformation from passivity, beginning with a knowledge of history and the will to redirect it intelligently so that past and future, first cause and final cause, coalesce rather than collide.

As a U.P. student, Rolando Cruz (positioned parenthetically, early and late in the novel, just as the Spanish priest and an American correspondent are in *Poon* but, in Roly's case, with significant intermittent forays into the intimate

life of Ermi Rojo) once pompously rejected the need for Filipinos to know their past. Then a teacher's prewar lectures on national independence and Roly's internment in Camp O'Donnell converted him. He became a history professor, until seduced by his own cynicism about the connection between vice and social mobility and by his willingness to risk his self-respect by facilitating satisfaction of other men's lusts. His justification for these acts is that he wants to provide a comfortable life for Lydia, his wife. Instead, disappointed, she leaves him. The implication is that even those who know history also have to know how and what to learn from it, or they are just as doomed to repeat its mistakes as the most uninformed illiterate. Otherwise Cruz might not have despaired to the point of suicide; otherwise, also, he might have helped Ermi Rojo cope successfully with her past.

THE THEME OF PERSONAL PROSTITUTION

Ermi is born as a result of her mother Conchita's rape by a Japanese soldier during the ravaging of Manila in January 1945. In a desperate attempt to deny that she, daughter of the illustrious Rojos, could be assaulted and then could bring herself to kill the rapist, Conchita confines her daughter in an orphanage, with the proviso that Ermi never be identified as a Rojo or be adopted. Although Ermi finds a surrogate family in Sister Constanca and her fellow orphans, she is far too intelligent not to become curious about her real mother. Conchita distances herself from her past by marrying Lieutenant John Collier, a friend of General MacArthur, and then following him to San Francisco. Finally Ermi's aunt Fely (formerly a mistress of the General) reluctantly acknowledges the girl and takes her to Ermita to live with her caretaker's family, while Fely moves to Forbes Park. Ermi's identity as a Rojo is supposed to remain a secret, although she eventually learns of her mother's rape.

Her homosexual uncle Joselito uses her nudity for self-stimulation, and she learns more about sex, vicariously, from Professor Simplicia Honorato at Assumption College when she is a student there. The professor rationalizes candid talk about sex by a subversion of logic. Sometimes she argues that adulterous episodes chronicled in the Bible can be ennobling, and that prostitution is better viewed, without regard to the prostitutes, as the hypocritical act of customers whose greed outside the brothels is a truer sign of indecency/obscenity. At other times she declares that people occasionally use prostitution to lessen stress, or that women have the right to sell their bodies if they want. Whether these are honest convictions about the complexity of human motives or contradictions proceeding from a woman who, considering herself undesirable, is projecting frustrated desires, is impossible to tell. In any case, they confuse Ermi later when, requesting money from Fely for a prom dress, she is not only refused but told that the Rojos all wish she had died. The once gentle Ermi, suddenly galvanized with anger at so gross a rejection, goes to the Camarin restaurant whorehouse in order to earn money and to punish the Rojos for their icy arrogance. So begins Ermi's simultaneous rise and decline as a sympathetic victim unwittingly engaged in self-sabotage.

Ironically, Ermi proves to be a Rojo after all, in her questionable morality (Don Manuel had been a collaborator during the Revolution, even betraying Mabini to the Americans), her furious pique (Fely fumes when her American General deserts her), and her rapidly escalating avarice (Joselito buys expensive properties but evicts Arturo's family from the Rojo house near Manila Bay). In her own way she typifies Rojo self-centeredness which, paradoxically, creates a void at the very center of the self. Ermi is as cunning as the Count of Monte Cristo in the management of her revenge, only she uses her body to achieve her mind's intent. The service she performs in 1964 for the Great Man (Sukarno?), which rejuvenates him briefly, earns her not only his gratitude but income enough to start her on her way to immense wealth and access to powerful Filipinos who will become unwitting agents of her hate. Ermi is far too chic and irresistible to resemble the trapped underclass call-girls whose case histories F. Landa Jocano outlines in *Slum As a Way of Life* (1975), but she does share with several of the streetwalkers a contempt for the men who think they possess her, however briefly. In a macho society it gives her secret pleasure to manipulate those men who, imperiously, consider themselves controllers of society.

However, she is equally capable of direct, frontal attacks. In San Francisco she accosts her mother, Conchita, who tries to explain that, resolutely denying that she had been raped, she had included Ermi in her denial as well, although she refused an abortion. That would have been murder. Still, if her hatred for Ermi has passed, she still expresses no love for her now and is satisfied simply to call Ermi weak for having chosen to be a whore. Ermi, in retaliation, seduces John Collier, the husband of Conchita whose bitterness thereafter can barely find words. "I hope you die," she tells her daughter, and never sees Ermi again. Similarly, with the assistance of a male prostitute provided by Didi, Camarin's owner, she breaks her uncle Joselito physically, so that the Rojo name is publicly ridiculed. She depends on prominent clients only for the *coup de grace*. One of them, General Bombillo, is persuaded to seize Joselito's haciendas in Nueva Ecija and Negros because, she alleges, he has poor-mouthed the military. Another sometime-lover, Senator Andres Bravo (who shares many of Marcos' characteristics except that Bravo is not president during martial law) is persuaded, as chairman of the Philippine Bank, to call in loans made to Fely and Joselito because, so Ermi says, they have snubbed the First Lady.

By the time that two-thirds of the novel have been completed, so should Ermi's need for revenge have been exhausted. However, she has one more enemy: herself. It is a commonplace that prostitution satisfies some women's hatred for men or their own low self-regard. Ermi's motives, however, exceed such generalizations. She sold her body originally in order to be financially independent of the Rojos and also, as a victim of rape, to punish those relatives who treat her as if she were its cause. Knowing they wish she were unborn or dead, just as pitilessly she makes herself a living example of the family's degradation—in just compensation, according to the primitive law of an eye for an eye. However, the same law makes inevitable the conversion of a person obsessed with hate into an addictively hateful person. Both Roly and Mac

(Arturo's son) often ask Ermi why, having more than demonstrated her power to manipulate the vices of the elite towards her own ends and having made a fortune in the process, she cannot retire, as Didi, for example, does. The answer, in the complex characterization provided by Sionil Jose, is that Ermi is a mix of self-hatred and affection. She is all kindness towards the other orphans, towards Arturo and his family, towards Alejandra the cook, and towards Anita the widowed whore and her daughter Lily. She is even compassionate in her sexual relations with her husband Meadows on their last night and with such elders as the Great Man, Roly, and, after seemingly interminable teasing, Edmund Dantes (hardly the namesake of Monte Cristo, he is the opportunistic publisher taken from Jose's third Rosales novel, *My Brother, My Executioner*).

Why could not a person of such genuine grace and goodness rise above adverse fortune? She herself wonders if she might have become a nun like those at the orphanage: she thinks herself capable of celibacy. Or should she, like Lily, have fought martial law from the hills, not the bedroom? Is she, in fact, conscious of the nation's needs at all or too overwhelmed with her own entanglements to care? The reason that she cannot transform herself, even after having redressed her grievances, is not physical desire. Despite her repeated yearning after orgasm, she connects it in her mind not, as some feminists might, with sexual climax but with a true love. That love is perpetually elusive. For a while Roly seems a likely prospect. But he has problems coping with his own past (his wife left him because he sacrificed his mission as a historian to the most intimate of public relations, as procurer). Ermi's own prostitution constantly reminds him of that fact, and his self-hatred leads to his suicide, appropriately using a wartime .45. He explains himself in taped self-accusations left for her. His journal too sums up his despair: "I cry because I have a beautiful country which has been savaged by its own people," people like himself, traitors to its deepest, oldest verities. In any case, even after his death Ermi laments her childlessness more than his passing.

What about Mac? Could he be Ermi's Deliverer from the Wasteland? If Ermi has been the (unwitting) conscience of Roly, Mac in turn has served as hers. He watches over her when she works out of Camarin and again in New York. He keeps appealing to her to reform, and avoiding her when she won't. Ermi, having quietly divorced her trial American husband and wanting to be born again (as well as prove that motherhood can be nurturing, after all) finally begs Mac not to leave for Saudi Arabia again but to let her bear their child. He goes, anyway. But will he not return some day? Or as her last hope, will she not follow him? Will they not manage to be reconciled? Not unless Mac changes as well. It is his pride, not love, speaking when he says (as he has *often* said) that he feels ashamed not just because of the way she earned the money lent to him for his training as an engineer and the money given his parents as well, but because he simply feels too indebted to her. His gratitude would have to be endless, leaving him no way to express the love she requires. He is a business success, linked with a multinational corporation. There is as much likelihood that he will become another Roly (Mac already hates himself)

as he rises to executive prominence, as there is that he will rescue the two of them somehow, eventually. The more he manages to match Ermi's wealth and therefore feel clean, clear, and independent, the less he will be prepared to offer what she needs: a love that observes the past without blinking, forgives, heals, moves on.

So it is not a romantic ending, merely postponed, that Sionil Jose has offered. It is completely possible that old Sister Constanca is prophetic, not suffering from memory loss, when she tells Ermi—a nostalgic visitor to the orphanage—that Ermi died years ago when she left that place. (Curiously, Mercedes tells the Count of Monte Cristo virtually the same thing: that Edmond Dantes died in the Chateau D'If.) Vengeance carried to an extreme or too long can be self-destructive. That seems to be one of *Ermita's* sorrow-laden motifs; just as another, in expanded form imported from "Obsession," implies that there are many, far too many, forms of prostitution.

THE THEME OF NATIONAL PROSTITUTION

The novel's most encompassing theme, however, concerns the confusion and imbalance not only in the sad history of Ermi but in contemporary Philippine society at large. Roly describes it well: "what is being destroyed now is not just a place but a nation because its people have lost their beliefs and all they have now is a price." Prewar *Ermita* (respect for which Jose indicates by dedicating his novel to his wife's parents, original dwellers there) could have been rebuilt, Rolando Cruz argues, but it is all "flesh trade" today, instead.

Rarely in life is anything simple, of course, and the author, through his characters, struggles to be evenhanded in presenting the mix of Japanese brutality, possessiveness, arrogance, sacrifice, and discipline. Yet Jose will not allow difficulty of judgement to lapse into permissive indifference. Above all, his inquiry is directed inward, through the mind of Roly: "how then can we protect ourselves from our leaders and, most of all, from ourselves?" Jose's is a moral imagination that insists on recognizing betrayals of the Filipino Dream not just by Don Manuel Rojo, Bravo, Bombillo, and Dantes, the wielders of power, but by widespread careless logic. With all her inherited problems, Ermi still might have suffered less, survived more happily, had common sense not been at a premium so often among those counseling her. Professor Simplicia Honorato's argument that women's rights include the right to prostitute themselves might just as easily have been used to justify other types of "prostitution" which she abhors. *Ermita* is an attempt to put sex in its proper perspective, but Simplicia's is improper. Pablo Perrera, who otherwise seems more intelligent than his employer Dantes, suggests that since Europe took centuries to develop democracy, the equally feudal society in the Philippines may need a great deal of time to improve. Yet that argument for gradualism (how long can integrity endure if equality is not a given, as well as a goal?) could have been coopted by spokesmen for martial law, a few years later, as it has been used, for generations, to delay and delay agrarian reform. Even Roly, who thinks that poverty, irresponsibility, the palaces of the rich, and the

dearth of hospitals are truly obscene, is confused enough to believe that pornography is more an esthetic nuisance than an immoral act (despite Joselito's shameful use of his niece and despite teen-age prostitution on the streets). He says that such earthiness is natural to agrarian societies, though his father sold their farm over thirty years earlier and since then Roly has been "earthily" urban! Hoffer, Ermi's anthropology professor in America, is no *guru* either. His philosophical relativism and academic detachment cannot help his student Ermi cope with the regret she feels for having reviled her mother, whose disappearance since then makes reconciliation impossible.

So general, in fact, is the moral derangement depicted—with Ermi representing *Ermita*, and *Ermita* illustrative of postwar Philippines—that Sionil Jose's novel risks being called a work of despair. If society cannot be redeemed, then one might be tempted to join the immoral majority. Under Marcos, as Roly says, centralization of corruption occurred. Would democratization of corruption be an improvement? Roly knows too well that "If you can't lick them, join them" may be a death for all. *Ermita* is a novel not of despair, but of desperation. Like so many of Jose's other works, it is a warning based on a view of traditional Filipino virtues, dynamically, evolutionary in appearance while remaining constant in essence; virtues never reducible to mere "situational ethics." How can a man of the world such as Jose is, how can a reporter and realist, defend such seeming abstractions? By not overgeneralizing. After all, *Ermita* does offer alternative figures to those who flounder and flutter, persons aligned along the same moral imperatives: Arturo, his wife Orang, their daughter Nanet, Alejandra the cook, Sister Constanca, and possibly Lily the political martyr (not enough is shown of her, but she seems cut from the same cloth as Emmanuel Lacaba, celebrated in Jose's "Lament for Eman" in his 1988 collection of poems, *Questions*). Nor should the sincerity of struggle be forgotten, the self-scrutiny edging towards soul-searching, in some of those who do waver and wobble: Ermi and Roly. They are not impotent, only inept. It is not their guilt which is required. They have an excess of that. Rather it is the taking of *responsibility* that is demanded. Knowing that they are their own worst enemies as well as endangerments to the Philippines-that-could/should-be, what will they do? The question is answerable, even if *final* answers may temporarily be lacking. No one is immune from history, Jose implies, but neither is the past immune from the future. In the very possibility of intelligent choice, grace *can* be reawakened, long after the sounds of the wake itself have fallen silent.