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The Critical Act in the *Smile of the Medusa*

Jorshinelle T. Sonza



Smile of the Medusa: Selected Fictions. By E. San Juan, Jr. Metro Manila: Anvil Publishing, Inc. 1994. viii, 148 pages.

Western-based intellectuals continue to debate the intensely polarized binaries with which Third World critics have constructed their so-called counterhegemonic aesthetics. Epifanio San Juan's collection of short stories, *Smile of the Medusa*, addresses as appropriate and relevant the issue of this mechanical gridlock in traditional politics (Jameson 1981, 9), especially as it applies to Third World resistance movements. To a certain extent the Frankfurt School of Thought has resolved this "problematic" by asserting the prominence of imagination as "a necessary supplement to class action" (Jameson *Marxism and Form*, 8). Furthermore, they use contemporary issues of race, class and gender to focus attention on the controversy of binaries. San Juan's anthology, in privileging the writer to act as the discontented interpreter, uses the issue of revitalizing "contradiction" as a way to redeem history from careening towards a dead end.

To achieve such a goal, the author keeps the discontented interpreter in the role of critic by reinforcing the idea of "the daily plebiscite" (Bhabha 1990, 19) which establishes the individual's right to be consulted always. It is, therefore, not surprising that San Juan should use narrative criticism to advance the plot of his stories. The analysis and reflection of this method rigorously sustains the active conversation between two incompatible realities. Thus, San Juan's fiction subverts the arrogance of pure ideology and in so doing, makes a major contribution through the reworking of the political imaginary.

The author develops a broad spectrum of narrative processes to neutralize the intransigence of history. For instance, he extends the scope of Filipino resistance by depicting not only the current forms of insurgencies but by also including rebellions staged against the former colonizers. As this enlarged historical canvas becomes the backdrop against which characters act out expressions of defiance, the author suggests the performative nature of the revolutionary temper, not its abstract qualities.

These creative expressions appear as proselytizing in "The Strike," the outright undermining of the executioner in "The Idylls of a Conspirator," and

the ultimate sacrifice of one's life in the "Smile of the Medusa." San Juan dramatizes these performative responses to domination in diverse narrative forms: allegory, fable, confession, reflection, recall-memory, and drama. The wide array of improvisations defies "narrative containment" and illustrates that there is obviously more than one way to tell a story. The heterogeneous processes actively operate within the critical paradigms of the narrative to create the organic unity of form and content. For instance, a straightforward storytelling suddenly shifts to another narrative channel: the dialogues in a drama script corrupt the fictional mode. This process extends the form of the storyline only by maintaining these contradictions.

The assumption here is that subverting the narrative structure becomes a form of "critique" which incorporates new ways of signifying. "The Reign of the Assassins" proceeds in this manner. Revolutionary leaders like Caesar and Espiritu express opposing points of view that follow one another in a narrative flow but are destabilized when Corpuz, the infiltrator of the movement, dramatically appears and delivers his lines. This final performance undermines the narrated points of view which had been the previous focus of most of the text. By reinforcing the contradiction in the text, San Juan uses form to reinvent the continuing critique.

To accelerate the critical motion, San Juan also diverts the reader's attention from ahistorical visions and then refocuses it on the "physicality" of the revolutionary mode. In so doing, he identifies its motives as human, and therefore, subject to the temporal claims of its desire. This perspective aligns him with writers like Elaine Scarry (*Literature and the Body*), Helene Cixous (*Body and the Text*), or Andrew Ettin (*The Betrayal of the Body Politic*) whose concerns with anatomy allow them to explore larger political systems. San Juan, in this regard, vigilantly reminds us of the intimate link between eros and politics: satisfying a sexual impulse is akin to fulfilling a revolutionary goal. Both reveal the need to act, and both can be exploited to further the ends of the other.

In "The Reign of the Assassins," for instance, the seductive female informer Victoria uses sex to rebel against the politics of Caesar and Espiritu, the top-ranking officials of the resistance. In the same vein, Grace uses politics to attract males in "The Strike." The implication of both situations is clear: if realpolitik equivocates between desire and action, how can it presume to be perfect and pure?

The impulse to dissect and scrutinize details in these selected fictions is tactical. This method highlights disclosures regarding discontinuities in the broader political systems. By exposing the discontinuities, we are subverting the aura of their mystique. Consider the detailed examination of the human corpus belonging to a bureaucrat clerk in "The Spoils of the Wager."

Mr. Homero plumped flabbily on his tall three-legged stool like an ancient oracle on his tripod. He flexed his stout unwieldy legs and

grumped. He shifted, licked his lips voluptuously, and sensed at once the gnawing emptiness of his stomach-pit. (81)

The Clerk's clockwork routine within the fringes of a social structure is a subtext to the larger expressions of the deadening effects of a highly organized society. Because the marginalized fail to authenticate their subjectivity and agency, they are burdened by the deadweight of their passive existence. The emotional violence that comes from such a Kafkaesque disposition demonstrates how intensely interwoven is the personal and the political, the detail and the structure. This significant link within the margins extends to the center and discloses a weariness that resonates with decay and death. In this atmosphere, the dictator in "The Smile of the Medusa" plots his fall from grace and power. Evidently, both ends of the political spectrum—the center and the periphery—define the vulnerability of the system. If anatomy becomes the focus of political fallibility, then San Juan appears to suggest that the "pure essence" of an ideology reveals a predisposition to contamination and, therefore, can be easily corrupted.

In San Juan's narrative agenda, death and decay are a double entendre: they simultaneously negate and incite moments of vital self-renewal. Death and decay flatten the body politic of a nation to magnify the ills that plague its society. In this sense, death is a historical caesura where "the problematic" may be perceived with greater clarity and precision. The author illustrates this notion in his other works: Ruben Magdiwang (a case of irony since "Magdiwang" signifies celebration) in "Requiem for a Suicide" takes his own life after a serious case of what the author refers to as aesthetic fervor," that is, a life deprived of action is without purpose; the dictator in "The Iron Heel: A Fable" simply vanishes because his position lacks genuine power; and Jack, the Peace Army volunteer is dismissed without Jack's knowledge, the ultimate betrayal that puts an end to meaningful relationships. Throughout the text, the recurring trope of death suggests the pernicious and pervasive presence of a void from which characters never seem to escape. Images of entrapment—"prison-chambers," "fugitive phantom," "captivity," "fat iron bars," and "virtual prison"—circulate within the text.

On the other hand, death articulates "the new desire to think historically" (Hutchen 1985, 88) which circumvents the old desire reeking of suicides, nervous breakdowns, homicides, political betrayal, to mention a few. San Juan acknowledges the need to transform this status quo because, as one character puts it, ". . . it was all a lie" (24) and, therefore, must be reimaged. And by invoking images of death and decay as agents of change, the author indicates fundamental as well as systematic revisions. Dismantling the existing political structures is the ultimate form of critique: large-scale and massive defiance mobilizes the text into action.

However, San Juan is cautious not to tread on another monolithic block, so he further elaborates on the critique to eliminate the absolutes. The author

"resists summary" (Bhabha 1990, 19) as he redeems the spirit of protest from total closure. For example, the author pushes critical inquiry to the limit by constructing the revolution on conditional terms. As one character explains, the revolution itself could be "a betrayal of the revolution" (28).

To strengthen critical inquiry, then, the author scrutinizes political motives through the interior monologue. Characters continually reexamine their position within the resistance. Their mental landscapes are organically related to their impulses and physical actions. Consider how a revolutionary leader subjects himself to self-criticism:

"If my pistol were with me—but how I hate strutting around with a gun (which is something external, alien to the body), a symbol of authority without which no salute greets your presence and you are just nothing . . . Yet, lo! To be summoned out of rank and file and elected as leader to one commanding peal of trumpets . . ." (46) Reflections of this kind lead to the critical act. San Juan relentlessly reworks the critique until the utterance ". . . it was all a lie" translates into ". . . it was all a possibility."

Thus, San Juan's pursuit of provisional truths in selected fictions appears to have achieved the exhilarating and forward-looking libertarian visions that could elicit a smile even from the Medusa.

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