

**A STUDY ON THE ROLE OF POETRY
AS CRITIQUE OF SOCIETY
IN JOSE MA. SISON'S POEMS**

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PREFACE

It is not often that one is given the time and the chance to do what one enjoys. Chances are, one ends up doing something not because one wants to but because one has to. The writer feels very fortunate that she has been given the rare opportunity to do a study that enables her to articulate what she has been fighting for all these years. The chance was given her and she was provided the venue to express the truth of the people's struggle for genuine freedom and democracy in the land. These are the realities of life which she wants to impart to the greater majority of the people still living in darkness.

In doing her study, the writer has discovered that indeed, all of us have a historical role to play in working for an equitable society. The task of shaping the future lies at our hands and the moment to do is now.

The writer hopes that the readers will join her study not only in this historical voyage but also in the quest for freedom in the land.

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Chapter One INTRODUCTION

I. BACKGROUND ON JOSE MA. SISON'S POETRY

Jose Ma. Sison, popularly known as Joma, belongs to a breed of writers whose works speak of social upheaval against the unjust structures of society. More often than not, we see works of protest literature like his contain both an exposition of the situation and a motivation and incitement to action.

It is probably next to impossible to write on Jose Ma. Sison's works as separate from his life. To do so would not only be an injustice to him as a writer, but also to his role as a revolutionary partisan, an organizer of armed struggle. It is therefore necessary to know who this man Joma is, for us to fully situate and understand the writings of the man: a manifestation of his deep involvement in the people's struggle for national freedom and democracy.

Jose Ma. Sison was born on February 8, 1939, in Cabugao, Ilocos Sur. He was educated at the University of the Philippines, where he obtained a degree in English literature (cum laude) while at the same time taking economic courses. He has taught English, political science, and social science in Philippine universities, served as adviser and writer for some members of the Philippine Congress, and delivered papers at international conferences on nuclear disarmament and art.¹

A prolific writer, Sison has contributed to international journals. He was the editor-in-chief of Progressive Review from 1963 to 1969, and is alleged to have been the editor of Ang Bayan (The People), organ of the Communist Party of the Philippines, from 1968-1977. He is the author of Brothers (Manila, 1962), and Prison and Beyond (Philippines, 1984), a collection of poems; and Struggle for National Democracy, a collection of essays on Philippine politic, economics and culture (Manila, 1967).

There was a radical change in Sison's style in his later poems. It was a marked difference in style as Joma underwent a rectification period. He wanted his works to become accessible to a wider audience so he has deliberately stayed clear from rigid structures and has resorted to direct speech.

¹ Jose Ma. Sison, Prison and Beyond: Selected Poems 1958-1983, edited by Edilberto Alegre, (Philippines: Free Jose Ma. Sison Committee, 1984), p. 133.

He was also among the first, internationally, to have translated into English, poems of the Indonesian *poet laureate*, Chairil Anwar (Djakarta, 1962). He is alleged by the military to be the author of Philippine Society and Revolution (Hong Kong, 1971).²

Sison is probably best known as the founder of Kabataang Makabayan (Patriotic Youth), a militant youth organization of which he was national chairman from 1964-1968. He has also been among the key persons behind numerous organizations, among them the Lapiang Manggagawa (Workers' Party), Socialist Party of the Philippines, National Association of Trade Unions, Malayang Samahan ng mga Magsasaka (Free Association of the Peasants) and the Movement for the Advancement of Nationalism. The military claims he is the founder of the reestablished Communist Party of the Philippines.³

Since November 10, 1977, Sison had been a political prisoner in solitary confinement. He was subjected to severe physical and psychological torture without being convicted of any offense. He was released in 1986 when President Corazon Aquino assumed presidency of the Philippines.

A. Statement of the Purpose of Study

Inasmuch as art has its distinct purpose, it has often been said that literary compositions that deal with timely crises or public issues are worthless propaganda. It is the purpose of this study to, first, study the poems of Joma Sison as critique of society and second, to determine what the role of art is in society as reflected in his poems.

1. Significance of the Study

The study will attempt to formulate a clear concept of the role of art in society. Moreover, the study will also try to disprove the tenets of the critics of progressive literature who believe in the superiority of style to idea.

² Ibid. p. 133.

³ Ibid. p. 133.

B. Statement of the Scope of the Study

The discussion on the role of poetry in society is limited only to six poems of Jose Ma. Sison, namely, “The Guerilla Is Like A Poet”, “Against The Monster On The Land”, “These Scavengers”, “Brothers”, “To Jasm, My Captive Child”, and “You Are My Wife And Comrade”. These will be analyzed in terms of whether or not these works are critiques of society.

C. Methodology

For this particular study, a combination of approaches will be applied: the Historico-Sociological and the Formalistic approaches.

1. *Historico-Sociological Approach*

This starts with a conviction that art’s relations to society are vitally important, and that the investigation of these relationships may organize and deepen one’s aesthetic response to a work of art. Art is not created in a vacuum; it is the work not simply of a person, but of an author fixed in time and space, answering to a community of which he is an articulate and important part. There is therefore, an interest in understanding the social milieu and the extent to which and manner in which the artist responds to it.⁴

2. *Formalistic Approach*

If the historico-sociological approach means taking a piece of work from a materialist viewpoint which is essentially from a historical context, the formalistic approach considers literature differently.

The formalistic approach to criticism would be free of the pursuit of extrinsically historic, moral, psychological and sociological interpretations, and free to concentrate on the aesthetic quality of the work.⁵ With this type of approach, there is a high place of art as art, rather than as an expression of ideas.

⁴ Wilbur Scott, *Five Approaches of Literary Criticism*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1962), p. 123.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

D. Definition of Terms

1. Revolutionary – a radical change in the status quo; effecting changes at the grassroots level.
2. Status quo – the prevailing semi-colonial, semi-feudal set-up of Philippine society which is protected by a fascist military arm.⁶
3. Semi-colonial – a condition where a country, supposedly sovereign, is actually controlled by a foreign power.
4. Semi-feudal – a condition wherein the economy of a country is backward. Agriculture is its primary industry and although there is an emphasis on other industries, the economy is weighed down by foreign capital.
5. Fascism – a violent means employed by the State to uphold its interests and maintain a strong grip on power.
6. Bureaucrat Capitalism – it is running the government like a business enterprise; usually the root cause of graft and corruption.
7. Petty bourgeoisie – generally composed of the middle class: the professionals and students alike. They are allies in the quest for change.
8. Peasants – composed of farmers and farmhands. The main force, they say, in the quest for national democracy because of their enormity, which make up for 75% of the nation's population.
9. Proletariat – the working class. The productive vanguard for industrialization and modernization. They possess the most progressive world outlook and methodology.⁷
10. National democracy – a political cause. It is the set of political ideas gained from concrete historical experience and from the profound analysis of the real problems that an entire people suffer at this historical stage. It sums up the people's view of their interests and aspirations, particularly when as a people they suffer from the dictates of U.S. imperialism, domestic feudalism, and bureaucrat capitalism.⁸

⁶ Jose Ma. Sison, On National Democracy, (Quezon City: Aklatang Gising Na, 1966), p. 10.

⁷ _____, Prison and Beyond: Selected Poems 1958-1983, p. 128.

⁸ _____, On National Democracy, p. 1.

E. Related Literature

The main reason that encouraged this writer to do a study on the role of art in society as reflected in Joma's poetry were the reading she had of Sison's works especially the poem "Brothers." This was further enhanced by encounters with different types of progressive literature from writers such as Fr. Edicio dela Torre, F. Sionil Jose, Eman Lacaba, et al. The moving force actually was the condition of our country at this particular juncture in history; how we continuously suffer from the claws of US imperialists, and how people respond to such conditions – these were the realities which interested this writer.

In addition, criticisms on progressive literature particularly those that claim that such works are of no literary value and are merely worthless propaganda motivated this writer to embark on a study to disprove these allegations.

Epifanio San Juan Jr. provides an overview of Philippine progressive literature in his Introduction to The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature. San Juan mentions that:

“The tradition of Philippine literature – as I try to argue in this book – is essentially progressive and revolutionary. It establishes its claim as an agent for transforming reality with a radical critique of actual conditions. By grasping the dialectical interaction between subjective and objective factors, it lays the true groundwork for unity of theory and practice. By situating man in history, it locates the significant concerns in dynamic social practices. For the artist to gain a knowledge of the truth of experience, he must dedicate himself to the pursuit of a humanist goal. This goal is to simply convey the truth of human condition in the given historical epoch that the artist lives as one who acts and who is acted upon. The artist devoted to objective truth and humanist values takes a definitive stand in contemporary problems and disputes by the practice of his art.”⁹

Fr. Edicio dela Torre, in his Touching Ground, Taking Root, has this to say about art and politics:

“On the one hand, it means being a people's artist – doing what it takes to be an artist, like honing one's craft, and sharpening one's vision. One does this as a companion of the people as they suffer and struggle on their long march to liberation. “People” in our present political situation means a cross-class coalition. One must speak to all of them although we can't help but speak more effectively to some rather than to others. The concept is not simple. Being with the

⁹ Epifanio San Juan Jr., The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature, (Quezon City: Manlapaz Publishing Co., 1971), p. 4.

people and serving the people involves both tactical and strategic considerations. This is true of art, as of politics.”¹⁰

In Bienvenido Lumbera’s article “Beyond Autobiography”, he says:

“Unless the Filipino writer today defines the nature of the class struggle in the present historical stage of his society and the function of his craft in this struggle, he betrays his calling and sides with the conspiracy of executioners. Partisanship is not a question of an isolated and hypothetical subjective decision detached from the objective social process. For it is the nature of art, of culture in general, to be a sensuous reflection of objective reality so that the value and significance of art depends on how far it succeeds in shaping the “concrete universal” artwork which mediates dialectically between consciousness and the material world.”¹¹

¹⁰ Edicio dela Torre, Touching Ground, Taking Root, (Quezon City: Socio-Pastoral Institute, 1986), p. 197.

¹¹ Jose Ma. Sison, Prison and Beyond: Selected Poems 1958-1983, p. 30.

CHAPTER TWO

A. PROTEST POETRY IN THE SEVENTIES

The Seventies were the most trying of times for most of the Filipinos. At this stage in Philippine history, a growing number of our local intellectuals began to be aware of social realities to which the peasant and labor classes had already responded to with emphatic vigor. Martial Law had been declared throughout the archipelago and has resulted in the summary repression and oppression of an entire people. Deepening discontent over income inequities within the country and inequities in the country's economic and political ties with the United States gave rise to mass organizations which linked graft and corruption in the government to what could be seen as the root cause of the continuing exploitation and brutalization of the Filipino masses – the semi-colonial status of the country.¹²

The poetry that followed Presidential Declaration No. 1081 proclaiming the whole country under Martial Law was undeniable and understandably more discreet, its protest covert. It would be unfair to say that poets have become less angry or less dissatisfied with the new political dispensation. The despair and the rage became even more vivid now that slogans, placards and demonstrations have to go, the poet was challenged to create new forms and techniques to express the realities of the time which have not essentially changed.¹³

The emergence of a poetry of protest during the period gives substance to the poet's affirmation of his twin role: that of being a critic of a fast crumbling social order and that of a catalyst towards the establishment of a new one.¹⁴

The protest poetry of the Seventies therefore has this kinship with politics and ideology of the "national democratic" movement. The poetry produced basically was anti-imperialist, anti-feudal, and anti-bureaucrat capitalist.

Strong nationalist sentiments, which were a major content or field of concentration among poets were highly political, and not merely racial or ethnic. There

¹² Bienvenido Lumbera, Revaluation: Essays on Philippine Literature, Cinema and Popular Culture, (Manila: Bienvenido Lumbera and Index Press, 1984), p. 96.

¹³ Lilia Q. Santiago (ed.), The Literary Apprentice 1981-1982, (Quezon City: UP Creative Writing Center, 1982), p. 45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

was a call for political unity to fight against a horde of oppressors among whom are Filipinos in cohort with exploiting invaders.

Martial Law was precisely the challenge faced by poets in that period. Their greatest asset is the fact that there was a realization of a condition which forbids open confrontation with the ruling class either verbally, physically, etc.¹⁵ Hence, they must find out for themselves the appropriate symbols, images, metaphor and language that will signify they have not altogether resulted in propaganda and forsaken art.

B. JOSE MA. SISON'S PROTEST POETRY

The Guerilla Is Like A Poet

The guerilla is like a poet
Keen to the rustle of leaves
The break of twigs
The ripples of the river
The smell of fire
And the ashes of departure.

The guerilla is like a poet.
He has merged with the trees
The bushes and the rocks
Ambiguous but precise
Well-versed on the law of motion
And master of myriad images.

The guerilla is like a poet.
Enrhymed with nature
The subtle rhythm of the greenery
The inner silence, the outer innocence
The steel tensile in-grace
That ensnares the enemy.

The guerilla is like a poet.
He moves with the green brown multitude
In bush burning with red flowers
That crown and hearten all
Swarming the terrain as a flood
Marching at last against the stronghold.

An endless movement of strength
Behold the protracted theme:
The people's epic; the people's war.

1968

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 27.

Discussion:

This is a poem stating the qualities of a poet that are also inherent in a guerilla warrior.

The guerilla has a mastery of nature. Just like the poet or any other artist for that matter, his senses are keen even to the minutest detail of his environment. The guerilla warrior is one with nature. He has perfected his every move and has even imbibed several qualities inherent in nature. He has this characteristic of being tranquil but nevertheless endowed with a venomous capacity to overcome an enemy in any eventuality.

Lastly, the guerilla is like a poet who blends well with the sea of humanity who are on a march against the establishment. The multitude will become an endless movement of strength to topple down the stronghold.

In like manner, the poet writes the people's epic as the guerilla wages the people's war.

Analysis:

The whole poem juxtaposes a poet and a guerilla warrior. This is most likely the personification of Jose Ma. Sison, who, at a particular point in time, had the dilemma of being true to his role as an artist and a revolutionary partisan.

In being an artist, one has to contend with the power of the pen. He is limited to expressing his ideas and berating the powers-at-hand with his creative talent. The most an artist can do is to speak of the truth and convey his intended message to the public.

A guerilla, on the other hand, has a protest against society and he manifests this by carrying a rifle. The guerilla had lost hope in the present system and has opted to be an agent of change- direct change, that is, by physically eliminating the people's enemies.

The poet uses a simile or a comparison, between the poet and the guerilla warrior. They are both attuned to nature, although quite differently. The artist has mastery of nature for aesthetic needs. The guerilla, on the other hand, has a mastery of nature for survival measures. They have different uses for nature but both are working towards the same cause: the artist manifests this desire for change and tells the reading public about it. The warrior has a direct involvement in the struggle by fighting to exterminate the people's enemies.

Jose Ma. Sison, in this particular poem, has employed the clever use of his craft to subtly bring about the need for and justification of armed revolutionary struggle. He has even likened the people's war to a people's epic slowly unfolding before our very eyes. Only a poet true to his conviction could think of this comparison between two seemingly

opposite and irreconcilable roles. But Sison has successfully merged the two in his own being.

Being both an artist and an organizer of armed struggle, he has made use of his literary know-how to bring the idea of armed revolution closer to the people. The idea of armed resistance is already embraced by the toiling masses, but not so with the bourgeois class. So he has brought the thought closer to the middle class through the use of his poems.

This poem is therefore a clear manifestation of the use of poetry as an agent for social transformation. There was a clever juxtaposition between a guerilla warrior and a poet – both are pursuing a common good, and are likened to each other. A poet is a guerilla in wielding his mighty pen, and likewise, the guerilla is an artist who speaks of the people's struggle eloquently in the language he knows best. They are both one with the people in their long march to liberation.

Against The Monster On The Land

For centuries the monster on the land
Has gorged himself with flesh and blood.
Now he wields a brittle rusty sword
And still casts a spell with a cross.

We go with the children of wrath
And prepare a trap across his path
A net of vine holding a carpet of leaves
Covers the pit full of bamboo spears.

When he stumbles into the hungry hole
And raves and writhes among the poles,
He shall see the children of the soil
Casting upon him buckets of flaming oil.

The night shall flee from the flames.
These shall rage until the break of day
And merge with the glory of the sun.
The monster shall have been gone

His sword shall break by a hammer blow
On a rock from which a sweet spring flows.
The fragments of the swords we shall gather
To fashion new things by the hammer.

The children of the soil shall be freed
Of yoke and terror in their country.
They shall stand against any monster
And win by wit and engulfing number.

The festival of the children of the soil
Is the festival of all children of toil.
We joyously sing and dance with them
As the ancient monster comes to an end.

17 March 1978

Discussion:

The poem tells of a monster who has been preying on people with his sword and cross. This has been going on in one land for centuries – the monster victimizing the poor people. After quite a while, the people have become so angered and realize that it is high time they all put an end to their common enemy. So they build a booby trap of leaves covering a pit full of bamboo spears.

Having fallen into the trap and now writing in pain, the monster shall see the people throwing upon him buckets of flaming oil. No one comes to this monster's assistance and he is left alone. With the dawning of a new day, the enemy is defeated.

Following his fall, the people have every reason for jubilation. They have rid themselves of any remnant of their enemy; his sword shall be broken and made into new things beneficial to the people.

The land and its people shall be set free from bondage at this ancient monster's end, and will stand guard against any other monster who might try to invade them once more. They have proven that they could overcome fear with wit and cooperation from all.

Analysis:

The poem speaks of a centuries-old monster eventually meeting its end through a people's own effort. From then on, the people shall stand guard against any other monster who might try to settle in their land.

The while poem is an allegory and there is much use of symbols to bring forth a deeper meaning.

The writer believes that the "centuries-old monster" being referred to is Spanish colonialism which introduced and perpetuated a feudal set-up in society. It is common knowledge that Spain colonized the Philippines for more than three hundred years. These colonizers made use of the sword, which is force, and the cross, which is Catholicism, for the Filipinos to accept their rule. Three centuries under the colonizers saw the rise and spread of feudalism which was heavily characterized by the peasants' suffering – they who produce the goods are left with barely anything at all. That is what was probably meant by the monster "gorging himself with flesh and blood."

The “children of the soil,” Joma Sison’s eloquent way of addressing the peasant class, can only endure so much and now sought to end their oppression. There is hint that the peasants will opt for armed struggle as there is mention of “going with the children of wrath.” They will organize themselves and move towards the downfall of feudalism. Sison foretells of a bloody and violent means to end the peasant’s dilemma, as suggested by the trap covering “a pit full of bamboo spears” and the peasants casting upon the monster “buckets of flaming oil.” This is bloody in the sense that the forces protecting the status quo – namely, the landlord and bourgeois classes and their military arm, would not give in to the peasants’ uprising without a fight. They have an interest to protect and as a consequence, they would do anything in their power to maintain their holdings.

But these forces would prove no match against the enormity of the angered yet organized peasantry. With the eventual downfall of feudalism, the peasants would be set free from bondage. There is no more reason for them to be afraid in their own country. They have proven that there is no match to their collective strength.

The establishment of a national democratic stage will have been reached following the deliverance of the peasant class. There will be a reconstruction from among the ruins of the old feudal system. All this is enough cause for joy among all the laboring classes. This is so because with the advent of the national democratic stage, there will also be the implementation of a genuine agrarian reform and national industrialization and therefore, the proletarian class is one step closer to their own liberation, which can only be attained within the socialist dimension.

The whole poem abounds with symbolism and allegory. There is a protest against an existing social order and this has been put across by Joma Sison with so much craft and mastery of language. There was no direct mention of who or what this monster was and yet, it was manifested clearly in the whole poem. Also, Joma made use of clever coinage for the peasant class, the proletarian class, and even the revolutionary partisans.

Sison spoke of social actuality in his poem. The use of allegory and symbolisms made Sison’s “Against The Monster On The Land” an artwork. It clearly shows a protest against an existing oppressive structure through the use of literary devices that made the whole work symbolic and allegorical.

Once more, this confirms the role of poetry as critique of society. His poem criticizes the feudal make-up of society and at the same time, prophesizes on the triumph of the oppressed classes. In this manner, Sison himself acts as a catalyst for social transformation.

To Jasm, My Captive Child

Radiance on the face of mother,
Where the sun is banned,
You were already a prisoner
Beyond the warmth of the womb.

You have freed yourself
From one enclosure to another,
To a blind tomb built by ogres
Who shun the birth of a new life.

So soon are you robbed
Of green earth, streams, fresh wind,
Raging flowers and chirping birds,
Sun, moon and stars in the sky.

What have you in this shut-in space?
Sickening heat most of the day,
A holocaust of dust and gas fumes
And sudden cold in the night.

You are the child of captives
And you must share their life
As the compassion of tyranny
Finds every reason for cruelty.

And yet our joy is boundless.
We crowd this room with our love,
Defy the arrogant walls
And reach out to those who care.

Were you freed from this cell,
There is still a larger prison
Where the people must struggle
To win the sphere of freedom.

Life is a series of struggles
Against the definite kinds of prison.
As you grow, you will know freedom
Is won as at your birthing.

Someday you will be proud
That since birth you have been
In the thick of the struggle.
Thus, we call you our jasm.

Feed well from the breast
Of your mother the courage
And strength to bring down
The walls of tyranny in the land.

January 1982

Discussion:

The poem is intended for the child of detainees. His mother is in jails, languishing inside a dark prison cell. Even as an unborn babe, this child is already considered a prisoner, denied of things essential for the normal development of human life. As such, so soon is he deprived of the beauty of nature and instead is walled in by an enclosure, characterized by oppressive heat during the day alternating with icy coldness at night.

He is the child of detainees, and therefore, would have to share in his parents' predicament. He must suffer alongside with them in the hands of a tyrant. Cruelty at the hands of his parents' tormentors will experience too, even at such a tender age.

Although they are captives, they still find comfort and happiness in being together within the confines of their prison cell. They have made a home out of this prison cell.

This joy could also be attributed to the presence of people who are still concerned about others like them.

When the moment comes when this child, Jasm, as he is called, will be set free from this physical confinement, there are still larger prisons he would have to face. Jasm must continuously struggle to be truly free.

Jasm was born in the midst of the quest for freedom. Now there is a calling for him to partake in his parents' courage and strength in this battle to bring down tyranny in his land.

Analysis:

The poem is a stirring testimony of the poet to his son. Jose Ma. Sison speaks to Jasm of the reality of a political detainees' life. He mentions the plight of detainees like him living in sub-human conditions. It is mentioned that inside a prison cell, there is virtually an aura of death as things elemental to the development of human life are denied.

Jasm's parents were both imprisoned and he would have to live with them as had been a normal practice for detained couples. As such, Jasm and all other children of detainees would have to grow in an abnormal environment.

Jasm could be a symbol for the multitude of Filipinos who are experiencing what it is like to be in prison. Sison and the other detainees symbolize the motherland who is also without freedom. There is no freedom in the Philippines under Martial Law and therefore the people are restricted. All the hardships being felt in the country are experienced likewise by the people. In this case, Jasm also experiences and partakes in his parents' suffering and incarceration.

It is quite obvious that the tyrant mentioned in the poem was Ferdinand Marcos who had Sison jailed since 1977. Marcos employed fascism against all those critical of his regime – and Sison was no exception. He had been one of those sternly opposed to the dictatorship of Marcos.

Even if there had already been a number of victims put in prison, there would be more men and women who would answer the call and eventually oppose this blatant disregard for the dignity of human life. Such is the reason for Joma Sison's apparent joy despite being put behind bars.

The poem speaks of the continuing struggle beyond the realm of the prison. Joma Sison tells Jasm that even if he were freed, there is a "larger prison" with which he must struggle. This "larger prison" is symbolic of Philippine society where there is class

domination; a segment of Filipinos controlling the very existence of the vast majority of the Filipino masses. The elite dominating the peasant and proletarian class; this is basically a dog-eats-dog society, and is precisely the reason which the organized and conscientized masses have been struggling against.

There is also a renewed call for Jasm and for all Filipinos to be resolute in the struggle to bring down the fascist forces of the Marcos dictatorship and to unite to bring about genuine freedom in the Philippines.

Unlike in Sison's earlier poems, this particular piece does not speak of any allegory or metaphor. Rather, this is a raw account of the author's experience inside prison. What could be considered here is the poet's use of a symbol to stand for the Filipino people. In this case, Jasm was used as a symbol of all people languishing under an oppressive system. The child is also symbolic of all those who wish to stand up and speak for their rights under a repressive system.

Sison has purged his lines of their former load of self-conscious imagery compounded with modifiers and syntactical constructions that choke out detail.¹⁶ In this poem, Sison dared to be different and he deliberately chose to be straightforward and didactically simple. This poem is among his second collection of poems which is part of Joma's rectification campaign to reach the broadest masses who could read in English. He chose not to fall into the contraptions of artistry that could filter the message he really wants to transmit. He opted to be truthful and direct in his craft.

Joma once more observed the unity of theory and practice in this poem. He spoke of the harrowing realities under Martial Rule and this was a criticism of the Marcos dictatorship. As with his other poems, Sison did not stop merely at pointing out the flaws of the present system; there is an incitement to action to change the oppressive structure. This confirms the decisive role of art as critique of society and as a catalyst for social transformation.

¹⁶ Jose Ma. Sison, Prison And Beyond: Selected Poems 1958-1983, p. 30.

You Are My Wife And Comrade

You are my wife and comrade.
It is harsh that we are kept apart
By a bloodthirsty enemy with many snares.
We care for each other's welfare.

The wishes of the tyrant are so evil.
He seeks the betrayal of our souls
By torture and the threat of murder
And the wasting away of our youthful vigor.

His cruel minions are gleeful
That we suffer in stifling cubicles.
They are driven by usurped power
And like dogs carry our orders.

But even in our forced separation
We remain one in fierce devotion
To the noble cause of the revolution.
Firmly the struggle we must carry on.

Our chief tormentor on the throne
Will someday be overthrown,
For the seed has been sown
And the future is well known.

We have lived a full and fruitful life
Even at a youthful age so rife
For so much more to be done
In the raging course of the revolution.

We fear neither hardship nor death
For the people's supreme interest.
We are scornful of slander and intrigue
As the people wait for us to speak.

We may never be allowed to speak.
But tongues of fire affirm our integrity.
More than enough are the testaments
For our children's worthy heritage.

We miss our beloved children.
But our spirit continues to guide them.
We will always be part of the movement.
Far beyond the bounds of the present.

10 March 1978

Discussion:

The poem is for the wife of a revolutionary partisan. Husband and wife are both part of the revolutionary mass movement. They have been forcefully separated from each other by a cruel and cunning enemy. Cruel, because he inflicts physical harm on his victims; and cunning, because he employs every devilish scheme he could think of to get everything he desires.

They are both confronting a powerful enemy who has at his disposal, forces who advocate and perpetuate this same cruelty.

Though imprisoned and kept apart, there is deep adherence and loyalty towards attaining their revolutionary cause in this husband-and-wife-comrades-in-arms tandem. There is in them, a prophecy of the inevitable defeat and overthrow of this demi-god. Although physically confined within their prison cubicles, they realize that so much more is to be done for the eventual triumph of the revolution.

With or without them, the people's interests will always be fought for and protected. And they will always be part of this great revolutionary movement.

Analysis:

The poem is a tribute of the poet to his wife. Both of them had actually been ordered jailed by Marcos – the tyrant Sison speaks of in his poem. Having been charged as enemies of the state, Sison and his wife had to spend time behind bars. They experience untold suffering as Marcos' henchmen carry out orders to torture them and constantly threaten them with murder. This is a usual practice for all victims of Marcos' tyranny – they were tortured so that they could point out their other comrades under heavy interrogation. In essence, this would be a betrayal of the revolutionary and would be a cause for the setback of the cause.

Although physically barred from the mainstream of the revolutionary tide, their deep adherence and commitment to the cause is encompassing. The people's struggle must go on with or without them. This has been a clear understanding in the movement because although Sison, their acknowledged leader, is in prison, it did not disrupt the growth of the people's resistance. Rather, it was a reason for the growth of the people's movement in the rural and urban areas.

The inevitable downfall of the Marcos dictatorship has been marked, as clearly stated in the line "our chief tormentor on the throne will someday be overthrown." History would prove that all dictatorships crumble and eventually belong to the dustbin of history. The people's movement is advancing its struggle against the fascist regime and it is only a matter of time when the revolutionary forces will finally triumph.

Sison tells his wife that so much more needs to be done for the success of the revolution. There must be a continuous effort to arouse, organize, and mobilize the Filipino masses. There are still many middle class Filipinos living in disregard of the occurrences in our country. Sison, his wife, and other advocates of structural change have abandoned all selfish interests and pledged their whole being in the service of the people.

The poem is written in simple language, devoid of any linguistic machinations. It must be noted that when the poem was written in 1978, Joma had begun his rectification campaign to reach the broadest masses he could through his works. He wanted to bring the idea of a revolution closer to the people. He has deliberately used simple language to transcend raw experience and develop it into poetry. It is safe to say that Joma has made use of a direct and straightforward manner to express his thoughts to the public.

We could say that poetry again served as an agent to criticize society. In this case, it was a criticism against the fascist regime of Marcos. Also, we could say that poetry acted as a catalyst towards social transformation by prophesizing on the disintegration of the Marcosian system. This is seen in the lines "our chief tormentor on the throne will someday be overthrown. For the seed has been sown and the future is well-known."

In parting, the poem is one which may be considered crafty in its own right. The poet is really speaking as one immersed in his own social milieu.

Brothers

Among green leaves my brother fell on soil.
On his forehead was his faith marked in red
By a bullet above sight, reaching brain,
Bringing blood below to his mouth agape
Kissed at last by the bride of hunger fond of delay.

In that central part of the country, the helpless
Corpse received rifle butts on the stomach pit.
Spilled were lumps of root plants, wild fruit;
And soldier-brother-killer trotted with his fast foreign gun
And received measly payment for people gone.

While my brother preyed on his own dear brother
In the open plains, green woods, mountains and rivers
Handsome handfuls of strangers smartly conspired,
Laughed with ornate native personages in large,
Clean, well-designed structures near the city harbors.

Among visitors of the room were priests and prostitutes
Palms close to their pockets, they come prim and proper
Peddling their blessing to their benevolent men.
Oh, my poor brother falling on soil, how far you lay.
As another brother crushes your dry throat on general orders.

1961

Discussion:

The poem speaks of the dreadful reality of war. This is a time when even blood relations are forsaken over one's own beliefs.

In this particular poem, a brother kills his own brother with a bullet shot on his forehead. This bullet shot proves fatal and results in the blasted face of the brother.

Elsewhere in the country, another corpse receives rifle butts on the stomach. Another brother is killed by his soldier-brother with a foreign gun. He receives meager payment for having performed his duties satisfactorily.

While all these killings are going on, while more brothers continue to prey on their brothers, a handful of people conspire: natives and foreigners alike, in big buildings in the city.

Inside the room, there are also priests and prostitutes who came to bestow their blessing on these people. This is going on while the killings continue in the countryside; killings that have been ordered so that brother may continue to clash with brother in a game where no one comes out victorious.

Analysis:

The poem is a protest against the collaboration of the local elite and foreigners in forming an unholy alliance called “feudal oligarchy.” Written in 1961, the poem already speaks of a harrowing reality happening in the country.

This is a protest against the use of force or fascism. The poem is an account of a war that pits Filipinos against Filipinos. There is a war going on in the countryside at this very moment. A lot of victims are claimed by this gross disregard for human life.

There is a confrontation between the peasantry and the landlords’ private armies in the countryside. This is brought about by land disputes and, the farmer, having nothing more than the shirt on his back, cannot do anything to make the landlord give in to his demands. There is essentially a clash of interest between landlords and peasants, and it is natural that the one who controls the wealth of resources will win over the one who does not own anything.

Driven by necessity, the peasants resort to open confrontation with the private armies of the landlords. Eventually, they will prove no match to the private armies. Even in death, the poor peasant is humiliated as shown in the line “the helpless corpse received rifle butts on the stomach pit.” The killers, on the other hand, remain free, and continue to wreak havoc on other peasants. They remain beyond the control of law because these “masters” are lawmakers themselves- they possess the political power as well, and therefore no one can go against their wishes.

Meanwhile, the feudal oligarchy Sison speaks of continues to conspire against the peasantry in their big building in the metropolis. Inside their rooms are priests and prostitutes who peddle their blessings on these men. “Priests” could be symbolic of the whole hierarchical Church who remains purely interested in the salvation of the soul. This Church betrays the true calling to be one with the people as they do not do anything to condemn the powers at hand. Rather, they drink, dine, and make merry with the people’s oppressors. “Prostitutes” could mean the real-life whores or mistresses of these men. They, the feudal oligarchs, are preoccupied with such trivial matters as the killings continue in the countryside.

Sison tells his readers of the harsh reality of the present societal set-up. One that is feudal and protected by a fascist military arm. There is wanton abuse of power in these landlords who are also oftentimes the country’s local officials,

Sison has made use of a factual notation of events and happenings, and skillfully organized varied appearances into a coherent whole.¹⁷ The result is a concrete dramatic situation which reveals the inner contradictions and antagonisms of two irreconcilable classes: the peasants and the oligarchy.

¹⁷ Epifanio San Juan Jr., The Radical Tradition In Philippine Literature, p. 98.

It appears that in this poem, Sison was employing revolutionary aesthetics. The poem is inspired, not by conventions of Philippine literature, which was heavy on style, but by the need to relate to facts in Philippine social life. Contrary to formal conventions, Sison does not invent any metaphor but would speak directly to his readers. This is clearly shown in the line “In that central part of the country the helpless corpse received rifle butts on the stomach pit.” He does not deal so much in the “hows” of a message but in the “whats”, i.e. what moral good his readers can derive from his poem.

The poem proves to be a criticism of the feudal set-up of society which uses force to maintain a stronghold on power. “Brothers” is one work that is strong in the sense that it criticizes, and dares to expose, the truth that not every poet dares to speak of.

These Scavengers

These scavengers, blessed children of gut, writhe
The ritual of suffering dexterously, dipterously.
Without sermon stalking them at the streetcorner,
They set upon the soulful privilege of garbage cans
And slimy dung-heaps to retrieve their flesh and breath.
Following the fate of their fathers, they feebly fare fast
Before fishes and loaves can multiply and flow.
They fall before the arid absolute of city pavements
And asphalt; the heaves and wildness of cement and steel
Bear no fruit, they tend a hidden garden nowhere.
Not a patch of land the size of grave can send them
Clean edible shoots, they mine the crumbs from orbs
Of refuse and fetch them deftly to their wound-mouths
That hold fast the curses kissed elsewhere upon golden cups
And munched with the pale and dainty shreds of ceremony.
Scavenger, as barrio brethren dig giddily for tubers,
Dig for bits of junk – pieces of paper and broken bottles
Below tarred and horny lampposts, from battered drums.
Still before they eat, they make their bid for the market
After fair, furious fight with flies flaunting their freedom.
Assailed by sales and subtlety and things past and cherished,
They are whelmed by the world before whelming a piece of it.

Discussion:

The poem characterizes a scavenger, and speaks of his dismal plight. The status of being a scavenger has long been a legacy of his ancestors –his father and forefathers before him have all been scavengers, and this had been passed on to his generation today. He is the child of scavengers, and now he too, is a scavenger.

A scavenger knows the rituals of suffering all too much. He has to dig through heaps and piles of garbage with the hopes of retrieving something that could see him through the day. Basically living a hand-to-mouth existence, a scavenger does not have a house to shelter him nor a small piece of land to cultivate and call his own.

Just as barrio folks dig the earth for tubers, so does a scavenger dig through the mountains of junk searching for scraps of paper and broken bottles. And just before they eat, scavengers scramble madly for the market to look for leftovers which are being feasted upon by flies. Such is the condition of scavengers. They live in utmost deprivation while some people benefit and conspire against them.

Analysis:

The whole poem is a symbol. The poem is an objective presentation of a scavenger's plight. But if we are to look at it from another standpoint, these scavengers could very well represent the whole Filipino people at this particular juncture in history.

Filipinos are experiencing very difficult times. Having been through a series of wars, they find it difficult to rise from its ravages. This is further aggravated by the fact that foreign investors are coming in the country. With the influx of foreign capitalists, Filipinos are oftentimes displaced and disregarded in favor of foreign interests. It is a fact that government gives priority to foreign entities over the people's interests.

All these happenings are detrimental to the Filipino people and they continue to sink in the graveyard of poverty. They who are the locals own nothing at all, and eventually become outcasts in their own country.

Sison spoke of another social actuality in this poem. With the clever use of language, a seemingly strong and radical poem is transformed into a symbolic and eloquent piece. There is a manipulation of words to bring about the desired effect, that of a subtle protest against the presence of foreign capitalists. Joma makes use of several poetic devices such as alliteration and metaphors in his poem. This is shown in lines such as "fair, furious fight with flies flaunting their freedom"; and with the use of metaphors such as "wound-mouth".

We could see that unlike his other poems that are directly didactic, “These Scavengers” does not exhibit the same trait. The poem is among Jose Ma. Sison’s earlier poems which are generally technically sound and patterned after the formalistic conventions of literature.

“These Scavengers” is a poem that demonstrates the poet’s grasp of the inner contradictions of his time. We see that the impoverished scavengers “assailed by sales and subtlety and things past and cherished” preserve the hope of the redeeming future.

There is again truth to the premise that poetry serves as a critique of society in this particular poem. It wages a criticism against the benefit of a handful at the expense of the majority.

CHAPTER THREE CONCLUSION

There have been a lot of contentions from the two schools of art regarding socialist realism. The first breed of artists belong to the *l’art pour l’art* movement or those who make art for art’s sake. These artists believe in the superiority of form to content. As such, it is the “how” of an artwork that interests them most. On the other hand, there is also the presence of artists who believe that art is reflective of society, and that an artist plays a historical role within the context of his social milieu.

Jose Ma. Sison is one artist who belongs to the second breed of artists who figure greatly in the events happening in one’s environment. More often than not, works heavy on content are accused of as propaganda. These usually come from those who advocate the art for art’s sake movement.

Sison’s works are indeed, heavy on content. His poems reflect and manifest a disgust and protest over contemporary social problems that beset the Philippines and the Filipino people. His poetry addresses the large-scale oppression and repression of the Filipino people and how they react to such sufferings. It is very evident from Joma’s poems that there is an incitement to action to end all abuses of power. There is mention of armed revolutionary resistance as a means of putting an end to the powers at hand.

In this particular subject, poetry serves as critique of society. There is no attempt to glorify the present-day situation. What Sison did was to show the concrete and objective conditions the people are faced with presently. If only for that, poetry served its purpose to be a critique of society.

During the course of this study, the writer also found that alongside with being a critique of society, poetry acts as a catalyst for social transformation. Sison repeatedly foretells of the eventual downfall of a crumbling social order and the triumph of all oppressed classes of society. He mentions the vision of the Filipino people's freedom from bondage as a recurring theme in his poems. There is the hope of redemption in his poems.

Having employed the mastery of craft and exhibiting the unity of theory and practice in his art, Sison has surpassed the challenge of his works as being mere propaganda. His poems, although direct and simple, are the poet's interpretation of events in his society. As such, a transformation occurs from being just a reality into a creative form, that is, poetry. The mere fact that Joma was able to channel his revolutionary fervor into a creative process that led to the composition of poems was in itself an affirmation of the poet's commitment to theory and practice. His works are direct and simple for he has deliberately chosen to do so in order to make his works accessible to the wider range of Filipino masses.

Art never transcends a definite social condition. Art is neither a metaphysical entity. Art is the product of the social conditions that define itself clearly with one's firm grasp of the contradictions and antagonisms taking place. Such is Sison's standpoint in producing his literary works. He is a revolutionary, both in theory and in practice because he has never spoken of anything but the truth. His is the type of "committed art" that combines both form and content to one extent.

Therefore, art or poetry, specifically, ceases to be a concrete manifestation of social actualities if one concentrates only on style. This, however, does not undermine the importance of creativity in form nor presupposes the superiority of content. Rather, it is the fusion of these two components that makes art last through time.

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