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Reading Short Stories of F. Sionil Jose Using Marxism as a Literary vista

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ABSTRACT

Honoring the role of literature as a mirror of society, this paper unravels the harsh conditions of class struggle in the Philippines through the selected short stories of F. Sionil Jose, a Filipino national artist using Marxism as a literary vista. After a thorough close reading of his short stories compiled in the book, *Puppy Love and Other Stories* (1998), five of his short stories were chosen and were subjected to content analysis in order to discuss the Marxist themes of class struggle evident in his stories. The themes of class struggle such as armed struggle, class repression and exploitation, and land grabbing were illuminated in the selections. Finally, the paper related the identified themes of class struggle in the short stories to the current Philippine situation in order to underscore and reflect on the timelessness and the relevance of the stories of F. Sionil Jose in the present time.

Keywords: *Marxism, Literature, Short Stories, Class Struggle, Philippine Society*

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1. Introduction

The Philippines is a country beaten with internal strife and social struggle. The insecurity of justice and social equality corresponds to violence, disorder, and general lawlessness. What politics and governance had lacked in its exercise, literature provided an escape for the expression of human freedom. Language mirrors the world (Krishnan, 2018). The high understanding of literature is based solely that the concept itself is a human construct. Although in contrast, it is also deemed a natural disposition of human nature (Hospers, 1953). As such, the interpretations and logical studies that arose from literature is reflective of the need to further understand the self or that of human experience. Hence, literature is the manifestation of our emotions and its plots expose the internal and external conflict, within and outside of ourselves (Lorenzo, 2014).

Literature draws the attention of people to life. The universality of ideas found in literature is continually subjected to in-depth criticisms in uncovering the nucleus of its substance. All these efforts to arrive at its main purpose, the philosophy of its creation. A theory mirroring the sustained

harshness of the Filipino condition can be described through the perspective of Marxism. It is a doctrine developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the 19th century. Marx theorized that class and its struggle were fundamental elements in the evolution of history. He claims that the demands of the ruling class for producing more goods and the resistance of the lower-class have driven the evolution of society (Heller, 2018). To emphasize this, an excerpt from the Communist Manifesto (Marx, et. al., 2002) reads:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave....oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes. (p. 31)

Rummel (1977) defines class as a vertical division into superior-inferior or superordinate-subordinate; a difference in class is a difference in wealth, power, or esteem. In the Marxist tradition, the class character and politics has been closely associated with access to land and property (Levien, et. al., 2018). This phenomenon

equates ownership of material resources with higher position in the class hierarchy, while lack thereof meant subordination. In Marxism, classes of people are divided into two: the bourgeois, who controls the capital and means of production, and the proletariat who provides the labour. Karl Marx's preconception on social conflict posited a class struggle between proletariat and bourgeois. The triggering factor for class struggle to happen occurs when people have become aware of their loss, of their alienation and proceed to a radical transformation of their situation by a revolution (Chamber and McLellan, 2018). To understand the reason why stratification of society happens and the subsequent rich and poor divide occurs, this can be surmised again from the text of the Communist Manifesto (2002) itself:

Your very ideas are but the outgrowth of conditions of your bourgeois production and bourgeois property, just as your jurisprudence is but the will of your class, made into law for all, a will whose essential character and direction are determined by the economic conditions of the existence of your class. (p. 35)

This principle establishes that individual character, opportunity and, ideology is based on the conditions which a person was born and raised into. It is expected that the bourgeois enjoys the privileges brought by their financial and social standing. However, persons coming from underprivileged sectors of society, the proletariat being of lower financial standing, tend to significantly lack opportunities, privileges, and even rights. Individual opinions are not excluded from class influence since it inevitably determines those opinions as mere rationalizations of a class status. Class struggle is so pervasive that it touches not one individual but a group of people.

According to Enfu and Zhongbao (2018), Marxism enriches and develops the construction of society's ideals on theories which concerns nature, law, and thought. Similarly, Aprotosoie-Iftimi (2015) states that art assists and exposes the development of human consciousness and existence and improvement of its social system. Furthermore, Dekoster (2018) tells that Marxist criticism exemplifies the evolution towards the classless society through which literature or propaganda is critical for its attainment in revealing the evils of a capitalist state. Karl Marx's conviction that the point of philosophy is not merely to

know the world but to change it for the good continues to infuse the essential bone marrow of virtually every major movement on the beleaguered planet (Lee, 2017).

The annals of Philippine literature did not fail to record the postcolonial malice and truths of a sad societal condition, especially that of the working and underprivileged classes. Teodoro (1981) wrote that: "Literature is an attempt to make the human condition in a particular time and place understandable." The historical struggles of a subjugated people, by poverty and illiteracy, are lyrics found in the requiems of Philippine literature.

Francisco Sionil Jose is a Filipino writer who has produced a series of novels and short stories that constitute an epic imaginative creation of a century of Philippine life and is perhaps the most widely known local writer internationally (Morales, 2012). He was born on 3 December 1924 in the small town of Rosales, Pangasinan, the Philippines. His novels, short stories, and non-fiction works highlight the social underpinnings, class struggles and colonial history of Filipino society. The common themes of his books evoke the feeling of action and deprivation, revolution and oppression, hope and failure, a constant movement in the narratives that touch the lives of characters torn in the dilemma of opposing circumstances; a pull towards change or comfort in their accustomed state. As noted by Ty-Casper (1998):

In history we see our country unfolding. In literature we see our lives unfolding, and we feel and share the experience of sacredness...it is that experience which makes us a nation, though remaining our individual selves. The sense of self is in that sense of nationhood. (p. 512)

F. Sionil' shows the intricacies and composite situation of the true sufferings of the poor. Wherever F. Sionil goes the reader is held in his story. The realism of his depictions fill the crevace of misunderstanding and along with it the elimination of emotional vagueness to the truths of a class-divided reality. In his book *Ermita: A Filipino Novel* (1988) he writes:

The obscenities of this country are not girls like you. It is the poverty which is obscene, and the criminal irresponsibility of the leaders who make this poverty a deadening reality. The obscenities in this country are the places of the rich, the new hotels made at the expense of the people, the hospitals where the poor die when they get sick because they don't have the money



either for medicines or services. It is only in this light that the real definition of obscenity should be made. (p. 25)

The works of F. Sionil Jose shoulder the burdens of the real-life marginalized Filipino. His brutal insinuations on Philippine politics and social trauma is a masterpiece wedged between the letters of his writing. However, these short stories do not stop on mere insinuations but are mediums for greater understanding of the social situation. In one of his essays he wrote, "We write from life and call it literature, and literature lives because we are in it." In those words, F. Sionil's effort to write the allegorical existence of his characters had since become part and parcel of what is considered Philippine literature, the story of one's own people.

This study aims to understand in-depth the works of F. Sionil Jose and relate it with Marxist philosophy, especially that of class struggle. The intent to relate the findings of F. Sionil Jose's writings is an effort to discover the meaning behind each story and find out how these narratives fit into the everyday account of the Filipino struggle. These relevant objectives conceived are as follows: 1) discuss the Marxist themes of class struggle evident in the selected short stories of F. Sionil Jose; and 2) relate the themes of class struggle in the short stories to the current Philippine situation.

2. Methodology

This research is a qualitative study that uses Marxist literary theory as a touchstone in order to delve deeper into the meaning of F. Sionil Jose's short stories and recognize its significance to the themes of his literary creations. Being a novelist, journalist, and a social thinker, his ability to write the truths of everyday living and more than a century-old culture of repression, poverty, and struggle is a pinnacle of national introspection. Using textual analysis the researchers intend to analyse and describe the content, structure, and functions of the messages contained within the selected short stories. This is ultimately done to fully understand how Marxism is genuinely reflected. To reveal and speculate on these ideas serves the purpose of truly knowing F. Sionil Jose's thought and perspective on Filipino problems.

The researchers, upon reading and consolidating information about the short stories of F. Sionil Jose, have analyzed its contents using Marxist literary theory. The researcher based his method for analyzing the stories and fulfilling the research

objectives through the guidelines set by Acompañado, et. al. (2018), which is summarized below:

1. Read and reread the selected short stories until saturation is achieved.
2. The researcher used textual analysis to interpret the content of the selected short stories.
3. Identify the content and message of the short stories;
4. Identify the human actions elicited in the short stories;
5. Cite passages that conform to the researcher's analysis of the short stories using Marxist literary lens; and,
6. Relate the findings in the current Philippine situation.

The study emphasizes class struggle because of its influence in relating peasant and worker history and its imminence in F. Sionil's short stories. The true understanding of class struggle bridges the gap between stories and the real-life Filipino situation, the abstract and real. Furthermore, class struggle is a pillar that tries to describe social relations. It paints an image of how interactions in a materialistic class-driven world are corrupted and easily visible in F. Sionil's writings. A careful analysis, by thorough reading, was done in order to efficiently complement the essence of the research in seeking the evidence of Marxism. Initially, the researchers selected and analyzed thirteen stories based on the book *Puppy Love and Other Stories* (1998). After a close reading, the stories were reduced to five, namely: *No Escape*, *The Machine*, *A Walk with my Grandson*, *Knowledge*, and *Molave and the Orchid*. These were chosen because the themes of Marxist class struggle are strongly evident in the chosen texts.

Table 1: An analysis of the plot and class struggles in the short stories

Title	Plot	Class Struggle
<i>No Escape</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The narrator's brother appeared one day bloodied and unconscious. His sudden arrival roused many questions from his siblings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gunshots from the hills signifying armed struggle. A family of peasants drenched in poverty; having little to eat and lesser money to spend.
<i>The Machine</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A farmer brought a tractor to his farmland, causing an argument with his old father who is reluctant of the machine. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Land grabbing against poor farmers Tenancy and the expendability of farmers Destruction of the forests and other resources near the farmland
<i>A Walk With My Grandson</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A Filipino in the US talks about memories of rural life during his childhood days. He compares it with the convenient life of his grandson. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The main character had a hard life during his poor childhood days with his mother who tried to always make ends meet. The grandfather of the main character had land stolen from him
<i>Knowledge</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Efren Sison felt inferior because he was poor. Working in a newspaper he came in conflict with his boss, Ditas, in trying to change the paper's contents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Efren's effort to write about far relevant social issues Efren's subordinate attitude with richer individuals; his former classmate and now his boss. His feeling of inferiority due to poverty
<i>Molave and the Orchid</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An orchid, swept by the wind, had clung to the big molave tree. The tree was bothered by the flower's presence and desired for it to go away. In the end the molave was cut with a chainsaw and the orchid lived as an ornamental plant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The two characters incessantly argued on why the orchid should remain and live beside the molave The orchid survived the drought symbolic of continued struggle to live The molave was cut in the end signifying bourgeois destruction

3. Marxist Themes of Class Struggle in The Selected Short Stories of F. Sionil Jose

Class struggle has its different manifestations throughout the short stories being studied, such as armed struggle, class repression and exploitation, and land grabbing.

3.1 Class struggle through armed struggle

According to Joma Sison, the people's war answers the central question of revolution, which is to seize power (Reyes and Romulo, 2017) but what really defines this armed struggle is the number of lives it cost. Armed struggle stems from the frustrations of the oppressed that has no other way but to take up arms. Its purpose is to challenge the established powers and incite a rebellion. Two of the five stories exhibit such examples. The older brother of the narrator in *No Escape* is presumed to have left the mountains where gunfire was heard. In the story *The Molave and the Orchid* an allegorical representation of such a struggle is depicted when the drought had tried to kill the plant, but the orchid survived.

3.1.1 No Escape

The narrator's brother is mysterious. He left his family at a young age and came back many years after bloody and wounded. The instance of his return and the gunfire in the mountains is not a coincidence "From those distant hills came the deep, muffled sound of guns. They

persisted far into the night, rumbling on like claps of May thunder."

"I couldn't help thinking of the mysterious folds of those hills where he had gone groping, looking for what I knew not." (p. 116)

It is an implication that he took part in the conflict that left him in bad condition. Speculating on his armed struggle, what made him take up arms is the poverty of his family and the harsh life he was born into. This course of action, which he vested unto himself, is not an isolated case. In reality, the occurrence of peasant revolts has ignited recourse for farmers to be noticed and heard but replied with violence. Marxism believes that the awareness of peasant worker's exploitation would lead to an armed struggle as an effort to change their neglected state, this being true in the story.

3.1.2 The Molave and the Orchid

Throughout the story, there is a constant exchange of rebuttals between the orchid and the

molave. It is known that the molave was not happy; hence he prayed malice on the little plant. Designating a bourgeois-proletariat relationship between the characters compliments the violent struggle viewed by Marxist philosophy. Such is revealed in the following lines: "...the drought came and for days on end the sun scorched the land" (p.190) The drought and scorching heat were the efforts to annihilate the orchid, symbolism of violence against the proletariat. These lines vividly imply a revolution. Historically, the greatest changes of society and governments always include the severity brought by toppling overruling classes. But, this harsh principle is also used for the repression of lower classes of people. The forces used against the working class, economic or legal in nature, intends to keep them dependent on the system that reaps benefits from their harder labour. In the scenario of the story the proletariat - the orchid - survives the drought and continues her argument with the tree, signifying that the struggle continues: "The orchid was still there, her leaves wilted, her roots all withered but not the whole, she was alive and breathing." (p.190) The orchid said the following: "Only death can set us apart," (p. 190) this denotes the mutual destruction of both classes. In the Marxist class conflict, there are three possibilities to a worker's revolution: the success of the proletariat, its defeat, or the failure of neither.

In the conclusion of the story, the tree was finally cut with a chainsaw. The Molave



fell along with the orchid but the latter lived, becoming an ornamental plant. This ending is an intentional insinuation of the proletarian victory. It signifies the ideal resolution of the workers' struggle against its oppressor, the destruction of elite hegemony. The tree's death connotes a violent end instigated by a revolution.

3.2 Class struggle through class repression and exploitation

The methods of exploiting and repressing people prove effective and efficient historically in providing cheap or even free labour. What all criminal forms of labour exploitation have in common is the abuse of a worker's social situation by an employment relationship that fails to respect the dignity of the individual worker (FRA – European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2015). This method is done to keep workers in line and ensure a steady flow of labor for the benefit of profit. It is observed within four out of five selected stories.

3.2.1 No Escape

This dialogue from the main character's sister is a sad acceptance of their perceived situation. Drenched in poverty, the hopes of even having cement for a decent burial of his big brother was impossible more so that they even have no food to eat. *"How can we get cement, we haven't got enough to eat...we cannot afford it..."* (p. 117). Furthermore, the implications of her speech tell that it is not only the natural elements and their poverty that give them hardships but somehow an implication of people or a group that keeps them in that situation: *"It is not only the land and the elements that are unkind. We will die here; what matters is but when. There is no escaping..."* (p.117). With this revelation two things are surmised that keeps them in repression: it is their (1) mentality and (2) actual condition. These two are related but are independent of one another. The idea of welcoming death, surely and willingly, stems from their deprived lives. They are always trying to live within the bounds of this difficulty but are discouraged to try and change its course: *"It is useless. It will always be this way. We shall rot here. Where we were born, where we belong."* (pg. 117). Their actual condition as impoverished farmers naturally denotes repression and exploitation in the Filipino context. No mention has been made on how they are treated as farmers but the outcome of characterizing them as such automatically creates a picture of a life full of hardships.

3.2.2 The Machine

The father of the main character exemplifies huge regret to what was lost and can never be returned. The lines are clear descriptions of how the complete destruction of forests, rivers, and the soil paved way for infrastructure. This careless sacrifice is what makes it harder for people dependent on those resources to live their lives; *"It was only fifty years ago...But what happened? They extended the roads from the south and cut down even the helpless sapling. They dammed the river, built a railroad, and sapped the milk of the earth. And today, what's left?"* (p.124). This raises a question if progress is beneficial for all people. The connotation of those lines speaks volume on how change is unequal, especially those who have no voice in its realization. Farmers who have toiled their land and harvested its fruits are continually kept from taking a stand on what is also beneficial for them. A divide ensues between the landowner and the farmers. In the majority of cases, it is always the peasant farmer who struggles to assert himself into being heard. This creates an attitude that farmers are mere instruments that plow the fields and harvest its grains. This repressed state is systematically carried out to maintain a workforce, a class, to ensure that food production continues and profit is gained.

3.2.3 A Walk with My Grandson

The grandfather, the main character, is a man who had worked so hard to have a better life from the familiar poverty of his youth. The aspiration to elevate his status meant labouring to gain and save material wealth. In retrospect, its cultural implications within society meant the equation of material well-being to happiness and success (Aknin, et. al., 2013). *"It is like growing old, the years peeling away until the person comes to his reward..."* (p. 128). In achieving so, it meant consistently working hard to reach a higher socioeconomic standing or keeping oneself in that stratum. This is an example how the true struggle of a class wrought by poverty aspires to reach an economic condition better than their own: *"It is the imagination, Fred, which takes us to so many interesting, distant and unreachable places-they can only exist in the mind."* (p.135) Prior to the dialogue, the main character and his grandson talked about going to foreign countries, he then replied with those lines. Such words may literally mean the use of imagination to travel distances but it also alludes to his incessant need to think of a better condition, a positivity that arouses

him to continue on living. The main character's poverty did not avail him the privileges his better-off grandson, Fred, to travel the world or to have a more comfortable life. However, the realization of his poor state during childhood freed him to know more of his disadvantaged situation. This truth became the fuel that pushed him to reach his dreams and work hard to achieve something much greater than what he was born into. His class struggle was not necessarily that of guerrilla warfare or an oppressive landlord but the internal struggle to fight towards his own ends regardless of material poverty, to push against the limits of his own class.

3.2.4 Knowledge

The sense of inferiority poverty creates among people who are underserved and communities underdeveloped are often the cause for their isolation and exploitation by the higher tiers of society. In this case, a mentality due to poor economic conditions affects the social attitude of an individual: "*Efren Sison was afflicted with an intense case of inferiority—he was poor...*" (p.151) The story reveals that because of his poverty, during high school, Efren kept himself away from girls and his classmates. In college, he was reluctant to be "*socially acquainted with a student as wealthy as Ditas (his classmate)*"(p.153) When he became a writer for a newspaper he was told to keep his progressive ideas to himself: "*You want progress in the Dantes empire? Do what the old man tells you to do, or what you think he wants you to do! Kiss his ass like me!*"(p.161) This obvious conservatism to push past the boundaries of his reluctant attitude kept him in line with the status quo of everything, in constant subordination to the people who were far richer and powerful than him. His confinement to this situation, not only of poverty but also of his mentality, proves to be his ideal conception between the poor and rich classes. In relation to this, the class far more influential and powerful has dictated this status quo, manifested by the "*elite that had no loyalty to Filipinas, only to their families*"(p.155) that caused so much of the Filipino malaise. The absolute compliance of the other characters in the story is all too familiar with the truth of the social structure in real life. The reasons to follow authority became a convenient excuse not to question or divulge the problems, or to develop the current system of relationships between the institution and individual. The reasoning for this is that those who are in position wields enough

influence and power to sanction those who oppose a belief established by people on top of the hierarchy. Hence, what is established becomes the reality all are expected to live with, a reality not reflective of the common people.

3.3 Class struggle through land grabbing

Land grabbing is typically accomplished through illegitimate means, which involves the exploitation of land-associated resources such as water, minerals, and forests. The actors at the losing end from whom these resources are 'grabbed' are often rural smallholders, such as farmers, fisherfolk, and indigenous peoples (Manahan, et. al., 2015). Because of this, the farmers become tenants or workers for their farms rather than being its owners. Two stories, *The Machine* and *A Walk With My Grandson*, reveal this type of class struggle.

3.3.1 The Machine

Expressing his deep sorrow by suddenly knowing that his land was taken from him unjustly, the grandfather spoke in clear passionate dismay: "*They say this is yours and this is mine. And I who was one of the first to clear this land, where is mine? Or even yours... my children?*" (p. 125) The sequestration of land from farmers is practically a life or death situation since it is in the soil which his life depends on; income, food, occupation. The unlawful and unjust acquisition of land from those who had really toiled its soil is what makes it an unjust and oppressive case. A master-servant relationship is imminent in a class society where illiteracy of the peasantry is continually being taken advantage of by landlords. The lines spoken by the main character's father: "*We can always go to where they will need us. Where there are no machines...*" (p.127) eludes to the sense of "disposability" of peasants. It connotes that they are mere implements bound to do work for their landowners wherever they see fit. It takes away the essence of freedom to choose, decide, and enjoy their labor. Living hard tilling the soil in a land not their own, they are dependent on the decisions made by those whom they tenant for.

3.3.2 A Walk with My Grandson

Looking back to his childhood, the main character's grandfather was a victim of land grabbing: "*I remember him taking me to the fields. It was harvest time, the fields were golden with ripening grain. He said all that land was his but it was stolen from him. I remember him cry.*" (p.136) The field's golden color of ripe grains was supposedly his, but sadly it was taken from him. His cry



was significant in making it known how truly important his land was to him. The poor circumstances in effect amongst farmers make it easier to break them down and create a situation for servitude. Hence, this proves effective to be a mirror of continued slavery. This was ingrained in his childhood memory, old age cannot erase. The experience imparted to him was a stepping-stone in understating part of what the real struggle brought upon those who have least. Becoming a writer, he did not forget to write about his own people and, most of all, his grandfather. These accounts were articulated in a few of his writings. He did it to escape the certainty of forgetting and to merit the struggles of faraway people whose lands were not their own.

[4. Relationship between the Themes of Class Struggle in the Short Stories to the Current Philippine Situation](#)

[4.1 Armed struggle in the current Philippine situation](#)

As revealed in the story *No Escape* class struggle was hinted through armed conflict in the mountains. The youngest sibling explicitly describes: "*From those distant hills came the deep, muffled sound of guns.*" (p.116) Relating this to the present, the insurrection of Filipino communist rebels in the thick jungles and mountainous terrains of the archipelago have persisted for 50 years. Since 1969 the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) has waged an armed struggle rooted in political, social, and economic inequalities prevalent in the country, manifested to the majority of the people as poverty, hunger, lack of social services, and joblessness, among others (Cosiso, 2017). The common victims for recruitment in this armed group are poor farmers in rural areas who are taken advantage of because of their condition. This situation is reflected in the story; a family of farmers who has almost nothing eats and have lost hope escaping their wretched condition. This is what pushed their big brother to flee years ago to find comfort by trying to change their negligence by other means. In view with this, historically, in the 1950s the Hukbalahap were the landless peasants whose grievances and demands for land ownership and crop sharing was not met by the government (Greenberg, 1986). It was the predecessor of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and shared the Marxist-Leninist views of communism (Ayal, 1975). They operated mostly in the provinces where the far-flung areas are hard to access by government help or control.

These groups extorted resources from the people of the barrios and barangays to finance them and sustain their operations. In *The Molave and the Orchid*, the escalation of an armed struggle is allegorical. The wind, scorching heat, drought, and cutting off the Molave are all symbolic. The wind that swept the Orchid to the trunk was the parallelism of people born into poverty or privilege. It is not by choice that people are born into the class they are in, and so was the Orchid without choice to cling towards the Molave. This can be related to the aforementioned motivation of those born underprivileged to fight. The drought, which wilted the leaves of the orchid – the proletariat, is a move to prevent its growth, to continue its suppression. In reality, the insurgent groups feel that they are being taken advantage of by the land or business owner. Their desperations became the armed struggle that we know of today. The Communist Party of the Philippines was reorganized and successfully adopted the path of armed struggle (Holden, 2013). In 1974 Jose Maria Sison wrote, "*Our people's war is protracted. It shall take a long period of time to change the balance of forces between us and the enemy.*" Forty-seven years since the reestablishment of the CPP, the people's war it is waging has grown stronger. According to Hashimoto's (2009) study, there are factors that impede the peace process such as the Philippine government's untrustworthiness because of inconsistent policies and human rights violations. The continuing armed struggle of these peasant farmers have been supported far and wide by leftist groups and even by youth leaders. With the failure of materializing a long-lasting peace talk, this insurrection is bound to continue costing lives from both sides. The perceived inaction of the government to answer basic peasant demands will become the lasting fuel of peasant revolts.

[4.2 Class repression and exploitation in the current Philippine situation](#)

Marx (2002) wrote, that "*in the bourgeois society, capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality.*" This meant that workers' rights are vitiated because of their maltreatment in the workplace. The least educated and the most desperate workers are victimized by unfair practices such as unsafe work environments, temporary employment, imposed overwork hours, etc. They have taken it upon themselves to fight for their

rights, resorting to dialogues and strikes to protest unfair labour practices (Gavilan, 2018).

Exploitation and repression manifest in different forms. In *No Escape* and *A Walk With My Grandson*, the theme of poverty is central to the story. The difference is that the former accepts the harshness of poverty while the latter freed himself from it. In *No Escape*, the characters are a family of farmers who are stuck being poor with no mention of hope but only screams of grieving. Similar with real Filipino farmers, the study of Panganiban (2010) showed that those who work in the farming sector experience chronic poverty. A 2017 Philippine Statistics Authority report reaffirms this. It reported that in 2015 farmers and fishermen were consistently the poorest since 2006 in the basic sector.

In a *Walk With My Grandson*, Fred's grandfather escaped his poverty through hard work, studying then becoming a journalist. Subsequently, he migrated to the US to find a better life, bringing his family along with him. This fact subtly compares how better the life in other countries is compared to the Philippines. This branding of greater opportunities abroad is a phenomenon that pushed an exodus of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) outside the country. The Philippine economy is stable and growing partly because of the remittances OFWs bring back to the country. Different to how the characters are depicted in the story, OFWs are exploited overseas. They are considered heroes at home, but have experienced deplorable conditions and maltreatment in the hands of their employers. The Philippine government is fast in sending its citizens to labour in other countries, yet fails to fully uphold the dignity of all those workers. Every so often that some OFWs return unpaid, abused, violated, or in a casket. The sacrifices of these people have been and will be abused because of their desperations. It is the common face of poverty that pushed them to suffer the personal struggles abroad and away from loved ones.

In *The Machine* the issues of farmers' displacement and their abuse are true experiences. Farmers' displacement is told in the line: "*Is he right about us?... now that that machine is here...*" (p.127) Their concern was for them not having a place to work because of the greater capacity of the tractor to work. This should not only be the case to fear displacement. Natural calamities such as typhoons and droughts contributed

to crop losses across the country, impacting the production of rice, vegetables and high-value crops (Cosiso, 2017). What is repressive in such situations is the inability of farmers to pay borrowed sums of money that were used to plant their crops. Response from the national government to provide assistance and cash incentives are often late. In a similar way, armed men that attacked villages instigated fear causing them to leave their lands. In *No Escape*, this was described in: "*those distant hills came the deep, muffled sound of guns.*" (p.116) Furthermore, abuse was shown by portraying farmers as compliant servants to their masters: "We can always go to where they will need us. Where there are no machines." (p. 127) Their portrayal typifies the attitude of poor farmers who have known only to till the soil and abides by the necessities of their landowners; a desperate and terrible state.

In *Knowledge*, exploitation and repression are observed through the officemates of Efren in their subservience to the publisher of the firm. The newspaper is structured in a way that it employs not because of fresh ideas. It gathers workers who are subordinate and persuaded to follow the monotonous irrelevance of the newspaper's articles. Efren's friend told him to "*not do anything new, to run it the way it always was.*" (p.163) In a more serious note, the death of journalists who critique social issues and write about controversial personalities face the serious danger of being killed. Words have power and it may cost a person's life. According to the NGO Committee to Protect Journalists, 142 journalists and media workers were killed in the Philippines from 1992 to 2002. While the country ranked 133rd out of 180 countries in the 2018 World Press Freedom Index, the lives of these reporters are always at stake, with each word are written and spoken is critical. In the story, the theme of masking the struggle of common people is deduced. When Efren met Ditas, the newspaper publisher, to discuss his proposition on better content for the newspaper she answered dismissively: "*we don't need articles on labour or these ancient relics like Isabelo delos Reyes. Filipinos have no need for knowledge of such irrelevant characters.*" (p.164) Considering this, it is futile how information outlets shape the realities of society's beliefs and opinions. This selective reporting disregards the relevance of people's struggle



and it dulls the ability to understand other's suffering.

4.3 Land Grabbing in the current Philippine situation

According to AKBAYAN (n.d), land is essential and was treated as a communal property shared by Filipino ancestors to provide food for the family and community. The concept of private ownership was alien to them. However, this is not the reality at present. The unjust acquisition of land from small rural farmers, as seen in *The Machine* and *A Walk with My Grandfather*, has been a relevant issue in the country for decades. According to La Via Campesina (2014), an international peasant movement, land grabbing as well as natural resources grabbing has been happening over a century, since Philippines' colonization by the Spanish in the 1500s. Since then, lands were taken away from the local farmers and were given to the Catholic authorities, private companies and influential rich families with ties to the Spanish colonial officials. Thus, the local farmers were deprived of their key livelihood source.

In an agriculture-based economy, the ownership of land and its cultivation meant wealth and power in the Philippines. But, on the other end of the stick poverty and neglect are the drivers of this luxury.

In both stories loss of land from the characters are almost instant, leaving no space for them to protest such an arrangement. In *A Walk with My Grandfather* land grabbing was explicitly mentioned: "*He said all that land was his but it was stolen from him.*" (p.136). The problem lies on the concept of owning lands back at that time. This was revealed in *The Machine* when: "*And I who was one of the first to clear this land, where is mine?*" The simple idea of being first to cultivate a piece of land, or its inheritance, is the mark of ownership of small farmers recognized for decades. However, this was taken advantage by landowners that simply claimed those lands that were occupied by small farmers but had no title. Such a declaration of land ownership was not accorded to these farmers who are unaware of such titles being necessary for ownership. Their lack of knowledge on these matters is simply because of one reason, *The Machine* reveals it: "*You were not educated,*' Father said."(p. 125) According to the data of National Network of Agrarian Reform Advocates-Network (NNARA Youth), seven out of ten farmers have no land to till and still employs a backward method of farming. It is

estimated that at least one farmer is killed every week for defending their right to land (PANAP, 2017). In an article written by Tony Katigbak (2017) in Philstar Global, it revealed that many farmers who are also community leaders were killed because of ongoing land disputes. The perpetrators being pointed too were the military, paramilitary groups, and armed goons of landlords and companies. Sadly, these deaths of hard-working farmers are given less attention to news agencies.

The hard process of land redistribution still continues for three decades through the government's Agrarian Reform Program. But farmers' deaths and the abuses against them will persist as long as armed and powerful groups are permitted to exercise violence. Land reform is a priority for the agricultural sector that has failed to significantly prosper for many years due to government negligence. Amidst all these cruelties, there should be continued hope that no more farmers should be taken away from their land.

5. Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the texts, 3 prominent themes of class struggle were found- 1) armed struggle, 2) class repression and exploitation, and 3) land grabbing. These 3 have also been related to the present Philippine condition, social issues that are true and relevant up to this day. The different problems that each character had and how they dealt with it contributed to the revelation of how those struggles mirror the possibilities of real life. The theme of armed conflict usually occurs because of deprivation: from education, decent jobs, water and electricity, and healthcare. Inequalities and exploitation occur either due to their already poor condition or there is an intentional effort to keep them in such state. Lastly, land grabbing meant stealing lands from uneducated and poor farmers who cannot assert themselves because of intimidation or have no access to legal assistance. The relationship of each theme to the Philippine condition cannot be surmised only as a part of the present, but it had always been there for decades and even up to a century. Each is a problem tied with another. The complex resolution of any of these will not be addressed by mediating only one. To emphasize this, it is found that armed struggle is brought up by land grabbing and class abuses. Similarly, land grabbing is related to repression and exploitation of peasants. All three themes are connected but are united against a

common enemy that orchestrates the demise of each of the characters, in a way direct or indirect, the bourgeois. The works of F. Sionil Jose are the interplay of characters between social and economic classes to perceive their hardships and the options that they have. They sympathize with the beleaguered situations that correspond to suffering and vulnerability of individuals. In his words, he cascades information that is essential in fully understanding, or at least a part of it, the movements and inactions of his time. The motivations to analyze these narratives stem from the need to create a perspective that corresponds to the realities of life. The Philippines is but a country amongst others, which suffers constantly in the hands of its own people. The corrupt and concentrated power in the hands of a few does not ensure the survival of the country's entirety.

What is needed in literature as of now is its power to record the destitute condition of common people and more so of the underprivileged. The authority to write and create a sense of understanding hardships elevates readers to comprehend abuse, negligence, and injustice through the power of words. The morbidity of social inequalities in Philippine society must be studied and understood. Writers portray an image to motivate social consciousness. In fact, these narratives deliver intimacy towards the real, although fictional and literary. It is recommended that other perspectives explain society and social relations in the works of other Filipino writers be explored. Greater studies will appreciate how each plot is carved by the author's inspirations and perspectives. Ultimately, it will prove that these are not mere tales, but recollections of reality.

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