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THE NOVELS OF F. SIONIL JOSE: PROTAGONISTS  
IN SPIRITUAL EXILE

Dudley de Souza

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by Dudley de Souza

Any examination of the fiction of Jose will inevitably have socio-political implications focussing around the question of exploitation and the sense of identity. In explaining the explicitly anti-Hispanic sentiment which is such a major component of his fiction, it would be necessary to understand the spiritual dilemma which recurringly afflicts the protagonists in his novels as it applies to the quintet comprising: The Pretenders (1962) My Brother, My Executioner (1973) The Tree (1978), Mass (1983) and Po-on (1984).

They constitute the backbone of Jose's achievement and they revolve around the realities as he perceives them of social injustice in the Philippines spanning a number of different generations.

Stated simply, the dilemma is this: in order to rise from poverty to power, wealth and all the trappings of success a brilliant or talented individual would have no other avenue except to cut his moorings with his people and join the exploitative class: the elite who have always been in power. He would, in other words have to accept social injustice and join the oppressors. As Juan Puneta tells Pepito Samson in MASS:

The doors are wide open to those who are  
bright.<sup>1</sup>

It is only required that one should cut oneself off from one's own roots and be, like Antonio Samson in *THE PRETENDERS*, a spiritual exile.

Before we examine the novels, it might be instructive to make a brief survey of the social-historical context of the Philippines as a means of immediate access to the kind of literary exposition which Jose makes of the Filipino identity.

More than three hundred years of Spanish rule inevitably left a firm impression on the Filipino character especially on religion, culture and social as well as economic institutions. And undeniably, the American regime that began at the beginning of this century also left its imprint on the life-style of the Filipino people through the education system, the form of government and popular culture. However, since national character -- it would be generally agreed -- takes a long time stewing, it would be most likely that the Spanish regime has left a deeper impression on the Filipino soul.

However, the Spanish factor in terms of a feudal structure with the conspicuous Spanish landlord has always appeared an imposition on the indigenous Filipino in F. Sionil Jose's novels as we shall show. What the Spanish regime made notorious was a feudal and decadent social order rooted in the fossilized encomienda<sup>2</sup> system.

This system originated in the commission of specific territory acquired by the Spanish, in the early years of conquest,

to the charge of encomenderos who had the right to exact tribute from the inhabitants and to treat them as serfs. Although the system underwent transformation with the passage of time it remained basically exploitative, leading to widespread abuses like absentee landlordism and the transmission of indebtedness from generation to generation. Even after the departure of the Spanish government the exploitation maintained its momentum with the Filipino Upper Class moving into the vacuum created by the departure of the ruling elite. Thus, the revolutionary, peasant-based Hukbalahap movement rears its head in the fiction of Jose -- especially in relation to My Brother, My Executioner (1973) where brother is pitted against brother on two sides of the same fence: the exploiter and the exploited, the landowner and the dispossessed....

Social problems in the writings of Jose are dealt with in literary terms i.e. through thematic contrasts, characterization, symbol and plot. Throughout his fiction, the underlying sense of social inequality is always present, from the picture of the peasantry turning away from the gates of the Asperri mansion while the master gnaws his teeth at the image of his deformed successor in "The Heirs" to the differences in the life-styles of Commander Victor, the guerilla leader and his half-brother Luis Asperri who lives on the Asperri estate (although not without qualms of conscience) in My Brother, My Executioner.

The polar positions in the structure of social inequality can be illustrated quite simply in diagrammatic terms thus:

### The Exploiters

The Spanish or Basque Vascon in the time of the extension of Spanish colonization.

The half-Spanish landowner in modern times.

Foreigners like the Japanese, Chinese and American businessmen who are seen as partners of the local magnates.

### The Exploited

The Indios of the early years of Spanish conquest

The peasantry and the slum-dwellers.

The dispossessed Ilocanos.

Despite this disjunction between oppressors and victims, the key to the sense of conflict and tension in Jose's fiction is very often the internalization of these polar forces within a central character. This applies especially to the protagonists in the quintet. They belong to both camps and are exiles living in a limbo of uncertainty. Although written last, Po-on establishes the setting for the "Rosales saga" -- so-called because the protagonist (like the author himself) was born in Rosales. In The Pretenders (1966) Antonio Samson's father, a peasant rebel, was jailed for his part in an Ilocano revolt against unjust dispossession of land opened up by the Ilocano settlers. Nevertheless, Antonio has married into the camp of the dispossessors -- the family of the industrial magnate and mestizo, Don Manuel Villa. In My Brother, My Executioner, Luis Asperri's mother with whom the protagonist identifies, is an Ilocano maid who had been wronged by his father, the wealthy Don Vicente Asperri. In Tree (1978) the narrator is the son of the Filipino sub-landlord managing Don Vicente's estate in the latter's

absence. The father has sympathies with the workers in the household but has to hold the reins according to the directives from Don Vicente. In Tree, however, the perspective is somewhat different since the boy protagonist is not fully aware of the implications of the social system he is part of -- unlike the intellectuals who occupy centre stage in The Pretenders and My Brother, My Executioner. Consequently, the approach there is only mild compassion for the oppressed and an ironic understatement governing the presentation of social inequality in the narrative. The conflict and the tension are not within the protagonist himself: they are external events -- viewed from a fairly safe distance.

In some respects, Tree antedates the other two novels. Although the publication date is 1978, it had appeared much earlier, as the story entitled The Balete Tree which has been referred to before. The conception of the internalized conflict characteristic of the protagonists in the other two novels would thus appear to belong to a later stage of thematic evolution in the fiction of F. Sionil Jose. Tree could thus be seen as a throwback although the publication date is 1978.

In Tree the narrator is a mirror: he reflects the life going on around him and although he himself is touched at points in the story (eg in the circus girl episode or when he confronts his father's mistress) his responses reveal a humanism and a detachment that are somewhat surprisingly mature; more significantly, his position vis a vis his father and the issue of social injustice in the Filipino barrio also reveals a similar detachment: it is the distancing of one who is not fully involved

in the proceedings. In other words, despite the emotional maturity of the narrator we remember that he is still too young to be aware of the extent or intensity of the social issues behind Tio Baldo's death or Old David's lament. It is as though we see more than the narrator sees as the novel unfolds: Uncle Berto who comes back from the United States, Padre Andong the parish priest, Tio Doro the school principal, Miss Santillan and Mr Sanchez who sing together...they all attest to the vivid life of the community around the narrator. They have the same right to be there -- even if the episodes are humorous -- as Tio Baldo's tragedy was. The narrator has reduced all episodes to the same level of significance simply because the other episodes do not serve as a justification for the existence of the Tio Baldo episode -- they do not sub-serve; they exist as equals and are there for their own distinctive life. The theme of social equality is thus incidental to this novel; in the words of the narrator, Tree is

...a journey into the past -- a hazardous trek through byways dim and forgotten -- forgotten because that is how I chose to regard many things about this past. In moments of great lucidity, I see again people who -- though they may no longer be around -- are ever present still; I can almost hear their voices and reach out to touch them -- my friends, cousins, uncles and aunts and, most of all, Father. 3

The account is thus semi-autobiographical. It is a journey into childhood: a picture of life in Rosales an enclosed segment of rural society under traditional, semi-feudal conditions (conditions originally rooted in the encomienda system although the system itself is not the central issue of the novel).

Towards the end of the novel, the narrator assumes a somewhat preachy tone, reminiscent of Bitfogel's outburst towards the end of The Pretenders. In Tree, this segment has the effect of making the narrator seem older than what he has projected himself to be all along (or is it that he has simply grown?). It summarizes the position of non-action that he has taken vis-a-vis the perception of social injustice around him:

Who was Don Vicente, after all? I should not be angered when men in the highest places, sworn to serve this country as public servants end up as millionaires in Pobres Park while using people's money in the name of beauty, the public good and all shallow shibboleths about discipline and nationalism that we have come to hear incessantly....

But like my father, I have not done anything. I could not because I am me; because I died long ago. 4

The kind of spiritual death indicated here is obviously a death in terms of identity. He has rejected or rather become indifferent to the impulse to belong to the people around him. He has become part of the feudal and essentially foreign superstructure imposed on the Filipino people. In other words, apathy appears to be the root cause of his loss of identity and the heart of spiritual exile.

Although the attitude of the protagonist is significantly different in Tree, there are a number of major similarities in all three novels of Jose, thus establishing a shared context. Firstly, the setting -- with minor variations here and there -- is common to all three, although not restricted to only these works of Jose. An early extended image of Rosales actually appears in the short story entitled "The Heirs" which is in the collection called The God Stealer and Other Stories (1968). Here, the

genesis of Rosales is described. The place was originally inhabited by Ilocanos but the Vascon Don Jacinto Asperri sees it as a future family estate and annexes it without more ado:

...he drank in the wide and glorious scene and sighed, "This is my land!" 5

Rosales is used as the setting for the rich and decadent Asperri household in My Brother, My Executioner in the same manner as in "The Heirs" -- except that the characters are now situated in contemporary times.

In The Pretenders, there is also a Rosales although this time it is not the base of the rich and exploitative but the poor who truly belong to the land where Emmy and Antonio Samson's son are staying at.

In Tree Rosales again becomes the centre of the action and it belongs to the rich absentee landlord Don Vicente Asperri who has left its management to the narrator's father who behaves like a modified version of the Spanish landlord with a retinue of servants and farmhands.

Secondly, there is also a sense of continuity in the retention of the Asperri family as a symbol of the decadent Spanish bourgeoisie in the Philippines although there is wider variation here than in the use of the Rosales setting. Here, again, "The Heirs" seems to be a prototype. In My Brother, My Executioner Luis Asperri is the son of Don Vicente Asperri by an Ilocano maid. Don Vicente appears again in Tree, although here he is not in the foreground. In The Pretenders, a deviation from the pattern is observable -- partly, perhaps, because the story was conceived a little before "The Heirs". Here, the Villa family

occupies the place accorded to the Asperris in the other novels. But the name is Spanish and the significance is similar. Don Manuel Villa, however, is a smooth-talking, self-aware and altogether more up-to-date version of Don Vicente, well-versed in the corruptibility of men:

Don Manuel brought his forefinger to the right temple and gestured twice. "It's all a matter of misunderstanding what a man wants most. If you give him that, then he is yours to command...." 6

While Don Vicente is the stereotype image of the landed gentry in the Philippines wallowing coarsely in his wealth with seeming indifference to the condition of the peasantry including that of his former lover (Luis' mother), Don Manuel is an urbane and conscious capitalist with a philosophy to boot. His argument proffered to the young Samson present almost incontrovertible reasons for maintaining his line of action or his course of corruption as we shall later see.

Thirdly, and more significantly, in our list of unifying characteristics in Jose's novels, there is a conspicuous thematic affinity in the quintet. The theme of betrayal pervades the series. This appears in the form of spiritual death as we have seen in the case of Tree, but more importantly, betrayal serves to underscore the tension produced by inner conflict in The Pretenders, My Brother, My Executioner and Mass.

In The Pretenders, the identity of the Filipino is particularized in the form of the Ilocano pitted against alien exploitation. The brilliant Ilocano scholar Antonio Samson (whose Delilah, incidentally is Carmen, the daughter of the

industrialist, Don Manuel Villa) is obsessed with the establishment of his genealogy: with the search for his Ilocano roots -- so to speak. His father was imprisoned for fighting for Ilocano rights. The scholarship boy returns from Harvard with a wife whose father was one of those against whom his father had fought. He thus joins the exploiters and disinherits himself from his Ilocano roots and the cousin by whom, unknowingly, he had a child before going abroad to study.

However, Tony's truce with his father's exploiters is an uneasy one. He has a conscience that insists on being heard. Despite blotting out the fact of his father's imprisonment and turning his back on Emmy his first love -- he begins to be tragically aware, partly as a consequence of boardroom meetings with the rich and powerful of the ugliness of the world he has been lured into by the sensuous charms of Carmen and the editorial position offered to him by her father, Don Villa.

Perhaps, the final dilemma that Tony and other brilliant and idealistic Filipino sons of the soil face is the fact of their corruptibility and the existence of the Don Manuel Villas who know how to take advantage of their weaknesses. It is precisely because of this corruptibility, Jose seems to be implying -- despite the ideals nurtured at Harvard and friends like Bitfogel, the American scholar -- that the essential fabric of Filipino society never quite seems to change from novel to novel. There are still the ilustrados who exploit and the Indios who are exploited; there are still the landed gentry and the dispossessed Ilocanos. Consequently, the dilemma remains and the

possibility of revolution by the peasantry is ever-present. This, after all, is the very stuff of the Hukbalahap uprisings and Jose saw the potential of turning rebellion against social injustice into a novel like My Brother, My Executioner.

However, in almost all the novels, the sense of the overwhelming odds of fighting against oppression is always conspicuous. This is especially so with The Pretenders where the protagonist commits suicide on the railway tracks -- to a large extent the victim of his father-in-law's (the steel magnate's) oppressive place in Filipino society. Unfortunately, Tony Samson's position weakens towards the end. This is because his suicide is as much a case of opting out as an act of courage. His realization of his failure in both worlds in that of the exploiters as well as the exploited -- leads to the final act. Tony cannot be devoid of compassion in the manner of Don Manuel Villa yet he is unable to champion the cause of the poor with any degree of integrity: he is caught in the middle and decides not to continue the pretence of belonging to either side. His bourgeoisie wife takes a lover, his friends are bought over and his Ilocano love rejects him just as he has turned his back on his Ilocano roots. Thus, the search for his roots is ironic, because he finds that his grandfather's name was Salvador (or Saviour) but as Samson, he has been shorn off his locks by a modern-day Delilah and has made unholy peace with the oppressors of the land. To some extent, The Pretenders can be characterized as an expose of social injustice in Filipino society. Talent and ability are perverted to inglorious ends by the wealthy and powerful. Within

this framework, Jose seems to place the true Filipino, the son of the soil or the Ilocano as the ultimate loser and all attempts at lifting his lot end either in violence or come to naught.

It is not until My Brother, My Executioner that we have some glimmering of a new dawn promising social justice with the imminent demise of the protagonist in the concluding chapter. Although sharing certain structural similarities with "The Heirs", this novel has for backdrop, a more immediate situation: the Hukbalahap uprising during the 1950s. This movement is of central significance to the novel because it symbolised a grass-roots reaction against social injustices perpetrated by the Upper Class Filipinos skilled in the arts of exploiting the rural masses -- a skill inherited from the Spanish officials and friars who amassed vast tracts of property under the encomienda system. The Hukbalahap uprising, which began as peasant resistance to the Japanese during the Occupation years (1942-1945), reflects one of the central concerns of Jose's fiction: social injustice as a consequence of foreign exploitation of the Ilocano and dispossession of land which he had struggled to open up.

However, what distinguishes the novel from the prototype story "The Heirs" is that now, the argument is more complicated. The novel centres on the perceptions of Luis Asperri who belongs to both camps. On his father's side he is with the exploiters; on his mother's, the exploited. There is some suggestion of this dilemma in "The Heirs" with the depiction of the half-native child Antonio Asperri, but he is not the centre of interest in the story and we do not see him from the inside. With Luis we have an

amalgam of both identities: the identity of the Upper Class Spanish landlord and that of the Peasant Class Ilocano. More importantly, it is his consciousness that provides the focal point for the novel.

His father, Don Vicente Asperri is the archetypal Spanish landowner who plays approximately the same role as Don Felix Asperri in "The Heirs". In the novel, however, the portrait of the landowner is ameliorated by Don Vicente's genuine regard for his son and the awareness that what he has to do is done with the son's interest at heart. His cruelties are seen as necessary inhumanities, acts of self-defense against the actions of the guerillas led by Commander Victor -- Luis' half-brother.

Despite this, however, what Don Vicente stands for is scrutinised by both his son Luis and Commander Victor. Luis is thus torn between alternatives -- the extreme positions held by his blood relatives: on the one hand the outright rejection of reactionary Spanish feudalism and, on the other, the dismissal of the guerilla extremists in the name of an exploitative paternalism.

Like Antonio in "The Heirs", Luis is the son of a servant girl who used to work in his father's household. In addition, the suggestion of Antonio's leanings towards culture and idealism are elaborated into Luis' incipient idealism and sense of justice which contrast markedly with the father's vulgar and cynical attitude towards emergent manhood and marriage.

The pull between the non-Filipino world of exploiters (Chinese shopkeepers are also aligned with Don Vicente) and the

Ilocano world of the exploited is symbolised in the two homes of Luis -- with his father at Rosales and with his mother at Sipnget -- where he feels he truly belongs:

I am home. I am home. This is the place honoured in the mind and sanctified in the heart. Although he had been away, the sounds and smells were always with him, the aroma of the newly harvested grain, the grass fresh with dew, the mooing cattle...and, most of all, the tones of his language, for there was in Ilocano, the aura and mystery of things left unsaid. 7

There is thus an overpowering awareness of belonging to a specific ethnic identity. Despite this, however, there is the considerable material advantage posed by the world of the exploiters -- and not only that, the social leverage gained could be turned to the benefit of the oppressed. Thus, although Luis sees that social justice would mean a re-allocation of his estate, it is a decision that he feels (not without guilt) should not be made too hastily. But Commander Victor and his rebels think otherwise and the home of Luis is visited with violence.

Significantly enough, the novel ends with Luis awaiting death in the doomed household. The forces of the oppressed are on the ascendant and violence is seen as the ultimate instrument of liberation. In the conclusion of "The Heirs", the Indios wait patiently with their tithes at Don Felix's gates:

He had told them to wait, these emasculated people who could go on waiting, living in servitude and at the mercy of his whims. 8

In Tree, social justice is viewed from a distance -- with a mild and relatively uninvolved compassion from a protagonist who confesses himself to being spiritually dead. In The Pretenders,

the protagonist is very much involved, has compassion and searches for social justice; but the forces of corruption are too powerful and insidious. Thus, suicide appears to be the ultimate conclusion for Antonio Samson. But in My Brother, My Executioner, the fire of vengeance is strongly insistent and even those in between -- who are "neither fish nor flesh", who try to maintain an uneasy truce between both camps -- are scorched. The people are no longer emasculated; they cannot go on living in servitude; they have lost their patience.

There is little doubt that Mass is the true culmination of the quintet despite the fact that, here and there, in Tree, for instance the appearance of side-tracking into a cul-de-sac of passivity towards social injustice is clearly visible. Mass returns, in a way, to the first volume in the series with the introduction -- right at the very beginning of Antonio Samson's son: Pepe Samson. Despite the initial disclaimer:

My name is Samson. I have long hair, but  
there is nothing symbolic or biblical about  
it; 9

The link with Samson is re-established and heightened. This Samson as the tale unfolds -- is the true inheritor of the name. There is a gradual development in the unfolding of the oppression of the masses culminating in an expose of the real oppressors and the beginning of the final destruction of these exploiters: a breaking down of the pillars that uphold oppression through the gospel of violent yet cunning action.

The oppressors are no longer the Spanish landed gentry although there is enough of their blood pulsing in the veins of

the illustrados of modern commerce who have replaced them. The real enemy Pepe realizes is the wealthy elite who will return to power no matter which figure-head holds the helm. As Juan Puneta pleasantly explains:

...But the change comes from us, dictated by us. And as for the President -- his interests are with us; he is one of us! Not with the masses -- ha, the masses!

.....

He likes to be surrounded by people who understand the impulses of power. Only the powerful know what these are. And the powerful are the rich. We will flock around him -- pamper him, kow-tow to him and then, suffocate him! 10

There is the implicit invitation to Pepe to join the elite, to be part of the oppressors just as his father had compromised through Carmen Villa. However, Pepe pulls a gun on him and the first killing of a violent revolutionary begins. He is the genuine nationalist aware of the conditions of oppression and unafraid of the necessary action to end it:

Nationalism means us -- for we are the nation and the vengeance we seek will never be satisfied till we have gotten measure for measure all that was stolen from us. 11

Unlike his father Samson, he has decided to maintain faith with his people and so cannot be considered a spiritual exile.

His words appear to be prophetic in the light of events that have overtaken the Philippines. President Marcos was ousted in 1986 via the massive demonstration of the people's will -- led by Cory Aquino who is now President. In this respect, Mass is very much rooted in the everyday reality of the Philippines. Jose has felt the pulse of the people. That is why it is difficult to agree,

without reservations when Shirley Lim states:

Jose's stories in Waywaya direct us to a democratic, romantic, nationalistically committed path, a path which can easily become narrowly sociological in bent, or polemical, or fantastic. 12

Truth sometimes appears stranger than fiction and in the case of Mass, truth seems to have caught up with fiction.

Jose's fiction has thus shown how spiritual exile was a condition of the dilemma his protagonists found themselves in and one consequence was suicide -- perhaps the ultimate expression of alienation; the alternative was violent overthrow of the corrupt establishment. There are, however, no easy solutions as Jose is aware; having developed from a relatively simplistic position of splitting Filipino society into the two camps of alien exploiter and indigenous exploited, he moved to the more realistic and dramatic portrayal of the Filipino as both inflictor and afflicted, oppressor and oppressed, exploiter and exploited -- a progression which, perhaps, necessitates the existence of protagonists in spiritual exile.

#### NOTES

- 1 Mass(Manuscript), p.3
- 2 A concise account of the system can be obtained from A History of the Philippines: from Spanish Colonization to the Second World War by Renato Constantino (New York Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp. 41-46
- 3 Tree, p.1

- 4 Ibid., p.133
- 5 The\_God-Stealer\_and\_Other\_Stories, p.12
- 6 The\_Pretenders, p.95
- 7 My\_Brother,\_My\_Executioner
- 8 The\_God-Stealer\_and\_Other\_Stories
- 9 Mass, p.1
- 10 Ibid., p.216
- 11 Ibid., p.218
- 12 "Dialectics of Form and National Consciousness in the Filipino Short Story: F. S. Jose's Waywaya and N. V. M. Gonzalez's Mindoro and Beyond" (unpublished paper)