

Superstructure, Status Quo and Ideology in Vicente Groyon's *The Sky over Dimas:* A Social Portrait of Bacolod

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Abstract

This critical literary analysis portrays the social milieu of the local society of Bacolod and Negros in the decadent 70's through the lenses of sociological and Marxist approaches to analyzing a literary text. Marxist elements of superstructure, status quo and ideology form the frame of references to interpreting and defining the culture perpetuated in a particular period of a local society. In-depth reading discloses a similitude amongst conjured literary elements of settings, characters, conflicts and themes and those that ensued in existent societies. The exercise of literary criticism is deemed a process which cannot be underrated in reflecting realities of life and the litany of human experiences.

Keywords: literary criticism, Marxist approach, sociological approach, local literature, critical analysis, novel

INTRODUCTION

History would enlighten us that literature is premeditated to be experienced in the community rather than privately experienced in solitude (Alterado, 2000). Literature has always had a strong social dimension. This social dimension makes literature a powerful means to delight, entertain, and instruct. Literature gives people something to talk about as it presents views to react against or stimulates the mind to inquire.

This is where literary criticism as an art takes its place in the constant pursuit of intellectual excellence through quality research. As it is only a few decades in the Philippines, Tiempo (1995) says that the term “criticism” itself is a most unwelcome word because as a people, Filipinos still harbor a considerable amount of colonial mentality. It was only until a few liberated Filipinos were privileged to study in Europe that the nation learned to embrace the art of literary criticism.

The heart of critical interpretation is critical reading. It lies on the process of how one can see a piece of work as an artistic composition. Though no single viewpoint can account for the complexity of a literary work, a definite perspective has to be applied to derive a reliable judgment of the work. Upbeat or disapproving the criticisms may be, the slow and careful turns of exploration will illumine the fine nuances of the whole stone (Guerin, 1992).

There are voluminous viewpoints to literary criticism. For one which raises issues on the social function of literature, the sociological approach is recognized as most apt. It focuses on the relationship between literature and society. With the conviction that art's relations to society are vitally important, it reflects the way literature interacts with society and showing how it can function as a mirror to reflect social realities, a lamp to inspire social ideals.

Marxist criticism is an offshoot of the sociological perspective. Based on the historical, economic and sociological theory of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, it asserts that literature reflects social institutions out of which it emerges and is itself a social institution with a particular ideological function (Murfin and Ray, 1997). In other words, Marxists view a literary work not just a work created in concurrence with changeless artistic norms, but as a creation of the economic and ideological determinant identifiable to that era and milieu. With this approach, the critic-researcher is challenged to consider

the literary work as a product of its era, especially as influenced by the economic and political ideologies that prevail at the time of its composition.

In the Philippines, the narrative tradition is characterized by much variety and richness, from its early forms to its emergence in the first decades of the present century in the forms of intricate such as novel. From contemporary Filipino novels in English, there is an ample field for the reader or critic to move around. Significantly today, new breeds of Filipino local writers have been too resolute in developing their skills to come up with works promised to last. Cheers go to Coscolluela, Aquino, Nava and Groyon who are well-recognized representatives of the flourishing writers of Negros Island.

Seeing the necessity to update the education curriculum to be more responsive to the needs of the 21st Century of Filipinos, the Department of Education (DepEd) features in its Enhanced Basic Education Curriculum (K-12) the learning of 21st Century Literatures from the Philippines. This pervasive and timeless relevance of literature motivates this study in exploring its potential in reflecting social realities, and in developing 21st Century skills among Filipinos.

Objectives

The analysis of the novel of Vicente G. Groyon entitled, *The Sky Over Dimas* to portray the society of Bacolod in a specific social milieu is the main purpose of the study.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What superstructures are expressed in the novel that determine the Culture's ideology and perpetuate the status quo of the bourgeoisie?

2. In what ways is status quo played out by varying social forces and institutions?
3. What ideologies of Bacolod are reflected in the novel?
4. How does the social function of the novel contribute to the literary appreciation of Philippine literature?

Framework

This study is anchored on the theoretical works propounded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels who brought into literary criticism the theory that there is a dialectical relationship between the literary work and its socio- historical background.

In their account, Marx and Engels concurred that there is casual connection between the content of literature at a given historical moment and the economic, social and ideological factors that shape and determine that content or form (Henderson & Brown, 1997). Furthermore, Marx theorized that ideology, which is the unifying belief and attitude that is common to a social group, is a strong force that makes literature. He believed that literature, as a cultural production, is a form of ideology, one that legitimizes the power of the ruling class. It reflects social institutions out of which it emerges and is itself a social institution with a particular function.

In his essay, *Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses*, Louis Althusser (1970) identified literature as an ideological state apparatus that explains the peculiarity of art in making us see, perceive, and feel something that alludes to reality. What art makes us see, and therefore gives to us in the form of 'seeing,' 'perceiving,' and 'feeling,' is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes.

Marx and Engels argued that art, ideology, and politics were 'superstructure' that rest upon the 'base'. Although, the Althusserians created a new theoretical structure which destroyed most of the content of the old notions of 'base' and 'superstructure' (Harman, 1986). The superstructure includes bits of society like the state, politics, education, religion, etc. (Cooch, 2012). It expresses, promotes, and determines a culture's ideology, and these institutions work to perpetuate the status quo of the bourgeoisie or the property owning and the controlling class.

Status quo, on the other hand, is the class relationship determined by the economic structure and reflected in the superstructure of society. The ideologies of a culture work to maintain these relationships.

Ideology is the unifying, system of beliefs, attitudes, and values expressed in the superstructure of society. It is the body of thought and ideas that guides a society and characterizes this consciousness of a class at a given historical moment (Lye, 1997).

This significant connection among the culture's superstructure, status quo and ideology create a 'dialectical relationship' between the literary work and its socio-historical background.

METHODOLOGY

The research method considered in this paper was literary criticism - the study of interpreting literature. Specifically, Marxist Criticism was used to explore the relationship between literature and society and how it functions as a mirror to reflect social realities.

The selection of the problem was an outcome of a thorough survey of a relevant Local Philippine literature. Having sought the permission of the author, the researcher analyzed the text anchored on the theory that literature mirrors society and the milieu where it was composed or

written, as propounded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. In an in-depth reading, Marxist elements were gleaned from the novel: superstructure, status quo, and ideology. The adaptation of critical strategies to translate the meaning of the text facilitated objective analysis and interpretation:

- a. The researcher looked for allusions and imagery that identify the context containing the meaning or truth of the literary text. In particular, motifs and allusive language that define important contexts of the literature were identified and analyzed.
- b. Critical information on contexts reflected in the text were gathered through interviews, documentary cross-referencing and library research. These information were used to explain the relevance of the text.
- c. Contextual information served as bases to pursue answers to questions arising from a casual response to the literary text. Historical and authorial data were uncovered to validate the researcher's understanding of the text.
- d. Through the rigid process of in-depth and close reading, broad social trends and issues were assessed that, in turn, considered as crucial unit of ideas that defined the culture of Bacolod at a given social milieu and history.

SUMMARY OF ANALYSES AND INTERPRETATIONS

Superstructure

In a close reading, Vicente Groyon's "The Sky Over Dimas" is a rich source of knowledge on the culture and society of Bacolod. Under the Marxist element of Superstructure, three dominant social institutions are evident: religion, family, and laws.

Religion is an anesthetic device that gives relief to the working class. It is "opium" they employed in order to deal with the bleak world in which they are living. Their belief and knowledge of the existence of the Supreme Being serves as a consolation for them who are oppressed and are suffering.

On the other hand, the family, which is the basic political organization of the society of Bacolod, is ruled by a husband who expects his wife and his children to obey him in almost all important matters about the family. It shows a common set up of a traditional Filipino family that adopts the system of kinship through inheritance, and where social antagonisms spread to a wider scale.

Finally, under superstructure, laws are deemed as an indispensable institution in the society. The novel reveals that some of these diktats perpetuate the status quo of the hacenderos who belong to the upper level in the social stratum, thus illustrates subtle partiality for the more dominant landed gentry of Negros and Bacolod societies.

Status Quo

In the area of status quo, the novel unveils the influence of the economic base of Negros to the relations of the different social classes of the society of Bacolod. The economic base or infrastructure of Negros, which espouses the features of feudalism by way of the hacienda system, keeps the elite class (landed gentry) in continuous power and the oppression of the lower class (sacadas, dumaans, obreros). Such system, which is primarily spun by the basic principles of labor, is deemed as a discreet way for the 'commodification' of workers, and in turn, triggers self-alienation.

In addition, economic, social, political, and gender-based motivations play out power relations between the

rich and the poor, between men and women, and between man and his/her society.

Lastly, power relations are also played out on the pervasive issue of women discrimination. An erroneous conception that women need do nothing more than fulfill their womanly duties as wives, mothers, and housekeepers; that for them to desire any other activities in life like supervising the hacienda and the farm is to be unwomanly, and unnatural is held quite naturally by Bacolod/Negros society. As a result, this matter drives women to struggle for primacy that leads to the notion of equality regarding gender roles.

Ideology

As far as value systems are concerned, the society of Bacolod/Negros possesses a cluster of collective beliefs and ideologies, which governs the people's dispositions toward aspects of living. One such disposition is that of the society's outlook about hard work. A member of the society is consciously captured by his/her strict belief in hard work and excessive concern for their livelihood.

Also, materialism and consumerism are evident among the elite members of the society. As such, this ideology discloses a powerful influence on the determination of social identity and status. Remarkably, the novel reveals a loose sexuality of the male members of the society, more apparent among the elite males. Such belief is perpetuated because it is collectively thought as ordinary and normal.

Finally, the novel exposes a shared belief by the society as regards to the public's stubborn and impregnable faith in what is established. The society of Bacolod/Negros adheres to something the way it used to be.

The abovementioned Marxist elements that were gleaned from the novel were carefully given attention. In the light of Marxist criticism, these elements were analytically decoded as they contain allusions and clues that point to the contexts containing the real meaning of the novel. Such contexts are found to relate to the social, economic, cultural, political, and ethical aspects of the society of Bacolod/Negros.

Taking them as a whole, these major Marxist elements interlock and are found to be illuminating the theme of the novel: the social decadence of Bacolod/Negros society in a specific milieu, which is most likely to be in the '70s.

CONCLUSIONS

Vicente G. Groyon's *The Sky Over Dimas* is one literary work that is a product of its era, and is especially influenced by the economic, social, ethical, and political ideologies of Bacolod reflected through the consciousness of the author. The novel reflects different social institutions, gives information on the social relations and depicts various value systems of the society of Bacolod in the early decade of the '70s.

Bacolod society, therefore, is portrayed as a social organization that considers religion and faith as an integral part of the society's existence. Its belief in the existence of the Supreme Being as an "opiate" or anesthetics of its members in coping with the bleak and difficult times of their lives. *The Sky Over Dimas* draw a picture of Bacolod as a society whose life is permeated by its religion. The society defines its existence through the family. It is clannish as proven by its discharge of the system of kinship through inheritance. The family, which is the basic political unit of the society, is patriarchal in nature where the husband is the

dominant figure. Hence, the novel further draws a picture of the family as a prototype society where social antagonisms spread to a wider scale. Bacolod in the '70s also considers the male central to almost all institutions of the society: family, education, trade and commerce, politics, religion, etc. It is also portrayed as one that is partial and bias regarding common laws and diktats to favor the elite class of the society.

Feudalism and capitalism are two of the dominant profiles of Bacolod society in the '70s. Sugarcane industry perpetuates the status quo of the elite class. Landed gentry is relatively portrayed as oppressive or reticent, manipulative or apathetic whose lives are either tragic or eccentric. Sugarcane workers are diffident and hardworking who can easily submit to the willpower of their landlords or hacenderos. Women are viewed erratically and are therefore not given significant social roles and functions in the society other than the womanly roles they are expected to do; that is, to be wives, mothers, and housekeepers.

The society puts emphasis on the value of hard work as attested to by the fact that the sugar industry in '70s was on the verge of collapse. Elite members of the social stratum are depicted as materialistic and consumerist as proven by the fact that luxury products serve to distinguish social identities. Male members of the elite class are drawn as womanizers and Bacolod in "70s does not take this as a bizarre attitude. The society can also be drawn as one having the stubborn and impregnable faith in what is established, be it respectable or not. Bacolod society in such specific milieu is thus portrayed as one no different from any society the world over. This portrait of Bacolod in the '70s has been clearly drawn from a novel that relates to the actual economic and social conditions at the time and place of the action it describes.

And taking into account the relevance of this contemporary socio-historical novel, it certainly contributes to the appreciation of local writers like Mr. Vicente G. Groyon III and the Literatures of our Country in general.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the part of the education agencies of the government, there is a need to continually formulate and implement policies and plans from the strengthening of an education curriculum characterized by an interdisciplinary approach. The formulation and implementation of such curriculum will ensure students' enhancement in seeing literature and the humanities as potential tools for developing our country. There is a need for school administrators to support whatever innovative policies and plans proposed by the Commissions on Higher Education or the Department of Education regarding literature courses. Such support should be manifested through efficient implementation so as to benefit students capably.

Curriculum planners need to develop and promote school curricula that will focus on the acquisition of literary skills (e.g. skills in evaluating literary works, skills in creative writing) so as to engender a continuous appreciation of literature. In planning, curriculum planners should focus and give prominence to the study of the literatures of all regions of the Philippines. Care should be taken to ensure adequate attention to literary works and authors outside the National Capital Region.

On the part of literature teachers, there is a need to promote the study and appreciation of local Literatures. They should advocate for their students the interest in studying and analyzing the literary masterpieces of local writers, and encourage further research on the strength

and potential of these literary works in reflecting the culture and society where they belong.

Promising and budding local writers should be motivated in developing their craft and dexterity in creative writing. They should be encouraged to read the works of successful local writers Vicente Groyon III and be fearless enough to publish their works as well.

Literary critics need to give accentuation on the relevance of using Marxist and other sociological – related approaches to analyzing literary works. They should realize that over and above the advantages of other approaches is the capability of using sociological approaches in reflecting social realities.

Local anthropologist and social researchers of Negros need to carry out further and latest research which will study the effects of the sugar industry to the people of Negros and Bacolod. Their study should also look onto the condition of sugarcane workers and women who were once two of the most subtly subjugated social groups of Negros in the '70's.

Students both secondary and tertiary, should read, experience, and appreciate literature. They need to read our local literatures to be aware of the way of life of the culture and society where they are a part of, and thus be given the chance to creatively experience the beliefs, emotions, pains, joys, struggles and successes of their fellowmen. They should develop a sense of appreciation and pride for their local literature. Students should study our local literatures first before studying the works of foreign authors. Like the researcher, they are greatly encouraged to hone their critical and analytical skills by reading and evaluating literary works of both local and foreign writers using any of appropriate critical approaches.

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