

Protest and Affirmation in the *Other Novel*¹

Adelaida A. Figueras-Lucero

Professor

University of the Philippines Diliman

Philippines

*Where is the clear voice, the strong heart, the great human spirit,
which will speak out, unafraid, for the victims of injustice in our
times today?*

--- Mochtar Lubis

Abstract

The aggregate of experiences from pre-independence colonial rule and abuse, to post-independence imperialism; from multifarious exploitations and concomitant struggles to drastic socio-cultural disturbance, economic underdevelopment, political enslavement, and psychological derailment, has awakened socially concerned writers to the recurrent patterns of injustice that violate the people's humanity, and has impelled the socially aware and the morally responsible to use their pens in helping restore the lost humanity of the oppressed and in establishing a new life and history characterized by freedom, justice, and dignity.

¹ This article forms the synthesis of my study of nine significant novels from the developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, from the postwar years to the seventies, the period of struggle for political liberation, and against class contradictions and commercialized cultures. For their artistic enactment of the peoples' sufferings, protestations, and aspirations, and for challenging the heretofore hermetic canon of Western classics, they comprised a force for social change. Hence, I call these the *other novel*: From Asia, Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers!*, Pramudya Ananta Tur's *Perburuan* (Fugitive), and Carlos Bulosan's *The Power of the People*; from Africa, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night*, and Camara Laye's, *The Radiance of the King*; and from Latin America, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Mario Vargas Llosa's *Conversacion en la Catedral*, and Carlos Fuentes's *The Death of Artemio Cruz*.

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The committed fictionist harnesses the potential of the novel to interpret and change reality, then transmutes into fiction his/her **resistance** to exploitation and domination in any form, as well as his/her **affirmation** of praiseworthy traditions and native culture, of human dignity, of hope in achieving self-assertion and reconstruction. Thus, in this crusade, the writer artistically renders the people's protest and affirmation in his/her committed fiction, in the *other novel*.

Introduction

The *other novel* is a child of the wretched's experiences of exploitation, dehumanization, and dislocation, shaped by a cruel milieu --- the oppressive triad of geography, culture, and history. For the rich natural resources of the Third world countries have lured Europeans into pre-independence colonial rule and abuse, and both Americans and Europeans to post-independence imperialism. For colonial rule has meant simultaneously grave economic exploitation (or plunder of resources and control of economy), drastic socio-cultural disturbance (or the "pulverization of traditional societies," the disruption of well-ordered social life, and the degradation of the native and his mores) and political enslavement (or loss of freedom and self-rule on top of repression and abuse). For the "flag independence" culminating the long and fierce nationalist struggle has frustrated people's expectations with their government officials' incompetence, neo-colonialism, martial rule or dictatorship. For the aggregate of these experiences have rendered most of the third world peoples economically underdeveloped, politically unstable, and psychologically derailed. Such background has awakened socially concerned writers, especially fictionists to the recurrent and unabated patterns of injustice that thwart the people's humanity, and has impelled the socially aware and the morally responsible to use their pens in helping restore the lost humanity of the oppressed and in establishing a new life and history characterized by freedom, justice, and dignity.

As an enlightened and courageous victim (or sensitive observer) of abuse, the committed fictionists cannot just tolerate the unmitigated suffering and oppression. They harness the potential of the novel to interpret and change reality, then transmute into fiction their resistance to such exploitation, their and the people's desire for a free and dignified station, despite the attendant risks and consequences. They may then denounce the foreign or neo-colonial arrogance

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and the denigration of natives: by conducting a dialogue between the people and their history; by asserting a preferred laudable past of glorious civilization, culture, and traditions; by unmasking the exploiters and their criminal excesses for what they are and for their deceptive propagation of their distorted pictures of “third world” realities; by rejecting the West and its commodified culture or denouncing the White-aping native rulers and their cohorts; and by proclaiming the beauty of the Black or the Colored as well as the validity of their values and institutions. Or determined in their cause, the writers may fight for freedom and equality, and uphold human dignity, as well as universal fraternity, national identity, and sovereignty. Such resistance against oppression and domination in any form, and such affirmation of praiseworthy traditions and native culture, of hope in achieving self-assertion and reconstruction--- which may be called the fictionist’s crusade of decolonization--- the artistically render in their committed fiction, their *other novel*.

Protest and Affirmation

Thus, as their novels treat of the agonies, protestations, and aspirations of the wretched of the Earth, as these articulate the writer’s mission of decolonization in a crippling milieu, they revolve around two main complementary themes: *protest* and *affirmation*.

Modes of Protest

The writer’s protest may be directed “externally,” at White colonizers and their interventions, as in the case of colonies; or at minority power groups castrated of their political, economic, or intellectual/artistic powers, as in the case of police states. For instance, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* criticizes the Western interferences in the tribal lives of of the Africans for their disastrous dislocation of the natives. Alex La Guma’s *A Walk in the Night* attacks the White minority and the trigger-happy military for causing a demeaning life of poverty , crime, and racial discrimination among the non-White masses through the color-prejudiced policies of repression and deprivation in that police state [then]. Jose Rizal’s *Noli me Tangere* eloquently indicted the abuses of the Spanish officials in the Philippines with their unjust taxation, their forced labor, their land grabbing, their fabricated charges, and oppressive practices, all in

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collusion with the power-hungry friars. Their ill-treatment of the poor colonial subjects is represented by the physical abuses and unjust accusations of the poor *sacristan boys*, Basilio and Crispin, by the vengeful friar and their being hounded like dogs by *guardias civiles*. These modes of power-flexing by *colonial minions* not only ruin the boys' lives but also render their hard-working mother crazy. On the other hand, the well-to-do natives, like the idealistic educated *illustrado* Ibarra, are suspect, scorned and plotted against; their fathers are, symbolically, treacherously killed, then ignominiously abandoned, and refused Christian burial. Or any well-meaning Indio daring to work for the rights of his fellowmen is pursued like an outlaw, the way Elias is stalked and shot at. Their brutalized ends become stern warnings to all non-submissive subjects.

Or the protest may be directed "internally," at sub-oppressors, neo-colonizers perpetuating unfair socio-economic, political, and cultural practices. In Peru, Mario Vargas Llosa's *Conversacion en la catedral*, for example, lashes at dictators' and their cohorts' unquenchable thirst for power, wealth, and glory regardless of the hellish life it brings to the Peruvians. Thus, Cayo Bermudez, Cayo Shithead to his detractors, becomes the architect of the Odrist politics of pricing everyone and everything; of appointments, re-appointments, and promotions; of bribery, blackmail, and betrayal; of repression and terrorism. Thru this compleat militarist and his machismo dictatorship, Vargas Llosa protests the corruption and strongman machinations of the political system, especially its acquisition and retention of power by nefarious and violent means.

Worse, Bermudez's corruption is reflected in his pervert sexual indulgence and its related exploitation of other people. He splurges on prostitutes and hostesses of classy nightclubs and brothels where he unwinds often; his continual adulterous fantasies of white elite matrons are interspersed with his political activities. His non-official and business deals are transacted with the aid of his sexy mistress, Hortensia, and her lesbian partner, Queta, and their sexual ploys. Likewise, the *gente decente* maintain facades of decency while becoming avid practitioners of graft, exploitation, and immorality: The respected Don Fermins play the games of envelopes (bribery) and connections very subtly and effectively, and lead the double life of model husband-father and "Gold Ball" (fawning homosexual in brothel circles); the Senator Landases' passion

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for gambling and sexual parties match their propensity for blackmail and money talk for political power; the Dr. Ferros are involved both in the malversation of public funds and with scandalously immoral mistresses; the Sen. Arevalos take pride in their campaign goons and their sexual obsessions. All these and more disclose the local leaders' twin brutalization in material corruption and sexual depravity.

The protest could also be trained at both "external" and "internal" forces, the hydra-headed monster in the form of multinational corporations in collusion with local leaders and their apparatuses for repression, that continue the economic stranglehold, the political clout, and social controls of colonial powers after nominal independence is gained. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* parodies the grotesqueness of Latin American reality brought about by its colonial experiences, and aggravated by imperialist ventures, and still exacerbated by abusive dictators as well as apathetic subjects, either traumatized into subservience or resigned to their predicament. Bhabhani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers!* exposes the inhumane connivance between colonial powers and local forces in depriving the Indian peasants of their rightful produce and causing starvation and untold suffering among millions of them. Every picture of unmitigated hunger and suffering; every fresco of government edict-cruelty and blind apathy to the peasants' plight, and every sketch of the profiteers and flesh traders' piling money and privileges out of the people's misery is heavily etched in indignant censure of the aliens' and natives,' government officials' and private citizens' grand scale exploitation and heartlessness. That it is a factual and graphic account of "one of the most shocking disasters in Indian history"-- the human-made famine in 1942 that took a toll of more than two million innocent lives of men, women, and children --- makes it a searing impeachment of man's inhumanity to man, in particular of the British authorities' and their fawning local partners' atrocities towards the innocent people of Calcutta, of Bengal, India.

Such social protest comes in three levels. The first and most common ---that of *awareness*--- seeks to awaken the people's consciousness to the subtle or rampant socio-political and economic evils, to the damaged cultures and psyches, arising from internal (socio-political, economic structures and excesses), and external (foreign or imperialistic) forces. Through

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realistic exposés or through montage-like, fragmented and collided landscapes and timescapes symbolic of the distorted realities, the novelists explore the oppressed, repressed, and depressed lives of the people, and reveal the modes of domination and exploitation employed cleverly against them. These documentations or symbolic montage fragments can raise the people's level of awareness of their undeserved wretched plight, of their being victims of injustice. These demythicize the "superior," "strong leader," or "exponent of democracy" stances of the exploiters, expose them for what they are --- monsters of oppression and repression --- and unveil their divisive tricks, their subtle devices and machinery for control and exploitation. These also demystify the ruler-distorted pictures of class-based schisms. Furthermore, these serve as conscientizing warnings to the perpetrators of injustice. Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers!* exemplifies this first level of protest as it graphically narrates the increasingly unbearable squalor and misery of the starved Bengali masses. It details the trek to Calcutta of hundreds of thousands of destitutes who had literally no more to eat in the countryside for there were no more leaves, roots, and soft stems to assuage their hunger. Hyenas and vultures lay waiting to prey on families that died of starvation, disease, or exhaustion. Those who reached the city were shocked to see hundreds of thousands packed in side streets and corners begging for food or competing with dogs for leftovers in garbage cans. They had not always been destitutes scavenging for food for they had their own huts, their farm produce, but foreign government and its local lackeys had repeatedly deprived the Bengali peasants of their grain produce or burned the fishermen's boats and rendered them easy preys to apathetic manipulators, profit-hungry hoarders, immoral brothel owners, and sycophantic law enforcers.

The second level of protest, which may be labeled *critical* or even *satirical protest*, is effectively conveyed through essentially humorous or exaggerated modes and devices. Contemptible practices of colonizers, neo-colonizers, culture wardens, economic bosses, and propagandists may be grossly pictured; abusers, irreverently ridiculed; victims, rendered foolish or pathetic. Camara Laye's *Radiance of the King* employs reverse assimilation (that is, a white man in Africa, lost in a culture he does not comprehend, is placed at the mercy of the Blacks) to mock the materialism and alleged superiority of the West, and to criticize the physical and psychological torture that assimilation brings. On the other hand, in his Nobel Prize-winning

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Cien anos de soledad, Gabriel Garcia Marquez puts together history, news, government propaganda, folk story, superstition, black humor, exaggeration, and the grotesque in a magical realist world satirizing the *irreal* reality of Latin American underdevelopment and uncertain future stemming from the tyranny of geography and history, as well as from the people's lack of solidarity. Fantastic and hyperbolic details may be mockeries or exaggerations parodying unpalatable incidents or practices or absurd solutions or reactions. They may be exaggerations for emphasis of those that many often dismiss, or for mock-emphasis of those that many should dismiss. Hence, the deliberate gunning down of the 3,000 men, women, and children in the town plaza, and their surreptitious evacuation in 200 train cars is both an exaggeration of the real historical fact to parody its brutality, and a blatant travesty of the government lie in order to subvert "official history." Hence, Col. Aureliano Buendia's thirty-two lost wars, and seventeen sons by seventeen different women, make fun of the Latin American "machos" and their chimerical and foolish political and sexual adventures. Hence, the Macondoans' survival of the almost five years of non-stop rains "conjured" by the head of the banana company (in order to postpone celebration and implementation of alleged settlement with the workers) cries for the end of the cruel disposal of power by those with power at their disposal. Such incidents and many more, while giving the reader a hilarious time, reduce the author's objects of satire to comic absurdity and push for their re-examination, if not redirection.

The third level of protest is found in *militant*, even *revolutionary protest* expressed through aggressive direct tirades, shock effects or calls to protest action, or even revolution. Carlos Bulosan's *Power of the People* issues an unequivocal call to armed protest as he details the development of the underground resistance into an anti-imperialist force and a genuine struggle for complete sovereignty. The multi-detoured journey of the seven-men contingent shows various encounters with their class enemies and the tangible destruction wrought by foreigners and their own kind; the ravages of imperialist war (3); the atrocities done by the landlords' mercenary police (32); competing with the plunder and unjust taxation by the *tulisanes* (32); the pillage of crops and animals (370); the burning down of community buildings and exodus to safer villages; the landgrabbing (149); the terrorism of community enemies; the Japanese rape of women (105); the violence of the Constabulary or the soldiers supported by politicians or the

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Japanese (341). The journey, therefore, impresses on the rebels the gravity of their task and the significance of their cause. As they carry out their confidential assignments, then, a lot of sacrifices have to be made and family relations have to be transcended by their commitment to the revolutionary goal. As Hassim explains to old Bio:

...Our first objective is to destroy the enemy in such a way that he won't able to reorganize himself, completely vanished from our midst and his poison purged to the last sediment of thoughts from the minds of those who believe him...(Bulosan 25)

The Forms of Affirmation

Complementing the protest theme in the *other* novel is the theme of affirmation. It comes in two forms--- the assertion of a glorious past, culture or civilization; and the affirmation of human dignity, fraternity, even liberty; of redemptive ideologies and values; of decolonized minds and reconstructed lives. The first type, *cultural assertion*, usually underscores the rejection of the hegemony of Western culture, the myth of White superiority, and the tools of domination by a foreign power. As it evokes nostalgia for a sacred past of noble heroes, tribal lawfulness, treasured traditions, and rich resources, it resents Western introductions that have wreaked havoc in their lives. As it claims a praiseworthy native culture or civilization, it debunks the West-concocted myth of White man's supremacy and White man's burden. It is not a mere nostalgic journey into the past, however; nor sheer digging into folklore in order to serve exotic dishes to the West. Rather, it is a turning to the past to discover their heritage, to scour native themes, to help shape national consciousness. Laye's *The Radiance of the King*, for illustration, maintains the primacy of the natives, their cultural practices, their lifestyle in their own land; and demonstrates the inadequacy and folly Western materialism, rationality, and impractical practices on African soil.

The revolutionary protest in Pramudya Ananta Tur's *Perburuan* is entwined with and enriched by Javanese traditions, especially the *wayang*. Drawing mythical parallels from the Pandawa *wayang purwa*, particularly from the "Death of Karna" *lakon*, lends stature to the twentieth

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century heroes of Pramudya, and adds breadth and depth to his study of men and war. He endows noble and divine lineage to his main character, Hardo, thereby imbuing him with a supra human stature, and the war he figures in, a divine mission. The link between the *Perburuan* war and the Bharata war in the *Death of Karna* becomes a conjunction of the mundane and the mystical, the twentieth century reality and prehistoric myth. And a barrage of parallels in the themes, in the characters, and in the structure of the *Perburuan* and in the *wayang* not only lend a richer dimension to the novel. These borrowings and similarities underscore the significance and continuity of the traditional heroism and moral values, and affirm the beauty and richness of the *wayang* tradition and Javanese culture.

Instead of looking back to the past, the second type of affirmation mainly looks to the future with hope, rallies the people towards emancipation, or staunchly advocates ideologies and values for political, economic and socio-cultural reconstruction. Often, this affirmation clinches a work of protest as the work winds up with an optimistic motif, such as a symbolic dawn coming, or chain loosening, or as it heralds a bright future upon the death of a suffocating old order. Carlos Fuentes's *The Death of Artemio Cruz* extols the goals of the Mexican Revolution as a *caudillo* whose life has been their negation, lies dying.

Or affirmation may be an independently-treated theme with a work focused on the enunciation of the human and humane, while seeking to dismantle the forces and structure of dehumanization. Pramudya Ananta Tur's *Perburuan (The Fugitive)* upholds the importance of love (brotherly, paternal, and conjugal), of human rights, and human dignity, notwithstanding adversity and poverty. The War, aggravated by the Blitar Rebellion, has wrought the greatest violations of humaneness and has caused a lot of suffering and uprooting---the numerous lives it has claimed, the violations of human rights, especially in the Japanese raids, arrests, and tortures, the disruption of day to day life and livelihood, the betrayals, and ruined homes. However, amidst the madness of war and the problems of poverty, several characters have struggled, unfazed, to uphold humaneness and human dignity, love and understanding. Hardo's stout heart bleeds for the destitute and the victims, forgives and even saves the treacherous Karim from the furious mob, and sacrifices his normal love life and comfortable home life for the rigors of rebel struggle for a free and respectable life. Ningsih, his beloved, is the embodiment of fidelity and woman

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dignity. Den Hardo's father is paternal love personified, notwithstanding torture and pressure. And the rebels unwaveringly wage a two-fold struggle from a *djiwa djadjahan* to a *djiwa merdeka* (from a slave soul to a free soul, or from ruin to social renewal).

Often, the modes of conveying the protest and affirmation are forms of protest and/or affirmation too. Fragmented narratives, montage dialogs, and juxtaposed time frames not only register the harshness of the realities being documented but also score the distorted pictures of marginalization peddled by the authorities. Magical worlds detail total pictures of incredibly destructive encounters with imperialist excesses and class contradictions, as well as decry the real world of lies, corruption, power struggle and denigration.

The growing preference for the use of the collective voice "we," instead of the individualistic "I," as well as for several protagonists and collective transformations, instead of single heroes and their privatized experiences, leap away from the realm of narcissistic egos to the concrete arena of social life, to stories of whole races, of whole continents, of "third world" peoples. Non-linear time, especially cyclical time, or psychic time conjoining past, present, and future, at once rejects the western chronological concept of time (conversely, it affirms a non-Western concept), and projects the perception of recurrent patterns of underdevelopment (that is, cyclical time), or the view of backwardness as time standing still for the people. The non-English or the nativized way of using English (or another colonial language) attempts to break the cultural chains of colonialism. More so when the fictionists abandon writing in a foreign language, use their indigenous languages, and utilize native cultural materials and aesthetic categories, then dialog with their own people especially on matters of national development; they would be affirming cultural autonomy, and at the same time, advancing literary decolonization. And when the fictionists invent new structures, multidimensional timescapes, fragmented –montages narratives, "total novels with magic realism, or conceive the novel as language structure... in order to create apt paradigms of the "third world" struggle, they extol the native writers' innovative artistry that their works embody and undermine western cultural hegemony.

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These two thematic strands of protest and affirmation complement each other, although either may dominate a work. Hence, the stale smells, the filth, the dilapidated homes together with the drunkenness, criminality, and depression in La Guma's *A Walk in the Night* primarily denounce the brutalizing environment of a white minority-ruled society that discriminates against non-whites, and perverts justice and goodness. Yet the work also underscores the battered poor's attempts to cling on to their humanity, to values of cooperation and love, notwithstanding the day to day shame of life in that community. Hence, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* may immortalize the self-sufficiency and wealth of traditions in pre-colonial Ibo society, but the work also undermines Western cultural/racial superiority, and indicts the colonizers for their destructive interventions and institutions. Hence, *So Many Hungers!* may indict the "nightmarish drama of disintegration" that the human-made starvation has become, yet it also affirms the great humanity that the exploiters have exceedingly impugned, that the peasants have desperately clung to, and the freedom fighters have so tenaciously worked for. Hence, *Perburuan* may be a revolutionary protest against foreign domination and local abuse, but it is also an affirmation of humaneness and human dignity amidst encompassing inhumanity, and of the beauty and wealth of traditional Javanese culture.

Conclusion

This complementary relation between these essentially antagonistic engagements may be seen as the literary correlative of the dialectical dynamics of decolonization in the *other novel* --- a struggle *against* as well as a struggle *for*, a *destruction* entailing *reconstruction*; a *resistance against* multiforms of oppression, and a *commitment to* freedom and self-regulation.

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