

## Syjuco Uses his Novel to Awaken the People of the Philippines



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### Introduction

The Philippines, it might be said, is a country in search of an identity. Its colonial Spanish rulers brought with them the Roman Catholic Church, making the archipelago the largest Christian state in Asia. Adherence to church doctrine has given the country one of the world's higher birth rates, but the church's moral teachings haven't made much of an impact. Having a mistress is de rigueur for political figures. Young prostitutes ply their trade in Manila's strip clubs, then go to Mass on Sunday. After the Spanish departed, the Americans left their mark. "We will become American," says Cristo, one of the characters in Miguel Syjuco's ambitious new novel about the Philippines. "Our children will learn to speak American. When they are ready, we will send them to America to be educated."

This land as a multi island country has gone under numerous tortures and colonies by different countries that caused it to lose everything from beginning till now. The following paper aims to illustrate the radical problems of the Philippines mentioned in the novel 'Ilustrado' authored by Miguel Syjuco as a migrated writer to Canada. He does his best to regain the lost identity of his homeland by awakening his country's people of various social problems. In the ongoing parts three major issues will be gone under discussion, firstly, corruption as the major calamity of most of the countries in the world especially the East and the Philippines, following by national and individual lost identity and attempts to regain it; finally diaspora as a worldwide issue which can be called both problem and benefit for a country.

"Ilustrado" is being presented as a tracing of 150 years of Philippine history, but it's considerably more than that. Just as this country is searching for its identity, its author seems to be searching for his own. What does it mean to live in exile? What does it mean to be a writer? The fictional Syjuco tells Salvador that he wants to change the world through his writing. "Changing the world is good work if you can get it," his master replies. "But isn't having a child a gesture of optimism in the world?"

The book begins as a murder mystery, but as Miguel returns to the Philippines in order to investigate Salvador's death (his mentor) and collect information so that Miguel might write Salvador's biography, it becomes more and more the story of Miguel's own literary ambitions, personal failures, and attempts at reinvention. Central to Miguel's fumbling after himself, the problem of how to conduct a literary life — how to live well, and fruitfully, while viewing literary work as one's calling — occupies much of the novel, from Miguel's own musings to Salvador's proclamations.

Ilustrado's form first seems a slapdash pastiche, combining first-person narration by "Miguel Syjuco" with excerpts from the biography of Salvador he's writing, excerpts from Salvador's own writings, racist jokes poking fun at Filipinos (which develop, brilliantly, into a sometimes affecting multi-generational family narrative), and third-person supplementations, corrections, and reiterations of Miguel's first-person accounts by a mysterious authorial narrator. It is filled with complexities, layering fiction with fiction — and non-fiction. Cristo is a character in a novel within the novel by a writer named Crispin Salvador, and he may be Salvador's grandfather's alter ego. In turn, Salvador, the principal figure in "Ilustrado," may be its 33-year-old author's alter ego. In a daring literary performance, Syjuco weaves the invented with the factual, putting himself directly into his own fiction — at times under his own name and elsewhere as "our protagonist." He also creates essays, poems and novels written by Crispin Salvador, as well as Salvador's autobiography, "Autoplagiarist." With the use of a compositional device called literary bricolage, Syjuco (the protagonist) pieces together Crispin's life and work through book excerpts, memoirs, articles, blogs, interviews, essays and poetry. In an interview, Syjuco (the author) explained that the narrative structure of *Ilustrado* is based on Philippine textiles, which, on the surface appears to be a patchwork, but on closer inspection, it is in fact intricate designs woven seamlessly with clear threads of continuity.

*Ilustrado* is basically a novel presenting the lives of two more or less expatriate Filipino writers, but there's little about it that's very basic. The writers are Crispin Salvador, found floating the Hudson in New York City in 2002, and 'Miguel Syjuco', an acolyte who is writing his biography, *Crispin Salvador: Eight Lives Lived*. Much of the novel is presented as this Syjuco's first-person account, in which he describes his own relationship with Salvador, the research he is conducting for the biography he is working on (and where it leads him), as well as much of his own life-story -- one strikingly similar to that of the actual author Miguel Syjuco ..... Interspersed throughout the narrative there are, however, also many excerpts from both the biography-in-progress, *Crispin Salvador: Eight Lives Lived* and many of Salvador's own works -- which range from his own autobiographical *Autoplagiarist* to a wide variety of fiction, from pulp-thriller to literarily ambitious, to the libretto for a "disco opera". There are also excerpts from newspaper articles, blogs posts, and *The Paris Review*-interview with Salvador.

On the other words, *Ilustrado* presents the Philippines from within and without, using its two characters that have left the country but are still closely tied to it -- through family, culture, and history -- to shine a light on some of the darker nooks and crannies, and a corrupted system. Both characters are almost chameleon-like in the multiple guises they appear in: the title Syjuco chooses for his Salvador-biography is appropriate, since Salvador did live many very different lives. Similarly, Syjuco, too, takes on a variety of roles in a variety of circles, ranging from typical college student to expatriate black sheep. Though useful in addressing so many different facets of Filipino life, in the Philippines and abroad, it's also one of the books weaknesses, these two main characters anything but fixed, and too often too readily adapted to meet yet another purpose.

The novel weaves the complex human experiences of its characters into key historical events such as the People Power revolution in the Philippines in 1986, which, after mass street protests, saw the end to the U.S.-backed dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. Although touching down often in Manila, *Ilustrado*'s characters and their experiences are forged in a global world, with storylines also unfolding in New York City and Vancouver. Diaspora meditations are strongly present and long narrative passages that take place

in airports and on airplanes point to the global experience of Filipino culture, stemming from a nation that today has one of the highest rates of emigration in the world.

Syjuco's descriptions are precisely detailed and support the novel's strongly humanistic tone, delivering important meditations on contemporary global history. "America imported and imposed its brand of democracy on the Philippines," says Syjuco, "putting into power first people who were sympathetic to Western policies, writing a system of political dynasties and patronage into the nation. I think that it is important to understand the problems in the Philippines today as linked to this history, while [Filipino history] can give us ideas as to what the situation will be 100 years from now in Iraq or Afghanistan, where again the Americans imposed 'democracy.'"

### **Corruption**

In the early 1960s, the Philippines was an economic power. In fact, during the era, the archipelago nation boasted one of the largest economies in Asia, behind only Japan. Today, while it remains an important part of Asean and the world community at large, it's safe to say that those glory days are long over. When most outsiders think of the Philippines today, it is political instability, economic struggle, crime and corruption that often come to mind. Nowadays foreigners and citizens alike say that the Philippines has the most corrupt leadership and economy. Corruption in the Philippines has become "a humanitarian crisis" and scandals increasingly seem to dominate the news. The worsening corruption has eaten up the right of every citizen to good governance, freedom, decent life, and more importantly his or her dignity. Corruption is a serious obstacle to the social and economic development of a country. The biggest losers are the Filipino people. In effect, the end-users are made to pay for overpriced goods or services or are made to deal with low-quality or substandard goods or services.

According to the World Economic Forum Global Competitiveness Report 2008-2009, companies have identified corruption as their number one concern for doing business in the Philippines, and bribery appears to be an increasing problem for companies. In the World Bank & IFC Enterprise Survey Philippines 2003, 45% of companies admit to having paid bribes in order to 'get things done', and in the SWS Business Survey on Corruption 2007, three out of five managers were asked for a bribe in at least one transaction the previous year, and the amount of the bribe was higher than it had been in the past.

There is much to expose, to indict. The Philippines is a country in which a man of morals can't be president, in which a politician who hasn't been linked to any wrongdoing isn't assumed to be honest, but merely better at hiding his corruption. (Or so says Salvador in a fictional interview with *The Paris Review*.) This is a country in which the rich live in mansions behind high walls in gated communities, their manicured lawns tended by impoverished laborers. The poor are reduced to stealing manhole covers to sell for scrap, and in the torrential rains that routinely flood Manila's pathetically maintained streets; a man can easily be sucked into a drain and drowned.

In the novel and in reality, the police routinely steal from street urchins. As Syjuco says to his grandmother "If I became a politician, either I'd be corrupted by the compromises I'd be forced to make, or I'd shot for my ideals. Don't you see?"(40).The writer frequently mentions this problem directly or indirectly in most part of the novel especially in the excerpts. Syjuco suggests by his words in his novel that people should awaken and be aware of their own country. However, it should not be forgotten that this

writer has uttered his ideas from outside. If he lived in his motherland and argued like this from there, he might see a various situations for his life and future, since in a country that corruption plays the most important role especially among the highest level officials like presidency, speaking about truth can seem very ambiguous.

This novel from beginning commences with a dark situation for a writer by mentioning the death of Salvador and continues with a dark description of society throughout the story, which the second one can be more tangible.

### **Lost identity**

National identity is the person's identity and sense of belonging to one state or to one nation, a feeling one shares with a group of people, regardless of one's citizenship status. The national identity of most citizens of one state or one nation tends to strengthen when the country or the nation is threatened militarily. The sense of belonging to the nation is essential as an external threat becomes clearer when individuals seek to unite with fellow countrymen to protect themselves and fight against the common threat.

The truth about “Filipino Culture, Filipino Identity and Philippine History” is most often lost in translation, sad to say, even amongst Filipinos themselves. Most Filipinos do not have a clear grasp of their history, most especially their pre-colonial history. Thus, those who try to explore and explain “who a Filipino is” fall in the pitfalls of false knowledge or maybe insufficient knowledge of Philippine history. In addition, those who may know something about Philippine history sometimes fails to understand its implications and relationship to the current condition of Philippine society.

A common but understandable mistake when discussing Filipinos and their culture is the questions of identity. The mistake being made in understanding Filipino identity is understandable primarily because if you trace history or may be even DNA would show that Filipinos come from a people of different races. The Philippines consist the Austronesian-dominated group which they divided into groups such as the Tagalogs, Visayans, Ilocanos, Igorots and so on. Also the Chinese has a minor presence in the country, but have impacted the country in many ways through cultural, economic and political aspects.

As mentioned in *Ilustrado*, the Spanish and American colonization has had big impacts on the society as well. And of course, the Aetas and other indigenous groups who have been here before the Austronesians. But really, does this all mean that they have a united national identity? Do all people feel that this is what it has proven to be? The Philippines prior to Spanish colonization was not even a country. It was a set of islands that had their own distinct ethnic groups who rarely mixed with one another. The Spaniards united them through Catholicism but they were still divided by language means. Only recently Tagalog has been selected as the National Language, which has enabled Filipinos of various ethnic groups to use as a lingua franca. Before this, the English language was used as a lingua franca during American colonization. To this day, Tagalog (Filipino) is being debated because many want the other Philippine languages also to be official along with English.

In the novel one of the concerns of Syjuco is his country and gradually his own lost identity. He does his best to aware people of the oncoming influences of not having a united identity for whole part of

the country. He wants to find the country's identity and then to be proud of it. However, he shows that most of the people has been used to be in this wilderness and finds to a difficult job to inform them. As he utters in the novel:

Sadie:” mom, Miguel grew up in the Philippines.”

Raquel: “Ah, I’m sorry. I keep forgetting. You don’t have a Filipino accent anymore! Good for you. (195)

By these sentences we can understand that they like to call themselves American or to adopt an identity other than themselves. Furthermore, On the other hand he shows some contraries in some part of them novel that suggest the ambiguity of the identity in this novel:

“Around that time the Philippines was listed by western government as a terrorist hotspot, though many Filipinos scoffed.”(p.54)..... “New York is beautiful, Granma...I wish you were here.”(51)

However, from the beginning of the story we can find a positive and optimistic point of view of the writer about his own motherland. From the first pages the authors hopes for great changes to happen in the country that will be in the profit of the people. To put simply he is into introduce and/or regain his country's lost identity and wants to aware people to amend or totally create a new identity which its original owners are the people of the Philippines not the other states.

“My biography of Crispin will be in indictment of my country, of time, of our forgetful, self – centered humanity.” (32)

Crispin was obsessed with our oral traditions and doubly infatuated with translating Filipino humor into English. He called jokes “our true shared history,” “our sweetly bitter commentary.” (35)

He believes this is the one of the writers’ and literate people’s duty to make the identity and introduce it to the word through their works. As it is crystal clear from most of the prestigious authors’ works in world, it is possible to shake a country or even the world by words produced though novels, poems and other genres.

## **Diaspora**

A diaspora is the movement, migration, or scattering of people away from an established or ancestral homeland or people dispersed by whatever cause to more than one location or people settled far from their ancestral homelands. Recently, scholarship has distinguished between different kinds of diaspora, based on its causes such as imperialism, trade or labor migrations, or by the kind of social coherence within the diaspora community and its ties to the ancestral lands. Some diaspora communities maintain strong political ties with their homeland. Other qualities that may be typical of many diasporas are thoughts of return, relationships with other communities in the diaspora, and lack of full assimilation into the host country.

During the Marcos (one of the Philippines’ president) years because of severe economic depression, lack of job opportunities and political oppression thousands of Filipinos desperately seeking better lives for themselves and their families took risks and bravely went to strange lands and cultures

taking on whatever jobs were available. However, nowadays, an estimated three thousand Filipinos leave the country every day, roughly a million every year. In 2004, 8.08 million Filipinos out of 80 million left the country. Today, with a population totaling 89.5 million, that would run to about 9-10 million, with about 3-4 million in North America, and the rest scattered around the world.

Ilustrado talks mostly of diaspora, or the great migration and departure of millions of Filipinos—whether they're OFWs, migrating families to Canada, or intellectuals pursuing further studies abroad. It also deals with the pains of Filipinos abroad who are denied their right of being considered as Filipinos on the grounds of geography and language. The author speaks about the negative aspects of this phenomenon about the Filipinos. He is in this idea that leaving homeland and family for the sake of finding money for his or her family does not make sense and there is no reason to leave a country that sometime was one of the most powerful economic poles of the world. He believes that one of the elements which leads this country to lose its identity among the other countries and the people of its own is this diaspora.

Sure, we abandoned the Philippines, inhabited Manhattan, and claimed the deserted nighttime streets, always, in an incredulous state of self-congratulation for what we would one day do. Sure, we went out constantly, driven by our fear of either missing out or dying lonely or simply growing old. (54)

To put simply, he is speaking about the hidden problems of migrated Filipinos who has left their own country and live among the outsiders which cannot appear their own heart words about their past, present and future. How can they call this way of pass days a kind of life while they have to tolerate it far away from homeland?

### **Conclusion**

Ilustrado is, of course, a work meant to free Filipino writing from the limitations -- to batter down the self-set walls, or at least try. By presenting so much, Syjuco suggests some of the possibilities for moving ahead and beyond -- but the presentation also has the feel of just throwing a lot out there, in almost hit and miss manner (just like the examples of Salvador's writing show the most varied approaches, from true popular pulp to a Palanca Award-winning story taking off "from the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet") -- making for a different kind of uncertainty. (Syjuco certainly seems to recognize this, to: his alter-ego in the novel is someone who is still in the process of finding himself, constantly expressing uncertainty about his actions). An often appealing but ultimately too far-flung and -reaching pastiche, *Ilustrado* is an interesting portrait of a class and nation, though generally it is more satisfying in its parts than its whole.

This paper has aimed to unearth the hidden and obvious cultural and individual problems of the Philippines. In the mentioned novel the author as a migrated individual has done his best to find the problems of his homeland and by clarifying them try to awaken the people in order to find a solution or a way to reconstruct everything according to the country's own people's ideas and interests. He wants to show that the Filipinos does not want a country governed directly or indirectly by foreigners. This paper did its investigation on three major problems of the land: Corruption, Lost Identity and Diaspora and through analysing the text related these mentioned problems to the society.

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