

Book Review

A Radical Rizal A Review of *Sisa's Vengeance*: A Radical Interpretation of Jose Rizal by E. San Juan Jr.

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Sisa's Vengeance contains two essays that explore Jose Rizal's historical materialist and feminist ideas, twin blades by which E. San Juan Jr. rendered Rizal's prose sharper in penetrating the ills of society today. In this review, I outline the content of the essays and consider the strengths and potentials of San Juan's radical interpretation of Rizal in light of currents in gender studies and the decolonialization project over a century since Rizal's martyrdom.

MAPPING THE DESIRES OF A RADICAL RIZAL

In his preface, San Juan invites readers to consider Rizal's works—not his image—allowing for an interpretation that maps Rizal's changing landscape of desire in various stages of his lifetime. San Juan proposed that Rizal's rejection, trauma, and powerlessness in different points of his life rendered a new subjectivity that steered his subversive metamorphosis. Amid bouts of self-doubt and depression, his ideas were nurtured by his historical time and material conditions. For instance, the failure of the secularization campaign of Palaez-Burgos forced Rizal to become radical, much like how Filipino activists in the 1970s were pushed underground after the unsuccessful Constitutional Convention and the martial law implementation. Rizal's works (words) can therefore be seen as archaeological evidence of his relationship to his environment, akin to Foucault's analysis of texts as monuments. In his careful study of Rizal's novels and letters, San Juan concluded that towards the end of Rizal's life, the hero was at his most radical persona.

Rizal's body of work is as subversive today in light of the Philippines' Disbursement Acceleration Program, Reproductive Health Law, and Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement. Take the slogan "To suffer and to work!" that San Juan remarked—the very same that Tales, Basilio, Isagani, and others did but to no avail—is the same slogan hurled against the socially excluded urban poor in the Philippines when

they assert their right to decent housing. On the other hand, the same slogan takes on a similar radical slant when it pertains to collectives (instead of individuals)– peoples struggling and sacrificing to determine their own future. The slogan mirrors how Rizal pictured a struggle towards liberation, one that demands the best of everyone, a revolution without shortcuts. Without prejudice against other means of social transformation, Rizal’s writings have taken such radical quality because they produce tangible effects, like the Katipunan revolt, and can spread like wildfire, like how it stirs us today, in what San Juan called the age of imperial terrorism.

In the first essay, “Rizal and Revolution in the Age of Imperial Terrorism,” San Juan critically reviewed biographies of Rizal written by Leon Maria Guerrero, Nick Joaquin, and Ante Radaic, all of which he found speculative or biased. He also exposed other writers, such as Benedict Anderson, who created their own Rizal to meet their ends. San Juan suggested that the disjunctions and oversight of these writers be addressed by employing historical materialism, which considers the totality of Rizal’s life and milieu, his ideas as well as practice. San Juan argued that Rizal’s novels and letters are social expositions of truth, which predicts the essence of Rizal’s moral realism– “the theory and practice of freedom by the insurgent people” (50). To conclude the essay, San Juan interestingly moved the discourse to the “woman question,” in recognition that gender equality is a “keystone of any emancipatory program of the progressive bloc” (63). Taking Rizal’s letter to the women of Malolos as reference, education was seen as an assertion of the dignity, courage, responsibility, and honor of women. The honor of Filipinas was then extended to the honor of patria and the Malay people.

The second essay, “Sisa’s Vengeance: Rizal and the ‘Woman Question,’” considered Rizal’s assessment of women’s actual virtue and potential in his novels and letters. San Juan hypothesized that Rizal was the first nationalist to have appropriated “the body and its constellation of desires as a vehicle for grasping our collective ‘being-in-situation’ simultaneously object and subject of thought” (67). Again using a historical materialist perspective, San Juan mapped the inequality of the sexes from the rise of class society and the overthrow of mother right, the degradation of women as landmark of patriarchy (Engels qtd. in San Juan 68). San Juan further recognized Rizal’s limitations in feminist theorizing but showed that his experience against the phallogocentric frailocracy was an impetus for his radical egalitarianism. Rizal’s annotation of Antonio de Morga’s *Successos de las Islas Filipinas* must have acquainted him with the economically and sexually free women in the pre-colonial egalitarian societies in the islands now called the Philippines.

San Juan argued that Rizal's revolutionary critique of colonial society is expressed in his "realistic-allegorical delineation of women in his works" (71). As witness to the patriarchal authority in the colony that allowed the Church to regulate, monitor, and control women's bodies, Rizal's characters illustrated how women's situations were symptomatic of the "health of the habitat" (71). Sisa's vengeance, therefore, is against patriarchal nihilism that is apparent in Rizal's letter to the women of Malolos, potential recruits of the national liberation social movement Katipunan. Women's vengeance is therefore in transforming the delirium of victims into a counter hegemonic force (Quibuyen qtd. in San Juan 104).

I have so far outlined the content of E. San Juan's thoughtful and lyrical essays. Attempting the same method of metacommentary he employed on Rizal's works, I shall bring out in the next sections, the strengths and further possibilities of E. San Juan's analytical framework in gender justice and postcolonial research, respectively.

Rizal's Gender Stereotypes and Solidarities

San Juan proposed that Rizal's revolutionary critique of a colonial society may be his characterization of women in his writings. Recognizing that gender is dynamic and its representations are varied, we can begin to distinguish that the emphasized femininity emerging in Rizal's prose reflects that of a typical nurturer in the figure of Sisa as a mother and gardener. However, Rizal also distinguished between the different social positions of women through Doña Consolacion, Doña Victorina, Sisa, and Juli, capturing their varying vulnerabilities and relationships within and among classes and generations. Rizal recognized that repressive laws and institutions were put in place in the guise of protecting women, but proved to be the exact opposite—it rendered women more vulnerable, with the poor and rural women like Sisa and young women like Juli as the most exploited. Contemporary feminist writers have visibilized the difference in experiences of women that Rizal was aware of as a social "intersectionality," based on their class, gender, and ethnicity (Crenshaw; Susskind).

In his novels, Rizal further depicted that the passivity, obedience, and silence of his fictional women characters led to tragedies. Could Rizal have understood his own stake in ridding women's bodies of patriarchal domination? Was it not the subjugation of women that traumatized his childhood, prevented him from marrying freely, and constituted the colonization of his motherland? In seeing that men have a crucial role in gender equality and in rejecting the dominant masculinity upheld by hegemonic powers (Connell), it seems that Rizal was truly ahead of his time. His male fictional characters were noteworthy in this aspect, underscored by Elias's

compassionate decision to let Crisostomo Ibarra live despite uncovering their linked histories. While the dominant masculinity was a robust, action-oriented man that protects and provides for the family, Elias did not kill a descendant of a rival clan to uphold family honor.

In his letter to the women of Malolos, Rizal accentuated their reproductive roles as mothers and teachers. While this may seem stereotypical, Rizal's message is anchored on his critique of religion as an ideological state apparatus and the disciplinary subalternization of women by controlling their mind and bodies through inferior education, surveillance, and sexual violence. Recognizing their powerful reproductive capacity as crucial in the formation of young people, Rizal was wary that women may reproduce the subalternization and the "blind obedience to an unjust order" (93). The reverse can also be true—that enlightened women can educate their children better than church-regulated schools. Rizal thusly valorizes the agency, personal autonomy, and civic solidarity—qualities that can birth a revolution—of mothers in the arena of everyday life. Subsequently, the household is transformed into a subversive space where the nation is shaped.

Rizal, additionally, may have alluded to the half-truth about Spartan mothers to imply that the people need to fight. In a letter to his nephew, Rizal suggests that women's habitus to fulfill duty could be converted to one towards community, uncannily resembling Rousseau's conception of civil religion. It is further noteworthy that in his letter to the women of Malolos, Rizal takes for granted that everyone has the capacity for reason and citizenship. That Rizal's writings have reflected a critical position against patriarchy and the subordination of women supports San Juan's central argument.

Rizal, Deathless Postcolonial Subversive

San Juan noted that in Rizal's fiction, the ideal Maria Clara blends into the picture of the landscape and Sisa is transformed into the voice of nature, pulsating with psychic energy. Rizal's women-homeland pair is reaffirmed by San Juan in wrestling with the woman question. San Juan suggested that Sisa's vengeance is justice—gender justice as part of a counterhegemonic insurgency. Extending the analysis of the subjugation of women rooted in the rise of private property to the colonial excursion, we can show that the reproductive power of women and nature has also made their bodies a stage of dominance. In wars everywhere in the world across generations, women's bodies have been sites of conflict, as if conquering women is to conquer a place. Thus, rape has been used as a tool of war in colonization and subjugation and, furthermore, the prestigious, political, and authoritative *babaylans*

(pre-colonial women healers and spiritual leaders) were demonized by Spanish colonizers as *manggagaways* (malevolent witches).

Rizal diagnosed that the *manggagaway* is a witch possessed by the “tensions released from the pressures of overlapping conflicts and contradictions of a transitional phase in society” (89). San Juan commended Rizal in anticipating “Freud’s transvaluation of the soul into the body-phantom registering the impingements of family/society” (90) as an instance of Rizal’s “historical-materialist sensibility and his ethico-political vocation to bring about a revolution in the national psyche” (90). It seems that Rizal demonstrated in Sisa’s character the society’s delirium but, however repressed, she was dignified and undefeated, “still animated with (its) genuine wants and desires” (82). Sisa thus reminds us of the poor, wretched motherland that Rizal the romantic had the heroic urge to rescue. But, even in death, Rizal demonstrated that a damsel cannot be saved by anyone but herself—realizing a self-determined “fate that she deserves” (110).

Rizal’s works are a fertile place for a post-colonial inquiry, even beyond the Marxist template, to explore a philosophy from the margins. How can Rizal’s racialized, sexualized, subalterned experience contribute to decentralizing knowledge from the West, an important project for decolonization (Escobar; Walsh)? Post-colonial analysis visibilizes that “colonialism, imperialism, sexism, racism . . . not regretful byproducts of modern Europe but part of the conditions that made modern West possible” (Lander 525). Any decolonization process must therefore be anti-racism and anti-sexism, promoting their opposite: equality and justice. It is therefore apparent that woman’s body/place as a site of subjects’ reconstitution is crucial in restoring the mother right stripped by colonization. The *manggagaway*, the *filibustero* (a subversive deemed an enemy of the state), and the subalterned others can lead this project of determining our own future.

San Juan has established in his essays that historical materialism is necessary to read Rizal in the context of his historical totality and that addressing the woman question is integral to the materialist study of history. San Juan’s interpretation of Rizal fills a gap in the literature on Rizal and has vast potential in contributing to postcolonial literature. Appropriating this interpretation in a time of globalizing terror and poverty makes Rizal a deathless, dangerous, subversive comrade of revolutionaries in history. Is San Juan also guilty of inventing his own Rizal to posthumously recruit him on the side of the national democratic struggle? A historical materialist analysis and an interrogation of Rizal’s discourse on women suggest that San Juan has in fact presented a more holistic, uncensored Rizal.

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