

Place and Cultural Identity in Joaquin's *The Mass of St. Sylvestre*

Mohammad Hossein Abedi Valoojerdi
University of Perpetual Help System Dalta
Las Piñas, Philippines

Abstract

Nick Joaquin (Nicomedes Márquez Joaquín, 1917-2004) is widely known for his interest in the Spanish colonial period and its culture in the Philippines. He employed the “Walled City” or Intramuros (Old Manila) as the setting for *The Mass of St. Sylvestre* (1946) and many other stories. Intramuros not only has an important role in Joaquin's short story as a physical place, but also conveys identity elements and cultural meanings. This cathedral city has a glorious but neglected past and Joaquin, by retelling the stories from this magnificent past, recalls the link between Filipino identity and the formation of culture during the period of Spanish colonialism. His approach to the issue of identity corresponds to what Stuart Hall classifies as the “Enlightenment Subject” (1996, p. 597). This paper attempts to explore the role that place and the experience of landscape play as markers of cultural identity in *The Mass of St. Sylvestre*.

Keywords: Joaquin, place, landscape experience, cultural identity

Introduction

Obviously due to his status as national hero, many scholars have studied the works of Rizal (José Protasio Rizal Mercado y Alonso Realonda, 1861-1896), yet only a few have examined the work of Joaquin, presumably a writer as important as Rizal. Among those few, even fewer have paid much attention to *The Mass of St. Sylvestre*, a work that challenges deep-rooted ideas and ranges across an array of complex concepts to upend assumptions about Filipino culture, confronting the reader with a variety of unconventional potential interpretations.

The Mass of St. Sylvestre is the juxtaposition of two tiers that come to make up a single reality, one in which each tier offers its own peculiarities. The story thus becomes the manifestation of a latent, repressed tier cloaked under another, more recognizable tier; an invisible history hidden within the conventional past. In this short story, Nick Joaquin re-narrates the local story of St. Sylvestre as an archetype of the culture that is concealed and in danger of being obliterated. He embeds the story within a historical catastrophe in Manila after the Second World War. As a historian and writer, Joaquin employs concrete space, time, and local culture to reveal the struggle between the past and the present, as well as the tension between the official and the repressed culture.

In the story Manila becomes the site of the battle between the repressed past and a present that has evolved from the effects of that repression, a place to experience colonial tropes and postcolonial reality concurrently, and thus a place to see the past haunting the present. A revision of history through the fictional world of *The Mass of St. Sylvestre* can give the reader clues with which to discover the hidden side of history and its relevance to the present.

In this field, the lack of research resources is a significant problem. According to Arong (2016), “Despite the emergence of Gothic criticism in postcolonial writing, Joaquin’s works have rarely received the attention they deserve in this critical area”. As Rommel A. Curaming (2016) points out, the absence of reference to any Filipino scholars in the field of postcolonial studies is telling. (p. 64) Paul Sharrad (2008) argues that Filipino writing in English suffers from lying outside the bounds of Commonwealth literature (p. 355).

This paper aims to be useful for scholars and students who wish a better understanding of Nick Joaquin's works and especially about his ideas on Filipino identity. It should also provide grounds for further studies.

Place, Landscape, Experience and Identity

The relationship between place, on the one hand, and culture and identity on the other, has always been a main concern in postcolonial studies, and Joaquin’s works have reflected this concern very well. In *The Mass of St. Sylvestre*, it seems that, Joaquin employs Walled City or Intramuros as the setting to manifest how culture (as history) and place (*here*, Intramuros), interact. Place, as Cresswel (2004) writes, “is not just a thing in the world but a way of understanding the world.” (p. 11)

Intramuros as setting helps Joaquin pursue two objectives: first, to show to what extent Filipino identity is constructed upon Spanish cultural foundations, particularly in Manila as capital of the archipelago; and second, to perpetuate a heritage that is being forgotten. In Joaquin’s world, space conveys culture and identity. Manila has been a walled city and a cathedral city for centuries, and this exclusivity distinguishes it among other cities. In this sense, the premises of

the Enlightenment Subject theory of cultural identity can help us trace the prevalent sense of loss all along the narrative. According to Hall (1996), the Enlightenment subject “is based on a conception of the human person as a fully centered, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness, and action” (p. 597). If in Joaquin’s story we understand Manila as having a dual function as city and as a metonymy for its inhabitants, we’ll appreciate how it projects its identity onto its inhabitants. The identity of the city here acts as the “inner core” which emerged “when the subject was born, and unfolded with it, while remaining essentially the same – continuous or ‘identical’ with itself – throughout the individual’s existence” (Hall, p. 597).

Manila has been a cathedral city almost from its foundation; for centuries it was one of only two cities (Goa being the other) to whose gates the New Year’s key-bearer made his annual visitation. For this purpose, St. Sylvestre always used the Puerta Postigo, which is—of the seven gates of our city—the one reserved for the private use of the viceroys and the archbishops. There he is met by the great St. Andrew, principal patron of Manila, accompanied by St. Potenciana, who is our minor patroness, and by St. Francis and St. Dominic, the guardians of our walls. (2017. p. 32)

As analogy for its citizens and their circumscribed identity, Manila has many stories to reveal from the past and the present. Its walls mark the border between belongs and what does not belong in the city. The city has had patrons and guardians. According to Viic (2011), the human being makes sense of the world “by creating spatial and temporal unities, and borders between them” (p. 103). Intramuros, or Walled City, can be explored as a colonial space in two different ways. One is through the analysis of the Spanish cultural elements, and the other is the examination of Filipino identity. The first tends to explore the role of the architecture brought to indigenous people by Spaniards. The second accepts the Walled City, as it was during the Spanish period, as a focal point of Filipino identity.

The relationship between people and the place in which they live is not necessarily bound to routine tasks: some places have the ability to provoke us emotionally. Viic (2011) classifies these places to touristic landscapes, sacred and memorial places, virtual places such as fictional landscapes in literary fictions or in paintings, and also virtual places created by the collective imagination,

such as the physical universe presented to us in scientific theories, nature presented to us in photographs in National Geographic, the promised land of the Old Testament, hell and purgatory, the ancient land of a people, the sacred place that can be found inside me according to some esoteric traditions, etc. (p. 104)

According to Knaps and Herrmann (2018), territories become significant to people due to memories related to them or symbolic meanings that are given to and derived from them. Being a cathedral city, Manila has a regional identity that gives it a sense of distinction and peculiarity. According to the story, it is one of only two cities to whose gates the New Year’s key-bearer made his annual visitation. Although the annual mass of St. Sylvestre has been a great honor bestowed upon Manila, it may be considered more as an experience in the imagination of people who share a collective identity than an uncomplicated event in reality.

The question here becomes, why did Joaquin choose an American soldier and leave him inside Intramuros to actually witness the Mass while so many Filipino believers would have been keen to participate in the Mass of St. Sylvestre? The answer is that by this device the author

underscores the existence of the two tiers of the Philippines' postcolonial reality. If the ritual had been witnessed by a Filipino, the reader could have considered it not an expression of underlying culture and identity, but a delusion resulting from the cultural and religious beliefs of Filipinos, a virtual place created by the collective imagination.

Joaquin creates a character that lives on Barnum Street in Brooklyn, and does not believe the story about the mass, and even has no idea about what he had witnessed. He is not a believer; we can learn it from the very first sentences of the letter written by the character (Francis Xavier): "I didn't know all that about living a thousand years or I might have acted otherwise. If that stuff is true—what a chance I missed!" (2017, p.37).

Therefore, the appeared mass is not a delusion. Francis Xavier has seen it in detail. His description of the scene is in accordance with the detailed description of the Mass of St. Sylvestre in the story. It is not correct to attribute Francis Xavier's observations to illusion for the following reasons:

1– The place is a determinative element here, since the mass is held at the supposed place in the Walled City. Xavier writes: "I turned my head just then—and there was the Walled City, and it wasn't smashed up at all." (p.38)

2– The time is definitive as well. The Mass is held only once a year, in New Year's Eve at midnight. Xavier has witnessed the ceremony at just that moment:

That night –it was New Year's Eve— I'd come back to camp early because I was feeling homesick... Around midnight I woke up from a doze and heard music. So I stuck my head out and I saw a kind of parade coming up the road. (p. 37)

Considering the fact that he is not a native Filipino and had never heard about the Mass before, it cannot be considered a case of hallucination, as it would not have been possible to experience the mass with its exact details. What Francis Xavier has seen is a perfect match for the mass that is described at the beginning of the story. Xavier stipulates that even after leaving the scene and returning, the Mass was still going on:

Then I said to myself: what a picture you could make of this, to send home. But I hadn't brought my camera and I decided to get it. So I ran out and down the street and past the open gate and into our camp. Nobody was around. I got my camera and raced back. When I reached the cathedral I could see that the Mass was ending. (p. 37)

So now the question is, if his experience is not a delusion, what is it? Why does it disappear at a specific time? Where did the people at the mass go? Moreover, where do they live?

We might be able to explain this event as what Husserl calls 'a landscape experience'. In this vein, the landscape is not a natural object; it is, instead, a cultural object.

In terms of Husserl, landscape is seen as an intentional object (*Gegenstand*) of experience – that which exhibits itself in an individual consciousness during the act of a landscape experience. The physical objects on a terrain just are there; but they can be meaningful as belonging to something that is called a landscape only if somebody views and understands them in such a way. (Viic, 2011, p. 105)

According to Viic, an act of landscape experience must be an elaborate act of consciousness, a series of perceptions of physical objects like a natural landscape or houses, roads, people, and so on, or discursive images of the same objects. As Husserl points out, it makes no difference whether the objects of experience are real or imagined, whether they correspond to how things are in nature, or are a misrepresentation of the natural order. The landscape must be perceived from a certain distance and angle, like unique site-seeing sites and platforms, but not from above as in aerial photos, and not from the height of human eyes (p. 105).

As Francis Xavier says in the story, he had a determined point of view towards the scene, which persuades us that he had undergone the landscape experience referenced above: “We were camped just outside the walls –on the grassland between the walls and the Port Companies...I saw a kind of parade coming up the road” (p. 37).

There are two features by which the landscape experience could be recognized here: first, there are several objects, like road, people, and Walled City:

I turned my head just then –and there was the Walled City, and it wasn’t smashed up at all. The walls were whole all the way and I could even see some kind of knights in armor moving on top of them. Behind the walls I could clearly see a lot of rooftops and church towers and they were none of them smashed up at all. (p. 37)

Therefore, we can conclude that thanks to “a normative scope and range of objects, real or imaginary,” Xavier had experienced a landscape. As Viic writes, “the experiencing of a landscape must include the perception of such objects as its part-acts” (p. 105).

Secondly, there is a particular point of view toward the landscape, which Francis Xavier as viewer is experiencing. In order to experience the landscape, we need not only a certain scope and range of objects, but also a very precisely determined point of view toward them that enables us to create a *perspective* specific to the landscape experience. It is an interesting fact that the normative (or desirable) height of the perspective constitutive of landscape experience is often set considerably higher than human eyes are from the ground, suggesting that a way of seeing that defines a landscape does not belong to our ordinary day-to-day experiences (Viic, 2011, p.106).

The landscape experience in this story promotes the idea of a two-tiered world derived from different presumptions about reality. One is founded upon the misrepresentation of present circumstances, and the other one upon a heterodox experience that denounces the repression of an authentic past, a suppression that has resulted in the loss of critical elements of identity. The characters in this postcolonial world are in a constant commute between the past and the present as the environment shifts from one tier to the other. Both tiers are real and alive.

The story epitomises a sense of loss. It is interesting that the narrator of the story himself has never seen the Mass. The story concerns the Mass of St. Sylvestre and of the old Intramuros as two intertwined features of identity that are both lost, both missing from the narrator’s perspective. These lines reinforce the sense of loss in the story and clearly associate that loss with American colonial rule: “And just as soon as the liberation forces opened the Walled City to the public, I went to see what war had left us of our heritage from four centuries. Nothing had been left...” The narrator, as protagonist, tries to figure out into what city would St. Sylvestre make his annual entry:

In what cathedral would he say his Mass? The retablo of the Pastoral Adoration has been smashed into pieces and dispersed into dust. Does that release Mateo the Maestro from his enchantment- or must he still, on New Year eve, reassemble a living body from stone fragments to fulfil his penance of a thousand years? (p. 37)

This narrative thus becomes a confrontation between the past and the present, a conflict between the identity that has already been formed (according to the enlightenment subject) and the reality of life, including many changes and contradictions. Now we can realize the reason for the final part of the Mass of St. Sylvestre. After centuries, everything is still the same. The old narrative of the Mass happens precisely with the same detail, but in front of Xavier's eyes. What Xavier tells about the ceremony matches the old narrative about the Mass. The insertion of the old and repressed narrative at the heart of current events manifests the core and the formative component of Filipino identity that corresponds to the enlightenment view of identity and, moreover, stresses the point that the identity of Manila has never changed. However, this identity has been repressed by American colonialism, and the landscape experience, here, functions as a reminder of the past.

Let us compare the two narratives.
First narrative, by the protagonist:

At the Puerta Postigo the heavenly multitude kneels down as St. Sylvestre advances with the Keys to open the noble and ever loyal city of Manila to the New Year. The city's bells ring out as the gate opens and St. Andrew and his companions come forth to greet the heavenly embassy. The two bishops embrace and exchange the kiss of peace, and proceed to the cathedral, where the Pontiff celebrates the Mass of the Circumcision. The bells continue pealing throughout the enchanted hour and break into a really glorious uproar as St. Sylvestre rises to bestow the final benediction. But when the clocks strike one o'clock, the bells instantly fall mute, the thundering music breaks off, the heavenly companies, vanish - and in the cathedral, so lately glorious with lights and banners and solemn ceremonies, there is suddenly only the silence, only the chilly darkness of the empty naves; and at the altar, the single light burning before the body of God. (p. 33)

Second narrative, by Francis Xavier:

The parade had stopped at a gate in the wall and a bishop was opening the gate and bells began ringing. There was another crowd waiting inside and they had a bishop too and the two bishops kissed and then they all went through the gate and I followed. Nobody took any notice of me. Inside, it was a real city, an old city, and hundreds of bells were ringing and they had a park with fountains all around and beside the park was a cathedral. Everybody was going in there, so I did too. (p.38)

However, the city, as the manifestation of identity, has been destroyed, facing the changes imposed by the American colonial rule. And this is the consequence of the new colonial circumstances:

The bright light was only moonlight and the music was only the wind. There was no crowd and no bishops and no altar and no cathedral. I was standing on a stack of ruins and there was nothing but ruins around. Just blocks and blocks of ruins stretching all around me in the silent moonlight... (p. 38)

The abovementioned description is the saddest exposition of loss presented by Joaquin in his works. This loss is the result of the conflict between identity on the one hand, and the colonial reality, on the other hand. This conflict can be examined through Stuart Hall's theory of the Enlightenment subject.

Conclusion

In Joaquin's short story, Manila as a place acts as the nucleus of Philippine identity. He manifests an intense feeling of belonging to Manila. He called himself a Manila old-timer and repeatedly employed Manila as the setting for his stories and reports. Harold M. Proshansky, in his essay *The City and Self-Identity* (1978), argues that physical dimensions help to define an individual's identity, and "it is important to conceptualize place-identity as a specific component of each individual's self-identity" (p. 147). According to Porshansky, place-identity as a concept emphasizes the conscious and unconscious relationship between the individual and the environment around him.

Qazimi (2014) classifies place-identity as one of the substructures of identity, like gender and social class:

It is composed of observation and interpretation regarding the environment. These elements can be divided into two types; one of them consists of memories, values, thoughts, ideas and settings, and another type consists of the relationship between different settings: home, neighbourhood and school. (p. 307)

In this sense, Manila is a specific component of identity in *The Mass of St. Sylvestre*. The way that Joaquin depicts Manila as the place-identity in the story reinforces the belief that Manila's identity is an entirely centred and unified concept which first emerged when Manila was born. "Manila has been a cathedral city almost from its foundation," and this fact has never changed. This approach to depicting identity corresponds to what Stuart Hall classifies as the Enlightenment subject.

References

- Arong, M. R. (2018). Temporality in Nick Joaquin's *The woman who had two navels*. *Kritika Kultura*, 30/31, 455–473. <https://doi.org/10.13185/KK2018.03034>
- Arong, M. R. B. (2016). Nick Joaquin's *Cándido's* apocalypse: Re-imagining the gothic in a postcolonial Philippines. *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture*, (6), 114–126. <https://doi.org/10.1515/textmat-2016-0007>
- Curaming, R. A. (2016). Postcolonial studies and Pantayong Pananaw in Philippine historiography: A critical engagement. *Kritika Kultura*, 27, 63–91. <http://dx.doi.org/10.13185/KK2016.02705>
- Hall, S. (1996). The Question of cultural identity. In S. Hall, D. Held, D. Hubert, & K. Thompson (Eds.), *Modernity: An introduction to modern societies*. London: Blackwell.
- Hall, S. (1996). Cultural identity and diaspora. In P. Mongia (Ed.), *Contemporary postcolonial theory: A reader*. London: Arnold.
- Hall, S. (1993). Encoding/decoding. In S. During (Ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Joaquin, N. (2017). *The woman who had two navels and tales of the tropical gothic*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Joaquin, N. (2017). *Culture and history* (Seventh printing). Mandaluyong City: Anvil Publ.
- Knaps, F., & Herrmann, S. (2018). Analyzing cultural markers to characterize regional identity for rural planning. *Rural Landscapes: Society, Environment, History*, 5(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.16993/rl.41>
- Proshansky, H. (1978). The city and self-identity. *Environment and Behavior*, 10(2), 147–69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916578102002>
- Sharrad, P. (2008). Echoes and antecedents: Nick Joaquin's *Tropical gothic*. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 20(2), 355–366. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449858108588692>
- Viik, T. (2011). Human spatiality: A cultural phenomenology of landscapes and places. *Problemos*, 79(2011), 103–114. <https://doi.org/10.15388/Problemos.2011.0.1323>

Corresponding Author: Mohammad Hossein Abedi Valoojerdi

Email: hossein.abedi@perpetualdelta.edu.ph