Postcolonial Gothic Elements in Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*

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

Abstract

Nick Joaquin (Nicomedes Márquez Joaquín, (1917-2004) is known for his unique style of writing, tropical Gothic, and applying gothic elements in his stories and novels. This paper examines his first novel *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* through the lens of postcolonial theory. The paper also investigates gothic narratives in his novel by applying David Punter's literary-historical approach. Punter (2000), in his book *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order*, examines the metamorphoses of the Gothic as a genre in some selected novels and poems. The book depicts new manifestations of the Gothic during 20th century literature. This paper attempts to investigate how the elements of postcolonial Gothic as discussed by Punter are manifested in Joaquin's novel. In doing so, the contrapuntal method of reading, introduced by Edward Said (1993), is also applied to explore the hidden parts of history in the novel.

Keywords: colonialism, contrapuntal reading, gothic elements, Joaquin, postcolonial theory

Introduction and Literature Review

Postcolonialism is a theoretical approach to studying social and cultural problems in former colonies of Western powers such as Britain, France, USA, and Spain. The postcolonial theory focuses on the relationship between the colonizers and colonized people, and depicts the problems that arise after the independence of formerly colonized countries.

Franz Fanon (1925-1961), Albert Memmi (1920-2020), and Aime Césaire (1913-2008) are the early scholars of postcolonial theory who have significantly contributed to the field. However, it was Edward Saeed's works such as *Orientalism* (1978), and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) that garnered the attention of academic circles more than ever.

Postcolonial theory, as an interdisciplinary field, posits various theories and notions. Since the early 1980s, some acclaimed novels such as *Midnight's Children* by Rushdie (1981), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), gained attention due to the presence of gothic elements in postcolonial literature. A growing focus on the connection between the Gothic and post-colonial literature could be traced even before the 1980s. In 1972, the University of Queensland published a collection of Joaquin's short stories entitled Tropical Gothic. The collection comprises nine stories spanning two decades of Joaquin's writings (1946 to 1966). Some scholars refer to Joaquin's unique style of English, his nostalgic sensation toward the Spanish past, and applying gothic elements to define the term "Tropical Gothic".

The Gothic as a genre has the ability to adapt itself to any place and time. From European countries in the 18th century to the contemporary Caribbean, African, or Southeast Asia, the Gothic has evolved by absorbing the indigenous elements of the place, and the spirit of its time. Hence, today the gothic transformations have become a field of study in literature and since the concern for the presence of the stranger has always been one of the critical themes in gothic literature, it has been employed in postcolonial theory as well.

This paper attempts to examine *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* by answering the question: What traditional elements of the Postcolonial Gothic can be found in *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*?

To answer the question above, the contrapuntal method of reading is applied to draw out the overarching postcolonial aspects found in the novel. Developed by Edward Said, contrapuntal reading is "a form of 'reading back' from the perspective of the colonized, to show how the submerged but crucial presence of the empire emerges in canonical texts" (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 2001, p. 92). This method helps to discover intertwined histories in a novel or other works of fiction. Looking at a literary work contrapuntally can reveal different perspectives of the context in which the story takes place.

David Punter's (2000) literary-historical approach is employed, too, to identify the elements of postcolonial gothic in Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*. David Punter (2000), in his book Postcolonial Imaginings, depicts the new elements of the Gothic. For instance, in postcolonial gothic, "Castles transform into pickle factories or family homes complete with verandahs and drawing rooms. Hostile mountainous backdrops fade into packed cities. Ghosts no longer whisper from paintings or haunt ships. Instead, they are the echoes of past memories, appearing where they cannot exist" (Denison, 2009, pp. 5–6). "If we are to engage with postcolonial writing," Punter (2000) writes, "then we have to do it through the encounter

between the postcolonial and the literary, in all its peculiarities, its exemplary unyieldingness, its intransigence, its resistance not only to political appropriation but also to theoretical oversight" (p. 10).

There are several Filipino writers such as Jose Rizal, Linda Ty Casper and Carlos Bulosan whose works lend themselves to a postcolonial criticism, but what distinguishes Nick Joaquin from these other writers is his attachment to the Spanish period, the era which began the formation of the modern Filipino identity. For Joaquin, the Philippine historical culture is created by the tools brought to the archipelago by Spaniards, "like, for example, the plow. The plow did not "corrupt," it begot, the Filipino." He believes that before the Spanish period, "there is not one authentic Philippine date. After the ensuing technical revolution, dates acquire a great practical importance" (Joaquin, 2017a, p. 17). Moreover, Joaquin juxtaposes this period with the succeeding American colonial period in the Philippines.

In recent years, some scholars have examined Joaquin's works from a postcolonial Gothic perspective. Arong (2016) in her essay "Nick Joaquin's Cándido's Apocalypse: Re-imagining the Gothic in a Postcolonial Philippines" explored the idea of the Gothic in Joaquin's writing and claimed that Joaquin is the "most original voice in postcolonial Philippine writing" (p. 114). Arong's (2018) more recent paper "Temporality in Nick Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*" argued as well that Joaquin's novel "should also be read as a strategy for resisting U.S. neocolonialism and a critical view of nativism, shedding light on the disjunction among history, culture, and literary consciousness" (p. 455).

P. Sharrad (2008) examines Joaquin's works contrasted to the history specifically, and in accordance with the history of the Philippines. Sharrad in his article *Echoes and Antecedents: Nick Joaquin's Tropical Gothic* examined Joaquin's works vis-à-vis the history of the Philippines. He pointed out the fact that religions and powers have colonized the Philippines over centuries. Filipinos were invaded first by migrating Malays with a dominant Islamic culture, then came the Catholic conquistadores, and finally the evangelists of materialism. Sharrad claimed that "this discontinuous culture of conquest has produced a certain schizophrenia in the Philippine sense of identity" (p. 355).

Postcolonial Gothic Elements

The past haunts the present: *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* begins in media res. Connie Escobar, as the main female character of the novel, claims that she has two navels. Having been overcome by anxiety, she asks Pepe Monson to fix this problem urgently and through a surgical operation, but Monson is only a veterinarian. Later in the story, the reader meets two inconsistent narratives, one given by Connie, and the other presented from her mother's, Senora Concha Vidal's point of view. Throughout the story, the reader finds out that Connie's husband Macho Escobar has had an affair with Señora Concha Vidal.

Like other gothic novels, the story unfolds the family secrets of the characters, but first and foremost, the memoirs from Connie's past bring great distress to her current life. Pepe Monson, who has always heard from his father about his years in Manila, has been living in Hong Kong for many years so far and is dealing with the past as well.

Doctor Monson, Pepe's father, is a revolutionary nationalist who has been in self-imposed exile for many years. He lives with the memories of the past during the years of exile and has almost lost touch with the present. At the last moments of his life, Doctor Monson regrets that he has

abandoned the present so as to live in the past. Connie's mother, whose character resembles a monster, is a victim of her past, too. In fact, the common point between Connie and other characters is an irritating and mysterious past. This way or another, all characters are prisoners of their past.

The Woman Who Had Two Navels depicts how the past can haunt the present and how ghosts from the past can create trauma in the current life. In this respect, the past always has a malicious effect on the present time; the atonement resulted from the sins of parents.

Sense of Loss

Along with Connie's bizarre claim to have two navels, the novel begins with a sense of loss. It is felt when Concha de Vidal meets Pepe Monson and reveals the friendship between their families in the past. Pepe was unaware of certain facts: "and when I was in school your father was the school's physician. I remember that the older girls were quite in love with him and kept praying for fevers. He was such a handsome, a magnificent gentleman" (Joaquin, 2017b, p. 70).

They talk about the Monsons' family house that no longer exists:

> Your father's family had a famous house in Binondo – Binondo's one of the oldest parts in Manila, the most labyrinthine – and your house was famous because our great men loved to assemble there – to talk, to dance, to quarrel, to plot revolutions. Mother took me there a few times. I was just a child in pigtails and my eyes popped out with bashfulness … It's not there anymore – your father's house … (Joaquin, 2017b, pp. 70-71).

The house is not just referring to materialistic objects here, instead, it is the manifestation of Inheritance of ancestors. It was old and had undergone the presence of several generations of ancestors. The destruction of such a house results in a deep sense of loss. It is necessary to look at the conversation between Concha de Vidal and Pepe Monson to see the depth and breadth of the sense of loss:

> … It was a courteous cordial house –an old, old house even then, and this last war had finally destroyed it, along with all the dear labyrinth of Binondo.
> She said: "It's not there anymore – your father's house …"
>
> He nodded: they had heard it was gone... "It was waiting for us to come home," he added …: "The house of our fathers is waiting for us to come home!" (Joaquin, 2017b, p. 71)

This sense of loss, however, is not limited to the lack of objects such as the father's house; this is the sense of loss that spreads through the souls of the survivors, and like termites in a wooden house disrupts their foggy identities. The characters, here, know that nothing is waiting for them to come back home.

Punter (2000) writes: "we might equally say that what is lost is also impossible to register" (p. 16). It is impossible to come home simply because one's home is nothing but a hallucination of home. The impossibility and loss are the genes that shape the story. The sense of loss is a common point for all characters

The objects in Pepe's office illustrate a sense of life, too:

> "Here" was Hong Kong, in midwinter, on Kowloon side.
>
> And why here? Wondered Pepe Monson, removing bewildered eyes from her face and looking rather dazedly around the room; feeling the room's furniture hovering vaguely – the faded rug on the floor; the sofa near the doorway, against the wall; the two small Filipino flags crossed under a picture of General Aguinaldo; the bust of the Sacred Heart upon the bookshelf, between brass candlesticks; the tamaraw head above each of the shut windows… (Joaquin, 2017b, p. 67).

Along with the atmosphere depicted in the paragraph, here are the materials of a postcolonial position or a gothic imagination: small Filipino flags, the picture of General Aguinaldo, the bust of Sacred Heart, and the tamaraw head; the objects that promote, as Punter writes, "a sense of history as an accumulation of relics, as an accumulative relic, an embedding of a notion of mourning" (Punter, 2000, p. 91).

Everything is foggy and floating, including the identities represented by small Filipino flags thrown in a room in Hong Kong. The picture of General Aguinaldo gives a sense of nationalism and is a reminder of a need for national identity. Even the season can create a sense of alienation: a Filipino, from a tropical land, now is in midwinter. The tamaraw head symbolizes an endangered species. In 1961, at the time of writing the novel, the tamaraw as the only endemic Philippine bovine was, and still is, on the brink of extinction. The whole scene in this paragraph is designed to induce a sense of loss and being lost.

"Fog or mist is conventionally used to blur objects not only to reduce visibility but also to usher in terror, be it in the form of a person or a thing;" Arong (2018, p. 463) writes. Furthermore, we may be more specific about Arong's suggestion that the fog in this scene ushers in terror, even considering the semantic difference between terror and horror. In fact, terror as a classic gothic convention has a variety of manifestations. Thus, it is possible to suggest that fog, here and among various emanations, refers to being lost. In addition to fictional functions, fog can indicate the lack of clarity not only for the physical objects in the scene but also for the identity of the character. "Hong Kong's infamous fog, especially during winter," when it incorporates the characters of the novel, can be a metaphor for the characters' fogy identity as well.

Hidden Histories: Hong Kong itself, as the setting, carries implications for Filipino nationalism. "Hong Kong is an important locale for Filipino revolutionaries and expatriates. Jose Rizal practiced as an ophthalmologist in Hong Kong prior to his exile in Dapitan, and the first Philippine Republic led by General Emilio Aguinaldo used Hong Kong as its base for its government-in-exile," Arong points out and compares Doctor Monson's character to General Artemio Ricarte, a nationalist who is regarded as the Father of the Philippine Army. It can be claimed that Doctor Monson's wishes never came true and the destruction of his house suggests the failure of the Revolution and Filipino nationalism.

Although Doctor Monson is a former rebel who has fled his country concerned with the aftermath of the war, it is inconsistent with San Juan's (1984) point of view that Doctor Monson "has contributed to the alienation of his children by indulging in the fashionable pose of self-exile – a metaphor of colonial domination – and has thereby doomed his offspring to private hell" (p. 149).

If we accept Arong's claim that the character of Doctor Monson in the novel is based on the true-life of General Artemio Ricarte (2018, p. 463), then we will find out that Joaquin considers him the last and authentic representative of the Revolution and the only general who never surrendered to U.S. forces. There is evidence to support this point of view, too, including the descriptive similarities that can be drawn between this novel and another essay by Joaquin. In his book *A Question of Heroes*, Joaquin asks a question that seems simple to answer at first glance: "when stopped the Revolution?"

"On April 1, 1901, Don Emilio took the oath of allegiance to the United States and on April 16 he called on the warriors still in the field to lay down their arms." By acknowledging and accepting the sovereignty of the United States, Aguinaldo put an end to the Republic. "The Republic had indeed ended – but had the Revolution?" Joaquin asks, and if the answer is no, so when stopped the Revolution? And answers: "Certainly not on that March day when Don Emilio fell captive in Palanan, nor on the April Fool's day when he swore allegiance to the United States, not yet on the day he called his armies to surrender." (Joaquin, 2005, p. 213) Furthermore, it is no surprise that Joaquin is complaining about the misreading of the 1900s by Filipinos:

> The 1900s that were Empire Days to the Americans, and for Filipinos the ABCs of a new culture, are usually read in terms of peaceful development, but is this a correct reading of the 1900s? Have we been trained not to see an important movement of that period: the continuing Revolution? (Joaquin, 2005, p. 213)

Joaquin is involved with both sides of the controversy: on the one hand, he is angry at those who have surrendered their lives and even hearts to the dominant military power and prevailing culture: His favorite cliché is depicting people swiftly and wholeheartedly falling in love with America. The submerged evidence is of a bitter, stubborn, and quite widespread resistance. The American lovers won in the end, and so thoroughly that we could forget there was even a struggle (p. 213). On the other hand, he is targeting those who promoted New Propaganda and left the Filipino identity to deteriorate.

After Aguinaldo's surrender to the Americans, Ricarte became the leader of the Revolution as "the only general who never swore allegiance to the United States," and "this was in the days when the canon of national heroes was being formed, and Ricarte could not, of course, be allowed even a minor place there, not so much because he was still alive as because he was still active, dangerously active," (Joaquin, 2005, p. 214) Joaquin writes, and even accuses the New Propaganda of abusing Ricarte's revolutionary struggle:

> Where the Republic fell, in 1901, in the person of Aguinaldo, the Revolution ground to a stop, in 1945, in the person of Ricarte.
>
> At that time, to suggest him for national hero would have meant a lynching but since then there has been the New Propaganda to make it square but square not to be anti-American (Joaquin, 2005, p. 214).

Joaquin, in his novel and essay, gives similar descriptions for Doctor Monson and Artemio Ricarte and seems to have a clear tendency to differentiate between Aguinaldo and Ricarte's struggles:

> … a few more years, and he and his general were pale fugitives, fleeing up rivers, through jungles, over mountains; the Yanqui soldiery hot on their heels. But he had resisted to the end – he and so many other splendid young men – resisting with the spirit when, bound and jailed, they could no longer resist with arms. Their general might submit; their general might take the oath of allegiance; their general might call on all the still embattled caudillos to come out and surrender – but these hardheaded young men flung at the Yanquis their gesture of spiritual resistance, preferring exile to submission (2017b, p. 74).

Joaquin (2005) has clearly separated the Republic from the Revolution as two mainstreams of the political view in the Philippines: "… we have been emphasizing the wrong movement in the 1900s," he claims, "the mainstream of our history was not our political development or education for self-rule, not the First Philippine Assembly or the rise of Osmeña and Quezon, or the Jon's Law. The mainstream is the continuing Revolution" (p. 226).

It seems that Joaquin has not even forgotten to pick out the Billiken to play a role in his novel as a metaphor, to show the cultural tendency of society to what he calls "emphasizing the wrong movement." (p. 226) According to Dorothy Jean Ray (1974), Billiken or Biliken (with one 'l' in the novel) is a charm doll created by Florence Pretz, an American art teacher and illustrator most likely in 1908, and "along with the horseshoe, the rabbit's foot, and the four-leaf clover, the Billiken is one of America's favorite good-luck pieces."

Surprisingly, the charm was widely accepted in other countries such as Japan, and even today, it is known as the God of things as they ought to be. In the Philippines, Billiken became the symbol of friendship between the USA and the Philippines thanks to participating in Manila Carnivals (1908-39) as the King of the Carnival. "But the nostalgia-evoking carnival god Biliken is also an icon of colonial amnesia" (Hau, 2015). According to McCoy and Roces (1985), the original organizer of the carnival was an American colonel George T. Langhorne. Caroline Hau (2015) writes: "Americans had taken a pre-Lenten festival and turned it into an instrument of pacification aimed at celebrating Philippine-American "friendship" and defusing any lingering hostility between Americans and Filipinos in the city."

In Joaquin's novel, Billiken plays a crucial role and is described as "an old fat god, with sagging udders, bald and white-bearded and squatting like a Buddha; and the sly look in its eyes was repeated by the two navels that winked from its gross belly" (Joaquin, 2017b, p. 100).

Connie's keen interest in Billiken reflects the influence of American modernism on Filipino identity.

Shame and Blindness: Concha Vidal, her husband, and Connie, all have sinister roles in the novel; however, it is essential to find out how these monsters are created. In Joaquin's novel, characters are living in a situation that creates monsters; that can transform individuals and also objects into monsters. It can even extract monsters from memories. However, at least some of these monsters are victims themselves. They have no choice but to become monsters. In fact, that is a monstrous estate: the estate of being colonized.

Many monstrous forms, "take the literal form of hybrids, mixtures of man and animal." Beyond the scary or different appearance, the relationship between monstrosity and power, the power that creates the monsters, can be studied, which "will inevitably maintain a dialogue with the realm of the political." David Punter (2000) writes:

> To take the emblematic European case of Frankenstein, we have there a text that has been read as being about power in all manner of ways and inevitably also, of course, about powerless-ness. We might think, for example, about the curious kind of power Victor Frankenstein wields over his creation, the power to bestow and in the end also to withhold life. Or we might think about the monster's frustrated and ultimately futile attempts to wield some kind of power over his own environment and over his creator, attempts that are doomed to come to nothing (pp. 110–111).

However, monsters do not always appear like Frankenstein. Punter, by reviewing different novels, explores how monstrosity is manifested in individuals and society. He – according to the novels he reviews – lists some features which lead to monstrosity. The first one is "shamelessness" which refers to "a history of unbelievable" or unacceptable actions performed by individuals, "however, they apparently feel no shame."

In Joaquin's novel, Concha Vidal and her husband do not appear in the form of hybrids; instead, what makes them monsters is shamelessness. Concha is not ashamed to talk about the corruption of her husband:

> Her father's in the government, you know, and when Connie was still in school there were some stupid charges against him – bribery, and using up the public funds, and having his daughter on the government payroll also she was just a schoolgirl who had never been inside an office (Joaquin, 2017b, p. 76).

and:

> I told her that people who had our advantages must expect to be envied and reviled by people who were not so fortunate; and there were many things grown-ups did which couldn't properly be judged by young people until the young people were grown-ups themselves… (Joaquin, 2017b, p. 77).

Connie's disillusionment actually begins when she discovers her father's money is "blood sucked from the people." However, this is not the only qualm about Connie and her family. Monsters can be victims too. Considering the point that Connie's father was a noted ilustrado but had transformed into a corrupt politician from a patriot, and the point that Concha is from a patriot family, too, leads us to a pervasive projection, which is a sort of inevitable fate. Concha and her husband's shamefulness is actually "a projection of the shamefulness of the society" they are surrounded by.

The projection can ruin everything in society, including the childhood of the characters. Connie becomes a monster precisely because of her childhood; as Punter (2000) writes: "there is the enduring relevance of the monster as a representation of childhood experience, as an at least initially uncomprehending victim of a realm that represents the adult world gone mad, crazed with its own power" (p. 111).

However, the project of monstrosity is not limited to individuals. It is like poisoned air that infects all aspects of being, including places and cities. That "wilderness is not in the far places of the earth, those spots on the map which are simply marked as terra incognita or 'Here be Dragons,' but right in the heart of social life" (Punter, 2000, p. 118).

In the novel, even Manila and Hong Kong have metamorphosed into monsters: Paco

> … had resumed his solitary explorations of the city but what he now saw increased his discomfort: the heat-dazzling panic-edgy streets darkened in his brain with doom, dirt, danger, disease, and violent death. Some venom was at work here, seeping through all the layers, cankering in all directions (Joaquin, 2017b, p. 93).

Conclusion

The Postcolonial Gothic combines two complex and contested terms: the Postcolonial and the Gothic. Joaquin's combination and employment of the resulting elements from the conjunction of these two terms creates new elements of the Gothic. Although there are no old and dreadful castles mentioned in *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, Joaquin's novel is imbued with the transformed form of some Gothic elements such as: sense of loss, the past haunts the present, hidden histories, and shame and blindness. Moreover, for Joaquin, applying gothic elements is a way to revive the repressed parts of historical memories of the Philippines. As discussed in hidden histories, he tends to explore the traces of the erased or hidden history in his novel. By recreating historical characters in the novel, he also focuses on the historical ambiguity, which resulted from the impalpable presence of those erased parts of the past at present. By placing those characters in a land of exile, Joaquin creates a sense of loss and by creating situations that turns humans into blind and shameless creatures, he provides a contemporary sense of Gothic.

References

Arong, M. R. B. (2018). Temporality in Nick Joaquin's *The woman who had two navels*. *Kritika Kultura, 30/31*(0), 455-473. http://dx.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, 6*(6), 114–126. https://doi.org/10.1515/texmat-2016-0007

Ashcroft, B., & Ahluwalia, P. (2001). Edward Said. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203137123

Hau, C. (2017, Nov. 19). The God of things as they ought to be. ikangablog. Retrieved November 10, 2021, from https://ikangablog.wordpress.com/2015/11/19/the-god-of-things-as-they-ought-to-be

Holden, P. (2009). The postcolonial gothic: Absent histories, present contexts. *Textual Practice 23*(3), 353–372. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502360902753013

Joaquin, N. (2017a). Culture and history (7th Ed.). Mandaluyong City: Anvil.

Joaquin, N. (2017b). *The Woman who had two navels and tales of the tropical Gothic*. New York: Penguin Books.

Joaquin, N. (2005). A question of heroes. Mandaluyong City: Anvil.

McCoy, A. W., & Roces, A. (1985). Philippine cartoons: Political caricature of the American era, 1900–41. Manila: Vera-Reyes.

Punter, D. (2000). Postcolonial imaginings: Fictions of a new world order. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Ray, D. J. (2019). Billiken Lore. Church of Good Luck. Retrieved November 10, 2021, from http://www.churchofgoodluck.com/Billiken.html

Said, E. (1993). *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books.

San Juan, E. (1984). Toward a people's literature: Essays in the dialectics of praxis and contradiction in Philippine writing. Quezon City: The University of the Philippines Press.

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

Wisker, G. (2006). Postcolonial Gothic. In A. Smith & A. Powell (Eds.). Teaching the Gothic. London: Palgrave Macmillan (168–182).

Corresponding author: Mohammad Hossein Abedi Valoojerdi
Contact email: hosseinabedi@yahoo.com