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The Man Who (Thought Me) Looked Like Robert Taylor

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THE MAN WHO (THOUGHT HE) LOOKED LIKE ROBERT TAYLOR. By Bienvenido N. Santos. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1983. 173 pages.

The Man Who (Thought He) Looked Like Robert Taylor takes for its subject the displacement and isolation felt by Filipino oldtimers in the U.S. It revolves around the cycle of departure-and-return, as Solomon King, the main character, finally goes on his last journey to search for friends who may still be alive.

The lament of Sol is one of a divided self, of not belonging to any country or group. He is one of the older generation of Pinoys, but he is different from them, (as seen by his efforts to better himself in night school). Neither does he belong to the younger group of self-confident Filipino professionals. His is an extension of the problem of all Filipino immigrants, so well understood by Santos when he says: "We're Pinoys, we're not black, we're not white."

This novel, like Santos' shorter fiction, describes the pathetic frustration and alienation of Pinoys in the U.S., and also their faith and resilience in an alien environment, what Casper calls "the folk endurance of a people partially immunized against despair by so long a history of dispossession."

The character of Sol is complex and well-delineated by Santos. Sol is in a state of isolation by his own choosing. The only Pinoy in a Polish community, he remembers bits and pieces of nineteenth-century poetry in a modern America. His habit of saying "Time is of the element" is a verbal attempt to adjust to his environment. It is deliberately ungrammatical, yet it fits his predicament exactly. He has relationships with women (all Caucasians), but no stable relationships with men. In the character of Banda, (who is shocked by his sleeping arrangements with Ursula, saying "In our country, when a girl . . .") Sol is reminded of his break with traditional moral values. And his relationships with women do not last either. Sol becomes possessive, yet a part of him remains distant. Like his father, he too is a master of the Filipino martial exercise "a silent duel of no touch." He identifies himself with the American actor Robert Taylor, deluding himself into believing he can pass as a copy of a celluloid American.

Santos' novel is rich in myth, dream and symbol. He uses the archetypal myths of the cycle, the journey, and the return to the womb (Sol's search for death). In the character of Sol, King Solomon is less wise, but is still searching for some kind of truth. Sol's encounter with Blanche is his last attempt at finding tenderness and contact with a "white" woman; but there is no nourishment, no strength in physical contact alone. Beyond that, Sol is incapable of giving more. Santos uses the symbol of arnis to describe his life. His life is a pantomime of "no touch" from which he has suffered many wounds. And finally, Santos uses the dream of seeing dead relatives before

one's death. Sol sees Barbara on his last journey; he dreams of Luz and his parents and partakes of their offering before he dies.

The Man Who (Thought He) Looked Like Robert Taylor is a fine work. Santos' execution fits well with his intention. The inclusion of two episodes, though, seem forced. The story of how Alipio got his second wife (entitled "Immigration Blues" in *Scent of Apples*), describes the plight of immigration refugees. And Jaime Pardo's story shows that you can't go home again, with sensitivity and understanding. These are fine stories, taken separately. In the novel, however, they interfere with the narrative of Sol's life.

What highlights the novel are the dialogues between Pinoys, found in-between the chapters of Sol's life. They are colorful, comic and true. The dilemma of the Filipino immigrant is summed up in one of these:

You leave home and country, seek sanctuary in alien land, refuge in another idiom, but you remain on the outside, you are neither called nor chosen; and you keep running, stumbling along the road over a snag of rocks, a net of thread at the feet, a clouding over in the mind, but it is only the surging forward that is momentarily checked, the motion continues, circular into nowhere; backward to what had been the native land, its warmth, its horrid climate, the farce of its form of government, the kindness of the poor, their hunger, their sentimentality and forward again into a glut of strangeness that never becomes familiar, an embarrassment of colors, a negative in black and white blown out of proportion.

Solomon King's life, and the whole structure of the novel are to be found in this passage.

Lourdes Ruth Roa

D R E A D E M P I R E . By Linda Ty-Casper. Hong Kong: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd., 1980. vi, 136 pages.

Dread Empire is an example of a novel where context is of the essence. The reader must look at the vaster social reality against which the story is set, in order to comprehend it fully. Linda Ty-Casper makes this very clear when she sketches for the reader the political landscape of the Philippines against which her novel is juxtaposed. She states that *Dread Empire* "attempts to show how public disorders are felt in the private lives of those who live through them."

In the introduction the author talks of the Filipino quest for freedom. Ever since the declaration of independence, the nation has been struggling, no longer against a foreign power, but against its lesser self. According to Ms. Casper, the onset of corruption came about when the theory of political