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Gagamba: The Spider Man, by Jose

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Gagamba: The Spider Man. By F. Sionil Jose. Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House. 1991. 121 pages.

Cleanth Brooks wrote recently in *The Partisan Review* about those critics who interpret literature as "social therapy." Literature has little objective value in itself, these critics say. It has value only in so far as the reader puts meaning into it, and in so far as it can be used for political, social or psychological purposes. The text only means what the reader or the critic wants it to mean. Brooks, of course, has little patience with that subjective and relativistic approach to literature, but the phrase "social therapy" is a good one. We might borrow it to describe this latest novel of F. Sionil Jose, which is a social commentary upon contemporary Philippine society and a sermon on the mysterious ways of God. Jose's social commentary is good, (his social insights are always perceptive), but the sermon in the first and final chapters of the novel might well have been left to the imaginative reader to discover for himself in his own personal exercise of social therapy.

Jose borrows a plot from Thornton Wilder and Filipinizes it in rather remarkable fashion. In *The Bridge of San Luis* Rey Wilder assembles a cast of characters, brings them all to the collapse of the bridge and studies the differences among them. Jose gathers a similar group of characters, a cross section of Philippine society, in an Ermita restaurant as an earthquake destroys the restaurant and all those inside it. The restaurant, called Camarin (the word means a theatrical dressing room, reminiscent of Shakespeare's "all the world's a stage"), is obviously a symbol for the Philippines. The plot enables Jose to study the individual characters as well as the Philippines in its social and moral context.

The cripple Tranquilino (the tranquil one!) Penoy (the Pinoy!), otherwise known as Gagamba, the spider, to the residents of Ermita, is the narrator and observer, as well as symbolic Filipino in the novel. "Once in an instant of brilliant insight he (Senator Reyes) saw in this homeliest of creatures (Gagamba), the essence of his own people, malformed yet capable of survival, of virile locomotion, with which to pursue the dream" (pp. 74–75). "On July 15, 1990 a killer earthquake—the strongest recorded in Philippine history—struck and for four minutes of apocalyptic turbulence" Manila was submerged in a wave of panic (p. 1). The Camarin Building on M.H. Del PIlar street was totally destroyed and everyone inside the restaurant was killed. "People crowded around (Gagamba, the Spider Man) asking who had been trapped inside and how did he escape. . . . God's will, he convinced himself, indeed. God moves in strange, unknowable ways and he, the worthless creature, was spared" (p. 2). Was it all part of God's plan, or was it as much a result of chance as the sweepstakes tickets that Gagamba sold to the patrons of Camarin?

Gagamba, who is Jose's main symbol in the novel, was a monstrosity. He looked like a two-legged spider. He had an oversized head and a squat body and long arms. He was born with short legs that were no more than a foot long, and even now when he was fifty years old they were as useless as ever. But all those inside the restaurant were dead—the rich, the handsome, the powerful, the sinners and the holy—and Gagamba was alive. "It was perhaps God's inimitable will that decreed it so. . . . Tell us, Spider Man if there is an explanation at all, why Camarin was destroyed when other demon-infested Ermita houses were not, and why, most of all, when you looked back you did not turn into a pillar of salt!" (p. 6) You looked back at Camarin, which was Manila, which was the Philippines, which was Sodom, city of sin.

The middle chapters of the novel introduce and describe the characters of Camarin who are a cross section of Philippine society. All of them come to Camarin at 1 P.M. on Sunday, 15 July and all of them are destroyed in the earthquake. All the habitués of Camarin are powerful men, politicians, journalists, generals, landlords and the handsome call girls who have made Camarin famous. There are also truth-seeking journalists, honest military men and a poverty-loving priest who worked among the *sacadas* and feels uncomfortable in the rich atmosphere of Camarin when he thinks of how much food he could buy for the poor with the money spent on lunch. There are Americans, Filipinos and Japanese in Camarin on that fateful afternoon. In Camarin you find every possible type that goes to make up Philippine society. The introduction of these characters one by one in preparation for the catastrophe, also gives Jose a chance to reflect on many contemporary social issues—GI babies, the prostitutes of Ermita, the corruption of the military, squatter areas, politicians who buy their way to power, the futility of Miss Philippines contests, and many other Philippine social issues.

The perceptive and knowledgeable reader will enjoy trying to match Jose's characters with contemporary figures. There is Fred Villa, the owner of Camarin, who insists on trying out all the girls before he allows them to ply their trade. All the waiters in Camarin look like Filipino heroes—Rizal, del Pilar and Mabini. (Is Jose telling us that the heroes of the Philippines have all been destroyed?) Jim Denison's mother tells him: "Never bring home a Filipina girl. Keep away from those women. They are awful, they will bring nothing but trouble" (p. 35). She has reason for that opinion since her husband, Jim's father, had gotten a Filipina pregnant during the war and left a daughter whom Jim returns to Manila to find. Jim finds his half sister and perhaps more understanding of the Filipina than his mother had. But then he stops in Camarin to go to the bathroom. The American who comes to the Philippines to look for his Filipina half-sister is destroyed in the earthquake. (Is that to be interpreted as a comment upon the split in Philippine-American relations, or as a punishment for colonial domination visited upon the son because his father took advantage of a Filipina?)

Mars Floro, Davao businessman with half a dozen women and money to burn, arranges to take a Japanese business partner to Camarin for lunch and then a quiet little afternoon interlude with one of the girls of Camarin. (Is that a comment upon Japanese sex tours?) Casty Novato is a truth-seeking journalist and Eric Hartiyan is a friend of the politician Rudy Golangco, who wants to buy an election. Eric invites Gasty to meet him at Camarin and then propositions him to support the politician. Gasty refuses and gets up to leave the restaurant in disgust just as the earthquake hits. Eduardo Dantes and Senator Reyes are old style Ilongo politicians in their 80s but their discussion of their sexual prowess is indicative of their impotence, like the old age and impotence, Jose would seem to say, of so many Filipino politicians.

In the final chapter of the novel, Jose preaches his sermon. "The people trapped in Camarin had money and influence in the highest places," (p. 117) but only three of Jose's symbolic characters survive the earthquake. They are the six-month-old daughter of a poor couple who came from Cebu and who live in the alley beside Camarin. (Is Jose saying that, when the social apocalypse comes in the Philippines, the poor will survive? The child of the landless and the dispossessed will live on to change the Philippines?)

The other survivor is Fred Villa, owner of Camarin. He is rescued from the rubble after five days. "He slid his hand down the front of his trousers and fondled his genitals. . . . He realized then, with despair and with sorrow, that he was paralyzed from the waist down" (pp. 118–19). The Playboy of the Philippine World has been rendered totally impotent. (Is that also Jose's judgement upon Philippine society or Filipino sexual mores?)

The third character who survives is of course, Gagamba, the Spider Man. "All those inside (who had died) learned men, rich men, powerful men—their big cars now demolished on the sidewalk, attested to his good fate. . . . God's ways were inscrutable, this was the proof: he was nobody, a worthless cripple. . . . He had never been religious; he spent little time in churches, he never said the rosary, but in his own way, he recognized God and often, asked Him questions to which God was silent, never giving Gagamba a sign that He had heard" (pp. 119–20). "He would have to go on living, salt of the earth (there are certainly biblical overtones in the use of that phrase to describe Gagamba), surviving as lowly beasts survive, and he would be closer to the ground now, to feel its whims and know its pulse, when again it would be wracked by anger" (p. 121). Jose certainly seems to imply that the earthquake will come again in Philippine society.

Cleanth Brooks says in that same article in *The Partisan Review* that "if we can observe through literature how human beings behave—how they justify their lives or how they fail to do so—we may enrich our own lives." Sionil Jose has given us a very pointed commentary upon the contemporary social situation in the Philippines in this novel. How his characters justify or fail to justify their actions can teach us much about how to live our own lives and how to direct our country in the days that lie ahead.

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