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Dread Empire

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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

opportunism became popular, "when getting on and ahead in the world took the place of doing what honor and integrity demanded." The succession of administrations became a series of "high promises and low performance." The two-party system became a political rigodon, where political affiliations changed at every change of the music. This failed to provide genuine opposition. Political loyalty and patronage rested not on issues or programs but on personalities and personal needs. Private interest rather than public welfare determined one's loyalties:

Now the country was not only divided into regions and provinces — coalescing when personal interests coincided, or in order to knock out another coalition — but also into personalities, little colonies held together by personal allegiances, political feudalism. With their special interests to protect, these political lords required and acquired private armies and sophisticated weaponry, and a hierarchy of command whereby lieutenants down the line tried to anticipate their superiors' wishes, breaking the law to fulfill these . . . assured of protection from punishment . . . (iv). [The main character of the novel, Don Paco, is an example of these "political lords."]

Ms. Casper describes the political structure in which the Dread Empire is set as one where elective offices were practically non-existent. The strongly centralized government could suspend or render powerless the provincial governors, who in turn impinged on the authority and mandate of the municipal officials. This was the nature of the present government. The big blow came when, on 21 September 1972, (the date on which the novel opens) martial law was declared. This was, in the author's terms, "as much a disruption of a country's sovereignty as any foreign occupation."

The novel itself revolves around Don Paco, the 65-year-old landlord-tyrant, part-time politician, who always gets what he desires. He rules over his fiefdom with an iron hand, at one time even with a band of armed men, unshakeable in his belief that he is infallible and immortal. He feels secure in the President's good graces and in his own health, despite many signs that his security was ill-founded. His thirst for power, his need to never lose his possessions, is so strong that his brother-in-law calls him a warlord. "He is comfortable only when he is looking down on people's heads" (p. 68). Many incidents in the story illustrate his pride and his appetite for power. Meanwhile the people around him are dying slow deaths. His marriage is shattered by his numerous affairs; his wife Patro sees herself as a woman whose life has remained un-lived. None of her servants envy her position, despite the money. Don Paco's son, Philip, is a frustrated writer, trapped in a hasty marriage and in an unbearable job at an insurance firm. The shadow of his father's disapproval falls darkly over him. Sebastian, Don Paco's long-time friend and driver, lives on a meagre salary that can barely support his family.

The tenant-farmers wallow in poverty; the floods that hit the plantations do not even concern Don Paco. The novel ends a few days after the declaration of martial law, when the President has Don Paco arrested. Don Paco's empire comes to its end. The whole novel is fraught with a sense of futility — the futility of all illusions of health, power and happiness. Symbolic is the dead *duhat* tree, which Doña Patro had re-planted in the ground, confident that it would live again.

Seen apart from its context, the novel makes a very interesting study in power — it provides perceptive glimpses into the calculated thoughts of the power-hungry. It treats of the hollowness and the desperation that maddens those who have wanted too much for themselves. It emphasizes the transience of power, "how completely everything is gone" at the end. It also portrays the injustice and the suffering that results from the abuse of power.

Put back in its frame, however, the novel is a thinly disguised criticism of the present regime and of Philippine political tradition. One character speaks against the injustice of martial law. The malpractices of landlords like Don Paco are exposed: the use of armed men to enforce their rule, their elimination of people who pose threats to them. Don Paco is himself a victim of the changing whims of higher authority: one minute he is an ally, the next minute he is arrested. The dread empire of Don Paco is also symbolic of the bigger dread empire, a microcosm of it. Don Paco always thinks that "he and the president are one" (p. 72). He often thinks of the president — their minds run along the same lines. The fact that Don Paco's empire comes to an end perhaps constitutes a warning to the President himself.

Perhaps the author is also attempting a critique of the passive Filipino people, embodied in the loyal Sebastian, who will die before he can demand proper compensation from Don Paco. Lt. Col. Beltran, who arrests Don Paco might also be symbolic of the military, who endure the conflict between personal ties/convictions and duty.

The novel's literary merits are many. Although Ms. Casper's aim is not so much to tell a story as to criticize the context that sired the story, she does not neglect her art. The novel is well-constructed. There is a wise selection of relevant detail. Her character delineation is excellent, perceptive — there is blood in her sketches. Her style is simple and fluid. Some of her images are vivid and startling.

There is certainly much room for novels like *Dread Empire*, novels that are aesthetic triumphs as well as triumphs in the plea for justice and the good of society.

Stella Pagsanghan