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## Under the Balete Tree: Deciphering Class Struggle in F. Sionil Jose's *Tree*

Lucy Marium Samuel

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### Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to decipher the class conflict or struggle in the Philippines, during the 1940s and 50s, embedded in the narrative economy of Francisco Sionil Jose's novel, *Tree*. It also tries to understand the class structure in the Philippines during three different periods- Pre-colonial era, Spanish era, American era and the Japanese attack period by drawing parallels in the novel. Though the study has taken up a Filipino novel, set in the 1940s and 50s, there is a need for looking into the class structure or the social structure of Filipino society. After giving a brief account of it, the paper endeavors to focus on the different forms of class conflict by a close reading the lives of the characters presented in the novel.

### Keywords:

Society, class, class struggle/conflict, forms of class conflict, power relations

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Literature acts as a guide to social reality. Historical texts always present facts or events before its readers, but only literature has the unique power in bringing facts with experiences or feelings. No literature is placed in vacuum, it is always placed in a social or historical background. When a reader reads a literary piece, he/she is getting familiarised with a particular history or culture along with the aesthetic appeal that the fiction brings into. In his seminal essay "What is Literature?" Jean-Paul Satre talks about the responsibilities of a writer and he asks writers for 'committed writing'.

There is no doubt that the written work is a social fact, and the writer before ever taking up his pen should be deeply convinced of it. He should, in fact, imbue himself with his responsibility. He is responsible for everything: lost or victorious wars, rebellions and repressions. He is the accomplice of the oppressors if he is not the natural ally of the oppressed. But not simply because he is a writer: because he is a man. He should live and desire that responsibility (and, for him, living and writing ought to be the same thing—not because art redeems life, but because life expresses itself in one's undertakings and his is to write). (Satre 286)

Accordingly, the Filipino writers try to fulfill their responsibility as a writer by portraying Philippine society in their works. Revisiting the past and bringing the past in the present is a common act from the side of the authors when Philippine Literature in English is considered. "The past both remote and immediate has always haunted the consciousness of the Filipino writer in English. It is as if by peering closely into the by-gone years, he may extract from the past some insights that might help him understand the present" (Reyes 117). Francisco Sionil Jose is a Filipino writer of this type, who always tries to mirror the society that he belongs to, in his writings. Jose is a famous Filipino writer, who writes both in Filipino and in English. Most of his works are

historical in nature and portray the true Filipino identity. The study has taken up his novel, *Tree* published in 1978. *Tree* belongs to Jose's largest body of work known as 'Rosales novels'.

The novel is set in the 1940s and 50s during the Second World War, a momentous period in the history of the Philippines. During this period the Philippines was under the supremacy of the United States and at the same time it had witnessed the Japanese attack and the Huk rebellion. Though the novel is set during these periods, it also recounts the pre-Hispanic society through its characters. The novel portrays all these historical events through the experiences of the protagonist- an unnamed man, who takes a journey into his haunting past. He narrates his story as a boy who has spent his childhood days in a small Ilocano town surrounded by elite class relatives, adoring servants, who served his family all their lives and friends below his class. The novel can be considered as a bildungsroman, because it presents the narrator's growth from childhood to adulthood, where he searches for moral values and justice.

This paper is an attempt to decipher the class conflict or struggle in the Philippines, during the 1940s and 50s, embedded in the narrative economy of *Tree*. It also tries to understand the class structure in the Philippines during three different periods- Pre-colonial era, Spanish era, American era and the Japanese attack period by drawing parallels in the novel. Though the study has taken up a Filipino novel, set in the 1940s and 50s, there is a need for looking into the class structure or the social structure of Filipino society. After giving a brief account of it, the paper endeavors to focus on the class conflict presented in the novel.

*The Philippines: A Past Revisited* by a famous Filipino historian Renato Constantino is a powerful attempt to revisit the Philippine past, to reject the misrepresentations imposed by colonial scholarship and to expose the inequity inherent in conventional historiography by projecting the role of the people. In this book, he observes: "human society is the cause and the result of people in motion and in constant struggle to realize the human potential, for the human being is the only species that has unlimited possibilities for development" (Constantino 3). Interestingly, this echoes the class struggle discussed in the *Communist Manifesto* "history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another" (Marx & Engels 14).

It has been observed that all history has been a history of class struggles between the oppressed and oppressor, between the dominated and dominating or between the exploited and exploiter. From time immemorial, there has always been a struggle between two or more classes in a society because of power relations.

The class struggles of the ancient world took the form chiefly of a contest between debtors and creditors, which in Rome ended in the ruin of the plebeian debtors. They were displaced by slaves. In the Middle Ages the contest ended with the ruin of the feudal debtors. . . . Nevertheless, the money relation of debtor and creditor that existed at these two periods reflected only the deeper-lying antagonism between the general economic conditions of existence of the classes in question. (Marx 135-6)

Even today in most of the societies, irrespective of all borders, there are conflicts in power relations. In the Marxian perspective, the class structure is based on the economy and it is defined in terms of 'production'. According to Marx and Engels, "every class struggle is a political struggle"(Marx & Engels 19) and Constantino also says that the economic struggles (meant by the struggle between dominant class and subservient class) "are often fought as political and intellectual battles" (Constantino 8).

Systems of stratification, according to the Marxian perspective, originate from the relationships of the social groups to the forces of production. In all the stratified societies, there are two major social groups: a ruling class and a subject class. Ownership and control of the forces of production enable the ruling class to exercise power over the subject class. This ruling class oppresses and exploits the subject class and as a result there has been always a conflict between these two classes. In a society majority of the population is the subject class whereas the ruling class forms the minority. Most of the time there is a friction between these classes and class conflict or struggle occurs.

In this sense, class conflict can mean "a class warfare or class struggle" and "the tension or antagonism which exists in a society due to competing socio-economic interests and desires between people of different classes" (CTI). It was Jon Elster who stated that "under any particular regime of production, there are many people who would stand in the same relationship to one another; in the productive process . . . people either work, or own the means of production. Those people in the same position on one side of this divide were in the same class" (127).

The social structure of primitive Filipino society was based on a myth. It was a Visayan myth and till the arrival of the Spaniards, this social structure continued. According to the myth, the three primary classes resembled "the original offspring of a primordial couple who were running away from their father's wrath. Depending on where they hid in his house, they were accorded as special class status" (Nadeau 16). During the pre-Hispanic past, there was no such great divide in the social classes. The social unit was the barangay, which has its roots in the Malay term *balangay*, means boat. The barangays were generally small, with thirty to hundred houses with a population varied from hundred to five hundred.

The village chief is the administrative leader of the community. Though he exercised the executive, judicial and military power, he remained as farmer. He did not enjoy the power of a ruler, and his authority was curtailed by the traditional body of customs and practices. The next rank called freemen, helped the chief in the battle, assisted him in his voyages and helped him in farming. This group supported the chief in the welfare of the community and sometimes they helped chief personally. The third group was "dependent population", who were "debt peons rather than chattel slaves in the classical European sense" (Constantino 31). Once they pay the debts they are freemen. Constantino states that it was Spanish chroniclers who referred them as "slaves" reflecting the European experiences.

Later with the arrival and occupation of the Spaniards in 1565, and their Divide and Rule policy, the social structure was restructured with an exploitative class. In the sixteenth century, the Spanish colonizers divided the society into three main classes: *datus* (rulers), *timawas* (commoners) and *alipin: namamahay* and *gigilid* (slaves).

Henceforth there arose a great and visible class inequality among the classes. The class structure became more rigid. The Spaniards occupied the first rank in the class hierarchy. When the Americans defeated the Spaniards and occupied the archipelago they continued “to expand upon the traditional authority structure by working through wealthy landed elites to consolidate their rule” (Nadeau 49). In this manner, by following the Spanish strategy they “perpetuated and solidified” the discriminatory class system. Though the Japanese have attacked the landlords and took over their lands and property, they were not really interested in reforming the Philippine society. The rich-poor divide surreptitiously existed and the exploitation continued even after the withdrawal of the Japanese from the land. The narrator of the novel clearly mentions this: “for what the Japanese did was not to destroy the landlords; they were not interested in social change, in restructuring of classes; they were only in the produce of the land, they got rice, and whatever bounties the land gave and in the process levelled everyone. But with the Japanese gone, the old arrangements were quickly resumed. . . .”(Jose 99-100)

*Tree* is set during the end of American reign; Second World War; and the Japanese occupation. It was also an epoch when tenants and farmers who started opposing the unfair landlord practices, took back lands and joined in guerilla groups against the Japanese invasion. *Hukbong Bayan laban sa Hapon* or *Hukbalahap*, (People's Army Against the Japanese) was one of the largest resistance movements during this period. A close reading of the narrative helps to unfold the reflections of these social conditions that engendered the novel, in multiple ways.

Class conflict can take place in many different forms. It can be in the form of “direct violence”, such as wars fought for resources and cheap labor or of “indirect violence” form like deaths from poverty, starvation, illness or unsafe working conditions. It can also take place in the form of coercion, such as threat of losing a job or pulling an important investment or ideology, (either intentionally or unintentionally). In addition to this, political forms of class conflicts exist; legally or illegally lobbying or bribing government leaders for passage of partisan desirable legislation including labor laws, tax codes, consumer laws, acts of congress or other sanction, injunction or tariff (CTI). A close reading of the novel illustrates the pre-colonial and colonial class structure prevailed in the Philippines and also presents the above mentioned forms of class conflict through lives of the characters. The following part of the present paper discusses this forms of class conflict by drawing parallels with the novel.

A piece of literature becomes influential, when an author succeeds in making characterization along with plot construction memorable. As literature mirrors society and the individuals constitute a society, an author should always present powerful characters in his/her work. It is through its characters that the novel, *Tree* becomes a chronicle of the times. The narrator of the novel is the son of a land overseer, who works for the feudal lord Don Vicente– “the wealthiest landlord in our country and for whom Father worked” (3). In the opening lines, the narrator mentions that it is a journey to the past and in his journey the readers get familiarized with many characters who belong to different classes. When the narrator introduces his family, he clearly connects the class structure of that society he belonged to, when he was a child. He says, “relatives, friends, tenants and all those fettered beings who had to serve Father as he, too, had to serve someone bigger than himself”(1-2).

The narrator's journey to the past introduces different characters who belong to different classes in the prevailing feudal hierarchy. For example, Don Vicente is the landlord for whom narrator's father is working for, and there are many tenants who work under his father. The novel is replete with the trails, miseries and sufferings of peasant lives, as a result of power relations exist in the society.

Sepa, Old David, Angel and Martina are representatives of *gigilid* class, but their modes of resistance against the tyranny are different. They live under the same roof where their master and his family live. Among them Sepa has got a good status because she "had served the family all her life, and she spoke to Father and me (narrator) with an intimacy none of the other help ventured to imitate" (9). She is the only character who remains till the death of narrator's father. Her realization at the end is also notable and she says, "I'm just an old, worthless woman imprisoned in the kitchen" (128). Though she realizes her plight, she keeps silent and her resistance is passive here.

Old David who has served the family for long years is treated more as a slave than a servant. The narrator loves him and it is he who narrates stories for him about hunting, deltas, etc. Though he serves the family sincerely he becomes a victim of feudalism. When Cousin Andring humiliates him and asks him to tell about his life, he compares his life with life of an insect—small and can be easily crushed with fingers. He recollects a time when there was no divide between the rich and the poor. Their grandfather used to give parties and his servants shared the same table which he used to eat and drink. This clearly questions the western chroniclers' creation of altered Philippine historiography and shows that there was a time when people lived like brothers, without exploiting one another. Like all other peasants in the land Old David loves his land because he was born there and wishes to die there. Even if he realizes class struggle and compares the past and the existing class structure like Sepa his mode of resistance becomes passive. He is being treated more like a commodity in the hands of his master. Without his permission he is handed over to Cousin Andring and Tio Antonia like a property.

Angel is one of the most unfortunate characters in the novel, who loses his parents because of the harsh life in Rosales. He is the son of a tenant couple who work for the narrator's father. Angel serves the narrator's family for ten years and is treated as a *gigilid* because his father's name is there in the ledger of narrator's father. The poverty compels his parents to sell their house and carabao and they flee to Mindanao for a better life. But the new place does not give them anything more than what Rosales has given them. Angel's mother writes him: "we will always fall prey, chick to the hawk. They said this land is ours and we can own all we plant, but here, there is hunger, too, as elsewhere in the world. We fear not only God's wrath, but also the field rats that devour our grain, the animals that trample our fields. We fear men because they have made the world too small for us" (108). After getting to know about the death of the parents, Angel plans to leave the place and decides to join with the soldiers. When the narrator talks about the predicament and the death that awaits him there, Angel replies by saying that he can die decently. Staying in that house as a slave and death are same for him. He says:

"It doesn't make a difference. . . . But what can I do? Will I stay here forever like David, tending the garden, feeding horses? I would have joined the Huks if

they came and asked me. I am sure that with them I'd be in a place other than here. Can't you see? I have to go. Where I am going I'll have my own life. . . . but don't think I'm running away from my father's debt. My salary, most of it, will go to Apo. Until we are free." (108)

Martina is another remarkable character in the novel, who has been serving the family since she was fifteen. She knows to write her name and had had some schooling. Her father worked in the rice mill of narrator's father and in an accident his feet got caught in gears. He survived, but was "maimed for life". The narrator's father gives him an annual pension of twenty cavans of palay, not out of sympathy but as a result of court order. Unlike other maids, in narrator's words, she is self-confident than arrogant and it does not mean that she is not paying respect to her master. From the very beginning she is "untrammelled by convention and uncaring toward those who thought she was without the refinements that any growing girl- barrio born or from the heart of town-should have" (45). Some of her statements- "the thieves in this town are not us" (47); "we may be little. . . but you must understand, we are not beggars"(51), show her self-respect and the class conflict which she undergoes. Like Angel, when her father dies, without attending his funeral she disappears from Rosales. Martina's life is another portrayal of miserable peasant lives and they become victims of indirect violence in the class conflict.

Another group of characters: Ludovico, Teresita and Martina's father, are from *namamahay* class and becomes victims different forms of class conflict. Ludovico, the son of a tenant couple, is another childhood friend of the narrator. It is he, among the farmer boys, who dared to show his true feelings to the narrator. He is "dark like most of the other barrio boys who had known non education except the practical kind that one absorbed after knowing hunger quite early in the villages and endless drudgery that went with being a tenant" (35). He goes to the narrator's house on Sundays with his mother Feliza, who is thin and pale because of poverty. The harsh life, hunger and disease deteriorate the family and take away the life of Ludovico.

Teresita is the girl whom the narrator falls in love for the first time, when he was fifteen. She is a "stubborn girl with many fixed ideas" (118). Like Martina, though she leads a penurious life, she takes pride in the way she is. It is a purposeful act of narrator's father that made her father to vacate the delta in Carmay, where he farmed a lot, when he gets to know his son's love for his tenant's daughter. Teresita knows well that, "oil and water could not mix" (8) and stays away from the narrator. Though she is good in her studies she could not continue it because of the cruel deed of her father's master. The family is compelled to migrate to the hills of Balungao. Here the class conflict takes place in the form of coercion.

The most rebellious character, Tio Baldo ends his life as a victim of class struggle. Though the narrator calls him Tio (uncle), he is not his real uncle, they have no relation at all. He is the son of an employee of narrator's father, who has served in the house doing some odd jobs. On the insistence of the narrator's father who also provided the money, he has gone through grade school and high school. Narrator's father wants Tio Baldo to work for him and Don Vicente, however he worked not only for narrator's father, but also for the tenants. He understands the pathetic plight of the tenants and stands with them. The tenants had all their hope in Tio Baldo and they have given a year's saving to Tio Baldo. When his master got to know about this, he threatens and scolds him, but Tio Baldo does not change his decision. He wants to give the

tenants' their lands back and he says: "Don Vicente can still live in luxury even without those lands, Manong. It's common knowledge he grabbed these lands because the farmers didn't know anything about cadastral surveys and Torrens titles" (64). Through narrator's father Don Vicente tries to bribe Tio Baldo for five thousand pesos, but he rejects. Though he has all the documents and maps regarding the lands, he fails in his attempt to give back the lands to the tenants. His statement – "we cannot fight money with money, nor force with force because we haven't enough of these. . . . since when could justice be bought, and men have become strangers to honor? And we who have been marked for this kind of life—shall we be slaves forever?" (69), shows the inequality and exploitation that the tenants have gone through at this particular period. This act of bribing the government by the powerful ones is a good example for the political form of class conflict discussed previously in the paper. At the end of his struggle for his class of people, in grief he hangs himself in the "lofty branches of the balete tree" (70). The image of balete tree runs throughout the progress of the novel.

Though the tenants who worked for narrator's father seemed to be unaffected with the Huk guerillas fighting for their lands (a form of direct violence), the narrator knows that the "surface calm was deceptive". He compares their wrath to the 'yellow poisonous yam':

. . . ; and though there were mere tendrils above the earth, crawling and withered, underneath was this root, massive and deformed, with appendages of the most grotesque shape, burrowed deep. To bring out the whole world require careful prodding and digging, so that all of the root would be lanced from its mooring, for any remaining shred could well be nurtured again by the rich and loving earth, not just into life, but into something bigger than the original root wherefrom it had sprang. (99)

The tenants plan a protest against the narrator's father. This is another example for direct violence, a form of class struggle discussed in the initial part of the paper. They question him; ask their rights over the land they farm; and raise their voice against the exploitation by the feudal landlords, but again they get oppressed and silenced by their landlord. The narrator says it is their hunger and belongingness towards the land that unite them together:

Hunger precipitated despair. But more than despair was the nagging belief that the land they had patiently and lovingly groomed never really belonged to them but to Father or Don Vicente. This rankled in their hearts- . . . . They knew that in the unrecorded past their forbears cleared the land were cheated when influential men made the Torrens titles. This belief alone united them and gave them strength. (102)

Finally the narrator calls all of them including his father as "victims of their own circumstances" (133). Nothing is permanent and everything undergoes change, the narrator knows this truth very well. But sometimes when he passes Rosales, he can witness no change in Rosales— only individuals change, but plights of the people are the same. Tenants attack narrator's father and kill him, hoping that they will get their lands back. But their deed goes in vain, though they killed their master, their fate does not change. Narrator says, years after that he cannot see a change in the class conflict.



The title of the novel also becomes important. The balete tree is a cultural symbol of the land. It stands as a shade for countless farmers; a giant tree endowed with talisman; a guardian over the land and lives of the villages; and as a witness to the happenings in the land. Moreover, the tree stands as a symbol of power. The novel ends with the description of the tree:

Who then lives? Who then triumphs when all others have succumbed? The balete tree—it is there always, tall and leafy and majestic. In the beginning, it sprang from the earth as vines coiled around a sapling. The vines strangled the young tree they had embraced. The multiplied, fattened and grew, became the sturdy trunk, the branches spread out to catch the sun. And beneath this tree, nothing grows! (135)

This is a powerful comparison between the powerful and the powerless; between the ruling class and the subject class. Balete tree stands as a symbol of the ruling class, which stifles and suppresses the saplings grow around it, which represents the subject class and does not allow anything to grow under it. Once the tree is allowed to spring up and to dominate, it will destroy others. It can symbolize Don Vicente or narrator's father who physically, economically and socially choke up the lives of the tenants. They are like balete tree— who have grabbed the lands from the tenants, took all benefits by exploiting them and giving miseries and death to their lives. The tree symbolically represents the power relationship between the father and the narrator like the castle in Franz Kafka's *The Castle*. The castle represents power and authority, and K. becomes powerless. Though he resists several times, the power exercised by the castle triumphs. Like that the narrator becomes powerless before his powerful father.

Philippine Literature in English has developed in the twentieth century and most of the genres, especially fiction try to revisit and rewrite the Philippine history. It can be observed as a conscious act from the side of Filipino writers to recuperate their history through the medium of literature. Through this particular novel, Jose presents the pre-colonial as well as colonial class structure in the Philippines, thereby he critiques the colonial chroniclers for erasing their class structure from the Philippine historiography they have created.

In *Tree*, Don Vicente, narrator's father and some of his relatives are the ruling class who are contrasted with the subject class which comprises of tenants and servants who serve them. The former class enjoys the ownership of the land and the forces of production and, the latter class makes the land productive, but is being exploited. These owners or landlords want to safeguard and preserve their property, because this economically dominant class want to be socially and politically dominant. This owning class aspires to be ruling class and begin to exercise authority over the subject class. The proclamation of narrator's father— "Don Vicente's word is law and I am that law" (11), evidently portrays this notion of dominance of ruling class. Their power relations of domination and subordination within the hierarchical chain of command create class struggle and hence there is a conflict over power and freedom. *Tree* is a powerful representation of this class struggle, brimming with a lot of unfortunate characters; and poignant and powerful symbols.

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**BIO-NOTE**

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Lucy Marium Samuel is a research scholar in the Department of English, Pondicherry Central University, India. She completed her post-graduation in M.A. English and Comparative literature in the same university. She did her MPhil in English Language and Literature in Amrita- A Deemed to-be University. She has presented papers in national as well as international seminars and also has published articles in research journals. Her research area is Philippine Literature in English.

E-mail: [lucymariumsamuel@gmail.com](mailto:lucymariumsamuel@gmail.com)

