

Article

## A Comparative Study on the Theme of Human Existence in the Novels of Albert Camus and F. Sionil Jose

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### Preliminary Remarks

Albert Camus (1913-1960), novelist, essayist, dramatist, and recipient of the 1957 Nobel Prize for Literature, is esteemed as one of the finest philosophical writers of modern France. The French existentialist philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote about him as “the latest example of that long line of *moralistes* whose works constitute perhaps the most original element in French letters.”<sup>1</sup> Camus’ literary legacy includes three novels, namely *L’Etranger* (*The Stranger*) of 1942, *La Peste* (*The Plague*) of 1947, and *La Chute* (*The Fall*) of 1957, and a fourth unfinished one that was posthumously published as *The First Man* in 1995. Camus’ works both intensively and extensively explored the theme that was prevalent in the intellectual climate of the post-World War II Europe, the absurdity of human existence together with the notions of alienation and disillusionment, and speculated beyond the crushing pessimism a glimmering faith on human dignity and brotherhood. These concerns, no matter how well ingrained they may be in the European history of ideas, would prove to be too cognitively remote for a contemporary Filipino reader. Thus, there is a need to mediate Camus’ literary discourses with a more familiar Filipino text.

If ever there are some few Filipino novelists in English who can possibly parallel the breadth and depth of Camus’ intellectual brooding, one of them would certainly be Francisco Sionil Jose. Eleven years younger than Camus and still very much productive, Jose has authored more than ten novels that are translated into over twenty languages. Nick Joaquin, his fellow National Artist, refers to him as “Asia’s white hope for the Nobel,” as well as “the most widely read Filipino author.”

This paper would pursue the question: what are the similarities and differences between Camus and Jose’s novels with regard to the theme of human existence? By comparing the novels of Camus and Jose, this paper aims to grasp the temporally and culturally distant speculations of the former on human existence through the more familiar texts of the latter. But since a

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, “Tribute to Albert Camus,” in *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays*, trans. by Germaine Bree (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 173.

comparative study is always a dialogical process, this paper is likewise expected to foreground the strands of existentialism that may have remained covert beneath Jose's fabric of social criticism through Camus' overtly existential texts.

To address the question, this paper surveys Camus' three complete novels using their most analogous counterparts from Jose's ten novels as intertexts. It should be stated at this point that the selections made from Jose's collection are motivated by a purely rhetorical strategy and that though it borders on arbitrariness and reductionism have to be made for the sake of methodology. Thus, Camus' *The Stranger*, that dwells on the theme of an impending death, was read side by side with Jose's *Sin*; Camus' *The Plague*, that portrays pestilence as an allegory of war, was read side by side with Jose's *Poon*; and finally, Camus' *The Fall*, that reflects on success and guilt, was read side by side with Jose's *Ben Singkol*. To further understand the philosophical theme of Camus' novels, his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* was likewise used as a general intertext.

Before moving into the actual textual productions of both authors, the interpretive framework of this paper needs some explications. This paper's strategy of comparative reading banks on the hermeneutic theory of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Hermeneutics can be understood as a theory, methodology and praxis of interpretation that is geared towards the recapturing of meaning of a text, or a text-analogue, that is temporally or culturally distant, or obscured by ideology and false consciousness. In our specific case, the texts of Camus are deemed to be both temporally and culturally distant from the contemporary Filipino reader, thus necessitating a hermeneutic approach for them to be systematically understood. Heidegger's hermeneutic theory is a reaction against Aristotelian realism and Cartesian philosophy of the subject that both find their advocate in Edmund Husserl's (1855-1938) phenomenology. Aristotelian realism and Cartesian philosophy of the subject both assert that the human mind is capable of grasping a faithful cognitive image of whatever aspect of reality the human mind studies. Husserlian phenomenology, though skeptical about the rigors of scientific method, is still faithful that despite the human cognitive frailty, the human mind remains fully self-conscious and capable of attaining reliable knowledge through a more systematic approach. Husserl theorized that to interpret a text, one has to methodically isolate it from all extraneous things including the interpreter's biases and allow the text to communicate its meaning to the interpreter. He proposed, then, the *Einklamierung*, the methodic bracketing of all subjectivities. Heidegger, though a student and follower of Husserl, questioned the possibility of the interpreter to actually prevent biases and presuppositions to color understanding and interpretation. Heidegger conceived of a new idea of a subject whose mind and being are totally immersed in the subject's life-world, such that understanding and interpretation would always proceed from the perspective of the subject's life-world. The Heideggerian subject is a subject that is formed by the biases and presuppositions of his/her life-world making him/her incapable of attaining

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full self-consciousness and objective knowledge. Thus, instead of hypocritically scrapping these biases and presuppositions, Heideggerian hermeneutics argued for a better use of these cognitive baggages by using them as premises in conversing with texts and objects. For Heidegger, these baggages, whether social, political, historical and cultural, are part of the very process of understanding.

Camus' novels come to us from a relatively distant time and place. They are discourses that emerged and existed in a milieu that is overdetermined by the nihilism that was unveiled and explored by Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky, reinforced by the grim atrocities of the totalitarianism of Hitler, Mussolini and Franco, but counteracted by the existentialist broodings of thinkers such as Sartre. The contemporary Filipino reader's time and place are certainly too different from those of Camus. Instead of a futile attempt to abandon this contemporary Filipino milieu and pretend to inhabit the life-world of Camus, Heidegger's hermeneutic theory instructs the contemporary Filipino reader to stay put in his/her own life-world and dialogue with Camus and his life-world. Instead of abandoning our own life-world, the Heideggerian method proposes to employ this same life-world as our premise in understanding another life-world. Thus, there is no need of forgetting and downplaying the contemporary Filipino life-world, rather the reader ought to highlight and bring into consciousness the significant elements of this life-world. One effective way of doing these is to immerse ourselves with the life-world within and presupposed by Jose's Filipino novels. In the process of Jose's dialogue with Camus and his life-world, Heidegger's hermeneutic theory points to the possibility of our profounder understanding of both Camus' and Jose's discourses.

### ***The Stranger and Sin***

In his essay "An Explication of *The Stranger*," Sartre wrote:

Camus' *The Stranger* was barely off the press when it began to arouse the widest interest. People told each other that it was "the best book since the end of the war." Amidst the literary productions of its time, this novel was, itself, a stranger. It came to us from the other side of the Equator, from across the seas. In that bitter spring of the coal shortage, it spoke to us of the sun, not as of an exotic marvel, but with the weary familiarity of those who have had too much of it. It was not concerned with re-burying the old regime with its own hands, nor with filling us with a sense of our own unworthiness.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "An Explication of *The Stranger*," in *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 108.

If *The Stranger* was considered a stranger even by its own French audience at the time when it was published, certainly this work would appear even more stranger to the contemporary Filipino reader who may have too much of the romance, didacticism, and traditional narrative style that characterize the majority of Filipino novels. Written in what Rachel Bepaloff called “cryptic realism” and definitely inspired by Andre Gide’s (1869-1951) *recit*, *The Stranger* is a baffling as well as fragmentary account of a segment of the life of a small-time clerk from a small-time establishment in Algiers. Sartre, in the same essay, *de facto* summarized for us the life story of Meursault when he raised the question:

How do we to interpret this character who, the day after his mother’s death, “went swimming, started a liaison with a girl and went to see a comic film,” who killed an Arab “because of the sun,” who claimed, on the eve of his execution, that he “had been happy and still was,” and hoped there would be a lot of spectators at the scaffold “to welcome him with cries of hate.” “He’s a poor fool, and idiot,” some said; others, with greater insight, said, “He’s innocent.” The meaning of his innocence still remained to be understood.<sup>3</sup>

Through the life-narrative that is bewildering both to the reader and to the main character himself, Meursault found the key to his meaningless, goalless, Godless and indifferent existence after taking an insult from a well intentioned prison chaplain on the eve of his execution who paternalistically told him: “I am on your side. But you have no way of knowing it, because your heart is blind. I shall pray for you.”<sup>4</sup> The code that would give sense to this fragmentary narrative is Meursault’s rather late realization, that occurred with his inner revolt against the prison chaplain and society at large, that man does not need meaning, nor goal, nor God to fill up his empty life, to live is more than enough. Camus made Meursault say:

And I felt ready to live it all again too. As if that blind rage had washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself—so like a brother, really—I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again.<sup>5</sup>

Written more than five decades after the *The Stranger* and in what Bepaloff would call “naturalistic realism,” Jose’s *Sin* tells the story of another

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. by Matthew Ward (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 120.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-123.

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dying man, Carlos Corbello. Unlike the young, economically struggling and later on death convict Meursault, Corbello is an aging, filthy rich who is dying of the ailments that usually accompany those who have too much of life in their old age. Yet both Meursault and Corbello attempt to make sense out of their wretched existence. The *Sin* purports to be the memoirs of Corbello, and on its first page, Jose made the dying man say:

How do I being this litany? Is this the time to do it? In my present mood of isolation and decay, crippled as I am, should I even try to put things down? A form of expiation, perhaps, or atonement, the recitation of a thousand *mea culpas*? And if I do it, which I know I must, should I be a slave to the rigid chronology of time or to some human conceit that will blot out everything self-deprecating? I know I have lived a very interesting life, but will it be possible for me to relate this life interestingly?<sup>6</sup>

Then the novel proceeded to unveil the privileged and powerful life of Corbello: his silver lined childhood in the still plush suburb of Sta. Mesa which even the turbulence of World War II was not able to disrupt; his carefree adolescence; and his easy ascent to success through easy money and political connections. Side by side with this what would be an enviable existence, the novel portrayed with equal clarity the tender as well as the darker and the less savory life of Corbello: his youthful romance with a pretty house help, Severina, that resulted to the birth of Delfin; his eventual struggle to win the love of Delfin; his incestuous relationship with his sister, Corito, that resulted to the birth of Angela; his affliction with syphilis, as an aftermath of an early exposure to a Pasay brothel owned by his father; and his eventual paralysis after a bathroom accident during a rendezvous with a visiting Spanish beauty queen. Corbello struggled to make sense out of his Godless existence, which he knew would certainly end up conquered in the cold clutches of death, by banking all his hopes and fortune on his two illegitimate children, Delfin and Angela. But on his sick bed, even these hopes turned against him. Delfin and Angela decided to get married. After a short while, Angela accidentally discovered that Delfin and Corito, her mother, are having another incestuous sexual relationship, which precipitated the revelation that Delfin and Angela could not get married because they are brother and sister. The novel ended up with the poignant confrontation between father and daughter.

But you were always a father to me. Yet I find it so difficult now to call you Papa. Oh, Tito, thank you just the same for having been so good to me. . .” Then she stood up, smiled at me through her tears, and slowly

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<sup>6</sup> F. Sionil Jose, *Sin* (Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1994), 1.

walked to the door. “Angela,” I called in my raspy, croaking voice, “Angela! It was not my fault! It’s fate—fate, believe me, dearest! And those infernal witches. *Brujas!*” But I do not think she heard or cared.<sup>7</sup>

As already mentioned, the narrative style of *The Stranger* is too different from that of the *Sin*, or from any other Filipino novel. Bespaloff, in her essay “The World of a Man Condemned to Death,” stressed:

In the *Stranger*, Camus has already perfected his instrument: that realism which I shall call “cryptic,” to distinguish it from naturalistic realism. Moreover, he had at his disposal an already perfect form, Gide’s *recit*, which he could freely adapt to his needs, thus having an extraordinary economy of means. Gide had shown him what use could be made of the I to express the most intimate experience with the maximum of detachment.<sup>8</sup>

The use of cryptic realism, that paints the illusion of fragmentation and incoherence, is not just a matter of style but of strategy. With this Camus intensively explored the subjectivity of Meursault while living rest of reality and society untouched, because it is precisely the rest of reality and society that Camus questioned. Though Jose is equally critical of society, his sticking it out with naturalistic realism, could similarly be not just a matter of style, nor a matter of the misfortune that both cryptic realism and Gide’s *recit* remained unfamiliar to the majority of the Filipino readers, but a matter of strategy for interpellating a defective society. Jose’s naturalistic realism attests to his faith in reality and the hope that critique can rectify the ills of Philippine society. The narrative-stylistic difference between *The Stranger* and *Sin* points out to the thematic difference of Camus and Jose’s concerns. Whereas, Camus does not care anymore with the structural defects of his society, because he is more concerned with counteracting the pervasive nihilism revealed and explored by Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky; Jose is not concerned with the absurdity of human existence because he finds the structural deformation left by the wake of the colonial occupation more pressing than the too alien issue of nihilism.

The difference between Camus and Jose with regard to their treatment, or non treatment, of the social context calls for further comments. Though social realism emerged in France through the works of Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) and Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893), the traumas of fascism and World War II, together with the promise of existentialism, are probably what made Camus transcend this narrative style in favor of cryptic realism that abstracts the individual from his social context. Meanwhile, the

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>8</sup> Rachel Bespaloff, “The World of the Man Condemned to Death,” in *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 92.

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social realism of Jose actually belongs to a trend in Philippine literature that seeks to revive the standards of realism and radicalism set earlier by Jose Rizal's (1861-1896) *Noli me tangere* of 1887, and *El Filibusterismo* of 1891, amidst a pathetic literary condition that wallows in the modes of romance and didacticism of the pre-Hispanic and Hispanic colonial narratives. If Camus reacted against social realism, because of his existentialist and individualist persuasion, Jose reacted against the pathetic Philippine literary condition, most probably because of his nationalist and therefore collectivist persuasion.

Though both *The Stranger* and *Sin* portrayed the life of an individual, their treatment of time varied greatly. Whereas, Meursault's time appeared as a short, but concentrated segment, marked by the death of his mother and the eve of his execution, Corbello's time epically spanned from his childhood to his old age. On the *The Stranger's* treatment of time, Besseloff commented:

Having neither past nor future, he has only a present which is crumbling away and does not become a memory. Time, until the final revolt, is nothing for him but a succession of distinct moments, which no Cartesian God pieces together, which no vital impulse spans, which no remembrance transfigures.<sup>9</sup>

Camus' treatment of time is again less of stylistic matter than it is strategic. By purposely disregarding Meursault's past and future, Camus eliminates two important points of references that can easily endow meaning to what he intended to paint as meaningless existence. Its diametric opposite can be seen in Jose's epically spanning time that provided a reference point and direction to Corbello's memoirs. Corbello's life will always be meaningful because he is an heir to the Corbello fortune which in return will continue through his illegitimate children, Delfin and Angela. By concentrating time in such a short span, Camus was able to thoroughly explore the fragmentary existence of Meursault, which is an impossibility for Jose to perform on Corbello. *The Stranger* broods upon the fate of the individual in the face of absurdity, a feat and a theme that might prove too alien to Philippine literature. Maybe, we are simply in a milieu where the social problems are more immediate and pressing than the more abstruse and philosophically refined question of individuality, or maybe we have a literary tradition that remained isolated from the recent speculations of philosophy, or still maybe we have a philosophical tradition that remained too impotent to alter the course of our literary tradition.

Lastly, we compare how Camus and Jose proposed their answer to the riddle of the absurdity of human existence. Sartre explicated what Camus meant by absurdity:

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

Primary absurdity manifests a cleavage, the cleavage between man's aspirations to unity and the insurmountable dualism of mind and nature, between man's drive toward the eternal and the finite character of his existence, between the "concern" which constitutes his very essence and the vanity of his efforts. Chance, death, the irreducible pluralism of life and of truth, the unintelligibility of the real—all these are extremes of the absurd.<sup>10</sup>

Camus lived in a life-world where the Nietzschean gospel proclaiming the death of God is already too pervasive. In such a situation, how can man make sense out of his futile existence, his being condemned to labor and sure death, without any assurance of meaning or afterlife? In Camus' essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, human existence is likened to the plight of Sisyphus, whom the gods sentenced to ceaselessly roll a rock to a mountain top, after which the rock is destined to roll down the slope again. For Camus, the greatness of Sisyphus is manifested "at each moment when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods," to start his task over and over again. Having accepted his sentence with courage and condemnation, he becomes superior to his condemnation. In *The Stranger*, Camus answer to the riddle of absurdity came toward the end of the novel, when Meursault's realized that man does not need meaning, nor goal, nor God to fill up his empty life, for to live is more than enough. The traditionally Catholic life-world of Jose was never seriously shaken by the Nietzschean gospel that proclaims the death of God. Yet, in *Sin*, Jose experimented with the Godlessness of Corbello. But Godlessness does not automatically sums up to an absurdity in human existence. Corbello looked with meaning beyond his impending death because he thought his fortune and legacy will flow to his two illegitimate children, Delfin and Angela. Surprisingly, when everything turned against him at the time when Angela discovered that Delfin and her mother had a sexual liaison, and when Corbello found himself abandoned by his children and sister in his sick bed, everything remained meaningful still. Corbello believed that his tragic life was a consequence of his evil deeds. Jose made him say:

I was now convinced I was possessed by some malignant and inexorable spell cast no less by my dear Severina before she died. I was defenseless against that dark, unseen power that she wielded; surely, she must have hated me for having abandoned her.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Sartre, "An Explication of *The Stranger*," 109.

<sup>11</sup> Jose, *Sin*, 163-164.



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With the overarching Filipino metaphysics of *karma*, even the most crushing tragedy would still be coherent. Thus, for Corbello his life is never absurd. Even though Jose tried to banish God from the life of Corbello, the contemporary Filipino life-world that is presupposed by the novel is replete with the religious metaphysics of Catholicism and Pre-Hispanic Filipino beliefs. The absurd, that consumed the creative energy and passion of Camus, has great difficulties in finding a meaningful place even in the contemporary Filipino life-world.

### ***The Plague and Poon***

*The Plague*, published five years after *The Stranger*, is a novel about a pestilence that befell on Oran, a port town on the Algerian coast, told from the perspective of a physician, Dr. Bernard Rieux. The story unfolded from the day rats scurried out of their hiding places into the open to bleed and die. Soon the scourge started to afflict the townsfolk of Oran, and people began to die by scores daily. Hesitant to call the catastrophe by its proper name, the town officials tried to bide their time and took a wait-and-see stance, until the mounting death count finally forced them to admit that they are ravaged by bubonic plague. To arrest the spread of the plague, the people of Oran collectively devised some measures, such as the forcible confinement of the afflicted in public isolation wards, the quarantine of the family members of the afflicted, the lime-lining of graves and later on the cremation of the dead, the formation of sanitary volunteers, and the most controversial sealing of the town gates. Though the townsfolk communally struggled against the plague, the death toll remained unrelenting. Some months after, as mysteriously as the rats started to die, the afflicted persons started to recover, and death rate began to subside. Though the novel overtly talks about a pestilence, it is generally believed to be an allegory of something else. Gaetan Picon, in his essay "Notes on the Plague," for instance stated:

How can one fail to recognize this city, taken by surprise by the abrupt apparition of tragedy, a city soon its own prisoner, no longer able to communicate with the free world except through memory, imagination and the vaguest of messages; a city shut in upon a universe of exile and separation, of suffering and brotherhood; a people of whom it is said that "a number of them piled into the maw of a crematory, evaporated into oily fumes, while the rest, chained down by fear and impotence awaited their turn." But if this city fallen prey to the plague evokes wartime France under the German

occupation, it is also any human city struck by any of the thousand plagues that destiny reserves for us.<sup>12</sup>

Written almost four decades after *The Plague*, Jose's *Poon* is the last to be created and at the same time the logical beginning of his Rosales saga, the collection recognized by the poet-critic Ricaredo Demetillo as "the first great Filipino novels written in English . . . the most impressive legacy of any writer to Philippine culture."<sup>13</sup> Strikingly resonant to *The Plague*, Jose's *Poon* tackled the themes of both pestilence and war as it portrayed the fate of the Salvador family from Cabugaw, Ilokos Sur, to Rosales, Pangasinan. Eustaquio Salvador and his whole family were forced to flee from Cabugaw because his father, Ba-ac, in a fit of rage murdered the Spanish parish priest who earlier sentenced him to be hanged by one hand until his limb rotted away and who machinated to evict them from the land that they are tilling. On their way to Rosales, Ba-ac was killed by a python and his wife drowned in a swollen river, leaving Eustaquio the leader of the family. In Rosales, Eustaquio became a teacher, healer and leader. Later, when the struggle against the American colonizers broke out, Apolinario Mabini sought refuge in Rosales and met Eustaquio, who became both his healer and secretary. When the day came that there was an important classified dispatch intended for President Emilio Aquinaldo, who was fleeing towards Ilokos, Eustaquio was tasked with carrying out this important duty. On horseback, he trekked back to his native Ilokandia and ended up joining the ranks of the heroes of Tirad Pass.

*The Plague's* narrative style seems to be a little bit different. Here *The Stranger's* cryptic realism mellowed down into a more naturalistic realism. This could be due to the reason that Camus shifted his speculations about the existential struggle against the absurd. Instead of the individual making sense out of his personal existence, *The Plague* talks about human collectivity struggling against the absurd. Hence, some aspects of the real and the social have to be included in the narrative. Prior to the outbreak the townsfolk of Oran existed in and for each of their own peculiar cares and concerns. It was the plague that consolidated the various *egos* into a collective *we*. Even the visiting journalist, Rambert, who all the while tried to find a way to sneak out of the city and be reunited with his girl friend in Paris, when an opportunity finally came for him to go out from the ravaged city, changed his mind. Camus made him say:

Until now I always felt a stranger in this town, and that I'd no concern with you people. But now that I've seen

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<sup>12</sup> Gaetan Picon, "Notes on *The Plague*," in *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 146-147.

<sup>13</sup> Ricaredo Demetillo, "Francisco Sionil Jose," in *Art Makosinski* <<http://www.me.uvic.ca/~art/afsj.html>>, 15 May 2008.

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what I have seen, I know that I belong here whether I want it or not. This business is everybody's business.<sup>14</sup>

Though *The Plague* employs a more naturalistic narrative style, Camus consistently refrained from engaging in explicit social criticism. Hence, the reality and society that is woven into the narrative's fabric are limited to those pertaining to the human collectivity that he is interested with. *Poon*, written a decade earlier than *Sin* has the same narrative style that has noticeably become Jose's personal style. Because it is written from the perspective of the poor and the down-trodden, unlike *Sin* which is written from the perspective of the rich and the powerful, its social criticism is more profuse and sustained.

Jose's *Poon* tackled in passing the theme of pestilence. When the family of Eustaquio Salvador were finally able to settle in a portion of Rosales, Pangasinan, which they called Cabugawan after their native Cabugaw, an epidemic broke out. Jose wrote:

The affliction that had almost taken the life of An-no was not confined to Cabugawan. Soon enough, there spread stories of how people were dying in the south, not by the dozens but by the hundreds. Manila, where there were many *medico titulado*, was not spared by the plague; the whole city was engulfed for days by smoke and fires that were stoked constantly so that the plague would be fumigated away. As the hot season dried up the rivers into stagnant pools, as the heat festered and *Apo Imit* bore down upon the land like an avenging ball of fire, the plague took more victims in Rosales and in the villages that ringed it.<sup>15</sup>

While Camus' plague was counteracted by the collective and rational effort of the people of Oran, through dialoguing with their city government and organizing citizen initiatives, Jose's plague was counteracted by the individual and mystical work of Eustaquio. This difference foregrounds the emphasis of Camus on universal brotherhood and solidarity, as well as his modernist faith on rational knowledge and management. Unfortunately, the individual mysticism of Eustaquio does not foreground Jose's belief on the strength of the Filipino individual, but merely incidentally reveals the Filipinos' faith on a charismatic leader that could lead them away from trouble, as well as betray the Filipinos' deficiency in rational knowledge and management.

Aside from brotherhood and solidarity, Camus presents in *The Plague* a more articulated thought in counteracting the absurd. In this novel, he systematically disabled the deistic metaphysics forwarded by the learned and

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<sup>14</sup> Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. by Stuart Gilbert (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1970), 170.

<sup>15</sup> F. Sionil Jose, *Poon* (Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1984), 142.

respected Father Paneloux, who during the earlier stages of the outbreak thundered in his pulpit:

If today the plague is in your midst, that is because the hour has struck for taking thought. The just man need have no fear, but the evil-doer has good cause to tremble. For plague is the flail of God and the world His threshing-floor, and implacably He will thresh out His harvest until the wheat is separated from the chaff.<sup>16</sup>

But Father Paneloux's attempt to render the plague meaningful was too simplistic, for it implied that only the evil doers will perish in it while the innocent will be spared. In the later stage of the outbreak, Father Paneloux saw innocent children ravaged by the plague, and later on, he himself perished in the same pestilence. Camus rejected the idea that human affliction resembles a divine flail that separates the wheat from the chaff, and favored the idea that evil in itself has its own meaning just as life in itself is a value. He made Dr. Rieux argue with Tarrou:

“But since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him, and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes towards the heavens where He sits in silence?” Tarrou nodded. “Yes. But your victories will never be lasting; that's all.” Rieux's face darkened. “Yes, I know that. But it's no reason for giving up the struggle.”<sup>17</sup>

Like Sisyphus, Rieux is determined to continue the struggle against death, and believed that the act of struggling alone makes man greater than death. Meanwhile, *Poon* presents a richer speculation against the absurd compared to *Sin*. Eustaquio having accomplished his mission by meeting General Gregorio del Pilar decided to hang on with the Filipino troops in Tirad Pass, instead of going home to Cabugawan where his wife and children are waiting for his return. In doing so, he was conscious of the superiority of the American arms and troops and he knew that the Filipino troops are facing their certain deaths. It so happened, after the battle of Tirad Pass, an American soldier was able to salvage Eustaquio's diary, in which the teacher, healer and leader of Cabugawan wrote:

Conquest by force is not sanctioned by God. The Americans have no right to be here. We will defeat them in the end because we believe this land they usurp is ours;

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<sup>16</sup> Camus, *The Plague*, 80-81.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-108.

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God created it for us. The whole history of mankind has shown how faith endures while steel rusts.<sup>18</sup>

Again, the religious metaphysics that make Eustaquio's decision to stick it out with the Filipino soldiers meaningful is a proof that the Nietzschean gospel proclaiming the death of God has hardly a place in the Filipino life-world. Another factor that cancels out the absurdity of Eustaquio's and the rest of the Filipino soldiers courage of facing the superior American forces is the emergent Filipino nationalism. Camus, who had experienced the dialectical inversion of nationalism in the atrocities of World War II, cannot be blamed why he would opt for the vague notions of brotherhood and solidarity, instead of the more vibrant and clear-cut nationalism.

### ***The Fall and Ben Singkol***

*The Fall*, published fifteen years after *The Stranger* and ten years after *The Plague*, is a novel about a once successful Parisian lawyer, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, sitting in an Amsterdam bar, indulging in a calculated confession to an unknown listener. Outwardly, Clamence is a picture of a gentleman of comfort, virtue and modesty, who struggles to overcome the futility of civilized life. Camus made him state:

Haven't you noticed that our society is organized for this kind of liquidation? You have heard, of course, of those tiny fish in the rivers of Brazil that attack the unwary swimmer by thousands and with swift little nibbles clean him up in a few minutes, leaving only an immaculate skeleton? Well, that's what their organization is. "Do you want a good clean life? Like everybody else?" You say yes, of course. How can you say no? "O.K. You'll be cleaned up. Here's a job, a family, and organized leisure activities." And the little teeth attack the flesh, right down to the bone. But I am unjust. I shouldn't say their organization. It is ours, after all: it's a question of which will clean up the other.<sup>19</sup>

But Clamence was likewise conscious that to go on with the struggle for meaning could make himself a victim and perpetrator of duplicity and inauthenticity that are afflicting humanity. Thus, he called himself a "doubled faced" and "charming Janus," being aware that his own psyche belies his theatrical facade. His struggle finally crumbled when a devastating experience occurred to him.

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<sup>18</sup> Jose, *Poon*, 231.

<sup>19</sup> Albert Camus, *The Fall*, trans. by Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 7-8.

On the bridge I passed behind a figure leaning over the railing and seeming to stare at the river. On a closer view, I made out a slim young woman dressed in black. The back of her neck, cool and damp between her dark hair and coat collar, stirred me. But I went on after a moment's hesitation. At the end of the bridge I followed the quays toward Saint-Michel, where I lived. I had already gone some fifty yards when I heard a sound—which, despite the distance, seemed dreadfully loud in the midnight silence—of a body striking the water. I stopped short, but without turning around. Almost at once I heard a cry, repeated several times, which going downstream; then it suddenly ceased.<sup>20</sup>

The trauma of witnessing a suicide and the subsequent guilt for realizing that he had remained a bystander, changed forever the superficial life of Clamence into what he called a “judge-penitent” and a self-exile to Amsterdam.

Written more than four decades after *The Fall*, Jose's *Ben Singkol* deals with the similar theme of guilt. Benjamin Singkol, a poor boy from Selasor, a small town in Ilokandia, with deformed arms that he inherited from his father, was able to finish high school and attended college in Manila through hard menial work and diligence. While working as a clerk in a medical/herbal laboratory, Singkol had an affair with his childhood sweetheart, Josefina, the rich daughter of his former employer. During the Japanese occupation, Singkol was drafted into the Philippine-American army. In a bloody encounter, he nursed and cared for a wounded comrade, Alex Reyes, who turned out to be a scion of rich business family in Manila. Back in Manila, Singkol was captured and tortured in Fort Santiago by the dreaded *Kempetai*. Vaguely conscious of what he may have revealed to the Japanese, he feared that he might have divulged the identity of Josefina and her radical theatrical group. Physically and mentally battered, and about to be executed, Singkol luckily escaped while being transported to another prison. After the war, he pursued his journalism course, wrote a novel and a number of searing articles, and pursue a degree in law. The trail of his writings led Alex Reyes to his office and out of the old wartime gratitude made him an executive of Reyes business establishments. Later on, Reyes convinced him to marry his sister, Isabel. Singkol, reluctant because of his vow to the memory of Josefina, finally agreed to marry Isabel, who prior to her death gave him a daughter whom they named after his dead childhood sweetheart. Josefina Singkol grew up and became involved in student activism that raged at the University of the Philippines. She was captured by the military and one day Singkol got a call from the dictator's top military advisers. Her daughter was okay and will be

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<sup>20</sup> Camus, *The Fall*, 69-70.

released as soon as Singkol would write a documentary favoring the exploits of the dictator.

In *The Fall*, Camus reverted back to the narrative style of cryptic realism that spun an even more fragmented and incoherent life account than that of *The Stranger*. In this novel, again Camus intensely explored the disillusioned subjectivity of his hero as he abstracted him from his social context. Jose, in *Ben Singkol*, remained in his now familiar naturalistic realism as he commented on the plight of the poor, the profligacy of the rich and the complicity of many Filipinos with the colonial domination as well as with the atrocities of the Marcos regime. As this novel strikes a more contemporary chord, among the three novels of Jose included in the scope of this study, this one is the fiercest and fieriest in as far as the author's social criticism goes. At this point, we can already establish some patterns: for Camus the theme on human existence is focused on the individual person, while for Jose the theme cannot be abstracted from the social milieu of the Filipino. Hence, the strategic difference in their narrative style.

In the confessions of Clamence, Camus' idea of the modern man emerges rather clearly. Clamence is a highly individuated and highly motivated person who could look at the people and the world as possible means to attain whatever goal he desires. Camus made him declare: "To tell the truth, just from being so fully and simply a man, I looked upon myself as something of a superman."<sup>21</sup> Clamence outward care for humanity is nothing but a mere internal compulsion to theatrically proclaim his superiority to others. But devoid of any metaphysical grounding and strong linkages with humanity, Clamence's movement to success and compulsion to magnanimity appeared to himself as pointless and futile. Jose's Singkol, though hardworking and highly motivated, had to depend so much on luck, such as his accidental acquaintance with Reyes, for him to ascend to the summit of success. Unlike Clamence's individualism, Singkol is burdened with so much commitments: his ties to Selazor, his gratitude to his aunt and former employers, his vow to the memory of the dead Josefina, and his commitment to the nation. By looking at each of Jose's heroes, we get the strong feeling that the contemporary Filipino could still be trekking in the twilight of pre-modernity.

The comparison between the pivotal guilt of Clamence and Singkol would reveal so much of Camus and Jose's conceptions of human existence. Clamence was hounded by the memory of that lady who jumped from a bridge into the icy waters. Camus' philosophical commentators associate him with the assertion that there is a single philosophical problem that matters, and that is of suicide. In the face of overwhelming absurdity, when man seems to be powerless, suicide could appear to be his ultimate option. But Camus looked at suicide as man's surrender to the absurd. He believed that human dignity and greatness cannot be manifested in such a surrender, just as it cannot be manifested in escapism. *The Fall* dramatizes this commitment to life. Clamence, whose mere fault was his inability to prevent the lady from jumping

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

off the bridge, was hounded by crushing guilt feelings that changed his whole life and made him into both an exile without a political cause and a wandering hermit without a god. Jose did not treat suicide in *Ben Singkol*. Singkol's guilt springs from his fear that he betrayed the identity of Josefina to his Japanese torturers. Singkol was similarly hounded by the thought that he is the cause of Josefina's death. Jose wrote of a poignant conversation between Singkol and his daughter.

I looked into her eyes, very brown, large, inquiring. "I suppose each generation faces some kind of test. Whether that generation is strong or not, not the entire generation itself, but its members, individuals like you. Like me. My grandfather's generation," I said thinking of Apo Iro, "it was the Spaniards who tested them, and the Americans, too, whom they fought courageously." I was thinking of the Battle of Tirad Pass. "And my generation, it was the Japanese who tested us." She leaned back and looked very thoughtful. "and perhaps mine—it is being tested now by Marcos."<sup>22</sup>

But Singkol was wrong, he also will be tested by Marcos, but the hounding memory of the dead Josefina had already changed him into a stronger person. When he received that call from the dictator's top military adviser, informing him that his daughter is in their custody and may be released after Singkol writes a documentary that would favor the exploits of the dictator, he was determined to pass the test this time. If in the other novels of Jose, the offspring is a major counteractive against the absurdity of human existence, in *Ben Singkol* the offspring is pitted against other major counteractives, the nation and human righteousness. Singkol becomes a political Abraham who is torn between sacrificing his offspring or ignoring his sentiments for the nation and humanity.

### Concluding Remarks

After our forays into the novels of Camus and Jose, what then are their respective conceptualizations of human existence? For Camus, human existence is situated at the plateau of modernism, where man, driven by the modernist logic of accumulation of knowledge, power, and wealth finds himself saturated with things that isolate him from humanity and could not infuse his own existence with meaning. Camus' modern man is a lonely individual, without a past, nor future, nor meaningful love life, nor children. His modern man is taken to be a symbol of the universal modern man that is devoid of culture or race. In his plateau of modernism, Camus decided to

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<sup>22</sup> F. Sionil Jose, *Ben Singkol* (Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 2001), 184.



continue the modernist journey, where other intellectuals have either languished in nihilism or taken the leap into the postmodernist horizon.

Jose's idea of human existence, on the other hand, can challenge the universalization of Camus' modern man. Our comparative reading proves that Camus' existential brooding is as a temporally and culturally over-determined as Jose's. Jose's human existence does not stand on the same modernist plateau where Camus' modern man stands. Consequently, the over-saturation with knowledge, power, and wealth that nauseated Camus' modern man are no of significance to Jose. Jose's modern Filipino is somebody that cannot be abstracted from his life-world, which is the structurally defective Philippine society. Jose's modern Filipino are so distinct from the highly individuated and motivated modern man of Camus, prompting us to suspect such a contemporary Filipino could still be trekking in the twilight of pre-modernity.

Universalizing the existential thoughts of Camus could mean the underrating of Jose's social criticism, just as the absolutizing of Jose's radicalism could undermine the wisdom of Camus. Both intellectuals struggled to make sense of their temporally and culturally determined existence using the intellectual tools available for them. Camus, bothered by the nihilism that was revealed and explored by Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky, and disillusioned by the atrocities manifested by World War II, had existentialism and the current French literary tradition at hand; Jose, bothered by the monstrously and hideously defective social structures left by the colonial powers and unreflective Filipino politicians, had a milder version of social criticism at his disposal. Certainly by highlighting the similarities and differences between Camus and Jose's brooding on the theme of human existence, their thoughts come to us in a more lucid, understandable and appreciable form.

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