

STRUGGLES FOR SURVIVAL AND REAFFIRMATION OF HUMAN VALUES AS REFLECTED IN NVM GONZALEZ'S NOVEL, *A SEASON OF GRACE*

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Abstract— The experiences of the characters that the reader meets on the printed page influence his understanding of human nature and life. It is in this context that a study on NVM Gonzalez' *A Season of Grace* was conducted. The study analyzed the struggles for survival and the human values imbedded in the novel and related these to the 21st Century Filipinos' struggles and values. It was found out that the novel is an illustration of a person's continuous struggle in a hostile environment. It presents the general pattern of struggle by all people, not only the Filipinos, against the threatening cycles of natural calamities, social disorder, economic imbalance and political turmoil. Thus, the novel contributes to a deeper understanding of what it means to be human and what it means to be alive, whether such life is lived in pain and suffering.

Keywords— *Struggles for Survival, Natural Calamities, Social Disorder, Economic Imbalance, Political Turmoil, Pain and Suffering, Human Values*

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature serves as a powerful medium for unveiling the varied dimensions of human life, allowing readers to engage with the world around them, the people they encounter, and their own inner selves (Dela Rosa, 1976). The experiences of literary characters often deepen the reader's understanding of human nature and the complexities of existence. Through these encounters, readers become more conscious of the consequences of their own actions, prompting them to adopt behaviors and values that are deemed meaningful and admirable within society. In this sense, sustained engagement with literature refines one's discernment of what is valuable in life.

Among the various literary genres, the novel has been regarded as the most effective vehicle for representing both external and internal realities. Owing to its breadth and scope, the novel can faithfully capture human experience and probe into the intricacies of human nature (Dela Rosa, 1976). While the novelist may be responding to specific social realities, the themes articulated in the novel often transcend time and place, resonating with universal significance (Loria, 1976). As an artist, the novelist is thus concerned not only with social observation but also with presenting profound and enduring truths through artistic expression.

One such novelist is Nestor Vicente Madali (NVM) González, a distinguished Filipino writer in English known for his ability to penetrate the essence of human character and spirit. His novel *A Season of Grace* exemplifies this artistry by portraying the resilience of individuals confronted with difficult choices and adverse circumstances. Through the story, González depicts struggles for survival while simultaneously reaffirming human values that are both culturally specific and universally resonant (Serran, 2008).

This study therefore examines the struggles for survival and the reaffirmation of human values as represented in NVM González's *A Season of Grace*. It explores how the novel presents these struggles in ways that parallel the experiences of 21st-century Filipinos, while also analyzing how the values embedded in the narrative continue to find relevance in contemporary society. By doing so, the study not only highlights the timeless quality of González's work but also underscores the enduring significance of literature in reflecting and shaping the human condition.

II. METHODS

This study involved critical analysis and evaluation and to deduce the main idea of the novel and make textual criticism, the formalist approach was employed. Thus, the texts of the novel were used in drawing forth proofs for the thesis of the study. Further, sources related to literature and to the thesis of the study were used to allow a more comprehensive evaluation of the novel.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Struggles for Survival:

The novel, *A Season of Grace*, is an illustration of the struggles the poor *kaingineros* of Mindoro experienced. It depicts their daily battle against the forces of nature, which was clearly depicted in the attack of the black mice to Sabel and Doro's *kaingin*; their battle against the abusive government officials. Which was shown in the *kaingineros*' encounter with the Treasurer of Palaon and his Deputy Assistant as well as their relationship with the scheming business adventurers, EpeRuda and Tiaga, and the struggle against oneself, which was

portrayed in Doro's unhappiness while working at the Alag firewood concession managed by EpeRuda.

Struggle Against Forces of Nature

In comparison with the struggles of the *kaingineros* against the forces of nature in the 50's, today's Filipino farmers are battling against more destructive natural forces such as typhoons, flashfloods and volcanic eruptions.

It is a fact that due to the country's geographical location, where tropical cyclones are formed and where the Pacific Ring of Fire and several earthquake fault lines are found, Philippines is beset by a host of severe natural disasters, including volcanic eruptions, tropical cyclones, earthquakes, floods, mudflows, fire and drought and according to PAGASA, the average cyclone occurrence in the Philippines is 19 to 21 per year, of which two (2) are super typhoons. But it is also noted that these natural calamities are becoming destructive because of the irresponsible stewardship of the environment.

Like Doro, Sabel and the rest of *kaingineros* of Mindoro in the novel, Filipinos need to appease mother earth. They need to consider that her resources are meant for all peoples. Thus, instead of cutting all the trees that can cut, there is a need to plant trees; instead of throwing dynamite to the seas and rivers to harvest tons of fishes, there is a need to take care of its fish and corrals.

Struggle Against Man

The worsening struggle of the Filipinos against the abusive government officials and inconsiderate landowners and businessmen is manifested in the widening economic gap of the two-class systems in the country, the small elite and the very large lower class Filipinos. The unequal distribution of wealth, power and economic security, with the elite controlling the lion's share, makes the security of the lower-class people lay on their patron's wealth and power. Like the poor *kaingineros*, who turned to EpeRuda and Tiaga for their farm and daily needs, the poor Filipinos also turn to the rich to finance their fiesta or to provide medication and hospitalization for their family (Andres, 1989). This very situation provides the rich more power over the poor Filipinos making them plunge into deeper poverty and utang na loob (debt of gratitude).

Furthermore, Filipinos' struggle against graft and corruption is also moving to higher level as revealed by the alarming statement of the chief of the Philippine Armed Forces about the military "I admit there is graft and corruption in all levels" (Decker, 2003) and the result of the Transparency International (TI) corruption index administered by the Germans identifying the Philippines and the political parties and legislature as the second most corrupt country (PDI, 2003). These reports just confirm the idea that a significant share of the country's budget is lost to graft and somehow explain why majority of the Filipinos have remained poor, or have become poorer.

These realities in the life of the Filipinos are not only indications of the gravity of the Filipino struggle against the evil people in the society; they also serve as challenges to the Filipinos to be one with others in the battle against the abusive members of the Philippine society.

Struggle Against Oneself.

At a certain point in the novel, *A Season of Grace*, the main character, Doro, experienced being torn between what he really wants out of his life and what he does for a living. Doro wanted to live his life cultivating land. This has been his dream, but because a group of mice devoured his rice field, he was pushed to servitude. To numb his difficulties, sufferings and depression, he resorted to heavy drinking of Tuba.

Filipinos of this century are likewise becoming more heavily burdened with the deteriorating economic conditions of the country partly brought about by corrupt officials and the demands of everyday living. As of 2000, the NSO survey showed that 34% of the Filipinos are living below poverty line. (INQ, 2003) This means that 26.6 million Filipinos out of 85 million are suffering from poverty in the sense of having no means to satisfy even their basic needs.

Compounding the problem of poverty is the government's inability to contain budget deficit. With the war in Mindanao from being resolved, and with the large infusion of money going to military operations, the 99.4 billion budget deficit (according to the Praymer, 2004) is expected to further swell beyond the prescribed ceiling.

Another indicator that the economy is far from being healthy is the high unemployment and underemployment rates. In the year 2000, unemployment rate stood at 13.9 %, the highest in nine years, while the underemployment rate reached 25.1 %. (Maglia, 2000) The implication of this is reduced consumer spending, which can lead to further deceleration of the economy. Such situations leave the Filipino powerless pushing him to do things against his will just to survive.

Human Values

A Season of Grace does not only present the struggles of the simple minded *kaingineros*, but, it also teaches the importance of the values of love, interdependence, faith in God and courage in difficult and challenging situations.

Love

Like all married couples, Doro and Sabel's marriage also arrived at a stage where the strength of their marriage vows is seriously tested. But, because their love is supported by mutual service, loyalty and obedience, it was able to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things and endure all things. (Cor 13:17) It is this unconditional love that helped them go through their struggles against the different forces of nature, the abusive and inconsiderate people in their society, and the daily tensions of life's difficulties and challenges.

“Marital love,” Pope Pius XI teaches, “consists in the deep attachment of the heart (will) which is expressed in action, since love is proven by deeds”. Paulette Bonifacio (2005) explains the teaching of the Pope as a union that is defined in loyalty, service and obedience, not in terms of interpersonal affection. It requires mutual empathy with and compassion for the needs, feelings and desires of one’s spouse and a mutual giving way to those needs, feelings and desires when the occasion so demands for the sake of and in response to love. Self-centeredness therefore, has no place in marriage. Thus, spouses who seek their own way always, who value the domination of their spouses, who will never give way to their partners will never become one person with anyone, perhaps not even with themselves.

In the Philippine culture, infidelity or extra marital relationship, which ranges from casual relationship to the keeping of *querida* or paramour, is considered by PCP II as a major concern in Filipino marriages.(PCP II) Proofs of its being a major concern in Filipino marriages are presented in the note of Carandang (1987) that wives rank infidelity as the number one family stressor; by the report of Lacar (1993) showing that male infidelity is the most frequent reason for marital separation and by the study of Vancio (1980) citing male infidelity as a major issue for marital break-ups in Manila. With these studies, it can be said that marital unions nowadays are greatly affected by infidelity for the breaking of marital vows among Filipino couples.

Interdependence and Camaraderie

Another human value that the poor *kaingineros* in the novel, hold dear is interdependence and camaraderie. These values are vividly illustrated in their sharing of whatever they have, whether it is roasted banana, pickled bamboo shoots, or old fishing net; their joining the *saknungan* system during planting or harvesting seasons; their togetherness during their nine-day novena and burial of Nong Tomas.

Relative to the universal human value of interdependence and camaraderie are the Filipino values of *pakikisama*, *bayanihan* and *pagdadamayan*. Though these values are bipolar or ambivalent, their positive side corresponds to the human values of interdependence and camaraderie. (Quinto, 2003)

Pakikisama as defined by Fr. Frank Lynch (1976) is “the ability to ability to get along with others in such a way as to avoid signs of conflict.” Thus, according to Andres, it encompasses the tendency to cooperate without hesitation, tendency to be obsequiously accommodating, hospitable and respectful to others, and the tendency to level with someone who is out of line or the curbing of anti-social attitudes by disallowing privacy. (Andres, 1989)

Unfortunately, the positive dimension of *pakikisama* is not the predominant and dominant side of the Philippine society today. It is now marked with *lagayan*, *palakasan*, and

lokohan. A typical example of this situation is the *modus operandi* of some political leaders who throw big parties and give gifts/money/bribe/*suhol* to their followers to reinvigorate their loyalty and to build a big reservoir of *utangna loob* and *palakasan*. (Andres, 1989)

Bayanihan on the other hand is “*pagkakaisa*layunin (unity of objectives), *pagkakaisa* kilos (brotherhood), *pagpapaunladngbawatisa* (developing of everyone), *masigasignapaggawa* (devoted and wholehearted work), *kinikilalaangmalakas at pinapalakasangmahina* (recognizing the strong and strengthening the weak), *pag-ibig at katapatan* (love and loyalty). This value of *Bayanihan* still remains in every Filipino but “the initiative of intensifying and expressing it has become so dormant that Filipinos seem to care only in time of crisis and calamities. (Andres, 1989)

Furthermore, the Filipinos before as portrayed by the simple-minded *kaingineros*, had a high sense of neighborhood or *pagdadamayan*. When somebody is in distress, the Filipinos in the past were always helpful. And because they received help in times of distress, they too incurred *utang-na-loob* and would be helpful. But materialism and individualism of the West have influenced the Filipino, somehow the *bayanihan* value waned. (Andres, 1989)

It is true that many Filipinos still observe the giving of *abuloy* (contribution of a sum of money to the bereaved family), the praying for the dead and the attending of funerals but, seldom do we now see Filipinos joining the *saknungan* system during planting and harvesting seasons or politicians helping the poor and the needy without expecting votes come election time. (Hollnsteiner, 1964)

What Filipinos need at present is to revive the *bayanihan* spirit and to put it into full force. (Andres, 1989) Thus, every Filipino is called to share what he or she has and to generously work for the common good of the Filipinos – for God’s kingdom. (Bp. Utleg, 2004)

Faith and Courage

The simple-minded *kaingineros*’ faith and courage permeates the novel. It is this faith in the providence of the creator that sustained them through the difficult times in their journey through life. Through this faith, they keep the hope and courage to face whatever life has for them.

Values of faith (spirituality) and courage pervade the hearts of the Filipinos who are hopeful of divine intervention in their daily struggles. It is their faith that serves as their coping resource of life’s adverse events. This is given evidence in the 1991 ISSP survey stating that eight to nine out of ten Filipinos agree that there is a God who personally cares for human beings (Mangahas, Guerrero, 1991).

Faith and courage are seen in the urban poor Filipino floating in the sea of high-price commodities, the farmer eking

out a living in the face of typhoons, floods and high prices of insecticides and pesticides and the domestic helper wanting to be with her children but needs to go abroad for her family's future.

Faith and courage are also said to have risen from the hearts of the people who braved the floods of Winnie and Yoyong to rescue people perched on the roof of their houses and from the countless volunteers who slept on top of the ballot boxes at the risk of their own lives during the last presidential elections.

These values are very much alive when Filipinos stood against the evil in society during the EDSA Revolution I and 2, which forced Ferdinand Marcos to step down from Malacanang in 1986 and that which ousted Joseph Estrada from power in 2001.

V.CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the expository and dramatic characterization, NVM is able to recreate life and human nature. He conceives his main characters, Doro and Sabel, as representatives of the majority of the Filipinos especially those in the rural areas – meek, passive, obedient and powerless. Moreover, the novel is an illustration of a person's continuous struggle in a hostile environment. This is shown by Filipino *kaingineros* as they fought for physical survival in the only way they knew. It presents the general pattern of struggle by all peoples against the threatening cycles of natural calamities, social disorder, economic imbalance and political turmoil. Thus, the novel contributes to a deeper understanding of what it means to be human and what it means to be alive, whether such life is live in pain and suffering.

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