

Survival and Sovereignty: Forces on the Rise of Aurelio Tolentino's Novels

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Abstract

The current paper divulges the cultural considerations that prompted the rise of Aurelio Tolentino's extant novels during the 20th century. An outstanding Kapampangan, Aurelio Tolentino (1875-1915) is an astute author remembered as both a moralist and insurrectionist-playwright in and out of prison due to his seditious writings. His five existing novels published from 1909 until 1914 prove to be an exposure of the interesting forces that urged the popularity of the novel due to dynamic circumstances. The cultural manifestations of the fictions merit explorations on the struggles that the author and the colonized Filipinos have undergone. A socio-historical approach is used to disclose the racial background of Filipinos who had to bear the conventional Spanish rule and the American liberal policy. This method explores the distinctness on how people survived and cried for sovereignty from a dual dominion that is a remarkable field exhibited by Tolentino. Seemingly, the novels served as a means of survival for the author and a forum on his goal of advocating a total liberation for the motherland. Likewise, the novels demonstrate Tolentino's craftsmanship as a versatile man of letters while collaborating with his audience towards the reality of their situation as suppressed people.

Keywords: survival, sovereignty, Kapampangan, extant novels, socio-historical method

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Introduction

Regional studies of literature have always been a fascinating field that disclose a connection among the past, the present and the future of a race. Literature takes us to a historical milestone that connects mankind in the world. Aurelio Tolentino's fictions are illustrations of a distinct identity which resembles the present social, political and other institutional forces and in the same breath caution his readers to what may occur. His themes are universal for they speak of an individual's natural instincts for survival and the quest for sovereignty.

The study is limited to the analysis of the five extant and available novels of Aurelio Tolentino that were printed from 1909 to 1914. These novels are part of the donations of Tolentino's heirs to the University of the Philippines Library in 1972 while the novels *Ang Buhok ni Ester* and *Maring* are also made available online through the effort of the University of Michigan Library and the American Philosophical Society. The other reported novels of the author which have gone extinct are no longer included in the subsequent discussion.

Aurelio V. Tolentino has been a product of the three-century rule of Spain and the forceful take-over of the US dominion. He is a distinguished and educated man who has personally got connected with the ugly visage of a subdued nation. He has been a freedom fighter and bestowed more literary legacy in terms of his volumes of extant works than any of his contemporaries. His expertise on his art is greatly exhibited from the different genres of his writings; moralistic works, essays, journals, zarzuelas, plays, and later his immensely popularized novels. He has been imprisoned nine times due to his seditious works and campaigns against foreign invasion. He would later use novel writing to communicate with his readers that would earn him the recognition of producing the most number of novels on his lifetime.

The first decade of US rule marked a literary shift from the Spanish-inspired corrido to realistic writings. The new policy on progressivism and liberalism built up an interest on modern-day landscape in terms of literary production. The usual metrical romances and fantasy tales encouraged by Spain had been spurned by playwrights in favour of realistic writings. The Spanish comedia and corridos were replaced by localized zarzuelas where Tolentino excels bearing on his name at least ten extant zarzuelas. Barely a few years during the onset of the US regime, the grandeur of Spanish-inspired literature in the form of fantasy and make-believe have been rebuffed by both the local writers and the reading public.

The liberalization policy in literature by the new American rulers inevitably marked an innovation in the old genres of writing. The swift development in the literary aspect paved the way for more printing presses, literary organizations, uncensored fictions and other writings, and more importantly the increasing number of patrons. Being a journalist-moralist, Tolentino has to adopt with the present trend of writing in order to keep his persona as an astute writer. Well acquainted with the rising popularity of novel writing in the West since the 18th century, the author has proven that he could go along with the newest literary movement. In terms of readership, his contemporaries have benefitted on the US educational policy that mandated natives to gain literacy. Larkin (1972, p.144) reports that the number of students in Pampanga increased from 3,400 (1901) to 13,000 (1910) and the number of schools jumped from

41 to 185 in the same period. Tolentino's first novel was released in 1909. As a man of letters, Tolentino was well aware that the Realism movement in his time was the promising and widely acknowledged hence he had to keep pace with that serving two purposes by doing so; he's into modern writing phase and he will use the forum to transport his message.

History accounts that the US occupation brought about an abrupt social and economic change in the Kapampangan society (Larkin, p.129). This in turn created a separate identity and economic hostilities among the elites and the common folks for a modern society is fast developing. The landlord-peasant camaraderie has been influenced by the rapid transformation in terms of social groupings. Aside from the upper class natives, the growing number of Chinese mestizos and a small group of Spaniards have been formed fashioned in each own circle through intermarriages and connections. The turnover of native elites has been significantly marked that showed the rising class of Chinese mestizos which created infusion as well as discrimination among the masses. Larkin noted that very few 'pure' Indio families and what remained was a governing class in the Kapampangan society.

Further, the onset of the 20th century shows the Chinese populace that has greatly increased in number with all their wealth, power and business acumen. They dominated the commercial sector of the province as buyers, exporters, middlemen down to being workers in all business sectors. It is of no wonder that the author vehemently despise the presence of the Chinese blurring on his novels that they want to own the land that belongs to the Filipinos. Consequently, during the first decade of the US rule, Americans are short-staffed to implement the new programs so they rely heavily to native cooperation. A new political structure has surfaced that required governors and board members in the province through an election process. The elected leaders have become the symbols and cradles of political power. The upper-class native elites have the authority to rule over their own people, not for the common good but more on personal gain.

Along with the stated reasons and more, Tolentino, recorded as newly married in 1907, opted to leave his birthplace and reside in Manila together with his family and venture into a printing press business for economic security. His transfer was not an isolated case because statistics show that as early as 1903, over 17,000 Kapampangans have already transferred to Manila. Having been imprisoned and about to be pardoned, Tolentino did not stay to see for himself how his beloved Pampanga would fare in drastic cultural transformation. He had to find some means to support his family on financial matters. Besides, he had to devise some means to awaken the sensibilities and patriotic spirits of his people on his call for survival and sovereignty.

Related Studies

Recent scholarly works pertaining to the genre that portray the colonial attitude of the locals need much to be desired and authors who indulged in this critique usually centre their insight on the characters. The study authored by Baldoz and Ayala published in 2013 has emphasized how US policies toward Philippines and Puerto Rico had affected the locals. The mode in which these policies created a great impact on the social conditions of the people yielded civil conflicts as the colonizers asserted

their own policy inappropriate to the contemporary state of mind of the colonized. The existing study also considers the age of US imperialism in the country which has been a recurrent theme of Tolentino's extant novels. The power of the US exerted to the natives is manifested by the author as a complete betrayal to the Filipino people. The colonial policy on liberalism has benefitted only the upper class while the poor have sunk into poverty.

Meanwhile, Patterson in 2014 has explored Pacho's novel *Cebu*, a Filipino American priest on his first trip to the Philippines to bury his deceased mother. The essay focuses on the social satire in the fiction that exposed how the ideologies of liberal tolerance affect Filipino Americans. It is disclosed that the novel searches for the social reciprocity that migrants pay back their homeland and the host country. The present paper likewise discovers the cultural aspects of Tolentino's novels that stimulated him to infuse his sentiments to his readers. Based from his biographical accounts, the author has gone through multiple ground battles on his advocacy to liberate the country from colonial rules. His novels are likely to serve as his platform to connect with his readers.

A regional literature supporter, Lalas-Garcia has initiated the most recent study on Kapampangan novels on her 2018 published book that focused on the sources and influences of the stated fictions. The investigation covered all the vernacular novelists and their works which stimulates more in-depth analysis on each of the Kapampangan novelists. The study of Tolentino's works is warranted because of his distinct personality as a nationalist writer aside from bequeathing more volumes of the early novel genre. In contrast to the wider perspective employed on Kapampangan novels, the present study exclusively deals on the literary landscape that prompted the author to produce his fictions.

The Socio-Historical Method

The current study is focused on the thesis that Aurelio Tolentino has come up with the most number of Kapampangan novels primarily because of his need for survival and his advocacy for total sovereignty from the foreign colonial power. The novels shall be analyzed as a whole based on their contextual setting not limited to any literary elements like forms or structures but a disclosure on how they existed as prompted by the condition of the early 20th century. The investigation of the novels is centered on the socio-historical and the cultural conditions that paved way for Tolentino's novels.

Reyes (1992) in her book '*Kritisismo*' as cited by Lalas-Garcia (208, p. 21) details the sociological and historical concepts of literary criticism in the country. The former states that critics will establish a broader perception on the local texts if they adopt the historical concept that takes the readers to the past when the literary form has started. Once the critics lay down the historical and sociological contexts of the works, it would be easier to realize why certain literary genres had developed and flourished in different stages. Previously in 1979, Reyes has attested to the appropriateness of the methodology when she engaged it on her dissertation *Kasaysayan at Kontekstong Panlipunan ng Nobelang Tagalog, 1905-1975*. She then found out that the use of the historical and sociological approach in her study affirmed the concept that the Tagalog novels of 70 years are created based on the subjective interpretation of the authors.

Ian Watt (1957, p. 16) affirms on his book *The Rise of the Novel* that the plot in the novels had to be acted by particular people in particular circumstances. By this he has explored the influences of social situations in the writings of a novel by Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding who were affected by the changes in the reading public of their time during the 18th century and that their works are conditioned by the new social and moral conditions which the novelists and their readers shared. In the same manner that the combined historical and sociological conceptual framework provides a wider standpoint on how Tolentino's novels have been produced, how they were influenced by the specific contextual setting of their time and why survival and sovereignty are the forces that impelled the writings of his novels.

Discussion

The five extant novels of Aurelio Tolentino has the same recurrent pattern of the author's need for survival and sovereignty and this is deliberately transported to his readers. As a well-known newspaperman and a patriot, the author finds his vehicle on his fictions to forge a strong bond with his audience.

Buhay (1909) - previously titled *Mutya* originally written in Kapampangan

The novel highlights the justice expertise of Aurelio Tolentino. It likewise marks the thoughts of the author in terms of how he sees the situations under the colonial rule. Being a law student, he provides free legal counsel to his readers. Having dealt with nine imprisonments, he guzzles in his novel the proper justice system that needs to be accorded to people. No one needs to be in jail if innocent of the crime and everyone has the right for freedom. Buhay and Marcial are victims of circumstances and they should not suffer needlessly. Good-hearted people should not be exploited to achieve one's end. When confronted with evil wrongdoings, somebody must step up and do all means to get out of the situation. Suffering is not needed for salvation. The call for survival to bear the colonized culture and endure societal pressures from varied sectors is effectively expressed on his first novel. The advocacy for a complete sovereignty from the foreign maneuvers is the inevitable duo on his aim for survival.

The author makes use of the character of Dining, the usually meek and pliant mother and wife to uphold the truth. She has gone to all authorities to prove that both her daughter and Marcial are innocent of the crime. She has led the way on how to discover a strong evidence that will point to the real culprit. She has exposed the duplicity in Don Marcelo's personality. Finally she has come to the point of betraying her wicked husband of conniving with the victim for his own selfish motives. Buhay and Marcial have survived the court trials and their ordeal; they had been accorded their most deserved sovereignty once denied from them. The strong and persuasive female voice is heard and the author's message is conveyed noticeably.

In a society where women are overshadowed by social constraints, men should demonstrate that they can do something to protect them. It is a shame on their masculinity that they remain placid on the trying situations that befall them. The new US rulers are abound but the natives should let their forces be felt and acknowledged. Traitors have no place in a land intended for the natives. The plight of the conniver

Daluyong who was exiled in Mindanao then later killed by the Moros needs to serve a warning to those who conspire to the invaders. Tolentino's readers are made to understand that it requires strong will, courage and even losing self-seeking family members to survive on their present situation and win the battle for sovereignty.

Ang Buhok ni Ester (1911-1915-three-parts)-Esther's Hair strand

Ang Buhok ni Ester is considered by literary critics as Tolentino's best novel for his use of gothic fiction on his novel. His characters show intense emotions that effectively connect with his readers and urge them to get involved in the turn of events. The title bears the name of Ester, the only sister of Ruben, the latter a medical graduate who comes back home to serve his people.

Tolentino has been very successful in fashioning his network of uncertainty on his characters. Ruben is a medical graduate, Oscar is a lawyer, both Ester and Gloria are well-educated women but all of them fall prey on the sly and cunning mind of Gerardo. The intellectual mind of the author has been well manifested by the culprit on his varied structure that favors only himself. Don Luis and Ester have gone hopeless and almost out of their mind because of humiliation bearing the disgrace that Ruben has been accused of, but the craftiness of Tolentino finds convincing scenarios that will comfort his readers. Ruben has survived from death penalty, Oscar has been freed from prison, Ester and Don Luis survive on their health problems, and Gloria has survived the rape attempts of Gerardo. All of them have gained their sovereignty from Gerardo's evil schemes and from the injustices of the court system.

The court proceedings are well-detailed and provider of accurate due process in the law system. The manner of questioning among witnesses during cross examinations would educate ordinary citizens on the justice system. Tolentino's readers would readily believe his series of reasoning for they are aware that the author has worked as a clerk of court and has studied law. Using his novel as his platform, the author's call for survival and sovereignty is very transparent. This fact is affirmed by the novel's preliminary pages that shows the message of Dr. Simpao in 1911 who has directly expressed the unfair justice system in the country, the corrupt politicians abound, and the optimism that integrity will prevail against evil practices.

The novel's appeal for sovereignty is heavily embossed on all his characters. Don Luis blatantly discloses the ills of society because of corrupt local politicians and the present foreign policy imposed in the country. He calls for sovereignty by using material resources and intellectual means especially to uphold love for the motherland. The lawyer character of Oscar talks about the present republic imposed by the Americans, also the two-faced natives who disguise as patriots but act as traitors. He further states that in order to gain freedom, people should guard their votes; anyone who sells their votes is worse than Judas Iscariot who sold only his Teacher not the whole motherland. The novel undoubtedly campaigns for initial survival then sovereignty.

Maring (1913) -Maria, Honor and Strength

The story of *Maring*, subtitled 'honor and strength' is again a story of survival and sovereignty. Tolentino's message is cloaked on the manliness of a woman character

who is able to surpass all adversity that confront her. He has masked through the conservative story of Maring his intention of getting into his readers' sensibilities.

The independence exemplary shown by the major character is hoped to penetrate into the thoughts of his audience. Maring, with all her difficulties is able to stand in her own, without assistance to anyone and still managed to keep her dignity intact. With the initiation of US commercialism in the country, the author wants her readers not to get lured on the new enticements being brought in the country. Maring has lived simply and rejected any materialistic offerings which taught her to trust her own judgments. Her survival is mainly because she worked on it, she has done the right thing and refused help from questionable donors. Her part time American employer entertains drunk guests in her home and one even attempts to molest her but she fought back and hard. She stabbed the American and he tried to chase her she led him to a river where he got drowned. Maring has survived to keep her honor all by her own determination and will. She did not hesitate to challenge and face the wrath of the Americans in doing so.

Moreover, the story of Maring exhibits her quest for sovereignty. The lead character wants to be free from oppression. She is deceived and taken advantage by more powerful people in her own land and only encouraged her to find means to escape from any trap. She flees when needed but continues to live with self-worth and managed to save her family. True, she has always been into a web of trials and misfortune but her willpower and resolve to emerge triumphant gives a renewed optimism to readers. The author is clear on his intent that the present situation is just temporary; that the colonial power has an end, that there is a way to get out of the situation and that like Maring in the novel, the Filipinos will gain their reward of sovereignty.

Kahapon, Ngayon at Bukas (1913) -Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

Tolentino's versified *novelang Tagalog* is sub-titled *Larawan ng Bayan* (Reflection of the Land). The narrative is set during the pre-colonial times when the land is abundant with gold and treasures. The circumstances nonetheless illustrate vividly that of the contemporary conditions. The gist shown below is translated by Lalas-Garcia (2018, p. 182-183) from the text's Tagalog version.

Raha Lakhang Bayan rules the land, his wife Kalayaan and his daughter Mithi are described as having incomparable beauty with noble deeds for the people. The Raha and his family acknowledge the proposal of friendship from the stranger Haring Samuel who later has betrayed their trust. The powerful King from a foreign land offers his aid to help the Raha to overthrow his invaders and by doing so Haring Samuel earned the gratitude of the natives. Eventually, Haring Samuel's troops assault the boundaries of the nation until the Raha is subdued and murdered.

Countless natives are mercilessly slain, their precious land badly devastated, the anguish of many are seen and heard and on the death of their Raha the hopes of the people are replaced by fear and helplessness. Haring Samuel imposes his new policies masked with promises of modernization but apparently are all self-serving and all for the benefit of the rich and powerful. After a few years, a glorious vision happened.

From beneath Raha Lakhang Bayan's resting place, a series of frighteningly thunderous lightning was heard and strikes at the grave and split it open to present the splendid image of the Raha whose face gleams with power and superiority. Haring Samuel seems to be jolted out from a deep slumber and seeks forgiveness for his treachery. The kingdom of Raha Lakhang Bayan is granted complete independence from any foreign rule as attested by rulers from different lands. Raha Lakhang Bayan infers that Yesterday's misery and bitter memories should be forgotten and everyone must be bound by love so that Today and Tomorrow's future of the land shall be secured for the common welfare of the people.

Tolentino's verses are undoubtedly a representation of his activism for the people's survival on the existing forces that transpire in the land. He does not have any qualms on portraying the US government as the deceitful Haring Samuel who has offered goodwill but later takes possession of the land. The issue on survival shown by the novel focuses on the degree of treachery that the new colonizers have conferred to the naïve yet overly grateful natives. The narrative illustrates vividly how the imperialists take control of the land and change the usual placid and peaceful way of life through their modernization policy but what is worse is the deteriorating life that the natives employ. The author candidly informs his readers on how indolence has affected the people who they have gone passive and live a miserable life. He also slapped the wealthy who serve as willing slaves to Americans and betray their own people for personal gain. This further exposes that the new colonial lords benefit massively from the land's resources as they impose heavy taxes and exploit the wealth of the land.

People should take heed of the dismaying reality extensive in the society. The cry for survival is not only because of the imperialist but more importantly on the natives who have gone worse. The blood of the nationalists shout for freedom and this strengthens the will of both Kalayaan (Freedom) and Mithi (Hope) not to succumb to Haring Samuel's offer of compromise.

The issue of sovereignty is thoroughly addressed to all sectors of the society. The novel is well armed with details on how to gain independence through unity and love to the motherland. Most dominant to this is a change of attitude to the natives. Tolentino courageously tags local elite traitors as worthless beasts that are dishonor to the country. He shuns them for their prejudice against the poor and the uneducated whom the former treat as their servants totally below their social status. The author likewise attacks the inactive and unambitious peasants who do nothing to escape from poverty. He condemns the gamblers and irresponsible men who forsake their wife and children hence remain unproductive. The novel illustrates that the ordinary citizens are weak and the wealthy and powerful are selfish which speaks of their subjugation.

Through the novel, Tolentino cries for a supreme effort for conversion in attitude to win sovereignty. He calls on his people to assert their rights, to serve selflessly, to be honest and think of others, to show total allegiance to the motherland and renounce loyalty to the present rule and most of all be united to prove that the natives are all one race who seeks total independence from the foreign rule. The final part of the versified novel is prophetic as it shows that freedom is granted to the land.

Kasulatang Ginto (1914) -Golden Inscription

From the sub-title itself, *History of a Free Nation*, set in 1350, the novel greatly exhibit the call for survival and sovereignty that will ultimately earn the 'history of a free nation'. The author has set his novel during the pre-Hispanic colonization where people had their own political system of government. They live in bounty and free do their own will as mandated by the law. There was a big setback though. People are disunited and lived separately away from each other physically and allegorically.

Occupying only one nation and living in abundance and prosperity, people are endlessly greedy and ceaseless in getting more. They fight each other to conquer more territories. The need for survival as illustrated by the novel is on the same selfish natives who are bent on destroying each other. They are dissatisfied people who want more to the point of killing each other. Family ties are broken because of this insatiability and Tolentino establishes the impact of ruining one's own people and motherland. He points out the material benefits that a united race will gain once outsider influences are expelled. The gold and natural resources of the land are vividly exemplified that readers are apt to get dismayed on the abundance denied to them by the present rulers. The infant Bagong Araw is placed in a golden tub while Tatlong Bituin's attire is embossed with diamonds, rubies and other precious jewels.

Tolentino presents his detailed account on the local dispute between two neighboring kingdoms. Although their respective rulers are allies, people are divided and treat each other as rivals. The novel has again stressed the authorial power by instructing readers that in order to survive one must know how to be unified. Both Lakhang Liwayway and Lakhang Makapagal become role-models for their particular constituents that there should be unity between them in order to survive adversaries.

Further, survival is needed to overcome traitors like the character of the selfish and greedy Maliwat who serve as detriments to the progress of the land. People need to join forces to eliminate power-hungry fellows whose deeds are only for their own benefits. The character of the ingrate Talimhaga is also highlighted to warn readers against back fighting natives. Tolentino is very explicit of local officials and elites who forsake the common people to gain the favor of the ruling class. Survival is needed in order to escape from their influences.

The activism for sovereignty is clearly presented on the blood compact that Bagong Araw and Tatlong Bituin are meant for marriage to merge their divided kingdoms.

The author directly states on his novel that there should only be one kingdom to gain true freedom as a race. The character of Lakhang Liwayway acknowledges that the land is threatened by invaders and that its wealth shall be assailed so she has engraved the golden inscription intended to expose the real identity of her son who will unite people and bring peace and freedom to the land. The pursuit of sovereignty is demonstrated when Maliwat staged a war against his father-in-law Makapagal and ordered him killed then seized his throne. Conquerors have no place in a land inhabited by free people so the author is quick to assure his readers that freedom shall be regained. Maliwat is subdued by Lakhang Makapagal transformed as the mighty Sinukuan while Lakhang Talimhaga is stripped of her crown and Bagong Hari regains

his right to the throne. Finally the nation has gained its freedom and lived peacefully with their righteous ruler.

Conclusion

The novels speak of the cultural conditions that were borne by the early 20th century Filipinos. The new American colonial lords have wisely acknowledged that the three-century imprints of Spain need to be wiped out from the natives. This has been accomplished initially by a conversion from the Hispanic-subjective religious writings and fantasy tales into the promotion of the Realism movement in literature that has become popular in American literature. The realistic type of literature is established and found to be more relevant to the contemporary situations welcomed by the growing number of readers. The latest backdrop meets the modern trend imposed by the new imperialists.

Further, the sudden swing in the socio-economic conditions has prompted Aurelio Tolentino to settle for a more profitable genre of writing. The author's struggle proves that more than his financial necessity as a new family man, his fictions are the means to an end. His century-old novels are all represented by the need for survival and his call for sovereignty. The fictions portray the need to survive both on the twofold standards of the locals and the immediate renovation imposed by the US liberalization policy. As the novels expressed, people are supposed to be free but held captive not only by the invaders but the disunited character of the locals. The characters in the fictions are the voices that persistently advocate to be wary on the present situation and strive to attain complete independence from the foreign intrusion. A prophetic voice is heard in the novels asserting for unity and gaining liberation.

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