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The Ideological Resistance within José Rizal's *El Filibusterismo*: Deconstructing a Post-Colonial Schema

José Rizal's 1891 novel, *El Filibusterismo*, is a dark, brooding satire of and manifestation of resistance to 19th-century Spanish colonial rule in the Philippines. Completed four years after its predecessor, *Noli Me Tangere*, the *Fili* resumes the tracing of Juan Crisostomo Ibarra – a Filipino mestizo educated in Europe who strives to institute reforms and positive change without entirely dismantling the colonial system – thirteen years after the distressing events in the conclusion of the *Noli*. Disillusioned and hardened by Padre Damaso's violation of Ibarra's late father's grave, failure of his initiative to establish a school for the local children, excommunication and wrongful framing by the frailocracy; and the sacrificial death of Elias, his loyal friend, at the hands of the *Guardia Civil* ([Spanish] Civil Guard); Ibarra radically transforms into Simoun – an anti-colonial revolutionary, who, under the façade of a wealthy jeweler and associate of the governor-general, proliferates the colonial government's crimes to foment mass rebellion by the Filipino people. Bernard Reines aptly distinguishes the two novels: "The *Noli* was a work of the heart; the *Fili*, of the mind" (Reines 103). The *Noli* was an idealistic endeavor aimed at awakening the Filipino people to their colonial situation and an appeal to the Spanish national conscience; through a faithful mirroring of colonial society and satire of Spanish friar rule, Rizal hoped to improve the relations between the two parties. His profound

disappointment with the reactions to the *Noli* is transmuted into the hatred, vengeance, bitterness, and enmity permeating the *Fili*. Dominated by ideological debates, the *Fili* manifests a greater sense of urgency – the satire of both Spanish and Filipino society more extensive, promotion of Filipino national consciousness more pronounced, call for unity and collective action more resounding, and desire for independence as opposed to assimilation more explicit. More significantly, Rizal dedicates the *Fili* to Fathers Mariano Gomez, Jose Burgos, and Jacinto Zamora – Filipino secular priests who challenged the corruption of the Spanish friars and colonial racial discourses on the inferiority of the natives in the 1860s (Rafael 40). In 1872, the three were falsely implicated in a local uprising in Cavite, unjustly executed by the Spanish government, and immediately transformed into martyrs for the nationalist cause (Rafael 40). Their deaths would be a turning point in Filipino national consciousness, and, for many *ilustrado* nationalists like Rizal, became the final indictment against Spanish colonial rule. What binds the two novels then are Rizal’s nationalist sentiments and intrinsic love for the Philippines.

Filipino national hero and martyr, José Rizal, was born on June 19, 1861 in the Philippines, where sixteenth-century Spanish “government, church, colonial practices, and racial policies” were still very much intact (Reines 16). As an *ilustrado* (enlightened Filipino elite), Rizal studied in Spain, France, and Germany, and was thus a product of the colonial system (Reines viii). Nevertheless, his life was dedicated to resisting Spanish colonial oppression, educating the Filipino people, developing a sense of national unity and national pride, and preparing his people for self-government – all through the nonviolent power of the pen (Reines vii-viii). On December 30, 1896, Rizal was executed by firing squad in Bagumbayan, following a mock trial in which he was convicted for subversion against the Spanish government (Reines

188). His death would further fuel the Philippines' fight for independence from Spain, which it eventually achieved in 1898 (Reines viii).

In accordance with nearly unanimous scholarly interpretation, Floro C. Quibuyen interprets the underlying theme of the *Noli* and *Fili* as the idea that “an oppressed people may be disunited and without a voice, but through enlightened struggle...can become a nation” (Quibuyen 83). I argue that this interpretation oversimplifies the struggle for independence and ignores the additional set of difficulties that arises in the subsequent post-colonial situation; namely, it fails to acknowledge the highly conditional aspect of Rizal's call for rebellion. Disunity and voicelessness cannot coexist with the “enlightened struggle,” as Quibuyen otherwise seems to suggest – overcoming this lack of unity and recovering that voice must necessarily work in tandem with it. Furthermore, I contend that Rizal's vision of an “enlightened struggle” goes beyond the mere awakening of national consciousness (although this process *is* a necessary condition of viable rebellion), evolving to entail an epistemological shift, a fundamental rewiring of how the colonized understand themselves as they head towards the post-colonial period. On a different note, echoing the common criticism of Rizal's hesitation and ambivalence towards Philippine independence in regard to his status as national hero, Eugenio Matibag views the *Fili* as both an “incitement to revolution and a dire warning against it” (Matibag 260). Scholars have interpreted Rizal's ambiguous stance (in the *Noli*, *Fili*, and his essays) on Philippine independence as problematic; I argue that this historical contradiction is resolved if one considers that Rizal was actually writing for the future (i.e. the youth), wherein lies his indestructible hope, rather than the present. The *Fili*'s dialogic form precludes a definitive answer to the question of the viability of Philippine autonomy, suggesting that the decolonization process – driven by an epistemological shift – must occur *prior* to the post-

colonial period. This expanded use of dialogue demands active cognitive participation from the novel's intended readership, effectually re-directing Rizal's ideas, knowledge, and insights towards the future as opposed to the present – a defiant act of ideological resistance to Spanish colonial rule.

Dialogue fundamentally structures the novel, establishing its tone and purpose from the outset. Through the continuity in use of the “social cancer” metaphor in both of the novels' introductions, Rizal positions the *Fili* in an ongoing conversation with the *Noli*, concurrently establishing it as a space for a national thought-experiment – the first component of ideological resistance. He utilizes the analogy of the “social cancer” in the *Noli* to present his objective and rationale: replicate the reality of colonial Filipino society, because it is in the act of seeing the reality, reflected by Rizal himself, and processing that reality, that Filipino society will become conscious of its social ills, from which collective and informed action can then be taken to produce a “cure” (i). Echoes of this enterprise resonate in the introduction of the *Fili* when Rizal urges the Filipino people to confront the “dreaded reality,” “look at it face to face instead of fleeing,” and “raise the shroud in order to uncover before the multitude the structure of the skeleton” (i). The difficult but necessary act of “rais[ing] the shroud” to thoroughly examine the inner essence of the “social cancer” is reiterated in more macabre terms – “dreaded reality” and “skeleton – to emphasize the concerning progression of the disease, its worsened state since the *Noli*. As such, Rizal chooses to end with a clear warning: “if before the reality, instead of changing, the fear of one is increased, and the confusion of the other exacerbated, then they may have to be left in the hands of time...and fate, which weaves the destinies of peoples and governments with their deficiencies and the mistakes they commit each day” (i-ii). The severity of Rizal's tone when he laments the uncorrected social “deficiencies” and “mistakes,”

culminating in his resignation to the valid possibility of his people's destiny being left in the "hands of time" and "fate," contributes to a greater sense of urgency, an explicit insistence to re-engage with the ever-more relevant ideas originally presented in the *Noli*. The metaphor of the "social cancer" hence goes beyond its initial purpose, from merely describing the present state of colonial Filipino society to serving as a link for the establishment of a critical dialogue with the past in the immediate present.

Indeed, Rizal's distortion of narrative time links the "social cancer" to the "specter of subversion" underlying the *Fili*, exemplifying the elevated level of individual engagement Rizal's national thought-experiment necessitates. The conditional connotation of "if" and "may have to be" in the previous passage reiterates the opportunity that still exists to "cure" or reform colonial society, the source of hope amidst the bleakness of the sequel. This open-endedness and possibility are characteristics of the "dialogismo narrativo (narrative dialogism)" form, coined by Joan Torres-Pou, that "deja al lector la posibilidad de llegar a sus propias conclusiones y sugiere las complejidades que plantean la formulación independentista y nacionalista (leaves to the reader the possibility of coming to one's own conclusions and hints at the complexities brought up by the independence and nationalist projects)" (Torres-Pou 10). Consequently, Rizal's readers, particularly the "Filipino people and their government," are pushed to initiate and actively participate in a larger conversation modeled after Rizal's own intrapersonal debate (i). In addition to reminding his readers of the "social cancer" left uncured, Rizal proclaims, "so often we have been haunted by the specter of subversion...whose very name steals our serenity and makes us commit the greatest blunders" (i). An agent of the past, the "specter of subversion" acquires the ability to produce the concrete effects of unrest and uprising in the present. In other words, the specter ceases to be a purely insubstantial entity as it becomes incarnated into the

figure of the *filibustero*, which, according to Vicente L. Rafael, acquired the sense of a “disruptive presence, a figure, who by word or deed, suddenly and surreptitiously steals upon the social order” by the late nineteenth-century (Rafael 42). The materialization of the past in the present becomes doubly enhanced through the two metaphors and creates a sense of temporal confusion, establishing the *Fili* as a simultaneous response to the historical past, warning to both the Spanish and Filipino agents of the colonial system, and Rizal’s inheritance – in the form of knowledge, insights, and ideas – for the future Filipino generation. This attentiveness to time creates a sense of the future-oriented unique to the *Fili*, signifying Rizal’s own shift to pragmatic, forward-looking thinking from his idealistic thinking in the *Noli*, characterized by a belief in compromise and hesitation to challenge the status quo.

This sense of the future-oriented establishes Rizal’s presentation of the necessary precursors to viable rebellion: a series of epistemological shifts. The debate on national language between Simoun and Basilio (a young medical student who, like the other Filipino youth, believes in reforming the system from within through mass education) introduces the seemingly contradictory necessity of mentally becoming colonial in order to become post-colonial. Simoun denounces Basilio’s and the students’ desire to spread the teaching of Castilian to all Filipinos; through the use of asyndeton, Simoun gravely likens “Hispanization” to “death, the destruction of your national identity, the annihilation of your Motherland, the consecration of tyranny” (68). The strong connotations of “destruction,” “annihilation,” and “consecration” convey Simoun’s vehement rejection of linguistic assimilation into the Spanish nation. Exemplifying what Rafael denotes “separatist logic,” Simoun assumes that the “domestication of the self occurs simultaneously with the containment of the foreign” (Rafael 58). In other words, Simoun correlates separation from the colonizer with the attainment of true independence; adoption of

the language of the colonizer, for instance, signifies dependence at its apex. Aware of the practical difficulties of imposing a Philippine national language, however, Basilio notes that “if the knowledge of Spanish can unite us with the Government, on the other hand it could unite as well all the islands” (69). Simoun counters this point, believing that Spanish cannot be the *lingua franca* (common language) of the Philippines because “for the ideas of its mind and the sentiments of its heart there are no words in that idiom...Language is the people’s thought” (69). Simoun’s equation of “language” to a “people’s thought” fundamentally establishes language as an encapsulation of a people’s “ideas” and “sentiments,” a unifying reality, and a shared means of expression. A common national language thus emerges as an elemental source of national identity, as well as a binding force through its promotion of collective individualistic thinking. Yet, as articulated in Basilio’s acknowledgment of the already solidified unifying quality of the Spanish language, securing such liberty lies in paradoxically adopting the Spaniards’ systematics of language. Simoun’s “domestication of the self” – the formation of a distinct national identity – must indeed work “simultaneously with the containment of the foreign” – the detachment from the colonial – albeit in reverse, for the process towards the post-colonial period is shown to necessarily entail a continued negotiation with the colonizer as opposed to a severance. Complicating the notion of independence, Rizal argues that to become post-colonial is to carefully re-work valuable elements of the Spanish linguistic model into a new, self-crafted Filipino system of language.

Aware of the identity crisis that inevitably arises following his assertion of the necessity of synthesizing both Spanish and Filipino characteristics, Rizal includes a dialogue between two powerful Spanish officials to moralize the concept of nationalism, clarifying it to entail justice and rectitude. Defending his decision to keep Basilio imprisoned despite Basilio’s indisputable

innocence, the governor-general asserts, “Do I not wield discretionary powers? Can I not do what gives me pleasure for a better government of these islands? What have I to fear? Can a servant, perhaps, accuse me before the tribunals and exact responsibility from me?” (341). Notably, the governor-general’s justification is framed as a series of rhetorical questions intended to reiterate his authority and suppress verbal opposition, and, by extension, a dialogue. The high-official, however, disrupts this intended effect in answering, “Your Excellency has not been chosen by the Filipino people but by Spain, all the more reason why you should treat the Filipinos well, so that they would have nothing with which to reproach Spain” (342). In response to the governor-general’s ensuing silence, the high official proceeds to chastise him: “For you the Spaniard can be a pirate, can be an assassin, hypocrite, deceitful, anything, just so he keeps what he has; for me the Spaniard should lose everything, empire, power, riches, all, everything, before honor” (343). Grounding his arguments in the notion of legitimacy, standards of basic moral conduct, and principle of “honor,” the high official rejects nationalism as a form of cultural and ethnic allegiance that enables immorality, hypocrisy, and corruption. The high official ultimately declares, “I would place myself beside the oppressed Filipinos, because I would prefer to succumb for the trampled rights of humanity than to triumph with the egotistic interests of a nation, even if that nation be called Spain” (344-345). Breaking down the racial distinctions entrenched by the Spaniards, the high official prioritizes his identification as a member of “humanity.” On this level, his alignment with the Filipino people destabilizes nationalism as a rigid concept founded on an “us” versus “them” binary – the nation of Spain versus the colony of the Philippines. The condemnation of one’s country and nationalist sentiments are shown to not be mutually exclusive, if and only if there exists a moral basis. Nationalism thus acquires the sense of desiring what is best for a nation in terms of its moral

health, to echo Rizal's medical analogy; in other words, love of one's nation becomes conflated with an uncompromising national commitment to upholding the "rights of humanity" over any national "egotistic interests." For Rizal, this shift in what it means to be a true nationalist, acknowledged to be extremely difficult, is essential to undergo prior to the emergence of a nation.

This re-defined sense of nationalism must fundamentally work in tandem with a cognitive awakening. The dialogue between Isagani, a native Filipino student, and Padre Fernandez, a Spanish priest and professor, highlights the shift that must occur in the sphere of education – rectifying the disparity between the state of enlightenment and lack of sociopolitical accountability among the youth. In response to Padre Fernandez's verbal attack on the Filipino students' defiance, Isagani retorts, "The fault is not all theirs...[it] is in those who taught them to be hypocrites; in those who tyrannize freedom of thought, freedom of speech" (298). He continues, exposing the mechanics of the Spanish educational system – "curtailing, as much as possible, knowledge; extinguishing all ardor and enthusiasm; diminishing all dignity...and inculcating in us ancient ideas, rancid notions, false principles incompatible with a life of progress" – and logic of the system – "it is not convenient that we enlighten ourselves because we are some day going to declare ourselves independent" (300-301). Alluding to Shakespeare's Cassius when he declares that the "fault is not all theirs," Isagani scathingly criticizes the Spaniards' fear of Filipino enlightenment and subtly assigns equal blame to those on the receiving end of the educational system, -- the students themselves – highlighting the two-way dynamic of education. E. San Juan notes that Rizal's concept of education "acquires a radical content because it is not passive absorption of abstract ideas but an emancipatory social practice, a harnessing of all the faculties for active intervention in society" (San Juan 31). This

“harnessing” of education for “active intervention in society,” as San Juan describes, articulates Rizal’s urging to the Filipino youth to take up the responsibility that accompanies education – knowledge put into practice. Education, for Rizal, is not a means of self-advancement or self-elevation, but a means through which to acquire the knowledge and critical ways of thinking essential for enlightened action – ultimately for the greater cause of independence from colonial subjugation. Caroline S. Hau describes the relationship between “revolutionary action and revolutionary consciousness”: “one not based on priority of one over the other, but on their mutual determination” (Hau 181). As Isagani demonstrates, “revolutionary consciousness” without “revolutionary action” has no significance following initial conscientization, but “revolutionary consciousness” necessarily precedes “revolutionary action.” Within the context of an education system characterized by social and moral corruption, the active use of consciousness, albeit evidently difficult to exercise within the inhibitory colonial space, leads to the formation of a cognitively self-reliant national character – a condition of viable rebellion. As such, the practical use of education becomes “emancipatory” in the sense that it is a means through which individual minds can be liberated from the mental enslavement by colonial discourses; the cycle of colonial hypocrisy and tyranny can subsequently be broken.

The termination of the cycle of colonialism is ultimately brought about by acts of moral creation rather than destruction. The concluding dialogue between Simoun and Padre Florentino (a virtuous native Filipino priest) emphasizes that rebellion must be morally sustainable in addition to being ideologically grounded. Frustrated with his thwarted scheme (a bomb intended to explode at a gathering of the colonial elite), Simoun demands, “does that God have to deny liberty to a people and save others much more criminal than I? [...] Why does that God have to take my iniquity more into account than the cries of so many innocents? [...] Why allow so

many deserving and just to suffer, and remain complacently unmoving in the face of their tortures?" (408). Rafael notes that Simoun "sets himself up as a third term that intervenes and adjudicates matters between colonizer and colonized" (Rafael 57). This third term, as Rafael comes close to articulating, is a God-like role – with this attempt at embodiment, the sense of an impending failure, both from a practical and moral standpoint. In attempting to rectify the logic of God by acting as the "Judge come to punish a social system through its own crimes," Simoun doubly dooms his endeavor – he justifies his actions on a rigidly retributive interpretation of justice that only further destroys, as opposed to a justice informed by moral considerations and of potential repercussions (70). Padre Florentino's rebukes Simoun, for the "glory of saving a country is not for him who has contributed to cause its ruin" and that "hate does not create anything but monsters, crime, criminals. Only love brings in the end marvelous works; only virtue can save!" (407). Rafael points out that instead of leading to the "domestication of nationalism," revenge "keep[s] the foreign in circulation" (Rafael 59). The character of Simoun is driven by vengeance, which necessarily "takes a violent form because it entails responding to a prior violence" (59). As such, Simoun inadvertently becomes an embodiment of the system itself, and, by extension, serves to perpetuate it rather than advance from it. In keeping the "foreign" in "circulation" – in other words, the "monsters, crime, [and] criminals" of colonialism – Simoun rejects the opportunity to establish a nation alternatively founded on the principles of "love" and "virtue." Contributing to the ruination generated by the Spanish empire, Simoun only hastens the ruination within, rather than transforming it into positive change and reform. Padre Florentino's final, pressing question – "Why independence if the slaves of today will be the tyrants of tomorrow?" – reinforces the fundamental necessity of breaking the colonial cycle of violence and immorality. In conflating the "slaves of today" with the "tyrants of tomorrow," he

acknowledges the ease in which colonial power structures are replicated; the post-colonial period thus even more so demands an uncompromising moral compass and collective self-examination of human tendencies. Simoun's silence, in addition to his death, terminates his dialogue with Padre Florentino, signifying that the potential resolution offered by virtue of the dialogue form lies not in the present, but with the future.

An analysis of the concept of a dialogue entails a consideration of the voices that are excluded from the discussion, just as much as those that are included. Rizal's deliberate minimization of the female voice – shaped by his intent to mirror colonial society – situates the plight of women as the all-encompassing representation of the colonial condition. Among the glaringly few female characters is Juli, the headstrong and devoted daughter of Cablesang Tales (a simple, respectable farmer turned violent insurgent) and betrothed to Basilio; barred from the opportunity of education, she works as a maidservant to a wealthy, elderly woman. With Basilio still imprisoned, Juli agonizingly concludes that there is only one solution: appeal to Padre Camorra, the notoriously flirtatious Spanish priest, who on multiple occasions “made her kiss his hand, caught her by the nose, by the cheeks, jested with her with winks and laughing, laughing, pinched her” (328). Rizal's use of asyndeton expresses the extent of the heavily implicated harassment Juli has faced; the limited but telling selection of detail illuminates how it has gone unjustly untold and with impunity. Upon her initial refusal to go to the convent, the narrator describes her thoughts: “she could not take that step without condemning herself, aside from being condemned by men and by God” (331). In acting of her own free will within the restrictive colonial space, Juli must necessarily condemn herself, or else face societal recriminations – Rizal's satirical critique of the deplorable lack of active roles for women in colonial society. The details surrounding Juli's death are conspicuously limited, summarized in only one sentence: “A

young woman had leapt from a window of the convent, falling upon some stones and killing herself” (336). The perspective of this reporting notably shifts from that of the third-person omniscient narrator to a townspeople; furthermore, the details of her meeting with Padre Camorra and moments (and thoughts) leading up to her suicide, in itself an understated manifestation of agency, are significantly omitted. Doubly stripped of her voice and power by the frailocracy and colonial society, Juli exemplifies San Juan’s argument that the “situation of woman may be considered the revealing symptom of the health or malaise” of Rizal’s milieu (San Juan 71-72). Indeed, the plight of women is grounded in colonial discourses of gender, race, and class power hierarchies, from which all the aforementioned epistemological shifts – regarding national language, nationalism, education, and moral compasses – intend to transcend. As San Juan implies, the powerlessness and voicelessness of women are manifestations of larger colonial rule, the gender and class struggles a microcosm of imperial functioning. The struggles of women in colonial society therefore become the struggles of all members of the colonized to overcome as they head towards the post-colonial.

Rizal’s *El Filibusterismo* is ultimately a synthesis of two interconnected dialogues: Rizal with his evolving ideology and Rizal with the youth in whom he plants the seeds of resistance – indestructible ideas. Transcending the cycle of colonialism necessitates a cognitive separation and progression from the logics of empire, which validates divisive hierarchies, justifies violence and brutality, and tolerates the oppression of groups of people, for ideas fundamentally forge, maintain, and perpetuate the rule and legacy of empire. In imparting his acquired knowledge of and insights into the mechanics of Spanish colonial rule to the Filipino youth, Rizal engages in a distinctive form of resistance that rejects armed rebellion and violent uprising in favor of a future-oriented instilling of enlightened and reform-minded ideas – the essential foundation of a

viable post-colonial nation. The fact that Rizal emphasizes the specific timing of revolutionary action emphasizes the fact that rebellion and independence will be meaningless and inviable without an initial, solidified ideological and moral basis. The most formidable obstacle facing the colonized emerges as the collective discourses – the ruins of empire – entrenched by the colonial system within their minds. The decolonization process thus becomes a complex, dynamic negotiation between two opposing identities – as the human remnants of empire and as individuals with cognitive agency.

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