

Star for a Cause: A Lacanian Review of The Solemn Lantern Maker

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Abstract— This paper aims to present Lacanian analysis of the novel, *The Solemn Lantern Maker* of Merlinda Bobis, a Filipino transnational writer. The formalistic approach was employed in the literary analysis of the elements of fiction, contextual representation of star as the novel's trope, and the societal problems depicted in the novel. It aims to introduce a paper that may be used in a teaching-learning scenario that evaluates and criticizes, anchored on the philosophical theory of Lacan on psychoanalysis. Saussure's linguistic as used in Lacan's psychoanalysis, traced the formalistic analysis in terms of characters and the trope, referring to the contextualization and symbolic meaning of star. The setting, structure and style, language and local color are suggestive of the foregrounding of the unconscious. The novel can be concluded as an expression of the author's speculation of the mechanism whereby an individual emerges into consciousness. The entire novel is suggestive of action that should emanate from the self, towards helping the community by being aware of the societal follies and angst originated from the colonial mentality brought by the country's course of history. It is recommended that the learning materials with realistic portrayal be treated with appropriate analytical tool.

Keywords— Lacanian analysis, psychoanalysis, *Solemn Lantern Maker*, Merlinda Bobis, Philippines.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Solemn Lantern Maker is a novel about star and silence published in Australia in 2008 and the following year in United States of America. It has 112 episodes/chapters divided into six days before Christmas, December 19 to December 24. The main character, ten-year old Noland is a mute, due to traumatic experience. The novel portrays binary oppositions such as powerless and powerful, Third-world country poverty and white- Western affluence with the balance on global and local issues. It talks about poverty, child prostitution, land struggles, and political corruption. They are the evident societal issues in the Philippines. The characters, amidst exploitations, bad memories and silences, exhibit hope for the better future. The novel's author, Bobis resides and works in Wollongong, Australia, but hailed from the province of

Albay in the Bicol region, southern part of the Philippines. She is an expatriate writer, a Filipino author who stays in another country but most of her works' subject is her own country. She writes in three tongues and in different genre where she proves her excellence in all her works through various awards and recognition. In general, she sees her country's need for liberation and search for cultural strength. Her being transnational motivates her to write from her perspective of Philippine culture associated with her personal experiences in other country. She wants her readers to understand her works from the recognition of society behind the creative representation of political and cultural flaws.

II. OBJECTIVES

This paper aims to introduce a reading material that may be used in a teaching-learning scenario which is based on the evaluation and analysis anchored on the philosophical theory of Lacan on psychoanalysis. Specifically, this paper deals on the formalistic evaluation of the elements of fiction focused on the characters' journey to self-fortification to reveal the socio-political and cultural angsts and the hegemony of power. Alongside, this paper also aims to disclose the contextual representation of stars behind the use of tropes in the narrative. Moreover, this paper also traces the cultural background of the Philippine underneath its tint of colonial mentality. This paper poses a reading material that serves not just a mere form of entertainment but also on discovering the reader's critical ability which is Lacan's idea on discovering oneself.

III. METHODOLOGY

The analysis of *The Solemn Lantern Maker*, Bobis' second novel is anchored on Lacan's concept of psychoanalysis which is applied in the understanding of the characters, their journey alongside their order of need, demand and desire. The formalistic evaluation of the novel including the setting, structure and style, tone, theme and the discussions of the societal issues led to the unveiling of the unconscious to conscious pattern as the reflection of the intrinsic complexities of the psyche. The trope was also used to reveal the hegemony of

power and the hidden colonial mentality behind the contextual representation of star in various instances.

Theoretical Framework

The Lacanian framework as applied in this paper claims that even if the signifiers are visual, they are treated as if they were verbal. Accordingly, “signifiers may only be interpreted when placed in a verbal context through chains of association” (Grosz, 2001,p 92-114). This paper used Lacan’s studies on the psychoanalysis and linguistics as theoretical framework, to show primarily how the conscious discourse veils the unconscious meaning.

Jaques Lacan (1901-1981) was a French psychoanalyst who re conceptualized Freud using post-structuralism. He sought to return psychoanalysis on the unconscious, using Saussure's linguistics, structural anthropology and post-structural theories. Lacan’s foregrounding of the unconscious lends to his speculation of the mechanism whereby an individual emerges into consciousness. Before the sense of self emerges, the young child exists in a realm, which Lacan calls the imaginary (pre-Oedipal), in which there is no distinction between the self and the other and there is an idealized identification with the mother. The child experiences both itself and its environment as a random, fragmented and formless mass. This paper shall follow the discussion of the novel identifying Lacan’s three orders- the imaginary, the symbolic and the real.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The main character’s Journey to self-fortification:

Noland and Nena’s Silent Space, A Star studied silent but loud cry for help

The main character, Noland is a lantern maker. He has been “silent” for four years. He is fascinated with angels and stars which clippings and sketches he keeps in his notebook. He basically believes that a star has five lights and angels live in stars.

This is how he is described at the beginning of the narrative:

Noland raises five fingers thrice to indicate fifteen pesos. Intent on his dinner, the man did not see the price. “how much?” he asks again. Noland raises his palm close to the man’s face repeating the gesture. The man pauses, stares- The man pays with a fifty-peso bill. Noland shakes his head and shows an empty palm. No change. Sorry sir. Perhaps two more stars? He offers a green one this time and another red.

“No, keep the change”. He waves the boy away and hangs the star on his window, just above the wheel. Then as an afterthought, “You mute, kid?”

The ten-year old nods.(pp.4-5)

Noland helps his mother earn their living through the colorful lanterns that he sells with his friend. They are living in a “box” called hut in the intersection of the city. It is made up of scraps of corrugated iron, wood, cardboard and plastic. They have been living in the slums area for two years. Later in the narrative, Noland becomes a subject of interest of a Japanese who gave him hundred dollars, food, new clothes and shoes in exchange of his photos taken in the hotel room. It worsens his trauma when the police “rescued” the American woman from their hut. Noland and his mother were brought to the precinct for detention and interrogation. In the epilogue, he is in a different house where he cannot see angels but remembers stars in the sky and hill.

Nena is Noland’s mother, a laundry woman whose legs were crippled four years earlier, the same time when his son acquires his “silence”. She has a trauma with “uniforms” and protects his son to the most that she can. She opposes the idea of helping the American woman lest it might cause them trouble. In the course of the narrative, she still takes care of the woman, offers her herbal medicine, and considers that she did it for her son.

Noland’s character is a victim of circumstances, of incidents around him. His only desire is to help “the angel” who fell from the sky. He only wants to decorate their house with pictures of stars and angels. He only wants to prepare designs of his lanterns in a notebook and to keep a picture of his mother with a young boy. Yet, it turns out that his simple wishes can be interpreted as a grim ploy of a terrorist conspiracy. Nena, on the other hand, is an archetype of a protective mother whose basic intention is to provide support and look after her son. There is a part in the narrative which suggests that she somehow feels jealous with their “guest. Generally, mother and son are both victims of situations that are beyond their control.

The above discussion on the mother and son showed an account of the mirror stage which is Lacan’s most famous theoretical contribution. For Lacan, the Freudian Oedipus complex stages the drama of the child’s laborious struggles to situate him/her-self vis-à-vis all three register-theoretic dimensions of Otherness. The child’s identifications with maternal and paternal Others are distributed across Real and Symbolic dimensions.

However, different subjects-in-formations distribute their identifications differently.

1.1 Other Character's Symbolic Order of Need, Demand and Desire

The understanding of the other characters in the novel provides the readers to decipher the main intention of the author as declared that the unconscious is structured like a language. Hence, linguistics and semiotics may be used in the analysis. (Grosz, 87).

According to Lacan, one of the (if not the) most significant and indispensable conditions of possibility for singular subjectivity is the collective symbolic order. Individual subjects are what they are in and through the mediation of the socio-linguistic arrangements and constellations of the register of the Symbolic.

A. Elvis and Bobby Cool

Elvis is a street boy who helps Noland sell his wares. He also works as a prostitute in exchange of his basic needs, like money, food and clothes. He cares about Noland like his own brother. Aside from helping him sell the lanterns, he tours Noland around, gives him money as a "share" from his "business profit" and treats him with food. When Noland becomes the target of the Japanese pedophile, he offers to do double work just to spare Noland from such "job".

After the hotel incident, Elvis fights back the pimp, who beats him in return and accuses him of having no sense of gratitude. He then tries to search for possible salvation when he visits the church and finding none, he continues with his known "business" even to locals whom he finds cheap. Elvis was shot by the police who are made to believe that he is the mastermind of the "terrorist attack" against the American woman.

Bobby Cool prides himself with the kind of job he offers to Elvis. He himself has been in the business and liberates himself after finding Elvis whom he considers as a "jackpot". He teaches Elvis the art of "becoming rich" through his language-English, the language of the customers and through wearing imitation of apparel brands. When Elvis fights him because of Noland, he loses his main source of income.

Elvis and Bobby are both victims of the pedophile industry in their own country. Such "industry" benefits the foreigners more because it is fueled by the cancer of poverty from the less fortunate children. With poverty at hand, the main focus is survival and morality does not matter. The narrative did not provide a redeeming condition in their characters. Elvis got killed and Bobby

might probably find another willing victim of his business.

B. Cate Burns

The American woman, Cate Burns arrives in the Philippines for a vacation, to unwind and rest her heart and mind from the disappointment towards her husband who does not want their child in her womb. She gets involved in the shooting of a journalist when she was "rescued" by Noland and Elvis who considers her an "angel". Her identity was only revealed through the news in the television. She temporarily suffered from amnesia due to trauma caused by the shooting and her miscarriage. When she was "rescued" from the hut and brought to the hospital, she wants to help the people who also helped her, but to no avail. The case of "missing American" was interpreted as a terrorist attack of the Abu Sayaff group.

Later in the narrative, everything becomes clearer as Cate remembers how it all started. She is a student in Cornell pursuing a doctorate degree in Literature and took off to another country without the knowledge of her husband. She recalls the incident before her flight to the Philippines from the taxi ride to the airport on the other side of the world "from a sleek apartment at leafy Cornell with a man in the bed whose smell is still on her. She has the imprint of his unwelcome lovemaking in the early hours" (p.220).

This is how she recounts the comparison between child and tax evasion:

Cook up the books for debit, cry poor, or poor me, and wait for the taxman to validate your withdrawal from the ranks of fatherhood. (p. 221)

Cate Burns is a woman who longs for love and liberty. When she decided to leave her husband, it brings her to a different scenario where she lost her child, and temporarily her own identity. She also lost her chance to help the mother and child, whom she knows are the ones who need protection. In her mind, she knows she can help but being controlled by some forces, physical and political; she is helpless.

C. Germinio De Vera and Lydia De Vera

Germinio de Vera is the man who was shot by the Pizza Hut man. He was a journalist famous for his daring exposés on corruption and extra-judicial killings.

This is how the narrative describes the news that reveals the motive of De Vera's murder.

The news speculates that Germinio De Vera was salvaged for exposing a senator's "friendship" with a famous Jueteng King, the godfather of illegal gambling. Perhaps the senator's election campaign was funded by this generous personage? But the journalist pushed his own luck further, throwing the deadly card on the table with the questions: Was the senator the Jueteng King himself? The answer was a speedy salvaging, on a motorcycle. (p. 59)

Lydia de Vera is the widow of Germinio De Vera. She organizes a public campaign against her husband's murderer. She finds her husband's old files on every corrupt official in the country and his newspaper articles that grew bolder through the years. She realizes that the bravery of her husband is at the same time his stupidity.

The couple is called "the young activist couple, the "idealists", the "radical couple". It signifies their compatibility in profession, being a journalist and a political science graduate. Their principle turns them into victims of the system, Germinio, the allegedly hero is considered the enemy and a fool. Lydia de Vera lost her love, her Jimmy, the husband for only two years. She was not able to do anything even at the later part of the narrative although she has the old files of her late husband. It is a life, love, and principle wasted in the societal chaos.

D. Senator GB or Good Boy Buracher

The senator is the one accused of being friends with the godfather of illegal gambling. He is the one pursued by Germinio De Vera and after the murder, pursued by another reporter. This is how the reporter interrogates him:

Senator, what about the fact that the deceased exposed your alleged involvement with illegal gambling, that you're possibly one of its big bosses, and that someone, in fact, overheard you threaten to "mow-down any two-bit journalist' who messes with your so-called 'operations'0 what do you say to that senator?

And senator, do you think there's any connections between Germinio De Vera's murder and the kidnapping of cate Burns? (p. 146)

The senator earned his nickname "Good Boy" from his religious charities where his wife who is twenty years his junior sings after they got married. He is described in the narrative who likes indirect influences. As such,

"he can speak to his friends who will make sure someone loses his job if this isn't handled his way" (p.217)

It can be gleaned from the way the senator reacts that he is guilty of the said accusations. When the TV news keeps showing the innocent face of the accused boy, he curses the TV and speaks his mind that, "if there's any more tugging at the heartstrings, they'll snap". It goes to show that his character wants to be freed from what he is actually guilty of. He will do anything at the expense of others, just to stay in his comfort zone, free from the accusations of which he is guilty of. He wants temporary peace, through forgetting his conscience when he is with his young wife and daughter.

E. Colonel David Lan

Colonel Lane is an American in charge of the "search and rescue operation" of the missing American, Cate Burns. He is called "people's colonel", being a model soldier from Afghanistan after the 9/11 attack in the US. He also tries to persuade the consul from the US embassy to help Cate Burns with her wish, about saving the mother and son. He had been warned to mind his business instead and it does not include saving other people who are not his people. He recounts the issue of Philippine-American relationship as presented in these excerpts from the narrative:

David hears the equal bitterness of the Filipina journalist on the television panel. After a while, he whispers tiredly, "Forty years Bettina. We occupied them for forty years and before that, we fought them in a war, and much later, we backed the dictator who robbed them blind for twenty years (216).

His character serves as an example of a willing victim of forces around him. He has a duty to fulfill yet not being able to do it at his own will and decision. His frustration left him restless that he can be likened to a prisoner. A captive of his duty as a soldier and husband, a person torn between his domestic life and country's call.

F. Colonel Roberto Espinosa

Roberto Espinosa is the chief of Special Projects. Special Projects include the Philippine government programs to combat against forces that serve as threat to its people. One of it is the Balikatan or the shoulder to shoulder fight with the US against possible attack of terrorism. Espinosa was able to "bag" the evidences found in the hut such as the stars, the notebook, the dollar, and the clippings. He also disguises as an ally of Nena and Noland who are the victims turned culprits of

a controversial murder. This is how his thoughts are described in the narrative:

Ah, there's blood on all our hands. He studies the photos of the boys again, trapped in a star. Yes, save the senator and save himself, his job, save everyone. A safe house then, safe from the news cannibals until the New Year, and maybe, just maybe- he mulls over possibilities, over the faces on the star. It must be the angels for where can this inspiration springs from? He wants to save one boy, at least the one he knows, but the older one makes him drop his eyes. (p. 239)

Later, his character knew full well that the mother and son are innocent. The 'truth' from the notebook, which others consider as the "terrorist- attack evidence" landed on his desk.

He receives phone calls that stir his sense of judgment and make him contemplate on what to do. Finally, like the other characters in the narrative, he was destined to be a captive of the system. It is the sense of survival that still succeeded. In a system run by people in power, there is an extensive manipulation of truth.

G. Eugene Costa

Described as the stalker young journalist, Eugene Costa pursues the case of the murder and the missing American. He tries to interview the senator only to be moved aside by his bodyguards. He believes in the same idea that Germinio De Vera was murdered because of his exposés.

His character is another archetype of a dutiful person, tied to the obligation of his work. He is physically and emotionally tired and longing for sleep and vacation in the province. Yet, he is mandated to seek the truth, despite his fright from being aware that anyone telling the truth can be murdered.

H. Mario and Helen, Mang Pedring and Manang Betya

Mario and Helen are a couple who has no offspring. Their source of income is the pirated video films they play in their hut in the intersection. Mario is fond of cockfight while Helen gossips and befriends their neighbors to catch fresh stories for the day. When she saw Cate Burns in front of their neighbors' hut, she manages to inform the authorities with the thought that she will get a reward.

Mang Pedring is called the "wire-man" in the intersection who provides illegal connection of

electricity through his bag of tools in exchange of a certain fee. Manang Betya is also one of their neighbors. She always holds a rosary in one hand and the other holds the notebook she uses for jueteng, an illegal gambling racket.

They are characters who are examples of common people who face daily struggles of survival. They mirror the kind of Filipinos who are fond of vices like gossiping and different types of gambling. They relied their source of living from business done in an illegal way. At the later part of the narrative, they all sought self- fortification against the "crime" done by their neighbors, trying to justify that they are better than them.

I. Mang Gusting, Mikmik, and Lisa

Mang Gusting is the store owner in the intersection. He has a karaoke that adds to the life of the nightly drinking spree. His wife left for Hongkong as an OFW and never came back. He is unaware of her charges there while he seeks for the satisfaction of his biological needs through Liza. She is one of the "karaoke women" at night and the washerwomen during the day. Nena lost the only client of her laundry over her. Michaela or Mikmik is the daughter of Mang Gusting. Like any other child who longs for a mother and grows up with only a father, she seeks companionship with her "gang" and learns that things can be acquired through pretension.

Those three characters are also representatives of people with their own desires. They cope with their longing through any available immediate means that they could have. Each takes an opportunistic way of getting through with the society at the expense of others.

2. Setting

The novel is set in the Philippines, in the heart of the city of Manila, its capital. The narrative expresses its history through the description of places that the characters explore. Primarily, Chapter 1 has description provided in the thought of the narrator, *palm as small as star, star as small as a country. My country's children, small as hope. (pp. 4-5)*

One of the characters explicitly introduces the place to the American woman this way: *Nena is excited. Philippines, you know, good, good. Philippines here, Manila here, my house here, you here, okay (p. 88).*

The narrative provides a photographic image of the slums, where corrugated iron, cardboards, and plastic make up a shelter or houses. The communities of the rich and the poor are both described through the representation of their ways of living. The senator's

lavish living is presented by the mention of some appliances like his own home theater.

Likewise, the area like Quiapo where the “religious vendors” of herbs used to abort a fetus, abound, along with the folks with so much catholic faith and worship the black Nazarene, is also described. Other landmarks are described such as Plaza Miranda where political bombing happened in 1972 during the dictator’s years of martial law; the Star City, “where Noland can find all the rides of his dreams”; CCP the Cultural Center of the Philippines-the building developed to the arts; and MOA, the Mall of Asia, one of the largest shopping malls in Asia. They all stand on a vast reclaimed area developed during the Marcos dictatorship. The narrative also mentions the airport named after Senator Ninoy Aquino who was shot at its tarmac.

It is Christmas season in the narrative and mentioned that the Philippines has the longest celebration in the world lasting usually for four months. Decorations are set from the first “ber” month, September and hang until the first week of January.

3. Structure and Style

The novel is told in an omniscient point of view. The narrator tells the story in an all-knowing manner, with insertions of inner thoughts provided in italicized form. The stories of the characters are interwoven in the incident that happens in six consecutive days. The narrative was able to link a local incident to an international terrorist attack and eventually goes out of proportion as an issue of national security. Note in the following excerpts:

Palm as small as a star, star as small as a country. How small (p.10)

Hush, I know a story you don't know. (p. 25)

This is how the idea is infused in the story:

It's a civilian matter, for God's sake but after 9/11 any American gets hurt or gets sneezed at in a foreign country and "terrorism" rears its ugly head. (p. 89)

Do you think this abduction could be a terrorist act against the United States? Lest you forget, we've had abductions before in Mindanao. (p. 108)

Who knows, the Abu Sayyaf has now infiltrated Manila. (109)

The chronology of events is presented with some flashbacks to clarify some issues like the background of the American woman Cate Burns, the experience of Colonel David Lane in Iraq, Afghanistan and the cause of silence of the main character, Noland, including the trauma of her mother to soldiers in uniforms.

This is an example of how the narrative presented the earlier events in a whole short chapter:

The sun is high and the field is white. It's close to noon. A man is pacing around the hut, his wife pleading with him. Earlier he was in the field, fixing a water pipe; a paddy fish was caught in it. The landlord's foreman came, a surprise visit- he usually comes only during the harvest. He was friendly, even got down on his knees to help him rescue the fish. They had a laugh, then a smoke. Then slowly the news about the planned subdivision, because the landlord must diversify. The voice was apologetic, saying nothing will happen until after the next harvest and his family can stay for as long as he likes even after that, until the construction begins, of course.

The rescued fish stopped struggling in his grip. His fingers burrowed into the gills; a bone struck into his palm. The sun disappeared in the sky; even as it burned his face.

"No, you're not going there, not like this", says his wife, but even his ears have died. Only his skin feels real, stinging in every pore as he walks out, walks to the big house, just as the landlord is getting into his Mercedes for a lunch in town without his usual bodyguards.

His ears have died like his eyes, all silent and dark, but his arms, his chest, all his flesh feels the warm spurts as he hacks and hacks. This is for my son, my father, my father's father- all of us that you've erased from this land. (pp. 245-246)

The above citation from the novel explains the earlier actions that led to the rationalization of events causing the mother and son's fate six years since then. The same is true with the socio-political issues that are mentioned in the story.

Lacan as discussed by Homer (2005) tends to associate the Imaginary with the restricted spheres of consciousness and self-awareness. It is the register with the closest links to what people experience as non-

psychoanalytic quotidian reality. Who and what one “imagines” other persons to be, what one thereby “imagines” they mean when communicatively interacting, who and what one “imagines” oneself to be, including from the imagined perspectives of others—all of the preceding is encompassed under the heading of this register.

4. Tone

The way the story was told has traces of concern to the innocent victims of circumstances. The story presents the main character as helpless. Despite his struggle against their poverty, his interest on stars and angel eventually leads him to a situation worsened by people, rich and poor, in his society. The hero turns out as evil and the evil evades the crime through the power of politics.

A call for awareness on the societal issues that oppressed the already oppressed is the novel’s purpose. It points to the opposite of the real problem, where non-serious matters are treated as the more serious. The tone can be clearly identified as satirical as the events pose various issues in the society from simple to complex manipulation of power. Hints of call for salvation is obvious in the presentation of how the fictional characters think for themselves, the real stories around them and the society as a whole. Below is an example of how call for salvation is presented in the narrative:

When a story is told, there’s nothing much to do. The air does it for us, replenishes our lungs because we’ve lost so much in the telling, but even this air is thick with story. It feeds us back what we’ve just told, so it’s difficult to breathe. (p. 253)

5. Theme

The whole novel is packed with different metaphors that call attention to listening, to paying attention with the things that matter despite the idea of silence amidst war. Both mother and son longed to be heard, to have someone who will ask them and listen to their cries, to break their silence and hear what they are about to say. Moreover, the need to give focus on the issues that can only be treated with one’s helpfulness is also one of the main ideas in the novel.

This is how the narrative presents such instance:

*What happened, Nena?
She keeps feeding the boy soup. It runs down his chest.
Did anyone hurt you, Noland?*

She is crying, It’s good to be asked, ay it’s good to be asked. (p.228)

It is also the consideration of respect of individual’s rights and freedom that the novel likewise wants to imply. Every character, including the mother and the son, has the desire of being free. The freedom to decide and do what they want. In the case of Noland, he only wants to sell his lantern and help the American woman whom he thinks is an angel from the sky. Nena only wants to protect her son and survive. Elvis and Bobby Cool want freedom and survival from poverty, hence the pedophile thing. Cate Burns wants to claim her freedom of keeping the baby and later, to reciprocate the goodness of those who help her. Before the murder of Germinio De Vera, he wants to expose the graft and corruption of the senator. The same concept is being pursued by the young journalist, Eugene Costa.

The other characters all desire freedom from poverty and claims for peace, (against the idea of relocation) in their place, the intersection. The Senator wants to free himself from the accusations of the media. Colonel David Lane as well as Roberto Espinosa wants their own liberty to help, to provide justice. The former wants pursue the request of Cate Burns and personally help the innocent victims by himself; while the latter wants to reveal the truth behind the “evidence”, the notebook with mere sketches of stars.

Furthermore, the concept of Christmas offers hope and salvation through the celebrated birth of infant Jesus, whom the Catholics believed as their savior. The season proposes most positive expectations of goodwill, love, reunion, forgiveness, acceptance and generosity. Such optimistic ideas are all suggestive in the novel.

The above discussion points back to the conclusion of Lacan (2004a) that underneath the signifier is a repressed unconscious reality capable of being unveiled. He borrowed the concepts of metaphor and metonymy from Roman Jakobson in re –appropriating Freud’s condensation and displacement of ideas.

6. Star: Its Contextual Representation

Star is ever present in the entire novel. Star in general, represents hope and optimism. Its brightness serves as the light that illuminates the concept of darkness. There are various ways on how the star is used in the novel to represent ideas.

Star for money. Parol or the Christmas Lantern is the ware that the main character sells. Star that way, serves as the main source of income that puts food on their table. It is also used by Elvis as a props whenever he

needs to deliver his service to a foreign client from the pimp, Bobby Cool. The same was used by Bobby Cool to win his trust and company as a possible another protégé in the future. Note this in the following excerpts:

Parol is the traditional star lantern. Not for Noland, Though. You call a star a star, or not at all. But of course, he can't say. Nor can he say that Bobby's donation of five hundred pesos towards his business is too generous. What if he can't sell enough lanterns to pay him back? But uncle and nephew assured him that business would grow if they worked together like family. (p. 6)

Star for Friendship. Star with five points is compared with the littleness of the palm. The little hands of Noland and Elvis which sealed their friendship through their “gimme five” gesture. The size of the star is also compared to the smallness of the Philippines as a country and its friendly relations with the vast land of United States of America. The US flag is composed of fifty-two stars that represent the number of states. Such ideas can be deciphered from the following lines in the novel:

Palm as small as a star, star as small as a country. (p.4)

They grew softer when his benefactors realized he couldn't speak. “You don't say because you're busy thinking”, Elvis diagnosed his condition. “So gimme five!” Their friendship was sealed. (p.6)

Star for Hope. Star suggests hope and inspiration for Noland. He decorates their house with pictures of angels and stars from magazines and billboards. His star lanterns also inspire him and encourage him to do creative things despite being forlorn for four years. This is how it is described in the narrative:

One Christmas, he bought some Japanese paper and bamboo from money earned selling his scavenged bottles. He made his first lantern, a tiny star. By a stroke of luck, he sold it to someone who had just bought a shell lantern. He happened to be standing with his star beside one of the stalls. The nice lady thought his creation “cute” and rare these days when lanterns were made of either plastic or shell, “Parolito – little lantern”, she said pinching his cheek. He couldn't name his price, but she gave him fifteen pesos. He was stunned. His mother wept and thanked his angels, not

for the money but for the return of her boy. He was coming alive. He stopped whimpering into space, stopped wetting his pants. He made more stars. In this joy, all sorrow could only be irrelevant. (p. 20)

Star for Entertainment. Star City refers to the entertainment center with different rides. When Noland first saw it, his impression is it is a city inhabited by stars. Elvis tries to tell Noland that it is where they can find Ferris wheels, bumper cars, roller coasters, Little Mermaid, Snow White, Horror House. It is a place where their cart is not allowed but other types of transportation abound. The following is an excerpt of the argument between the guard and Elvis at the door of the Star city:

At the door, the guard stops them. He notes the shabby cart, thinks street kids. “Hoy, not allowed”. “I'll pay for it, too- how much do you want?” He takes out a wad of pesos from his pocket. But the guard can't be seen to go back on his word. “You don't pay to me, you pay there.” He motions to the counter inside. But they won't let you in, so go away. You're holding up the line (p.104).

Star for Guide. In the story referring to the Holy Family, a star guided the kings to trace the newborn Jesus. This star is represented in the nativity of the Holy Family. In the novel, the star also serves as the guide of Noland towards coming to life after realizing that he could earn money out of selling the star lanterns. The sketches of star in his notebook also provide illumination of truth to Chief Espinosa, yet others interpreted them as a cult sign.

Star for Conspiracy. The notebook of Noland with sketches of stars where each of the five points was encircled is interpreted as a cult sign. There are also speculations from their own neighbors that the mother and son are part of a cult, called kultong terorista or a terrorist cult. Initially, this is how they have interpreted the drawing which resulted to the exoneration of the real criminal. The excerpt from the narrative discusses such assumptions although ironically, an American official sees clearly the truth. Consider the following excerpts from the narrative:

In the way the star is drawn and decked, it looks like a – what do you call it, a mandala? Is this evidence of a cult? Was the American abducted by a cult? And the journalist shot by

their hitman? Are the boys working for a terrorist cult? (p. 179)

*“A kid, a lantern seller, is an Abu Sayyaf operative in the slums of Manila, is that it?”
“What do you think?”*

He laughs bitterly. “A Hollywood conspiracy. C’mon, the boy’s hut is filled with stars and angels. He’s acatholic. It’s not Allah, Bettina, it’s a different God. But the spin doctors left that out, of course. (pp 213-214)

Star for a Private Room. A five-star hotel is where the “business” of Elvis concludes. It is also where Noland had his first exposure to prostitution, where he was exploited by a pedophile Japanese. The hotel room serves as Noland’s witness of Elvis’ supposition that Bobby is a liar. It could be for more than pictures that the Japanese has paid for. In another perspective, the room in a five-star hotel indicates the only place where Elvis and Noland can get resources for salvation.

Star for Angels. Nena told a story to the six-year old Noland that the stars above the hill are angels and they are watching over them. Over the years, whenever Noland collects stars, it is always accompanied by angels. This is how the narrative describes Noland’s thoughts when his father was killed:

He’s afraid there’s no angel waiting up there because there’s no star yet, of course. The stick figure is halfway up. Sometimes it disappears, swallowed by the brightness. He squints to bring it back. (p. 248)

Stars are used to indicate both negative and positive sides of the picture. The things that they represent show the connotative picture of the country, Philippines with longing for things which are foreign and looked up to. Stars suggest both hope and despair to the actual issues of the nation that need change for the better.

It can be gleaned from the abovementioned discussion of various representation of star, that the language of literature, like the images in Freud’s dreams is constantly being disguised as metaphor and metonymy. The readers’ task is to unveil the literary work’s latent, unconscious text from the manifest one. (Stoltfuz 1996, p.7)

7. Societal Problems Depicted in the Novel

Poverty is manifested in the narrative through the mention of the houses in the slums. The attitude of the neighbors towards one another is somehow suggesting

an intention, or a way of liberating themselves from poverty. Every character who lives in the intersection is wary of one another. For instance, Helen suspects that Manang Betya pocketed her winning once; and Liza has also hijacked her laundry customer.

The issue of gambling is also evident even in the intersection at the midst of crisis amidst the Christmas season and fear of the “relocation”. There is the mention that Mario won in the cockfight, thus Helen was able to cook chicken tinola out of his winning. The mention of jueteng is an explicit example of gambling where people bet money for a game of luck in their chosen numbers.

Child prostitution is clearly manifested in the narrative. Bobby Cool has been a child prostitute before he found a protégé through Elvis. Elvis succumbs to the “business” to survive and to enjoy simple pleasures like going to the mall, wearing fake branded apparels, and treating Noland with some of his “profit”. Bobby deceptively introduced Noland in the same business and it angers Elvis.

The problems met by OFW’s like the wife of Mang Gusting and Mikmik’s mother who went to Hongkong to work as a domestic helper is also implied in the story. The domino effect of having no woman in the family can lead to extra marital affair and an unusual personality of a child.

Issues on morality are not as much practiced by the poor, but more so by those in power and even government officials. As mentioned in this descriptive statement lifted from the novel: A businessman and his mistress sit up in bed, awed by the helicopter with a machine gun hanging out right at their hotel window. (p.91)

The issue of greed extends not only to the insatiability on money but also of power. The senator uses his connections not to lose his power, gained through obtaining money from gambling and other illegal activities. The unending war can also be traced from the greed of power.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Solemn Lantern Maker is full of urban-centered scenes with some flashes of a farm life that provide obvious contrast and similarity between the two. The desperate hope of those in the city fearing of eviction from their “borrowed lands” and their way of life presents a resemblance with that of those in the rural, in the farm, cultivating one’s land for their living. The novel calls for hope despite the traumatic experiences from the societal cancer, the hegemony of power.

The name Noland portrays the literal situation, “no land”. An incident in the past related to land when he was just six years old causes his trauma that results to his “silence”. The land in the narrative symbolizes not only a farm or a residential lot but a larger perspective of a country.

Holland (1968) in his *The Dynamics of Literary Response* considers that the literary text is decoded to reveal how disguise and adaptation into socially acceptable language serve to make unconscious wishes accessible to the reader through creative transformation. This is manifested in the novels of Bobis where she presents ideas about her own country compared with her experiences in other country.

The theme of freedom and identity in the novel can also be hinted from the idea of love. This idea of love was also evident in the other novels of Bobis as mentioned by Gilbas (2015) in her discussion of satirical tropes. From the novel’s analysis, this is clearly evident in the major character’s trauma that resulted to his “silence” which can be traced back from his father’s love. The arrival of the American, Cate Burns who was called the “angel” was triggered by her love to her unborn child. The love for “peace” of the other characters manipulated their actions and connivance to the extent of sabotage and salvage.

The idea of phenomenology as discussed by Hornedo (2002) states that “there is a human nature common to writer and reader. Thus the phenomenological intentional acts described by a writer in his work, even if fictive, since these have been present to another’s consciousness, they can become present again in another’s”. It was further explained that the said idea makes it possible for the reader to “re- experience the work in his or her own consciousness”.

The Solemn Lantern Maker, star and angel are the tropes which also become the source of problem in the narrative. They signify the opposite of the novel’s theme. They are hope and guidance that the characters’ need most. Those tropes also represent various incidental socio-cultural and political involvement of the country. Also, the tropes let the readers decipher and trace the historical journey of the Philippines from the colonizers. Both the star and angel of Noland can be accounted to the Catholic religion that gives hints of Spanish influence and at the same time American supremacy over a developing country like the Philippines.

The narrative is a showcase of the nation’s societal exploration where people’s dreams are silenced by their experiences, psychological intricacies and external power or forces. It is suggested that fictive stories be treated with analyses that may elevate the literary work from a simply “reading for pleasure material” to a culturally specific context that abounds with historical and universal truths exposing human conditions.

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