

Refugee, Shelter and Threat: Nature Represented in f. Sionil Jose's *Dusk*

Kristiawan Indriyanto
 Sanata Dharma University
kristiawanindriyanto@gmail.com

Abstract

*This paper seeks to explore the role and representation of nature in F.Sionil Jose's *Dusk*. He explores the journey of a Philippines' clan who migrates from Northern Luzon into Central Plains to escape the Spanish oppression. Through the presentation of an omniscient narrator who narrates the journey of Istak Samson and his clan, F.Sionil Jose depicts the lushness of Philippines' wilderness. To explore his representation of nature, this paper applies narratology and ecocriticism. Several narratological concepts used are mainly related with the issue of space, concerning the presentation and the spatial standpoint of the depiction of nature. These concepts analyze how the omniscient narrator of *Dusk* portrays the wilderness of Philippines interior. Nature is primarily depicted in two aspects. Firstly, nature can provide shelter, nourishment, and also comfort for the humanity. Secondly, nature is also an untamed and even hostile force who can claim the life of people who pass through it.*

Keywords: Representation of nature, space, ecocriticism, wilderness.

1. Introduction

Literature coming from Southeast Asia has received greater popularity nowadays, especially among the ASEAN members itself. Gin (2009, P.246), mentions how "Southeast Asian studies in contemporary Southeast Asia is assuming increasing importance in the region itself." He further notes that it is seen in the number of study programme –ranging from baccalaureate to doctorates – which offer Southeast Asian studies as a discipline. This phenomenon is linked with how English is more prominently used as the language for literature publication. As stated by Quayum (1981, P.81-91), "once an instrument of empire, English is now readily accepted as a bridge language and the language of cultural mutuality and impartiality among a growing member of Asian nations." His statement indicates the changing paradigm of the use of English, now the view is that English is less an extension of imperial authority but is instead a medium to communicate. The use of English is more stated in literature coming from Malaysia, Singapore and also Philippines. Some famous authors coming from these regions are Edwin Thumboo and Gopal Baratham from Singapore, Lloyd Fernando and K. S Maniam from Malaysia and

also F.Sionil Jose and Jose Dailsay, Jr from the Philippines.

This paper focuses more on F.Sionil Jose, more specifically on one of his novels entitled *Dusk* or *Po-on* in the original language. *Dusk*, which was published in 1984 is the last novels in the Rosales quintet. Although it was printed lastly, chronologically it is the first novel in the saga. Istak Samson (Eustaquio Salvador), the protagonist of *Dusk* is the ancestor of Tony Samson (his grandson) in *The Pretenders* (1962) and also the great grandfather of Pepe in *Mask* (1979). The Rosales quintet expresses anti-colonialist view, from the earlier Spanish colonialism (ended in 1898), American imperialism (until 1946), and even the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos (started in 1965). Several studies, for example the ones written by Jaime an Lim (1991, P.81-91) and Elizabeth G.Yoder (1988, P.82-84) have charted how this anti-colonialist perspective is reflected in Jose's saga. To differentiate this study from previous research, this paper mainly focuses on two main aspects: (1) reading only on *Dusk* and (2) analyzes the role and representation of nature through ecocriticism.

This paper uses two main theories to analyze *Dusk*, narratology and ecocriticism. The

main framework of the analysis is focusing on the rhetorical organizations of texts (Martin, 2007, p.1), how several narrative devices are used by the narrator to create meaning. This paper especially emphasizes on the narratological concept of space, how space is presented and integrated on the narrative. Furthermore, the analysis also concerns how F.Sionel Jose depicts nature in two contradictory aspects, either emphasizing the safety and comfort of nature and also how nature is also dangerous. These two theories illustrate the role and representation of nature in F.Sionel Jose's *Dusk*.

This paper summarizes several narratological concept related to space. Space in narrative is a relatively recent avenue for analysis, as stated by de Jong (2012, p.2), previously narrative gives more emphasis on the temporal arrangement of story instead of the spatial arrangement of space. De Jong further acknowledges that contemporary narratologist has entered the "spatial turn", recognizing the importance of space such as the location where the story takes place. These discussions affirm how contemporary narratologies also focuses on the issue of space.

Regarding space in narrative, this paper reviews several main concepts. Firstly, the aim is on reviewing how presentation of space is integrated in the narrative (De jong, p.8-11). The presentation of space is related with who the focalizer is. Focalizer refers to the one who focalize, the one who narrates the event using his/her perspective and also his/her voice. Regarding how space is presented, it can be presented by the narrator him/herself using their own focalization. In this case, the narrator can employ external omniscient focalization or the narrator can also use more limited internal focalization. Another possible way to present space is through the focalization of a character (character-focalizer). In this way, an external omniscient narrator employs embedded focalization to voice his/her character's speech.

Second important point related with the presentation of space is the spatial standpoint of the presenter. Previously this paper has

explained how presentation of space is related with who the focalizer is and now the focus is on the distance between the focalizer and the object described. One way is called *panoramic* standpoint, where the focalizer stands at a considerable distance where s/he can oversee a large stretch of space (on a tower, hill, tree, etc). Secondly is *scenic* standpoint. While previously on *panoramic* standpoint the focalizer is rather faraway, in *scenic* standpoint the focalizer is located directly on the spot. *Scenic* standpoint is further divided into *shifting* standpoint (the focalizer moves about) and *fixed* standpoint (static in one perspective only). Lastly is *close-up*, where the focalizer looks at an object from close quarters.

After reviewing several narratological concept of space, now this paper briefly reviews ecocriticism. This approach focuses on the relationship between literature and nature, as human culture is linked with the physical world. It is further explained by Glotfelty:

Ecocriticism can be further characterized by distinguished it from other critical approaches. Literary theory, in general, examines the relations between writers, texts, and the world. In most literary theory, "the world" is synonymous with society –the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of "the world" to include the entire ecosphere (Glotfelty, Cheryll and Harold, 1996, P. xiv).

Several literary theorists, one example Edward (1975, P.1-23) Said emphasizes the worldliness of a text. Said illustrates how reading of a text inevitably must also focuses on the historical context of its production, as a text is part of the world. Ecocriticism expands on this definition, the notion of "the world" is not only limited to the socio-historical contexts but also includes the ecosphere. Hence, ecocritical reading gives more emphasis of nature depicted in the text.

This thesis uses the ecological concept of wilderness. Wilderness is defined by Greg Garrard (2004, p. 59) as "nature in a state uncontaminated by civilization." Garrard's statement indicates that the absence of human

made civilization is the defining characteristics of wilderness. Although wilderness is noted by the total lack of human society, human can also exploit wilderness, in form of opening up the land for settlement. Gerrard (p.60) notes how stories about wilderness commonly tell about “settler experience in the New World – particularly United States, Canada, and Australia.” This aspect of wilderness can also be found in F.Sionel Jose’s *Dusk*. An important plot point is how Istak Samson and his tribe clear up the wilderness in Rosales, Pangasinan and establish their settlement there. Therefore, it can be seen how wilderness functions as a source of haven, refugee, and shelter.

Although wilderness can provide nourishment and safe shelter for humanity, there is also another aspect of wilderness. The word “wilderness” itself is derived from the Anglo-Saxon ‘wildeoren’, where ‘deoren’ or beasts existed beyond the boundaries of cultivation (Greg, p.60). Although previous definition of wilderness emphasizes on how it is possible for human to cultivate wilderness, nature is actually always a threat due to its unpredictability. Hence, human can never be able to fully tame wilderness. Margaret Atwood identifies one archetype of wilderness, which is “death by nature.” Death by nature is defined as “something in the natural world which murder the individual (Margaret, 1972, p.54).” She especially asserts on how nature, particularly wilderness is primarily dangerous with its murderous intentions. The beautiful setting and landscape are actually filled with hostile threats all over which threatened humanity. Several possible “death by nature” are drowning, freezing, and also death by wild animals. It shows the contrasting aspect between hostility and safety of wilderness.

2. Discussion

The primary emphasis is on highlighting two aspects of nature depicted in F.Sionil Jose’s *Dusk*. Before explaining the aforementioned part, this paper briefly explores the thematic function of space in *Dusk*. Although *Dusk* is not strictly categorized as a nature writing per se, nature is important due to its thematic function in creating the plot. Nature writing, as defined

by Roche (2016), is “writing about nature from an ecocentric standpoint, denoting a nature centered, rather than human-centered, system of values.” Although F. Sionel Jose does not primarily write *Dusk* “from an ecocentric standpoint”, it can be seen how nature, especially wilderness plays an important role characterized by the thematic function of space. The conflicts and dangers faced by Istak and his tribe is caused by their journey across the wild regions of Philippines. Further sections will explore the role and representation of nature in *Dusk*.

a. Nature as Shelter and Haven

Firstly, this paper how wilderness functions as the source of refugee, haven, and comfort for the escaped citizens of Po-on, Istak’s home village. Due to the accidental murder of Cabugaw’s pastor by Istak’s father, the people of Po-on have to escape the retribution of the Spaniard’s military forces – the Guardia Real-. In order to do that, they abandon their home in Po-on, and they journey into the region of Pangasinan, far to the South. Their journey is marked by their close relationship with nature, nature provides them with nourishment to sustain their life. It is depicted through the narrator’s *scenic* standpoint; the narrator is positioned on the scene:

There was the day’s work, the gathering of grass for the bull, the preparation of food or the search for it—green papayas, wild bananas, and the edible leaves of trees. They had stopped for the day, and the men had cleared the crest of a hill on which stood a giant tree. They were at the edge of the forest and to their right the land undulated in a series of low hills into the sea. (p. 132)

From the quotation above, it can be seen how the Po-on denizens’ voyage Southward is advantaged by the richness of the wilderness. Nature provides them with “green papayas and wild bananas”, furthermore their livestock is also able to feed from the grass.

Another thematic function of nature in this way is how nature conceals the fleeing Po-on villagers from the pursuit of the Guardia

Real. As the tribe from Po-on are being hunted, they are unable to use the highroad during heavy traffics and they have to move carefully across the wilderness. The road is only usable by them when it is nighttime. The narrator narrates it as, “again, they travelled by road. To use the road, they would have to circle around the towns where the Guardia would be (p. 138-139).” As they are unable to use the road openly, the majority of their journey is through the wilderness. The trek is depicted by the narrator’s panoramic standpoint:

Morning again; the sky lightened slowly and the stars winked out. Istak could raise half his body now. They were on a rise of ground and close by the forest, with the mountain rising behind the tall trees. On one side, through the curtain of tall grass, the land plummeted to the sea, and there, like a brown line on the coast, was the Spanish road (p. 118-119).

While previously scenic standpoint means that the narrator is there directly on the spot, this use of panoramic standpoint causes the journey to be narrated from bird’s eye perspective. In other words, the narrator is positioned above the Po-on denizens. It is stated that the fleeing Po-on tribe on “a rise of ground, near the forest.” The narrator further contrasted between “tall grass” on one side and “the Spanish road” on the other side. We can see how the wilderness conceals the migrating Po-on villagers by the concealment of “curtain of tall grass.” It illustrates how nature helps the fleeing Po-on denizens from being captured by the Guardia Real.

Furthermore, wilderness in *Dusk* is also important in which Istak’s fellow villagers establish a new settlement in Rosales. In this case, the thematic function of wilderness is similar with the settler narrative of the New World, opening up the untamed land for civilization. The unsettled land near Rosales is offered to Istak through the embedded focalization of Don Jacinto, a member of Spanish *principalia* – noble class:-

“I can help you,” he continued. “You must help me, too. I have land which I

cannot clear or plant because there are not enough hands for it. You can work there ...” Then he turned to Istak. “There is plenty of land here—across the creek are more cogonals, mounds, many, many trees. They are yours if you can clear them. So why don’t you work for me and I will give you all the seed rice you need? There is still time—if you want to stay—to prepare some of the fallow land for planting.” (p. 180).

It is later explained that the land Don Jacinto gives to the Po-on resident is rich and fertile. The first harvest is successful and able to provide food for its settlers. It is narrated by the narrator’s scenic standpoint:

The cogonals they cleared yielded to their will. These lands had never been plowed before—the roots of the wild cogon had bored deep and wide into the soil and many a time a plowshare would snap as it lost in the constant wrestling with the stubborn mesh. All of them also worked parcels in Don Jacinto’s land, and here they did not have too many difficulties; the land had been planted before and had merely lain fallow; the soil yielded smoothly to the plow.(p. 188).

b. Nature as Hostile and Malevolent Force

Although nature in *Dusk* is depicted as a source of comfort, safety, and refuge, F. Sionel Jose also emphasizes another aspect of wilderness. The wilderness is dangerous, it is full of hostile threat, either wild animals or the nature forces itself which humanity cannot control it. These two aspects are depicted in *Dusk*, Sionel Jose portrays nature as a malevolent entity, it even claims the life of both Istak’s father and mother. This fits with which Atwood previously describes about “death by nature.”

Death by nature occurs in two ways in *Dusk*, death caused by wild animals and death through forces of nature. Istak’s father, Ba-ac is killed by a python during their journey across the forest of Eastern Pangasinan. During this

event, the focalization shifts from the primary narrator into Istak as character-focalizer.

It was Dalin who first noticed it when she looked back; the cart was following them, but Ba-ac was not in the driver's seat. Istak called for all of them to stop. He peered inside the cart but the old man was not there either.... He retraced the trail, shouting his father's name. Maybe Ba-ac had slipped, or had fallen asleep and toppled off the cart. But he would have awakened and called. The forest seemed to close inexorably on Istak; he was far from the carts and could no longer see them nor could they hear him, for he had run part of the way.(p. 153).

The use of character focalizer enables F.Sionel Jose to narrate how Istak witnesses his father's death using his own eyes, through *close-up* standpoint:

At the turn of the trail, he saw it—this python dangling from a tree, as thick as his own thigh, and it was coiled around the old man, who was no longer moving, his eyes closed as if in sleep. The reptile was tightening its coil, squeezing the life, the blood, out of Ba-ac.... Ba-ac's body was completely crushed. His bones sticking out of the shapeless shirt wet with blood. Istak sank on his knees and cried. A massive wave of weariness swept over him, drowning him.(p. 154)

The death of Ba-ac as mentioned above is described vividly by Istak's perspective. Through *close-up* standpoint, Istak's distress is emphasized. He witnesses directly how his father is "squeezed and crushed by the reptile".

Nature does not only kill Istak's father, but it also takes the life of Istak's mother, Mayang. F. Sionel Jose employs similar narrative technique, Istak's character focalization in *close-up* standpoint. The author once again emphasizes the sadness of this particular event, in how Istak directly sees how her mother is taken away from him. During their crossing of Agno river, a tree which swept downriver struck Mayang's cart, she is carried away by the river's current.

Istak led the last cart with Mayang and their seed rice. If he tarried, the tree might sweep away the coconut trunks underfoot. He was now in the middle of the river, directly in the path of the oncoming tree. He shouted at the animal to hurry. It was then that the cart refused to budge, its wheels stuck between the coconut trunks. No matter how he pulled at the poor beast, the cart would not move. He shouted at his mother to get out quickly, but Mayang, perhaps too tired to move, did not hear, or if she heard, she acted too late. The tree was upon them like an avenging hand. It towered over the cart, swallowing it.(p. 171)

Once more, the hostility of nature is focused upon. It is perhaps unfortunately that Mayang's cart is destroyed by the swept away tree, but it highlights the erratic-ness of nature. Nature is unpredictable, although all of the Po-on denizen's carts able to cross the river safely, no one is able to predict that Mayang's cart will be the one to be swept by the current.

3. Conclusion

It can be summarized that F.Sionel Jose depicts nature in two contradictory ways. On one side, he emphasizes the aspects of refuge, shelter, and comfort of wilderness. The Po-on citizens are able to escape the Guardia Real due to their trek across the landscape. During their journey, nature provides them with concealment and also nourishment in form of edible foods. Furthermore, their new settlement of Rosales is also blessed by fertile lands. Yet although nature gives many benefits, it is undeniable that nature is also an untamed and even hostile force. This aspect of nature manifests in what Atwood states as "death by nature", how nature claims the life of people who passed through it. It is seen by how both Istak's father and mother died in the wilderness.

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