

## FRAGILE ARENA: THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN PROTEST AND CONFINEMENT IN THREE *SUGILANON*

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### Abstract

Though the Hiligaynon prose narrative form called the *sugilanon* appears innocuous enough, it can also be—and has been—used as a channel of social protest. As a protest text, the *sugilanon* can expose, criticize, and propose alternatives to perceived social wrongs such as the oppression of one individual by another or of one social class by another. This paper seeks to explore the protest aspect of the *sugilanon* through three examples of the form. The three texts are analyzed and evaluated in terms of the extent to which they manifest recognition of and engagement with, the oppression in the world that they create and/or in the world that surrounds them. At the same time, since these texts exist within contexts where the power relations tend to confine protest, this paper also analyzes how each text manifests such confinement, or conversely, how it manages to “escape” confinement.

### Keywords

confinement, counter-consciousness, Hiligaynon, Philippine literature, protest text, regional writing

### About the Author

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### Editor’s Note

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My paper’s framework begins with Michel Foucault’s concept of confinement. “Confinement” as Foucault conceives it may be defined as a condition of “permanent visibility” created by subjecting all individuals, through various social institutions, to examination, investigation, evaluation, and judgment, and to penalties if judged unfit or aberrant. This condition exerts on individuals an internal pressure that circumscribes all their thoughts and actions, turning them into unwitting transmitters of the very power system that controls them, and making confinement, in effect, utterly inescapable (Foucault 464-5, 470-86).

This will not, however, be applying Foucault's concept of confinement in its entirety, particularly in the matter of confinement's inescapability. I believe that confinement is made inescapable only by two factors: ignorance and inaction. If, through some mechanism a counter-consciousness develops and is acted upon, escape from confinement becomes possible. This paper's main objective is to demonstrate the tension between these principles of confinement and escape—and the role of counter-consciousness in three examples of the Hiligaynon fiction form called the *sugilanon*. The discussion here is derived from a somewhat longer study I made on the same theme, using the thirteen stories in the anthology *Sugilanon: Mga Piling Maikling Kuwentong Hiligaynon*, edited by Rosario Cruz-Lucero.

The three stories discussed in this paper are among the thirteen. What follows now are sections abstracted from the longer paper, with some modifications for cohesion and/or compression.

The texts to be analyzed are the following: "Si Pingkaw" by Isabelo S. Sobrevega, first published on August 14, 1968, in *Hiligaynon* magazine; "Panaghoy sang Ginahandos nga Palpal" ("The Sound of a Stake's Lament") by Juanito Marcella, first published on September 7, 1966, also in *Hiligaynon* magazine; and "Diin ang Hustisya?" ("Where is Justice?") by Nilo Par. Pamonag, originally published in *Hiyas '75* by the Yuhum Press.<sup>1</sup>

"Si Pingkaw" is about a woman who scavenges for her and her children's survival, and who goes insane when the children, poisoned from eating scavenged food, fail to get medical treatment in time and, one by one, die. "Panaghoy sang Ginahandos nga Palpal" is about a farmer, Tyo Danoy, who has tilled the same piece of land for almost two decades on the strength of a pledge made by the late Don Lucas, his landlord, out of gratitude for all that Tyo Danoy had done for him and his children during the Japanese Occupation. But now Don Lucas's son Emilio (whom Tyo Danoy calls "Toto Meling"<sup>2</sup>) is taking back the land and evicting Tyo Danoy, only because the latter, totally ignorant of Emilio's political involvements, had supported his own son against Emilio's candidate in the last elections. "Diin ang Hustisya?" is about two friends who choose separate paths to achieve similar goals. Both are concerned about the poverty, oppression, and injustice prevalent in their society, but the wealthy Manny believes that change can best come about through elections, while the sugar worker Nanding—himself a victim of injustice—believes that revolution is the only effective recourse. Because these three stories deal with social problems, they are read here as texts of social protest, that is, as texts which seek to expose, criticize, or propose an alternative to, a perceived social wrong.

As texts of protest the three stories are further classified according to the level of their comprehension of the oppression that exists in the worlds that they create and/or in the world that surrounds them. These levels may be articulated as follows:

Level 1: The oppressive situation is recognized and therefore presented or used as the text's background or context, but the text makes no judgments about it. The reader is left to make those judgments.

Level 2: The oppressive situation is not only used as background material. The text raises questions about it and/or depicts the power relations that produce it thereby implying that it is an undesirable situation which should be rejected.

Level 3: The oppressive situation is rejected outright in the text, which now seeks or presents ways to correct it or replace it with a more desirable situation.

### PROTEST AND CONFINEMENT IN THE THREE *SUGILANON*

"Si Pingkaw" exemplifies a "Level 1" protest text. Poverty is the central issue in this story, evident in Pingkaw and her children's surroundings and way of life. While her children are alive, Pingkaw seems oblivious to the oppressive conditions under which they all live, content to push her cart and scavenge for things that she and her children can use, wear, or even eat. Her poverty and the indifference of other people only strike at her consciousness when her children fall ill and she can get no help for them until it is too late. Yet she never questions her situation. Neither, for that matter, does the story's narrator, who contents himself with merely reporting the incidents in Pingkaw's life.

Because both its narrator and its main character avoid confrontation with the socio-political realities around them, this story's capacity for expressing protest is greatly limited. In presenting the issue of oppression as mainly a question of survival, with oppression itself as an unquestioned and thus inescapable fact of life, "Si Pingkaw" fails to promote a higher level of understanding of the causes of oppression and the forces that create or perpetuate it.

Somewhat more "advanced" as a protest text is "Panaghoy sang Ginahandos nga Palpal."<sup>3</sup> In the relations between Tyo Danoy and Don Lucas, and later Emilio, the story depicts the *amo-suluguon* (master-servant) dichotomy in the characters' world, a dichotomy that remains unbroken through all the surface changes in their relationships and

circumstances. Tyo Danoy's life is so enmeshed with those of his masters' that he considers their welfare as his personal responsibility, supporting them in wartime and later caring for Emilio after his father's death.<sup>4</sup> And yet he never forgets that he is their servant. For their part, the family repays their servant's loyalty with kindness and generosity, as Don Lucas does through his pledge of land, but they also never forget that they are the masters. This is what makes it possible for Emilio to reverse his father's pledge when later developments, in his view, justify it.

The *sulugon's* absolute subservience to the *amo*, his dependence on the latter's good will and on the reciprocity in their relationship, is evident in Tyo Danoy's repetition of the words *Pamangkota lang bala si Toto Meling* (Just ask Toto Meling) when he recounts to Mr. Tante, the lawyer sent to evict him, the many proofs of his devotion to Emilio and his family:

Kon nahibaloan ko lang, bisan nga magpadayon man sa pagkandidato ang anak ko, sa kandidato ni Toto Meling ako mabulig. Man agalon ko si Toto. Lima ka tuig kapin ang pag-uporay namon diri sa Tapaslong kag sunado ko gid ang pamatasan niya. Pamangkota lang bala si Toto Meling. Sang panahon sang okupasyon, nakaabot gani ako sa Talangban sa pagpangita sing idalawat ko sing bugas agod itil-og sa ila. Nahibaloan ini ni Toto Meling. Pamangkota lang si Toto Meling. Ang pag-unong ko sa ila panimalay sadtong buhi pa si 'To Lucas nga iya amay wala sing kapin kag kulang. Nahibaloan ini ni Toto Meling. Pamangkota lang bala si Toto Meling.

[If I had known, even if my son had gone on with his candidacy, I would have supported Toto Meling's candidate. You see, Toto is my master. We were together here in Tapaslong for over five years and I know his nature well. Just ask Toto Meling. During the occupation, I even went as far as Talangban to earn enough to buy rice so I could offer it to them. Toto Meling knows this. Just ask Toto Meling. I gave nothing more and nothing less than devotion to their family when 'To Lucas his father was still alive. Toto Meling knows this. Just ask Toto Meling.]

Unfortunately, there is reciprocity in the *amo-sulugon* relationship only when the *amo* recognizes it. Emilio does not, so Tyo Danoy loses his land.

This story exemplifies the Level 2 protest text because by revealing Emilio's political involvements, the story depicts the connections between economic and political power, demonstrating how these powers create conditions of dependency and oppression by the

way they are exercised. The exposure and exploration of some of the roots of oppression enable the reader to understand such situations better. However, by making the main character resign himself to an unjust situation, the text blocks out the possibility of correcting or eradicating oppression itself.

The third-level protest text is exemplified by “Diin ang Hustisya?” where the sugar worker, Nanding, is falsely accused and convicted of killing a soldier who was among the goons and military men sent to break up a strike organized by Nanding’s union. He escapes from prison and eventually joins the Communist Underground. Visiting his friend Manny at the latter’s vacation-house late one night, Nanding ends up arguing with his friend as Manny attempts to convince him to go back to the fold of the law. Their exchange of views echoes bits and pieces of the long-running debate between “radicals” and “moderates” in this country’s political life. The following are segments from their argument:

“Nanding, indi pa ulihi ang tanan agod magbalik ikaw sa latid sang kasugoan.”

“Ano nga kasugoan?”

“Ang buot mo silingon, Manny, ang kasugoan diri sa aton? Ang kasugoan nga duha sing nawong: isa para sa mga manggaranon kag mga gamhanan kag isa naman para sa mga imol kag mga wala sing hikap?”

“Isa lamang ang kasugoan, Nanding. Ina ang kasugoan nga wala sing pinilian. Sa diin sa iya tiilan ang tanan alalangay. Nakita mo ang simbolo sang hustisya? Nahibal-an mo ina, indi bala, Nanding?”

“Nagsayop ikaw. Ang babae nga simbolo sang hustisya madugay na nga ginbuslan sang hurong. Ang iya timbangan nagahuyog lamang kon tampukan sang pilak kag tungtongan sang pusil!”

[“Nanding, it isn’t too late yet for you to go back to the fold of the law.”

“What law?”

“Do you mean the law in this country, Manny? The law with two faces: one for the rich and the powerful and another for the poor and those without connections?”

“There’s only one law, Nanding. That’s the law which does not discriminate, and before which all are equal. Have you seen the symbol of the law? You know it, don’t you, Nanding?”

“You’re mistaken. The woman who used to symbolize justice has long been replaced

by a goon. His scales only move when money is piled into them and a gun laid on top!]

In the course of their argument covering the issues of social justice and elections vs. revolution, the two friends force each other to articulate clearly their commitment to their choices and their motives for making those choices. In this Level 3 story, the power relations involved in oppression are exposed, mainly through the two main characters' discussion. The story escapes confinement to a large extent because it freely explores options for change, accommodating even views from the political left, and it also blocks power from controlling the turn of events by allowing its main characters their choices. In the end, Manny decides to run for congressman against the corrupt incumbent, while Nanding goes back to his life underground.

To better understand the dynamics of protest and confinement in the three stories, it would be useful to look into the various contexts that operate in and around these texts. One of the contexts is the *hacienda* system, the root of the power relations that has circumscribed much of Negros life in the twentieth century. The system that turned Negros Occidental in the mid- to late nineteenth century from a wilderness to the country's "sugar capital" also bred what social historian Violeta Lopez-Gonzaga calls the "*amo-sulugnon* complex," the "face-to-face relationship" that bonded the landlord-master to his sugar workers "with the fixity, and the fragility, of an umbilical cord" (49). The relationship often redounded to the benefit of the master, for in the vast, essentially capitalistic Negros plantation system, labor was simply an instrument of production—necessary, but renewable and expendable,<sup>5</sup> making the sugar workers almost entirely dependent for their survival on their landlords.

If one subscribes to Althusser's concept of ideology as being present in and around us at all times, informing all our thoughts and actions without our being aware of it,<sup>6</sup> one can see how the *amo-sulugnon* type of power relations becomes "natural" to both sides, and conversely, how protest against such a relationship becomes "unnatural." This type of consciousness can easily operate as a source of confinement in any aspect of culture that evolves within an *hacienda*-based, economic and political system. It was beyond the research scope of this paper to determine the *sugilanon* authors' birthplace, hometown, or class origins, but one may infer from the authors' use of Hiligaynon that they must have had some contact or association with the culture of Negros Occidental or the Hiligaynon-speaking parts of Panay. Applying Althusser's concept of ideology to these writers, one could say that they probably absorbed—in different degrees, certainly, depending on the

extent of contact—the consciousness prevalent in these regions, and thus became limited (or confined) in their perceptions by that consciousness. This could help explain the varying degrees of limitation in the expression of protest in the texts discussed here.

At the same time, taking Macherey's view that literature can reveal the contradictions in ideology by "fictionalizing" (or reconstructing) it (Macherey 465), one can also see how a counter-consciousness can develop even in the presence of a dominant ideology. The sociopolitical developments in Panay and Negros, and the rest of the country for that matter, would not have escaped reportage (and therefore reconstruction) in print and broadcast media, and even in ordinary people's conversations. If one allows the term "literature" to include these other texts, one may find in them a source of counter-consciousness for any *sugilanon* writer they might have reached, such as, for instance, the author of "Diin ang Hustisya?"

The confinement of protest in a literary text may also be accomplished through the text's form, which thus becomes the site of the interaction between its author's consciousness and the tradition to which the text belongs.

In her book *Translating the Sugilanon: Re-framing the Sign*, Corazon D. Villareal traces the roots of the Hiligaynon narrative tradition to pre-Spanish oral literature as well as to the 19<sup>th</sup> century narrative poems called the *composo* and *corrido*, the *pananglet* or exemplum, and a publication called the *Almanake* in which songs derived from Spanish Christmas carols, like the *Daigon<sup>7</sup> sa Noche Buena*, would appear (13-5).<sup>8</sup> These literary forms were characterized by didacticism, conventionalization of characters, and romanticism in the sense of being both idealistic in their intentions and melodramatic in their effects. These characteristics of the earlier narrative forms are found also in the *sugilanon*,<sup>9</sup> "packaged" in a leisurely, gentle style of storytelling that, Villareal notes, reflects the Ilonggos' manner (13). But such characteristics may also further explain how the *sugilanon* can be confined as protest text, especially when one considers these characteristics as working in tandem with ideology. Though didacticism and conventionalism in themselves have no politics, the culture in which they exist does, and it is the dominant ideology in that culture which dictates what "morals" a text may teach, what "conventions" or norms it must follow and help to perpetuate. Having evolved within a cultural system that discourages protest, it is not surprising to find *sugilanon* like "Si Pingkaw" and "Panaghoy sang Ginahandos nga Palpal" carrying the same subliminal message: "If you are born poor, accept your lot, cheerfully suffer it in silence." Facilitating the transmission of this message are the stories' gentle narrative style and the melodrama that evokes more pity than protest.

It is "Diin ang Hustisya?" that manages to send a less subservient message, still

“packaged” in the standard *sugilanon* narrative style. The message is: “Leave the system, reform it, or change it—just don’t let it go unquestioned.” As a Level 3 protest text, this story clearly demonstrates the dynamics of consciousness and counter-consciousness, of confinement and escape, as they interact with tradition.

The site of this interaction is the third context of the *sugilanon*—popular culture.<sup>10</sup> The *sugilanon* may be considered part of Hiligaynon popular culture because (1) it uses the vernacular; (2) it is essentially a “home-grown” form, its ancestry being literary forms that were also, in their time, “mass-oriented”;<sup>11</sup> and (3) it has been disseminated mainly through mass media.<sup>12</sup> The third factor is particularly relevant to this discussion because of the way commercial, artistic, and political considerations usually have to be juggled in publications intended for mass consumption.

Commercial considerations contribute to the confinement of protest in publications in two ways: (1) by making it “practical” or “necessary” to use material that is not likely to offend those who can determine a publication’s existence; and (2) by automatically attributing value to material deemed “appealing” to the target market—no matter what qualities that appeal may be based on. In an environment characterized by domination and dependence (like the Negros *hacienda* system) or by a political dictatorship (like Marcos’s martial law government), publications have to be careful not to displease the dominant forces because the ideology that has evolved in these environments has given these forces considerable power of confinement. If a popular magazine were therefore to feature a protest text at all, the protest would have to be as subtle as possible, a quality that, unfortunately, could render it vulnerable to co-optation or “neutralization” as in the case of “Si Pingkaw” and “Panaghoy sang Ginahandos nga Palpal.” Even “Diin ang Hustisya?” published while the country was under martial law, tempers its daring by not committing itself to a wholly revolutionary perspective.

The second commercial consideration has to do with pleasing the market. As Cruz-Lucero notes, when the *Hiligaynon* writers shifted towards the end of the 1930s from translating and adapting English and Tagalog fiction to writing their own stories, they had to maintain the already-established conventions of didacticism, sentimentalism, and melodrama (xiii-xiv), which as has been seen, lend themselves well to the exercise of confinement. If one further considers that norms, conventions and the tastes of the mass market may also be defined not by the masses themselves but by a dominant ideology or dominant class—the very power that can determine the life or death of a publication—one can imagine to what levels of confinement the accommodation of political interests can lead.<sup>13</sup> This is how popular culture becomes a site for the interplay of form and ideology in



the confinement of protest.

Yet again, the protest-confinement dynamics does not stop there, for popular culture may also be used, deliberately or accidentally, to counter confinement. For example, it is a wonder that there are any *sugilanon* at all which deal with poverty and oppression, given the culture or ideology within which the form evolved. The very existence of these themes in such stories may be read as a form of protest because as Cruz-Lucero notes in her introduction to the *sugilanon* anthology, the stories, when taken as a body, mirror a society mired in poverty, oppression, and injustice, and thus render dubious the assumption that social equality is inherent in a democratic society (xv).

It appears, moreover, that the *Hiligaynon* magazine itself operated with a certain amount of counter-consciousness, for at various times in its history it had sponsored story-writing contests that either specified “social justice” as the theme, or resulted in the writing and publication of texts with that theme.<sup>14</sup> These developments in the *Hiligaynon* may of course be seen as simply more attempts by the dominant ideology to control the growth and direction of social consciousness in the *sugilanon* by limiting the expression of such consciousness through contest rules, editorial policies, and other means. What can change the equation, however, is the reader, for if a reader has already developed (or is developing) some kind of counter-consciousness, he/she will recognize the most subtly hidden or still incipient protest within a story, and in this way enable the text to escape even a self-imposed confinement. In the contest between protest and confinement in the *sugilanon*, therefore, the reader is an important factor, for if a *sugilanon* writer can write differently and produce “Diin ang Hustisya?” why should a *sugilanon* reader not read differently and re-produce “Si Pingkaw”? Protest is not necessarily only in the text a writer writes; it can also be in the meanings a reader reads.

## NOTES

1 Cruz-Lucero, editor of the anthology *Sugilanon*, acquired the copy of this story from “A Historico-Critical Anthology of Hiligaynon Literature” (typescript; 1979), edited by Lucila Hosillos. It was Hosillos who found the story in *Hiyas* ‘75 (Cruz-Lucero viii).

2 “Toto” is the Hiligaynon equivalent of “señorito” and is usually used by servants to address the master’s son. The master himself would commonly be addressed as “Nonoy,” which would be equivalent to “señor.” “Toto” may also be used as a term of endearment or a nickname for a boy. When used as a nickname, it usually remains so up to adulthood.

3 Literally, the title translates into “The Lament of a Stake That is Being Pounded,” but this sounds awkward. What was done instead was to locate within the text the image presented by the title. That image, which appears at the end of the story, was used as a guide in formulating the title’s English version.

4 This kind of loyalty may seem unusual, but it is not uncommon in landlord-tenant relationships such as those in Negros. The discussion on the *sugilanon*’s socio-political context will show how such relationships develop.

5 Those *hacenderos* who could afford it kept all their workers on the plantation year-round on a tenancy basis, but others had to take in extra labor (the *sacadas*—literally, the “recruited” [Regalado and Franco 29]) on contractual basis at milling season to beef up their regular workforce. The arrangement was not without its problems for these *hacenderos* (breaches of contract by labor recruiters sometimes occurred) (Lopez-Gonzaga 45-47), but on the whole the system thus begun must have worked favorably for the landowner because by the late 1880s, some *hacenderos* had begun to see the advantages of hiring day laborers seasonally rather than maintaining tenants. An important consideration for them was the “high labor cost” that went with the tenancy system which required them to support their workers year round, even when there was little work to do on the plantations. (In reality, the wages offered, when compared to the workers’ cost of living, were barely enough for their subsistence [97, 99]).

6 French philosopher Louis Althusser discusses this “embedding” of ideology in his essays, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” and “A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre.”

7 Villareal says that the word *daigon* comes from *daig*, which means “to light,” and that it refers to the custom then of “lighting fires along the road for the carolers.” An earlier version of the *Daigon* was found

by Villareal, published separately in a pamphlet, which she says indicates that “narratives compiled in the *Almanake* had already floated in small, individual pamphlets” (15).

8 Villareal cites as her source for this information Sr. Evangelista Ma. Socorro Nite, S.Sp.S., “Magdalena Jalandoni, Hiligaynon Novelist,” diss., Ateneo de Manila U, 1977 (23).

9 The conventionalization of characters is seen, for example, in the lack of ambiguity in the likes of Pingkaw, Tyo Danoy, Manny, and Nanding. In fact, they are not so much characters as representations of particular social groups, e.g., the scavengers ignored by society, the peasants oppressed by their landlords, the liberal middle class and the militant working class. The three stories discussed in this paper also impart “lessons” or “messages” aimed at social or individual enlightenment or improvement (as perceived by the writer, that is), and this is achieved through closing words that sum up the point to which plot development and characterization have been leading all along. The stories’ idealism also reveals itself in the salutary endings which suggest a belief that society can (and should) be improved by imparting to it the right “message.” Their melodrama may be revealed in the storyline (e.g., “Si Pingkaw”), in a specific scene (e.g., the argument between Manny and Nanding in “Diin ang Hustisya?”), and/or in the way language is manipulated (e.g., Tyo Danoy’s heartrending repetition of “Pamangkota lang bala si Toto Meling” in “Panaghoy sang Ginahandos nga Palpal”).

10 Ricardo Abad, drawing from *The Journal of Popular Culture* (1981), gives a very broad definition of the term: “popular culture are products designed for mass consumption” (Abad 12). Abdul Majid bin Nabi Baksh says popular culture “generally signifies the great variety of broadly intellectual-aesthetic products which, in the twentieth century, are mostly disseminated by the mass media of communication and are used by the ‘uncultured’ populace” (Baksh viii). Within and around these definitions are other concepts and interpretations of concepts that attest to the very fluidity of popular culture as a term and as a site for the creation, or conveyance, or countering of consciousness. Illustrative of this fluidity of popular culture is the *sugilanon*, which may or may not be subversive of ideology, or may be both subversive and not, depending on how it is read.

11 The *composo* and *corrido* were circulated mainly through oral tradition; the *pananglet* and *daigon* saw print in popular publications like the *Almanake*, the books of conduct, and various religious books and pamphlets (Villareal 13-6).

12 The *sugilanon* appeared in the Manila-based weekly, *Hiligaynon*, from the 1930s to the early 1970s, and with the demise of that publication in 1974, in the Iloilo-based magazine, *Yuhum*. The *Hiligaynon*, in fact,

contributed greatly to the advancement of the *sugilanon* as a literary form (see Cruz-Lucero xiii; Regalado and Franco 291, 379; Villareal 13).

13 A significant point to keep in mind here is Bienvenido Lumbera's concept of popular culture as a set of "cultural norms and their respective content, which had been introduced from without, before these had been assimilated into the sensibility and value-system of the people" (Lumbera 182).

14 In 1938, the magazine launched a story-writing contest with "social justice" as the required theme for the entries, resulting in the publication of one or two "social justice stories" in each issue for that year. Then in 1969, another short-story writing contest was held by the magazine, which awarded the first prize to Lucila Hosillos for "Bunyag-Takas" (one of the stories in Cruz-Lucero's *sugilanon* anthology and classifiable as a second-level protest text). And in 1970, the magazine awarded the first prize to "Ang Taytay" by Isabelo Sobrevega, who himself said that he was known for his stories about "outcasts and victims of injustice" (Cruz-Lucero xiv-xv).

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