

“Rizal Como Novelista: Rizal as a Novelist in the 19th Century”

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Brief Summary of Rizal’s Life

One of the most prominent figures who played a big role in Philippine history is Dr. Jose Protacio Rizal Mercado y Alonzo Realonda, or commonly known as Jose Rizal. When one asks an individual for their personal image of Rizal, perhaps each one has their own perceptions.

As for his humble beginnings, Jose Rizal was born on June 19, 1861, at Calamba, Laguna. He is the seventh child of Francisco Rizal Mercado and Teodora Alonzo y Quintos. Rizal belonged to a middle-class family that could provide him with a university education in the Philippines and abroad.¹ He is a man with multiple professions. While he originally earned a land surveyor and assessor’s degree in Ateneo de Manila University, Rizal also took up a preparatory course on law at the University of Santo Tomas (UST). However, when he discovered that his mother was going blind, he decided to switch to medicine school in UST and later on specialized in ophthalmology. He opted to travel to Madrid, Spain, in May 1882, and received his Licentiate in Medicine from the Universidad Central de Madrid.²

In Barcelona, the Ilustrados or the Filipino educated class during the Spanish colonial period in the late 19th century like Rizal established a reformist movement called Propaganda, an unwavering campaign for political and social freedoms, lobbying the peninsular government using their connections with liberal Spanish politicians, and in fact, Rizal was one of the major ideologies of the Propaganda movement.

He was arrested and convicted on charges of rebellion, sedition, and conspiracy that led to his execution in 1896. He is now revered as the national hero of the Philippines for his key role in inspiring the Philippine Revolution against the oppression of Spanish colonial rule through his two novels, "Noli Me Tangere" (Touch Me Not), which he wrote while he was in Berlin, Germany in 1887, and "El Filibusterismo" (The Rebel) in Ghent, Belgium in 1891.³ Through his writing, Rizal exposes the cruelties of the Spanish friars in the Philippines, the defects of the Spanish administration, and the vices of the clergy. There is no denying that Rizal was a top intellectual and writer.

The novels, essays, and articles of Rizal were one of the causes of awakened Philippine nationalism. This article will focus on the image of Rizal as a novelist, many arguments could be presented as "image" could be a viewpoint of one’s own. However, in this paper, "Little Mansions: Some Aspects of Jose Rizal as Novelist" by Elliot C. Arensmeyer and "Rizal's Novels: A Divergence from Melodrama" by Alma Jill Dizon are the basis to elaborate, compare, and contrast Rizal's image as a novelist in the 19th century.

Inspirations of Rizal as a Novelist

The “Little Mansions: Some Aspects of Jose Rizal as a Novelist” by Elliot C. Arensmeyer viewed Rizal as a novelist who is a product of a European background in various contexts. He argued this by looking into Rizal inspirations and role models as a writer. When Rizal was still studying in Ateneo Municipal de Manila, he often read the works of Alexander Dumas' “The Count of Monte Cristo”, one of the greatest Greek and Latin Romantic Authors. His travel

diaries and journal mentioned a variety of European writers like Dante and Tolstoy. Rizal's Chateaubriand influenced Rizal in his treatment of the new world. Charles Dickens became his inspiration to fight for the oppressed through his novels, but the most influential people in his writing style, and his critique of the frailocracy and poor governance in the Spanish colonial government was shaped by the three giants of social realism in Europe; Dickens, Honore de Balzac, and Emile Zola.⁴ Hence, Arensmeyer strongly believed that his writing is shaped by his European intellectual interest as a result of his education experience in Europe. However, the author also considers the possibility that Rizal's mother, an educated woman, influenced him to have a life-long affection for words and poetry.

Rizal's Writing Style as a Product of Social Realism

The 19th century was called the "century of novels". "Little Mansions" was connotated by the author as texts, which appears to be good in quality, but not as famous as the other literary works in the 19th century. Novelists, during this time, commonly have 1-2 masterpieces. *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo* were said to be Rizal's most notable works. Arensmeyer described these novels as a product of social realism, an artwork which criticized and tackles oppression and critic politics.⁵

During the time when *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo* was published, Filipinos were so engaged in reading *awit* and *korido*, as these are the literary works that the Spaniards wanted to feed up with the Filipino public. Aside from these forms, Filipinos also read *moro-moros*, *comedias*, *zarzuelas*, *carrilos*, *anarulos*. These are the "most suitable for the Indios" according to the Spaniards. Despite this, Rizal is still able to capture the attention of his audience through his novels. Rizal started to write these novels with clear intention in mind, it is to "bring his people out of their long medieval twilight dominated by the last medieval power in Europe, Spain, and into the dynamism excitement of the nineteenth century."⁶ Rizal is a classic good man who pursued to end oppression, which was established by his Jesuit education.

Technicalities and Writing Style of Rizal According to Arensmeyer

Arensmeyer used the following criteria in analyzing Rizal's writing style and works as a whole: purpose of the writer, prophecy, pattern, fantasy, rhythm and style.⁷ In terms of the purpose, according to Arensmeyer, the *Noli Me Tangere* was written to expose the hypocrisy of the friars and the poor governance in the Spanish colonial government. However, the purpose of *El Filibusterismo* is not as defined as the first one, because of its cliffhanger plot and intricacies. It somehow rejects anarchism as a solution to promote political upheaval, but Rizal still failed to emphasize the purpose of the latter.⁸

In *Noli Me Tangere*, the hypocrisy of the friars was highly emphasized. Rizal used the homely details of each friars to classify them according to their "types", which is diffused throughout the book. Rizal used the homely details of their lives, appearance, eating habits, gait to emphasize their attitude. An example of this is when Padre Damaso became furious when he got a chicken neck in a Filipino dish called "Tinola".⁹

Carnality and lust of friars was highlighted in his two (2) novels. Starting from Padre Damaso raping Pia Alba, assault of Padre Camorra resulting to Juli's suicide, up until Padre

Salvi's dark thoughts provoked him to lust with Maria Clara and her friends as they paddle in the brook. Rizal was very much aware of the vow of celibacy of the friars. By pointing out these deeds, their hypocrisy will be very much highlighted. Padre Florentino, who is a Filipino secular priest, is only the "good" priest in his novels. There could be three reasons why Rizal is intensely criticizing the friars. First, the problems which his family and friends had in Laguna as tenants of the Dominican estates. Second, the extreme anti-clericalism which Rizal encountered in Spain. Third, the analysis made by his own intellect of the political situation in the Philippines which made him believe that the friars were the most serious enemies of reform and progress during the Spanish colonial period.¹⁰ This also reveals the European contemporaries, dark, sexual undercurrent like the Victorian writers are doing.

Arensmeyer noticed the formation of round characters to put the connection between these two novels. Basilio binds the connection between these novels. From Basilio's introduction in the bell tower of the church in San Diego up to his last appearance on the streets of Manilas.¹¹ Aside from the things mentioned, the author noticed these particular minor writing styles: Rizal used satire and humor in several parts of the novel. He was keenly aware of the nature of a woman. The most noticeable pattern that Rizal used is the alternating scenarios in towns and countries. Rizal viewed Manila as the one who held the darkness of colonial rule the most, where abuses often happen.¹²

In conclusion, Arensmeyer stated that the plots failed to stand alone but Rizal was successful in turning social realism into prophecy. Humor and truth rise above all styles. Naturalism and realism were very much present. However, the message of Rizal can further be broken down to deeper analysis.

Rizal as a Novelist Beyond The Lens of Social Realism

Rizal was undeniably subjected to a wide range of Western influences. The Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the French and American Revolutions, liberal democracy, and realism were all important influences on Rizal's thinking. Rizal was immersed in the realist literature of Europe, that this immersion can be seen in his first novel, *Noli Me Tangere*, which might be considered as the first realist novel of social criticism by a Filipino even without a national precedent or tradition.¹³

However, Alma Jill Dizon, in her article "Rizal's Novels: A Divergence from Melodrama", points out that beyond the lens of realism, there is a melodramatic aspect in works that, like Rizal's novels, serve political change and the construction of national identity. Melodrama is a kind of dramatic writing that originated in France at the time of the revolution. Dizon contends that If we will consider Rizal's works to be part of the melodramatic tradition, we may be able to see how his novels exhibit the conventions of the genre while also deviating from them, as well as what the implications of this divergence are for the proto-nationalist novel.¹⁴

*"An ongoing problem in Rizal scholarship is the tendency to read him as a Realist. The preponderance of critical work attesting to realism of the *Noli* and the *Fili* have had the unfortunate effect of blinding us to their melodramatic aspects and with these, a realm of possibilities."*¹⁵

Rizal with Romanticism and Melodrama According to Dizon

In an attempt to analyze why some view Rizal as belonging to the school of Realism, Dizon looked into historical events and talked about the concepts of romanticism and melodrama.

The Romantic literary period, which spanned the late 18th and early 19th centuries, is often credited with giving rise to the melodrama in France.¹⁶ Spanish literary criticism has long held that Rizal is a Realist because of its predisposition to disregard everything between the Golden Age and the Realism period. As with the Enlightenment, Romanticism arrived late in Spain and was overshadowed by the political upheaval during the reign of Fernando VII and subsequently his successor, Isabel II. Late nineteenth-century writers even avoided melodrama and spoke out against what they saw as the delusion of love and good endings. To say that Rizal is a Realist is based on the Realists' own disdain for popular literature that time.¹⁷

With the entrance of the American educational system, literary models and their supporting criterion were introduced and had been emphasized. In the Philippines, Rizal has been isolated from the Spanish literary tradition, leaving him as the lone founder of Philippine literature with no role models to draw inspiration from. Hence, the primacy of English-language models and Comparative Literature's conventional focus on European authors has led to the necessity to elevate Rizal to the same level as western canonical Realists. Because of this, Rizal's satire was viewed to be more of a realist and only his lyricism was deemed romantic.¹⁸

Considering that Rizal's thinking was greatly influenced by the Enlightenment and early Romanticism, the melodrama's less realistic elements in the *Noli* and the *Fili* should be given some thought. Peter Brooks even demonstrates in his book *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* that "echoes of the melodrama can be detected even in the classic Realist novels."¹⁹ This shows that there is no need to completely relegate the aspect of melodrama. Realism, in general, is a slippery phrase that sometimes leads us down to many dead ends, misdirecting our attempts to get a deeper comprehension of how Rizal's novels have impacted the course of history.²⁰ Dizon asserts that:

*"We should instead go back to the very idea of fiction as manipulated text and not so different from criticism despite its usually more entertaining nature. In this way, melodrama is not less valuable than realism but rather better suited to political commentary by infusing narrative with a clear moral code."*²¹

Noli Me Tangere and El Filibusterismo as Incomplete Melodrama

Noli and *El Fili* share certain qualities with the melodrama, such as the confrontation of good and evil, "clear physical markings, mute gesture, and melodramatic peripety."²² It was Rizal's way of presenting the characters in the novels with the explicit descriptions of gesture and physical traits that have been pivotal in their melodramatic form. For one, "nationalism is the invisible thread that sews up Rizal's novels, particularly *Noli*'s fictional elements into a unity that can be seen in its structural eurhythmics which are evident in the

consciousness of the main characters Ibarra and Elias.”²³ Rizal dramatized the characters' motives, their natures, and the transformations that occurred in their lives in this fashion.

What made Rizal's novels an incomplete melodrama is its literary tendencies to diverge from the norms of melodramatic storyline and style. Rizal's works are characterized by a multitude of unresolved plotlines, the separation rather than the reunion of families, and the inability of the hero and the heroine to be married.²⁴ Rizal also steered away from the Romantic trope of emphasizing the strength of evil with tragic endings and the Melodramatic trope of presenting a tragedy that will restore society's original balance. Rizal's works include numerous melodramatic elements, but there's no climactic moment of recovery. “Instead of confrontation and climax, the novels have an extenuated ending in the final chapters of the Fili.”²⁵

It was this manifestation and at the same time, collective divergence of the novels from melodrama that has amplified their unique and powerful literary influence in sparking the necessity for political reform and a desire for fundamental transformation.

*“The melodramatic characterization introduces and intensifies the social problems of colonial life, with the suffering of the good helping to make notions of morality and responsibility personal for the reader. Intentions aside, the lack of redemption in the novels stimulates a need for action, serving to justify revolution through their inability to present a happy ending under the colonial regime.”*²⁶

Indeed, Rizal's writing prowess—one that allowed him to not just be confined to the realms of realism—is one of the factors that cemented his historical and literary place in national and international history. There is no question that as a novelist, he was effective “in refracting the Western notion of nationalism via realism in terms of his own personal experience, social reality, and vision.”²⁷ But more than that, the melodramatic characterization in the novels he has written has developed an emotional depth that helps flesh out a morality play that criticizes the hypocrisy and harshness of colonial life.²⁸ It was Rizal's use of incomplete melodrama through unideal endings together with intimate portrayals of human emotions and experiences that greatly influenced the Filipinos before and still impact our society now.

Comparison and Contrast of Arensmeyer and Dizon's Views

In Arensmeyer's “Little Mansions: Some Aspects of Jose Rizal as a Novelist” and Dizon's “A Divergence from Melodrama,” Rizal emphasizes on his written works the desire to expose the injustices and defects occurring in the Spanish colonial government to awaken Filipinos and ignite a sense of nationhood. Arensmeyer describes Rizal's writing as a novel-narrative which is arranged in sequence and chronological order whose purpose is to tell a story or a point-of-view that should communicate a prophecy or idea.²⁹ According to his analysis of Rizal as a novelist, Rizal was to inspire people into entering the 90th century and stir up a revolution and indictment against those in power during his time.³⁰ Through *Noli Me Tangere*, he aimed to reveal the truth behind an invisible government ruled by the friars in the Philippines and the weaknesses of the government. *El Filibusterismo*, on the other hand, did

not have a clear resolution or purpose as Arensmeyer expresses since the plot left the readers in an open-end discussion.

Dizon describes Rizal's writing as a melodrama which aims to voice the necessity for political changes and reforms. Dizon states that Rizal's novels were a play of good and evil that are represented through the different stories and perspectives of the characters, exposing their hidden motives and actions through their thoughts and gestures.³¹ As Rizal writes these characters, he sketched them with either intentions of good and bad to make visible to the readers a noticeable difference among the characters. In the same way Arensmeyer conveyed to the readers that *El Filibusterismo* left at a cliffhanger, Dizon articulates that Rizal's novels lacked redemption on the need for action which would justify the demand for a revolution. Both authors talked about Rizal and his objective through his novels, showing them to be parallel with one another. Similarly, the authors displayed Rizal's goals, objectives, and purpose through the novels he had made to inspire and criticize society at that time.

Although both authors had similar sentiments on Rizal and the message he aimed to convey in his novels, Arensmeyer and Dizon expressed different perspectives on Rizal as a writer. Arensmeyer argues that as Rizal writes his novels in Europe and gauges its intellectual experience in the given context, his way of writing had been affected.³² Having inspiration from the three giant authors in Europe, Arensmeyer states that Rizal is a "product of European background" whose style was essentially derived from. He describes Rizal's writing as realism whose prophecy is acclaimed with propaganda. Arensmeyer views Rizal as a novelist who is a result of the social realism and politics of his time as the utilization of satire in his novels were indicative of these. Moreover, being an artist in Europe meant taking part and contributing in social realism and critic politics.³³

Contrary to Arensmeyer's analysis of Rizal as a novelist, Dizon argues that Rizal's novels were romantic and melodramatic. He asserts that his novels were beyond realism which is considered to be romanticism as he proposes the idea of the manipulation of fiction is not far from criticism regardless of its foundation and nature.³⁴ Dizon claims that the melodrama can better infer the political commentary in Rizal's novels through its entertaining style and method of how Rizal expresses his message and objective. She further justifies that realism would rather misdirect the understanding of Rizal's novels. Countering Arensmeyer's idea, Dizon asserts how melodrama can be manifested in Rizal's novels which may appear to have a deeper psychological depth as compared to realism.³⁵ Regardless of whether Rizal's works are viewed in the lens of social realism or melodrama, it is undeniable that his novels had a huge impact on Philippine history and the formation of nationalism.

Conclusion

Focusing on the image alone of Rizal as a novelist could get different arguments as the word "image" alone could get many viewpoints from every individual. However, if we based Rizal's image as a novelist from the journals, "Little Mansions: Some Aspects of Jose Rizal as Novelist" by Elliot C. Arensmeyer and "Rizal's Novels: A Divergence" from Melodrama by Alma Jill Dizon, both authors coincided on some parts, especially on Rizal's main goal as a novelist.

They have emphasized their points and arguments in such a manner that they have scrutinized Rizal from a fresh perspective. The first author, Arensmeyer, pointed out that Rizal, as a novelist, was a harbinger of people taking part in the revolution in order to end oppression. On the other hand, the latter, Dizon, pointed out that Rizal, as a novelist, wanted a reform through the manifestations of his characters' development.

Upon exploring the image of Rizal as a novelist, we can ponder from Arensmeyer and Dizon that despite the differences in the perspective of Arensmeyer and Dizon on the writing style of Rizal, they share the same sentiment that the novels are in service of political reforms and the creation of nationalism in the Philippines. Rizal was among the first to affirm the Filipinos through his works, especially his novels. He put a premium value on time to generate a political consciousness that fed into the nationalist revolution of 1896 and the struggle for independence that followed.

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Captions

1st picture:

Jose Protacio Rizal Mercado y Alonzo Realonda

[<https://www.esquiremag.ph/long-reads/features/jose-rizal-rare-photos-a00297-20200619-lf-rm>]

2nd picture:

A young Jose Rizal.

[<https://www.esquiremag.ph/long-reads/features/jose-rizal-rare-photos-a00297-20200619-lf-rm>]

3rd picture:

The Ilustrados.

[<https://www.esquiremag.ph/long-reads/features/jose-rizal-rare-photos-a00297-20200619-lf-rm>]

4th picture

The image above shows how furious Padre Damaso was when he got the chicken neck part in his Tinola

[<https://pepper.ph/pinoy-food-literature/>]

Caption:

RIZAL, THE REFORMIST by Martino Abellana

[<https://mb.com.ph/2018/03/19/destination/>]

<https://janinekarlablog.wordpress.com/2016/03/06/noli-me-tangere-and-el-filibusterismo-summary-with-a-reflection/>