

The Language of Catastrophe in Erik Gamalinda's Novel "The Empire of Memory"

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Abstract

Martial Law (21 September 1972 - 17 January 1981) was a traumatic episode in Philippine history, not only to those who were severely affected by it, but also to those who were witnesses to the atrocities. This pushed Filipino writers to write outstanding stories that depict the dark era, among these, "The Empire of Memory" by Filipino writer Mario Eric Gamalinda (published in 1992 and was later revised in 2000), recipient of numerous recognitions such as the Manila Critics Circle, Palanca Awards and the Republic Heritage Award. This study aims to analyze the language of catastrophe in the novel depicting the journey of a man named Al Diaz during the dangerous days of dictatorial rule. With the ongoing peculiar revival and perverse nostalgia for authoritarian rule around the world, historical distortionism and denialism imperils truth and freedom. With the ubiquity of social media platforms, the Philippines is mired in misinformation, its past in the throes of obliteration and its democracy in perdition. Fortuitously, the tragic turn in the country's history is made indelible by writings such as Gamalinda's novel, which must be appreciated in the context of the critical tradition of Filipino patriots like Jose Rizal and nationalists like Bienvenido Lumbera. The cancer of systemic corruption and human rights violations eating away at society embodied in the narrative, are seared by the burning language of Gamalinda's novel in the collective memory. Through the study of Gamalinda's novel, the catastrophe (from a Greek word meaning "overturn") that was Martial Law will be seen in a new light: instead of the disastrous tragic gloaming of the oppressed Filipino's struggle for freedom, the redemptive dawning of a new era in the bloodless revolution of People Power that emancipated democracy in 22 February 1986.

Key Words: Philippines, martial law, catastrophe, dictatorship, People Power

Introduction

With the ongoing peculiar revival and perverse nostalgia for authoritarian rule around the world, historical distortionism and denialism imperils truth and freedom. This directs the attention to the social base of the new authoritarian regimes in general. In Europe and the USA, a lively and controversial debate has evolved concerning the rise of Donald Trump or the electoral successes of right-wing authoritarian populist parties in France, Germany, and other countries (Hochschild, 2016).

Thus, the global moral appeal of human rights and democratic governance appears to be in severe crisis. In both the Global North and the South, many countries have witnessed the rise of racist, sexist, and illiberal politicians into the highest positions in the government. These politicians and

their allies continue to challenge constitutionally guaranteed norms of democratic governance, peaceful political dissent, and human rights protection including marginalized minority groups (Regilme, 2021).

Closer to this researcher's home, the Philippines, consider this scenario:

By mid 2018, the authoritarian regimes in Thailand and in the Philippines appear fully consolidated. In Thailand, General Prayuth Chan-o-cha took over power in a coup d'état in May 2014. In the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte was elected president in June 2016. Both countries are important examples for the rise new authoritarianism in Southeast Asia because they put a spotlight on the social basis of new authoritarianism. What is remarkable in both cases is the role of the middle-classes in the process of toppling the democratic systems and consolidating the new authoritarian regimes (Schaffar, 2018).

Martial Law (21 September 1972 - 17 January 1981) was a traumatic episode in Philippine history, not only to those who were severely affected by it, but also to those who were witnesses to the atrocities. This pushed Filipino writers to write outstanding stories that depict the dark era, among these, "The Empire of Memory" by Filipino writer Mario Eric Gamalinda (published in 1992 and was later revised in 2000), recipient of numerous recognitions such as the Manila Critics Circle, Palanca Awards and the Republic Heritage Award. This study aims to analyze the fictional retelling of this epoch in the history of the Philippines, depicting the journey of a man named Al Diaz during the dangerous days of dictatorial rule. The cancer of systemic corruption and human rights violations eating away at society, seared in the collective memory, would be redeemed in the bloodless revolution of People Power that emancipated democracy in 25 February 1986.

This invective against the return of strongman rule in the Philippines is very grim:

When [Martial Law](#) was declared in 1972, then-Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos raised the communist scare. Duterte raised it once more by claiming that [terrorism](#) is the top threat to the Philippines despite the ongoing pandemic. In the past, [Marcos](#) stressed the need for discipline and obedience to the law. Duterte echoed him and even blamed, through his spokesperson, '[undisciplined Filipinos](#)' for the continued spread of the virus — even though the Philippines languished under the [longest lockdown](#) in the world. As the government opted for a military solution to the health crisis, it used the lockdown to legalise authoritarian rule and suppress basic rights. There is no need to formally declare Martial Law — it is defacto. A tyrant occupied the highest office of the land and his signature [fist bump](#) is actually an iron fist. Welcome to the new normal (Arao, 2020).

And much darker is the rhetoric that dominated social media in the Philippines with the impending return to power of the Marcoses as the dictator's son advanced for the presidency in May 2022: "There was also corruption after the 1986 EDSA Revolution; There was no real change after Marcos was ousted – corruption and poverty today is just as bad; It was better during the Marcos years, even if corruption was prevalent, at least we had a lot of infrastructure projects. It was the golden age!"

These quotes were among the common refrains filling social media as Filipinos tried to grapple with the depth of corruption during the Marcos regime and the persistence of corruption even under the post-EDSA reform era.

Political scholars and media analysts posited this warning about the Filipinos' misbegotten nostalgia for authoritarian rule:

Suffice to say that the May 2022 elections is a crossroads for the Philippines. The next leadership should not be allowed to come into power solely because of false nostalgia over the Marcos era of martial law. No Philippine leader should have the opportunity to bring back the same systematic centralization of power. Neither should these next leaders persist on the present path of imbalanced growth and the failure to correct growing political malfunctions (Ronald Mendoza, 2022).

But alas, the dictator's son won and the country that has endured almost three decades of authoritarian rule is back in limbo.

This paper aims to review the burden of history through a delineation of the language of catastrophe used by awarded Filipino writer and literary scholar, Eric Gamalinda, in the novel "The Empire of Memory."

Methodology

Eric Gamalinda's "The Empire of Memory" is considered one of the few literary pieces that seeks to fathom and empathize with the suffering of the Filipinos during one of the darkest eras of Philippine history—the Martial [Law](#) era. As the title explicitly shows, the novel is centered on the theme of memory—its corruption (Lim, 2019).

For this study, the systematic disinformation foisted by the dictatorship will be underscored through a close reading of the text and analysis of its ramifications. The three main divisions of the book: July 1966: Sod Manila!; The Empire of Memory; and July 1999: Promised Land will be delineated focusing on the language of catastrophe embedded in the rhetoric of historical distortionism.

Fortuitous perhaps that this researcher personally knows Gamalinda as he was two years her senior in the Faculty of Arts and Letters of the oldest Catholic university in Asia, the University of Santo Tomas. He also majored in Journalism and was Literary Section Editor of the school newspaper, The Varsitarian. This researcher knew him briefly during their shared years in the campus publication. Thus, the researcher knows very well the events fictionalized in the novel, as they were chronicled in the so-called "mosquito press"—the handful of publications that dared to hold the line of freedom of expression during the dark years of suppression.

Results and Discussion

The Writer

Eric Trinidad Gamalinda is a poet, a fictionist and an essayist. He took undergraduate courses at the University of Santo Tomas for three years and the UP for a semester. He was a local fellow for poetry of the UP ICW in 1983. In 1990, he went to Great Britain to represent the Philippines in the Cambridge International Writers' Conference and to attend the Hawthornden International Writers' Retreat in Scotland, 1991. He got a Rockefeller Foundation residency in Bellagio, Italy. He participated in the Japan International Cooperation Agency's Programme for the 21st century. He currently works with Columbia University's Center for Investigative Journalism. Gamalinda's poems are collected in *Fire Poem/Rain Poem* (1976) and *Lyrics From a Dead Language* (1991). His stories have been

gathered in *Peripheral Vision* (1992). His first novel, *Planet Waves* (1989), was set during the turbulent Martial Law era. A second novel, *Confessions of a Volcano* (1990), was written after a visit to Japan, and explores the differences between Filipino and Japanese consciousness. A third novel, *The Empire of Memory* (1992), is set against the momentous events before, during, and after the EDSA revolt. Two of Gamalinda's poetry collections won prizes in the Palanca. *Ara Vos Prec* won in 1985, while *Patria y Muerte* won in 1988. He also won Palanca awards for: *Anatomy of a Passionate Derangement*, a one-act play in 1980, "Mourning and Weeping in this Valley of Tears," a short story in 1988, and "The Unbearable Lightness of EDSA," an essay in 1990. His novel, *Planet Waves* received the National Book Award for fiction from the Manila Critics Circle in 1989.

The Novel "The Empire of Memory"

Two young gifted writers are hired by Dictator Marcos to rewrite Philippine history: the older, man jaded Jun Hidalgo, who becomes tutor to the seven years younger, adventurous tyro, Alfonso Diaz, who narrates the story. Their less than noble mission: to make it appear that Marcos was destined to rule the country in perpetuity. Working from an office called Agency for the Scientific Investigation of the Absurd (ASIA), they set out on a quest that will take them across a surreal panorama of Philippine politics and history, and in the process expose to vulnerability their ethical principles and beliefs. This fictional landscape includes mythological sultans, mercenaries, the Beatles, messianic Amerasian rock stars, faith healers, spies, torturers, sycophants, social climbers, sugar barons, millenarian vigilantes, generals and communists—a fantastic array of characters, who are culled from real events nevertheless. Like the allegorical journey of Dante the pilgrim in the *Divina Comedia*, the saints and sinners populating Gamalinda's *Empire of Memory* have much to go through in their rendezvous with history.

Analysis

The recurring motif of disinformation advances the narrative of *The Empire of Memory*. The novelist Gamalinda used actual events in the Philippines to weave his fantastical tale that meanders from Metro Manila to the Batanes Island chain, to an undesignated Isneg Reservation, to Isla de San Miguel (somewhere between Cebu and Samar) in the course of Martial Law as the dictator builds up of his iron clad empire through the so-called New Society. The veteran media magician Jun sacrifices truth for expediency, and Al, his shadow, is caught up in the fabrications. Jun is cynical about his role as propagandist yet he has no qualms in all his pursuits of deception. The 'I' narrator, Al expends all his genius to dispatch the schemes and projects of his mentor—making up stories to distort the truth.

The novel opens with the coming of the Beatles to Manila, for which First Lady Imelda harnessed all her power for an exclusive lunch with the quartet, but her schemes ended in a fiasco. But it was not only her machinations that went awry, also the plot of upstarts officials in the military to ingratiate themselves to the conjugal dictatorship. Recounted Jun: "Marcos is going to bypass everybody and build up an army of his own. All these new guys will be licking his boots, there's nothing the generals can do about it" (p. 21). Martial Law held fast its vise-grip on the country so long as Marcos held the military in the palm of his hands through bribery. In this prologue chapter, Gamalinda underscores the systemic deception that the dictator maneuvered to keep his power.

In the Chapter "A Lost Tribe", Gamalinda points to "a land both fact and fiction, where generations leave no trace of themselves and everything is constantly wiped out, punctually, by clockwork destruction: typhoon, tsunami, earthquake, drought. Because of this we have no memory

of ourselves: we remember only the last deluge, the last seismic upheaval” (pp. 19-20). In this chapter is recounted the hoax of the prehistoric tribe claimed to be discovered by a crony of the dictator, which was actually a ruse to cover up a huge mining operation. Mythmaking was complete with the coverage of National Geographic, but the prevarication was later uncovered when two people were killed in the mountain habitat of the so-called stone age tribe. One of the tools of deception of Martial Law is to concoct stories like this, to occupy the minds of the simple folks while the rape of the environment goes unabated and the cronies enrich themselves.

In tracing the genealogy of the First Lady, Gamalinda takes the reader to the Visayas, scrutinizing Villa del Fuego’s history, where the roots of Imelda Marcos’ mania for ostentations and malversations are rooted. In the chapter “Blood and Glory” is recounted the collapse of the Manila Film Palace, where workers were buried alive in fresh cement as the contractors were ordered to finish the building in record haste for the First Manila International Film Festival project of the first daughter, Imee. To appease the spirits which haunted the film palace after this tragedy, Imelda ordered a canao or tribal exorcism. While animal sacrifice was going on, something eerie transpired: “The lights began to flicker more strongly. A wind blew in and threw open one of the entrance doors. The chandeliers swayed, sending long shadows all over the hall. The observers inched closer to one another in fear. There was a sob somewhere. And then, when everything subsided, all the lights went on” (p.160). Here, unequivocally, Gamalinda is positing that the Marcoses controlled even the recesses of hades. This was too powerful even for the educated to contend with, as Filipinos are wont to be superstitious.

In the chapter “A Wedding” is recounted the sickeningly opulent wedding of the conjugal dictatorship’s youngest daughter Irene to the scion of an old rich family, Gregg Araneta, packaged like a royal wedding, complete with a horse-drawn carriage imported from Austria. But the bacchanalia was cursed by a strong earthquake that devastated six towns in Ilocos, Marcos bailiwick. Gamalinda’s narrative was dramatic: “The church of Saint Monica was ripped apart, its tower chopped off clearly and the rubble gathered to a dusty mound below. Inside, the church beams crashed into the altar and the pews, lopping off the heads of saints and the wings of seraphim... When the rescue teams brought out food from the Red Cross and the nunneries in Manila, nobody inside the church moved. Nobody made a sound” (p.200). Here, the Marcoses have reached a point of no return as even the heavens are wailing from their wantonness.

Their days of infamy will end very soon after the earthquake, with the assassination of Senator Benigno Aquino, Marcos’ nemesis. “Two days later, the senator, dressed in a white suit, arrived on a plane from Hong Kong and was shot pointblank from the back of the tarmac. She (Imelda) wept bitterly for the fate of the country, and then she walked slowly into the presidential bedroom, towards the president’s sickbed to tell him of the sad event” (p, 204). Of course, Imelda was shedding tears not for the country they had plundered, but for her own impending fall from grace, as she was now the power behind the throne abdicated by her husband who was sick with lupus. The bloodless revolution dubbed People Power freed the country from the dictatorship on 22 February 1986.

Conclusion

Dictatorship, Deception, Dementia and Decay are the four horsemen in the Martial Law apocalypse. The pestilence that was Martial law was rendered dramatic by Gamalinda, with his powerful words and images taken from real events, borne by archived data. His goal is to immortalize historical fact by fictionalizing it in the novel “The Empire of Memory.”

The rapacity of Ferdinand and Imelda are borne by court records both local and international. The political and economic infrastructure of plunder supporting the Marcos dictatorship are irrefutably exposed in the book "Some are Smarter than Others (Manapat, 2020). All that Gamalinda needed to do was to weave the tales of greed into a saga that is disturbing to make it timeless.

Gamalinda's subversive defiance is hardly surprising since he writes against the backdrop of radical tradition common in Philippine Literature: turn of the century Propaganda Movement waged by Jose Rizal and his compatriots, the 1940 proletarianization of literature spearheaded by Salvador P. Lopez and the appearance of emergent literature during and after Martial Law (Sonza, 1997).

Sadly in the May 2022 elections, it is said that about 31 million Filipinos voted for the dictator's son, Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr., catapulting him into office as the first majority president in the post-1987 Philippines. It was called a cautionary tale as many international observers wonder how Filipinos elected Marcos Jr. to the highest office in the land after driving the family out of the country just 36 years ago. On their decades-long road to Malacañang, the Marcoses [worked](#) tirelessly to rehabilitate their image. Most recently, social media [emerged](#) as a critical platform for fostering nostalgia for the martial law period, glamourizing the Marcos family, and whitewashing the history of the Marcos regime (Quitzon, 2022).

In this post-truth age, when many Filipinos are lured by you tube and tiktok propaganda, literature written by those with a keen sense of history must be brought to light. "The Empire of Memory" by Gamalinda is one inscrutable work of fiction that must be read by the new generation to whom much is owed by those who lived through the time of unspeakable horrors and who understand the language of catastrophe too well.

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