

BETWEEN ACTION AND INACTION: A PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF F.SIONIL JOSE'S *MY BROTHER, MY EXECUTIONER*

Lucy Marium Samuel

Research Scholar
Department of English
Pondicherry University.

Abstract

The paper titled "Between Action and Inaction: A Psychoanalytic Reading of F. Sionil Jose's My Brother, My Executioner" is an attempt to look at the psychological plight of Luis Asperri, the protagonist of the novel, who is always caught between two poles: past and present, and memory and reality, which leads him to a realm of both action and inaction, within the light of psychoanalytic study of splitting. The detachment and alienation an individual suffers due to the political scenario result a kind of identity crisis. Modern humanity is split in their thoughts and actions. Most of the time the question "To be or not to be?" comes to their minds and makes thoughts splintered. Luis is a representative of this kind. Like other novels of Jose this also depicts the social underpinnings of class struggles and individual's tussles in that society. The novel tells the story of Luis Asperri, the illegitimate son of Don Vicente, a feudal landlord and his relationship with his mother, half-brother Victor and grandfather who live in the outskirts of Sipnget. Luis becomes a sufferer and spectator in the novel. In Luis Asperri, the splitting happens at three levels: in relationships, in places and in ideology, and this make him a victim of inaction. This paper endeavors to study Luis' psychic split in this three different levels.

Key Words: *Splitting of psyche, identity crisis, feudalism, past, memories*

BETWEEN ACTION AND INACTION: A PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF F.SIONIL JOSE'S *MY BROTHER, MY EXECUTIONER*

- Lucy Marium Samuel

The studies and conceptualizations of splitting of psyche are developed basically from the studies of Sigmund Freud. All his works depend on the idea of conscious and unconscious mind and its working, which paved a new way of thinking in psychoanalytic studies. It is he who divided the human psyche into three levels: ego, super ego and id; conscious, conscience and unconscious respectively. According to him "everything that is repressed must remain unconscious: The unconscious has the wider compass; the repressed is a part of the unconscious" (Freud 162). Human beings tend to ignore or forget the unpleasant events, desires, fears and memories and these repressed elements become the part of their unconscious. The purpose of the repression is "avoidance of unpleasant" (Freud 153). The "unresolved conflicts, unadmitted desires, or traumatic past events", are "forced out of conscious awareness" and get into "the realm of the unconscious" (Barry 97). Sometimes the repressed emotions and feelings in the unconscious create a friction with the conscious psyche resulting a split in human psyche, and get reflected in the actions of a person. Many theories were formulated and still formulating in this area of study. It is William Ronald Dodds Fairbairn, a Scottish psychiatrist who developed the concept of splitting based on object relations theory. In a simple manner splitting of psyche refers to "an unconscious ego defense mechanism by which a fairly complex entity cannot be accepted into consciousness in its entirety because it contains aspects that are both acceptable to a person as well as unacceptable" (Simon).

According to Fairbairn the self is "an active center of personal integration that is ultimately the precondition for experience, both external and internal" and "the unconscious structures that exist within the self are created by splits in the self which occur because they are incompatible with the overall integration of the self" (Ruben). If the integration of ego is not complete and perfect splitting of ego occurs.

This kind of splitting can be seen in the psyche of Luis Asperri, the protagonist of Francisco Sionil Jose's novel *My Brother, My Executioner*. F. Sionil Jose is a famous Filipino novelist and he is known for his Rosales novels. The select novel is a novel

from Rosales saga and it tells the story of Luis Asperri, the illegitimate son of Don Vicente, a feudal landlord and his relationship with his mother, half- brother Victor and grandfather who live in the outskirts of Sipnget. Luis becomes a sufferer and spectator in the novel. This paper is an attempt to look at the psychological plight of Luis who is always caught between two poles: past and present, and memory and reality, which leads him to a realm of both action and inaction. The detachment and alienation an individual suffers due to the political scenario result a kind of identity crisis.

In Luis Asperri, the splitting happens at three levels: in relationships, in places and in ideology, and this make him a victim of inaction. Throughout the novel Luis is confused about his identity and this brings a sense of futility in him. He wishes that he would never been born and sometimes one can see his desire to live a comfortable life. This ambivalent nature of his mind results in splitting. His childhood memories in Sipnget always comes to his mind and he takes flight to his past. Being a poet and a journalist he wishes to reform the feudal society and raises voice against that through his writings. But when it comes to action he fails. He becomes incapable of doing what he preaches. Luis' father insists him to forget the past by saying "the memory must be erased" (106) and "to wipe out the traces of a past that will bother" them (107). But Luis is not able to repress the past events and memories in his unconscious and that splitting in his psyche results in this kind of inaction in him.

Split in Relationships

Luis has spent his childhood days in a village named Sipnget in Rosales and at the age of eight he is taken to his father's big house in Ermita. Though he faced poverty and hunger, he shared the warmth of his mother's love, care of his old grandfather and enjoyed the company of his half- brother Victor in Sipnget. His father, a feudal landlord, was unknown to him, until his age of eight. After that he stays with his father and he goes to Manila for his college education. When he stays with his father with all comforts, same time he yearns to be with his mother, grandfather and Victor. When his father says that "you are my son, my blood is in your veins, my sinews..." he silently tells in his mind "I am your son but also my mother's" (15). Though he had bitter childhood experience and lacked parental care in childhood and later years, the splitting of ego occurs in him because of the "frustration of his desire to be loved as a person and to have his love accepted" and for Fairbairn this state is the "greatest trauma that a child can experience" (Fairbairn 39). And this trauma haunts him continuously and affects all his relationships.

Another conflict Luis confronts is with him and his brother. From childhood onwards that differences exist between them in their physical appearances as well as in thoughts and actions. Victor is full of vigor and spirit, in narrator's words "self-willed and strong", and has always "known the secrets of the land" (31). When Luis says in his mind "believe me, I am you and you are me!" (72), and says to Victor they come from same womb and hence they are equal, Victor replies that, "how I wish I can believe that, . . . but it is not so. If we cannot be equal, at least both of us are Filipinos, with the same opportunities. I did not make the laws, nor I set the system for mestizos and brown people like me. I would like to think that under the skin it's same red blood" (74). When Victor asks him to give away all his wealth and join him, he tells him that they can share the wealth. This shows his desire to live comfortably in the midst of all affluence. Though he loves his brother and his village, he is not ready to sacrifice the comforts he enjoys in the city.

When it comes to his relationship between Ester and Trining, again Luis becomes a man of inaction. He hates his father's ideology, but contrary to that he follows his words when he thinks of marriage. He loves Ester, but marries his cousin Trining for his own benefit. There also he fails to act according to the desire of his heart. His father tells him:

"Young, romantic love! Yes-you must know the feeling, the experience. But don't forget what marriage is for. You can have a mistress, Luis. But marriage must be for more than love,. Politics, economics, stability. . . . the politicians that I knew- the powerful men in government--they married not for love. So, keep your romantic notions and do the right thing just the same" (11). . . ."And Trining--I hope that your closeness to each other has not made you blind--she is very pretty, if you have no feeling for her except that of a cousin or even a brother, don't worry. Love will come. She is a very good girl and she cares for you, although you perhaps do not know. I think she adores you. And do not forget, she is rich--and it will be in the family, intact. No messy legal procedures and all that sort of thing. Your being cousins is no problem. We will get dispensation from the bishop later" (91)

Though he opposes when Ester says that he married his cousin so that his hacienda won't be split, it is the truth. He never wants to give up all the comforts and wealth he enjoyed as Asperri. He consoles himself by thinking, marrying Trining is "not wrong, for if it were. Then I would feel wretched. Even if it was Father who planned it this way, this is also what I want" (94)

Split in Places

Throughout the novel Luis is always caught between two places-- Sipnget, the village he was born or in his word the land where he belongs to, and Ermita, the town where his father lives. When he thinks of Sipnget "Luis felt a dull ache pass through him, but it was nothing but a wisp in the wind; he was here in this place called Rosales--and how small, how nondescript and immemorial the town appeared" (6). Luis always has a kind of affection towards his native village than his father's place. He never felt a belongingness to Ermita, because all the beautiful memories he cherishes happened in the small village, which he was born to.

His father's house in Ermita for him just a stony mansion, though he had lived a great part of his boyhood in that big house, he has never regarded it as home, and loved that mansion more than the poor hut in Sipnget. For him that "huge house was nothing but slabs of stone, solid pieces of wood and polished floors, and servants who flitted about at his slightest whim, barefoot and nameless, although he know where they come from. They were his people once upon a time, but he was an Asperri now and that made all difference" (8). That big brick house turns to be a "mass of unfeeling masonry" and "an alien room" for Luis. Because the people that he loves are not there--"they were in another time and place"(17). Luis visits Sipnget after a long time and for him that is the place he belong to:

I am home. I am home. This is the place honored in the mind and sanctified in the heart. Although he had been away, the sounds and smells were always with him--the aroma of newly harvested grain, the grass fresh with dew, the mooing cattle, the young herder's call for his water buffalos, the cackle of hens, the rustling of bamboo in the wind and most of all, the tones of his language, for there was in Ilokano the aura and the mystery of things left unsaid" (21)

Split in ideology

Luis is a poet and journalist and is outraged by the gross inequalities in the society. He writes about sufferings of the tenants and the needed land reforms, but fails to bring himself to practice what he preaches. He writes against feudalist oligarchy and acts as a real feudal lord. Though he loves his village and his mother, grandfather and brother, he leaves all of them for the sake of his better future. He is too ambitious in this sense. He pities on the plight of the tenants, but does nothing to help them. He follows the same path of his feudal father. This ambitious nature made him stick to his

father and his wealth, even though he realizes that his father is the reason for the destruction of Sipnget and deaths of his beloved. When his father dies and all the wealth of Asperri's comes to his hands. Though he gets a chance to implement the land reforms which he advocates in his writings, Luis hesitates without giving way a single rice paddy. He himself only "made poetry words, never with actions" (Kerkvliet).

Luis is the only heir of Asperri, but initially he felt that he has to earn for himself so he starts working in a wealthy publisher's magazine. When he gives money to his mother she hesitates to accept it. But he says that, it is his own money. On contrary to this the reader can see the same person who enjoys the enormous wealth of Asperri. When it comes to action Luis forgets all the ideology that he has preached. He writes about the sufferings of the tenants in Sipnget, at the same time becomes a spectator of the destruction of the village by the civilian guards. Though he gets the chance to act, he fails in that. He is always caught between two poles.

Luis Asperri is not a hero in the novel, *My Brother, My Executioner*. He is a man of inaction, when he gets chances to be a hero he utterly fails. The splitting of ego in him withdraws him from actions. His half-brother Victor is presented as a hero and Luis understands this in the end of the novel that the "rebel is a true creator" (Kerkvliet). Victor is able to forget the past and he does not cherish the memories in his mind. So he becomes a man of action and nothing prevents him in his action. But Luis is always haunted by past and memories. He fails to distinguish between past and present and memories and reality. This makes him a spectator and suffer at the same time. He witnesses all losses in his life- missing of his mother; death of his grandfather, wife, lover and father; destruction of his village; violence of his brother. In the end of the novel he loses even his life.

Work Cited:

Fairbairn, W. R. D. *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality*. New York: Routledge, 1952. Print.

Freud, Sigmund. *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*. New Zealand: Penguin Books, 1984. Print.

Jose, F. Sionil. *My Brother, My Executioner*. Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1988. Print.

Kerkvliet, Benedict J. Review, *My Brother, My Executioner*. By F.Sionil Jose. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 41, 2, Feb. 1982, pp.417-418. Web.

Rubens, Richard L. "A View into the Unique Origins of Fairbairn's Theories". Web.

<http://www.columbia.edu/~rr322/ORIGINS.html>

Simon, George. "Understanding "Splitting" as a Psychological Term". *Counselling Resource*. 28 Oct 2008

Web.<http://counsellingresource.com/features/2008/10/28/splitting-as-psychological-term>

