

Chains of Oppression

ABSTRACT

This collection of three pantoum-style poems: “Pedro’s Plight,” “Teresa’s Act,” and “Jose’s Honor” explores the enduring struggles of Filipino laborers across successive colonial eras, weaving a multidisciplinary tapestry of literature, history, and socio-political critique aligned with the journal’s focus on labor dynamics. Through the lens of Spanish friar exploitation in the agrarian fields, American cultural imperialism in the performing arts, and Japanese wartime brutality during the Bataan Death March, the poems illuminate themes of economic oppression, cultural resilience, and unyielding defiance against dehumanizing forces that commodify human toil and spirit.

The repetitive lines, characteristic of the pantoum form, echo the cyclical nature of exploitation and endurance, reinforcing a rhythmic lament that mirrors the relentless grind of labor while amplifying the first-person personas’ intimate, visceral voices. Pedro’s character shows weary submission yet quiet rebellion, Teresa’s character displays a performative hope amid destitution, and Jose’s persona reveals a stoic honor in the face of torture. This stylistic choice not only heightens emotional intensity but also symbolizes the historical repetition of colonial subjugation, inviting readers to reflect on labor as both a site of historical trauma and a catalyst for literary resistance.

The struggles of Pedro, Teresa, and Jose are not isolated events, but echoes that have reverberated through history, specifically within the backdrop of the colonial and wartime Philippines. Each persona (Pedro, Teresa, and Jose) embodies an indomitable spirit as their character navigates challenges during their time (Spanish, American, and Japanese occupation), whether it’s the economic exploitation of Pedro, the performer’s struggle for survival in Teresa’s Act, or the brutal treatment of Jose at the hands of the Kempeitai.

All three poems deal with the theme of oppression, whether it is economic, cultural, or physical. Meanwhile, each poem reflects a unique struggle against oppression, poverty, and the quest for dignity in the face of adversity. The use of repetition and refrain in each poem creates a sense of rhythm and emphasizes oppression and resistance.

Keywords

Colonial exploitation, labor oppression, pantoum, Philippine history, resilience

I. Pedro's Plight

I swing my bolo at the break of day,
The friar counts coins, not the sweat on my brow.
Rice for my family? Just half a sack, they say.
As the church bell tolls, I will not bow.

The friar counts coins, not the sweat on my brow.
They tax my carabao, my soul, and my song.
As the church bell tolls, I will not bow,
While Padre dreams of wine and silks all day long.

They tax my carabao, my soul, and my song,
Yet I carve stone for a convent I will never own.
While Padre dreams of wine and silks all day long,
I whistled through blisters; my flesh had turned to bone.

II. Teresa's Act

Under the stars-and-stripes hung, the curtain sways.
Teresa's purse is lighter than the air.
I voice fierce love of flag in dulcet phrase,
But rice and rent still vanish with despair.

Teresa's purse is lighter than the air.
Backstage, the laughter masks her tired feet.
But rice and rent still vanish with despair,
While khaki ranks watch, bemused, from every seat.

Backstage, the laughter masks her tired feet.
Hope pirouettes through every bold refrain.
While khaki ranks watch, bemused, from every seat.
Teresa shines onstage. Offstage, she bears the empire's stain.

III. Jose's Honor

The Kempeitai knew where the Filipino rebels slept.
My silence cracked like a carabao bone.
A boot struck my ribs where secrets were kept.
Better the cold grave than to live alone.

My silence cracked like a carabao bone.
They dragged me out with a rope and spit.
Better the cold grave than to live alone.
I will never trade my soul for food or wit.

They dragged me out with a rope and spit.
To march from Bataan's blood-soaked shore.
I will never trade my soul for food or wit.
I would rather walk with spirits whose bodies broke before.

Author's Bionote

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