Metaphors in Juan Luna’s Works: A Semiotic-Hermeneutic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Juan Luna was a major force of painting tradition in the Philippines particularly in the late 19th Century. Like his colorful paintings, his life was also interestingly complicated that scholars and historians were fond of studying about. His paintings are known to be packed with symbolism. In this study, I tried to interpret the painter’s works and the intricacies of his life as a nationalist and as a private person. By employing semiotic-hermeneutic interpretation, an exposition of various symbols embedded in his works and what they signify was made. As gleaned in the works interpreted, messages and contents were conveyed and made powerful through his visual metaphors. Apparently, Luna concealed his nationalistic ideas and his innermost feelings in his work.

RESUMO

Juan Luna foi uma grande força da tradição da pintura nas Filipinas, particularmente no final do século XIX. Como suas pinturas coloridas, sua vida também foi curiosamente complicada, sobre a qual estudiosos e historiadores gostavam de estudar. Suas pinturas são conhecidas por serem repletas de simbolismo. Neste estudo, procurei interpretar a obra do pintor e os meandros de sua vida como nacionalista e como pessoa privada. Por meio da interpretação semiótico-hermenêutica, foi feita uma exposição dos vários símbolos embutidos em suas obras e o que eles significam. De acordo com as obras interpretadas, mensagens e conteúdos foram transmitidos e tornados poderosos por meio de suas metáforas visuais. Aparentemente, Luna escondeu suas idéias nacionalistas e seus sentimentos mais íntimos em seu trabalho.
**Introduction**

Juan Luna shocked the world when his mammoth painting entitled Spoliarium won the gold in the prestigious Exposición Nacional de Bellas Artes in 1884 (Gaceta de Madrid, 1884). He was the first Filipino international achiever. His name became synonymous with Filipino genius and creativity. Even the national hero Jose Rizal recognized this during his homage to Luna and Hidalgo in June 25, 1884 at the Restaurant Ingles in Madrid. There Rizal said, “...creative genius does not manifest itself solely within the borders of a specific country: it sprouts everywhere; it is like light and air; it belongs to everyone: it is cosmopolitan like space, life and God” (Guerrero, 1974, p.112).

He was here referring to the genius of the two Filipino artists. Rizal believes that Luna’s and Hidalgo’s works can truly be comparable with that of other world renown European artists of their time. Here he points out that genius knows no territory. The Philippines, no matter, how humble and crude it was perceived to be, can produce geniuses like Luna and Hidalgo.

The popularity of Luna pervaded the 19th Century Philippines. With this popularity, he was perhaps the Manny Pacquiao of his generation. But he was not only known for his paintings, he was also a known propagandist. He was also famed for being compatriot to propagandist writers like Rizal, Del Pilar, and Lopez Jaena. Luna’s approach was different, his was not through and by the power of his pen, like his Filipino compatriots, but through the subtlety of his brush and the genius of his artistic mind.

This paper tries to critically interpret four major works of the artist, which are as follows: Spoliarium (1884), Parisian Life (1892), España Y Filipinas (1886), and the Death of Cleopatra (1881). The symbolisms that are strongly suggested in the works are revealed, which are expected to galvanize Luna’s deep seated and colorful nationalism as juxtaposed with his own gloomy life.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents Luna’s short biographical sketch and the social milieu he was born into and/or the circumstances that he had to contend. In section 3, the development of semiotics which the semiological analyses are crudely based was explicated. In the same section, I also discussed in brief the basic principles of hermeneutics. In section 4, the pre-selected paintings are presented and briefly described. Section 5 presented Spoliarium and how it portrays the Philippines as the bloodied/dead gladiators. In section 6, discussion on the enigmatic gazes of the propagandists (including Luna) and other symbolic elements in the painting Parisian Life is made. In section 7, an analysis of the España Y Filipinas and how it manifested the purported intention of the Mother Spain in her conquest to the Islands. Section 8 was devoted to the Death of Cleopatra and how it reflected the hope and possibility of the ultimate end of the nation’s horrors. Finally, the points of this paper are summarized in the last section.

*Juan Luna and his Milieu*
Juan Luna is a Filipino who excelled in his field. He is an artist par excellence, whose artistic genius “proclaim(ed) his arrival on the world scene” (Joaquin, 1980, p. 13). In Madrid, he stood alongside the Queen Regent Maria Cristina and sat side by side with princes and dukes during the inauguration of his painting La Batalla de Lepanto in 1887. He became friends with the Queen Regent. The latter even ordered the release of Antonio Luna through Juan’s intercession in 1897. He was personally congratulated by the King of Spain upon winning a gold prize for his Spoliarium in 1884 (Joaquin, 1980). All this he did during the mighty Spain’s occupation of the Philippines and Filipinos were colonial subjects. While he enjoys the company of the who’s who in European society, in his home country, the indios continue to experience exploitation and maltreatment in the hands of their colonial masters.

Prior to Luna’s popularity, the spite of exploitation drove many young ilustrados to travel to Europe to study and later form movements to alleviate their country from its ordeals. Names of Jose Rizal, Graciano Lopez Jaena, Marcelo H. Del Pilar, Valentin Ventura, Trinidad Pardo de Tavera, and Luna among others became synonymous with the propaganda movement. Their flight was a reaction to the church and the state’s repression of their artistic, scientific, and intellectual pursuits. The Filipino masses at that time felt disconnected from these ilustrados with their belief that these propagandists were only fighting for the gains and privileges of their class (Jaoquin, 1980).

The facts, however, proved the selfish image of the ilustrados wrong. Juan Luna, for example, capitalized on his fame in Europe to put across his partiality towards the masses. His work People and Kings, for instance, portrays the revolutions of the masses against their royal oppressors. He painted the conditions of the masses, “he painted proletarian subjects: a jobless laborer, children in an orphanage, a rag-picker, a pregnant Cockney girl shivering in the London cold.” (Joaquin, 1980, p.15). He agreed to illustrate some portions of Jose Rizal’s Noli Me Tangere with an intention to move the masses and to make the novel understandable even to children. He was already a known painter at that time but he offered his services for free. This proves that at least in Luna, the Filipino ilustrado is not a selfish class indifferent from the masses (Joaquin, 1980).

In 1881, the Death of Cleopatra (La Muerte de Cleopatra) won for Luna his first major prize at the Exposition of Fine Arts in Madrid. It was the start of the artist’s fascination for international competitions. Being a Spanish subject, Luna had to forestall comments disparaging his works that might influence the jurors prior to judging. His labors were kept in secrecy before entering them in the competition (Pilar, 1980). The news about his victory was not made known to Manila deliberately as evidenced by a report in El Commercio on July 16, 1881 (Pilar, 1980). It was only on October 15, 1881 that a Philippine creole and Luna’s long-time friend, Javier Gomez de la Serna reported his triumph at the El Commercio. In fact, no official recognition from the Spanish government in the Philippines was ever made until eight
months later when Governor-General Primo de Rivera granted the artist with an annual pension to support his studies in Rome (Pilar, 1980).

In 1884, Spoliarium won the Medalla de Primera Clase in the Exposition de Bellas Artes in Madrid (Gaceta de Madrid, 1884). Unlike the La Muerte, Spoliarium invited a lot of attention from journalists, reviewers, and art enthusiasts from around Europe. Photographs of the work have reached Manila on May 8, 1884 through the international boat Asia prior to the opening of the exhibition. With Spoliarium, Luna’s popularity became far and wide not only in Madrid but in most regions of Europe and Asia.

A year after, the artist fell in love with Paz Pardo de Tavera. She was Felix and Trinidad’s sister. Juan and Paz developed admiration for each other during the months that the Pacto de Sangre was being painted with Trinidad standing as Legazpi and Rizal as Sikatuna. Paz was impressed with Luna’s self-confidence, intelligence and gentleness (Pilar,1980). She was also Paz’ admiration for the artist flattered him. He (being an Indio) could not believe a woman from an old Spanish aristocrat lineage loving him. For her part, Paz felt privileged to be wooed by Europe’s renowned visual artist. On December 8, 1886, the couple tied the knots in a church ceremony in Paris. Soon after, Andres came and brought ecstasy and excitement to the genius native.

During the last months of 1887 the same year Noli Me Tangere of Rizal was published, the widow of Alfonso XII, Queen Regent Maria Cristina and Infanta Isabel unveiled La Batalla de Lepanto with Luna assisting them at the Spanish Senate. With the invitation of the Queen, Luna attended the opening session of the senate and sat in a seat reserved for nobilities. This was reported in January 1888 on El Comercio highlighting Luna’s unique friendship with the Queen.

Possibly believing in the improving impression of Filipinos (courtesy of Juan Luna) before the European eyes, especially of the royalties and officers of the colonial power, expatriates like Antonio Luna, Jose Rizal, Mariano Ponce, and Marcelo del Pilar established La Solaridad. Other members of the association were Juan Luna, Pedro Paterno, Felix Hidalgo, Jose Ma. Panganiban among many. The association’s primary aim is to promote better relationship between Spain and the Philippines (Schumacher, 1973).

The ideals of the La Solaridad is believed to have been captured by a painting done by Luna for Pedro Paterno entitled Espana Y Filipinas (1886) and its later version entitled Espana Guiando a Filipinas en el Camino de Progresso (1888). Since the earlier version of the Espana Y Filipinas, life was hard for the painter. His paintings were no longer attracting crowds as they were before and sales, despite good reviews from Javier Gomez, remained stagnant. With his dwindling finances, the proud Luna had to depend on his wife Paz for sustenance. In 1888, Doña Julia Gorricho—the Pardo de Tavera matriarch, realized the family situation. And since Felix had just married, she convinced the couple to live with her at 26 Villa Dupont, 48 Rue Pergolese.
In 1889, Rizal noticed that Luna’s works were beginning to embrace social realism which was far from his previous works (Epistolario Rizalino, nd). Luna’s involvement in La Solaridad, Los Indios Bravos, and Club Kidlat strengthened the impression that Luna was becoming more of a patriot than an artist. In 1890, Luna joined a group of artists in France called Societe Nationale des Beaux-Arts, an organization strongly associated with the Socialist Party of France. His works became more political than academic (Pilar, 1980).

Not long after, Paz health deteriorated which caused the abortion of the second child. The incident infuriated Juan Luna. His already strained marriage began to fall apart partially because of the growing suspicion and paranoia. In September 1892, the marriage was violently ended by a carnage that left Julia and Paz dead. Luna was tried and jailed for a while but because of his connections in the officialdom and his temporary insanity plea, he was set free for a penalty of amounting to a sum of 1650 francs and 80 cents. Months prior to the domestic violence, Luna gifted Ariston Bautista Lin a small painting entitled Parisian Life.

He died in 1899 in Hongkong of a massive heart attack, the same year Antonio his beloved young brother died.

**Semiotics and Hermeneutics**

Semiotics is a powerful framework employed in interpreting and understanding artworks, visual images, and literary texts. Works of Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Pierce, and Roland Barthes defined this framework (Krampen, 1987). Social and cultural practices play an important role in Saussure’s semiotics. Sign as a signification is where meaning-making rests. This signification is a combination of both the signifier and the signified. The signifier refers to the physical and material elements of the texts such as images, sounds, words, letters, lines, and movements. The signified on the other hand refers to the mental concepts and associated/allied ideas representing the sign. The signifier is the medium or the channel of meaning and the signified is the meaning itself. Saussure presents two orders of signification: the first order and second order significations. The first order signification is called denotation. Denotation is the simple combination of the signified and the signifier. It is the objective meaning. The second order signification is connotation. It refers to the mental and subjective meaning (Krampen, 1987). On the other hand, Pierce’s semiotics is known for his concepts of sign and its signifying elements. For him, in meaning making, it is the signifying elements that is important. These elements are as follows: representamen, interpretation, and object (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Apparently, Pierce’s representamen is Saussure’s sign; while Saussure’s Signifier-Signified is Pierce’s interpretation.

Roland Barthes systematically reconciled the above theories. The first order signification (denotation) refers to the Saussure’s signifier and/or Pierce’s sign/representatem, while the second order of signification (connotation) involves Saussure’s combination of
signified-signifier and/or Pierce’s Interpretation. With influence from Louis Althusser, Barthes adds another concept in the second order signification. This concept is myth and ideology or ethos. According to Barthes, myth is culturally bound. It flows from various mediums in different ways. It is a kind of speech trick which presents an ideology, values, or ethos as a natural state of affairs were in fact a man-made or socially constructed meaning or perspective (Barthes, 1986).

Other the framework of semiotics, I also employed the hermeneutics of Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher in this article. The philosopher believes that meaning of a text can be reconstructed through a systematic method of interpretation. The interpretation must be polished and logical that it even surpasses the interpretation by the author himself. It is clear to Schleiermacher that a text follows conventions such as the rules of language, time and culture that constitute the context of the work. These rules and conventions are either known or unknown to the writer (Demeterio, 2011). A reader, who belongs to a different language, time, and culture, needs to be aware not only of the known conventions but must also recognize those which are unknown to the writer. The reader is even given a better opportunity than the writer in interpreting the work because he sees all the circumstances, conventions and contexts surrounding the text (Demeterio, 2011). According to Schleiermacher, meaning of a text is the meaning in the mind of the writer when the text is being written (Demeterio, 2011). As elaborated by Hans Georg Gadamer, understanding is not only concern with the exact words but also the objective meaning, the individuality of the author. He believes that the reader must be able to understand both the linguistic and the psychological contexts of the text to interpret the meaning of the text.

The reader must be able to reconstruct meaning through two ways: grammatical reconstruction and psychological reconstruction. Grammatical reconstruction involves linguistic interpretation while psychological reconstruction is the process of understanding the psychological make up of the individual writer through his intentions and concrete biographies. These reconstructions will give the text a context that would facilitate interpretation and understanding.

**Luna’s Paintings Pre-Selected for this Study**

The author took the liberty of selecting Luna’s paintings for this paper. The following factors were considered in the selection: popularity, pre-conceived relevance to Philippine history, biography of Luna, and pre-conceived relevance to Luna’s political leanings.

a. **Dimension(s) and Location**

Spoliarium. The work was first conceived in 1881 during Luna’s apprenticeship with Alejo Vera in Rome. He was inspired by Charles Louis Dezobry novel entitled Rome in the Time of Augustus; Adventures of a Gaul in Rome. The painting was finished in March of 1884.
It was exhibited in that year’s Exposicion de Bellas Artes in Madrid. The huge painting received critical acclaim and won for Luna the highest award in the said exposicion. The official dimension of the painting is 7.75 m x 4.25 m (Pilar, 1980). The medium used is oil. It now occupies a huge space in the National Museum of Fine Arts in Manila sharing a hall with an equally important work entitled La Tragedia de Governor Bustamante by Felix Resurreccion Hidalgo.

Parisian Life. The Parisian Life was originally given to Dr. Ariston Bautista Lin, a wealthy doctor/inventor/propagandist. For years the painting adorned the walls of the Nakpil House (the residence of Lin) in Quiapo until it was lost and later reemerged in Christies’ auction in Hong Kong in 2002. The Government Security and Insurance Service (GSIS) thru GSIS Museum curator Prof. Eric Zerrudo participated in the auction and acquired the oil painting for HK$ 2,000,000 (Flores, nd). The painting is measured at 57 cm x 79 cm. It can be viewed at the master’s halls in the National Museum of Fine Arts in Manila.

Espana Y Filipinas (1886). In as much as there are several versions of the painting, the researcher decided to focus on the one located at the Lopez Museum. The record shows that there are several copies of Espana Y Filipinas and two are extant today. The other one belongs to the National Gallery of Singapore which was the Espana Y Filipinas (1884). Approximately, the Luna versions are both the same in size at 229.5 cm x 79.5 cm.

Death of Cleopatra. The painting was Luna’s entry to the National Expocision de Bellas Artes in Madrid in 1881. It won the silver award in the said exhibition. Done in oil, the painting is roughly measured at 4 m x 7 m. In the early quarter of 2018, the painting travelled from its original location the Prado Museum of Madrid to the National Gallery of Singapore for a special exhibition where many Filipinos marveled at its exquisite beauty. After the exhibition, the piece went back to Prado.

**Figure 1.** Explicit Visual Elements.
The painting is unusually humongous in size. Luna featured two dead gladiators (A, B) being brought towards the darkest and most dreaded part of the Roman Colosseum. The scene appears to be an ordinary event for the Roman Soldiers (C, D) who dragged the lifeless bodies. The Filipino genius manipulated dark shades of red, brown, and ochre to convey the brutality of the game and to evoke powerful emotions of anguish and pity as can be gleaned on the walls (k2) and the Pavement (K1). The melancholic hues are also applied in varying combinations and textures in the overall look of the painting. The employment of diagonal lines gracefully journeying across the humungous canvas creates the illusion of theatrical movement. This technique adds dramatic impact to the overall visual effect of the painting. The portrayal of sobbing women (F) likewise adds a feeling of torment to the audiences (J) as they witness the tragic outcome of the game. While the scavengers (H, I) are surveying and plotting to strip off the cadavers of any valuable possession. They are vultures waiting to devour the carcasses. A man who looks like a priest (E) appears to be murmuring prayers for the souls of gladiators who perished. A friend or a relative (G) in the corner is seen searching for a dead loved one.

**Figure 2. Visual Map of Parisian Life**

![Visual Map of Parisian Life](image)

*Source: Juan Luna (1892).*

The painting features the banality of everyday life of three propagandists (D, E, F) in Paris. On surface, there is no extraordinary about the central feminine figure (A). But upon closely examining the lady's posture, proportion and her overall demeanor, a sight of awkwardness suddenly emerges. The lady uncomfortably seated in a long-cushioned sofa (I) which connects her to D, E and F. Carefully placed just beside the central figure is an elegant
European Hat (C) atop an overcoat (B) with a checkered printed lining. An empty wooden chair (G) boringly faces the central figure. In front of the lady is a table (H) on it are two glasses (O, P) of wine. The upper portion of the painting adds to the overall composition the window (M), the window joint (N), wooden ornament (k), and a vase with a bouquet of blue or violet roses (L).

**Figure 3.** Visual Map of Espana Y Filipinas

The painting is an allegory of Spain (A) guiding her colonial subject Philippines (B) towards the light (F) while navigating a set of concrete stairs on which flowers (D1, D) are scattered and in disarray. The sky (E) appears to illuminate the journey.
Figure 4. Visual Map of Death of Cleopatra.

In another dramatic fashion, Luna here theatrically portrays a very important event in history. The death of the central feminine figure/Cleopatra (A). The lady is lying in tranquility on a beautifully and elaborately decorated bed (D) surrounded by her most loyal servants or slaves (B, C). The entire composition is contextualized by the room's decorations—the still decors and ancient ornaments: Sphynx (E), Egyptian Monster figure (F), Fur Carpet (G), gigantic armoured soldier sculptures (I, I1). The entire room is being hold together by two large Egyptian columns (J, L). An incense smoke (H) appears to float and add an air of gloominess to the scene.

Spolarium: The Analogy of Dead Gladiators

The Spolarium shows dead gladiators being dragged towards the darkest portion of the canvass which appears to be a place where corpses are stocked like useless wastes. The scene is so dramatic that it could be mistaken to a moving theatrical tragedy. Drops of blood splattered on the ragged pavements. The gladiators are beaten with punctured skin where tissues and flesh seem to burst out. Ladies produce howling cry in one corner, while priests
say silent prayers in another. It is a gloomy sight. It is even more depressing than that of Caravaggio’s The Beheading of St. John the Baptist (1608).

In 1884 the same year Spolarium won the prize, the Philippines and its people had been through a lot of pains, exploitations, and struggles since the Spaniards arrived in its shores. In fact, with the escalating disgust of the people, sporadic uprisings were already initiated within the decades prior. Most popular and bloody was perhaps the Cavite Mutiny of 1872 (Foreman, 1906).

Undoubtedly, Luna was cognizant of the ominous situations that the archipelago was in (courtesy of the Spanish colonizers). He was already of age when the mutiny happened and during the time when most of the mutineers were executed on the grounds of Bagong Bayan (Luneta).

Luna’s use of gladiators is a poetic yet tragic metaphor. The dead gladiators may be likened to Filipino natives and broadly to the entire Archipelago. In an earlier essay:

...the Philippines could also be likened to dead gladiators whose beaten and bloodied bodies are dragged on the ragged pavement of the Spolarium. After a gladiator satisfied and entertained the roaring Roman crowd, the gladiator is castoff as a piece of trash, belonging to his own class of crushed and deserted players. This was exactly what Luna had in mind. It was Luna’s prediction that the Philippines, as a gladiator, will be forsaken and left on a very miserable plight after satisfying its Spanish masters. (Viray, 2014, p.4-5)

Here, Luna used the Spolarium to convey what he felt about his country and his people. The painting was his medium to reach his countrymen and the global audience. He wanted the world to know that in this huge Roman Coliseum named after the Spanish King Philip, sufferings and tears inundate its oceans. Obviously, “the scene is an allusion to the deplorable state of Spanish rule in the Philippines” (Pilar, 1980, p.52).

Luna implicitly conveys here the metaphors of the certainty of death, man’s inhumanity to man and the metaphor of a dying nation. Should the archipelago remain in its current plight, the country is a gladiator that faces the barbarism of its masters, the abuse of its resources until drained, and the certainty of its impending death. The patriots and the nationalists would just be like that woman and that pained relative wailing for the lost of their beloved country. The vultures waiting to benefit from the demise of the country are those Filipinos who are waiting to gain from the death of the collective aspirations of the nation. And that crowd, indifferent and apathetic, are even more guilty as they remain complacent and nonchalant while the resources of their country are being drained, abused, and exploited.

During a celebration in Restaurante Ingles that served as a tribute to the winners, Rizal and Lopez Jaena, albeit in different fashion, asserted the national importance of Luna’s
Spoliarium. Rizal said: “Genius has no country; genius burst forth everywhere; genius is, like a light and air, the patrimony of all” (Quoted in Pilar, 1980, p. 59). He also continued, “Spoliarium is a reflection of the spirit of our social, moral and spiritual life, humanity subjected to trials unredeemed, reason in open fight with prejudice, fanatism, and injustice” (Pilar, 1980). For Lopez Jaena, “The Philippines is more than a veritable Spoliarium with all its horrors! There lies in mangled fragments, humanity massacred, the rights of man perverted! There is no semblance of justice for the common man, and liberty is cinders, ashes, dusts!” (Pilar, 1980).

The painting is also Luna’s channel to publicly mourn for the loss of his beloved brother Manuel whom he spent his childhood with in Intramuros. He is somehow the relative weeping by the coliseum’s wayside, and he is also the priest reciting prayers for the soul of his beloved Manuel.

The painting is both Luna’s medium to show both his political and personal thoughts. His brushstrokes, so vivid and strong are mirrors of his steadfastness to alleviate the situation of his country and countrymen; and his manipulation of shadows and light represents his ways to gracefully swim along the horrors and tribulations of life.

**Parisian Life: the Nationalist Gaze and Luna’s Call for Temperance**

The Parisian Life (1892) was a gift by the artist to Dr. Ariston Bautista-Lin, a Filipino doctor who was one of the generous financiers of the Philippine propaganda in Europe. The painting was done months prior to the gruesome murders at 26 Villa Dupont, 48 Rue Pergolese in Paris where Luna shot to death his wife Paz and his mother-in-law Julia Gorricho. The various symbols of death and sufferings appearing in the painting may perhaps, among others, reflected the artist’s temperament and his bleak household during that fateful year.

The painting shows a Parisian lady sitting nonchalantly at a café. Not far from her are three well-dressed gentlemen throwing meaningful gazes. Obviously, the three men appear to be Juan Luna himself, Jose Rizal and the Chinese looking guy is the propagandist doctor Lin.

Palpable is that this masterpiece is far from what it is on surface. The painting is full of symbolic elements with which the artist is known for. The following are just few: the evocative gazes of the propagandists; the black rope that seems to hang the lady; the huge vase with blue-violet roses on the interior sill; the haft-empty glass atop the table fronting the Parisian lady; and, of course, the lady herself.

The gazes thrown at the lady appear to be intrusive, inquisitive and (yet) emancipative. Juan Luna’s gaze is intrusive. It obviously causes discomfort to the lady. That of Bautista-Lin is more inquiring than an expression of distrust. And Rizal’s is subtle and indirect. Despite of the variety of meanings that these gazes might evoke, there is an overlying intention (albeit inconclusively) if they are to be taken from the overall context of the artwork—that is gloom and death. Note that the blue-violet flowers and the imperceptible rope represent death.
The inquisitive gaze of Lin perhaps may suggest his sincere intention to know the reasons why the lady (Philippines) is drowning in a murky situation. Why is the country in quagmire? Are the energy and resources she possessed (contained in the haft empty glass) being siphoned by the imaginary (momentarily absent) companion (a European as evidence by a checkered overcoat on the cushioned sofa)? These nationalistic ideas though not profound are appropriated by Luna in the gazes of Lin.

Luna’s gazes are so direct and intrusive possibly because of his strong and resolute intention to think of ways on how to free the lady from her sufferings. How can the propagandist like him and the rest of the Filipino scholars in Europe (symbolically situated in another table) emancipate the Parisian lady from her bondage? Rizal’s delicate and stealthy gazes show the hero’s calculating and perhaps cunning approach to the revolution. Luna, a close friend, may have known Rizal’s strategy even prior to the latter’s establishment of La Liga Filipina in 1892. To stress, La Liga Filipina is Rizal’s model of government where principles of social reforms, equality, justice, and progress were laid down.

The nationalistic fervor of the three heroes could be gleaned from the gazes that they threw towards the lady. Gazes that try to inquire, intrude, and emancipate. The painting uses symbolism to convey its otherwise explicit import.

Another likely interpretation is perhaps personal than nationalistic. I would like to focus on the work’s purpose as a warning to Paz Pardo de Tavera. Paz would not have died and the gruesome event on September 22, 1892 would not have occurred had Bautista-Lin understood his friend’s call for temperance. Remember that it was only months after the work was finished and given to Bautista-Lin that the bloody event happened. Possibly, Luna tried to restrain himself by communicating, albeit symbolically, his state of mind to Bautista-Lin to whom the painting was given. But Luna’s wealthy friend was not able to grasp the message and just dismissed the painting as an ordinary painting from an extraordinary painter. He never expected his friend to be a painter (of such virtuosity) was at the edge of insanity and despair. Despite Luna’s violent tendencies, Bautista-Lin never imagined that the artist could murder his own wife and mother of his beloved son—Andres. Lin was obviously mistaken. He did not comprehend the painting.

Let us focus on some visual elements of the painting that could prove this point. Prominent personalities who are obviously portrayed in the painting are Jose Rizal, the artist, and Ariston Bautista Lin. Other than their very apparent physical features, their mannerisms and postures seemed to have been captured so accurately. The artist and Lin-Bautista directly stare at the direction of the Parisian lady, who appears to be inconvenienced by the accusing glances. Rizal, as gentle as he was, seems to avoid contact with the lady. Obviously, the lady does not resemble (even a bit) Paz. The soft features of the woman are far from Paz’s rigid and
firm profile. It would have been easy for Lin to crack the cryptic code in the painting had Paz’s face perfectly match that of the lady.

The Parisian lady appears to be in the company of a European man as evidenced by the overcoat on the cushioned seat just beside her; the slightly misplaced wooden seat; the full glass across the lady’s haft empty wineglass; and the European hat placed deliberately on the table. Apparently, the lady is not comfortable seeing the guys on the other table. She seems very worried that these people could catch her red handed. Her reaction suggests guilt, fear, and worry.

Luna might have projected Paz through the Parisian lady. Suspicions of his wife’s adulterous relation, at least in his mind, were confirmed. It should be noted that there was no concrete evidence in history which points to the adulterous relationship of Paz. But in Luna’s mind, there was a fixation. He already created an adulterous monster out of his wife. His jealousy was so strong that reasons could no longer permeate.

Luna knew how intelligent his doctor friends were. He perhaps expected them to discover the messages hidden in the work. Obviously, Lin and Rizal failed to read his mind, his psyche, hence, the tragedy.

España y Filipinas: A Guide to Enlightenment

España y Filipinas portrays two ladies at the topmost step of a slightly winding staircase. A lady who appears to be of a European descent (as evidence by her dress and bearing) and another who’s appearance likely represent a Filipina native are staring at the horizon. The European points to a distant direction while she embraces the Filipina in a caring yet authoritative manner.

The artist here shows the following symbolisms. First, the set of stairs represents progress. Second, the European lady is the Mother Spain guiding her ward—the Saya Clad Philippines. The horizon symbolizes the future and/or enlightenment.

On surface, the artist advocates and promotes the sacred intention of the colonizers. It somehow reenacts the arbitrary invasion of scientific, cultural, and technological ideas that the country is compelled to absorbed. The European colonizers projected themselves to be so superior in all aspects while the Filipino civilization remained crude and unsophisticated aching enlightenment. The colonizers appear as saviors from the evils of ignorance, affirming their messianic complex.

Quite contrary, I believe that Luna’s intention was to inform his countrymen about the dangers of this purported colonial assimilation. The danger lies at the edge of the stairs. It is too risky for the Filipina native to stand side by side with the colonizers at that ledge. The caring embrace could at any time be a deadly mechanistic push which would leave the native (Philippines) into a free fall.
This manifests Luna’s tendency to doubt things which appear to be beautiful and ideal. The scenario in the painting suggests beauty as white roses are scattered on the stairs. A deceitful feeling of comfort may be generated. But behind that beauty, there lies the danger. Remember that roses do not only represent beauty, but they also represent pain because of their sharp thorns. In case of misstep, the Filipina would have to endure thorn injuries. As can be noticed, all the roses are on the side of the Filipina and almost nothing on the pathway of the European lady.

The flowers scattered on the staircase represent the ambivalence of the journey—that is sweet and yet thorny. In some versions of the Espana Y Filipinas, especially that one that belongs to National Gallery of Singapore, the flowers are accompanied by the colors of mother Spain as if suggesting that the ambivalence of the journey is the latter’s making. And the intentions of guiding the country to enlightenment could be subject to doubts and scrutiny.

La Muerte de Cleopatra: The Metaphor of a Dwindling Power

The central figure in the painting obviously represents the power and wealth of Mother Spain. Though surrounded by her riches, the royalty was not able to escape the inevitable end. Her death is reflective of Spain’s eventual demise. Luna may be indicating the losing hold of the royalty to the country. Or an equally valid interpretation could be that Luna believes that exploitation and the abuse (as personified by Cleopatra) of officialdom in the Philippines may soon meet its poisonous snake.

The slaves especially the black one may be interpreted as the native who may have enigmatic reaction to the death. She represents the natives’ possible reaction once Spain withdraws from the country or once it loses hold and grip. The natives may have varied reactions. Others may be joyful and rejoiceful, while some may feel disgusted and concerned.

The presence of the sculpture armoured soldiers surrounding the prostate body of Cleopatra may indicate Spain’s military power that may seem to be a warning to the colonial subjects—that the death is just a bodily death. And that the real power of Spain rests in the military and in classic religion as represented by symbols of antiquities that dominate the entire stage—the sphynx, the monster, smoke, and the column that hold together the edifice.

Conclusions

In the works above interpreted, messages and contents were conveyed in symbolic manners. Luna seemed to have hidden his nationalistic ideas in symbols. The artist is perhaps one of those propagandists who tried to expose and educate his people about the real situation of the country; how the colonizers continue to exploit our natural resources and how they enjoy inflicting suffering to the poor natives. If Rizal’s contribution to the revolution, among others, is the publication of his two popular novels, Luna’s may perhaps be these paintings.
The idea of nationalism in Luna may not be as explicit as those of his compatriots in Europe as decoding symbols (present in his paintings) is necessary; but his nationalistic fervor could not be discounted.

In the above works, it can be deduced that Luna used symbolic elements to portray his sincere and deep-seated nationalism. His Spolarium is a metaphor that likens the country to a gladiator whose energy and resources have been drained by his Roman (Spanish) master leaving her bloodied, dead, and useless. The Parisian Life presents a condition of the archipelago that necessitates emancipation. The Death of Cleopatra represents the aspirations of Filipinos to alleviate their conditions and mirrors their hope to finally put an end to all the exploitations and abuses that the indios suffer. And finally, the España Y Filipina implicitly portrays the cunning and deceitful ways of the colonizers that put the country in the brink of a sudden fall.

It can also be gleaned from the discussion above that Luna’s works have a point of commonality. Spolarium and Parisian Life are both placed in a gloomy back drop. The España Y Filipina and Death of Cleopatra, though not evidently dark, predict something so deadly. Luna’s inclination towards the dark, depressing, and gloomy might perhaps have originated from his own personal experiences as he himself must hurdle life’s challenges in the most difficult and thorny ways. But evidently, his nationalism remains ever burning despite these personal challenges.

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