

Conference Paper

Transcending Oppression and Exploitation: Struggle for Education in Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* and Sudham's *Monsoon Country*

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Abstract

Diasporic literature functions as an important source which provides the social contexts of the home countries of its authors. Carlos Bulosan's 'America is in the Heart' and Pira Sudham's 'Monsoon Country' are among this group of literature representing the voice of the oppressed and exploited farmers in the Philippines and Thailand, respectively home of the authors. The farmers are represented as being exploited by those in power, including colonizers, local officials, landlords, and middlemen. The exploiters can be seen as capitalists who accumulate wealth through the labor and the property of farmers. In their methods of oppression the oppressors employ State Apparatuses and Ideological State Apparatuses to maintain the status quo and reproduce the exploitative system. To transcend the oppression and exploitation, the major characters of the books struggle to obtain education, since they view that ignorance is the most important cause of the exploitation. Education is seen as the only way to eliminate ignorance and liberate themselves as well as their people from the exploitative cycle. 'America Is in the Heart' and 'Monsoon Country' represent the voice of the farmers in the Philippines and Thailand who condemn their exploiters and raise readers' awareness of the problem.

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1. Introduction

Asian diasporic literature has been an integral part of English and American literature for a very long period. The arrival of Asian immigrants brings about Oriental cultures in many forms, which help increase cultural diversities in their destination countries. These people play important role agents that drive the economy of those countries. Talking about Asian diasporic subjects, many people might think about only Asian Americans. Actually, Asian diaspora also "includes, conceptually, Anglo-Asian, Asian-Canadian, Asian-Australian, and more; it even reaches out to enfold Asia" ([10], p. 96). That is to say, this group of people also include those who move to countries in Asia. In the United States, Asian people are regarded as one of the largest groups contributing to the construction of the nation's identity. Southeast Asian diasporic people are among Asian as a whole who move to other countries. Some of them become writers producing various forms of literature to portray their lives.

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Southeast Asian diasporic literature is a significant source providing backgrounds and cultures of its people. A large number of them were from rural areas, where they escaped from hardship and suffering in order to seek fortune and build a new life on a new land. Their rural life is often portrayed in their literature depicting landscapes, ways of life, communities, social conditions, and reasons for their flights from their homelands. In this paper, I study the social contexts in the rural areas as portrayed in two literary works of two Southeast Asian diasporic writers. The study aims to explore how the main characters struggle to obtain education in order to transcend oppression and exploitation in their homelands. The first book, *America Is in the Heart*, is an autobiography penned by Carlos Bulosan, a Filipino immigrant who immigrated to the United States. The second is *Monsoon Country*, a novel by Pira Sudham, a Thai writer who had moved around several countries, including New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong, and England, before returning to Thailand. Both Bulosan and Sudham have risen from humble, rural origins, where poor people are oppressed and exploited.

2. Education as a Form of Struggle Against Oppression and Exploitation

Carlos Bulosan was born in 1913 to impoverished peasant farmers in Luzon, the largest island in the Philippines, where Manila, the capital, is located. However, Bulosan's hometown was in a remote area of this island, where his family underwent several forms of exploitation from landlords and moneylenders. Escaping from poverty, he managed to accumulate enough money for a passage to Seattle in 1930. It is amazing that he could compose a great work like *America Is in the Heart*, since "He had completed only three years of schooling and spoke little if any English" ([11], p.xv)

Being a Filipino writer in the United States, Bulosan greatly contributed to the diversity of Asian American literature. Such diversity is explained by [5], "Asian American literature has been enriched by the voices of writers of diverse ethnic origins" (p. 7). Without the voices from the Filipinos, this statement will not be complete, since they are among the largest groups of immigrants who help to construct the diversity in the United States. As a Filipino, it was an arduous task for Bulosan to gain recognition through his writing in the United States in the first stage because he was discriminated against: "it is almost impossible for a Filipino writer to write like himself, to be part of the great American arena of writing, because he is always a Filipino, he is always a slave to his country's traditions and history" (quoted. in [8], p. 77). Nevertheless, his works finally became an important voice of the diversity in American literary cannon.

As depicted in *America Is in the Heart*, most of the Filipinos in the rural Philippines earn their living by rice farming. However, most of them are impoverished, since they are peasants renting land from greedy landlords. They need to either share their crops with the landlords or pay them for the rent, which seems to increase every year.

As stated in the story by Bulosan, this exploitative system is a consequence of the Spanish colonization, which had ruled the Philippines from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries: "the peasants had been the victims of ruthless exploitation for years, dating back to the eighteenth century when Spanish colonizers instituted severe restrictive measures in order to impoverish the natives" ([3], p. 23). Another authority that rips the farmers off is the church, which comes with the colonization and becomes an owner of a huge area of land. The farmers' ordeal and plight result from their lack of land ownership and, thus, the right to reap full benefits from their crops: "The land never did belong to us ... It belonged to the church" ([3], p. 27). It is not wrong to say that the exploitation comes in the form of saints in the church.

According to the history of the Philippines, the country's economy was substantially destroyed by the Spanish colonizers, as stated by [6]: "For two hundred years, the Philippines colony remained largely undeveloped economically except for the limited effects of the activities of encomenderos and Spanish officials and of the friars who settled in the provinces" (p. 54). The encomenderos were the agents who collected the tribute for the colonial government. These people, as well as other religious figures, were granted privilege over the native. They employed their power to exploit the native, instigating great suffering especially for farmers who had to pay tribute to the colonizers: "The encomienda system was generally characterized by greed and cruelty" ([6], p. 44). However, the power of the encomenderos later declined, while the friars' and the priests' power rose. They entered into partnership with farmers, loaning them money, seeds, working animals, and tools. In return, they received half of the harvest. Since the farmers had to share such a large amount of their crops, they began to accumulate debt, which led to the loss of land. As [6] puts it, those farmers had to mortgage their land and finally lost it to landlords (p. 68). This was the origin of the landlord system, which had robbed Filipino farmers for a very long period.

Landlordism, as a result of the Spanish colonization, was exacerbated by the American colonization. As stated by [9] through his autobiography, "Bulosan renders in symbolic form of fabulation how the U.S. conquest exacerbated feudal injustice in the Philippines" (p. 446). The United States was another important factor that perpetuated the landlordism in the Philippines, since the American colonizers fostered feudalism, which benefited only the elite. In the story, although there is the uprising of the oppressed farmers, they cannot fight against the powerful landlord system, since the landlords are part of political structure in the Philippines. This is one of the significant reasons why a large number of the Filipinos decide to leave their home country in search of a new life. This includes Bulosan. To him, it seems that the only way to transcend this exploitative system is to get away from it, since his homeland becomes the land of no hope for the poor.

A major cause of the poor's suffering has to do with the lack of education, which is also represented in 'America Is in the Heart'. Education seems to be the only hope of

the poor to alleviate their suffering, as it will lead to promising career opportunities. However, most of them are unable to acquire education because it requires a huge amount of money. In addition, education has been reserved for only the rulers and upper-class people since the Spanish colonization period: "In Spanish times education was something that belonged exclusively to the rulers and to some fortunate natives affluent enough to go to Europe. But the poor people, the peasants, were denied even the most elementary schooling" ([3], p. 14). Even in the age of American colonization, education was still unobtainable for the poor. This tragedy is contrary to the claim of American colonizers that they would uplift the Philippines: "Education was a central promise offered by US officials looking to legitimate the occupation of the Philippines" ([16], p. 64). Despite this claim, for poor peasants, educational opportunities were still out of reach.

Bulosan himself considers the significance of education to be primary, but his family could not afford to send him to school. Although he was unable to enroll in formal education, when leaving his hometown to Baguio, where he was helped by Miss Mary Strandon, an American woman, he attempted to educate himself. Being aware that English was mandatory in order to build a new life, he asked a friend to teach him to read, and he did some work for him in return. Bulosan improved himself through self-education. He learned mostly from reading, with the help from Miss Strandon, who encouraged him to read and brought him books. Reading had gradually broadened his perspective towards the world and enhanced his understanding about his conditions, especially after reading about Richard Wright, an American Black writer:

"I was beginning to understand what was going on around me, and the darkness that had covered my present life was lifting. I was emerging into sunlight, and I was to know, a decade afterward in America, that this light was not too strong for eyes that had known only darkness and gloom" ([3], p. 71).

Although he lacks formal education, reading leads him to enlightenment and enables him to read his own experiences. As [16] argues, "As the son of parents who neither read nor write, Carlos invests remarkable power in the literary as the mode through which he reads his experience in the world" (p. 62). It is the power of reading that enables him to conceptualize his own life, as well as to understand that it is liberty that he really aspires.

Through education, Bulosan came to understand that his life had been covered by darkness from the oppression by those in power, who wanted to maintain the exploitative system by keeping the poor ignorant. Keeping education expensive was regarded as an efficient strategy to reserve this intellectual weapon for only upper-class people, empowering them to control the poor and use them as a tool to maintain their superior status. Nevertheless, through self-education, Bulosan finally liberated himself from the imprisonment of ignorance. After he acquired full literacy, he discovered a way to speak and fight for himself and his people: "They can't silence me anymore! I'll tell

the world what they have done to me!" ([3], p. 180). His writing ability allows him not only to disclose to the public his traumatic experiences in America as a result of the anti-Oriental concept of some American people, but also to condemn the misuse of hegemonic power of the rich in the Philippines.

Similar to Bulosan, Pira Sudham was born in a small remote village in the north-eastern part of Thailand, which is known as Esarn. He spent his childhood in the rice field before migrating to Bangkok to be a servant of a monk in order to make a living and pursue higher education. Sudham entered had been admitted to Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok before winning a scholarship from the government of New Zealand to study English literature at Auckland University and Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. He had spent over 20 years in New Zealand, Australia, and United Kingdom, where he has written several short stories, poems, and *Monsoon Country*, his first novel. Being a prominent Thai writer who write in English about his country, Sudham was nominated for the 1990 Nobel Prize in literature. '*Monsoon Country*' is more or less Sudham's autobiography. It tells a story of a boy from the village of Napo in a rural area of Esarn, who comes to be a monk's servant in Bangkok to pursue education, since his family cannot support him financially. Similar to Sudham's being awarded a scholarship to New Zealand, Prem the main character in the story, is also granted a scholarship to pursue a degree in England, but does not finish it. He witnesses political turmoil in Thailand, in which a large number of students are massacred during their demonstration against the government. Being disappointed and outraged by social injustice, he terminates his education in England and returns to his home village, where he enters a monkhood. Similar to '*America Is in the Heart*', '*Monsoon Country*' depicts the rural life of poor farmers who are oppressed and exploited. This book portrays the hardship and suffering of the poor who are always exploited by capitalists and those in power.

'*Monsoon Country*' describes the life of the majority in Esarn, who earn a living by rice farming. Actually, rice farming has been the main occupation of most Thai people from the ancient time. As stated in *A History of Thailand*, rice farming played a significant role in sustaining the country's economy: "Everywhere, he found, farmers produced first for their own family needs and sold only what surplus that remained. According to the local saying, the household waited until it saw the yield of the current harvest before selling off the surplus of the previous one. Food security was priority" ([2], p. 86).

Most of Thai farmers are poor; furthermore, their poverty is aggravated by the exploitation of capitalists, who are depicted in '*Monsoon Country*' as middlemen. It is easy for farmers to be cheated, since they are illiterate. Sudham depicts this injustice in the scene when Prem's father sells his crops: "The mill owner, the traders, the middlemen and the shop-keepers who were mostly Chinese and become powerfully wealthy, dealing with the illiterate peasants who squatted on their heels like beggars,

watching sadly as their products were weighed and valued" ([14], p. 34). The total sum of the rice for the whole year—after dividing some for family consumption—is worth only 280 baht (approximately nine U.S. dollars). Other farmers also suffer from the same fate due to their illiteracy and lack of power to negotiate. In addition, they have no other choices in selling their products since it is impossible for them to transport the products to trade in other towns because of poor transportation, which will substantially increase the cost. Therefore, the farmers' choice is "take it or leave it" ([14], p. 34), as the Chinese middleman shout to them when they try to ask for little higher prices.

Apart from capitalism, Sudham also explicitly condemns corruption as a major cause of the villagers' suffering. In 'Monsoon Country', the headman is portrayed as the representation of corrupt system in the village of Napo. He rises to power by bribing people to vote him with a very small amount of money. Even a small amount of money means something to the poor due to their extreme poverty.

"Their dumb faces shone with joy for doing something for something, without knowing what they were doing. To stretch their hands upward was such an easy feat to do, for ten baht, when one would have had to work the whole day as a labourer to earn a similar amount" ([14], p. 18).

The villagers have to accept the consequence of their action as they suffer more in the hands of the corrupt headman. The headman corrupt the development budget from the government. He also corrupt the money donated by charitable organization when drought hits the village. That is why the headman becomes so wealthy and powerful that the villagers fear his power and inevitably pay respect to him and his family. Historically, the Thai government did not pay much attention to the hardship and the problems of the farmers. As a developing country, Thailand spent most of energy and budget on developing projects, as acknowledged by [2], p. 88), "the government gave agriculture a low priority behind railway building for defense, magnificent royal construction, and project of national building". The priority of the government was moving mega projects, neglecting the poor. This allows corruption to permeate in the country, especially the rural areas.

One of the major causes of the never-ending oppressive system has to do with the farmers' lack of education, which is also elaborated in 'Monsoon Country'. The older generation do not have education opportunities, since there is no school in the village. Without education, people in Napo are ignorant and powerless; they fear the power of those who are more educated, including the middlemen. Even the headman of the village, who is supposed to protect the villagers, misuses his authority to oppress them. In maintaining his power, the headman attempts to deprive the villagers of education since he knows that people with knowledge will challenge his power:

the headman said we did not need the school at all. He said, what was the use of having a teacher who considered himself better than everybody else? What was the use of being

able to read and write? It only made the children think that they were better than their parents. You had no need to be able to read and write to be farmers. You could not eat books, he told us. ([14], p. 83-84)

The headman views that keeping the villagers ignorant is an effective way to maintain his power, so he strongly opposes the idea of building a school. As a result, children in Prem's generation have to use a temple as their poor classroom: "The school building was on the temple ground. To claim it school would be only partially true because the old thatched sala (pavilion) was also used for holding religious ceremonies" (20 italic mine). The condition of the school indicates the negligence of the government. In the case of Napo, with the poor schooling and only one teacher for the whole village, educational efficacy is next to impossible. Meanwhile, convinced by the headman, ignorant parents are unable to perceive the importance of education. They simply want their children to grow up and help in the rice fields. They stated "After all, they had raised their young to work and to look after them in their old age. What good would it be to have an artist or an educated person in the house?" (42). For poor people in the rural areas, education is considered as valueless as their primary concern is the basic necessities for their survival. Their lives are occupied by the struggle for survival, so education is an unattainable luxury. This notion arises as a result of the intellectual domination by the oppressive leader. Without the appropriate guidance, they fail to understand that education can help them transcend poverty and the exploitative system. The lack of education also interconnects with the lack of confidence and belief in self-improvement. The parents do not believe in their potential, as well as that of their children, in improving themselves. This indicates that they distrust the power of education, which they believe to be beneficial for only the upper-class people. Due to these limitations, the temple school can offer only a very basic level of education, which is the reason why Prem has to leave the village of Napo to be a monk's servant in Bangkok for a better educational opportunity.

Prem possesses strong determination to improve himself through education. He views that not only that education will bring him benefit but also it will improve the condition of the people in his home village. This encourages him to apply for a scholarship to pursue a degree in England. His concern for the poor people in the village of Napo motivates him to win the scholarship. During the interview, he states:

I've arisen from the mud, from a mire of ignorance and darkness, to catch a glimpse of light to free myself and to walk in daylight. I was, and still am, that buffalo boy who alone boarded a train bound for this city in May 1965 so that I could go to a secondary school. Now eight years later I am ready to brave the flight towards an unknown country to encounter all sorts of new experiences, to learn, to hear more, to read more, and to look from afar so that I may see my own country in a truer perspective. When I achieve my goal, then I shall return to help my country and its poor. ([14], p. 78)

Prem wins the scholarship, which means both good and bad news for his family and himself. He needs money for the preparation cost including buying suits, a suitcase, new shoes and other expenses. To find him, his family have to sell their buffaloes, which are regarded as their loyal friends: "We can sell one or two buffaloes, so we can raise the amount of money you need" ([14], p. 80). The poor have to sacrifice their valuable belonging since they do not have a lot of money. However, this painful sacrifice provides Prem with opportunity to obtain true freedom, searching for knowledge. In Thailand, his poverty is a great obstacle to educational freedom, since education is the privilege for the elite.

Unfortunately, Prem does not finish his education in England and then returns to his homeland in the village of Napo, before entering the monkhood. He contemplates the social injustice that he has encountered, especially the massacre in the student demonstration in Thailand, in which one of his friends is among the casualties: "That fatal day hundreds of students marched out of the university. Many were killed by troops shooting from tanks and helicopters. Rit too fell and died with his skull broken" ([14], p. 79). This represent the real tragic event occurring in the history of Thailand. In 1973 and 1976, Thai students, with their bare hands, rallied against the corrupted government. The government deployed military force to disperse the demonstration, resulting in numerous casualties and injuries. In [2], pp. 194-95) stated "Early on 6 October 1976 they began firing rockets, hand-guns, and anti-tank missiles into Thammasat University. A handful of students who tried to escape were brutally lynched, raped, or burnt alive outside the university. Officially, forty-three students and two police officers were killed. Over 3000 were arrested on the day, and some 5000 later". Sudham inscribed this historical account in 'Monsoon Country'. This event contributes to Prem's failure and disappointment towards social injustice. Prem becomes aware that although he completes his education, he will not possess any power to change the social conditions in Thailand.

The two novels discussed above epitomize the represent

Based on the discussion above, the farmers in the two countries are oppressed by force and ideology, respectively. The farmer in "America is in the Heart" are controlled by repressive force, which is represented by the violence of the military in dispersing the mob. In the case of farmers in 'America Is in the Heart', the government exercise the power by means of repressive force to control the mob, which is represented in the way they disperse the farmers who attempt to resist the oppression. According to Althusser, the government in the Philippines uses Repressive State Apparatus to reproduce the oppressive and exploitative system. Meanwhile, farmers in 'Monsoon Country' are oppressed by Ideological State Apparatus. They are convinced by the headman in the village that they do not need education. They just need to grow rice. The headman convinces them that they do not need education because he does not

want them to gain consciousness to resist the oppression. The Repressive State Apparatus, includes police, courts, prisons, and army, while the Ideological State Apparatuses are comprised of schools, churches, families, and other institutions that can instill ideology in people. The major difference between these two groups of apparatuses is that "The Repressive State Apparatus functions by means of 'violence', whereas the Ideological State Apparatuses functions 'by ideology' "([1], p. 13420). In fact, to control the oppressed group, both apparatuses are needed. However, as evident in the two literary books, farmers in the Philippines and Thailand are controlled by different apparatuses.

3. Conclusions and Suggestions

'America Is in the Heart' and 'Monsoon Country', Bulosan and Sudham share several similarities in the narrative. In both novels, the main characters comes from poor families in underdeveloped rural area. They portray the major issue of poverty due to the lack of education and illiteracy. The poor farmers portrayed in both novels experience the same plight due to the lack of education and illiteracy. In both countries, education opportunities are reserved for the elite, while poor people receive only primary education, which hinders their chance to be free from the exploitation. Despite their limited circumstances, both Bulosan and Prem strongly aspire to improve themselves through education in order to gain more social opportunities. Witnessing and experiencing the injustice in their communities, they come to understand that there are no other ways to help them ascend from the oppressor-oppressed discourse except education. Once they can get out from their communities, they understand that what they learn from their communities is limited. There are a lot more for them to learn in order to emancipate themselves from the oppressors as well as from their own ignorance. This is the main reason why they put a great effort on pursuing education by self-supporting. Bulosan, unable to attend school, learns mostly by reading, while Prem decides to leave his family to serve a monk in a temple to gain opportunity to pursue higher education.

Through 'America Is in the Heart' and 'Monsoon Country', both Bulosan and Sudham convey the voices of rural farmers in the Philippines and Thailand, who are silenced by the oppressor. The farmers' suffering is neglected by their governments, although those farmers are the providers for the countries, helping to sustain the economy. With such negligence, they become the underprivileged and helplessly live under hardship and suffering from exploitation. However, the success of the two books helps to disseminate information about the social conditions in the rural areas of the two nations, unveiling the fact that the poor are always victimized by the rich. In his interview, Sudham explains why it is imperative for him to write and give voice to the poor:

In my mind I carry memories of childhood, of life in villages, much as a pregnant woman carrying a child. Every day these images grow, and I know that one day I shall have to give birth to them through the medium of writing. Besides, I don't want people in our villages, so far removed from other peoples because of distance and poverty, to be born, suffer and to die in vain. (DCO Thai – Books and More)

Therefore, literature is employed as an effective means for Sudham to give voice to the underprivileged in the rural parts of *Esarn*. Bulosan and Sudham are both from dirt, in the world of poverty and ignorance, where the poor are not seen and heard. However, their determination, patience, and fighting spirits render them equipped with intellectual power to express themselves. This achievement transforms them from pieces of dirt into the precious voices of the underprivileged.

In the two stories, the farmers' lack of power to represent themselves can also be described by Spivak's concept about the voice of the marginalized. The term "subaltern" as defined by Spivak encompasses the underprivileged or the marginalized who are outside the elite sphere. These people are silenced by the epistemological domination of the West, which Spivak calls "epistemic violence" (24). The subaltern in this sense refers to "the margins (one can just as well say the silent, silenced center) of the circuit marked out by this epistemic violence, men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat" (25). In the oppressive discourse, their voice is suppressed, so they are inevitably unheard. Spivak poses the question, "Can the subaltern speak?" Of course, they can, but who will listen to them? Without voice, these people also seem to be invisible; their existence is denied. Therefore, it is the job of the intellectuals from the subaltern group to speak for their people. Bulosan and Sudham are regarded as intellectuals who represent and give voice to their people, raising readers' awareness about the oppression and exploitation in their communities.

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