

The Pursuit of Lucidity

As I was walking along Padre Faura a few summers ago, I stumbled upon a little book shop called "*Solidaridad*" and was immediately filled with the oddest sensation, one that compelled me to go inside and have a look. It stunned me to be standing there, to say the least. I walked out empty handed but with a lot of questions in mind waiting to be satisfied. I always had a sort of fondness with literature. Even at a youthful age, I prided myself on being a bookworm, one that could easily recognize any title or author and tell you about the books I have read like they were tattooed on the back of my hand. Hence, it came as a surprise when I walked around and barely recognized the covers around me. I soon found the quaint little book shop a mystery my all too modest mind couldn't comprehend.

A few years passed, as I researched on Filipino authors for a subject called 21st Century Literature, I found out that *F. Sionil Jose*, the 2001 National Artist for Literature and famed Filipino author, owned the place. It tugged on my heartstrings a bit because it took a while before I could recognize the names of some Filipino authors and appreciate how much they have poured out in words to keep our culture alive. It troubled me that I lived in the same country where they also dwelled, and not know of the struggles our people went through because I was too busy being in the know about faraway places and their own set of struggles. My interest was so fickle, it couldn't last a page. My mind draws a blank when I try to think of anyone who could know anything about our culture more than what meets the eye. I'd like to think that school has been of great help, but to tell you the truth, the knowledge I was (and still am) looking for, need to be found elsewhere. Some of these places are found in the heart of Metro Manila. It is so fortunate that we can now go to the *National Museum* for free. The first time I ever went there, I came out with a deeper appreciation for the arts and the talents of our countrymen. Seeing the *Spolarium*

in person almost brought me to tears. The feeling was more than just being able to take photos inside to enhance my *Instagram* feed, it was more than that. It became a gateway for my interest to flourish. Local tourist attractions might play a big part in introducing our country to foreigners, but they can also become places for true-blooded Filipinos to rediscover their identities, and we often disregard them, as we do to what is happening around us on the daily.

There are so many underlying issues I tend to miss because they aren't on the news but on paper, barely touched, let alone read. I am somewhat a foreigner in my own home and it bothers me until I am at my wit's end. I speak the language but do not take the time to listen when it is being spoken. My knowledge is unfortunately limited to history textbooks with a lot of stories to tell, but often missing the heart and voice of the people in it. Sometimes the content is a biased version of what really happened. They bore me to tears, and if not, they become bedtime stories even when it is still hours away before I actually have to go to sleep.

I could easily put the blame on technology and the rampant colonization the internet is exposing our people to everyday, most especially the youth. The childhood of my generation consisted of trying out the early trailblazers of social media: *Friendster*, *MySpace*, etc. or surfing the internet for games rather than enjoying the good old-fashioned *patintero* or maybe even *tagu-tagan*. The media was no different. In *teleseryes*, poor people were always scrutinized, portrayed by actors with dark complexion while the rich were the complete opposite, and it grew so much on us that it has become normal not to be proud of the God-given features we were born with. We become anti-poor with no compassion. Let's face it: we're only ever proud of a fellow Filipino when they win or become well-known internationally, and only then do we incessantly tell others we are of the same race. I am afraid I have unconsciously acquired this kind of

disorder we suffer as a nation, even when we could barely call ourselves that, because we continue to be comfortable with this maltreatment.

We are no longer interested in getting in touch with our culture—an honest outlook on some of today's Filipino society, even if we beg to disagree. We are quick to defend ourselves from our neglect because we refuse to acknowledge it. Although there are people who stray from this common ideology, our support is not enough for there is still a need to address this issue. However, it is not too late to turn things around, I believe. There are easier means to make people around us interested, simply by supporting locally made products and forms of entertainment. We often dismiss movies of some genres; particularly horror, action, and sci-fi, because we claim that the knowledge and equipment used in Filipino films are not as advanced as those in Hollywood. Filipino writers struggle to market their work because only those people seen on television who publish their books, or those who exhaust the "*hugot*" trend, get enough attention. Bigger, global clothing brands are those often tagged in Instagram posts of these so-called *influencers*. Shockingly, there are some Filipinos who buy in the mindset that anything local equates to being in poverty; there is an obvious divide between the rich and the poor. When most of us do show our support, however, we tend to settle for less by only making ourselves familiar with our culture on the surface level. The Filipino, per se, doesn't deserve half-hearted attempts at being recognized, for it should be given our undivided attention.

However, our weaknesses could also very well be our strengths. Our dedication to technology and its forms could bring our culture and literature alive again if we try hard enough. Filipino authors are now capable of having louder voices, wider platforms to share their work, and reach an even bigger audience. The convenience that we are able to experience can be beneficial rather than destructive, in terms of influencing others to explore what the Philippines

has to offer. Nowadays, it is a well-known fact that *millennials*, more than older generations, are more attuned to using the internet, therefore giving the youth a power that can touch millions of lives with just one click. We are so busy with our social media personas; the right filter to use, the *Facebook* games to play, and what to tweet about, when the solution is (literally) right at our fingertips. Being born into this age of technology, I can relate to these in my everyday life. As I grew older, however, it opened my eyes to more things happening around me. In social media jargon, I became “*woke*”. Meaning: I am aware of the injustices and privileges in our society; that I am an active participant in wanting things to change for the benefit of everyone.

I used to have very little appreciation for OPM or books in the *Filipiniana* section of the library. I could only dream of having the amount of independence it takes to join rallies or write articles strongly opposing the government. However, before my classes on literature persuaded me that they are worth the try, my curiosity being fed by reliable articles on the internet, being a spoken word admirer and aspiring performer, or my strong opinions on political issues in our country (#MarcosNotAHero and war on drugs, to name a few) it was the *Teatro Tomasino* play of the Ricky Lee classic, *Para Kay B*, which had done it for me. I remember buying the tickets in UST, and the book, to indulge my whims (it was discounted!) the day after my 16th birthday. I had it signed right after the play when I met Ricky himself. That book, however cliché it might be, may not be the first Filipino novel I’ve read, but it was with me through moments of teenage heartbreak, and has been a big factor on why I choose to still be ‘woke’ to this day.

There is a *meme* popular among the Filipino youth, wherein parents would always say, “*Ayan kaka-computer mo yan!*” (“You always being on the computer is to blame!”), towards every bump we encounter in our teenage lives, and it reflects the negativity of technology’s power to isolate us from reality. We find it humorous in a sardonic manner, but contrary to

popular belief, some of the youth on the internet play a big part on why I am in love with the distinctiveness of our culture, today. There is an on-going hype in Filipino films and music. Problematic Filipino stereotypes are deconstructed, and more issues are addressed. Social awareness has become common in our timelines. We develop a deeper concern for each other, how we are represented, and also, reminisce together on the past. Our culture is promoted on every platform, our literature gaining more leverage each day. Being fluent in Filipino or being multilingual around our country is celebrated, so are Filipino physical features, and of course, our food. Besides traditional Filipino dishes (with loads of rice!), who doesn't love good old *Jollibee*? A lot of places in the Philippines are highlighted in 140-second videos, budding Filipino writers and artists use their skills for the common good, and overall, being a young Filipino online has never been this welcoming. The challenge is bringing this growing interest and positive environment in real life. It proves to be a difficult road to take but not an impossible one if the youth chooses to not stop being themselves, and to keep voicing out their views even in fear of being easily dismissed. Our power to influence even if it is through social media can translate to even bigger responsibilities in the future, provided that we stick to our sense of nationalism and encourage others to do the same.

Now, as I am writing this on the family desktop, in the summer heat only slightly diluted by the electric fan directing the wind onto my back, I reminisce of that younger version of me in *Solidaridad*, clueless as ever, and can't help but smile at the person I am today. I still have a long way to go. There are more books to read, poetry to write, music to listen to, battles to fight, and museums to explore. Whatever it took to get me here was all worth it, though. If I were to go back to that little book shop, I wouldn't dare as much to call it 'little' anymore. For beyond those book spines, covers, and pages in between; is a bigger world, where I'd rather be.