

Philippine Social Constructs Found in Bob Ong's Stories

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ABSTRACT

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Literary texts are products of an ideology. Consequently, some Filipinos write about social constructs to uncover and question the existence of a particular social norm. Bob Ong, a Filipino writer, makes readers experience factual events. His novels *Macarthur* and *Kapitan Sino* uphold the cultural, economic, and political constructs which made these works vulnerable to be examined from a socio-political perspective. This study used the qualitative-descriptive methodology to show different social classes, conflicts, and resolutions found in the novels. This study also features the ills of society as a reflection of the Philippine society. The following conclusions are drawn: First, that the Philippine social construct can be interpreted based on the Class Conflict theory from the ideology of Karl Marx. Thus, social classes are classified as bourgeoisie and proletariat. Second, conflicts are societal in nature and are challenging to resolve. Indeed, the novels reveal concerns that reflect the contemporary Philippine circumstance.

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Introduction

It is natural for Filipinos to laugh at life situations that are considered serious and severe, especially in times of misfortunes, from natural calamities, like typhoons and earthquakes to contemporary issues such as politics, poverty, and death. This type of topical humor is exemplified in the books of a Filipino mystery man, whose blockbuster novel sales are designed to appeal to many kinds of people. Bob Ong created consciousness, vigilance, and aroused concerns through his novels. His effort to reach out and appeal to the readers' patriotic senses is believable in his stories. True to that, Bob Ong's *Macarthur* (Red Book) and *Kapitan Sino* (Silver Book) embark upon societal problems.

To continue, Filipino readers enjoy Bob Ong as an artist because his novels are a true depiction of Philippine reality. His technique of combining random comments partnered with wit gathered mass appeal. The novels *Macarthur* and *Kapitan Sino* have shown issues which highlight struggles of the Filipino. Ultimately, the novels discuss the reality of being poor, neglected, and

underprivileged in the Philippines. The informal style of writing is refreshing compared to the all too serious way of interpreting our society today. Hence, this research highlights the existence of social constructs and how this resulted to conflicts using Marxist literary criticism.

Specifically, this study aimed to:

1. Identify the social classes present in the novels, *Macarthur* and *Kapitan Sino*;
2. Analyse the class conflicts or class struggles, in terms of:
 - a. Class systems and
 - b. Resistance;
3. Interpret whether the class conflicts or class struggles are resolved by the opposing forces;
4. Recognize the ills of society created by these class conflicts.

Method

This research made use of qualitative-descriptive method as its research design. This research also used the Class Conflict Theory by Karl Marx. According to Barber (1957), Karl Marx was the first proponent of class struggle as a social science theory. Classes were determined according to who owned the means of production (employers) and who operated the means of production (workers).

According to Marx, the conflict will take place between the bourgeois and the proletariat. The former owns the natural and human resources, that is, they control the means of production while the latter supplies the labor so that owners can make a profit from. The struggle, on the other hand, is rarely realized as a clash of owner and laborer, most times the conflict is just between class differences. The Bourgeois and the Proletariat are two parts of a whole that struggle against each other, not just physically but also ideologically (Dobie, 2009).

Class system is pyramidal in form, with a few people on top in elite positions, a larger number in the middle, and the vast majority at the bottom. An example is this: the working class in a class system collides with the dominant class, finally reaching synthesis, which generates another opposite until classes have disappeared altogether (Borgatta et al., 1991).

Class analysis, of course, remains the key aspect of any Marxist sociology, even those (e.g., Max Weber) that acknowledge the importance of class conflict perceive that class creates conflict (Chinoy, et. Al, 1957).

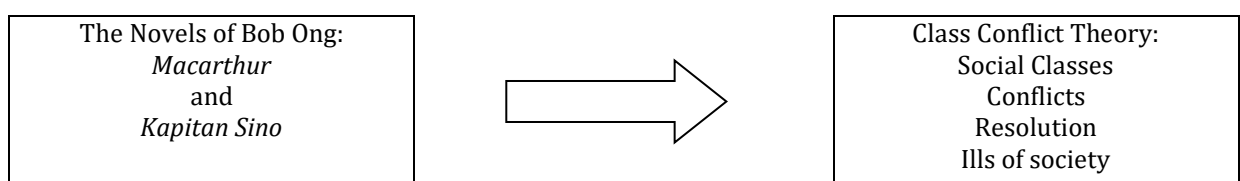


Figure 1

The figure above shows that the researcher used the novels *Kapitan Sino* and *Macarthur* written by Bob Ong for analysis. The theory applied is Class Conflict which suggests that human behavior in social contexts results from conflicts between competing groups. Bob Ong, the author of *Kapitan Sino* and *Macarthur* understood the Philippine society in terms of conflict between social classes. The thing about Class Conflict theory injected in both novels suggests that different social groups appear wherever, including the Philippines. These social groups struggle to compete against each other, thus disturbing the social order, resulting to social ills in the society.

Discussion

This part presents the result of the analysis. Table 1 shows the social classes that are present in the novels, *Macarthur* and *Kapitan Sino*. The social classes are classified as the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The social classes are determined primarily according to who own the means of production (dominant class) and who operated the means of production (working class). Their difference in terms of ideology indicates the classification of the two opposing classes.

Table 1. Social classes found in the two novels

<i>Social Classes</i>	<i>Macarthur</i>	<i>Kapitan Sino</i>
Bourgeoisie	<p>Topak and his colleagues A police officer named Topak is an ideal bourgeois. Topak is a law enforcer but he just uses this image to pilfer among ordinary citizens. Along with his officemates, they filch around the city</p> <p>Aling Sally Marilen's employer; Aling Sally retaliates to the lowly housemaid who can't defend herself. Instead of speaking about the real problem she blames Marilen for being inadequate.</p>	<p>Aling Baby A lady who is described as boastful of her appliances at home. She likes to appear superior to others. Her character is one example of a bourgeoisie since her luxuries are real and attainable for her.</p> <p>Vice Mayor Samonte He is a prominent image in the novel. The Vice Mayor portrays the corrupt and unreliable politician. Instead of using the money for government services he spends it by giving a lavish party to address <i>Kapitan Sino's</i> bravery. Eventually, we learn that this is just a scheme for the Vice Mayor to collect money from the pockets of well-established organizations. He uses his power to trick and control his subordinates. The nature of wanting to remain in control sets the Vice Mayor as an exemplary example of a bourgeoisie.</p>
Proletariat	<p>Marilen Marilen is Aling Sally's maid; most of the time, Aling Sally blames Marilen for every bad situation. Marilen, although innocent is put upfront to take all of Aling Sally's sentiments. Even so, Marilen meekly follows her boss.</p> <p>Cyrus Cyurs dreams to have a good life but he</p>	<p>Rogelio Rogelio has been struggling financially. He came from a poor family and his job offers minimal pay. His job is as repairer of damaged appliances provides for him not wealth but another person's comfort. The poverty he is experiencing is worsened by his own skepticism.</p> <p>Mang Dino Mang Dino is an indigenous citizen who</p>

	<p>does not have enough financial support to even go to school. The material conditions of Cyrus social status have reduced him to a difficult existence from which he can find no exit.</p>	<p>weighs bronze in a junk shop. He works even up to night time but gets a low salary in return. Mang Dino is a lowly character, having been mocked by his neighbors because he is an uneducated man.</p>
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Based on the definition given by Karl Marx in his *Communist Manifesto*, the Bourgeoisie (or self-proclaimed elite) is described to have owned valuable possessions. In the novels *Kapitan Sino* and *Macarthur* by Bob Ong the characters Aling Baby, Vice Mayor Samonte, Aling Sally and Topak are described to have social positions and material possessions to exert power over those who do not. Furthermore, in the novels mentioned, the proletariat is the social class who does the production of goods, or the workers in the society where they belong. The characters belonging to the proletariat such as Marilen, Rogelio, Cyrus, and Mang Dino are all subject to disrespect by their superiors.

Having identified the social classes available in the two novels, the next part introduces the analysis of the class conflicts or class struggles in the class system and the resistance as a product of this division. The two social classes present in the novels, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are described in order to analyze their differences in terms of social constructs. The conflict of *Kapitan Sino* and *Macarthur* by Bob Ong focuses primarily on the clash between social classes. Table 2 shows the two opposing forces fighting against each other.

Table 2. Conflicts found in the two novels

<i>Macarthur</i>	<i>Kapitan Sino</i>
<p>Conflict: Person against Person Marilen vs. Aling Sally The perfect representation of a bourgeoisie is in the character of Aling Sally; her portrayal as cruel employer who exploits Marilen is a clear image of how someone from the upper class uses power to undermine those who cannot defend themselves. The depiction of a proletariat, on the other hand, can be seen in the status held by Marilen as a housemaid. Their conflict appeared when Aling Sally accuses Marilen, her housemaid of not organizing the things in the house. Their relationship as employer and employee is a faultless illustration of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie exercises too much authority over the proletariat. The control of the bourgeoisie who owns the means of production is used invariably in the situation when Aling Sally's outburst regards the housemaid as someone who has the lowermost importance in the house.</p> <p>Conflict: Person against Society Cyrus vs. Topak and his colleagues The conflict between Cyrus and Topak along with his colleagues started when Cyrus stole a necklace</p>	<p>Conflict: Person against Person Aling Baby vs. Mang Dino Aling baby is a bourgeoisie while Mang Dino is a proletariat. Their classes are enough point of conflict already. Aling Baby once prejudged Mang Dino for he came from the rural areas. She belittles him since he has no formal education. For the second time, Aling Baby underestimated him by scolding him in front of all her neighbors in Pelaez. Mang Dino who knows nothing about segregation is discriminated by Aling Baby who publicly called him names.</p> <p>Conflict: Person against Society Vice Mayor Virgilio Samonte and the People of the city vs. Kapitan Sino The character of the Vice Mayor as a bourgeoisie is obvious in the novel whereas Rogelio is clear to be a proletariat. Apart from their difference in status in the society where they both live, they are also mortal enemies, in a sense that Rogelio, the real <i>Kapitan Sino</i> superhero does everything to eliminate mischief, including corruption. While the good for nothing Vice Mayor does his best to strengthen corruption in the place. The Pelaez Vice-Mayor therefore is dishonest in his propaganda, while a political event is going on in Pelaez an anomaly is also happening. A clear</p>

<p>from a lady. Topak manipulated the situation to his advantage. They saw each other again in rather the same situation. The only difference is that Topak uses force physically over him this time. When Cyrus was captured by Topak, the police officer beats him and forces him to submit the things he has stolen. But the conflict does not end there, the display of authority by the police showed deeper differences between the bourgeois and the proletariat.</p>	<p>indication that he is a bourgeoisie that uses excessive power to rule over innocent citizens.</p>
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The analyses presented that the proletariat in a class system stays at the bottom of the social system indicating a deprived place in society. When the proletariat or the working class is put down by a bourgeoisie there will be resistance from the working class and a disturbance in the system. There will be clashes between classes, therefore, conflict is present.

To continue, Table 3 shows how the conflicts were resolved in the two novels: *Macarthur* and *Kapitan Sino*. In this modern world, class diversity put aside equality in such a way that social disorder was disturbed. By this, the dominant class (bourgeoisie) tried to overpower the working class (proletariat) thereby executing what we call conflict between social classes. The resolution may or may not happen as confrontations from both forces appear to be present in the social system persistently.

Table 3. Resolution of conflicts between social classes

<i>Macarthur</i>	<i>Kapitan Sino</i>
<p>The conflict between Marilen and Aling Sally remains unresolved for the reason that Aling Sally's attitude as a bourgeoisie does not warrant her to apologize. Even if it is clear that Aling Sally mistreats her housemaid, the position of the housemaid remains. She will always be subjected to scorn and she will let it pass like nothing happened because she wants to stay in her job. The lowly character after having been disrespected by Aling Sally will continue in her effort to lessen her employer's anger.</p> <p>The conflict between Cyrus and Topak with his colleagues is resolved because Cyrus after the abuse he has undergone in the hands of Topak walked back home as if nothing happens. Topak who practices too much authority over Cyrus tries to rob him of things in replacement of the latter's freedom. So, Cyrus who is left to choose of course prefers to be set free instead of fighting for his right to remain silent.</p>	<p>the conflict between Aling Baby and Mang Dino remains unclosed for there has never been an answer whether Mang Dino changed his ways of burning the garbage. Furthermore, there are no statements in the novel that suggests that Aling Baby has educated Mang Dino the right method of garbage segregation. She only voiced out her comments for the other people to hear, not really intending to teach the indigenous man. It seems that her reason for pointing out the old man's flaws reflected her own, for she also has responsibility with the garbage.</p> <p>The clash between the Vice Mayor and the city people versus Rogelio is not resolved because the money that is supposedly given to the true <i>Kapitan Sino</i> has been thwarted by the appearance of impostors. What is worse is that <i>Kapitan Sino</i> is not even truly invited in the event. In the end, Rogelio who is <i>Kapitan Sino</i> is blamed for the commotion that took place in the said event. He is then put behind bars and his identity is made known to the public.</p>

The conflicts appear to be external; physical and societal. The bourgeoisie tries to remain in control by overpowering the proletariat, while the proletariat also tries to overthrow the existing

authority hereby executing what is called conflict between social classes.

Next part recognizes the ills of society found in the novels. The Class Conflict theory states that class differences create social problems and disorder. Bob Ong was remarkable in his account of the lower class' resistance over the elite's determination to remain on top.

Table 4. The ills of society as reflected in the novels

<i>Macarthur</i>	<i>Kapitan Sino</i>
<p>Robbery One of the most dominant ills of the society found in <i>Macarthur</i> is robbery. Robbery has always been a serious problem in the Philippines. This problem is like corruption and Cyrus the main character has corrupted his victims through stealing and abusing them. Cyrus lives through stealing and he is also feeding his drug addiction through this vice. The root of this ill has always been poverty but Cyrus has committed a fatal offense because he does this to continue his drug addiction.</p> <p>Drug Addiction Drug addiction has been a very familiar problem that the country faces. This social problem affects millions of people. The government has pointed out the bad effects of drug addiction but addiction is still rampant. Moreover, drug dependence shape useless citizens.</p> <p>Murder Murder is one of the deadly sins in the Ten Commandments, the Bible. In <i>Macarthur</i> one of the characters is killed. The police discovered the character's dead body in a river. Instead of capturing the killer the police remains nonchalant of the situation.</p>	<p>Corruption Because of this social problem the town of Pelaez is not improving. The money that is supposedly given to the people to build local hospitals is spent for nonsense things. This is probably the primary ill of society found in the novel. Because of corruption the town's people suffer deprivation of goods. Furthermore, gambling is also present, a sign that the Vice-mayor is trying to earn money from the pockets of the citizens.</p> <p>Backbiting This is a common social problem among bystanders. Instead of using their time productively, the gossipers gather up outside their homes and talk nonstop about nonsense topics concerning their neighborhood. The awful thing is that the gossipers thwart the alley way of vehicles making it impassable. Bob Ong is saying that this social problem is a total waste of time.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Poverty</p> <p>Both novels, <i>Kapitan Sino</i> and <i>Macarthur</i>, discuss poverty in the Philippine setting. Because of poverty the characters resorted to doing bad things and made their lives miserable up to the very end. It is hard to escape poverty in such a place wherein people tend to worsen their situation by doing more harm than good.</p>	

The ills of society found in the two novels were poverty, corruption, backbiting, robbery, drug addiction, and murder. The issues were determined through the characters encounter of mishaps and struggles within the society.

Conclusion

After having analyzed and interpreted the works of Bob Ong, the following conclusions were drawn: First, social realities portrayed in the novels were abuse of power which then lead to backbiting, robbery, corruption, poverty, drug addiction, and murder. Second, the social classes embodied by the major characters were classified as the bourgeois or the dominant class and the proletariat or the working class. The main conflicts found in the novels were personal (person against person) and social (person against society). Fourth, the two novels were similar in terms

of reflecting abuse of authority. The novel *Macarthur* ruled through police brutality torturing the poor and underprivileged while in *Kapitan Sino*, the public official had a corrupt leadership. With the two novels representation of reality the readers could analyze issues regarding class differences and conflicts in the society in the Marxist perspective.

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