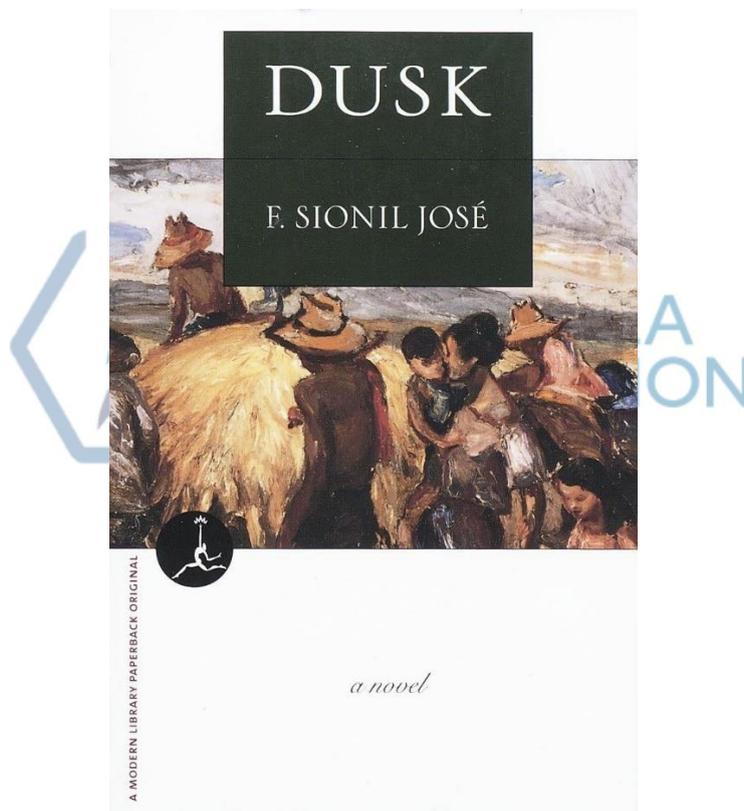


Book Review

The Role of Religion in “Dusk”

Author: F. Sionil Jose

Francisco Sionil José was a Filipino writer who was one of the most widely read in the English language. A National Artist of the Philippines for Literature, which was bestowed upon him in 2001, José's novels and short stories depict the social underpinnings of class struggles and colonialism in Filipino society.



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Reviewed by: Niyanthri Arun

Written by one of the Philippines' most well-known writers, "Dusk" by F. Sionil Jose (1984) is the first in a five-story saga, considered to be one of the finest works of Filipino literature written in English. The story begins with the protagonist, Istak, unintentionally witnessing the priest of the Spanish convent that he attends having intercourse with a parishioner. The priest, out of a desire to keep this secret, commands Istak and his family to leave the church and the land they have farmed. Outraged by this, Istak's father murders the priest, after which the family is forced to escape the town and settle in a part of an unoccupied forest to evade the Spanish authorities, creating a home in a town they call Po'on. As time passes, Istak marries and is respected in the community as a healer and farmer. However, this peaceful lifestyle is interrupted as war begins brewing between Spain and the United States. Driven by his belief in an independent and peaceful Filipino nation, Istak chooses to fight for the rebels' side. This decision forces him to confront moral and spiritual dilemmas as he works with great freedom fighters to prevent the further treatment of his people as second-class citizens in their own country. The novel details the hypocrisy and authoritarianism of the Spanish elite—represented by the priest in the story—and serves as an account of colonial atrocities as well as the role of religion as a tool of oppression, a unique exploration of a technique used in many colonial endeavours.

Though many of the characters in the novel itself are religious, including the protagonist, the personal empowerment that is gained from this individual practice of religion is separated from the domineering ideology propagated by the Spanish colonizers. Through this separation, the moral dilemma Istak faces becomes clearer: the church is at once his saviour and oppressor, and he must find a way to reconcile his faith with the knowledge that the church as an institution was not built for the benefit of his people. Istak was educated in the convent from a young age because an older priest recognised his potential and therefore had a strong belief in God and knowledge of scripture. Despite this, it is his involvement in the affairs of the church as an institution that causes his downfall. Despite this fact, his faith remains steadfast throughout the novel, as does his gratitude to the Spanish priest who recognised his potential. His discontent with the Spanish colonial system, therefore, stems from the power imbalance between natives and the Spanish, perpetuated by the church. This resentment is conveyed by the quote in which it is said: "It was the priest who ruled, and who enacted the laws of the Church and man, and added to such laws the lash of prejudice, for power was always white, Castilian, and not brown like the good earth." The Spanish version of Christianity at the time was meant to spread the mentality that they, as the people who brought religion to so-called uncivilised people, were

the superior race and favoured by God. Istak is thus outraged by the fact that the colonial system favours neither morality, justice, nor faith but instead blindly follows the authority of the Spanish elite.

This realisation causes his spiritual and mental transformation—he begins to foster more strongly anti-colonial ideas while recognising that God is not less accessible to him than to anyone else simply because of his skin colour, leading to his ultimate evolution for the better. Thus, his religion led to the growth of a nationalist spirit within him, leading him to aid revolutionaries fighting against the Spanish. This concept of nationalism is encapsulated in his internal monologue, in which he reaches the ultimate realisation that God is not only for the white man—when he thinks, “I should worship not a white God but someone brown like me. Pride tells me only one thing: that we are more than equal with those who rule us. Pride tells me that this land is mine, that they should leave me to my destiny, and if they will not leave, pride tells me that I should push them away, and should they refuse this, I should vanquish them.” (143). Istak’s change in faith throughout the novel is a poignant portrayal of religion as a complex idea that can simultaneously fuel and end revolutions, adding nuance to the conversation surrounding the conversion of many indigenous people during the time of colonisation in the Philippines. His belief in a God who represents him motivates him to also take confidence in the fact that the identity of his people should be reflected in other aspects of their lives as well.

Dusk is a rousing story of survival and perseverance, as well as the fight for justice for a nation and the faith one holds to be true. In the process of telling this story, the concept of faith itself is questioned as it is separated from man-made religious institutions. By doing so, it reveals that this difference, once it is fully realised, can open the minds of a nation to make them realise that they need not be bound by their faith and that it can be used to break these forcefully made bonds instead. In short, it changes the perception of religion as a weapon of the oppressors to an equaliser that helps individuals realise their equal worth and prompts them to extend this concept to their families and further to their nation. This revelation that the colonisers have no right to justify their conquest in the name of having God’s favour, that grace resides in all, is encapsulated most succinctly by Istak in his moment of epiphany: “No stranger can come battering down my door and say he brings me light. This I have within me” (143). The unique perspectives and stirring writing in the novel make Dusk an essential read for anyone interested in Philippine history, the origins of nationalist ideals, the brutality of colonisation, or the impact

of religion and the moral conundrums it causes.

