ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the rap poetry performed by the mendicants aboard Public Utility Jeeps (PUJ) plying the streets of Metro Cebu. The rap poems which were collected either through audio recording during actual performances or through handwritten copies provided by the mendicants themselves were basically in Cebuano Visayan with intermittent code switches in Tagalog and English. The fourteen rap poems collected were translated into English. The rap poems were primarily intended as an apparatus of mendicancy. However, under critical examination, the mendicants’ rap poetry subverts the immediate pragmatic authorial intent and behaves as an autonomous text replete in critical elements in manifold forms of social redress, protest, and commentary. From a mere apparatus of mendicancy, it has metamorphosed into a formidable apparatus of critique from “below” so much so that it is proffered by the mendicants, -the marginalized who live at the margins of society. Gravitating around the predominant themes of marginality and poverty, the rap poems resound as a searing indictment of a society whose publicly professed ethical and cultural values are discredited by the very existence of the subterranean social pathologies that breed the poorest of the poor.

Keywords: rap poetry, mendicants, apparatus of mendicancy, apparatus of critique, social redress, protest, commentary, marginality, poverty, lived experience, critical theory

INTRODUCTION

Long time ago, minstrels made a good living as royal entertainers in the courts of Medieval monarchs (Kieckhefer 96). Reminiscent of the Medieval minstrels, groups of individuals eke out a living by performing rap poetry aboard public utility jeeps (PUJ) plying the streets of Metro Cebu. Unlike the royal minstrels, however, they are more mendicant than entertainer.

This paper deals with the rap poetry performed by the mendicants aboard PUJs in metro Cebu. It posits that the rap poems transcend the mendicants’ immediate pragmatic purpose. Appropriated as an apparatus of mendicancy, the rap poetry subverts authorial intent and rises as an autonomous text replete in critical elements in the form of social redress, protest, and commentary. It is a form of social critique from “below” proffered by the mendicants, the marginalized who live at the margins of society.

As a linguistic and aesthetic construct, literary works are essentially a social document (Sell 26). The humanizing element of a literary creation
becomes evident in its power to intensify and expand the person’s awareness of the other and steer humanity to the essence of all destinies, the struggles, aspirations, triumphs and sorrows of life (Branch 43). As narratives of sociality that sustains the rich deposit of cultural knowledge, literature humanizes the world. Poetry is one of the oldest genres of literature. The Greek word “poieo” means “to create” or “to produce.” Etymologically, poetry is thus an act of creative production. Poetry is of various types, such as quatrains, cinquains, tercets, couplet, diamante, sestina, villanelle, sonnet, ballad, emblem, haiku, elegy, limerick, epic, acrostic, ballad, didactic, epigram, epitaph, narrative, lyric, ode, idyll, doggerel, aubade, blank verse, free verse, and rap.

Rap poetry emerged in the African-American cultural community. As a component of the hip-hop culture which developed in New York in the 1970s, rap became a medium of expression and social protest. Murray (403) remarked that “Rap is the voice of alienated, frustrated, and rebellious Black youth who recognize their vulnerability and marginality in post-industrial America.” Social protest is not a feature exclusive to rap but a distinction that is also shared by poetry in general. Emily Steiner (173), in her analysis of Medieval English literature, declared that “poetry is a genre of social action.” Salma Jayyusi, an Arab poet, averred that his poems are a “social document” that tackles the hardships of the Arab youth’s social existence (Wael and Kamal 142).

**Mendicants’ Rap Poetry**

Mendicancy is proscribed by law in Cebu City. However, it has managed to co-exist with the prohibition by taking a peculiar form. Young boys and girls as well adolescent and middle aged individuals, perform rap poetry aboard public utility jeeps (PUJ) in order to beg from the passengers. The beggars’ rendition of rap poems accompanied by skilful use of improvised tin cans as bass and matched by the creative manipulation of hands, mouth, and vocal chords to produce a rhapsodic symphony can be both amusing and annoying to jam-packed passengers.

Most of the rap poems were collected through audio recording during actual performances aboard PUJs. In some cases, the mendicants provided handwritten copies of their poetry. All the poems are basically in Cebuano Visayan with intermittent code switches to Tagalog and English. By their own account, the poems were collectively composed by the mendicants themselves. The collected poems were then transcribed using a Cebuano Visayan orthography which were then translated to English. The arrangement by stanzas as well as the provisions for punctuations are arbitrary.

Below is an example of a rap poem in Cebuano Visayan with its corresponding English translation.

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1 In collecting the rap poems, the mendicants were duly informed that their performance will be recorded to which they freely gave their consent. They were given tokens for permission to record their rap poems. Those who provided handwritten copies were properly compensated.
2 Cebuano or Cebuano Visayan is one of the major languages in the Philippines. It is a language spoken by the majority of the Filipinos particularly in the Visayas and Mindanao. The Philippines is comprised of three major islands collectively named Luzviminda which stands for Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. Manila, the Philippine’s capital city, is located in Luzon.
3 Tagalog or Filipino is the national language of the Philippines while English is its second national language.
4 The translation is done for the pragmatic purpose of making the text understandable in English. It does claim conformity to aesthetic and literary standards of translation of poems.
Table 1. Full text of the rap poem “Kalisud” with the corresponding English translation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Kalisud”</th>
<th>“Hardship”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Cebuano Version)</td>
<td>(English Version)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Kini amu’ng isturya sa Pilipinu’ng daku,  
Ang pangita’s kalibuta’ng gadumut.  
Ug nganu’ng siya pa ang nahatagan ug kinabuhi,  
Pwirti na niya’ng paningkamut  
kuwang pa sa pamuhu?  

Sa iya’ng pamilya ug gasuga lang sila’g lamparilya,  
kwarta’ng daginutun, kwang pang matrikula.  
Naningkamut ug maayu  
para lang makalahutay sa kalisud,  
Sa kalisud sa kinabuhi gitawag na pagsulay.  
Piru nakapait daghan ang sapi-an  
sa atu’ng ka-igsu-unan  
Wala g’yud makatabang,  
Ila ra g’yud nga gikataw-an ug ila pa’ng sawayun,  
Ang pamilya’ng sa tibu-uk adlaw  
ka-usa ra makaka-un.  

Ug wala g’yud gibuhat,  
kutub ra g’yud sa pagtan-aw,  
Sa mga uyamut nga sa Kagotum Kay ga tiyabaw.  
Sa puwirti niya’ng paningkamut tibu-uk adlaw,  
kutub ra gyud sa asin nga parisan ra ug lugaw.  
Paminawa ug maayu ang lanug nila nga tingug ,  
Mga yanu nga Pinuy nga nag antus sa kalisud.  
Gibuhat ang tanan, ug puwirti na niya’ng paningkamut,  
samtang sila’g mga datu sigi lá’ng ug pangurakut.  

Bata’s kadalanan ug na-a sa pantalan,  
Nigpis pa ug mga lawas bitbit dili duwa-an;  
kung dili naningkamut na sila nga maqtrabahu,  
para na’y malutu sa gagmay nila’ng kaldiru.  
Ug ang ila’ng amahan naningkamut sa pagbasura,  
Nangchina-ut nga maka kita bisa’g piku nga lata, arun makakuwarta,  

This is our story of a true Filipino,  
Of what it means to live a difficult life  
in a hostile world.  
Why must he suffer this kind of fate,  
Despite his hard work, still life is scarce?  

His family relies in a kerosene lamp,  
The little money he’s got is short for tuition fees.  
He does his best to get through difficulties,  
Difficulties that come as trials in life.  
But how sad it is,  
Many of our wealthy brothers and sisters  
Are never willing to help.  
They look at us with indifference  
Yet mock us -we who are eat once a day.  

They do nothing except look at us with apathy  
We, the lowly who cry out in hunger.  
We work hard every single day,  
But all we have is porridge and salt on the table.  

Harken well to the echoes of their cries,  
Poor and lowly suffering Filipinos.  
They’ve done all they could,  
While the rich steal.  

Children in the streets and the ports,  
With scrawny bodies don’t play any toys;  
Instead, they have to work,  
So that they can cook food in their mall pot.  
While their father scavenge  
Hoping to find even dented tins to sell,
The poem “Hardship,” typifies all the mendicants’ rap poems in the selection in terms of its stanzalastic structurization and predominant social undertones. The themes revolve around the mendicants lived experiences of marginalization —poverty, hunger, homelessness, helplessness, stereotyping, discrimination, absurdity, greed, and apathy. The crude employment of poetic elements such as language and imagery is evident. In the terms of the mendicants, the creation and appropriation of poetry is primarily dictated by an immediate and prosaic purpose, namely, that of pecuniary solicitation thus diverging from the legitimate and universally accepted teleology of literary pursuits.

A total of fourteen rap poems comprise the present collection. For the purpose of establishing the factual basis
upon which the thesis is pursued, excerpts in English version are lifted from each rap poem and presented in tabular form. This manner of presentation fulfils the requirement of brevity and space, albeit admittedly, it has its limitation so much so that the rap poems are reduced to their presumably important representative parts. Be that as it may, these excerpts should suffice as predicate requirements upon which the thesis is established. The first column corresponds to the titles of the rap poems; the second column constitutes the excerpts; while the third column comprises the themes.

Table 2. Excerpts and reference from fourteen rap poems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rap Poems</th>
<th>Excerpts</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Hardship”</td>
<td>Whose hunger for supper they put off by sleep; So that the next day the same hunger and another are met by the morning meal, His mother lies in the mat, She is sick but water is her only medicine. Hungry scrawny bodies playing no toys They do nothing but look at us with apathy Aren’t they satisfied with their wealth?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Here Is Love”</td>
<td>We toil hard yet the means of living is always scarce. We are not like them snatchers and thieves. Ours way is better than theirs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Please Understand”</td>
<td>Do not think that I’m here do evil instead extend your help, I’m begging for bread.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Don’t Worry”</td>
<td>We know that we are upright, And we’ve heard all the wrongs from people who can’t do anything good, But keep looking for our mistakes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Worry No More”</td>
<td>Here we are now, in front of you, not to rob you nor steal from you. We are in front of you begging for help.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Here We Are”</td>
<td>We know the past of the people who are struggling like us. That even eating three times a day is a great difficulty. They say do not malign us, lest we take your money away. No, no we are not like that, for we keep on the right path.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“When Will It Be”</td>
<td>When will the people stop mistaking us for a plague, a robber, a snatcher, a kidnapper? All the bad things they think about me cause me great suffering.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“We Are Jeepney Rappers”</td>
<td>We are poor Filipinos, thrown into this damn world we loathe: Do we deserve this life?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“May You Return”</td>
<td>I have been running after you girl, like my love will never end, But you’re nowhere in sight, you took a flight.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Listen to Us, Please”</td>
<td>Where is Jesus, they said the redeemer? Why did he allow an evil government in our fatherland? Landslides here and everywhere, the mountains are destroyed.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Forget Not”</td>
<td>Forget not your origins, lest you won’t find the good path. That’s why if were are like this, Don’t immediately say that we are not good; For none of us can judge, except the one Lord above.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Forget”</td>
<td>Forget the problems, mind them never, for all of us have them. But when the problems become worse, should we worry about them? No, let the survival, denial problems worry about themselves. Yeah, yeah, break it down!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What Will Happen”</td>
<td>What awaits us and to people like us, Who beg here and beg there? We are helpless!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The excerpts from the fourteen rap poems reveal the mendicants’ lived experience of poverty, hunger, squalor, affliction, deprivation, regret, uncertainty, self-pity, marginality, God, faith, disaster, government, absurdity, greed, apathy, stereotyping, and calumny. This poetic configuration of the people’s lived experience underscores the power of poetry as a mimesis of life and social realities (Isomaa et al 16). The rap poems perceptibly point to a singular persona which resonates in a voice so indistinct from the authors. The mendicants, who composed the poems themselves, did not bother to conceal their social identities in their poetry. Martin Heidegger notes that poetry is a form of unconcealment as it removes shrouds of obscurity (Gosetti-Ferencei 186), but such is beyond the immediate interest of the mendicants. Unlike the professional poets, the mendicants suffer no torment if they are unable to acquit themselves from the poetic expression of their thoughts and sentiments any more than they aspire to be poets.

The rap poem “Hardship,” speaks of an existence amidst poverty, hunger, affliction, and absurdity. It is a poetic reproduction of the common evils associated with penury. Social reality is explained using the images of “lugaw” (porridge), “hungry scrawny bodies playing no toys,” “hunger snatches the little money from an afflicted mother,” and “hunger is tamed by sleep.” In their misery, the mendicants scorn the rich and the powerful for their greed and apathy, - social traits that are linked to their own sufferings. Distrust between the rich is not uncommon in societies plagued with inequality. This mutual suspicion is partly caused by the breakdown of norms of equitability and dialogue (Rowell and Kuzmic 87).

Poverty generates stereotypes of the poor and these images are awash in bigotry and discrimination (Lang 265-272). The protest against derogatory tags that depict the mendicants as crooks and villains is a dominant theme in almost all of the rap poems. The misery spawned by sordid poverty is only exacerbated by calumny. “Here Is Love,” not only bewails how every hard toil miserably falls short of the day’s needs but also disputes the social label of being thieves. In the maze of poverty and pain wrought by stereotyping, love is embraced as a normative antidote to despair. Love soothes the injuries of the poor. “Please Understand” is a public appeal for a fair judgment. It engages the public and calls for a factual appreciation of the mendicants’ identity as rappers and never as villains. “Don’t Worry” echoes the plea for fair judgment even as it begs for help. In “Worry No More,” the mendicants insist on ethical propriety as they indict people who are typified as faultfinders and unlettered in the virtue of common good. “Here We Are” clarifies the boundary between mendicancy and thievery while insisting on the former. “We Know” and “When Will It Be” express the mendicants’ appeal for fair judgment in the midst of destitution and discrimination. The mendicants’ lament finds support in Macarov’s (49) observations that most poor people do not necessarily commit crime.
We Are Jeepney Rappers” voices out the mendicants’ contempt of the world. It is a condemnation of a world that is hostile and absurd, a world that cares not of most unfortunate. It challenges the legitimacy of social institutions that do not foster inclusive growth but secrete extreme poverty and extreme wealth. “May You Return” likens the life of poverty to the fate of a forlorn lover who blames his own poverty for the flight of his beloved. “Listen to Us, Please” takes a religious stance as it entreats both God and people mercy and understanding. Appropriating the discipline of questioning, it proceeds with an introspection into the veracity of one’s faith, as though bordering on doubt. It seeks for an explanation of a social evil personified by a wicked government that allows the destruction of nature as well as the physical evil signified by the occurrence of natural disasters such as landslides. “Forget Not” issues an ethical memorandum on the duty of gratitude as a requisite for good life. Unabashedly, the mendicants point to their faults as reference but quickly caution rash judgment.

“Forget” calls for a stoic attitude towards adversity. Brooding over problems does no good after all they tend to worsen. “What Will Happen” is the pauper’s anguished vision of the future that stores no hope. The gloom of uncertainty and despair hardly provides any meaning to a life of squalor. Indeed, there is not a world more absurd and hostile than the one that alienates and excludes.

The rap poems depict a life of poverty in its variegated, ugly manifestations. The literary narratives not only reproduce the pathological conditions of the marginalized but also serve as a sword of protest and social redress. In its entirety, the mendicants’ rap poetry is a wild fire of social commentary and critique ravaging from and within an empty belly.

Critique from the Margins

Poetry together with other forms of art are “assemblages of culture” (Joyce 23). Inasmuch as culture is a product of society, then social realities can be analyzed by examining culture through studies in poetry. In a sense, poetry is a discipline of social reality. Recognized as text, the rap poems diverge from authorial intent and become an autonomous meaningful entity (Lodge and Wood 266). Enframed as social text, the mendicants’ rap poems operate as a social critique that configures critical theory.

Critical theory, in the words of Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), must seek to emancipate human beings from all conditions of enslavement (McGuire 4). An emancipatory critical theory is explanatory, practical, and normative, that is, it must explain social problems, identify the transformative agents, and provide a critical paradigm (King and Zanetti 48-49). Axel Honneth, a third generation Frankfurt School thinker, locates the normative paradigm of critique in the struggle for recognition (Petherbridge 10-21). For him, the task of critical theory is to unmask social structures that impede genuine recognition of the integrity and dignity of
human beings. Social pathologies are caused by non-recognition of human rights and dignity.

Critical theory as an erudite, theoretical framework of critique finds its counterpart in the mendicants’ rap poetry both as text and praxis of critique. It is a critique from below proffered by the marginalized who live at the margins of society. The fourteen rap poems oscillate through invariable attempts at description of social reality, identification of causes of social pathologies, allusion to sectors of society as agents, and naïve prescription of normative paradigm.

As critique of society, the mendicants’ rap poetry provides a descriptive narrative of the life of poverty. The mimetic construal of poverty includes the lived experience of hunger, hard toil and scarcity, helplessness, misery, absurdity, affliction, stereotyping, self-pity, uncertainty, and calumny. This literary modelling of the realities of poverty effectively unmasks a social order plagued by moral, economic and political pathologies. The reality of extreme wealth juxtaposed with extreme poverty creates an ugly picture of deep-seated social inequalities (Myser 107-109). That which rap poetry does not analytically explain owing to its literary nature, it mirrors in the forms of typifications.

The descriptive narratives of poverty provide a platform of protest and redress. Here, the mendicants’ rap metamorphoses into a poetry of protest and social redress. It addresses society’s conscience squarely by unequivocally pointing to the structures of the unconscionable. By disclosing the hideous and sordid images of poverty, the mendicants dispute the publicly acclaimed norms and ideals of society. The presence of the poor at the margins of the society exposes a pathological center and indicts its privileged inhabitants, -the rich and the powerful- for their greed and apathy. The rap poetry’s subterranean version of social reality offers an unusual yet radical argument: the test of justice and democracy lies not in the exclusive accumulation of wealth, but in the inclusive reduction of poverty (Lotter 119-121). The mendicants’ protest corresponds to a rejection of the dominant values of the social corridors of power that undermine the dignity of the weak and the impoverished.

To the consciousness of the mendicants, society is absurd and hostile. Society’s hostility is shown in its tendency to regard the poor as villains and crooks. Calumny only aggravates their misery. The mendicants’ grievance are not without basis because society has the tendency for generalized distrust against the marginalized (Hardin 22-25). These lamentations reflect Wordsworth’s poetic dissent to poverty, hunger, homelessness and their effects upon humanity (Bailey 57). The South African poet, Dennis Brutus, pronounced a strong condemnation of the excesses of the wealthy and the powerful during the apartheid through poetry (Sustar and Karim, 247).

In the face of destitution and calumny, the mendicants invoke ethical
propriety. Ethical engagement is an essential part of the normative requirement of critique (McGowan 52-53). The rap poetry show vestiges of normative dynamics through appeals on love and common welfare. Love is prescribed as an antidote to marginality and discrimination. However it is conceived, love alleviates pains and suffering (Spitzer, Bernhoft, and De Blasi 185-186). Love presupposes justice (Brunner 50-51) even as justice sustains social stability and order (Floistad 137). While poetry is hardly an effective medium by which an ethical framework can be developed, the indication of this normative paradigm already suggests a specific direction. Moreover, since rap poem’s collective persona addresses society in general, it vicariously posits the same society as the agents of transformation.

CONCLUSION

The rap poems are appropriated as an apparatus of mendicancy. However, the poems’ reconstruction of the conditions of poverty as well as their strong indictment of the oppressive social structures that produce extreme inequalities necessitated an irreversible subversion of the immediate pragmatic purpose of their creators and performers. Emerging as a densely social text, the mendicants’ rap poetry rises as a double edged sword of social critique unleashed by the marginalized who live at the margins of society. Critique goes beyond the central and reaches the peripheral. The naive rather innovative mode of mendicancy flares as rousing indictment of a soiled social conscience.

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