
Bong-bong Deterioration

In the short story “The Blossoming of Bongbong,” the main character, Bongbong, moves to America with big hopes to reshape his life and achieve success. This vague notion of the American dream leads to Bongbong’s desire for the quintessential, yet seemingly paradoxical American life: a movie star career, and a simple, non-contradictory lifestyle— everything he can’t achieve in the Philippines. Yet for some reason, he seems unable to secure them and loses himself in the process. Through the analysis of Bongbong’s wishy-washy attitude toward defining a cultural identity, along with his pursuit of different recreational activities and more generally, his dabbling in the arts, one can trace the degeneration of Bongbong’s self-identity and how he morphs into the exact person he does not want to be. His skewed and idealized image of the American Dream makes him passive, filling his spare time with cooking, books, music, and astrology, while waiting for success to finally hit him. Combined with his lack of commitment to a single cultural identity and a retreat from his interpersonal relationships, Bongbong becomes an isolated, hypocritical, and delusional hermit. By the end of the story, Bongbong can no longer relate to the world because he can no longer relate to himself.

Bongbong’s conflicting allegiances to the Philippines and America are manifest through his perception of others versus himself, and result in a surrender of his American dream. Though Bongbong originally says that he “[wishes he] was a movie star,”— a fundamentally American dream— he tells Frisquito that “[his] sister is the biggest [liar] of them all” for enrolling in an Elizabeth Arden beauty course and keeping a modern apartment in order to assimilate into American culture. The contradiction between what Bongbong wants for himself and how he judges others is evident. Shortly afterwards, Bongbong writes to Frisquito: “If I went back to Manila I could be a movie star” (86). It seems that Bongbong is confused about where he can achieve success, and has given up his starry-eyed hope of becoming a glamorous public figure in America. Perhaps he feels that in the Philippines, where he was reputed as the “best-dressed young VIP,” he has a higher chance of success because his natural mastery of Philippine culture gives him the advantage of confidence (85). In America though, with “no skills, and no college degree,” he is unable to realize his dream (86).

Bongbong presents another contradiction in his cultural loyalty when he simultaneously longs for the Philippines yet is reluctant to disclose his country of origin to Charmaine, a beautiful, exotic woman who soon becomes Bongbong’s friend. When Charmaine assumes he is a “Chicano”; he wants to tell her he is “Ethiopian, or Moroccan, or Nepalese...”- that his country of origin is of no importance to who he is today (88). He tries to throw off his past in order to create a new identity for himself, but fails because he cannot establish a concrete direction. To fill his days, he reads—“anything from best-sellers to plays to political science to poetry. A lot of

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it he does not understand, but the names and events [fascinate] him.” (87). Bongbong buries himself in books, yet cannot understand their content. The books he chooses are “random”—and chosen based on their “titles or the color of their book jackets.”(87). If he cannot commit to being American from within, this superficial immersion into literature does not allow American culture to penetrate deeply enough from the outside. He remains in this state of cultural imbalance, his identity hovering in no-man’s-land. Yet later on, as Bongbong explores different art forms with increasing participation, he allows it to overtake his mind and swallow his identity.

The mention of art as a catalyst for Bongbong’s transformation is perceived from the very beginning, when the short story introduces Bongbong’s good friend, Frisquito. In a way, Frisquito’s own situation foreshadows Bongbong’s psychological journey. Having lived in New York, Frisquito once attempted the American Dream, but ends up deranged and unsuccessful. Frisquito “soon learned to do without women or men,” which seems to foreshadow Bongbong’s monastic fate (84). This solitary, celibate lifestyle culminates in a perverted artistic expression for both characters; Frisquito paints “masturbatory” paintings, while Bongbong plays the saxophone in seclusion while practicing levitation (84). Bongbong, secluding himself with his music and telescope, retreats further and further from the world, living internally and neglecting the physical aspects of daily life. He speaks “as minimally as possible,” appears to be unnaturally disinterested in women, only wears his velvet green suit, and refuses to eat (93). When Charmaine confronts him about his eating habits, he says, “Maybe I eat a saxophone” (94). This imagery of Bongbong imbibing the music, sustaining himself with it, shows that he has completely abandoned his physical needs.

By the end of the short story, when Bongbong’s meditational powers are at their apex, Bongbong can no longer “remember [anyone’s] name, including his own”(95). Forgetting himself and his reality, Bongbong becomes isolated from the entire world. After Bongbong buys a telescope with the money Frisquito sends him, he writes in a letter: “With my telescope I can see everyone, and they don’t have to see me” (96). Even his hallucinations, once teeming with all kinds of people, are now uninhabited and lonely: Frisquito “[flies] far away... [becoming] smaller and smaller” until he “[vanishes]” (97). When Bongbong wakes up to reality, Charmaine is gone as well. Alone, without friends or family, Bongbong finally achieves peace with himself when he has retreated so far into his mind that he cannot even sign his name in his final letter to Frisquito; he had “finally forgotten who he was”(97).

The key catalysts in Bongbong’s degeneration are his passive attitude toward achieving his American Dream, his confusion as to where to plant his national flag, and his complete surrender to the arts. In the process, he isolates himself from his friends and family, becomes the very person he intended not to be, and loses all traces of his self-identity.

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