

Analysis of the bread of salt story



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Arturo Perez-Reverte, in his exhilarating novel *The Flanders Panel* wrote, “There’s nothing more misleading than an obvious fact.” (Perez-Reverte, 1990. p. 76) It’s a philosophy to which most will disagree. How can the apparent truth be misleading if it’s utterly evident in the first place? The aforementioned line was taken from a fiction integrating art, history, chess and mystery, creating a web of complex thinking strategies and problem solving skills involving an equivocally complex way of decision making. Everything revolves around a puzzle to which one must separate the facts from the notions.

It’s a struggle to delineate what is purely imaginative from what the actual reality is. This theme regarding the conflict between what exists in the mind and what physically or actually exists is also the same theme that governs NVM Gonzalez’ *The Bread of Salt*. The short story, being a “coming of age” literature involves a young boy of fourteen as a protagonist. He’s a grandson of a deceased coconut plantation overseer. He’s a boy filled with dreams and aspirations and innocent yet intense adoration for a mestiza named Aida, the niece of the old Spaniard for whom his grandfather used to work.

He dreams of her almost every time, even in his mundane task of getting up early every morning to purchase pan de sal (bread of salt) in the bakery for his family’s breakfast. It is apparent in the story that the tiresome duty of his is becoming a burden to him already, to which his only compensations are the daily revival of his childish curiosity and marvel as regards to the creation of the ubiquitous breakfast table item and a good look at the ocean, in which somewhere in the landscape, he catches a glimpse of the old Spanish house where his Dulcinea dwells.

The bread of salt! How did it get that name? From where did its flavor come, through what secret action of flour and yeast? At the risk of being jostled from the counter by early buyers, I would push my way into the shop so that I might watch the men who, stripped to the waist, worked their long flat wooden spades in and out of the glowing maw of the oven.

Why did the bread come nut-brown and the size of my little fist? And why did it have a pair of lips convulsed into a painful frown? For my reward, I had only to look in the direction of the sea wall and the fifty yards or so of riverbed beyond it, where an old Spaniard's house stood. In one of his sporadic yet usual daydreaming, he imagines himself as the destined one for Aida. He even thought that the latter also holds romantic interests in him, albeit hidden. And that he claims to have known it all along no matter how much she tries to be discreet. I often wondered whether I was being depended upon to spend the years ahead in the service of this great house. One day I learned that Aida. . was the old Spaniard's niece.

All my doubts disappeared. . . If now I kept true to the virtues, she would step out of her bedroom ostensibly to say Good Morning to her uncle. Her real purpose, I knew, was to reveal thus her assent to my desire. On quiet mornings I imagined the patter of her shoes upon the wooden veranda floor as a further sign, and I would hurry off to school, taking the route she had fixed for me past the post office, the town plaza and the church, the health center east of the plaza, and at last the school grounds.

I asked myself whether I would try to walk with her and decided it would be the height of rudeness. Enough that in her blue skirt and white middie she

would be half a block ahead and, from that distance, perhaps throw a glance in my direction, to bestow upon my heart a deserved and abundant blessing. I believed it was but right that, in some such way as this, her mission in my life was disguised. The intensity of his love for the young girl, however, also instilled in him an initiative to improve.

He made himself stronger and more capable in the field of sports, music and academics. The problem, nonetheless, lies in the fact that he does this along with the notions that he was doing Aida a favor by becoming the most chivalric and dashing knight he can be. Not only does he dream of becoming a knight to his lady but a poet and a virtuoso musician as well. His mind, in fact, has already wandered as far as Europe in the joyous relish of the fame and fortune that extremely talented artists are bound to receive.

All these untold aspirations seemed true to him. Only that in reality, he hasn't even bought the lovely stationery on which to pour out all the unuttered emotions he has towards Aida and the brooch he suddenly planned to offer her. The school orchestra conductor, however, was not at all oblivious to his painstaking diligence regarding his violin lessons. Neither were his band mates. Soon he was invited to join Pete Saez' band. He took this as the opportunity to earn money for the much-awaited proposal with the stationery and the brooch.

And as if his luck hasn't manifested itself enough yet, he was no longer assigned with the task of " taking the money to the baker's for rolls and pan de sal" since the tiresome task was already given to the " poor girl" whom his aunt employed as a maidservant. Then Paez' band was invited to play at

the party to be thrown by the Buenavista Women's Club for the two Buenavista sisters who will be arriving from Manila. He felt proud and important to be part of an event as momentous and as high class as such.

It was in their extreme excitement that, to make sure they won't be late for the party, they discouraged the other members of the band from eating dinner. When finally they were told to have their meal, the young protagonist got overwhelmed with confusion because of the dishes of beautifully presented food, most of which he doesn't recognize. And out of comfort, or ignorance, or a sudden lapse of ethics, he put some sweets which "appeared like whole egg yolks that had been dipped in honey and peppermint" in several sheets of napkin paper and slipped them in the packet under his shirt.

To his utmost surprise and embarrassment, Aida approached him and asked if he has eaten, offering him a big package if he waited until the party's over and the guests have gone home. I brought a handkerchief to my mouth. I might have honored her solicitude adequately and even relieved myself of any embarrassment; I could not quite believe that she had seen me, and yet I was sure that she knew what I had done, and I felt all ardor for her gone from me entirely.

And so that's how the young protagonist realizes how far his world is from Aida's. Her remark might have been due to genuine charity and concern, but nevertheless, it made clear to the young man that his lack of finesse, probably due to his social orientation, was the setback which makes the materialization of his dreams almost, if not already, impossible. The Bread of

Salt by NVM Gonzalez is Filipino to its very core. One only needs to look at the apparent elements of the short story to see that it was written by a Filipino for Filipinos. The tradition, the thinking and other cultural elements of the story reflect the way people live in a particular period.

The pan de sal being one of the staple food of the masses and the title of the story is one of the many manifestations of the story's local color. The story opened and ended with it; the life of the protagonist daily revolved around the task of buying it and with his own money he decided to purchase some, though this time it was only for himself. One will also notice how art, and in this case, music, was viewed by the majority then. Musicians were regarded not as talented individuals but as employees and a low class one at that.

According to the young boy's aunt, musicians eat last in parties. The protagonist cannot be therefore blamed if he dreams of becoming an honored artist in Europe, where art and artists are regarded in a rather more dignified standard. One of the most stunning, yet true things about the short story is the Filipinos' pride in almost everything especially in the way they make their class known in parties usually, where one always tries to exceed whatever others can display.

Not that it's horribly negative in its entirety nor is it a racial brand. Some of the attitudes presented in the story also exist in other cultures. However, a Filipino can understand how things or attitudes like these take place in the environment in which they exist. And the writer, whose ingenuity is remarkable, was able to depict the sad facets of the tradition of his people with the aim of providing a reason to contemplate.

Just like other “ coming of age” literature, The Bread of Salt shows how society or situations open the gate of realization to a young soul whose innocence was guarded by purity and naivete. Hard as it may seem, life, in its purest and most significant form should be regarded as an experience of waking up from one’s untold, internal realities to face what lies ahead – what really lies ahead. Social, intellectual, and physical differences may be bitter setbacks against an individual’s ambition or dreams yet reality has always been this harsh.